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For two long years Max Vonner, captain of the starship *Orion,* had been flying through space on an uninterrupted flight. Now at last he was approaching the planet Omina in the outer galaxy; he and his crew were about to succeed or fail in their mission. But even more frightening than the unknown ahead of them was the unknown past. For in order to prepare them for the voyage, ground control had wiped out all their memories of life on earth before blast-off, so that they could recall only dimly whence they came.

LENOX HILL PRESS
419 Park Avenue South, New York 10016

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Printed in the United States of America

CHAPTER ONE

Max Vonner, captain of the starship *Orion,* lifted his gaze to the forward scanner screen and saw the immobile ball of the planet Omina in the outer galaxy, now filling half the sky. It was now only five days away, and when they swung into a computerized orbit around it their flight from earth would have lasted two complete years—two long years of uninterrupted space travel!

There was a movement at his side, and he stirred, looking up into the gaunt face of his relief.

"Hi, Ed!" Vonner studied his first officer for a moment, then got to his feet and moved aside to let Lieutenant-Commander Ed Bardo sit down in the control seat.

"Any orders, Captain?" Bardo demanded, and he did not meet Vonner's eyes. He sounded surly, as if he were still caught by the tail end of a bad temper. That was unusual for Bardo, and Vonner realized that the man had been in a de-

pressed mood for the past week. He frowned as he waited for Bardo to look up at him. But Bardo was making an effort to avoid him.

"What's wrong, Ed?" Vonner asked gently. "Beginning to feel the tension of the climax of this trip? It's only five days away now. I'm going to talk with Quill shortly, to see what sort of a picture he's making now we're almost within range of Omina."

"I've just left him," Bardo admitted. "He reckons the atmosphere will be the same as earth, or near enough to make no difference to us."

They both looked at the forward scanner screen, and Omina hung there, still wrapped in the mystery of space. Vonner could feel a constriction in his chest and throat. He could understand what Bardo must be feeling. For himself, there was a strange longing deep inside that gave him the desire to quit the ship for a very long time. He stifled the desire. They had all been conditioned for the two-year flight, and in the background, not even contemplated yet, was the return flight! Vonner narrowed his eyes as the thought crossed his mind. He was beginning to feel uneasy for the very first time since blast-off long ago, and he wondered if this could be the first sign of some insidious space sickness.

"Any orders, Captain?" Bardo repeated, and

for a moment his pale blue eyes flickered in Vonner's direction.

"No changes yet!" Vonner glanced at the big command screen, which was blank. The whole two-year flight plan was present on the control computer, and confirmation of course changes and other data was flashed automatically on the screen. There was nothing beyond maintenance that the crew had to do on the *Orion*. The ship managed itself through the trackless oceans of black space. For weeks now the command screen had remained inanimate, as if the computer had died on them. Vonner returned his attention to Bardo, and his frown deepened. He hoped Bardo was not cracking up. Soon the whole crew would have their time cut out to prepare for orbit and landing on Omina. They would have to justify their presence after two years of inactivity. "Are you feeling okay, Ed?" he demanded.

"Fine, Captain! What about you?" The tone in the man's voice denied his words, and Vonner compressed his lips.

"I'm fine, Ed! But you seem to be a bit under the weather. Report to the doc when you get off duty."

"Yes, Captain!" Bardo nodded and started his check sequence, and Vonner watched him, certain there was something wrong but unable to pinpoint it. "You reckon it could be space

fatigue?" Bardo went on without looking round. He spoke too loudly, and Vonner felt doubtful.

"Have you got any of the symptoms, Ed?" he countered softly.

"No! I do feel a bit edgy, but we've been almost two years in this flying can."

"The longest space trip to date," Vonner said with some pride, "and mainly experimental. We're guinea pigs, Ed, don't forget."

"Yeah!" Bardo grinned lopsidedly. "I volunteered!"

"We've proved that the human element in space has sufficient adaptability," Vonner went on. "They figured we might all be raving mad by the time we reached this point. But I don't feel any different from the day we blasted off from earth, do you, Ed?"

"What did they do to us, Captain?"

"Do to us?" Vonner thrust out his bottom lip. "What do you mean, Ed?"

"Nothing. Forget it. In a few days now we'll know some of the answers to the questions that have gnawed at all of us from the first moment we started out. Two long years! They said it couldn't be done! But here we are, and apparently none the worse!" Bardo paused and smiled thinly. "Unless we are all stark raving mad and don't know it." He showed his teeth in a grin. "But don't you have any doubts now we're al-

most at our destination?"

"Doubts?" Vonner considered for a moment, then shook his head. "No, I don't have any doubts. What about you?"

Bardo shook his head. "No doubts, Captain, but I must confess to an uneasiness I can't explain to myself. I just can't put my finger on it. It's been troubling me for some time. It's like trying to remember a dream you know you've had but can't recall. I can feel it there just below the surface of the mind, but it won't come free and clear."

"You too!" Vonner felt relieved as he spoke. So he wasn't the only one.

"So you know what I'm talking about, Captain!" Bardo looked up, looking relieved. His closely cropped blond hair made him look teenaged, but his face was very serious. "I keep telling myself it's the result of being cooped up in this ship. I guess we've come through this pretty well considering. But one thing really puzzles me, Captain."

"Tell me about it," Vonner said urgently.

"There are seventy-seven of us aboard *Orion*, and no one has a memory stretching back farther than two years, Captain."

Vonner stared down into his subordinate's face and saw the doubt showing there, and his own doubts were suddenly clarified. Why hadn't

he thought of it before? He couldn't remember what had happened in his life before this trip commenced.

"Well, Captain, what about you?" Bardo demanded. "Do you know anything at all about your origins? What happened in your life before we blasted off?"

"I'm the same as the rest of you, Ed," Vonner said slowly, his mind trying to grapple with the possibilities. "But it's nothing to worry about!" He said it with the intention of bolstering himself as much as Bardo. He had been worrying subconsciously about this very problem, but now it was out in the open, and he did not like the size of it.

"I'm beginning to wonder who I am," Bardo said. "What did I leave behind on earth? Whom have I left behind? What did they do to us? Was it a mutilation of the mind?"

"Take it easy, Ed." Vonner could think of nothing else to say. His mind was filled with the same questions, and he was thinking it strange that they hadn't crossed his mind before. The whole crew, including himself, had been through a mental process that was intended to fit them for astral life and the long trek through space. But it hit hard that he had no knowledge of what had gone on before blast-off almost two years ago. He turned to depart, and Bardo

reached out and took hold of his elbow.

"Just a minute, Captain! Do you think it was right that they stole our minds? They turned us into robots—flesh-and-blood machines."

"Probably for our own good, Ed, and we'll get everything back when we return to earth."

"When! We've been two years getting here. There's no telling what's going to happen in the next week. Starfall Omina is five days away. If anything goes wrong, we'l never get back to earth."

"Cut it out, Ed!" Vonner spoke sharply. "You know we might have gone crazy on this two-year flight if we'd had full control of our minds."

"It might be all right for you not to know who you are, Captain, but it worries me!" Bardo spoke angrily, sullenly. "They had no right to impersonalize us!"

"We all volunteered, Ed!" Vonner placed a hand upon his subordinate's shoulder. "Just simmer down, will you? You're on duty now. I'll wait for you to be relieved, and then we'll talk some more. I'm going to see the doc now, and you'd better report to her when you get through here."

Bardo scowled and returned his attention to the panels and banks of instruments and dials before him. Vonner stared down at him for a moment, wanting to say more, but his mind was

confused and he couldn't think of the right words. He turned and left the control room and made his way to the sick bay; there was a frown upon his rugged face. Questions were flooding his mind, and he could not find the answers. For two years he had been an unquestioning robot in this huge starship, with no thought for the past. Only the future had appealed to him, the future and the great task of landing on Omina and carrying out the duties assigned to him and the crew. . . .

Dr. Adah Morley was a strikingly beautiful woman in her thirties, a honey blonde with blue eyes and an attraction that would make itself felt by any man. But Vonner did not consider why she made no impact upon him when he entered her office and stood on the threshold staring down at her. She looked up at him, and a thin smile came to her face.

"Captain, I was about to come to you. I'm worried!" She paused and studied his face, then nodded slowly. "You're worried, too! Is anything wrong? Are you feeling ill?"

"I'm fine, Doc," he replied, and moved to a seat and dropped into it. "But we've got to have a talk. I'm beginning to notice small details that don't add up, and I don't like it. Ed Bardo just took over from me, and something he said has set me thinking along unusual lines."

"You too!" Dr. Morley sighed and pushed back her chair. "That's what I want to see you about, Captain. I want you to take a look at the sick list. Check back through the past week and see what I'm getting at." She passed him a sheaf of papers, and he frowned as he scanned them.

"You're getting a bigger list each week, Doc," he commented.

"The numbers aren't significant in themselves, Captain."

"You haven't got an epidemic on your hands, have you? That sort of thing is of the past."

"No physical ailments, Captain. But the crew is coming down with space sickness. It's a mental disease that was supposed to have been eradicated by the psycho-processes used on the entire crew before departure from earth."

"But you subject us to a booster dose of brain-washing on that machine of yours, Doc," Vonner protested. "Once a month the entire crew goes through the process. I've never really understood exactly what it does to us, but we've had no complaints since we left earth."

"I have a feeling that the machine has developed a malfunction, Captain." There was a serious note in Dr. Morley's voice, and Vonner studied her lovely face with closer attention than he had ever shown before.

"That could be serious, although I wouldn't

know unless you told me exactly what that machine does, Doc."

"Look at me closely, Captain!" There was a vibrant note in the woman's voice. "Tell me what you see."

"I see you, Doc." Vonner smiled, and she permitted her expression to alter a little, but she did not smile.

"What do you feel when you look at me?" she persisted.

"Feel!" He frowned, shaking his head. "I don't feel anything. What are you getting at?"

She nodded slowly. "My suspicions are hardening. I'd like to try a little experiment with you, Captain. Would you come over here, please?"

He got up as she arose, and followed her into the inner office. She shut the door and looked at him, standing little more than a hand's breadth from him. Vonner looked down into her face, his teeth clenched, and there was an expression of inquiry on his features.

"What's this all about, Doc?" he demanded.

"That brain washing machine, as everyone calls it, is a booster machine intended to bolster the mental patterns fed into each crew member's mind during documentation for this trip, Captain. You have this knowledge in your subconscious mind, but it has been blocked by the process. You cannot remember a single thing

that happened to you before blast-off, can you?"

"No. Not a thing. That's exactly what Ed Bardo pointed out to me when he came on duty a while back. That's why I'm here, Doc. I want to know what's going on."

"You don't even feel an interest in me, do you, Captain?"

"Interest?" he repeated. "I'm interested in your welfare."

"But not more so than in any male member of your crew?"

"No." He shook his head. "This experiment you wanted to try—what is it?"

She came nearer to him and placed her hands upon his shoulders. "Kiss me, Captain," she commanded.

"Kiss you?" He frowned. "What do you mean, Doc?"

She smiled. "It's obvious that the process isn't losing its power in your mind, Captain. All knowledge and instinct which you had in the past, and any other detail that isn't imperative to your duties on this trip, have been blocked from your mind. Can you imagine what might have happened on this two-year trek with seventy men and seven female nurses enclosed on this ship? The greatest problem facing scientists after man landed on the moon and began to look farther afield was the human element in space

travel. Man was not suitable for confinement over long periods, unless he could be amenable to the changed conditions and strictures of stellar flight. The process that was carried out on this entire crew is the result of many years of tests and experiments, and until now it has proved immensely successful."

"Just a minute, Doc," Vonner said patiently. "Give it to me straight. What exactly did they do to us before this trip?"

"Your mind was drained of all impulses, instincts and memories. Your memory banks were plundered. Every impression and memory you ever stored in your head was taken away from you, Captain, and the same thing happened to each member of the crew. Then you were connected to a sealed circuit computer, and the knowledge and skills you needed on this trip were impulsed into your brain. You are a flesh-and-blood robot. You have no personality and no individual instincts. They've obliterated the instincts of a million generations from your mind, Captain, in order to keep you sane on this trip. When you return to earth, the process will be reversed and you will become normal again, but until then you have no personal control over yourself. Your reactions and thoughts are governed by the patterns that were fed into your mind by computer. You're not human, Captain,

and won't be while the monthly brainwashings continue. That's putting it relatively simply, mind you. That's the whole thing in a nutshell."

"And how can you know all this?" Vonner demanded. "Were you not processed like the rest of us?"

"I was, and programmed to my particular duties. But this booster machine, which is needed to prevent normal instincts from returning, is malfunctioning in some way. In the past week I have had twenty men in here demanding answers to questions that I dare not answer."

"You haven't told anyone what you've just told me?" he demanded.

"No one! You're the captain. You have a right to know, because I'm going to need help to cope with the problems now arising. I think you have an emergency on your hands, Captain."

"Before we go on to that aspect, tell me some more about kissing," Vonner said.

"No, Captain." Dr. Morley shook her shapely blonde head. "If I'm any judge of the situation, you're going to need a cool head in the next few days. You wouldn't thank me for putting a whole world of new ideas into your mind."

"Can the machine be fixed?" he asked.

"That's not in my department. You'll have to check with the chief engineer. But I warn you, Captain, that he was in here this morning, and

I saw a glint in his eyes that could only come from one of the blocked emotions I was telling you about."

"I'm beginning to understand something of the problem." He nodded slowly. "Ed Bardo worried me when I listened to him, but now I have a clearer picture of the situation. We'd better get a check made on that brainwashing machine of yours before my crew fall apart at the seams. But wouldn't it help if we gave the men an extra dose of the processing, even if it is of a lowered strength?"

"I was going to suggest it," she said. "Perhaps we'd better arrange for it, and the sooner the better. Once the men get out of control, it may be too late to try to maintain order."

"What would you expect to happen if the effects of your machine wore off completely?"

"Discipline would go, without a doubt. I doubt if anyone would be able to withstand the mental shock of discovering his own past in one unblinking revelation."

"Then I'll have the off-duty men lining up here within the hour," Vonner said. "Will that be all right with you?"

"Yes, Captain. We shall be able to cope. It will mean working around the clock, but it is imperative that the treatment be given immediately. Perhaps you'll have some of your secur-

ity men standing by."

"You expect trouble, Doc?"

"You sound surprised, Captain." She shook her beautiful head, and Vonner had the sudden feeling that there was something attractive about her, and it sent a pang through him. He narrowed his eyes as he stared into her face. It was as though she were magnetic and he were a piece of inanimate metal. There was a strong attraction between the two, and the knowledge was like the ripples on a lake, spreading across his awareness in ever widening and deepening circles, catching him up in some unknown vortex that tugged at the very roots of him. He shivered and backed away from her, his face showing her something of the conflict taking place inside him.

"I'll have the security men standing by," he said uncertainly.

"You'd better report for processing first, Captain," she told him softly, following him as he turned and went back to the outer office. "And get all the security men through first. If there is trouble, you'll need armed men to control it. Treat this as a major emergency, Captain, and you won't be underestimating the situation."

"I'll do that, Doc," he said uneasily, and paused in the doorway to look back at her. For the first time in two years he felt uncomfortable in her presence, and there were vague, intangible

impressions deep in his mind, as if all his instincts were trying to burst through the blockages placed upon his mental processes. It frightened him to realize there were so many strong emotions inside him, and the knowledge warned him that there was no time to lose.

CHAPTER TWO

Vonner called for a conference of his senior officers, but he left Ed Bardo on duty in the command room. There was tension in him as he greeted each officer in turn upon his arrival, and he felt dark suspicions in his confused mind as he wondered if any of these important men were regaining their complete minds.

Aaron Marr, the astrogator, was the first to arrive. Marr was forty, a medium, thick-set type with dark hair and probing brown eyes. He watched Vonner carefully without speaking and poured himself a drink at Vonner's instigation. Dalus Wayland, the chief engineer, paused in the doorway when he arrived, and Vonner felt a tingle of anticipation as he waited for the man's report. Wayland was tall and hefty, and he grinned at his captain.

"I got a message from Doc just after you called, Captain. If you're in no hurry to see me, then I'd better find out what she wants."

"I wanted to see you to send you on to the sick bay," Vonner said. "That brain washing machine she uses on all of us once a month is giving her some trouble. There's a loss of output, or main power. Go along and take a look at it, Dal, and then report back here. If you find any trouble, then take care of it."

"I'm on my way, Captain," Wayland said, and grinned at the watchful Marr as he departed.

"You look as if there's some problem coming up, Skipper," Marr said "It has nothing to do with Omina, has it?"

"No, it's an internal matter, Aaron. But I'll wait until the others arrive before I start talking about it."

Howie Farrell and Philo Curran arrived together. They were close friends. Farrell was the communications chief, and Curran, the only military officer among them, was boss of security. Vonner motioned them to the table and told them to help themselves to a drink.

"Before we start in here, Phil," Vonner said, "I want you to put your guards on full alert."

Curran stiffened immediately. "What's wrong, Skipper?" he demanded.

"Nothing yet. I'm merely taking precautions. The entire crew will be taking mental processing again, starting in an hour, and I want some guards present to insure there's no trouble, no

opting out of the process."

"We've never had trouble before!" Curran was bothered, and he didn't conceal the fact.

"I want your security men to go through the brainwasher before I announce to the rest of the crew that an extra processing session will commence. If anyone objects, then he must be arrested immediately and compelled to submit."

"I'll get onto it right away," Curran said stiffly. "But I would like a little more information to go on before I start."

"Make sure of your own men before you report again to me," Vonner said.

"What do you suspect, Skipper?" Aaron Marr was worried and could not conceal the fact.

"Later, Aaron," Vonner said. "Phil, get on with it now, will you? I assure you this is urgent."

Curran moved to the door, and paused when he reached Vonner's side. "You're talking as if you expect a mutiny, Skipper," he commented. "Have you got wind of something?"

"No. I told you these are just precautions. It seems that the brainwasher has developed a malfunction. We weren't properly screened the last time, so it's got to be done over. Some of the crew members might not think it's a good idea. That's all."

Curran saluted and departed, and Vonner

breathed deeply. He turned back to the door when Quillon Reid, the chief scientist, entered.

"You're just in time, Quill," Vonner told him. "Sit down and help yourself to a drink. I shall be expecting a report from you tomorrow about the conditions on Omina. We're close enough now for your instruments to make definite readings."

"I've been getting some pretty good reports all day," Reid said happily. "We'll have to get together tomorrow at the latest, Captain." He paused and looked at the intent faces around the table. "Most of our earlier reports are substantiated. There is an atmosphere around Omina, and I have reason to believe that it compares favorably with Earth conditions."

"That can wait until later," Vonner said harshly. He moved to the head of the table and sat down.

"Is Ed coming?" Aaron Marr demanded.

"No. He's on duty in the control cabin." Vonner clenched his teeth for a moment. "I'll talk to him later. There's no cause for alarm at the moment, but I am taking certain measures to protect the successful climax of this mission. In five days we shall swing into orbit around Omina, and our shuttles will start ferrying men to the planet's surface. In five days we shall all be working to capacity, and I must have this

business settled before we come under end-of-flight orders."

"What do you suspect is happening on the ship, Captain?" Quillon Reid leaned forward, a tall, slim man with deep brown eyes. "It must be serious, or you wouldn't have called a conference."

"This isn't so much a conference as a collective interview," Vonner said. "I want to see you in order to decide if you're still efficient in your duties."

"This brainwashing machine hasn't been doing its job right," Aaron Marr said. "How can that affect us, Skipper? What does it do to us once a month?"

"I've always been under the impression that it helps to keep us mentally alert," Reid said before Vonner could speak. "Isn't that so, Captain?"

"Something like that," Vonner said tightly. "It does no harm, but if it isn't used, then a lot of things could happen to the human brain."

"And if it has developed a malfunction, then those things have started happening?" Howie Farrell demanded. His fleshy face was wrinkled around the eyes, although he was barely thirty. He eased his stocky figure in his seat and fixed his blue eyes upon Vonner's face.

"No. It isn't like that," Vonner said. "I guess

I really need Doc here to make the explanations, but she's busy right now, so you will have to make do with what I can tell you. There's no need for worry. Everything is under control. But some of the crewmen are beginning to show signs of insufficient treatment, and as soon as the machine has been checked out, we'll all of us take another dose of processing, and the danger will have been averted. There's not much I can do until I get the chief engineer's report, so I thought we'd try to get out a list of the men in your various departments who have been a little out of sorts lately. They're to be processed in the first batch."

"I've got a couple of men in communications who have been griping for the past week," Farrell said. "I've had to take them to task. So this is the cause of it, huh? All right; I'll put their names down. We'll see how they come out of the processing. If they are different, then we'll know it is a malfunction in the doc's brainwasher."

There was a short silence while each of the officers made a list of the men under his command who had seemed to behave unusually during the past week, and Vonner sat watching their intent faces.

"There are about twenty names altogether," he commented when he had scanned through the lists. "Doc Morley told me that she'd had the

same number through her hands in the past week. I'll check the sick reports, and no doubt we'll find these names on both lists. When you get the call for men to be processed, I want these particular people to be sent first."

"Okay, Captain," Aaron Marr said. "But why don't you want Ed down here? Is he affected?"

"I think he is. I didn't like the way he spoke when he relieved me a short time ago. In fact, it was what he said that sent me to the doc. But if my guess is correct, then we'll all be okay after reprocessing. You can go about your business now, and keep this quiet. Stand by to send your men to the sick bay when required. I'll be in touch with you."

One by one they departed, and Vonner heaved a great sigh when he was finally alone. He took a drink, and then fell to pacing the room, his thoughts probing into the inner recesses of his mind, and pulled himself up short when he realized that he was trying to recall some of the obliterated thoughts in his mind.

Returning to his desk in a corner, Vonner opened the internal communication line to the sick bay, and almost immediately Dr. Morley's voice answered.

"Doc, is Dalus with you?"

"Not with me, Captain, but he is in the department. He's got a couple of his men and their

blueprints, and they're checking the brain-washer."

"I see. Any idea when he'll get through?"

"No, Captain."

Vonner gnawed his lip. He recalled what Adah had said about kissing, and wondered exactly what that was. He discovered that he was trembling and his hands were sweating.

