

The Springers are cruel, cunning and ruthless aliens who will stop at nothing in their mission to take over new planetary sectors and monopolise galactic trade. Earth is an obvious target and when Ezztak, Patriarch of the Springers, gives the order to ‘Destroy That Planet’, an emergency message is sent out...

## **CAN PERRY AND HIS MUTANTS SAVE THE SOLAR SYSTEM...?**

*This is the stirring story of—*

# **SNOWMAN IN FLAMES**

## **1/ THE SEMI-SLEEPERS**

The Universe was his domain, his home the gigantic spaceship—2100 feet in length—which was the longest armed craft of his clan.

He was old. Ancient.

A mighty mane of ice-grey hair framed his tanned face with its hard, pitiless eyes which had looked upon thousands of suns.

He looked like a human being but he was not born on Earth. He had never even seen Earth, not even its sun.

He was Ezztak, Patriarch of the Springers clan; tight-set of mouth, commanding of character, a being whose vocabulary lacked the word ‘compromise’; and he was about to incorporate a new solar system into the Empire of the Traders.

A solar system whose central sun was known as Sol. The Springers were so named because they called the universe their home and leapt from system to system to reinforce and enlarge their trading monopoly. Ever stronger, ever expanding.

The Springers were descendants of the Arkonides, that humanoid race that once upon a time had built a mighty... which to this day they still *believed* they ruled. Wrong: long since the Springers had become independent, no longer giving any allegiance to the Arkonides. They were too busy trading and massing fortunes. And, if necessary, fighting.

Like now.

Ezztak’s lips drew pencil-thin when he recognized on the videoscreen the face of his clan member and friend Orlgans aboard the ship *ORLA XI* only a few light-minutes away.

"What's up? A new attack on those damned Terranians?"

Organs resembled Eztak except that his hair was not grey but of a darker colour, brown or perhaps dirty-red, depending on how the light fell on it. Organs had been the first of his clan to attempt to incorporate an unwilling Earth into the colonial empire of the Springers.

"A new attack?" His furious voice boomed from the loudspeaker. "Who can tell whether this is a new one or the same old one! There's hardly an interval between. I can't figure it out. These Terranians seem so inconsistent. They attack, fire a few shots and with-draw—before we can wipe them out."

"You call that inconsistent?" Eztak's laugh bellowed forth. "I'd call it clever and cautious! They know our forces are definitely superior to theirs."

"Maybe yes," retrenched Organs, face contorted in a furious grimace. "And on the other hand, maybe no."

"Right now there's a lull in the battle. We've enough ships to destroy those two Terranian units if we really set our minds to it. They're only playing for time, using diversionary tactics—they seem to want to head us off from something."

"From what?"

"If I only knew! I'd be much happier," Eztak admitted grudgingly. "Why do they defend a solar system which is uninhabited and 320 light-years from their own home planet? There *must* be a reason for it! Rhodan never does anything without good reason."

Organs didn't immediately answer. He was deep in thought while his eyes were fastened on the giant orange sun which hung far ahead in space. A blue satellite orbited it. Four planets circled two suns in an eccentric orbit. The system of the double-sun Beta-Albireo, 320 light-years from Earth, totally insignificant and unimportant, unless...

"You forget he has a reason, Organs said finally. "The second planet of this system harbours a few of Rhodan's people, who know more than they have admitted so far. Rhodan tries to prevent our capturing them."

"So why doesn't he just kill them?"

"Perhaps..." Organs stopped short. To his mind the explanation seemed so fantastic that he didn't dare express it.

"Perhaps what?" The patriarch was anxious to hear Organs' theory, no matter how wild.

"Perhaps the Terranians are *friends* of Rhodan and for that reason he doesn't want them dead."

Once more Eztak bellowed forth with uncontrollable laughter. His next words revealed how alien his philosophy was from that of an Earthman's, how small a premium he placed on friendship, how suspicious he was of even those whom he called friends.

"Friends! Why'd he give a damn about that if so much more is at stake? If his friends are dead, Rhodan will be safe from any betrayal on their part."

Organs remained silent. He had already had dealings with these Earthlings and learned that they often reacted quite differently from the hardboiled Springers.

Etztak threw a glance at the radar screens to check that his fleet was circling around the second planet of Beta-Albireo in the prescribed battle position. His forehead was deeply furrowed. He was thinking hard but the result didn't seem to upset him.

"There are five Terranians down there on that iceworld—three men and two girls. As far as we can make out they also have a robot with them. An Arkonide fighter robot. I simply can't understand why all our efforts to kill these three people have been without success."

"Because we secretly kept hoping we might catch them alive. They know some things it'd be most useful for us to learn—that's why!" Organs shook his head. "You realize just as well as I that it would be senseless to annihilate these Earthlings, especially that Tiffloor. Tiffloor might even have knowledge of where that planet is located about which legend tells us..."

"I'm not interested in legends, only in hard facts," the patriarch interrupted him. "Planet of Eternal Life—there is no truth to it, just a myth. If indeed it exists we would have found it long since. On the other hand I wonder why Rhodan failed so far to rescue his five men from this iceworld?"

Organs narrowed his eyes. A peculiar expression came over his face. A dog might look that way that had suddenly discovered a trail it had long been searching for.

"Maybe Rhodan's whole tactics serve the purpose to divert our attention from this iceworld. Why else would his two ships keep attacking us in a half-hearted manner and never let it come to a real battle? Why did this Tiffloor pop up all of a sudden, a man who doesn't really know anything at all but gives the false impression of knowing such a lot? Why are we being pushed to concentrate all our efforts in trying to catch Tiffloor and his companions here on this iceworld? Couldn't that be nothing but a clever trick of that wily Terranian Rhodan?"

Etztak had been listening silently. The furrows of his forehead deepened. A pensive glitter came over his hard eyes. Then he slowly nodded and raised both his hands as a sign of agreement.

"It sounds very reasonable, what you suspect here. But if Rhodan wants to divert our attention and to delay us—what is at the root of it? What is he trying to accomplish?"

Naturally Organs was at a loss for an explanation. "I don't know. In any case we should make an all-out effort to capture these Terranians on the iceworld—or to kill them. How many ships would you suggest sending on this mission?"

"Three should do," replied Etztak. "Make sure that the planet's surface will turn from an iceworld into a fiery hell. And if those Earthlings don't burn to death they'll at least perish by drowning in the melted snow waters."

"Wouldn't it be preferable to have them fall into our hands still..."

"Not necessarily!" countered the patriarch. "The only thing that matters here is to prove to Rhodan..."

He couldn't finish his sentence for the general alarm signal was racing throughout his ship.

Rhodan's two fighter units were attacking again.

Major Nyssen, commander of the heavy cruiser *Solar System*, was in constant televideo communication with Captain McClears, commanding officer of the sister ship *Terra*.

The two spacespheres had a diameter of 600 feet and were equipped with the most modern weapons of Arkonide technology. Gigantic reactors created protective screens which could not be penetrated by even the most powerful rays of the Springer ships.

"We're proceeding to a new attack, McClears," Nyssen informed his colleague. "But if Rhodan doesn't heave in sight soon, I'll go crazy. Those guys must catch up with us sooner or later; our luck's bound to run out. And how much longer Tiff can keep up that game of hide-and-seek on Snowman, I wouldn't dare to prophesize."

"I wouldn't care to be in his shoes now," admitted the captain.