"Are you busy right now, Doc?" he demanded in suddenly husky tones.

"No, Captain. Do you want me?"

"I have a list here of men who may be feeling the effects of under-processing by that machine of yours. Bring your sick lists along, and we'll compare notes."

"I'll be right with you, Captain." There was a click, and the line went dead.

Vonner sat back in his seat and stared at the opposite wall. His breathing was jerky, and he could feel a tingling deep inside, as if some powerful unknown force were twisting the very roots of his being.

Adah Morley came into the room, and Vonner straightened in his seat and stared at the woman. She was wearing black tights that showed every curve of her long legs and a short tunic that was close around the neck and snug-fitting. Sweat touched Vonner's forehead as he gazed at her.

"You're looking very tense, Captain," Adah

Morley commented. "Nothing wrong yet, is there?"

"I don't know." He went to her side and stared into her face, aware that her wide blue eyes were watching him intently. "I feel kind of strange," he said. "I don't know how to explain it. But I've the idea that there's more to you than shows. Why should it come to me now, after all these long months? What is there in life that I don't know about, Doc? How come you seem to know about it when none of the rest of us do?"

"I'm the doctor," she replied, smiling. "My processing was different from yours, and from the chief engineer's, for instance. They couldn't interfere with my work by blotting out my mind. I was processed, but only mildly, and I know more about the past than anyone on the ship."

"I see. But they did something to you to make sure you didn't flip your lid on this flight." Vonner moved closer to her, staring at her without the inhibitions he might have had if he'd not been processed. "I don't get this. The influence must be wearing off pretty quickly now. I've got a feeling that you're different, Doc. I'm getting some strange sensations deep inside."

"Then we must lose no time in getting the brainwasher back in service," she retorted. She stood immobile before him, and her eyes attracted him. He could see his reflection in each

of them, and leaned a little closer to get a better view. "You're near enough, Captain," she said softly, and her words seemed to release a brake in his mind. He took a sharp breath and started to move away, but it was in him to fight against the impulse.

"Kissing," he said slowly. "What is it, Doc?"

"This isn't the time to discuss it," she replied, and there was a wistful expression on her face. "I'd like nothing better than to come back here and discuss it with you after I get off duty, but I'm afraid you won't understand after you've been through the brainwasher again."

Vonner didn't understand her. There was a thundering sound in his ears, a sense of darkness in his mind that seemed to hover at the fringes of his awareness. He was aware of a growing attraction in Adah Morley, and he stifled a groan as his awakening instincts took command, and he slid his arms about her. He crushed her into his embrace, and she remained mute and unprotesting. For long moments he stared down into her upturned face, his mind grappling with the mountainous changes sweeping upon him, overwhelming him with their unknown power. Then he kissed her, and she slid her arms about him and responded with all her strength.

Vonner finally broke away from her and stepped back, breathless and strangely ashamed.

"What did I do?" he demanded huskily. "Doc, what's gotten into me?"

"That's what they call kissing back on earth, Captain," she said, and her eyes seemed to glow from some inner pleasure. "You have a lot to get back to, and you don't know it. But I've known it, and I've waited almost two years for the chance to see you as a real human man."

He went around the desk and sat down, and was amazed to find that he was trembling. He couldn't take his eyes from her face, and wondered that she showed so much animation.

"We've got to get that brainwasher back in service as soon as possible," he said shakily. "If the rest of the crew are going to be affected as I am, then we can't be too careful. I'll have more trouble on my hands than I shall ever be able to handle."

"I've already given instructions to the nurses to remain in their quarters, and I've given them injections to help them. They will be affected in the same way, you know."

"Do you mean that the sensations I had a moment ago when I kissed you are also in the nurses?"

"Why not?" She laughed musically. "That's the order of things on earth, Captain."

'I don't understand, Adah!" He used her name without realizing it, but she noticed and

smiled.

"There are many things you don't understand. But when you return to earth you'll be returned to normal, and it will be as if you had never been under the influence of the brainwasher. That day can't come quickly enough for me, Captain."

"Let's get on with this business," he said. "I'm impatient to get back to earth now, but that must wait. We have a job to do out here, and we'll do it. Under the influence of the brainwasher, the return trip won't seem so bad."

They checked the lists, but Vonner found it difficult to keep his mind on what he was doing. However, he had his duty to do. He sighed wearily as he got to his feet and escorted Adah to the door.

"Go back to the sick bay and stay there until we know what's happening," he said in a gentle voice, and before she could depart he lifted his hands to her shoulders again. She turned to him immediately, her eyes glowing, and Vonner groaned and stepped back quickly, trying to hold himself in check.

"It's going to be a long trip back to earth, Captain," she said softly. "Max!" Her face seemed to change shape as she moved toward him. "I've longed to hear my name on your lips. I've been tormented by my love for you ever since I first met you, before any of us was proc-

essed. You were in love with me before the trip, Max. I only hope that when we get back you will remember everything. There will be four years cut out of our lives, but it won't matter if we can take up again where we left off."

"Love!" He groaned rather than spoke the word. "Yes! I'm beginning to understand." He closed his eyes as he shook his head. "Get away from me, Adah! Don't tempt me. I've got so much to do. Let me finish the trip. Let's get this over and done with."

"I understand." She spoke softly and started away from him. "I'll tell the chief engineer to report to you as soon as he's finished with the brainwasher, and you'd better be the first in line, Max."

He nodded and watched her go. There was much in his mind that he could not understand, but the fogs were lifting slowly, and each moment brought increased awareness.

Returning to his desk, he sat for a moment trying to get his mind back on duty.

He looked up as the chief engineer came into the room, and a glance at Dalus Wayland's face warned him that trouble had already come upon them in some form or other.

"What's wrong?" he demanded, coming to his feet. "What on your mind, Dal?"

"The brainwasher, Captain!" Wayland

paused beside the desk and stared down at Vonner. "I've located the trouble, but I don't believe it. One of the input booster circuits has been deliberately neutralized. The machine has been sabotaged!"

CHAPTER THREE

"Sabotaged!" Vonner stood staring across the desk at Wayland, unable to believe his ears. "How can that be? Why was it done?" He dropped back into his seat, shaking his head, his mind at a loss. "Who among your crewmen has the knowledge to do such a thing, Dal?"

"One of my men?" Wayland shook his head, dropping into the opposite seat. "It couldn't possibly be one of my men, Skipper. No one could get into the chamber, for a start."

"I was forgetting!" Vonner put a hand to his forehead and sighed. "Can you repair the fault, Dalus?"

"I've got a couple of men working on it now. There's a lot of rewiring to be done. Curran has put a couple of guards on the job. They're armed with stun-guns. I don't think you have anything to worry about now, Skipper."

"Perhaps you'll get back to the machine and supervise the repairs. I want to know the instant

it is operational again." Vonner paused, his eyes showing his subordinate that he was not really taking it all in.

"Are you all right, Skipper?" the chief engineer demanded.

"I'm fine. You get on with that work, Dalus. The sooner you get it fixed, the better."

Wayland nodded and departed, and Vonner sat for a moment with his head in his hands as he tried to still his whirling brain. He thought of Ed Bardo, on duty in the main control room, and tightened his lips. Ed would have to stay there until the last possible moment.

He reached out and switched on the communicator, opening himself to the control room. The next moment Ed's voice was sounding in his ear, reporting the same as usual that everything was okay. But Vonner noticed there was a difference in the first officer's tones, and he frowned as he asked:

"How are you feeling, Ed?"

"I'm okay, Captain. What did the doc have to say?"

"I'll talk to you about it when you come off duty," Vonner said. "I have a problem on my hands at the moment, Ed."

"Anything I can do to help?" Bardo demanded, and his tone was suddenly urgent.

"Not right now. Everything is under control."

Vonner depressed the switch and cut himself off. He got to his feet and left the room, walking along the corridor toward the sick bay. He wouldn't feel easy until the process could be applied to the crew again, and he would be the first to take the electronic impulses. His face was harshly set as he pondered over the brain-washer. Who had sabotaged it? How could any of the crew know what the machine had been doing? More to the point, how had someone managed to get into the chamber where the machine was situated?

There were guards in evidence now, and when he reached the sick bay there were two men standing by the door, guns in hand, motionless but alert. They saluted him as he arrived. He returned their salutes and entered the sick bay, to find Wayland sitting at the desk opposite Adah Morley.

"Have you finished, Dalus?" Vonner demanded.

"It's just about completed, Captain," the man replied. "I've had a new circuit wired in. It's saved a lot of time."

"Time is important right now," Vonner said, and he did his utmost to keep his interested gaze from the watchful Adah. But he had to look at her to give instructions, and he was aware of a painful throbbing inside as he faced her. She

was beautiful! He could feel desire welling up inside him like an overflowing fountain. It was an effort, he found, to keep his mind on what he had to do. "Have you got the processing cassettes ready, Doc?" he demanded.

"Everything will be ready when the machine is ready, Captain," she replied, and there was the ghost of a smile about her attactive mouth.

"Let's take a look at the machine," Vonner suggested.

Wayland got to his feet and led the way to the processing chamber. There was a guard outside the door, and another inside supervising the work of the two technicians.

"Nearly finished?" Wayland demanded harshly, and one of the two men nodded.

"Just got a couple of screws to tighten, and she's all yours."

Vonner looked around. The files containing the cassettes were already opened on the nearby table, and he moved closer, to see that his own was in first place. For a moment he hesitated. He was tempted to miss his turn. He was the captain! He could keep to his duty even if he failed to suffer the evil influence of the brainwasher. He sighed as he beat down the temptation and turned to look at the watchful Adah.

"Have you got the list we worked out?" he demanded. "We'd better get started."

She held out the list, and he took it. There was silence around them, and for a moment everything seeemd to close in on Vonner. His hand touched hers, and it was like receiving an electric shock. He drew a sharp breath and turned away.

"I'll have these men called to the sick bay," he said. "Dalus, you and your men can receive treatment before you leave here. Any idea where Philo went to after he posted his men outside?"

"He's posting guards at all strategic points through the ship," the guard reported. "I can get him on my short wave if you want him, Captain."

"No. He'll report to me as soon as he's through." Vonner motioned to Adah to accompany him, and they went back to her office. He sat down at the communicator and gave out the list of names of the men he wanted to report to the sick bay. All the time he was busy he could not keep his mind from Adah, and when he turned to her there was a wistfulness inside him that cut like a laser beam.

"You're almost back to normal," she said softly. "I can tell by the expression in your eyes, Max. But it's goodbye again soon, and it will last for two years."

"But you know about me," he retorted. "It

must be torture for you."

"I don't know so much after my processing," she said. "It won't be so bad when we've all been through the brainwasher."

"The first of the men will be here shortly," he said, getting to his feet. "Give me a moment, Adah. Perhaps I'll be able to retain some of the pleasure in the long months to come."

She slid into his arms. He kissed her, and his action served only to tear some more of the veils from his mind. He held her until he heard footsteps outside, and then he released her reluctantly.

"It won't be forever, Max," she whispered, and her eyes were shining.

He nodded and led the way back into the processing room. Already there was a line of men forming in the corridor, and he paused and took a good look at some of the waiting faces. Some of them were remembering! It showed plainly in the strange expressions confronting him. But one or two of the men were jocular, proving that the process was holding them as usual. He felt no relief when he stepped into the chamber and found Wayland checking the repair work which had been done.

"All ready, Captain," Wayland said. "You want me to be the first."

"Yes." Vonner nodded, and watched while

Wayland sat down in the chair before the machine. The two mechanics and the guard were watching. Vonner gritted his teeth as Adah locked Wayland in the seat, then attached electrodes to his temples and forehead. It was a procedure which had become a part of their life aboard the *Orion*, but it was the first time Vonner had witnessed it in progress while he had a full awareness of what was happening.

Adah crossed to the table and took up Wayland's personal cassette. There was one for each member of the crew, including herself, and now Vonner was wondering what would happen if someone was processed under the wrong cassette. But it hadn't happened yet, and he watched intently as the woman he loved crossed to the machine and pressed the cassette into a slot in the top. Then she threw a switch, and the hum of power sounded. She watched a dial closely, and Vonner saw a needle flickering, moving across the face of the dial. When she flicked a second switch, there was an added whine to the hum, and lights flashed on the machine. In a few moments it was done, and the machine subsided as Adah switched it off. She released Wayland, and he got to his feet, apparently none the worse for the processing.

"How do you feel, Dalus?" Vonner demanded.

"Okay, Skipper!" There was faint surprise

in the man's voice. "Shouldn't I be!"

"It's all right. Carry on. Your two men can go next." He glanced at Adah. "Then do the guards here before starting on those men outside." He paused and frowned as he caught the sound of a commotion outside, and moved quickly to the door. Before he could reach the aperture, there was the sharp crack of a stun-gun firing, and shock ran through Vonner. He hurled himself into the corridor and found the guard standing warily over a fallen crewman. The rest of the men in the line were frozen in sudden fear.

"What's this?" Vonner demanded, and the guard stirred himself and came to attention.

"Johnson, Captain," he reported. "Said he wasn't going to be processed and started off along the corridor. I had to stop him."

"Good man." Vonner let his gaze take in the rest of the men, and he could see doubt and anger in some of the watching faces. "What's the setting on your gun?"

"Ten minutes, Captain. Colonel Curran set all the weapons for ten minutes."

Vonner nodded. The stun-guns could be preset for degrees of power, and the maximum power would kill.

"Keep these men in line," he ordered, and turned back to the processing room. The second

of the two mechanics was in the chair now, and Vonner watched, an unusual fascination gripping him. He wanted to delay his own processing for as long as possible, but his duty beckoned him, and he knew he had to be in the correct frame of mind to see himself safely through the crisis. "Take me next, Doc," he said crisply, and went forward when the mechanic got out of the seat.

Adah strapped him into the seat and went for his cassette. He watched her closely, feeling emotional, wanting to kiss her once more. When she returned, there was a slow, sad smile on her lovely face, and their gazes met and held. She watched him as she dropped the cassette into the machine, and he nodded slowly, reluctantly. Then she threw the first switch, and he tensed, wondering if he could retain any of the wonderful impressions that had returned to him. The second switch snapped home, and it was as if a curtain fell into place in his mind. He likened it to a blink, a mental blink; and when the tremor was past he was a flesh-and-blood robot again.

Dr. Morley let him out of the seat, and he stood up, looking around. His gaze was impersonal now, and he motioned to the guard to take his place in the chair.

"Thank you, Doctor, he said, and there was an added sharpness in his tone that he could not detect. Wayland was watching him, on the point

of leaving with his two mechanics. "Everything seems to be in order now, Dalus," Vonner commented. "We'll leave the doc to get on with her work." He glanced at her. "I want the check list after processing is completed," he warned her. "Make sure everyone has the treatment."

"Yes, Captain," she replied stiffly, and he departed, with Wayland accompanying him.

In the corridor, Vonner paused and looked at the waiting men. The guard was watchful and ready for trouble. The situation was well in hand, and for the moment Vonner was content. But when they passed out of earshot of the men, he paused again and looked at Wayland.

"How could that machine have been sabotaged, Dalus?" he demanded angrily. "How many men, including yourself, would have the necessary skill to make the adjustment needed?"

"I'll let you have a list, Skipper." Wayland was worried, and it sounded in his voice. "There aren't more than half a dozen of us, and I would pretty well stake my life on any of the others."

"I'm concerned about the situation. Someone knew what the machine was doing; I want to know the reasons why he sabotaged it," Vonner went on. "What did he hope to gain?"

"It's beyond me, Captain." Wayland shook his head. "But your problems will be over as soon as the culprit gets a full-power dose from

the brainwasher."

"I'll be checking the processing list very carefully," Vonner said. "I think I can trust the doc to do her duty properly."

"She won't let anyone get away with anything," Wayland assured him. "I'll go through my files now and make a list of the men capable of sabotaging that machine. It shouldn't be difficult for you to find the culprit."

Vonner nodded.

Colonel Curran arrived, and Vonner studied the big man's face as Curran made his report. He was aware that Curran's alert brown eyes did not remain steady and never once looked in his direction, and Curran was reputed to be the most fearless and dedicated man on the starship.

"The ship is secure, Captain," Curran said. "My men are on emergency standing. I've checked security and have nothing to report. There is no unusual situation aboard."

"Good work, Philo." Vonner nodded. "Have you been processed yet?"

"I'm on my way thre now. What about the duty men in the flight control room?"

"I'm going up to relieve Ed myself, and the normal relief will stand by. I'm waiting for the rest of the crew to be processed before sending in the duty men."

"I had a word with Wayland." Curran looked

at Vonner squarely for the first time since coming into the room. "He said something about sabotage."

"I want you to take charge of the investigation, Philo." Vonner was feeling uneasy again. "Wayland is going to let me have a list of the men aboard who would have the knowledge necessary to do what was done. I want you to find the culprit and confine him. This is a very serious business. The security of the entire ship was jeopardized by that single act. But more than that, I want to know why it was done!"

"Leave it to me, Captain." Curran turned to leave, but paused in the doorway. "I've put two guards in the flight control room, sir," he reported. 'You already know that Bardo is acting strangely, don't you?"

"I do. But it's Ed I have to thank for putting me wise to what was happening. That will be all for now, Philo."

"Very good, Captain." The big security man departed, and Vonner frowned as he tried to pinpoint the changes he imagined he had seen in the man.

But Curran hadn't been reprocessed yet! He would be strange until it was done. Vonner leaned forward in his seat and flipped the switch that activated the P.A. system. He moistened his lips before speaking.

"Attention! Attention! This is the captain. All departments will report for mental processing on the standard rota, commencing in ten minutes. That is all!"

Almost immediately the internal communicator was flashing, and Vonner opened the line. He wasn't surprised to hear Ed Bardo's voice in his ear.

"Captain, what's this?" Bardo demanded harshly.

"You heard the order, Ed. I'll be up to relieve you in thirty minutes. You know the procedure."

"But why the extra processing? It's in standard orders that brainwashing takes place once a month. Surely an extra dose will be dangerous."

"I've just taken my extra tingle, and I'm feeling fine," Vonner responded. "Why are you getting het up, Ed?"

"Nothing, I guess. Perhaps you'd better come up here and talk to me."

"I'm on my way up, but first I must drop in at the sick bay to check that everything is going smoothly."

The line went dead, and Vonner leaned back in his seat. He suppressed a sigh as he considered all that he'd done. Nothing had been overlooked. In an hour, the crisis would be completely averted. He gnawed his bottom lip for a moment,

then selected a switch on the internal communicator board and flipped it. Howie Farrell, the communications officer, spoke immediately.

"Give me a minute, Captain. I have a message coming in."

"Call me back then." Vonner relaxed, then connected himself to the sick bay. After a short delay, Dr. Morley came through. "How is it with you, Doc?" he demanded.

"I've finished the special processing on those men showing the more obvious symptoms of space distress, Captain," came the clinical reply. "I'm now tackling the standard rota. I'll let you know when I get through."

"Thank you, Doc. I shall need you at a special conference later. I'm going to hold an inquiry into the whole business, and I shall need to know how an unauthorized person got into the brainwasher."

"I'll hold myself ready to report to you with the superintendent of nurses, Captain. Will that be all?"

"For now, Doc. I'll be in touch." Vonner closed the line and got to his feet. There was nothing else he could do until the processing of the entire crew was completed.

Moving to the door, Vonner paused when it opened, and frowned when he saw Sergeant Nevin of security coming forward, followed by

two heavily armed guards.

"What's the trouble, Sergeant?" Vonner demanded.

"No trouble, Captain," came the firm reply from the tall, red-headed security man. "I've got orders to put you under arrest. I hope you won't make any trouble, sir."

"Arrest!" Vonner was shaken to the core. "What kind of a joke is this? Upon whose orders are you acting, Sergeant?"

"Commander Bardo has assumed command, sir."

"Bardo!" Vonner repeated the name as if he were in a dream. "You take your orders from Colonel Curran."

"Colonel Curran is under arrest at this moment, sir," came the quiet reply. "All senior officers are being placed under arrest."

"But this is mutiny!" Vonner made an effort to recover from his shock. "What has induced you to act upon Commander Bardo's orders? Have you been extra-processed, Sergeant?"

"No, sir."

"Then you're suffering from space sickness, the same as Commander Bardo, and I order you to place yourself under my command." Vonner stepped forward and lifted a hand to take a stun-gun from the nearer of the two guards.

"Stay where you are, sir," Nevin ordered, his

pale eyes narrowed.

"Don't be a fool, man!" Vonner closed on the nearest guard, intent upon wresting the initiative from these men before the situation fell apart. But the guard lifted the small weapon and fired. Vonner didn't even hear the crack of the discharge. There was a minor explosion of energy inside his head, and he fell limply to the floor, shuddered convulsively, then relaxed into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR

In fifteen minutes Vonner came back to his senses, but he couldn't see for some minutes after his mind reawakened. He found himself lying on his back, and the pain in his head pinned him to the durasteel floor. By degrees the iron ice of the stunning energy bolt receded, freeing his mind and releasing his senses from its unbreakable grip, and he groaned as full awareness came to him. He opened his eyes to find himself lying in one of the security cells, and as the situation dawned on him he realized the hopelessness of his predicament.

Mutiny! The word was large in his mind. Ed Bardo had relieved him of his command! But why? Was this the result of Ed's partial recovery from the brainwashing process? Vonner got unsteadily to his feet and leaned against the bulkhead. He had only himself to blame for this. He should have sent Ed to be processed before the rota started. The man's attitude, before all this started, ought to have warned him just how far the situation had deteriorated.

He moved around the blank walls, trying to

find the door, but the steel was flush and obdurate. His head still felt strange from the burst of energy that had knocked him down, but his mind was beginning to react again, and he put a hand into his pants pocket and produced his electronic key. A grin touched his face, and his dark eyes lost their dazed expression. They hadn't bothered to search him! He moved around the walls, not sure of his position in relation to the ship, and the electronic key, a narrow twist of microsteel shaped like a magnet, vibrated in his hand as he operated it. A moment later the steel door opened soundlessly, and he stepped out into the corridor. The door closed at his back.

Now what? He glanced around, then moved along the row of cells, pausing at the first and opening the door with his electronic key. The locks were electric and would resist the force of an atomic blast, but the simple key in his hand acted like a magician's wand.