"I'll handle that giant cucumber of a spaceship commanded by the patriarch Eztak and you attack the ship next to it. And just remember: fire just one shot and then let's beat it! They mustn't find time to incapacitate us through a concentrated action of their ray cannons—but more important than that they mustn't get a chance to concern themselves with Tiff."

"Got it" replied McClears and grinned. "Will do."

The two cruiser-spheres accelerated, zoomed out of the planet's shadow and arrived within a few seconds near the ships of the Springers, which were taken by surprise by this sudden appearance. A round fire by the cruisers' devastating ray-cannons bounced off the protective screens of their adversaries, flowing side-ways without causing any damage to the Springers' fleet. But at least this sudden assault sufficed to delay once more the hostile actions the Springers patriarch had planned. Furthermore, Rhodan gained some time—although he didn't know it yet.

For just at this moment Rhodan was still more than 1750 light-years away and about to start on a transition.

With the same speed which they had carried out their attack, the two heavy cruisers *Terra* and *Solar System* withdrew from the scene. Under no circumstances could they risk endangering these two ships, for they were the only thing for the time being with which Earth could confront the assailants from the depths of the universe. Even though Earth was 320 light-years distant from this spot, what difference did it make if it was possible to travel even greater distances with hyperspace transitions lasting but a few seconds?

In this moment of greatest danger Earth stood but a short distance away from the final union of all mankind. The formation of a world government was only a question of a few more days. The representative of the New Power, Colonel Freyt, would do his utmost to make this union a reality as quickly as possible.

The threat of the galactic traders—the Springers—could not be compared with that of earlier invasions. The New Power had succeeded in driving off the Mindsnatchers, thanks to Earth's superior technological means. Also the lizard-like Topides from the Vega system had not represented too great a danger to mankind.

But the Springers were a far more serious menace to the safety of Terra.

The mighty race of the Springers—whose attention had been focused on Earth as a result of a tragic event—was in every respect superior. They were closely related to the Arkonides, the former masters of the universe—they possessed Arkonide weapons, knew and used their tactics and were fully aware of the Arkonides' weaknesses.

The Traders regarded Earth and in particular Perry Rhodan as a threat to their unrestricted galactic trading monopoly. They felt they had to bend him to their will—or else destroy him.

But neither possibility was so simple, it turned out. For this adversary was almost in the same class as the Springers themselves. Neither the Terranians nor Eetzak's Springer clan realized that a third party had already entered the dispute. Alerted by the repeated space ruptures caused by many transitions, Topthor had intervened in this fight.

Topthor, also of the Springer race, belonged to the clan of the Mounders. In olden times, long since forgotten his ancestors had lived on a planet with a very high gravity.

During the course of many thousands of years the former Arkonides had lost their humanoid shape to some extent: they became wider and shorter. The present day Mounders never measured more than 64 inches—in height as well as in width. They were square-shaped, squat people weighing around half a ton.

Topthor had eight ships which were circling around Earth's solar system beyond Pluto. With eight additional ships he had followed Rhodan to the vicinity of the Planet of Eternal Life. Upon his return from that artificial world, Rhodan had surprised Topthor, who had attacked the New Power's *Stardust*, with the new weapon obtained from the Immortal. Five of Topthor's ships had been annihilated during this battle. Topthor fled panicstricken, found however still enough time before setting out on a blind transition to send a message via hyperwave radio to the members of his race. Rhodan could not prevent Topthor from sending this warning to Eetzak but he knew its contents.

Some 1500 light-years from Beta-Albireo, Topthor's three ships emerged from hyperspace. It took several hours until they calculated their exact position and found the coordinates for the next jump.

The leader of the clan of the Mounders, Topthor, intended to return to that solar system in which Terra was revolving around its own sun as the third planet. Topthor still possessed eleven ships. This was sufficient, if necessary, to destroy Earth.

But this would mean at the same time the destruction of a potentially very lucrative colony. And Topthor was foremost a businessman, even if his clan dealt more with convoy duties than trade. The other traders would summon him and his battle fleet to come to their aid whenever they would run into difficulties. And Topthor was well paid for these services.

This time, however, the opportunity had presented itself for Topthor himself to found such a colony—besides that, Rhodan owed him five ships.

Topthor therefore ordered his ships to leap back to the solar system of Earth.

And apart from the insignificant fighter forces of the New Power, Earth was at this moment quite helpless.

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About every 123 years there was an 80-year long Ice Age on the second planet of the system Beta-Albireo. This was caused by its eccentric orbit which again was the result of its twin sun system. The central star, an orange-coloured giant, was 600 million miles distant from the second planet, while its blue companion was still another 180 million miles farther away. Because of their present tremendous distance the double suns supplied so little light and warmth to the second planet that there reigned forever twilight and an average temperature of minus 150° Fahrenheit on this frozen planet.

This iceworld called Snowman was a hell, a very frigid inferno.

Despite this, some human beings lived on it. While fleeing from the Springers they had been forced to an emergency landing which left them shipwrecked in this unfriendly climate. Since that time they had been condemned to lead a life of inactive waiting on this lonely, dead world; but they knew that Rhodan had not forgotten them and would come to their rescue.

Julian Tiffloor, the leader of the little shipwrecked band, was 21 years old and reputed to be the best mathematician of the Space Academy of the New Power. Rhodan in person had selected him for this special mission, although Tiffloor had not been properly informed of its purpose.

The second man on Snowman was Humpry Hifield. He was 20 years old, had straw-blond, stiff hair and believed himself to be irresistibly handsome. He could not understand, therefore, why Tiff had been able to snatch from under his nose the 19-year-old Mildred Orsons. He lived in constant dread of not being sufficiently noticed by others and despite his physical superiority was forever plagued by inferiority complexes. This was at the bottom, though not exclusively, of his hidden hostile feelings toward Tiff.

Cadet Klaus Eberhardt was the third man of the expedition which was now waiting on this deserted world to be rescued. His hair was dark-blond and he was rather stocky and thickset. He always needed time to solve problems; quick action was not his forte.

Mildred Orsons, the cosmo-bacteriologist, could rightfully be proud of her pitch-black hair, her dark eyes and her finely chiselled features. Until recently she could never make up her mind between her two admirers Tiff and Hump but this seemed to have changed now. Quite openly she had made it clear to Hump that she preferred Tiff.

And finally Felicita Kergonen should be mentioned, the rather reticent galacto-botanist with blond hair and a dainty figure. Her secret love was Humpry, the plump and awkward one, who apparently noticed nothing of Felicita's affection. Felicita was all of 18 years old and was thus the youngest member of the foundered expedition.

That is, of course, if one forgot Pucky.

Pucky—it must be emphasized however—was not a member of the human race, and nobody knew how old he was. The 3-foot tall mouse-beaver came from a far distant planet where he had managed to stow away on Rhodan's spaceship. Ever since that time, Pucky would not leave Rhodan's side unless he was forced to by an important mission. Pucky's outer appearance resembled strongly that of an oversized mouse with a very broad beaver tail. He was especially remarkable for his lone incisor which was particularly noticeable whenever Pucky was grinning.

Unfortunately, there was not the slightest reason at this moment for a happy grin.

Pucky distinguished himself mainly through his almost unbelievable talents, which made him the most amazing of all the mutants. This mouse-beaver, who looked so harmless and droll, was an outstanding telepath and therefore capable of learning at an incredible speed most languages. In addition, he had mastered teleportation, so that he could transport himself at any time wherever he pleased. And finally, Pucky was a telekineticist. Using only his mental powers he was able to move objects and living creatures without having to lay as much as a paw on them.