In the first cell he found Philo Curran stretched out on the floor, and Vonner thinned his lips as he entered the little steel cubicle. He bent over his security man and saw bruises on Curran's fleshy face. So Philo had put up some resistance! It was good to know that some of the others were against Bardo.

There was nothing he could do for the man. Curran would recover in his own time. Vonner

heaved a sigh and left the cell, going on to the next one, and found Aaron Marr just regaining his wits. Marr stared up at him in dazed shock, and sat blinking his eyes and shaking his head in much the same way Vonner himself had done. He couldn't speak at first, and Vonner crouched beside him, just waiting.

"What happened, Skipper?" the astrogator demanded eventually. "Why have I been arrested? You don't suspect me of sabotage, do you?"

"I didn't arrest you, Aaron," Vonner replied grimly, and explained what had happened. He saw pure disbelief on the man's face.

"But what's happening?" Marr continued. "What's Bardo going to do?"

"I dont know, but I have no doubt we'll get some idea before very long." Vonner got wearily to his feet. "There's not much he can do." He glanced at his watch. "No doubt he's taken over the ship by now, but he can't go anywhere in it. He won't know enough about your job to do anything about our present course."

"I've been thinking about that," Marr said slowly. "Before I was arrested, I mean. Each of us on board has been programmed just like a computer. We each know our duties, and it's only men like you and Bardo who have more than one program impulsed into you. It's obvious that

you and the other key officers on board must have some knowledge of all the departments. That brainwasher could give to any man whatever sequence is on the cassette inserted into it, couldn't it?"

"I don't know. I suppose so. We'd have to check that out with the doc. But I can see what you're getting at, Aaron. You're thinking that Bardo has gained access to the brainwasher in some way and absorbed the programs from some of the other cassettes."

"That's right. If he took mine, then he'd know as much about astrogating as I do, and if he took Wayland's then he'd have the same knowledge as a chief engineer."

"And if he went through the entire ship, then he could have the knowledge of every man aboard!" Vonner felt his mind tremble at the thought. Then he shook his head. "I doubt if one man's brain could contain so much information. If it were possible, then there wouldn't be seventy crewmen aboard. There'd be a captain and no crew."

"Perhaps. But it is worth a thought. What are you going to do now, Captain?"

"Try to regain control of my ship!"

"Do you know who's working with Bardo?" Marr was rubbing his temples, his face twisted a little with the pain inside his skull.

"No. Curran is in the next cell, and he's still unconscious. So he's on our side. I'm going to check out the rest of the cells. Do you feel ready to go along?"

"Sure. Just give me another minute. But we aren't armed, Captain. If Bardo wants to get a whole lot rougher, then he's only got to give the word."

"We'll worry about that when the time comes," Vonner decided. "I can't just sit around wondering what will happen next. I've got to try to take the initiative."

"I'll go along with you, all the way," Marr said. "I didn't even see who stunned me. I was in my quarters with my back to the door, trying to do a little homework against the time we'll slip into orbit around Omina. Then—wham! I didn't know a thing until I saw you bending over me."

Vonner nodded. He was still a little dazed himself, and he couldn't find any reason for what Ed Bardo was doing. But he'd know soon enough, he thought grimly as he moved to the door and unlocked it. He pressed his electronic key against the smooth steel, felt the vibrations begin to waver, and then slid the key toward the top left-hand corner. The door opened immediately, and he peered out into the corridor.

"Isn't there a guard down here?" Marr demanded uneasily. "I don't fancy getting another

bolt from one of those guns."

"I haven't seen anyone. No doubt they're all busy taking care of the rest of the crew. Go and take a look at Curran. He ought to be snapping out of it by now. I'll go this way and check through the other cells."

"Okay. But wait for me before you go any farther!" Marr grinned thinly and went next door; he paused in the open doorway of Curran's cell and glanced back at the watchful Vonner. "He's beginning to stir, Captain," he reported.

"Good. Help him up out of it and come with me." Vonner went on to the next cell, opened it, and discovered Dalus Wayland pacing the small confined area. The chief engineer swung around as the door opened and glared at Vonner.

"What is this all about, Skipper?" he demanded angrily. "That was no way to arrest a man!"

"You'll have to take that up with Ed Bardo, Dalus," Vonner said grimly, and told his subordinate what had happened.

"I had a feeling that something was eating Ed," Wayland said when Vonner had concluded. "You figure he did something to that brainwasher."

"More than likely, but we won't know until we can talk with him. Your being here proves that you're not in on this mutiny, Dalus. Are you

with me to try and regain control of the ship? Curran and Marr are down here. I've just released them."

"You can bet your sweet life I'm with you." The chief engineer was angry about his arrest. "What the devil's gotten into Ed?"

"I'm to blame," Vonner said quietly. "I should have had him processed before anyone else. God knows how long he's been planning this, or how long he's been returning to normal." He turned to leave the cell, and Marr appeared, supporting a half conscious Curran. "Step in here a moment, both of you," Vonner went on. "I want to check the rest of the cells. It's better that the corridor is kept clear, just in case."

"You figure those guards will kill us if we get too frisky?" Marr demanded.

"I wouldn't like to test them," Vonner replied. He went on, and in the next cell he found Howie Farrell. The communications officer was stretched out on his back, unconscious, and Vonner shook his head as he gauged the degree of the man's incapacity. He went to the door of the cell and called for the others, and when they came trooping in he faced them grimly. "It looks to me as if Farrell has been given a big stun," he said tightly. "He should have medical treatment."

Curran was rubbing his temples, his large, strong face twisted with a grimace of pain. But

his glistening brown eyes were steady as they regarded Vonner.

"I'm to blame for this, Captain," he said firmly. "As chief of security, I ought to have known about this plot."

"Don't blame yourself," Vonner said generously. "In my capacity as the captain, I'm equally to blame. But that's not going to help get us out of this. We're going to have to disarm the guards Bardo has gathered around him and take over the flight control room. Until we know what the true situation is, there's not much we can do."

"Sergeant Nevin took me," Curran said, and there were traces of surprise in his unsteady voice. "My own right-hand man! Just wait until I get him into these cells!"

"He and the others are still unprocessed," Vonner pointed out. "They're not capable of their own actions. We'll handle this as simply as we can. Are there any guns down here, Philo? If not, where is the nearest supply?"

"There won't be any guns in this block," Curran retorted. "I imagine the best thing to do is get to the crew's quarters. If we can determine who's with Bardo, we'll know what the odds are, and can plan accordingly."

"That could lead to killing," Wayland said slowly. "Captain, I've got a better idea."

"Let's have it then, but be quick," Vonner

retorted urgently. "There's no telling what is going on around us."

"We can make our way to the engine room from here with little or no trouble," Wayland said quietly. "Once inside, we can seal off and take command of the ship. The engine control room is master to your flight control room, Captain, as you know. Bardo, up there on the flight deck, cannot do a thing if he hasn't taken over below."

"You're right." Vonner nodded instantly. "I should have thought of that. But I'm certain Bardo will have considered it, so we'll have to be prepared for trouble. With the main engine room doors closed, nothing short of a nuclear explosion can open them. We could dictate terms. If we cut the main switches in the engine control room, then everything on the ship will shut down. Come on; we can't afford to waste any more time." He paused as they started from the cell. "Wait a moment," he warned. "There's an atomic disintegrator in service. They could cut through the engine room doors with that. Chief, how long would it take them to get through, do you think?"

"Hard to say for certain." Wayland scratched his chin. "But we can cut power if they start anything like that. Those doors are built to withstand accidental atomic explosions. You know as

well as I do that our motors are potential atomic bombs. But I've got the feeling that if we take over down there and kill the master switch, Bardo is going to start feeling sorry for himself."

"I'll take your word for it." Vonner nodded decisively. "Let's go."

He led the way to the heavy door that shut off the cells from the rest of the ship, and his electronic key opened it without trouble. Peering out into the corridor, he found it deserted, and motioned to the others to follow. They slunk along the long metal tube that was the corridor, and Dalus Wayland pushed his way abreast of Vonner.

"Captain, we'd better get out of this corridor," the chief engineer said. "There are sure to be guards at all strategic points. Let me take over for a bit. I can get you into the engine room with no trouble at all."

"Go ahead, Dalus," Vonner invited. He glanced at the others. "Anyone who has any helpful suggestions at any time can speak right up. Were you all reprocessed before this mutiny started?"

They all replied in the affirmative, and Vonner sighed in relief. He didn't want any extra complication clouding the already obscure situation. They went on, with the chief engineer leading the way, and descended two levels by way of a

narrow flight of steel stairs that spiraled dizzily. Then Wayland paused on a small landing and slid aside a thin square plate that revealed two switches. He flipped one, and a section of the steel bulkhead slid noiselessly open.

"Inspection tunnels," Wayland said. "Me and my assistant are the only men on the ship who know them all. You can get anywhere on the ship through these."

"That's handy to know," Vonner said, grinning. "So let's get moving. I shan't feel easy until we're inside the engine room."

They entered the narrow tunnel, and Wayland switched on some lights and then closed the entrance. As they went on again, Vonner could hear the steady hum of the gigantic engines, and the tunnel seemed to be vibrating steadily with throbbing power. For what seemed ages they followed the tall, hefty figure of the chief engineer, until finally they came to a blank steel wall. Wayland turned and grinned tightly.

"We've arrived," he said tersely. "On the other side of this door is the engine control room, Captain. I expect you know the layout in this area, but if any of you don't then I'd better explain. It's a small chamber with all the control panels in it, and normally either I or the assistant chief engineer is on duty there. Bardo might have put a guard in there with him,

but at this moment Lieutenant Mellon should be alone."

"If Bardo has left him on duty, then it means he's one of the mutineers," Vonner said crisply. "I want it understood that none of these mutineers can be blamed for what is happening. I want to take back the ship without hurting anyone, if possible, but don't let that order restrict you. The ship and this mission come first. Kill if you have to. Now get this door open, Dalus, and we'll tackle anyone on the other side."

Big Philo Curran pushed his way to Vonner's side. "Let me go in first, Captain," he said roughly. "This situation has arisen because I fell down on my job, and I'm the best trained fighter on the ship."

Vonner nodded, and tensed as Wayland prepared to operate the great airtight door. The chief engineer slid open a plate in the wall and pressed a button, and the door slid aside. Curran went through the opening almost before there was sufficient space for his powerful frame, and Vonner was close behind, followed by the others. Vonner saw Mellon seated at a desk, and there was a security man standing nearby. Both men turned quickly, and Vonner saw the surprise and fear that came over the guard's face. The man dropped his hand to his belt, where a stun-gun was holstered, but Philo Curran was halfway

across the room before anyone could move. He swung a heavy fist at the guard's unprotected jaw and connected powerfully. The sharp crack of the blow made Vonner wince, and Curran half turned to throw a triumphant grin at him as the guard crumpled. He caught the man and lowered him to the floor, snatching at the stun-gun, and he squared his powerful shoulders as he came erect with the weapon in his hand.

"Now this changes the situation, Captain," he said heavily.

"Watch the door, Philo," Vonner commanded. He turned to look at Lieutenant Mellon, who was getting to his feet, an expression of relief showing on his face.

"Chief, Captain," Mellon cried. "Thank God you're here! They were forcing me to work with them. They told me you were all being held as hostages, and if I didn't do what I was told you'd all be killed."

"Glad to know you're with us, Mellon," Wayland said. "We're going to seal ourselves in here and close the four engine-room doors." He moved to a control panel that was alive with flickering green lights and tremoring gauges and dials. He started to throw big switches, and more lights flashed. Then he turned to face Vonner, heaving a long sigh of relief. "That does it," he said. "All four main engine-room doors are locked,

and nothing short of an atomic explosion will open them, apart from these switches."

"Surely there's an auxiliary control," Vonner said.

"There is, but it doesn't come into action unless these main controls fail for any reason. We're safe in here, Captain, and we control every light source and machine in the ship. Every ounce of power originates from here, and these control panels operate completely independently of auxiliary circuits and sequences."

"Good. Now we're in a position to talk to Bardo," Vonner said. "But first we'd better check the staff in the main engine room.

"There's likely to be another guard, at least, in the department."

"We have five mechanics on duty in the engine room," Mellon said. "The normal crew is still on duty, and there is a guard on them."

"If you know where he's posted, then come and show me," Curran said. "I'll soon take care of him. Then you'll be free to carry on, Captain."

"Go with him, Mellon," Vonner ordered. He looked at the eager security chief. "Report back to me as soon as you've secured the engine room, and I'll take steps to contact the flight control room. Bardo is going to feel unhappy about this."

Curran nodded and preceded Mellon out of the room. Vonner moved to the desk and sat

down. His fingers hovered over the communicator buttons, but he contained his impatience. He needed information badly, and his eyes flickered toward the unconscious guard lying on the floor, but already showing signs of coming to his senses.

"Get that man up and in a chair," he ordered, and Aaron Marr motioned to Farrell to help him. Vonner waited until the guard was conscious. When the man opened his eyes and looked about dazedly, he found the senior officers of the ship around him in a tight circle. "You're Burke, aren't you?" Vonner demanded.

"Yes, Captain." The man spoke sulkily. "How did you get here? We were told you and the rest of the officers were in the cells."

"I'll ask the questions," Vonner told him. "Just what were you told about me and the rest of the officers?"

"That you were all suffering from space madness, Captain, and had been arrested for the good of the ship."

"How many men are in on this mutiny?" Vonner didn't take his eyes off the man's face.

"About a dozen."

"When did you first learn of it, and why did you agree to join it?"

"Sergeant Nevin sounded me out. I know all about the brainwasher, sir. It's monstrous that

we should be processed like that. On the last rota, those of us who were to take part in the mutiny were passed through the brainwasher without being processed."

Vonner frowned. "How was that accomplished?"

"Commander Bardo had it arranged with one of the nurses, sir." Burke was speaking more readily now. "Nurse Kendrick is on our side, and she always helps the doc with the brainwashing. The mutineers were told to make a sign to her when we entered the chamber, and she did something to the machine so we didn't get any power."

"And as a result you resumed full control of your minds!" Vonner gnawed his bottom lip. "What is Commander Brado's intention, do you know?"

"We're going back to earth, Captain."

"That's madness! Howie Farrell leaned forward. "How can Bardo hope to handle my particular department? I'm sure my assistant wouldn't help him."

"He'd never find the way," Aaron Marr retorted. "Apart from the fact that the ship is computered to its present course and will fly into orbit around Omina in five days, I wouldn't throw in my lot with Bardo. I'm sure he doesn't know how to get back to earth."

"He's done a lot of things already that are

ordinarily beyond his comprehension," Vonner said. "We'd better suppose that he can do all that he says he can. We shan't know exactly what has been going on until we have the mutiny under control. Then we'll have the whole story. Burke, you can consider yourself under arrest. You'll be reprocessed as soon as possible, and that will take care of it."

"Captain, you mtust be crazy, like Bardo says." Burke started to his feet, and Marr grabbed him and thrust him back into the chair. "Can't you see what's happening to you and the rest of us?"

"You tell me what you think is happening," Vonner said easily.

"We haven't a chance of getting out of orbit once we go in," the man retorted. "Commander Bardo has worked it out. We won't be able to land on the planet, and we'll be stuck in orbit. We'll be marooned in space! We're all going to die out here! Our only chance is to turn around now, before it's too late, and get back to earth."

Vonner frowned. He could tell by Burke's face that the man believed what he had been told, and for a moment he felt the icy palm of disquiet touching him. But he shrugged his shoulders.

"I fail to see why you should believe an unqualified man like Commander Bardo," he said quietly. "Surely you don't imagine that I would deliberately endanger this ship and the entire

crew! If I thought there was the slightest danger, I would abort the mission at once. That is a part of my orders, Burke. The ship and the crew come first. If Commander Bardo thought there was any danger, he had only to report his suspicions to me, and I would have had them checked. Your common sense ought to have explained all this to you, but I appreciate that the omission of reprocessing affected the judgment of you and the other mutineers, and you're not to be blamed for this lapse. Commander Bardo is showing all the signs of space madness, but I'm sure the doctor will be able to help him."

"It'll be too late for all of us if you don't get the ship out of Omina's gravitational pull before it can affect us," the man replied. "Commander Bardo knows what he's talking about. We're doomed if we go on. In two days we'll be unable to turn back. It's certain death, Captain, but you can't see it. The reprocessing has affected your judgment. You can't tell because you're still under its influence, but the rest of us, the mutineers, have our complete powers of reasoning again, and we know the commander is telling the truth. If you break the mutiny, you sentence us all to death."

CHAPTER FIVE

Philo Curran came back into the room, pushing a guard ahead of him, and the big security chief was grinning hugely. He had another stun-gun in his hand, and came forward to give it to Vonner.

"No trouble at all, sir," he reported. "The engine room is ours. You can carry on now."

"Thanks, Philo. Keep an eye on the prisoners. What about the mechanics in the engine room?"

"They're not armed, so there's nothing they could do about us even if they wanted to," Curran said.

"Okay." Vonner took a deep breath and went to the desk communicator. He looked at the intent faces surrounding him and tried to ease some of the tension that was clinging to him. He didn't want to think of what Bardo had told his fellow mutineers, but Burke's words were circling in his brain, and his hand trembled a little as he reached out and flipped the switch that would

give him an open line to the flight control room. A light flashed on the communicator, and then Bardo's voice sounded.

"Flight control. What's your problem?"

"Engine room here. I have no problems now, Ed, but you have." Vonner smiled grimly as he heard a smothered gasp at the other end of the line.

"Captain! How the devil did you get down there?"

"That doesn't matter, Ed. I'm in control again. I have most of the senior officers with me, and we're sealed in the engine room. I'm ordering you to surrender yourself for reprocessing."

"Never! You don't know it, Captain, but the whole ship is heading for destruction."

"I'm quite willing to talk that over with you, Ed, but not in this situation. I must have full control of the ship. I'm not going to bargain with you. Either you surrender now, or I shall cut main power."

"You wouldn't risk the ship," Bardo replied with a laugh. "I know what would happen if you cut power now. We're only five days from Omina. Interrupt the computers now, and we'll turn into a fireball as soon as we hit atmosphere."

"You're planning to turn the ship and go back to earth, Ed. Tell me how you expect to do that."

"It's quite simple. I availed myself of the reprocessing machine and the cassettes of all the senior officers. I have all their programs in my mind. I can do your duties and all the others. I'm making calculations now to turn the ship."

"Ed, you're suffering from space madness. I've been learning something of your past activities, and I can understand the state your mind is now in. You've got to surrender to me at once. We're in danger all right, but not from my control. You think you're right, but you've got space between your ears."

"Nothing doing." Bardo laughed harshly, and there was a trace of hysteria in his tone. "You daren't cut power. That much I do know. There's nothing you can do, even though you have taken over the engine room. It's stalemate. You can't harm me. But you haven't any food or water. I'm going to put the atomic disintegrator to work on the main engine-room door, and I'll be through it in half an hour even if you do boost the electronic tensions of the doors."

"What are you afraid of, Ed?" Vonner tried to keep his tone cool, reassuring. "I know you missed out on the last regular monthly process, and your mind has returned to normal. Naturally, you're confused. I want nothing more from you than your submission to reprocessing. After that we'll resume as before."

"Not a chance! It's certain death on our present course."

"Why? Give me your reasons!" Vonner was aware of the deep interest of the men around him, and he hoped Bardo's hot words would not set them thinking. "If you think the ship is in some kind of danger, then your duty is to report to me, not take over the ship. I am qualified to handle every emergency."

"You're bound too tightly to your duty. You would go on even if it meant death for everyone." Bardo sounded angry and bitter. "I can't take any more of it, Captain. I'm gonna turn this ship around."

"I can't allow that, Ed, and you know it. Either you turn the ship back to me, or I shall have to take steps to stop you. That could be unpleasant for the both of us."

The line went dead, and Vonner paused with bated breath as he waited. When he was certain there was no reply coming from the mutineer, he switched off the line and leaned back in the seat, to stare into the circle of keen eyes that surrounded him.

"What was he talking about, Captain?" Aaron Marr demanded.

"I don't have the faintest idea, men," Vonner replied. "I'm as anxious as the rest of you to know the dangers, if any. It's obvious that Bardo

is now suffering from space fatigue at least, and possibly he's in a forward stage of space madness. Now we can all understand why we were processed. This sort of situation would have arisen a long time ago if we'd not been conditioned to our mission. But the problem now is how to take over the control room!"

"There are several ways we can overcome the men in the flight control room," Dalus Wayland said. "I can cut their source of power, and that means a loss of light and heat and air for them. If we could time it right, we could render them unconscious, then go in and take over."

"I don't want to go to those extremes unless I have to, Chief," Vonner said. "There might be an accident, and I want to avoid killing anyone. In particular, we've got to take Bardo alive in order to question him about this bee in his bonnet."

"You figure he might have something with that wild talk of his?" Curran demanded, twiddling with his stun-gun.

"I wouldn't discount it, Philo." Vonner pursed his lips for a moment. He let his mind pursue the several courses open to him, but before he could come to a decision, the communicator on the desk was operated and Bardo came through again.

"Captain, can you hear me?" There was an exultant note in Bardo's voice.

"I hear you." Vonner suppressed a sigh as he flipped the switch. "What is it now?"

"I've got the doc in here, and everyone else important to me. If you meddle with our air supply or the heat or light, then she'll suffer with the rest of us."

"I can assure you, Bardo, that I'll have no consideration for any member of the crew when I decide what to do about you." Vonner didn't feel the slightest pang of emotion as he spoke.

"You don't know what you're saying, Captain." Bardo laughed, and it was an ugly sound. "You don't know it right now, but the doc is the woman you love. That's the trouble with brainwashing. It's taken all the pleasure out of life. If you were back to the normal state right now, you would be doing anything to save this woman. I'll make a deal with you. Let me run the ship and you can have her."

"No deal, Bardo. I don't know what you're talking about when you mention the Doc. She's just another colleague to me, and if she's had the misfortune to get dragged into this, then she'll have to take the consequences just like any other crew member."