All these mutant traits had not fully unfolded until the past few months, for in the beginning of his friendship with Rhodan, and particularly with Bell, he was only capable of telekinesis. But then, being constantly in the company of the members of Rhodan's Mutant Corps, Pucky had plenty of opportunity to improve his talents. He was certain to eventually uncover additional hidden abilities presently lying dormant inside him.

This strange little furry creature was gifted with an astonishing degree of adaptability. He was hardly bothered by the icy cold of the dead planet. He could stay out of doors for a short while without the benefit of a spacesuit and could breathe easily the icy air. On this world existed only one other being which was his equal in this respect.

But could a robot really be called a 'being?'

RB-013 'Aubrey'—was over 7 feet tall, had two powerful legs and four arms. His two lower arms were actually perfect energy rayguns. The robot was part of the routine equipment of the three-man destroyer and it was the only thing the crew had been able to salvage, besides their lives, when their craft had been shipwrecked. Only thanks to the robot's assistance had they succeeded in melting a livable cave into the icy surface of the deadly planet. Aubrey was an excellent fighter and also a superb, untiring worker.

Ever since Pucky had been deposited by Bell on this iceworld—a dare-devil feat in itself—in order to come to the aid of Tiff and his crew, the situation had become more bearable, although nerves were on edge from the constant attacks by the Springers. However, now they had a large enough supply of food and equipment to hold out for awhile.

Pucky was sitting on a box in a corner having his furry stomach tickled by the kind-hearted Felicita Kergonen.

"You are an angel," Pucky chirped with an improbably high-pitched voice. "I already envy your future husband."

"Let's hope all he'll want is to have his stomach tickled!" Humpry Hifield said spitefully from another corner.

"Sour grapes!" remarked Klaus Eberhardt with surprising reaction speed this time. "If I were a girl I wouldn't tickle your stomach!"

"I'm glad you *aren't* a girl," countered Humpry coldly. His voice lacked any warmth although it was fairly warm in the cave. The robot had built a small airlock so that at least here inside they could open their helmets.

"Can't you can your eternal squabbling!" intervened Tiff. "There are plenty of more urgent things to worry about. If the Springers manage to locate our robot, they'll gas us down here. They've already

removed the ice cover from half the planet—we're lucky we didn't drown so far."

"Thank heavens the cave is on a mountain—or isn't it?" Hump asked insolently.

"And if they rake the mountain with their ship's cannons, Hump, what then?"

Hump did not answer. Pucky sighed in his corner: "Isn't it lucky I'm the only telepath here!"

Tiff threw a swift glance at the mouse-beaver. He was getting sick and tired of the whole affair with Hump and he decided not to mince any words toward Rhodan when...

Yes, indeed, when!

Suddenly Pucky rose to his full height. The hair on the back of his neck was bristling. Slowly he pushed Felicita's hand aside, cocked his head as if listening to something. Tiff noticed at once. He watched the mouse-beaver with great interest. Finally he could restrain himself no longer.

"Something going on, Pucky?"

"Yes, I think so. They're attacking again. Three ships this time. And they're flying suspiciously slow."

"Can you see them?"

"Just a moment!" Said Pucky—and vanished.

The rest of the group in the cave looked at each other with dumbfounded faces. The mouse-beaver had once more transported himself without warning out into the open in order to reconnoitre the terrain.

Klaus Eberhardt was just about to say something when Pucky rematerialised in the middle of the cave.

His brown fur was covered with snow.

"We've to get out of here!" he shrieked in excitement. "One more minute and this mountain will be a hell. The Springers discovered me. But I still managed to destroy one of their ships."

"Destroy?" gasped Hump, perplexed.

"Later!" replied Pucky. "Fortunately, meantime I used the opportunity to scout around for another hiding place. I'll take you there. Right away! Close your eyes—and your space helmets. The new place hasn't any airlock yet."

"Airlock?" wondered Tiff, but vanished the same instant before he had a chance to say anything more. The two girls followed one second later. Then it was Eberhardt's and Hump's turn. Finally the robot and the boxes with equipment followed suit.

It was just like magic.

Pucky was standing in the centre of the cave and directing the entire proceedings like a field marshal. Whatever he was looking at would disappear as if carried off by an invisible ghost. Within a fraction of a second he could transport anything anywhere he desired, provided it did not exceed one 1000 times his own weight. And that was exactly what he was doing now.



Those involved noticed nothing. Although they retained their natural body forms, the transport was effected so rapidly that their sense organs had no chance to register even the slightest impressions.

Tiff was still exhaling when he found himself in a pitch-dark room. Quickly he shut his helmet; it was ice cold in the place.

He turned around and noticed a faint glow of light in the distance which he took to be the entrance to the cave. How far away the new cave was removed from their former hiding place, he was unable to guess, for there was no relation to the distance covered by a telekinetic transport and its duration.

Within seconds all the others appeared nearby in the darkness. He sensed rather than saw it. Not until RB-013 lit up his lamp could Tiff reassure himself that all were safely reassembled.

Except for Pucky.

This fact however did not worry Tiff unduly.

"He probably wants to watch what's happening at the old cave," he guessed. "Too bad we'll have to build another airlock here again. By the way, that's not ice here, it's solid rock. I think Pucky has brought us to the equator where there are still some ice-free spots. It seems to me, also, it isn't quite so cold here."

"Yes" Hump laughed sarcastically. "Instead of 150° below freezing we have only 125° below."

The emotionless voice of the robot interjected. "It is exactly -70° Fahrenheit. If I switch on the heating aggregates, we can manage quite well without an airlock. It will suffice if we use the boxes with the equipment as an entrance door."

"That's a splendid suggestion," said Tiff. "Let's go to work!"

"And how about Pucky?" wondered Klaus Eberhardt.

Hump glanced at him with a lofty air.

"How stupid can you get! Since when can Pucky be stopped by some boxes?"

Eberhardt was just about to reply but had hardly opened his mouth when Pucky suddenly returned.

"Friends!" shouted the little guy and his voice was shrill with excitement. "That was some sight! I'll never forget it as long as I live! They melted down our whole ice mountain."

"At first I managed to destroy one of the three attacking ships. I teleported into its command centre and almost tore out the commander's red beard. The guy was so startled that he lost control of his ship, ramming it at high speed into the nearest glacier. His ship disappeared halfway into the mountainside. I can't imagine any survivors of this disaster—their sister ships were busy letting their comrades go up in steam. Whether it's part of their strategy not to permit any survivors, isn't clear to me. In any case, I leaped off the ship at the last moment to carry you all to safety. Then I returned. The two ships were just about to turn our ice cave into an ocean of flame. I'm telling you, my friends, we would have been miserably burnt to death—or drowned. Anyhow, I still managed to put another Springer ship out of action. I jumped into its arsenal and set off an atom bomb stored inside. Unfortunately I couldn't save our

auxiliary vessel."

"You mean to say then, Pucky, that only one of their ships escaped?" Tiff inquired. He no longer looked as dejected as before. "Man alive, Pucky, what would we do without you?"

"No insults, please," Pucky replied soberly, at the same time displaying his lone incisor, a sign that he really didn't mean what he was saying. "After all, I don't call any of you a mouse."

Tiff grinned. "What part of the planet is this here?"