"Stick to that decision, Captain." Dr. Morley's voice cut in above Bardo's, and Vonner heard Bardo smother a curse. Then there was the sound of a blow, followed by several cursing

voices. Vonner got to his feet, reaching forward to cut off the communicator. He spoke through his teeth.

"Chief, cut the lights in the flight control, will you? That will do for a start. If we can soften them up a bit, we might make Bardo amenable."

Wayland nodded and turned to the panel board. His skilled fingers sped over the switches and levers, and a moment later he glanced at Vonner and nodded.

"They're without light, Captain," he reported.

Almost immediately the communicator burst into life, and Vonner switched on his end of it. Bardo was yelling at the top of his voice, and there was now panic in his tone.

"Captain, if you don't restore the light, I'll have the doc killed. Don't be a fool. You can't beat me. You can't save the ship if you resist. Throw in the towel, and I'll do what I have to now to save us all."

"No dice, Bardo. Surrender unconditionally, and I'll restore order. I'm the only man who can save the ship, if it is in any danger. Report to me what you think is the trouble, and I'll check it out. That's the only sane way to save the ship."

"You're a fool!" Bardo sounded as if he were nearing the end of his patience. "You're relying completely on your computer drive, and it's

wrong. I know what I'm talking about. I've got Wayland's engineering knowledge programmed into my head, and I know as much about astrogating as Marr himself."

"Let me talk to him, Skipper," Marr said softly at Vonner's side. "Perhaps I can blind him with science."

Vonner nodded and leaned back in the seat. The astrogator bent over the desk and leaned an elbow upon it. His heavy features were intent as he spoke.

"Ed, this is Marr. What's on your mind? Tell me about the computer error. If you've absorbed my duty program, then you'll be able to talk my language."

"I don't need you!" There was contempt in Bardo's tone. "I have one advantage over you, Marr. My mind is not dominated by that damned brainwasher. You're duty-bound like the rest of the crew. You can't see the wood for the trees. Let me talk to the captain."

"This has gone on long enough, Bardo." Vonner cut into the conversation. "I'm going to make life unpleasant for you. Give in now and save us all a lot of trouble."

"Nuts!" The line went dead, and Vonner could feel his patience dying.

"Chief, make it cold for them," he ordered harshly. "Put their temperature down to zero."

"Right away!" Wayland turned to his panels again, and Vonner watched silently, his face set and his eyes brooding. "That's taken care of it." Wayland turned back to them again. "It'll take thirty seconds, but then they'll know what it's like to be really cold."

"While they're freezing we,'ve got to figure out our next move," Vonner said. He eyed big Philo Curran speculatively. "We're got a couple of stun-guns with us now. We ought to put in some kind of counter. Aaron, before we do anything, can you think of any reason for Bardo's attitude? Is there anything wrong with our course?"

"Not as far as I know, Skipper," the astrogator replied firmly. "The computer can't be wrong, as a matter of routine. There's nothing wrong as Bardo claims, and I carry out periodic checks in my department. Sorry, but I can't help you."

"Where would Bardo get the idea from that the computer is wrong, Captain?" Howie Farrell demanded.

"If we knew that, we'd have some idea of the problem," Vonner retorted. He looked at the chief engineer. "That inspection tunnel we came along to get here—" he mused— "it's part of a complete network, isn't it?"

"That's right, Skipper. If you want to get into the flight control room, then I'll put you right

at the door you need." Wayland paused for a moment and thrust out his bottom lip. "But I must warn you that if Bardo has programmed himself with my personal duty cassette, then he'll know about the tunnels."

"I know." Vonner was grim. "But I'm counting on the fact that he may be so busy right now that he won't even give them a thought. We're going into the flight control room and take it over. If we succeed, then the rest should be easy."

"You'd better stay here, Captain," Curran said. "I'll go, and I'll need just one man with me."

"No." Vonner shook his head. "I've got to get in there to stand by. We can leave the chief here in control; and you'd better remain, Farrell, with one of the guns, to keep an eye on the prisoners."

"Perhaps I'd better get back to communications, Captain," Farrell said. He lifted a hand to his forehead. "I've got the feeling that there was something important going on before I was stunned."

Vonner looked at the communications officer, his own mind ticking vibrantly. They were all still suffering partially from the effects of being stunned. The discomfort had worn off, but the mind was still shocked and unable to function

one hundred percent. Suddenly something seemed to click into place in the captain's brain, and he became urgent.

"Howie, I called you just before the mutiny occurred, and you asked me to wait because there was a message coming through. Was it a message from earth?"

"An outside message!" Farrell started nervously, as if he expected a blow. "Why, yes! I picked it up on Emergency. It's all coming back to me now. That stun-gun knocked it completely out of my head."

"Don't spell it out, Howie," Vonner said urgently. "Just tell me what it was about."

"I didn't get the chance to work on it, Captain." Farrell was apologetic. "The message hardly came through before they stunned me."

"Then you'd better make it priority and get into your office," Vonner decided. "If it came through on Emergency, then you can bet that it's got to do with the running of the ship. Perhaps it ties in with what Bardo is talking about, but how he would know about it when the rest of us overlooked it beats me."

"If he missed a reprocessing session, then he's had full control of his whole mind for some time," Philo Curran said. "In our state we rely too much on the computers."

"Thats what we're supposed to do," Aaron

Marr said. "Look how far we've come from earth on a computer course, and when you look at the front scanner screen you can see Omina as large as life." He laughed harshly. "I don't think I could have brought us here by my efforts."

"Well, let's get something done," Vonner said. "I'm going to control with Curran. Chief, you stand by here. Give us five minutes; then return light and heat to the control room. We'll burst in on them soon afterward, and I'll let you know how it goes. Howie, as soon as you get the all-clear from me, get along to your office and work out that message. Is that understood?"

"Okay, Captain." Wayland and Farrell spoke in concert.

Vonner glanced at Curran, and the big security man grinned and nodded.

"I'm ready, Skipper," he said.

"Do you know your way through the inspection tunnels, Mellon?" Vonner asked the assistant chief engineer, and the man nodded. "Then you can go along with us and show us the way." He paused for a moment to consider. There were a dozen other details clamoring for attention in the back of his mind, but he couldn't attend to them all, and the most urgent were about to be dealt with. But he felt optimistic, and his strict training kept him to the main objective and refused to let him be sidetracked.

Mellon fetched a small but powerful hand lamp and led the way into the inspection tunnel. Curran followed closely, and Vonner brought up the rear. The assistant chief engineer did not falter as he went through the network of tunnels, and they ascended to the higher levels, encased in glistening steel. Their shadows were gigantic and leaped about them as they progressed with the aid of the portable lamp. Then the main lighting system was restored, and they proceeded at a faster pace. Finally Mellon paused and indicated the right-hand wall.

"The main control room is on the other side, Captain," he said.

"Good work, Mellon." Vonner glanced at Curran. "Ready, Philo?"

"As ready as I shall ever be, Skipper," the big man replied, and grinned confidently. "Open the door, Mellon, and let me at them."

"Don't shoot unless you have to," Vonner warned. "The less trouble there is, the better."

"I know how to handle it." Curran checked the stun-gun. "I'll give them a ten-minute knockout if I have to use it."

Mellon watched Vonner's face, and operated the door mechanism when Vonner nodded. But nothing happened, and Curran was trembling with eagerness, leaning forward, standing on the balls of his feet.

"The door won't budge," Mellon reported. He jammed his thumb against the button again and again with no response, and Curran started cursing to himself.

"The power is on again," Vonner said. "What's the trouble, Mellon?"

"I can't tell, Captain! It could be anything. But my guess is that Bardo is aware of the inspection tunnels, and he's activated a defensive screen around the control room."

"So what can we do?" Vonner showed his teeth in a mirthless grin as he pondered.

"We won't get through this or any other door," Mellon said. "There's nothing we can do right now."

"And the screen continues to operate even when the main power is cut," Vonner mused. "It seems that Bardo is one jump ahead of us."

"What are we gonna do, Captain?" Curran demanded.

"We'll have to forget Bardo for a bit and try to round up all those mutineers who are not in the flight control room. We've got to find some loyal men and arm them, Philo."

"Well, we won't accomplish anything here," Curran retorted. "Put us in the main corridor, Mellon, and we'll take it as it comes."

"Let's get into the sick bay first," Vonner said. "If you can make certain that the brain-

washer still operates, we can push all our prisoners through it. When they've been reprocessed, they'll be beyond Bardo's influence."

Mellon turned instantly and began to retrace his steps, and eventually they paused in another part of the tunnel. This time the door operated, and Curran leaped into Dr. Morley's private office. Vonner, following closely, saw that the office was empty, and there was an indefinable pang in his chest as they went on. Curran jerked open a door that opened into the sick bay office; there were half a dozen men present, with two guards standing by the door giving access to the main corridor. Curran was across the room in half a dozen strides, closing on the two guards and catching them unawares. They surrendered without trouble, and Vonner felt easier when Curran passed him one of the captured stunguns. The men in the room proved to be prisoners who had tried to resist the mutineers, and Vonner soon took command.

"We've got to arm these men, Philo," he said. "You'll have to take over the security block and capture the arms store. We'll go right through the ship and take over. When we've accomplished that, we can concentrate on Bardo." He looked around at the assembled men. "Anyone here knows where the doc is?" he demanded.

"Bardo had her taken into the flight control room, Captain," someone said, and Vonner thinned his lips as he tried to fathom what was happening in his mind. He was unusually concerned about the doctor, but didn't know why.

"I want to see the nurses," Vonner said. "They were confined to their quarters. We've got to get the brainwasher working again. Keep an eye on the two prisoners until we know what we can do with them."

He sent Mellon back to the engine room with a message for Wayland. They were to maintain pressure on Bardo. He gave the chief a free hand, knowing that Wayland would know a thing or two about using his power to create discomfort for those in the control room. Then he went to find a nurse who could handle the brainwasher, remembering that the superintendent of nurses had given Bardo access to the re-processing room. He discovered that the superintendent was in the main control room with Bardo, but found someone who knew about the brainwasher. Two of the captured guards were processed, and Vonner was satisfied that the machine was still in working order. The guards became amenable, and were in the forefront of the surge of men Curran led to liberate and recapture the ship.

Vonner made his headquarters in the sick bay, and prisoners were soon streaming in under

guard to be reprocessed. In an hour most of the ship was back under Vonner's lawful command, with the notable exceptions of the communicators' center and the flight control room. Bardo had the two most important departments under his control, and Vonner could find no way to dislodge the mutineers. Then Vonner received a message that Bardo was threatening to smash the flight computer unless there was a truce for bargaining, and Vonner reluctantly agreed to withhold his plans and talk.

CHAPTER SIX

Vonner returned to the engine control room to find a state of tension existing. Farrell was beside himself with worry, and as soon as Vonner appeared, the communications officer started talking about the emergency message that had come through earlier.

"Howie," Vonner told him, "I've taken back most of the ship, but we can't get into your department or at Bardo. I'm here now to try to work something out. There's only a handful of men with Bardo in the control room, and half a dozen of them in your place. Bardo has surrounded the area with a force field that even the atomic disintegrator can't touch. I'm as worried as you about that emergency signal, but we can't do anything about it yet."

"We can throw another screen around the one Bardo set up," Dalus Wayland said. "We can't get in, but we can prevent them from getting out. I don't know if they've taken food and

water in with them, but if they haven't, then we can force them to submit."

"But that will take days," Vonner said. "In less than five days now we have to swing into orbit around Omina. We've got to regain control immediately."

"Got any ideas, Skipper?" Wayland demanded. "I've exhausted my mind. As far as I can tell, there's nothing we can do either to get into the control room or get them out. Bardo has set into operation the remote control gear. It was designed for just such a situation as we have facing us. They're drawing emergency power straight from the engines themselves. We daren't shut down the main drive if we're to maintain our planned course, and even if we did, they would still generate enough power to stay where they are."

"Can't you rig up some kind of an emergency cut-out, Chief?" Vonner demanded. "There must be something you can do. We can't let Bardo command the ship much longer."

"He wants to talk to you, Captain," Aaron Marr reported.

Vonner nodded and went to the desk. He sat down heavily, and waited for a few moments to compose his mind. Then he opened the line to the control room, and Bardo spoke to him.

"Ed, you don't have a chance now," Vonner

said with more confidence than he felt. "I've regained control of the rest of the ship, and the entire crew have been reprocessed."

"You might have the body, but I have the brain under my control, Captain," Bardo replied exultingly. "I'm giving you one last chance to surrender to me. You've got five minutes. I'm timing you as of now. In five minutes I'm smashing the flight computer. That's all I've got to say to you."

"Don't be too impatient, Ed!" Vonner retorted sharply. "Just listen to me for a minute. You won't do any damage to the ship, because you're scared to die out here in space. That's the reason you organized this mutiny in the first place, isn't it? You said you thought I was going to kill us all by following orders which you decided were wrong. So you're scared to die, Ed. Now let's get down to brass tacks. Farrell received an emergency signal just before your men attacked him. We can't get back into the communications room to decode it and act upon its information. It may even now be too late to take the necessary steps, but if you don't want to die out here then you'll let me know the contents of that signal."

"Nothing doing, Captain. You can't bluff me. No doubt you're wondering how I'm managing to be two jumps ahead of you all the time. I

know you tried to get in here through the inspection tunnel. But you couldn't make it, and you haven't the power anywhere on the ship to get at me. I know all this because I processed myself with your cassette. I know how you react and what you would do in any situation. As soon as you plan a move, I know about it."

"If the brainwasher works like that, then you ought to know what's troubling me now, Ed," Vonner retorted thinly. "You are as concerned about the safety of the ship as I. You know I'm telling the truth when I say we all stand a very good chance of dying out here if you don't surrender. I can't give in to you. I have my duty to do, even if it does mean the end of the ship."

"I'm already working on the flight computer, Captain," Bardo said. "I'm giving it new orders. We'll be turning soon to follow a home course. We're going back to earth."

"And what will happen when we reach there, Ed?" Vonner demanded gently. "This is a spaceship, remember. You can't go down through earth's atmosphere. You'll have to take me into the orbit base, and there you will be arrested." Vonner paused and shrugged. "This is, if you ever find your way back to within a billion miles of earth."

"I can do it, and I shan't get caught." There

was a dogged note in Bardo's voice, and Vonner felt a wave of weariness assail him. "I'd rather take this slim chance than run the risks you would subject us to by going into orbit around Omina."

"Let's get together and talk this over, Ed," Vonner suggested.

"Where?"

"I'll come up to you." Vonner was unemotional. He knew what was at stake, but it didn't worry him. He had to concentrate upon his duty, even if it cost him his life.

"I'm not killing my screens for anything," Bardo said. "I can't trust you, Captain. You're not in possession of your entire mind, like me. You can't see danger. You've been conditioned to this situation, and you know nothing else. But me, I'm back to normal. I can reason things out for myself."

"You're crazy, Ed, space-crazy. You don't know what you're saying! One man cannot run this ship. We've put a counter-screen around you. Drop your screen, and you'll come up against ours. You can't get out. I'll starve you into submission if I have to."

"You don't have the time." Bardo laughed crazily. "In less than three hours, we'll be heading back the way we came."

"You forget that I'm in control of the engines,

Ed. I'll cut our speed to a million miles an hour, and we'll never get back to earth in your lifetime."

"You won't do that." There was a crazy confidence in Bardo's voice. "You wouldn't condemn yourself and this ship to space. You'd rather get back to earth without accomplishing your mission than not get back at all."

"We aren't getting anywhere, Ed." Vonner reached out to cut the line, but Bardo warned him to wait.

"I've been pointing out to you that I hold all the advantages, Captain. You think it is stalemate, but I have hostages here, and unless you agree to do what I want, then I shall kill my prisoners, commencing with Dr. Morley."

"You wouldn't do anything so foolish, Ed," Vonner said patiently.

"Don't try me, Captain."

Vonner tightened his lips.

"Ed, if you harm any of those prisoners, I'll have you buried in space alive."

Bardo laughed frenziedly. "You've got five minutes to surrender to me, Captain," he said, and closed the line.

"You can't trust him, Captain," Wayland said. "He's crazy."

"Dalus, there isn't anything else I can do," Vonner retorted tiredly. The space pallor in his

face made him look a lot older than his thirty-five years, and he shook his head as if the problems were too much for him. "You heard what he said. He's holding all the big cards. We can't get at him, and we don't have the time to wait it out. He's going to smash the ship and kill us all if we don't get at him."

"You just said we can't get at him," Farrell said worriedly.

"We can't while we're trying to fight him," Vonner said, and there was sudden decision in his tone. "But there is one way we can achieve a slim chance."

"And what's that?" Aaron Marr demanded.

"Do as he says and surrender to him." Worry showed in the deep lines around Vonner's eyes. He spoke through his teeth. "That way we'll get close to him, and we'll have to watch our chances."

"It's too much of a gamble," Farrell said worriedly. "In this present mood, he may kill us all."

"Not if he thinks that one or more of you is prepared to go along with him," Vonner ventured. He was deadly serious, his dark eyes narrowed. "This way, we've got no chance at all. Time is the operative factor. "We don't have time. So one of you grab a stun-gun and arrest me. Put me out with a dose of energy; then call

up Bardo and tell him what you've done. Hand me to him on a platter, and he'll come out from behind his screens. It's the only chance we have."

"I agree with you," a voice said from the doorway.

Vonner looked across to see big Philo Curran standing there, a stun-gun in his hand; the security man was nodding slowly.

"I'm the best man for the job, Captain," he said. "I'll get close to Bardo and put him out. Are you ready?"

Before Vonner could say anything more, Curran shot him with the stun-gun. Vonner opened his mouth to call out, but the bolt of energy bludgeoned him instantly, and he didn't even have the sensation of falling to the steel floor. Blackness more dense than deepest space enveloped him, and his mind blanked out. . . .

In ten short minutes Vonner recovered his senses, to find himself back in one of the cells, and this time his electronic key was missing. He sat up slowly, waiting for the shock of the energy bolt to leave him, and by degrees his mind became clearer and he felt easier.

Finally, the door of the cell opened and a guard appeared, carrying a stun-gun. Vonner got to his feet without a word and was escorted out. They went along to the sick bay, and when

they entered the reprocessing chamber Vonner felt alarmed. But Dr. Morley was there, and so were Bardo and several other men, mostly guards. Vonner tensed when he saw that the guards was carrying lethal Othic ray guns, but his eyes went to Dr. Morley's face and stayed there.

"Captain, I'm glad you came to your senses," Bardo said, coming forward. "I've assumed complete command of the ship, and the entire crew is working satisfactorily. I can trust them all now because they recognize that I am the only man able to save them. But I need your help. I cannot trust you, your mental outlook being what it is, so I am going to conduct a little experiment. You are going to be reprocessed, but in reverse. If I take all your technical knowledge away from you, I can safely leave you in the cells."

"Don't be a fool, Ed," Vonner told him angrily. "You've gone as far as you can. I've submitted to you because it was the only way to save the ship, but you had better do some straight thinking before you go any further."

"You're wasting my time. I have a tremendous amount of work to do. Sit down in the chair and let the reverse processing begin." Bardo glanced toward the doctor. "Don't try to cross me up, Doc, or you'll never live to try again. Give him the full processing treatment in reverse."

Vonner wanted to resist, but he didn't have much chance with the watchful guards about him, and Bardo took care to remain out of arm's reach. Max was made to sit down in the seat, and Dr. Morley came close to connect him to the machine. There was the usual tingling sensation at the back of his neck, and pleasant little thrills touched his spine. He kept his eyes on the doctor, and slowly his awareness changed. His alertness vanished, and all thoughts of duty disappeared. His mind emptied completely, then refilled with details of his past life, before earth blast-off.

Dr. Morley, watching his face intently, saw love dawn in his dark eyes, and knew the process was completed. She switched off the machine and came to release him.

"Adah!" Vonner got to his feet and put his arms around her. He turned to face Bardo when the man laughed.

"Now you're a whole man again, Captain," Bardo said. "You will find your mind becoming filled with the terrors of space when you've had a chance to think it all out. You're no longer a threat to me. You're deeply in love with our doctor, and that emotion should keep you fully occupied. I'm having the cassettes of all the crewmen amended. By the time I'm finished, they'll all be slaves to me."

Vonner made no reply. He slid his arm around Adah's waist and turned to her. Bardo watched for a moment, then turned and left, followed by his guards. He didn't even leave a guard on Vonner.

Dr. Morley returned the cassette to its file, and Vonner stayed beside her. When she turned, he put his arms around her.

"It seems such a long time since we were last together," he told her.

"It's seemed longer to me," she commented. "At any other time I would have enjoyed this interlude. However, the whole fate of the ship is in your hands, and I've got to get you back to normal."

"Normal?" he said. "But I am normal. I feel normal."

"Normal for a man, yes." She smiled sadly. "But I mean normal for a spaceship captain. I daren't give you another dose of processing to neutralize that reverse procedure that was just carried out on you. The shock would kill you, or render you completely witless. Commander Bardo certainly knew what he was about. But he did make one mistake, and I've taken advantage of it. He started this whole business by sabotaging the machine, and I did almost the same thing but with a great deal more simplicity. I loosened one of the terminals. You didn't get

full strength on the reverse processing, Max, and in about three hours you'll be just as you were before. I hope it won't be too late for you to deal with Bardo then. He's having trouble with his plans, although he doesn't know it yet. Your fellow officers are just waiting for their chance to jump him, but with those processed guards around him with those lethal ray guns, no one dares take any kind of a chance."

She slipped her arm through Vonner's and took him into her private office. He kissed her, but she pushed him away, and his face showed hurt.

"What have I done?" he demanded.

"It's all right, Max," she told him. "You'll snap out of it soon. At any other time, I'd be delighted to have you like this, but the ship and the entire crew are at stake, and you're the only man who can save them. Lie down on the couch there, and I'll give you a shot that will put you to sleep for two hours. When you come to again, you'll be ready to fight Bardo, and he mustn't have the slightest inkling of it."

Vonner nodded and sat down on the couch. He leaned back and put up his feet, and Dr. Morley prepared a hypodermic. There was a wistful expression on her face as she administered it; then Vonner closed his eyes and lapsed into unconsciousness. He didn't feel the imprint of

her soft lips against his slack mouth. He knew nothing until the effects of the powerful drug wore off. When he awoke, his mind had returned to the moment before reverse processing, and he felt an urgency in him that was hard to contain. Sitting up, he immediately saw Dr. Morley at her desk and called to her.