"I transported you about 300 miles farther south. This iceworld is approximately as large as your Earth but has a smaller gravity which leads us to conclude it has also a smaller density. We are now near the equator in a natural rock cave. The Springers should find it rather difficult to roast us down here—600 feet of rock are not to be sneezed at!"

"The way you talk!" complained Hump. "It's obvious Bell gave you language lessons."

"Kindly refrain from insulting Mr Bell," Pucky defended his secret pal in a very formal manner.

"So we are underground?" asked Tiff. Pucky shook his head.

"No, not exactly underground. We are inside a mountain. But we are surrounded by solid rock not by ice. Let's settle down here and wait comfortably till Rhodan picks us up. And if he picks us up, Tiff, you will have served your purpose."

Tiff was suddenly wide awake. "Purpose? What purpose?"

Pucky grinned. His incisor seemed to wink roguishly at Tiff. "The cell sender sewn inside you during an operation has a range of two light-years. Our telepaths therefore always know where you can be found. You can't get lost. But the Springers believe you know a lot of secrets, that's why they're after you and not after Rhodan, who wanted to shake them off his back for awhile. Rhodan went to the Planet of Eternal Life meanwhile in order to get a new weapon, since he couldn't handle the Springers with the arms at his disposal. So if he returns that will mean he has obtained the new weapon. Sounds logical, doesn't it?"

"Sure does," admitted Tiff. He looked rather unhappy and startled. "That means I was nothing but bait here for the Springers all the time?"

Pucky was still grinning. "So was I, don't worry. All of us!" Suddenly he turned serious. "It was most important, however, that Rhodan obtain that new weapon, otherwise Earth would have been lost."

"He hasn't got it yet!" objected Hump.

"True," said Pucky. "I only claimed that he will have it in his possession when he comes here to liberate us. Till then we'll have to be patient. By the way, I hope to be able to establish better communication with the semi-sleepers. They should be more alert here near the equator."

"Semi-sleepers?" asked one of the girls who so far had not participated in the discussion.

"Yes, Milly. That's what I call the inhabitants of this planet. So far we haven't seen any of them but I was able to receive their thoughts. They are rather confused but still quite intelligent thoughts. They live

somewhere below the planet's surface under the ice and as far as I could make out come above ground when the ice melts during the planet's short summer. But this won't happen for a few decades."

Tiff shook his head. "I'd never believed there could be life on this iceworld."

"If you could call this life in our sense of the word; we'll have to wait and see," Pucky cast a damper on their expectations. "Maybe we'll soon find out. I'll try to establish contact with them. But first let's build a wall to ward off the cold. Let's do it with our hands; we need the exercise."

"And afterwards I want to go for a walk outside on the surface."

"I'll come with you," Mildred added quickly.

"Me too," whispered Felicita.

Pucky nodded his little mouse-head.

"You can leave as soon as we're through here with the work. Our robot can produce enough heat to make life bearable for us down here. Outside you'll need half the capacity of the heating aggregate in your spacesuits. A space helmet is not absolutely necessary."

"Well, let's get to work now!"

Tiff was not too astonished that the mouse-beaver had practically relieved him from his responsibilities as leader of the group. As surprising as this fact might seem, it actually shouldn't be that way, for Pucky was the most able mutant in Rhodan's Corps. He certainly was one of the most important members of the fighting troop which at the present time had to defend Earth. Admittedly Pucky was not a human being but the members of the space fleet had understood long since that one should not judge a living creature by its exterior appearance.

Pucky cocked his head a little as he looked at Tiff. "Difficult problems, aren't they?" he asked and grinned impishly. "But don't worry needlessly. I'm only trying to help you before you get too discouraged. You carry the whole responsibility on your shoulders, for you are the leader of this group. I have come here solely to help you out. And if once in awhile I arrange things, I do it only so as not to let boredom take over. For nothing is more dangerous in this situation than too much introspection."

"It's alright," Tiff smiled gratefully. "We understand each other."

They dragged the boxes toward the exit, where they piled them up to build a wall. They left a narrow passage which they closed off with a blanket. This way they were sheltered from the cold outside air.

Contentedly, Pucky rubbed his paws together. "And now go for your walk. Hump will prepare a meal in the meantime. Eberhardt can help him with it. He must be a good cook—his figure is ample proof of it—and I'll..."

"Always these snide remarks about my figure!" complained the cadet. "I can't help it if I am pleasantly plump!"

"That's the understatement of the year!" called out Hump, roaring with laughter. "No wonder he's getting fatter every day: He eats double rations like he was getting paid for it! It's a good thing we have plenty of supplies!"

...make an exploratory trip down into the depths of this cave," Pucky persisted. "Maybe I'll discover something interesting."

Little did he know at that moment how much truth there was to this mere surmise.

## 2/ "A NEW SUN"

Etztak nearly burst with fury when the returning commander reported that two of the three ships he had sent out had failed to return with him. One of the ships had crashed as the result of a navigational error and had to be destroyed to prevent its falling into the hands of the enemy who might extract some information from the crew. The other ship had suddenly exploded in midair.

"And what's the story with Rhodan's people?" asked the patriarch after having calmed down sufficiently to resume his questioning. "Have you caught them?"

"I couldn't say for sure," admitted the commander of the one remaining ship of this ill-fated expedition. "We shelled the entire area where they must have been staying. Of course it was not possible to check the results of this bombardment. But I saw something."

"Something," inquired Etztak without properly understanding. "Like what? Let me hear!"

"What I saw was no Earthling, it was much shorter, perhaps half as tall as we are. I would say a young Terranian but this doesn't seem to make any sense."

"Nor to me," Etztak countered with sarcasm, for he remembered Pucky quite well. "So what was it then?"

He received no answer.

Instead there came a hum from the intercom.

With an impatient wave of his huge hand he ~ missed the unlucky commanding officer and switched channels. The bearded face of a radioman appeared on the screen.

"A hyperwave message, sir." Etztak noticed at once how puzzled the man seemed to be, that he had difficulty speaking. "From Tophor."

Etztak couldn't believe his ears. "From whom?"

"From Tophor, sir."

Etztak leaned back heavily in his armchair. The leader of the Mounders! "What is that supposed to mean? I haven't asked the Mounders to come mixing into our affairs! I need no protection."

"I don't think that's what the message is about," the radio technician dared to utter a mild protest. "At

least not directly."

"Is that what you think? How about reading the message out to me? Maybe the matter will make more sense then."

The radio technician looked at a piece of paper and read: "To Eztat, patriarch of the clan of Eztat. Perry Rhodan, the Terranian, has succeeded in obtaining a new weapon. With it he destroyed five of my ships. Impossible to offer any resistance. I warn you, Eztat! Secure our services! Rhodan will attack and destroy you. Only a surprise attack can render him harmless. I'll call back with my new position. Awaiting your offer.

Tophthor,

Clan of the Mounders'

Eztat nodded his head to acknowledge the message. Then he ordered the message brought to him. He cut off the connection to the radio room. Without delay he gave the signal for general alarm. For the time being the second planet with Rhodan's five people had become non-essential. His first and fore-most task now was to prepare for Rhodan's imminent attack.

At least this is what Eztat tried to make himself believe. Secretly it began to dawn on him that he had committed an irreparable mistake: He had permitted himself to be distracted from his real opponent. While he thought Tiff to be one of the main foes, he had actually been just an unimportant figure placed in this situation merely to sidetrack and throw him off Rhodan's scent, his trip to the Planet of Eternal Life and the new super-weapon.

To his sorrow he had to admit to himself his enemy's plan had fully succeeded.