"What time is it, Doc?" he demanded.

She turned swiftly in her seat, then glanced toward the door. Getting to her feet, she came to his side and sat down on the foot of the couch.

"Captain, you won't remember much, but I have to tell you." She went on to sketch the details of what had happened, and Vonner frowned in puzzlement. "Do you get it?" she demand.

"I don't know if I do," he retorted. "You mean Bardo has set me free? I'm at liberty to go around the ship as I please?"

"That's right. Bardo thinks you're under the influence of the reverse process, like the rest of the crew. You're going to have to act as if you are or he'll kill you. You'll have to wait for your chance to take him, but watch out for the six guards. They have been programmed to protect him, and they'll kill anyone who tries to get near him."

"And the other officers?" Vonner demanded dazedly. "What about Wayland, Marr, Farrell,

Curran?"

"All reverse-processed. They can't do a thing to help you. Can you understand that?"

"Yes." He nodded, but there was a frown on his pale face. "But how do I have to act when Bardo is around?"

"You're not supposed to remember anything about being captain of the ship. The only thing you know about is being in love with me."

"In love with you?" He frowned again, and she shook her head as she sighed heavily.

"There'll come a time when you'll know exactly what that means. But right now it's not in your head, so you've got to learn the part and act it as though it were second nature." She leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth, and Vonner leaned away from her, his face showing surprise. She laughed a little harshly. "That's what people do when they're in love," she said. "It's all right between a man and a woman. You know that much, don't you, that I'm a woman and you're a man?"

"Yes, sure! But this kissing business is strange. It isn't bad at that, huh?"

"You're getting the idea." She laughed as he smiled. "Listen, Max, whenever the guards or Bardo are around, then you've got to act as if I were the only thing on your mind. Pretend that you don't know a thing about running the

ship or about the situation. But you'd better get close to Bardo and try to find out what he's doing. I fear the worst, I can tell you. He's interfering with the computers in the flight room. We're going to be so far off course that all the computers on board the ship won't be able to help us."

Vonner got to his feet, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'll go and take a look around, Doc," he said thinly. "But I shall be back for some more lessons in kissing. You can look forward to that."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The flight control room didn't seem any different to Vonner when he entered. There was a guard just inside the doorway, but the man merely glanced at him and made no effort to stop him. Vonner's eyes went first to the forward scanner screen, and he saw Omina as before, but the planet seemed to have moved to the right of the screen, and Vonner knew that Bardo had succeeded in changing the course of the ship, if only slightly. Bardo was standing by the flight computer, and there were two technicians with him, working inside the highly complex instrument. Bardo looked up as Vonner approached, and grinned as if nothing had happened between them.

"You're just in time to see the course change, Max," Bardo said, and it was obvious that he suspected nothing of Vonner's true mental attitude. "How are you feeling now? I was going to have you blasted out into space, where

you could no longer pose a threat to me, but the doc assured me that reverse processing would cure you of any resistance. I'm glad. It wouldn't have pleased me to kill anyone."

"Adah has told me something about what's happened," Vonner said mildly.

"And of course you bear me no grudge because of it," Bardo went on. "I trusted in the fact that a woman in love will do anything to save her man, and it looks as if I were right. I've had the entire crew reverse-processed, and then the key men have been re-processed to slightly different patterns, insuring their complete co-operation and loyalty. Even if you were able to resist me, Max, you wouldn't find anyone to help you."

"Then why the guards around the ship?" Vonner asked.

"Just a precaution." Bardo smiled. "You would have done the same thing if you'd been in my shoes."

"I'd like to know why you mutinied in the first place." Vonner kept his tone deceptively mild, and watched Bardo's intent face without showing his interest. "Adah told me I was the captain, and although I can't remember what the situation was, I'm sure I'm the kind of man who would have listened to any observation concerning the ship's general security."

"Now that you're normal and unprocessed

with your captain's cassette, you can see the sense of the situation," Bardo told him. "That's why I couldn't tell you what I discovered while you were still captain. Your duty patterns wouldn't let you doubt the computers. If I had come to you with the tale that the computers were giving you a false reading, you would have thrown me out of your office. You would have continued on the present course and crashed into Omina. As a matter of fact, the emergency signal that Farrell received just as I decided to take over the ship was about altering the ship's course considerably, and in the direction I had already worked out to be the correct one. Since you ended your resistance, I've had Marr work out the new course to check my figures, and he's made adjustments to computer control to offset the errors it has been giving out."

"Then why not hand the ship back to me?"

"I could have the entire crew reprocessed and this business erased from all minds," Bardo replied. "But if I did that, you would continue with the original flight plan and go into orbit around Omina, then make preparations to land."

"Isn't that what you intend to do?" Vonner demanded, and he could not keep the edge out of his tone.

"Certainly not. That's why I can't give you back the ship, Max. If we go into orbit around

Omina, we'll never be able to kick away again."

"What made you decide that?"

"I've reprocessed myself with the cassettes of every key man on the ship, Max." Bardo's eyes gleamed as he spoke. "I'm a walking space crew, and I could dispense with all the officers and do their work with no trouble. That's the beauty of the brainwasher. A man doesn't have to learn any skills. All he needs is a cassette containing the information, and when he's been processed with it he can automatically do the job."

"But having all these skills and the knowledge at your fingertips wouldn't help you make a discovery that, once in orbit around Omina, we wouldn't be able to blast clear again," Vonner pointed out. "What gave you the idea, Ed?"

"I've had the advantage of being unprocessed for more than a month, Max. I've had time to think. We're traveling at millions of miles an hour. Our omni-thermo drive is controlled by computer, and the computer is at fault. Instead of cutting out the drive in order to put us into orbit around Omina, it would have thrust us straight into its atmosphere, and we'd have burned up like a played out star." Bardo paused and moistened his lips. "You and every other man aboard the ship had complete faith in the system, and if I had tried to warn you I would

have been treated for space madness. This was the only way I could save us. I had to take over, no matter what the cost."

"And what are you doing now, Ed?"

"I'm going to stop the ship when the flight computer has been adjusted, then turn her around and blast straight back to earth."

Vonner tried to take in what his subordinate had said, but he found it difficult to accept the possibility that Bardo might be right.

"Anyway, that's the reason for what has happened, and I'm quite sure you would have done the same thing if you'd been in my shoes, Max." There was satisfaction in Bardo's tone; he was elated by the thought of his own brilliance. "When we get back to earth, I shall hand the ship back to you. No doubt the people back there at earth control will be able to discover why the computers were malfunctioning, and they'll agree that the mission had to be aborted."

"I'll take your word for it," Vonner said easily, and smiled. "Do you mind if I stick around and watch?"

"Go ahead. You have the freedom of the ship. I know there's nothing you can do to stop me now, because it isn't in your mind to resist, and the doc daren't give you another dose of processing because the shock of it would kill you. That reverse processing is dangerous."

Vonner nodded and moved away, and walked around the control room as if he hadn't a care in the world.

He had already discovered that the guard by the door was not interested in anything that went on about him. Somehow it seemed only too easy for Vonner to take over, and he wondered why Bardo was so lax with his own security. There seemed to be only one way to find out, but Vonner was half afraid to start anything in case his subordinate had a nasty surprise up his sleeve. It wasn't like Ed Bardo to take a chance.

But Bardo was intent upon his assumed duties, and when the technicians had completed their work upon the flight computer, Vonner knew the time had come to make his move. He waited until the technicians had departed before moving toward Bardo, who had seated himself in the main control position. Vonner watched as Bardo began to lock in the controls to his command circuits, and then the man started feeding his instructions for stopping the main drive and turning the ship into the pre-selector computer. Vonner could wait no longer. He took the stun-gun from his pocket, moved around until Bardo was between him and the guard, then showed the weapon to Bardo.

"Ed, get away from there," he warned tensely. "This gun is set for maximum power. It'll kill

you."

Bardo looked up at him, frozen for a moment, his face a mask of surprise and shock. Then he took a deep breath and straightened, getting out of his seat and standing with his arms at his sides. Again Vonner felt that this was too easy, and he frowned as he glanced toward the guard, who was looking at them suspiciously, unable to see the gun in Vonner's hand. Vonner raised the weapon and sent a shot of energy at the guard, knocking him to the floor, and grinned tightly as the ray gun spun from the man's nerveless hand and skidded away.

"That does it, Ed," Vonner said tightly. "Put up your hands. Don't give me any trouble, or I'll kill you. This ship is my lawful command, and I'll make all the decisions necessary. You've raised doubts in my mind about the future of the ship, and I shall check your observations very closely. But the command comes back to me, and you're going to the brainwasher to be re-processed."

"Don't be a fool, Max," Bardo said thinly, and he did not raise his hands in a token of surrender. "How do you imagine I've insured my safety among the entire crew? Do you suppose I would trust the doc to do exactly as I told her? I'm not that kind of a fool. Before I cut off the screens around the control room when

you surrendered, I did some work on several circuits. I cut into the impulse lines leading to the remote control activators of the reverse drive. Do I have to spell it out for you?"

He held out his right hand, exposing his wrist, and Vonner saw the glinting bracelet of metal that Bardo was wearing—recognized it instantly as a pre-set pattern radio-detonator, and knew why the man was so sure of himself. Bardo saw his swiftly changing expression and grin.

"I see you get the message," he said grimly. "If I don't use the neutralizer on this detonator every thirty seconds, then the reverse drive will be activated while we're traveling in a forward direction. I've used a pattern that you wouldn't be able to figure out in a thousand years. Shoot me and the neutral circuit will lift in thirty seconds, and that will be the end of everything. The least that will happen will be that the engine room will be out of action for a week. I doubt if the technicians will be able to repair the damage inside of a month. With our velocity, we'll be within the gravitational pull of Omina inside of five days, and nothing will stop us from burning up in its atmosphere."

Vonner hesitated for the slightest moment, his mind alive with thought. Then he shook his head. "Ed, you've gone to a lot of trouble to save yourself and the ship from what you thought

was certain death. I suspect that you put yourself before the ship, so you're not going to try to outwit me by sentencing us all to death. I think you're bluffing."

"I expect you do!" Bardo showed his teeth in a smile. "Okay, so call me."

Vonner hesitated again. But he knew he could not afford to submit again to this madman. They would all eventually die if Bardo carried out his intentions.

He lifted his gun slightly and altered the power setting from maximum to one third. He didnt take his eyes from Bardo's intent face, and saw the man's expression change slightly.

"You wouldn't be so foolish!" Bardo said nervously.

Vonner raised the gun and pointed it at Bardo's head. "Do you want to bet, Ed?"

"Don't be a fool. I've warned you of the consequences. I am telling the truth. I couldn't afford to bluff."

"I'm following my hunch, Ed." Vonner clenched his teeth, and his finger tightened on the trigger. Bardo read something of his intention and fell back a step, fear showing now in his face.

"Don't, Max. You'll kill us all!"

Vonner fired, and Bardo jerked away as the bolt of energy struck his head. He fell heavily

and shuddered for a few seconds, then relaxed and lay still. His outflung right arm held Vonner's attention, and the bracelet detonator glinted in the powerful lights.

Thirty seconds? Vonner stood frozen. There was nothing he could do about the detonator. He wouldn't be able to find the right pre-set pattern in a hundred years. The seconds passed swiftly, and then there was a warning buzz from the detonator on Bardo's arm. It signaled that the neutralizing circuit would be lifted in five seconds. When that happened, the detonator would take effect on whatever piece of machinery it was patterned for. Vonner sank his teeth into his bottom lip and clenched his hands. Had Bardo been telling the truth?

The next instant the detonator was activated. A single red light glowed on the device to show that it was working, and Vonner caught his breath and closed his eyes. The engine room itself might disintegrate under the power released by the detonator. It would mean the end of the mission and the ship itself, for, as Bardo had said, the damage couldn't be repaired in time to prevent the gravitational pull of Omina from drawing the ship to destruction in its atmosphere.

But nothing happened! The tense seconds ticked away, and the ship remained steady. Vonner slowly opened his eyes and stared down at

the motionless Bardo. He began to breathe again, and lifted a hand to his forehead to discover beads of perspiration. He emptied his lungs with a deep exhalation, and then sucked in a tremendous amount of air. His legs were suddenly trembling, and he turned to the large control console and flipped the communicator switch, opening the line to the engine room. He kept an eye on the awakening guard as he waited for a reply.

"Wayland here! What is it?"

"Dalus, this is Vonner. I've resumed control of the ship. What state are you in?"

"Captain, am I glad to hear you! But how did you take over? Bardo told us your were reverse-processed."

"Explanations can wait, Dalus. Just tell me what happened to you and the rest of the officers. What treatment did Bardo give you?"

"We were reprocessed, and he kept us under his power with a remote control detonator. You'll find it on his wrist, Captain. But it's quite safe. He made the mistake of telling me exactly what he had done, and it was a relatively simple operation to render his work harmless from this end."

"You mean he wasn't bluffing about that thing?" Vonner demanded.

"He certainly wasn't bluffing. If he had carried out his threat, we would have been drifting in space for a very long time."

"I thought he was bluffing and called him," Vonner said in shaken tones. "How long has his detonator been ineffective?" He was still stiff with shock.

"About four minutes." Wayland sounded unmoved. "You've had some luck, Captain. But you'd better watch out. Philo Curran and half a dozen guards are making their way toward you through the inspection tunnels. We timed it so he would arrive after I had done my dismantling work here. He'll be bursting in on you in a few minutes. Better get in touch with him with your general address communicator and warn him that you're back in control."

"I'll be back to speak to you again shortly, Dalus," Vonner said. He was breathing heavily as he sat down at the control panel, and he cut in the general address communicator, knowing that when he spoke his voice would be heard in every part of the ship. He kept his stun-gun handy as he watched the guard returning slowly to consciousness. "This is Captain Vonner speaking," he said deliberately. "All crewmen will report to their emergency stations and stand by. Officers will report to the flight control room as soon as possible. Colonel Curran, the present state of emergency is over. I have resumed control of the ship. Report to the flight control room immediately."

He sighed heavily as he switched off. With the crew standing at their emergency stations, it would be easy to check them. A roll call and general inspection would indicate if the mutiny was really at an end. He opened a line to the sick bay and heard Adah Morley's voice in his ear.

"I heard your general message, Max," she said. "Is everything all right now?"

"I hope so," he replied. "It was a bit tight, but I think I am back in control. I shall want to see you again very soon. I shall hold an inquiry into the mutiny, and we'll have to take steps to see that the brainwasher cannot be sabotaged."

"The nurse responsible for that is under arrest as of this moment," Adah told him. "You'll want Bardo reprocessed, won't you?"

"As soon as I can get him down to the sick bay. But what effect will all this have upon him? Just before I stunned him, he seemed in the last stages of space madness."

"That is what I'm afraid of," she admitted. "He processed himself with half a dozen cassettes. I think he must have overloaded his mind. There are limits to what the brain can take, and this is the reason there are so many men aboard the ship. If it had been possible to pattern one man with the duties of the entire crew, then there would be only one man aboard. Bardo ought to

have thought of that himself. But send him down as soon as you can, and I'll see that he gets treated."

"Thank you, Adah." Vonner smiled, and some of the tension seeped away.

"You'd better forget what I told you about being in love with me," she retorted. "Call me Doc again, won't you?"

"Only in front of the men. You'll have to call me 'Captain.' But I like the sound of my name on your lips."

"Max!" She spoke almost shyly, and he laughed. "It's so good to know that you do love me, and that you know it. But you ought to be processed again to erase it. You have your ship to think of."

"And I've got a lot to do." He realized the true situation and stiffened a little. "I've been processed too many times today," he said. "I'm carying out my duties as before, but I've got one extra bit of knowledge. I know I'm a man and you're a woman and that we're in love. I know what kissing is. You're not going to take that away from me now, Adah."

He broke off as the inspection tunnel doorway suddenly opened and Philo Curran entered the control room at the head of half a dozen men. The big security chief was grinning hugely as he came across to stare at Vonner. Then he looked

down at the unconscious Bardo and signaled to two of his men to pick up the man.

"I'll be seeing you later, Doc," Vonner said into the communicator, and closed the line. He grinned at Curran. "Get Bardo down to the sick bay, Philo, and that guard with him. Tell the doc to get to work on them. Leave a strong guard there. I don't want Bardo getting free again, even if he is reprocessed half a dozen times. Then go around the ship and check up on the entire crew. Emergency alert will exist until the present situation is ended. Take over, Philo, and do a good job."

"You'll never have to worry about the security of the ship again, Captain," Curran promised, and escorted his guard out with Bardo and the sentry.

Vonner watched them go, relief swelling in his chest. But the trouble was far from being at an end. Bardo had changed the ship's course, and there was still the business of the man's fears for the ship to be investigated. Max switched on the general address communicator and called for an immediate conference of officers.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Vonner looked at the taut faces of the officers assembled before him in the control room. Aaron Marr was looking particularly worried, and Vonner was half afraid to ask his astrogator what was bothering him. Howie Farrell, too, was nervous and tense. Only Dalus Wayland looked happy, and that was because his massive engines were still continuing in their usual way. Vonner described the situation as he had gleaned it from Bardo, and then proceeded to question the men.

"The most important thing at this time is the main drive," he said, his eyes singling out Wayland's face. "Have you adjusted the alterations that Bardo carried out, Dalus?"

"All taken care of, Captain." Wayland smiled thinly. "It was touch and go, but a miss is as good as a mile, and I've been over all the circuits with a detector and can report with confidence that everything in my department is back to normal."

"That's more than I can say," Aaron Marr commented thinly.

"I'm coming to you now, Aaron." Vonner nodded slowly. "I know you've got a load of grief for us. Tell us the exact position, and what steps you're taking to revert the situation to normal."

"I've got my men checking the computers, Captain. They're in a mess. Bardo altered the programs, and I shall have to take them all down to see if they correspond with the data sheets. It's going to take me a long, long time. But my work of redesigning the patterns depends upon the information Howie got in that last emergency signal. If it was a course change, then it will complicate matters still further." Marr shook his head gravely, for only he knew the exact position, and he didn't like the picture he was getting.

"What about it, Howie?" Vonner demanded. He regarded the communications man as he awaited a reply.

"It was a course change, Captain," Farrell reported, "and it called for a five-minute directional boost. Activation time was four hours ago." He glanced down at his watch and nodded seriously. "Four hours and twenty minutes," he amended.

"You can feed the data into your computer and add the time lag," Vonner said. "That will give you a new sequence. If Marr can put the

computers straight, then we should have very little trouble."

"May I come in here, Captain?" Quillon Reid demanded. He had been sitting quietly at the far end of the table. Now he leaned forward and stared at each face in turn before letting his whole attention center upon the captain.

"What's on your mind, Quill?" Vonner demanded. "Have you anything to say about this particular situation as it affects our astrogation?"

"It might touch indirectly upon it, Captain," the chief scientist said patiently. "To put matters right, you've got to understand what Bardo was trying to do."

"I know what he was trying to do." It was Vonner's turn to show patience. "He was scared by some calculations he had made, and he thought we had no chance of pulling out of Omina's orbit after we went in. But I found he contradicted himself. He went on to say that he feared we wouldn't go into orbit, that we would find the gravitational pull too great and would burn up in the atmosphere. I'm inclined to believe that Bardo was suffering mind sickness at the time. None of the readings so far has given any indication there's that kind of trouble awaiting us."

"Bardo talked to me a lot in the time that he

held control of the ship," Reid went on. "He was sincere in his convictions, although I must agree with you, Captain, that he wasn't very rational at times. I think he was motivated by sickness—space madness—and he was only concerned with heading the ship back to earth. An analysis of what he said points to that. He processed himself with the cassettes of every officer present, and overloaded his mind to such an extent that his real fears and the fancied ones could not be separated."

"What's the point, Quillon?" Aaron Marr demanded.

"The point is: whatever Bardo did to the computers was with the intention of turning the ship around." Reid grimaced as he stared at the men about him. "Perhaps it might help you to know what to look for in the way of changes in the patterns."

"There is a simpler way of finding out what we want to know," Wayland said. "The men are working on it right now. They're having to go to the memory banks of the computers and retrace everything to the time when Bardo took over the ship. All input data will be recorded, and it will be a matter of checking item by item."

"How long is that going to take?" Vonner demanded.

"Too long," Farrell cut in. "I suggest you cut

the engines, Captain, until we have this matter under control. We must be many millions of miles off course now, and each minute is adding to the problem."

"If we cut speed, we're going to create some new problems," Marr said.

"But of a lesser degree, surely, Vonner interjected.

"I agree with that," Reid remarked. "The fact that we'll arrive in orbit late does not matter as much as arriving in the correct place."

"Well, let's see what we have." Vonner straightened his back. "We're heading in the wrong direction at this moment, and there's no way of setting up a correction course until the alterations that Bardo made to the computers have been erased. How long is it going to take you to check, Aaron?"

"Two hours," the astrogator replied without hesitation. "Perhaps a little longer."

"Then I suggest we cut the main drive until we've thrashed this out. What do you say, Chief?"

"Okay, if it will help!" Wayland glanced around the table. "Anyone have anything to add?" He paused, but there was no reply. Then he looked at Vonner. "If you'll record the order, I'll attend to it right away, Skipper."

"I'll do that." Vonner got to his feet, his

movement indicating that the conference was over. He faced Marr. "I shall expect reports as soon as you're in a position to make them, Aaron."

"I'll keep on the ball, Captain," the astrogator replied.

"Before you break up this talk—" it was Reid again, and the scientist was troubled— "I must report that Bardo said among other things, that he had taken steps to stop the command from being wrested from him, but that in the event of it happening, he had carried out certain measures to insure that the ship would not reach Omina."

"Did he give any indication of what he meant?" Vonner demanded.

"No. He said so many things that I had to concentrate upon the more important. But I have a feeling that he's booby-trapped some of the controls, and when they're used we'll find more trouble in our laps."

"He did a neat job with that remote-control detonator," Wayland said. "If I hadn't taken the teeth out of it before you jumped him, Skipper, we would have had to push the ship the rest of the way. You've got Bardo in a safe place now, haven't you?"

"He's being well taken care of," Vonner said, nodding. "But we can't pass this threat off lightly.

I've got to insist upon a thorough check being made on every piece of equipment in the ship. We can limit the essential area of the search by concentrating upon the sequences necessary for swinging into orbit. Dalus, that's up to you. But before you get moving, just answer me one question. Is it possible that Bardo rigged up something that can't be traced?"

"Not if I have the time to carry out a complete check with the micro-detectors," the chief engineer replied briskly. "But when I say time, I really mean time. It can't be done in a few minutes, or even a few hours. We can risk cutting the main drive, and that should give us a respite. But I'll need to be very thorough about everything else."

"Well, get to it and see what you can do," Vonner ordered. "It has to be done, and as efficiently as possible. I'm relying on you to get us into Omina orbit in one piece."

They began to get up from the table, and Vonner watched them depart. He called to Reid before the scientist left the room:

"Quill, I need a moment of your time."

Reid came back to him, grave of face and deliberate of manner. At forty, he was one of the oldest men aboard, and for two years he had been recording and interpreting the data received about Omina. He knew more about what was

awaiting them than any other two men, and Vonner wanted reassurance.

"Sit down, Quill. This is just as important as what has gone before. What readings are you getting now? Do they confirm all the hopes you had earlier?"

"I'm quite certain that we'll find an atmosphere comparable to earth, Captain, and there is evidence of vegetation and animal presence. We are still a long way off, and in a couple of days I'll really be able to tell you something. But at this moment I'm quite confident that nothing will go wrong. Bardo was out of his mind with his fears. I would stake my reputation on that."

"Thanks, Quill. I know I can rely upon your judgment. That will be all for now."

The scientist departed, and Vonner got to his feet and began to pace the floor. He looked at the forward scanner screen and saw that the picture of Omina now clung to the extreme edge of the screen, showing that they were seriously off course.

The communicator was activated, and he turned toward the controls, opening the line. Dalus Wayland spoke to him.

"I'm ready to cut the main drive, Captain, if you'd care to record the order," the chief engineer said.

"Is there any danger that Bardo interfered

with this phase of the engines, Dalus?" Vonner could not prevent an edge of fear from coming into his mind.

"I don't think he would have picked the main drive. He would need that to get out of here," Wayland retorted.

"But we'd have to cut the main drive to come into orbit," Vonner protested.

"Well, we've got to take a chance, Skipper. If you want to cut our speed, I'll have to kill the main drive."

"Okay." Vonner was aware that sweat beaded his forehead. "I'll record the order now, and we'd better stand by for trouble, just in case."

"If the main drive is booby-trapped, then it won't matter about anything. We'll be the brightest star in the sky for a couple of seconds." Wayland laughed boisterously, and Vonner wondered where the man got his nerve.

"Stand by, Dalus," he said. "Your order will be coming through now." He turned to the control computer and fed in the necessary information. There was a tightening in his chest as anticipation grabbed him, and he waited out the seconds until the order was put into operation. There would be no perceptible change unless the main drive had been tampered with, and only the dials on his console would show that the engines had been cut. Red lights glowed and buzzers operated.

Nothing else happened, and after a minute he began to relax. Then Wayland came through on the communicator again, and there was relief in the man's tone.

"Seems to be okay, Captain. Anything else now."

"That'll be more than enough for now, Dalus," he retorted. "I'll be in touch with you later."

Wayland laughed and closed the line, and Vonner sighed heavily and wiped his forehead. Now there were other things to do, and it was essential that he make a round of the ship himself, to show himself to the crew and to see what had been done in the way of returning everything to normal. He also wanted to see Adah Morley and to check upon Ed Bardo.

Vonner was replaced by the duty officer and started his rounds. He met with Philo Curran, and the security chief reported that the situation was completely under control. The crew was one hundred percent behind them again. The brainwasher had been busy, and Ed Bardo had been processed and was sleeping in the security ward. Curran grinned tautly as he studied Vonner's face.

"It's been quite an exercise, Captain," he said. "Your report is going to raise a few eyebrows back on earth. What I'd like to know is what really started this off."

"I don't know that myself yet, Philo. As soon as this emergency is over, I shall hold an inquiry. I want to know how he could get the superintendent of nurses enough interested in him to induce her to sabotage the brainwasher."

"I'd like to hear his story, Captain." Curran laughed and shook his head. "But we seem to be out of the woods now."

"I'm not too sure of that." Vonner shook his head. "We've traveled too far since that emergency signal came through, and I've recently learned that Bardo might have sabotaged some of the machinery aboard to prevent us from getting into orbit around Omina. Wayland is checking everything. We've stopped the main drive, but we can't lose much velocity, and I daren't throw the reverse drive switch."

"It's still a bit tense, then." Curran shook his head. "Bardo certainly had things worked out his way, didn't he?"

"I don't think I shall reinstate him even if he has a complete recovery," Vonner said. "What do you make of Lieutenant Hanton?"

"A good steady man, Captain."

"And what about Bardo? Do we keep him penned up until we return to earth?"

"I don't know. Let me sleep on that one, Philo."

Curran nodded and went on his way, and

Vonner walked slowly along the main corridor until he reached the sickbay. He paused at the door of the doctor's room, and his face lost some of its hard expression as he thought of the woman.

Adah Morley was in her office working over her reports when Vonner stuck his head around the door. She smiled eagerly when she saw him and got to her feet, her movements quick and cat-like. Vonner watched her with interest, aware now of her tall, slender figure and the beauty of her face.

"Captain, I'm glad to see you," the woman said softly. "Have you everything under control now?"

"Yes, Adah, and no small thanks to you for your part in it."

"I was only doing my duty, Captain," she murmured.

"Call me Max," he commanded. "It sounds so wonderful coming from you."

"But we're both on duty, Captain," she pointed out. "Have you come to take another dose of processing? You're not quite adjusted to your duty cassette."

"I never want to be again," he retorted. "I don't want you erased from my thoughts. It's going to be a tough time the next few days. I shall need the thought of you to give me

strength."

"That's very nicely put." She smiled as she came to his side. "With a little practice, you're going to be the Max Vonner I knew back on earth."

"Was that good?" he demanded, smiling.

"Very good," she admitted.

He sighed, nodding slowly. "What we have to do for duty," he commented. "But if all goes well, we'll be standing on solid ground again in a few days."

"Then a month's stay on Omina before the return flight. I really think you should be completely processed for the next two years, Max. It will be too much of a strain on you otherwise."

"I'll think it over," he replied. "But let me get back to duty. How's Bardo?"

"I gave him full-strength processing, and he's asleep now in the security ward, under a strong guard." She glanced at her watch. "He'll be coming to soon. I suppose you'll want to talk with him."

"Will he remember anything at all about the mutiny?"

"No. He will remember the things that were done, but not that he was a mutineer. None of the other men can recall this. If you are wise, you'll just tell him he was taken ill and has been unconscious and delirious. He won't know

what to believe about the thoughts in his head, and tomorrow he will be able to return to duty."

"I don't want him back on duty until after we are in orbit around Omina," Vonner said firmly.

"Can you keep him under sedation?"

"It won't be necessary! He'll be as sane as you when he comes to."

"I'd rather not have him to worry about."

"All right; I'll keep him under for a few days."

"Have you talked with the nurse who was helping him?" Vonner queried.

"She's been reprocessed, so she won't remember anything about it now, but I did have a few words with her. It seems that when Bardo was being processed a month ago, the terminal that I loosened for you today was disconnected, and he didn't get the full treatment. The nurse noticed this, but was afraid to report it, and she also disconnected the same terminal when she was due for treatment. After a week they both began to regain their normal minds, and they got together. It went on from there."

"We must take steps in future so that a similar incident doesn't occur."

"Don't worry about that." She smiled slowly. "It wont happen again, I promise you."

"That a relief!" He patted her shoulder. "I wouldn't want to experience another situation

such as I've been through during the last few hours. I'm certain now that there can't be anything worse on Omina. Anything that happens after this will be in the nature of a picnic."

"Do you remember what a picnic is?" she demanded softly.

"No." He shook his head. "I don't even know why I used the word." There was a wistful smile upon his face. "I've been missing a lot since this trip commenced, haven't I?"

"You have, but that won't matter so much if we get the chance to make up for lost time," she told him.

He nodded and took her into his arms. "At least I'm learning about this part of it." He kissed her gently, and when she clung to him with surprising strength, he was reluctant to break her grip. "I'll come back and see you soon," he promised. "When I'm off duty, we'll go into this more thoroughly. But now I have a ship to run, and the problems confronting us are enormous. This is one situation the space planners on earth didn't allow for. They didn't think this could happen."

"Let's hope we'll get back to tell them," she said, and Vonner felt strangely protective toward her. She kissed him again and again before he could get away from her, and her mouth against his felt strangely warm and exciting. But he had

his duty to do, and departed reluctantly to throw himself back into the thick of the problems confronting them. He had barely left the sick bay when he was called over the general address system, and he hurried back into Adah's office to the communicator. "It's Wayland," she said, making room for him at the desk. "He sounds very worried about something!"

"That's unusual for Wayland," he commented, tensing as he opened the line to the engine control room. "I hope it isn't something unpleasant that Bardo has left for us." He raised his voice slightly as he spoke into the communicator. "Vonner here, Dalus. What's the trouble?"

"It's as bad as it can be, Captain," came the terse reply, and such was the tension in Wayland's voice that it was almost unrecognizable. "The main drive has been stopped almost twenty minutes now, and I've recorded some sort of activity in the nuclear pile. It can only be an explosive device, probably fitted with a time fuse. I'm getting to work on it, but there may not be a lot of time. If you're not too busy elsewhere, will you come down and lend a hand?"

"I'll be right with you, Dalus," Vonner replied, and tried not to notice the sick feeling which assailed the pit of his stomach. "Alert the ship for me, will you? Emergency alert, and the

crew had better get into space suits, just in case."

"It isn't space suits we'll be needing if my fears prove correct, Captain," Wayland retorted drily, despite his nervousness. "There'll be nothing left of anyone or anything if we have an explosion in the atomic pile."

But Vonner didn't need to be told, and he closed the line and paused only to pat Adah's shoulder before hurrying on his way to the engine control room.

CHAPTER NINE

When Vonner entered the engine room, he found technicians busy donning space suits, and Wayland was consulting a chart spread out on his desk. The chief engineer looked up at Vonner, and there was relief in his eyes as he got to his feet.

"Well?" Vonner demanded. "What can you tell me, Dalus?"

"My fears are correct, Captain. Bardo rigged a time bomb in the pile. I don't know what fuse he used, but if we don't do something quickly we're gonna end up like stardust."

"When did you notice anything unusual?" Vonner asked.

"The controls showed something was amiss as soon as the engines went off."

"What happens if we put on the main drive again?" Vonner was thinking hard. "If Bardo rigged this so the bomb would explode if we stopped the engines, then it's in the cards that

he arranged for a neutralizer to work if the engines kept at top speed."

"I've thought of that," Wayland said wearily. "I can start the main drive immediately, and we won't feel the difference, but if I do that I shan't be able to get into the radioactive area to deal with the bomb. We've got to fight this thing now. If we maintain speed until we reach Omina, then cut the engines, as we'll have to do, we'll provide a firework display for anyone inhabiting the planet."

"So you're going in there to tackle the bomb." Vonner narrowed his eyes. "Why can't it be done with the main drive in operation?"

"It's impossible to live in there even with protective clothing. You know that, Captain."

"What makes you think the bomb is inside the works?" Vonner was almost holding his breath.

"The detectors indicate that it is." Wayland shrugged his shoulders.

"Then how did Bardo get it in there? The main drive was in action when he planted the bomb."

"So it was!" Wayland frowned. "But wait a minute. We must remember that Bardo knew as much about engines at that time as I do. He processed himself with my cassette, remember. I imagine he must have used the induction port.

He could open that for a short time if he put on a suit. But we'd have to shut down the main drive and go inside in order to get it out."

"Well, try it!" Vonner tried to disguise his tension. "Can you manage alone? Shall I come with you?"

"No. I'll need to take a man who knows the inside like I do." Wayland grinned. "Better wish me luck, Captain. If I don't make it, then everybody will have to get out and walk."

Vonner smiled. "Do what you can, Dalus. I'll get back to flight control. Or better still, I'll go and have a talk with Bardo. He might be able to tell me something."

"I'll keep in touch." Wayland returned to his chart, and Vonner left the chief engineer.

Ed Bardo was conscious in his cell when Vonner looked in on the man. He sat up slowly when he saw Vonner and smiled wearily.

"Glad to see you, Captain, he said steadily, and it was obvious that he could not remember anything that had happened to him. "I've been ill, so the doc tells me. Space madness!"

"That's right, Ed." Vonner spoke gently. "It happens to us all at one time or other. But you're doing all right now. In no time at all you'll be back on duty."

"I feel okay now, Captain; just a little tired but I can resume my duties."

"No, Ed. I want you to rest up."

"How long have I been ill?"

Vonner consulted his watch. "You were on duty twelve hours ago when it struck you, Ed. Can you remember anything at all about your actions during that time?"

Bardo thought for a moment, then shook his head. "I seem to remember relieving you in the control room, but there's nothing after that."

"Well, don't worry about it. You'll be all right in a day or two. I'll have to go now. I'm busy, but I just had to look in on you."

"Okay, Captain." Bardo relaxed and passed a hand wearily across his eyes. "Was I violent?" he demanded. "Is that why I'm in the security ward?"

"It was a bit tense while you were unrestrained, Ed." Vonner smiled thinly. "But it's nothing to worry about. We've all had crewmen come down with space madness." He moved to the door, then paused. "Have you everything you need?" he demanded.

"Sure, Captain. The doc is taking good care of me. There's even a guard outside the door. But I'm okay now."

"I'm glad to hear it, Ed. I'll be by to see you again shortly. But we do have something of an emergency on our hands at the moment."

"Anything I can do to help, Captain?"

Vonner smiled. "I think I can handle it, Ed," he said, and departed, pausing only to make sure that the guard locked the door of the small ward.

As he went around the ship, Vonner was aware that tension was growing in him. He was expecting an explosion, but realized that if it came he would not know anything about it. He returned to the engine room to discover that Wayland and one of his assistants were in the midst of removing the explosive device from the reactor room. Wayland was in communication with one of his men, keeping up a running commentary on what he was doing, and his words were being recorded. Vonner took over the communicator and spoke to Wayland, asking for a progress report, and Wayland laughed before replying.

"I've got it taped, Captain, but the darned thing might explode before we can remove it. I've asked for an ejector capsule to be made ready, and the sooner we blast this thing clear of the ship, the happier I will be."

"I'll check to see that everything is ready for you," Vonner promised. "Now I'll let you get on with it in peace."

"You'll know if I've made any mistakes," Wayland said, and Vonner felt tension closing in on him again.

There was nothing to do but wait, and time passed all too quickly, cutting down whatever

margin of safety was left to them. Wayland appeared from the reactor room with his assistant; between them they carried a lead-lined box clipped to a transit rod. Vonner went with them to the nearest ejector port and could see Waylands trembling as they made ready to discharge the deadly cargo. Within two minutes the ejection had taken place, and Wayland stripped off his gloves and helmet. His dark eyes were narrowed and bright as he looked into Vonner's face.

"I wouldn't want to go through that again for anything in the world," he said. "Let's hope Bardo didn't cook up any other unpleasant surprise. Have you seen him, Captain?"

"Just talked to him, Dalus, and he can't remember a thing about the mutiny. I'm keeping him isolated for a few days, at least until after we are in orbit around Omina."

"If we ever get there." Wayland shook his head slowly. "We've got a lot working against us now. How are they making out with the computers? Has Marr found us a new course?"

"I haven't had time to check, but I'm on my way to see him now. You'd better stand by in case we can start moving again."

"We're traveling pretty fast at the moment," Wayland said, grinning.

"Free flight!" Vonner nodded. "But we shall need the main drive to put us back on course."

"I'll be in the engine control room," Wayland told him.

"I'll be in touch," Vonner retorted. "Thanks, Dalus, for a good job well done. Let's hope that's the last of the unpleasant surprises."

"It would be as well to check over your control room," Wayland said. "Bardo was in there for a considerable time."

"It's being checked out," Vonner told him.

They separated then, and Vonner went back into his control room. Aaron Marr was seated in the chief astrogator's seat, his head bent over whatever he was doing, and Vonner went to stand at the man's shoulder to peer at his work without interrupting. Marr glanced up at him, his face grim, but he did not speak, and bent his head again to resume his concentration. Vonner nodded slowly and went to supervise the work being done on the computers. But there was nothing he could do but wait, and he moved to his own control seat and sat down.

A glance at the forward scanner screen showed him Omina almost out of view, and he didn't envy Marr the complex task of preparing a fresh set of figures for the computer. He carried out some checks of his own, and was satisfied that when the computers were reset the ship would be trouble-free.

Lieutenant Hanton came into the control and

reported to Vonner. "You wanted to see me, sir," he said. "Colonel Curran told me."

"Yes, Hanton!" Vonner dragged his mind from the worries nibbling at him. "I want you to take over Commander Bardo's duties. He's unfit for duty."

"Right, sir. It's time you went off duty. Commander Bardo should be on duty now."

"I'll be standing by until this present emergency is over," Vonner told him. "You can carry out a check through the ship on all personnel. They should be at their emergency stations. I think they can be relieved now. Give the necessary order, will you?"

Lieutenant Hanton nodded, evidently pleased with his promotion to second in command, and Vonner watched him as he went about his duties, hoping that there would be no repetition of the trouble that had come to the ship through Bardo's actions.

Time had no meaning aboard the ship. Events were the milestones rather than the passage of time. But the human system had its own clock, and Vonner found himself in a daze before Aaron Marr reported that they could follow the new course. When Marr had worked out his figures, he explained them to Vonner, pointing out that the adjustments to be made could easily be added when the computers were ready to accept the

data.

"How long before the computers are rectified?" Vonner demanded.

"Several hours yet, I'm afraid," Marr replied. "There's so much to do."

"Is there anything I can do?" Vonner was beginning to feel the severe strain of the past few hours.

"No, Captain." Marr studied Vonner's face for a moment. "You ought to get some rest. I'll call you if anything breaks."

"I think I will. There's a busy time ahead of us."

"If we ever get there," Marr said grimly.

Vonner was relieved by Hanton and went to his quarters. Almost twelve hours had passed since the mutiny had ended, and he needed to sleep. He stretched himself out on his built-up couch, closed his eyes and, notwithstanding the pressures and worries in his mind, drifted quickly to sleep and lay mindless until a hand touched his shoulder. Then he came back to full alertness, to find Hanton bending over him. He sat up quickly.

"Mr. Marr asked me to call you, Captain," Hanton said. "The computers have been fed with the data concerning the new course, and Mr. Wayland wants the order to activate the main drive."

"Thank you." Vonner got to his feet and glanced at his watch. "How long have I been asleep?" he demanded.

"Ten hours, sir." Hanton smiled. "I stood two watches. You needed the rest, Captain."

"You're going to spoil me, Hanton." Vonner smiled in his turn. "But let's get back to normal now, shall we?"

"Yes, sir!" Hanton grinned as he departed.

Aaron Marr was waiting in the control room, and he looked as if he hadn't slept since they'd left earth. But the chief astrogator was cheerful now, his complications behind him. He saluted Vonner perkily, and Vonner returned the motion.

"You can get into the main drive whenever you like, Captain," Marr reported. "I've already informed Wayland, and he's standing by." He glanced at his watch. "I'll start the time running now and switch in automatic, shall I?"

"Yes, please!" Vonner moved to his seat and dropped into it, opening a communication line to the engine room, and Wayland spoke in his ear.

"Everything ready at this end, Captain."

"Thank you, Aaron. We're switching over to automatic, and your orders will be through in a moment." As he spoke, Vonner operated his command computer, feeding in the necessary data, and saw from the corner of his eye that

Marr was busy at his console. A few moments passed, and then Wayland reported that he had his orders and was preparing his program. "Thank you, Dalus." Vonner was beginning to tense, and he forced the thoughts of what had happened during the past twenty hours out of his mind and concentrated upon his sequence. He flipped some switches and opened up the general address line, moistening his lips before speaking. "Attention! Attention! This is the captain speaking. Stand by for the main drive. Repeat. Stand by for the main drive. Five minutes to ignition."

He caught Marr's eyes, and the astrogator nodded his agreement. Five minutes! Vonner now lost himself completely in his work and checked the switches on his panels. Lights were flashing and the computers were whirring, sending impulses throughout the ship. There seemed to be a gathering of power about Vonner, although it was intangible. It was like a tiger tensing before its leap upon some unsuspecting prey. Liuetenant Hanton, standing by a bank of instruments, began calling the minutes off. Wayland came through on the communicator to report that his controls were set and locked upon the computer. Marr was still busy at his console, feeding data to the computer, for each passing second added to the stream of adjustment necessary so they could find their true course.

The last moments fled. Wayland reported ignition. Marr was watching his instruments with deadly intensity. With thirty seconds to go, Vonner alerted the crew, and could imagine the activity taking place in various parts of the ship as the men prepared for acceleration. Hanton began counting off the seconds, and when he reached zero the whole ship trembled imperceptibly. Vonner closed his eyes for a moment, offering a silent prayer to whatever benign Fate guarded them. Then Wayland's voice came through, calm and deliberate, reporting that acceleration was proceeding according to the flight plan. Marr now became the central figure in the operation, feeding more calculations into the computer, and Vonner looked at the forward scanner screen and saw the tiny crescent that was Omina already beginning to edge back toward the center.

"Lapse Four!" Wayland reported.

"Give me Six," Marr replied. He flipped a couple of switches and then looked toward Vonner. "We'll be coming round any second now, Captain. You've lost almost a day. We've got to allow for Omina's orbit. Stardrift Twenty now."

Vonner nodded. He could feel a sense of relief sweeping through him, and he sighed heavily and relaxed a little in his seat. Wayland came through once more to report Lapse Six. Everything was

fine.