"Organs!" he yelled into the microphone as the questioning faces of his clan friends appeared on the picture screens. "Rhodan has got the new weapon. I received a warning from Tophthor..."

"The Mounder?"

"Who else?" Eztat snapped furiously. "He is roaming around here somewhere in the vicinity though I didn't request his aid. But still, he has warned me. Rhodan plans to attack us. I don't know any details about this new weapon but I'm sure we'll be able to handle that threat. Organs, in the meantime I want you to proceed to the second planet with another ship. Let that planet go up in an atomic explosion."

"Explode the whole planet?" Organs raised his eye-brows. "Turn the entire planet into a sun? Don't you realize that this goes against all laws if you annihilate an inhabitable world without a proper reason?"

"Isn't it a sufficiently compelling reason if I want to revenge myself on Rhodan and especially on the escaped prisoners?"

"Is that a compelling reason?" doubted Organs.

"For me it is!" raged the patriarch. "I want to teach him a lesson once and for all: not to stick his nose in my affairs!" Eztat conveniently forgot that just the opposite had been the case: he was the one who planned interfering with the affairs of Earth. Rhodan was merely defending himself against the Springers' assault. "And part of this lesson will be to wipe out his men and the planet on which they found refuge."

"Total annihilation by an atom bomb—unleashing an atomic fire that can never be extinguished?"

"Yes, make a new sun out of this second planet!"

Organs nodded his head in consent and vanished from the screen. It was obvious that he did not agree at all with the mission he had been charged to carry out by the patriarch. But he had no alternative; he had to obey. He informed the commander of another ship to assist him with his task and to supply cover if necessary. Then he broke out of line from his formation and started on the lengthy preparations to make reality of this devilish plan.

Meanwhile Eztak consulted with the other Traders how best to meet Rhodan's expected onslaught. This was not easy for nothing was known of the workings of the new weapon. The brief hints supplied by Tophthor were not enough to get a clear idea.

Tophthor had promised to report back again but nobody could tell when this would occur.

"Keep in close formation," ordered Eztak. "When-even Rhodan appears we'll rake him with a concentrated energy bombardment. Even his energy screen won't withstand such a barrage. And don't let yourselves be distracted any more by those two cruisers."

On the one hand the patriarch was right but on the other he did not know that it would have been quite easy for the two cruisers to carry out heavier attacks and even to destroy one or the other of the Springers' ships. But the two cruisers had merely carried out Rhodan's instructions when they left it at simply feigning attacks.

It wasn't Rhodan's intention to give a warning lesson to the Springers by involving them in a normal battle: he planned to deal them such a blow that they would give up any future ideas of ever trying to interfere again in Earth's affairs.

And that's why he had needed time to obtain the new weapon from the planet Wanderer, that strange artificial world which existed in another dimension and that had been created by a being representing the spiritualisation of an entire race which had thus become immortal. *The Planet at the Edge of Eternity*, Rhodan had once called it—and probably had hit the nail right on the head with that name.

Eztak knew nothing of this planet that existed as a vague legend among the races of the galaxy. Nobody knew whether or where it really existed. But Rhodan knew the planet. There he had received a biological cell shower from the Immortal which arrested in him and also in his friend Bell the natural process of aging. Every 62 years, however, this procedure had to be repeated.

And then the Immortal, that incomprehensible being, had given Rhodan the new weapon he wanted in order to ward off the attacks from the Springers.

Eztak began to vaguely guess at all these facts now and he was overcome by a first feeling of insecurity. Had he underestimated his foe? But Rhodan was only an Earthling, a member of a race to be considered underdeveloped if measured by galactic standards. It had not been too long since they had first ventured out into space. Only thanks to the technological means supplied to them by the Arkonides, who had become shipwrecked on the Moon, had these Terranians been able to make a giant leap ahead. But could such a leap replace the natural course of evolution over the span of thousands of years?

Eztak doubted that but still the feeling of insecurity remained in him.

\* \* \* \*

The *Stardust*, Perry Rhodan's gigantic spacesphere, completed its transition and materialized in normal space. More than 1750 light-years had been traversed.

Rhodan felt the pains of rematerialisation gradually leave his body and his clear mind of awareness take over again. Beside him, Reginald Bell was moaning and groaning, as if somebody were taking out his appendix without an anaesthetic. It was a matter of principle for Bell to carry on like that at all transitions; it had become a bad habit. No wonder, then, if Rhodan paid no attention to his friend's laments.

Had their calculations been correct?

Rhodan sat up and stared at the picture screen. He saw a confusion of stars and he knew at least that he no longer remained in the vicinity of the planet Wanderer. However it was impossible to ascertain right away with the naked eye whether the *Stardust* had exactly reached its destination, for planet Wanderer had also covered an unknown distance while they stayed on it.

"Are we there?" asked Bell. He tried a smile which failed miserably. "Strange, there we were on the Immortal's planet just this very moment it seems, and now..."

"Up ahead I can make out the double star of Beta-Albireo," Rhodan interrupted his friend. "Distance about two light-hours. Our emergence from hyperspace was probably already registered by Eztak. He most likely will have taken measures accordingly. Let's not forget that he has been forewarned, even if he must be racking his brains in vain as to what this new weapon is really like."

"Won't he be surprised when he finds out!" said Bell. "Two tele-transmitters capable of teleporting any matter over any distance. This means we can smuggle atom bombs aboard their ships—and they can't do a thing about it."

"Don't forget, if they direct all their fire power in a concentrated attack against our protective screens we can't withstand such an onslaught. They aren't quite as defenceless as you would wish. It will all depend on whether we can be faster than the Springers."

"Even if that Mounder Topthor has warned them, we have nothing to fear," prophesized Bell, who was quite surprised to see that Rhodan seemed to be suddenly lost in thought. Apparently his mentioning the name of Topthor had brought some memory up in Rhodan's mind. "What's going on, Perry?"

"Topthor!" said Rhodan. "I almost forgot about him."

"So what?" Bell shook his head. "I don't understand. We have wiped out five of his ships and therefore have nothing to expect from him—no more hostile actions. He has only three ships left now."

"That's exactly it!" Rhodan frowned. "Remember the way it was? He must have followed us to the Planet of Eternal Life. And that was possible only provided he jumped from the same spot we did. But we didn't come from the Beta-Albireo system but from Earth. That means he now knows the position of Earth. And I'll bet anything he's returning there again. If he's bent on revenge we have nothing to ward off an attack of his three battleships."

Bell had forgotten to grin. "Sounds positively scary. And you're probably right. What can we do now, Perry?"

Rhodan kept staring at the picture screen. He was facing a difficult decision. Up ahead Tiff was waiting to be rescued. The second planet must surely have become hell for Tiff and his little group—Rhodan was convinced of that. Pucky could not be expected to hold the Springers at bay indefinitely. And the two cruisers under Maj Nyssen couldn't keep on forever feigning attacks. Eztak was bound to see through the whole swindle sooner or later. And if he should then make up his mind to carry out his threat, Tiff and his band would be lost.

On the other hand, Tophor might meanwhile attack Earth with his three gigantic battleships.

Rhodan didn't dare send a warning message now to Col Freyt—he was afraid to give away his position. And no doubt the Springers were capable of intercepting his radio message.

Rhodan hesitated only briefly, then decided to do two things almost simultaneously.