"Hanton, you'd better go off duty now," Vonner called to his new first officer. "I'll be on duty for the next five hours. Get some sleep, and when you report back here we'll have a talk about what happens when we reach orbit around Omina. Bardo was supposed to command the first landing party, but with him out of action, I shall have to go. You'll remain in command of the ship while I'm away."

"Yes, Captain!" Hanton turned and departed, and Vonner was satisfied as he returned his attention to his duties.

Marr came across to talk to him; the astrogator was looking pleased with himself. "Well, we finally made it," he remarked. "I don't mind telling you that my mathematics were strained to the very limit, but I've checked every figure, and it comes out the same. We'll be orbiting Omina in a little under four days."

"That's the best news I've heard yet," Vonner told him. "I was praying once or twice back there."

"I think we all said our favorite prayer," Marr retorted. "I don't know about Dalus, but I was beginning to wish we were any place but right here."

Vonner told the astrogator about the explosive device that Bardo had fixed to the atomic pile,

and Marr's pale face went a shade paler.

"Our reports are going to make interesting reading if we ever get back to earth, Captain."

"It won't matter if we don't." Vonner smiled thinly. "Farrell is sending information back all the time, and news of what has been happening on board is already on its way home."

"Well, they won't be able to send any orders canceling the landing, that's for sure," Marr remarked. "We'll be in orbit and on the way down before they'll know what's happened."

"Perhaps that's a good thing. I wouldn't want to abort the mission now we're this close."

"Reid is certain we're going to find conditions similar to earth. Do you think they'll ever colonize Omina?"

"If it is suitable, then it will be colonized. But we don't know what we're going to find down there, Aaron."

"After the past twenty-four hours, we can face anything," the astrogator reported.

Vonner silently agreed.

CHAPTER TEN

Three days later they were preparing to decelerate. Aaron Marr had worked out his coordinates, and the ship was under his control as they stood by. The main drive was cut by computer command, and shortly afterwards the first of a series of burns with reverse drive began to cut their headlong approach to Omina. Marr was jubilant after he had checked the graphs; he came to Vonner's side and stared at the scanner screen showing Omina in more detail than they had ever seen it before.

"It's out of my hands now, Captain," Marr said. "It's all on automatic. You're going in now, and the next twelve hours will be the longest we've ever experienced."

"There's a lot to be done before we swing into orbit, Aaron," Vonner replied. "I shall be taking down the initial landing party. That was Bardo's job, but I'm not going to entrust him with any duty before we're well on our way back to earth."

"I agree with that," the chief astrogator said. "But what was Bardo talking about when he said we couldn't get into orbit around Omina? Do you think there was any truth in his theory?"

"I don't know, Aaron, and that's a fact. I'm having a talk with Quillon shortly. At this distance he's getting the clearest readings ever. He was so excited a short time ago when I called him that I couldn't get any sense out of him. Do you want to go ashore with me?"

"I do! I wouldn't miss it for anything. After coming such a long way, I want to be one of the first men to set foot on the only planet that might prove to be a second earth."

"Well, they've checked everything in our own solar system," Vonner commented. "We've got nothing that compares. We'll know in a few hours if Omina will prove to be the heaven scientists are all looking for."

"Scientists and space men," Marr said with a laugh. "Well, I'll get back to my figures. I can't be too careful at a time like this, eh, Captain?"

"We're all depending on you, Aaron," Vonner

returned.

"Me and a whole army of computers!" Marr turned away, and Vonner called the engine room to check with Wayland that the orders were clear and true.

The chief engineer was happy in his control room, and Vonner switched off and set about his own routine. He had much to do, not the least of which was to get a clear report of ground conditions on Omina. He switched on general address and called for an officers' conference, arranging for a time lapse of thirty minutes. Then he went to see Quillon Reid.

The space laboratory was the most complete hive of industry aboard the ship. White-coated assistants were busy checking readings and analyzing reports, and Reid himself was at a desk that was under a mound of papers and data sheets. The chief scientist got to his feet when he saw Vonner and came around to greet him.

"All our earlier findings are being substantiated, Captain. I don't have to tell you that I'm the happiest man aboard the ship. There's atmosphere down there that's as good as any you've ever breathed on earth. Vegetation abounds, and there is animal life."

"Can you elaborate on the animal life?" Vonner demanded. "What can I expect to meet when

I step out of the shutter-ship?"

"What can *we* expect to meet?" Reid amended with a smile. "I am afraid that detail is beyond me, but there is life down there; and with such an environment, so similar to earth in many ways, I can say with some confidence that we can expect to find animal life in much the same form as ours."

"Human people!" Vonner thought about it for a moment. "It's quite a thought! But at what stage of progress? Will they be ahead of us in technology, or behind?"

"That we shan't know until we land." Reid was trembling with excitement. "All these readings point to a situation on Omina that exceeds our greatest hopes."

"Well, keep me informed if your readings give some clue to what we can expect down there. Perhaps we should try to get in contact with Omina, in case we're mistaken for enemies. There's no telling what may happen."

"Well, comunications are not my department. I suggest you have a talk with Farrell about that."

"Thank you, Quill." Vonner smiled and nodded. "I'm holding a conference shortly. I'll get down to brass tacks then. I know you're busy right now, but hold yourself ready to attend if I

should need you."

"I'm ready to do anything and everything," Reid said enthusiastically. He sounded like a schoolboy; Vonner had never seen his chief scientist so excited. Some of the man's elation communicated itself to Vonner, and he departed, feeling exalted by his own anticipation of what lay ahead.

Now there seemed to be so little time left, although the routine to be followed had been laid down according to a strict timetable. At the officers' conference, Vonner got the facts of the situation, and they covered all aspects of the procedure for orbiting and then landing on the alien planet. Preparations went on unceasingly, and the computers carried out the work of controlling the ship, slowing it in stages as they approached the great ball that had been their target during two long years of flight.

Vonner snatched his rest in short naps, but the communicators were always buzzing for him, and with twenty-four hours to go until orbit, he found no time for anything but duty. He paced the control room when he was not busy, and his eyes were attracted to the forward scanner screen almost against his will. Omina lay before them, only a few hours away, and Vonner was struck by the planet's apparent resemblance to earth. Even at this still great distance, he could see that

this planet was more like earth than any other he had ever set eyes on.

As the hours passed, he became even more attracted to the sight. There was a bewitching quality about Omina, hanging there in the totally black sky, shining, drawing, attracting, pulling the ship ever closer despite the regularly fired reverse drive. The gravitational pull was having some effect upon the instruments, and more than once Vonner thought of what Bardo had said of Omina. *Once they went into orbit they would never be able to get away again!* Bardo had been so right about other things when Vonner had thought him to be raving that uncertainty began to take root in Vonner's mind, but was pushed into the background by the sheer weight of work that fell upon his commanding shoulders. He missed Bardo, for Hanton, although a good officer, could not equal Bardo in experience, and Bardo had been specially trained to take the first shuttle-ship to the surface of Omina.

Instead of taking a nap when he found the time, with ten hours to go to orbit, with their speed down to a negligible fifty thousand miles per hour, Vonner went along to the sick bay to talk with Bardo. But first he wanted to see Adah. The doctor was in her office reading through a stack of reports. There was a worried expression

on her beautiful face as she looked up at Vonner.

"What's wrong?" he demanded instantly.

"Nothing that I can put my finger on, Max," she replied slowly. "I'm checking through the readings from the brainwasher. There's something wrong somewhere, but my analysis refuses to divulge it."

"We're not in for a repeat of what happened with Bardo, are we?" he demanded, dropping into a seat beside the desk.

"No. The brainwasher is working all right. I've had no one on sick report in the past two days. That's normal, of course. But after the preceding week, when there were a dozen men a day reporting in here, I can't help wondering. No one knew about the long-term effect this brainwashing would have upon the crew. I know the sequence was thoroughly tested on earth before it was decided to use it on this trip, but tests on earth have been known to supply solutions that differ from those arrived at in the same tests made in real space conditions."

"Are you trying to tell me something, Adah?" Vonner was frowning. "If you are, then don't spare me. Let me have it straight. I'm so worked up over everything else that I won't have the time to take anything easy. Hit me with it and let me sort it out."

"There's nothing I can bolster with any definite proof, but I think you should be prepared for a breakdown in the efficiency of the process that has kept you all sane for the last two years."

"You mean the effects of the process might suddenly wear off?" Vonner demanded.

"I don't know what I mean. All I do know is that a lot of these readings aren't right. I've checked all the data. I've tested the circuits on the brainwasher, and there's nothing wrong. But I've got readings here which don't apply."

"Aren't you thinking that this is why Bardo went crazy as he did?" Vonner demanded. "Wasn't it the result of someone tampering with that terminal?"

"This unknown force could have been the start of it, and all the other incidents might have fallen into a pattern that released Bardo from his specially induced mental state."

Vonner considered for a moment. He eyed the woman, love showing on his face, but he was trying to maintain his control over his personal feelings. Her face showed concern, and that worried him more than her words.

"Would it help if the entire crew received another processing session?" he asked.

"I wouldn't dare risk it after the past incidents. Everyone, including yourself, and Bardo

most of all, has been subjected to brainwashing far in excess of the safety margin."

"But you're not getting complaints from any of the crew?"

"No, and that's what is so baffling. According to these readings, some of the crew ought to be in trouble, one way or another."

"What am I going to do?" The question forced itself from Vonner's lips, and he knew an agony of indecision. "There are so many tricky duties to be performed in the next hours. What happens if a man suddenly loses his skills in the middle of a maneuver? Supposing Marr forgets about mathematics as he is working out his orbital co-ordinates? What about Wayland doing a series of retro-blasting with the engines? Are you telling me I shouldn't trust them now, Adah?"

"You have to trust them," she replied seriously. "We're so close to Omina now that you can't abort. Even if you didn't want to go into orbit now, you would have to go round the planet. All I can do is warn you to be careful, Max. Don't take any chances. Try to check everything that is done by your officers."

"That's impossible," he replied, shaking his head. "If there is any danger of the crew forgetting their duties, then we'll have to take a chance

and reprocess them. The mission can't fail at this late stage."

"I wouldn't be responsible for their mentality afterwards, Max."

"It will be better to take that risk than have anything go wrong during the dangerous moments of going into orbit or attempting to land." He shook his head as he considered the prospect. There was a frown upon his face, and she could guess at the weight of worry burdening him.

"I wish I could do something to help you, Max," she said softly, and he forgot his troubles for a moment and reached across the desk to caress her hand.

"Thanks, Adah," he said. "You're a great comfort to me as it is. I'll have to think about this business. I've got an hour or two yet. But what about Bardo? What's his condition right now? He's been subjected to more brainwashing recently than the entire crew together. Have you had a look at him lately?"

"He seems to be in pretty good shape, but he doesn't act normally. He's retreated into silence, and there's tension and fear registering on his electronic checks."

"Perhaps I'd better make the time to have a look at him," Vonner said. "You'd better stand by to reprocess the whole crew, Adah. If I de-

cide that it's necessary, will you carry it out?"

"Of course!" She nodded instantly. "You're the captain. You have to consider the safety of the entire ship. If we cause permanent damage to some of the crew, it will be a small price to pay for the success of the mission."

"You sound cynical," he observed.

"I'm not being cynical. I'm speaking from an objective point of view. I'm looking at it from your angle. You're the captain, and you have your duty to do regardless of the cost. I'm here to back you up, Max, and that's what I'll do. My personal feelings don't enter into it."

"Thanks, Adah. I won't make any rash decision. If the crew have to be reprocessed, then you can bet that I'll be first in line." He stifled a sigh and shook his head as he got to his feet. "I'll go and take a look at Bardo. I'm worried by this, and I hope we can figure something out before I give the order that will commit us to orbit and landing."

"I'll keep my fingers crossed for you, Max. It's little enough. Do what you have to."

"Thanks." He smiled and turned to leave the room.

"Max!" she called to him. When he paused, she came around the desk to stand before him, looking into his eyes with an open, loving expres-

sion on her face. "Kiss me before you go," she said. "You won't have the time to see me between now and landing. You'll be too busy to think of me, but I shall be in an agony of suspense until this mission is behind us."

"Don't worry too much." He took her into his arms and kissed her. "I think it will go off okay. After all this, we'll be able to concentrate upon each other. It won't be long now before we're on that long, boring run back to earth."

"I'll pray for that moment to come," she told him, and he had to take his leave, although every instinct tried to prevent him from doing his duty.

He was thoughtful as he went to the security ward, and the sight of the guard at the door cheered him a little. He was glad that the security arrangements hadn't been lifted. The guard opened the cell door for him, and Vonner entered, to find Bardo asleep on his bed.

"Wake up, Ed!" Vonner touched the man's shoulder, and Bardo opened his eyes instantly, peering up at Vonner for a moment before recognizing him.

"Captain!" Bardo came to his feet quickly and reached out to grab Vonner by the shoulders. "You've got to stop this mad attempt to land on Omina! You should have left me in charge of the ship when I had control. We'd have been

well on our way back to safety by now."

"Ed, take a hold on yourself," Vonner commanded, and thrust Bardo backwards to sit upon the bed. Bardo stared up at him, his face showing some of the stresses acting in his mind. "You're not under the power of the brainwasher!" Vonner was realizing what Bardo had said. "You remember the mutiny again, Ed."

"I remember!" Bardo's face was sullen. "I can't make you understand what's happening, Captain. You're going to rue the day you didn't listen to me."

"Why, Ed? I'm willing to listen to you now." Vonner moved to a seat and dropped heavily into it. He leaned forward and fixed his subordinate with a steady gaze. "Tell me just what is on your mind, Ed," he encouraged.

"You think I'm suffering from space madness, Captain." Bardo shook his head. "I'd only be wasting my breath. No matter what I say now, you're going into orbit around Omina, and you're going to land."

"That's right, Ed! I'm only sorry that you won't be there with me. But I've got to keep you confined. On the return trip to earth, we'll try to find out what's wrong with the brainwasher, and if we can fix it, you'll be as good as new."

"The brainwasher isn't taking effect now,

Captain."

"How do you know that?" Vonner was struck by the sanity that sounded in Bardo's serious tone. They eyed each other silently for a moment. "Why has the power worn off you, Ed?"

"It will wear off everyone." Bardo leaned forward, suddenly energetic again. "Don't you remember that the brainwasher is made to switch off its power when it reaches the end of the trip?"

"But going into orbit around Omina isn't the end of the trip, Ed. It's only the halfway stage."

"It's the end of the trip." There was such finality in Bardo's voice that Vonner could not repress a shudder that touched his spine. "We're going to finish right there in orbit, Captain, unless you do something drastic."

"What is going to happen when we're in orbit to prevent us from blasting away again?"

Bardo did not answer, and Vonner shook his head.

"You're still suffering from space madness, Ed. I can't get any sense out of you. Quillon Reid reports that everything is okay. He's the most excited man on the ship. I don't think there's anything to worry about. You try to rest up, and the doc will see what she can do for you when we start back for earth."

He turned away and rapped on the door so the

guard would unlock it. As he stepped back to allow the door to open, Bardo attacked him from behind, leaping at him and striking at the base of his neck with a powerful fist. Vonner thought Omina had fallen on him, and dropped to his knees as if he'd been pole-axed. Blackness swept across the screen of his mind, and he began to lose consciousness. As the door opened, Bardo leaped at the guard, who was not expecting trouble, and they grappled for a moment before Bardo struck a telling blow. Vonner collapsed under the weight of the falling guard, but the movement jerked him out of the black void that tried to engulf him. He looked up in time to see Bardo leaving the cell at a run, and urgency flared through him.

Pushing himself to his knees, Vonner snatched the unconscious guard's stun-gun, then leaped to his feet and raced out of the cell in close pursuit. He fired when he saw Bardo at the end of the corridor, and the flailing bolt of energy struck home with telling force. Bardo went down and lapsed into unconsciousness. Vonner went forward slowly, breathing heavily, and as he reached Bardo's motionless figure, Adah came out of her office.

"Max! Are you all right?" He nodded and pointed to Bardo.

"Adah, he was normal when I went in to see him. He had recovered from reprocessing."

"I warned you," she said. "I don't know why it's happening, but it will surely affect the rest of the crew."

"Then we must start another reprocessing session immediately. Set it up, will you? I'll get Curran to take over. We must have all key personnel processed again before I start going into orbit."

"I'll be ready for the first man in fifteen minutes. Will that be all right?"

He nodded. "Use your communicator to call Curran here, will you?" he asked.

"Max, I think you're going to find more trouble than you could ever dream of. I don't like this at all."

"Are you beginning to suffer from the same malady that has gripped Bardo?" He stared anxiously at her face, and felt no relief when she shook her head vehemently.

"I've been in my right mind all the time, remember," she said. "There's something not quite right here, Max, and I wish I could put my finger on it."

"Never mind that now," he retorted. "We haven't the time for anything but the bare duties pertaining to orbit and landing. Get Curran here

for me, Adah. I'll stay until he arrives. Then warn the control room that I'm on my way there and ask for all chief officers to be there. Communications, engines and astrogation can be handled from the flight control room. I want those men where I can watch them all the time."

"Please take care, Max!" She turned and hurried into her office, and Vonner tightened his lips as he stared down at the huddled figure of Ed Bardo.

"I'll take care," he muttered. "But against what?"

He paced the corridor until Curran arrived, and as soon as the security chief had been briefed to supervise the processing of the entire crew, Vonner hurried to the flight control room. He was driven by an inner motivation based on worry and instinct. He couldn't get out of his mind the thought that Bardo had been trying to warn him of something bad which even the man himself could not explain. In his normal mind, Bardo had seen, or interpreted, some set of conditions which gave him nightmares. But he hadn't been able to pass on his fears, and now Vonner was unable to work them out, in the same way that Dr. Morley was unable to pinpoint the failure in the brainwasher.

But the routine of going into orbit could not

now be halted, and Vonner was aware of a deep fear in the back of his mind. If Bardo should be proved right in his fears, there would be nothing they could do to prevent a disaster. All they could do now was sit tight and take whatever was coming. It wasn't a satisfactory way of arriving at the end of a mission. The crew might come apart at their mental seams at any time, and Vonner could only pin his hopes on the failing brainwasher. In a few short hours now, the worst of the maneuvering would be over, and if they could hold together until then they would find the rest of it relatively simple.

But Vonner was aware of a shadowy doubt forming in his own mind, and when he reached the control room he found a situation that didn't help bolster his faltering confidence. Howie Farrell, chief of communications, was fighting two guards as they tried to drag him from the communications console, and Farrell was shouting at the top of his voice, babbling incoherently about strange voices calling from earth. As Vonner arrived, Farrell was overpowered and subdued, and Vonner ordered the man to be taken to the sick bay. The assistant communications officer took over, and Vonner waited for someone to give him a report of the incident. He waited with foreboding gathering in his mind, and for

some moments he was on the point of deciding he should abort. But even that choice was denied him now. They were committed!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When order had been restored in the control room, Vonner faced Aaron Marr, who was looking excited in contrast to his habitual calm. Dalus Wayland came in at the door as Vonner demanded an explanation, and the chief engineer moved to Vonner's side to listen.

"Farrell interrupted my work," Marr said, indicating his own system of computers and panels. "He called to me that he was receiving voices from earth."

"But that's impossible," Vonner said impatiently. "He'd never pick up that kind of signal out here. This must be what Dr. Morley warned me about. Bardo has just had a relapse, and he is as crazy as he was when he led the mutiny. There's only one thing to do. We'll all have to go through the brainwasher again." He glanced at the impassive face of Dalus Wayland. "Would you go and take a look at the brainwasher again,

Dalus, if you can spare the time? The doc seems to think it still isn't functioning properly."

"I'll get along to the sick bay immediately," Wayland said. "I don't have anything to do. I'm programmed to the computers now. The engines are out of my hands."

"Well, I've still got a lot to do," Marr said, turning back to his console. "I'll have to start checking the whole sequence again. Captain, you'd better do something about this place. I can't concentrate with these disturbances."

"These disturbances?" Vonner demanded. "Has there been more than one?"

"Quillon Reid was shouting on the communicator a short while ago. Wanted to have all the co-ordinates checked." Marr shook his head and thinned his lips. "I couldn't help him. I'm too busy. I must check these figures. No need to spell out to you what will happen if I make a miscalculation, Captain."

"Get back to it then, Aaron," Vonner said, frowning. "I'll attend to this." He moved to the side of the assistant chief of communications. The man sat before a massive board of switches and flashing lights. "Can you tell me what it was that upset Farrell?" he demanded.

"Sorry, sir! I just don't know. Mr. Farrell was checking the main receiver. He had earphones

on, and I didn't. Suddenly he leaped to his feet and said he was getting earth voices. He pulled off the earphones and handed them to me, but there was just a lot of static sounding when I listened. Mr. Farrell wouldn't believe me when I said I couldn't hear a thing. He called me a liar and hit me. You came in as they were taking him out of here. That's all I can tell you, sir."

"Carry on." Vonner suppressed a sigh and turned to look at the forward scanner screen. Omina was plainer than ever, and he was struck by the resemblance it bore to earth. There were no features visible at the distance, but shades of blue, brown and green showed clearly on the screen. He remembered the last picture he'd had of earth before blasting away, and this reminded him of it.

Wayland cleared his throat, and Vonner looked at the man. They were the same age, and Wayland seemed to be the steadiest man on the ship. There was nothing that Wayland didn't know about engines. He could recite chapter and verse of the history of the engines, going back to the Twentieth Century. Man had first pottered about with mechanical power four hundred years before, and he had come a long way since those primitive days.

"Captain, what's going on here?" Wayland

demanded.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Dalus. I think the brainwasher is to blame, but we shan't know the truth until it's been thoroughly checked.'"

"I'd better make a start and do something about it," Wayland told him. "But I can assure you, Captain, that there's nothing wrong with it. I checked it a couple of days ago, and it was in perfect working order."

"I'd better go and see Reid. I wonder what's eating him now!" Vonner was already running through his mind for the points he had to chase up. He dismissed Wayland, and the chief engineer went off. Crossing to his desk, Vonner sat down and opened a line to Reid's office. The chief scientist came through immediately.

"Captain, I'm glad it's you." Reid sounded excited. "I must talk to you. This is urgent. Can I see you right away?"

"Certainly, Quill. Hand over what you're doing to your assistant and come up to the control room immediately. Make it in a hurry, because I'm busy."

"Be right with you!" The line was closed, and Vonner sighed and sat back. His eyes strayed to the forward scanner screen; now Omina was very close, and beginning to take on detail.

"Captain, my computer is going haywire!"

Aaron Marr leaped to his feet and hurried to a bank of instruments. He fingered buttons and watched dials for reaction, and then he turned to face Vonner, his eyes glinting with a wild light that Vonner had never seen before in any man. "Captain, all my co-ordinates have vanished. I don't have a thing to work on."

Vonner sprang to his feet and hurried to Marr's side, reaching out a steadying hand to the man's shoulder.

"Take it easy, Aaron," he said. "Perhaps you inadvertently wiped the tapes clean."

"Are you kidding?" Marr grinned, and there was a shadow on his features that scared Vonner. "It happened just like that, while I was sitting there. Everything went haywire, and now there are no co-ordinates."

"How long will it take you to prepare another sequence?" Vonner watched Marr's face closely.

"At least three days." Marr waved his hands. "Everything's gone."

"The memory banks will have stored everything you've done since we left earth orbit. Check back and pick up where you dropped everything!" Vonner was certain Marr was feeling overworked.

"I just tried." Marr shook his head as if awakening suddenly from a deep sleep. "I got a flash

on the panel indicating no more readings." His face suddenly underwent a change, as if he had just realized something which had slipped his mind. "I'll tell you what's happened," he said in an awed tone. "We've just come in range of Omina's magnetic attractions. The memory banks must have been wiped clean, but how I don't know. We can't reverse them and get a return course to earth. There's nothing to go on. We're not going to get back to earth, Captain!"

"Take it easy, Aaron," Vonner said firmly, "and keep your voice down. Get back to work. You know what co-ordinates you need to go into orbit. The drive computer has its final instructions. Just take it easy and let things take their course."

"I've got a funny feeling that I've been making mistakes all along the line," Marr said, shaking his head, his eyes wide and solemn. "Captain, I think I've made a complete mess of things and sent us around in a circle. That's not Omina we're coming up to, but earth.That's why the readings are gone! It was scheduled to happen on our return flight. When we got this close to earth, mission control was due to take over. They would look upon us and bring us in."

"You're talking nonsense, and you know it," Vonner said angrily. "Sit down and shut up,

Aaron. I know what's wrong with you. We all have to get processed again. You're losing your immunity, Aaron. Just sit down and stay quiet."

"It doesn't matter what frame of mind I'm in," the astrogator retorted. "I know what I'm talking about."

"Just take it easy. We'll sort things out." Vonner tried to keep a note of desperation out of his voice.

"We haven't got time to sort anything out," Marr insisted. "We'll be going into orbit around Omina, and we'll never be able to get away again."

Vonner stared at the man and could hear Bardo's words in his mind. That was exactly what Bardo had told him! But Bardo couldn't have known what would happen to the computer banks —unless Bardo had done something that would wipe out the recordings at a certain time.

"Aaron, did Bardo do something that wiped out the banks?" he demanded crisply, and his sharp tone stirred the astrogator from his daze.

"Bardo!" Marr got to his feet his eyes showing comprehension. "That fool! He must have set the erasers on a time pattern."

"If he did, is there anything you can do about it?" Vonner asked impatiently, although a sense of urgency was building up in his mind.

"Nothing!" Marr shook his head dumbly, overawed by the prospect of trying to find his way back to earth.

"It shouldn't be too difficult to remember some of the co-ordinates, Aaron," Vonner encouraged. "We're planning to remain in orbit for a month. Perhaps we could send a signal to earth and get control to send us a copy of the co-ordinates. They're tracking us closely, remember."

"Sure." A little color was coming back into Marr's face. He nodded, and exhaled deeply. "I'm sorry, Captain. I guess I blew my top, huh? We're all getting a bit tense. Farrell's behavior must have triggered me off. We can get into orbit all right, and if you send a signal to earth, we'll have a reply on the sonic emergency frequency in time for the return."

"That's it." Vonner felt easier himself. He heaved a sigh. "Take it easy now, Aaron. You've been hard at it for days. There's nothing more you can do right now. We're in the hands of the computers. They'll put us into orbit. As far as I can see, there's nothing to worry about. Let's all take it easy now, huh?"

He turned away as he spotted Quillon Reid coming into the room, and Reid hurried toward him. Before the scientist could speak, Vonner held up a hand. There had been too many upsets

in the control room already. Everybody was shaken, and Reid himself looked as if he had a bombshell to toss among them.

"Let's go into my quarters, Quill," Vonner said. He caught Lieuteuant Hanton's eyes. "Stand by here, Hanton, and call me if anything comes up."

"Yes, Captain." Hanton moved to the commander's console and sat down.

Vonner turned to Reid and saw the scientist standing with his eyes glued to the forward scanner screen.

"Come on, Quill," Vonner said gently. "Let's get out of here. I'll share your troubles. It might make them seem smaller."

Reid said nothing, but turned on his heels and led the way to Vonner's quarters. Once inside, the scientist turned quickly and faced Vonner, who was surprised to see the gravity in the man's face.

"Captain, we can't land on Omina," Reid said in a shaky voice.

"Can't land!" Vonner was thunderstruck. "Why not?"

"Our detectors have picked up heavy radiation. I haven't the exact breakdown yet, but I know from the data already in that it's lethal."

"You reported vegetable and animal life a

short time ago, Quill. How do you account for that?"

"I don't know, Captain! Half an hour ago everything looked rosy. Now I wouldn't give you the all-clear to land. But that's not all."

"Isn't that enough?" Vonner countered.

"I've got a feeling that the planet out there isn't at all the way the readings would have us believe. We're getting readings that could come from earth itself, and I'm thinking the equipment recorded earth as we blasted away, and is now back feeding that data to us. Omina isn't at all what we think. The radiation down there is getting stronger all the time and is now having some effect on our equipment. I've been misleading you for weeks, Captain, and didn't know it. There was no way of checking."

"If you're right now, then you're not to blame, Quill," Vonner said slowly. "We've got to go into orbit around Omina. There's no way of getting out of it. Will that be safe enough?"

"Sure. But on no account must you land."

"We can carry out further tests from orbit." Vonner considered for a moment. "Can anything else go wrong, do you think?"

"I don't know, Captain, I really don't know." The scientist shook his head. "So much has gone wrong since Bardo started that mutiny. We would

have been all right but for that."

"We're all right now," Vonner said, forcing a smile. "Don't worry about it, Quill, and keep all this to yourself. You'd better get back to your equipment and keep the information coming in. I shall be relying on you for a correct picture of the planet as soon as we're in orbit."

"I shall do my best, Captain." Reid turned and departed. His shoulders were bowed, and he had the air of a man who knew the worst about the situation. As far as Reid could tell, there was no hope of making a landing on Omina.

Vonner stood for a moment, his mind turning over all the incidents that had taken place. Nothing seemed to be going right! He set his teeth into his bottom lip as he considered. But there was nothing he could do. They had to take it as it came, and what would happen next was anyone's guess. He shook himself from his thoughts and went back to the control room.

There was a message waiting for him. The brainwasher was ready to receive the officers. Curran was on the sick bay communicator, and Vonner gave him a list of the men and the order in which they would be sent for processing. Curran reported that some of the men had already been processed, and they were about to put Bardo through again.

"I'll wait until last," Vonner said. "I've got some checking up here to do before I can get away."

They soon entered the last phase of the long flight, warping into an eccentric ellipse around Omina. There was nothing they could do except stand by and watch the controls. The drive computer was handling the maneuver, cutting speed, altering course, firing direction jets, applying the instructions that had been fed into it by Aaron Marr and Dalus Wayland. The command computer was the supervisor, checking the data before any electronic order was issued. Vonner watched the controls, filled with conjecture and hope. So much had gone wrong that he wondered just how much more he could take without cracking. He knew better than anyone that the slightest mistake or mishap now would finish them. They were far from home and dependent upon Fate to make a good planet-fall.

The view of the forward scanner screen grew clearer as each minute passed. Vonner was amazed that Omina could resemble earth so closely. But that had been the reason mission control had selected Omina in the first place. Even from earth, observations had shown this strange planet to be sympathetic to human life. It was all Vonner could do to take his eyes off the

screen, and the longer he watched it the more convinced he was that they were going to be successful. He was startled when the communicator flashed him, distracting him from his thoughts. He opened the line and heard Reid's voice in his ear.

"Captain, that radiation has gone." Reid sounded excited, and relief laced his voice. "It must have been a belt of radiation at some distance from the planet. There must be patches of the stuff at these higher levels, and that's why I got readings earlier, and then nothing. But everything is fine again. The readings are better than ever."

"Good work, Quill," Vonner said, and some of the worry dropped from him. He straightened his shoulders and heaved a long sigh. "Keep checking until we're firmly into orbit."

"Leave it to me." Reid chuckled easily, his fears gone, and Vonner grinned as he closed the line.

"How are you making out, Aaron?" Vonner could not keep quiet any longer. The astrogator had been slumped at his desk for an hour after returning from processing. Vonner could tell by the man's attitude that he was busy over his calculations. Marr looked around, nodded, and resumed his work, and Vonner got to his feet and

walked around to check it.

Marr was drawing pitcures, not working at all, and when he realized that Vonner was at his side he grinned loosely and thrust the pad away.

"Nothing else I can do until we're in orbit, Captain," he said.

"Sure. I'm glad you can relax now," Vonner told him. He gently punched the chief astrogator's shoulder. "Enjoy yourself while you can. You don't see any difficulties now, do you, Aaron?"

"None that we can do anything about, Captain," came the steady reply, and Vonner nodded and turned away.

"Captain!" It was the assistant communications officer. He was seated at his banks of instruments, earphones on his head, and Vonner could see the surprise on the man's face from across the room.

"What is it?" Vonner crossed the room with quick strides.

"I'm getting earth voices, just as Farrell did." The man jerked a thumb toward a second set of headphones, and Vonner frowned as he picked them up. As soon as he donned them, he heard a curt voice calling in English. "What do you make of it, sir?"

"What do you make of it?" Vonner countered.

"We know that can't be coming from earth. Ordinary communications would take several thousand years to reach this distance from earth. It sounds like a call signal, doesn't it?"

They listened again, and Vonner watched the communications man's face. He saw incredulity and disbelief dawn in the pale features, and he strained his ears to pick out the words that were being repeated on the air.

"It's a call signal, but it isn't ours, sir," the man said. He shook his head. "This is crazy. That's coming from the planet."

"It can't be," Vonner asserted. "Not in English. Are you sure you're not having computer trouble? Could this be some sort of freak playback from your signals computers?"

"Impossible." The man shook his head. "For one thing, that's not any call signal I know. There was no other space program in progress when we left, was there?"

"Not in this area." Vonner was frowning. "Two years is a long time. Try to get into contact with them. Give them particulars and ask them to identify themselves."

"Could it be another spaceship in this area?"

"That you'll have to find out." Vonner took off the headphones and turned away, his mind reeling under the development. What else could

happen? What was he to believe? The obvious conclusion was that the voices were coming from Omina, but he couldn't accept that the animal life Quillon Reid had detected spoke English. Yet he knew it was impossible for *Orion* to receive communications from earth by radio transmission. He could feel the coldness of fear creeping along his spine. Again he thought of Bardo's warnings; all of them couldn't be shrugged off as the ravings of a space madman. He went back to his desk and opened a line to Reid's office. The scientist spoke immediately.

"Quill, we're getting voices on radio transmission," he said, cutting in. "What do you make of it?"

"Impossible, if they're coming from earth. But they might well be the people on Omina."

"Speaking in English?" Vonner did not disguise the skepticism in his voice. "I won't accept that."

"I wouldn't accept that myself," Reid replied. "I expect you're getting a playback from the last messages we received from earth on our outward trip."

"I thought of that, but I'm told that these call signals don't relate to us."

"Better forget about it, then, until we're safely in orbit. I can't help you. But you'll have

plenty of time to sort things out when we're orbiting."

"Okay. Let it go for now." Vonner killed the power, and the line went dead. He lifted his eyes to the forward scanner screen, and Omina was before him, very close and coming closer. He could tell just by watching that they were almost in orbit. Only minutes separated them from the end of the outward trip. Once in orbit, they would circle the planet, taking pictures and giving the scientists a chance to use their equipment for information. Then they could interpret their signals and advise on the landing. Until then there was nothing anyone could do, and Vonner felt uneasy as he watched and waited. No matter what happened in the next few minutes, there was nothing anyone could do to prevent or avert a disaster.

"We're orbiting, Captain!" Aaron Marr stirred himself and looked around at Vonner, who jerked himself from his thoughts. "We're still under computer control. Everything is okay from this end."

Vonner nodded and opened the communicator line to the engine control room. Dalus Wayland spoke to him, and Vonner gave the chief engineer the news.

"That's a relief, anyway, Skipper," Wayland

said. "Now comes the hardest part, huh?"

"We'll be making several orbits, Dalus, before attempting a landing. There are one or two queries I want straightened out before we set foot on Omina." Vonner closed the line and handed his duty over to Hanton. Then he went along to Quillon Reid's department.

The chief scientist was checking reports and readings, and he seemed to be on the verge of bursting with excitement. He looked up at Vonner and grinned expansively.

"This is it, Captain," he said. "To all intents and purposes, we've gone into orbit around Omina."

"Are you sure your readings are correct, Quill?" Vonner sat down and leaned back in the chair.

"Correct?" Reid stared at him, frowning. "Anything on your mind, Captain?"

"Nothing definite. But it couldn't be earth itself that we're orbiting, could it?"

"Strange you should say that!" Reid put down the papers he held and leaned his elbows on the desk. He looked Vonner straight in the eyes. "I don't mind admitting some disquiet. Things have been happening that don't make sense. Those radio communications, for instance. They must have come from Omina, not earth. If there had

been any changes in call signals, we would have been notified. I would like to accompany you on this first trip to the surface of the planet, Captain."

"You're giving me the go-ahead, Quill?"

"Yes. You couldn't find a more perfect planet for colonizing anywhere in space."

"I'll start preparations for the landing party, then." Vonner glanced at his watch. "We'll separate from the ship in three hours. Will you be able to make it?"

"I'll drop everything else to be there," Quillon Reid asserted.

Vonner visited the sick bay on his way back to the control room and found processing still going on. Adah was busy, but she left one of the nurses in charge and came toward Vonner when she saw him.

"Max, I want to tell you about Bardo," she said. "I reprocessed him at maximum power plus Lapse One. He needed a boost to get his mind back to some degree of normality after the heavy burdens it had been carrying. He passed out in the process and babbled a lot until after it was over. I switched on the recorder to get what he said, and although I haven't had time to check everything that came through, I did hear one or two interesting things that might help you

solve some of your problems."

"Such as?" Vonner demanded.

"Lieutenant Farrell is suffering a nervous breakdown because of those English voices he heard over radio transmission. Well, it was Bardo's work. He recorded some tapes while he was in control of the flight control room, and he timed them so they would operate when we were nearing orbit, in the event, he lost control of the ship to you again."

"That does solve a worry I've had on my mind," Vonner said. "But I can't help wondering if there was anything else Bardo did to prevent us from getting out of orbit again. He's been talking about it ever since I resumed command."

"But you've had the ship checked completely, haven't you?"

"Yes. There's little chance that anything has been tampered with and gone unnoticed. But I'd like to hear the tape, if I may."

"In my office. Will you help yourself while I get done here? I want to be on that first landing with you."

"I shall be taking all departmental chiefs," he said with a smile. "Apart from that, I want you with me because I feel the need for your presence."

"That's cheering news. I'll be there."

Vonner nodded. "Just under three hours before we separate from the ship," he said, and went into her office, to sit at the desk and switch on the tape recorder. He listened to Bardo's voice. There were long periods of silence and intermittent spates of babbling, and Vonner could only wonder at the sorry state of Bardo's mind. He heard the bit about the recorded voices, intended to fool them into thinking there were English-speaking humans on Omina, and shook his head sadly as he reflected that Bardo could never again be trusted on duty. The brainwasher had worked with a vengeance upon his first officer. But there was nothing else of interest on the tapes, and he switched them off and went about his duties.

Three hours later, the landing party was aboard the long shuttle-ship. Philo Curran was present with a heavily armed escort party of six men, and Reid was there with an assortment of instruments. Aaron Marr and Dalus Wayland were also present, as were Dr. Morley and two nurses. In the care of the nurses was Ed Bardo, for Vonner could not bring himself to leave the man behind. Bardo seemed his normal self again, but there was a deep restlessness in his eyes that worried Vonner, and he had given strict instructions to Adah to keep a close eye upon the man.

Vonner settled himself in the pilot's seat and

ran through the sequence designed to eliminate mistakes. Then he started the motors, ran up to full power, and activated the launching process. They were all strapped in their seats, relaxed as much as was possible in their heavy space suits. The shuttle-ship lurched sickeningly, then twisted away from the parent ship, but was still under its control by means of the computers. There was little that Vonner had to do to fly the craft, for the work was done for him by auto-pilots. He was merely a supervisor, ready to adjust the controls if an electronic order came through. They dropped away swiftly from the vast shape of the parent ship, following a similar orbit, and traveling faster than the *Orion*.

They entered the atmosphere of Omina, then glanced out again as their speed caused friction to heat their outer shell. They dipped once more, planing down, ever nearer to the strange unknown world that awaited below. Vonner watched his instrument panels and tried to keep an eye on the view port to his right. But he was too busy to sneak a preview of the landscape below.

At two thousand feet the craft leveled out, and a series of flashing lights indicated that they were maintaining that height as they sped along across the surface of the alien planet. Their speed dropped, and Vonner saw from the view port that

they were approaching a flat plain, the landing area selected by the computers aboard the *Orion*. They slowly lost altitude, and the built-in detectors were recording and transmitting their impulses to the computers. Then they descended gently and came to rest on grass. The motors cut out automatically, and a heavy silence descended.

Reid got out of his seat and came forward to check the instruments. Vonner stared from the view port with wide, interested eyes. He could see trees in the distance, and the glint of water. Birds were flying in the air, wheeling and plunging in much the same way as they did back on earth.

"We can get out of our space suits," Reid said. "This planet is a second earth."

"You and I will go out together, Quill," Vonner said, and it was difficult for him to keep the excitement out of his voice. "I think you'd better come along, too, Philo, with a gun, just in case."

They stripped off their suits, and Vonner led the way into the air lock. Reid was carrying various instruments, and the scientist was impatient to touch the ground. Curran fingered a lethal ray gun. Vonner operated the doors; then the outer hatch slid open, and they all took good, long breaths.

"Smells good," Curran said, and they laughed.

Reid pushed forward, and Vonner put out a restraining hand. He wanted to be first on the ground, and Reid laughed good-naturedly as he stepped aside.

"I always thought the captain was the last man to leave the ship," he commented.

"This is the reverse situation," Vonner told him, and jumped through the hatch to the ground outside. His feet swished in the long grass, and he fell to his knees, remaining there, peering around, sniffing the air and studying the sights that awaited in the strong sunlight.

Reid and Curran arrived beside him; the three men stood up and walked away from the ship, with Vonner slightly in the lead. At fifty feet they paused and looked around, and Vonner noticed anxious faces watching them from the view port of the shuttle-ship. He nodded and waved an arm, inviting the others to join them. When he turned around again to stare across the plain, he saw Reid bending down, inspecting the grass and the ground, while Curran did a dance of triumph.

"We've made it, Captain," he said, grinning hugely. "We've arrived."

Vonner nodded, watching Reid setting up his equipment. A great relief was filling him, and he straightened his shoulders and took a deep

breath. There was a faint breeze, and it felt strange upon his gaunt cheeks, with their space pallor, after such a long confinement in the ship. But he reveled in it, and a corner of the curtain in his mind lifted and showed him a little of what life was really like. He looked toward the ship and saw Adah jumping to the ground, and he hurried toward her, holding out a hand to her. When she joined him, he walked her away from the ship, toward a sharp rise in the ground, and when they reached it they stood upon its small crown and looked around.

"This is a great moment, Max," she said softly. "Do you realize that Omina is the only planet capable of maintaining human life that has been found?"

"I know." He nodded. "I've had a feeling, despite the setbacks of the past few days, that this was it. There's still a lot to do, and we've got a month in which to do it. You're going to be very busy, along with the others. But my work is done for the time being. And I have a feeling that there's a lot for me to consider." He looked around and saw Ed Bardo sitting upon the ground, handling the grass and the earth as if he had never seen such things before. "Setting my feet back on soil has done something to my mind, Adah," he went on more slowly, thinking

deeply, trying to lift the mental curtain a little higher. "I know that I love you, that we meant a great deal to one another back there on earth. Don't you agree that this is the most wonderful moment in your life?"

"Up till now," she retorted, a soft smile upon her face. "But you wait until we get back to earth, Max. Do you realize that you've got as much exploring there to do as you have here? Two new worlds to look over, and there's a great deal of promise in each."

"I know what you mean." Vonner sighed as he relaxed and sat down upon the grass. "Let's take a couple of minutes before we start. We'll get the rest of the crew down here from the *Orion* and start establishing a base." He shaded his eyes against the glare of the brilliant sun and stared out across the plain. "Looks to me as if there are animals over there," he commented. "Let's hope the natives, if any, are friendly."

He placed an arm about her shoulders, and they sat resting, a warm, deep feeling inside them. He felt as if his work had been completed instead of about to begin. But the unknown parts of it were at an end, and what came next could be handled from experience. So his mind was leaping ahead, bridging the limitless space that existed between them and earth, and he knew

that the wonderful feeling of achievement now in his heart would be matched by the thrill of returning and laying claim to more than the glory which would be theirs. There was more than a world to conquer, he knew. Man had to understand himself before he could hope to understand creation, and man, although infinitesimal in space, was the most important atom in the universe.

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A Message from Earth

Kenneth W. Hassler

Men suspected that earth was dying, that it had become too weak to control its far-flung outposts. In fact, earth was indeed poorly equipped to send a fleet of spaceships into warp to meet the challenge of Vankar, Thane of Kraaken. Therefore a single man, Gundar Helge, was chosen to go out into the void and save the mother planet.

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