He switched on the intercom. "Attention all hands! Attention weapon centre! We're undertaking another transition. Distance two light-hours. After rematerialisation hold the tele-transmitter ready for immediate action. Keep ready two fusion bombs. Exactly 20 seconds later a new transition to Earth. Await further orders. That's all for now. Thank you."

Bell was moaning. "Here we go jumping again! We haven't had a chance to recover properly from the last one!"

"No time now to pamper ourselves! Attention, transition will take place in 60 seconds."

The metallic voice of the robot counter began calling out the seconds.

"30... 29... 28..."

Rhodan remained stiffly in his chair. His right hand grasping firmly the lever which connected him with the armament centre. Close to it was the firing button of the tele-transmitters. As soon as the *Stardust* would rematerialise, it would change itself into a death-dealing monster.

Eztak was smart enough not to let himself be distracted by the renewed assault of the two cruisers *Terra* and *Solar System*. Only one of his ships was ordered to return the fire. Whereupon the cruisers withdrew, as Eztak had expected them to do.

No, this time Eztak could no longer be fooled. He was on his guard. He was waiting for Rhodan.

The space rupture sensors of his giant 2,100 feet long battleship were running at full speed. Suddenly they registered something.

At a distance of barely two light-hours a transition was just taking place. A ship must have returned from hyperspace into normal space, for the rupture occurred in a negative direction. The positronic brains began to work and a few seconds later Eztak had the result in his hands.

At a distance of exactly 118.38 light-minutes a ship which had leapt across 1749.89 light-years had returned into normal space and rematerialised.



That could only be Rhodan!

Once more the alarm signal raced through the ships. All ray cannons were ready to shoot. The protective screens were erected. Eztak ordered his ships to take up positions so that any suddenly appearing enemy could be taken under crossfire from all directions.

And then the space rupture sensors registered a second transition: this time in a positive direction...

...and in this same instant Rhodan was in their midst!

The giant sphere with its 2400 feet diameter had more mass than Eztak's entire Fleet combined. The ship's awe-inspiring size paralysed the Springers for a few precious seconds, seconds they could never make up.

One of the Springer ships detonated before any of them had a chance to fire a single shot. It detonated without any apparent reason, melted before the horror-struck eyes of old Eztak and left nothing but a cloud of radioactive dust which spread out in all directions. Nobody had any inkling that the tele-transmitter had teleported a medium-sized atom bomb right inside this ship's munitions storage hall, where it had been caused to detonate.

Eztak opened fire. Beamed energy rays flashed from all available cannons, hitting the protective energy sphere which surrounded the *Stardust*. For the time being these rays were deflected without causing any damage. The *Stardust*'s generators produced sufficient energy to compensate for the extra strain.

And then, exactly 15 seconds later, Eztak's second ship exploded.

Almost five seconds passed before Eztak could open his blinded eyes—just in time to observe Rhodan's *Stardust* disappear again. He had hardly gotten over his shock when the two cruisers renewed their attack. Major Nyssen was acting on instinct when he saw Rhodan go into action. He realized that the new weapon had been found and he believed that this was the beginning of a general assault.

The *Solar System* pounced on a ship of the Traders fleet which had been standing off to one side. It belonged to a smaller category and Nyssen knew that it contained mainly storage holds and was not so well equipped with arms. Its energy screens were accordingly less powerful. The cruiser's concentrated barrage breached the protective screen and tore open the port side of the freighter.

But not enough time remained for Nyssen to complete his work of destruction. The *Stardust* vanished as fast as it had come. No radio message, no warning, nothing. The mighty battleship had appeared like a ghost and like a ghost it had plunged again into the abyss of the universe.

Nyssen gave the order to retreat.

A thoroughly confused, and for the moment helpless, Eztak was left on the scene of the swift space battle.

In less than 20 seconds he had lost three of his ships.

\* \* \* \*

Tophthor sat in his supra-dimensional chair like an enormous clump of meat. He was staring at the picture screens. The constellations of the stars crystallized from the void and offered a familiar, welcome sight.

Yes, indeed, the transition was a success.

Before Tophthor's three ships stood the solar system whose third planet was causing him so much trouble.

A quick manipulation and he had established communication with the other two ships. "Grogham, get in touch with our fleet. The eight battleships ought to be staying on the other side of this sun. We'll meet 10 light-hours away from here on a line formed by the sun and its outermost planet. Be ready for a video conference in two hours."

"I'll take care of it," promised Grogham, the acting commander of the convoy fleet. He, too, was a Mounder and weighed some 1200 pounds. "In two hours. Are we going to destroy the third planet, Tophthor?"

"In case these crazy Terranians don't accept our offer they'll pay dearly for it. Rhodan is quite busy elsewhere, trying to tackle Eztak. We have plenty of time.

This is where Tophthor was greatly mistaken but of course he could not know otherwise. The same instant he was speaking these words, three of Eztaks ships were annihilated. And while he had not yet finished what he was saying, Rhodan was once more slipping into the fifth dimension in order to make the far distant leap to Earth.

Rhodan was clever enough to materialize 20 light-hours distant from Sol and without any further transition he flew with the simple speed of light into his own solar system. This greatly reduced the risk of being detected by enemy forces.

Unnoticed he reached Earth and landed in Terrania the capital of the New Power. Colonel Freyt was quite astonished to see his boss so soon again. He suppressed a snide remark that Rhodan had failed to inform him of his arrival via hyper-radio for it was obvious that Rhodan was very much pressed for time. The *Stardust*, with Reginald Bell aboard, remained on the landing field—ready to take off at a moment's notice, Rhodan alone had rushed by car into the control centre located under the protective energy dome, in order to place Earth on red alert. A few brief radio communications with the pertinent offices the world over had sufficed to combine all authorities in a common action.

They were prepared.

And they were waiting...

\* \* \* \*

"It would be totally senseless," Tophthor pointed out and looked at the commanders of the other 10 ships

for approval, "if we were to attack without issuing a warning and to annihilate Terra. What good would a destroyed planet be if on the other hand its inhabitants could be very useful to us?" The 10 bearded men on the picture screens nodded their huge heads in agreement. "It makes much more sense if we start negotiating with them. Rhodan is currently in a system 320 light-years away, trying to cope with Etxtak. He might even get the better of him since he has the new weapon. As far as we personally are concerned this would mean no great loss to us, even if we would lose Etxtak's clan as a future source of income. If on the other hand we should gain a strong foothold meanwhile on Earth, this would afford us the opportunity to establish there a new and profitable Springer colony."

"And Rhodan?" someone asked.

"Rhodan?" A broad grin spread across Tophthor's bearded face. "Won't he be surprised to return here after a victorious battle with Etxtak and learn Earth has changed ownership during his absence!"

Grogham cleared his throat. "I'm afraid you are underestimating these Earthlings," he interjected.

Tophthor looked him full in the face and stopped grinning. "Are you serious? We have here 11 ships, the best battleships in the universe. And what has Rhodan to offer? Nothing!"

"Don't forget he has a new weapon now!"

Tophthor wasn't any too happy to be reminded of this sad fact. And particularly to be reminded by Grogham how Rhodan had destroyed five of his ships in no time.

"If we should run into any difficulties we can always get in touch with our base," he relented. "Anyhow, I'll try to seize control of the Earth. We'll approach the planet to within a distance of ten light-minutes and then I'll take up radio communication with them. We'll soon find out how Rhodan's people are going to react. I'm certain they have nothing to confront us with."

This time he received no reply.

The fleet, consisting of 11 ships none less than 900 feet long and armed to the teeth, set course for the sun and sped toward the still tiny-looking star at the speed of light. Shortly before he reached Jupiter's orbit Tophthor slowed down and cautiously approached Earth.

But all his caution was in vain. Satellite spies had observed and reported his approach. Rhodan had been warned. After having made the necessary precautions and preparations Rhodan returned to the *Stardust* and went to Bell in the command centre.

"Well, what happened?" Bell wanted to know.

"I have instructed Col. Freyt to transfer to us any radio calls he might receive from the Mounders. I shall answer these calls in his name. They must not find out that we are already here and are expecting them."

Two hours later the little red control lamp lit up. Tophthor had made contact with Earth without knowing who he was talking to.

Rhodan permitted himself to assume a pseudonym. A few manipulations and they were ready not only to talk but also to see each other. It didn't matter that this was a televideo communication. Rhodan knew Tophthor but the latter had never laid eyes on Rhodan himself.

The huge figure of the Mounder was most impressive but the sight did not frighten Rhodan. He knew him—and also his weaknesses.

"Terra here," he announced himself in a matter-of-fact voice. "You have called us?"

Topthor's face expressed surprise at the lack of surprise his call had apparently caused.

"We wish to enter into negotiations with the Terranians," he said in the purest interkosmo with a slight accent. "The mighty clam of the Mounders has some proposals to make to you."

"We are listening."

"Who am I talking to?" inquired Topthor and looked Rhodan straight in the eye. Without as much as batting an eyelid Rhodan's glance locked firmly with that of the Mounder.

"Col. Freyt, substituting for Perry Rhodan, head of the New Power, Peacelord of the Universe."

"What is the New Power?"

"The power that represents all Earth."

"I'd like to talk to Perry Rhodan in person." *What a sly fox*, thought Rhodan, while Bell, out of the tv camera's range, was grinning derisively. *He wants to find out if we have any idea...*

"He is unavailable for the moment," said Rhodan. "What do you want from us?"

"Do you know who I am?"

"Quite a monster, as far as I can judge from here," countered Rhodan.

"I am Topthor, the oldest member of our clan."

"The smartest one too?"

For a moment Topthor seemed to be quite confused by these peculiar questions, then he became furious, for after all, all the other commanders of his fleet were listening in and could hear how this Earthling made fun of him.

"We are carrying on trade on all the inhabited worlds of the galaxy and I believe you might have interesting objects to offer and vice versa. Please state your exact location."

"I can't allow you to land here as long as Rhodan hasn't given his express permission. State your position."

"We want your landing coördinates, otherwise we'll land anywhere we please."

"And?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

"Is this a threat? Don't underestimate us."

Topthor laughed out loud and stroked his full beard. "Underestimate? If we could defeat Perry Rhodan, we won't have any difficulty with his home planet either."

"Ah, you defeated Rhodan?"

"Yes, but unfortunately he escaped. Will you give us your landing coordinates?"

Rhodan quickly glanced at Bell, who handed him a piece of paper. Rhodan held the paper so that Topthor could also see what was written on it. Rhodan read aloud the following text: "Mars orbit-direction Earth. Velocity 4592 sec/mile. Direction MX-T4." Rhodan looked up. "We could talk to each other within 10 minutes, Topthor, if you like."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"That is your present position and your flight direction and velocity. Don't assume only Rhodan possesses the means to wipe you out. And don't you believe either we didn't know exactly what happened near the Planet of Eternal Life. And finally, don't be so sure that we have only one ship of the *Stardust* class..."

Rhodan was bluffing with the last statement but it worked.

Topthor gave a sudden, involuntary start. "Are you referring to the giant spaceship?" But then he grinned. "You can't scare me away, Earthlings. Only Rhodan visited the Planet of Eternal Life and got the new weapon. You down there have nothing but conventional weapons and those we can handle quite easily."

"Go ahead! Try it! I'm warning you once more: leave us alone, don't try to force your trade on us and turn Earth into another Springer colony. Do I make myself clear?"

"We'll land in an hour," replied Topthor and cut off the connection.

Rhodan stared at the blank picture screen. Then he turned to Bell.

"Well, what do you say to that? They won't listen to reason. They won't negotiate. They believe they're perfectly safe as long as the *Stardust* and its new weapon is far away from here. My claim to possess several of these giant spacespheres will duly shock them. The survivors will tell their clan members about it—and Earth will play a role within the universe not to be taken lightly but to be greatly feared. Our planet will be known as a good place to stay away from. This is absolutely necessary for us in order to survive and attain our goal."

He issued a few orders to Col. Freyt, then switched on the intercom of the *Stardust* .

"Attention! Start in one minute. Observe all safety measures—we'll be flying with excessive acceleration while still inside the atmosphere. Attention! Fifty seconds to go. No transition! Weapon centre—be ready for action! In exactly 10 minutes. Await my orders. Attention! Forty seconds till blastoff!"

Bell fastened the wide belt around his broad belly. His eyes were glittering merrily and full of enterprise. "Maybe you are right," Bell tried to overcome his moral scruples. "These Mounders have to be taught another lesson since the first one didn't do the trick."

"And then we'll proceed as fast as possible to Snowman. I'm very worried about Tiff and his friends

there."

"Especially Pucky!" said Bell and watched the turning hands on the dial. "Ten seconds to go."

### 3/ "HANDS OFF EARTH!"

Tiff could hardly conceal his amazement when he left the cave and walked out into the open. Only the tops of the nearby mountains were covered with snow and a bit off to the right on the wide slopes where the sun rays did not reach. Everywhere else the ground was black and free of snow. It was mainly bare rock but under the circumstances these bleak stones almost reminded him of home.

Mildred Orsons shook her head, her long black hair flying like a windswept banner. It was bitter cold but it was quite bearable for a few minutes. It didn't seem quite so icy as they were standing in the sunlight and also protected by the rocks. "Doesn't look bad at all," she said gaily although she felt quite different inside. "I could even imagine there might be some life forms existing on this deserted ice world."

"Right now we should only worry about our own lives," replied Tiff and smiled at the young girl. He knew that she was fond of him and had finally overcome her wavering attitude. She seemed to feel merely pity for Hump, which in turn had greatly relieved Felicita whose love for Hump had so far seemed quite hopeless. The only one who apparently was totally unaware of this complicated affair was Eberhardt. He got along famously with everyone and was content to be left in peace.

"Tiff, do you think Rhodan will come in time to rescue us from this place?" asked Felicita in an anxious voice. It was her nature to be always concerned and a bit frightened. "Why aren't the Springers attacking us?"

"They have their hands full right now," guessed Tiff. "Pucky saw to that."

"What would we do without Pucky!"

Tiff laughed. "You seem to be quite enamoured of the little guy, Felicita."

"Aren't we all to some extent? Milly, don't you agree?"

The dark-haired girl nodded her head in assent and closed the helmet of her light spacesuit. At the same time she switched on her communication set. The others followed suit.

"It's getting cold," she said. "I can't stand it for very long without protection. Or else I'll turn into an icicle."

"An inhospitable world," remarked Felicita and pointed to the valley where occasional spots of snow were visible. "And its not only the Springers that make life so miserable here."

"Most any world is good for something," countered Tiff who kept steadily examining the sky. "Even this one. Remember the Moon, it lacks air, and we can at least breathe here."

"But the Moon is so much closer to Earth," Milly made an important point. "And that is what really matters."

Tiff did not answer. For an instant he believed he saw a sudden flash of light high up in the blue-green sky but then he was sure he had been mistaken. He turned to Milly and placed an arm around her shoulder.

"Distance has only a symbolic significance, not a practical one. You can be much more lonely on the Moon than here where we are 320 light-years removed from Earth."

"Let's go over there to that little brook," Milly suggested. "It seems an eternity since I last saw a brook."

They ambled leisurely across the dark rocks which stood in sharp contrast to the remaining areas still covered with snow. The ice floes were floating in the water but the ground seemed to be warm enough that it was not frozen over despite the cool air temperature. The water was rippling merrily downhill—not too long ago it had been ice and probably soon the water would freeze again.

Felicita bent over; her voice expressed astonishment. "There is some life after all on this ice planet—look here! Real plants!"

"Just algae, that's all," Milly said depreciatingly. But she encountered at once objections from Felicita the botanist. "Algae are plants, Milly. They are the beginning of life. All life has developed from them—given enough time."

All of a sudden Pucky appeared among them. He had simply teleported himself; most likely the little fellow had been too lazy to run all the way on his short little legs.

"And these algae have had enough time on this planet!" he chirped with a strange emphasis. "Life has developed from them—even intelligent life. Return to the cave and I'll show it to you."

"Intelligent life?" Tiff echoed slowly. "Do you mean to say you have found your so-called semi-sleepers?"

"Just wait and see," promised Pucky eagerly. "They are wonderful little creatures—and besides they are telepaths. Or I should rather say: Hypno-telepaths, for their thoughts exert a strange and forceful influence if they address you."

"Now what's that supposed to mean?" Tiff wanted to know, feeling cold showers down his spine. He remembered he used to feel the same way as a child when his grandfather would tell him some scary ghost story, especially late in the evening. "Hypno-telepaths?"

"When they are thinking they can simultaneously influence the mind of other creatures. But don't worry, Tiff, they are absolutely harmless. Besides, they are afraid of the Springers."

"What do they know about the Springers?" Tiff said in alarm. "How can they possibly know anything about them?"

"The semi-sleepers are gifted with an incredible sensitivity. They have intercepted thoughts full of hatred emanating from space. And this can be only the thoughts of the Springers. They are not troubled on our account; they have recognized that we mean them no harm. But they are very frightened of the Springers and their evil intentions."

"As long as they remain hidden deep inside the planet they have nothing to fear, nothing will happen to them," Tiff asserted in his ignorance.

Pucky grinned. "You'll be mighty surprised!" he promised. "And now, walk back to the cave—or are you as lazy as I am?"

Grumbling, Tiff started to move; Milly and Felicita followed. The young girl botanist threw a quick glance back at the algae growing along the banks of the little brook and decided to have another look at these strange plants later on.

Pucky vanished—and awaited them inside the cave. It was pleasantly warm and the air was filled with an inviting smell.

Hump looked up as his friends entered. "It's about time you're back. Dinner is ready. For a change, Eberhardt made himself useful today: he helped unpack the food concentrates."

"The gravy would have been burned if I hadn't watched out. for it," Eberhardt defended himself against Hump's accusation. "That guy talks a lot and whatever he says is a lie."

Pucky kept sniffing the air and was moaning in anticipation of a delightful meal. "I suggest we eat first. The semi-sleepers won't run off. At least not for the time being."

"And later on they might?" Tiff couldn't contain his curiosity.

Pucky bared his incisor with a wide grin. "Yes, later on they will—in spring. In about 50 years from now."

Tiff looked closely at the little mouse-beaver but it was impossible to learn from the expression of his cute, sly features if he had been joking or not.

RB-013 stood without moving in a corner and radiated a pleasant warmth. His heater was giving off warm rays fed by an inexhaustible energy supply from his Arkonide reactor. life inside the cave would definitely not have been quite so pleasant without the presence of the machine man.

The young people sat down on some boxes and began to eat. The two master chefs Hump and Eberhardt were duly praised but they began to quarrel immediately as to who was mainly responsible for preparing such an excellent meal.

This was the moment when Felicita dared for the first time to make open advances. "You cooked an excellent soup, Hump," she said and threw a glance of frank admiration in his direction. "I could not have done as well."

Hump was always receptive to compliments. He puffed out his chest, looked sneeringly at Eberhardt. "When I get married my wife won't have to bother with the cooking," he promised.

Tiff made a face. "You'll do that for your wife?" he inquired.

"You bet!"

"Ah—and you'll send your wife out to work, won't you?"



"How do you mean that?" Hump could hardly bring out the words, he was so busy chewing.

Tiff grinned. "Man, do you realize what it's like to be a housewife? To stay home and take care of a household? Why don't you ask Milly, for instance? She'll only have to cook and stay home later on when she gets married. But then on the other hand I won't have much to say in the kitchen, and all I'll do is bring in the bacon.

Hump's face looked so stupid that Pucky burst out in squeals of laughter; even the robot's heating lamp seemed to flicker. But nobody paid any attention to this rare manifestation of the automaton's emotions; everyone was too busy observing Hump.

The cadet of the spacefleet first turned pale as a sheet, then red as a beet. His gaze was wandering, fixed for a brief moment on each of his friends, but he was met everywhere by expectant glances which obviously were eagerly following the development of the situation.

Finally his gaze remained fixed on Milly. "Is that the truth? You really want to marry him?"

The girl nodded her head and a strand of her black hair fell across her forehead. "But didn't you know that already?"

Hump swallowed. "How could I? Where should I have known that from?"

Milly smiled innocuously. "Even if I were in love with you, do you really think I would steal another girl's boyfriend? And especially if I realized that this girl has lost her heart to you, which you are too stupid even to notice."

Hump's face looked even more stupid now than before, if such a thing was possible. Tiff had trouble not to burst out laughing. Felicita looked most embarrassed. The spoon in her hand was shaking dangerously, spilling her soup. Only Eberhardt seemed disinterested in the whole proceedings. He ate his soup with relish, not paying any attention to what was going on around him, grunting occasionally contentedly, which caused Pucky to nudge him from time to time to urge him to mind his table manners.

"A girl's in love with me?" Hump finally stammered, perplexed.

"Why, can't you imagine anyone would fall in love with you?" Milly challenged him. "In any case, don't worry about me!"

Hump's gaze wandered over to the deeply blushing Felicita, who had not counted on such unexpected assistance. She lowered her head, greatly embarrassed.

"Is that true, Felicita?" whispered Hump.

She slowly nodded her head.

Pucky could not stand this any longer. "What strange creatures you are, you human beings! Of all things, you have to pick on this time when we should be enjoying a meal to settle such personal affairs. Don't we have more pressing things to attend to now?"

Tiff pointed at the soup pot which stood on a larger box which served them as a table. "Isn't it amazing to what use one can put a pot of soup—besides eating it." He looked at Milly with appreciation. "If you hadn't spoken up, Hump would never have found out that Felicita likes him. He is too dense to notice

anything and Felicita is too shy to speak up for herself. Well, *that* matter has been taken care of now. Is there any dessert?"

This remark was enough to rouse Eberhardt from his usual state of being only half-awake. "Dessert?" he mumbled suspiciously. "Don't you ever get enough to eat?"

Tiff stood up. "Just a cautious inquiry. Pucky, what do you suggest next?"

The mouse-beaver, who had gradually grown accustomed to eating like his human friends, although he infinitely preferred dining on a live rabbit, bared his lone incisor, wiped his droll muzzle with his paws. "A walk after dinner works miracles they say," he pronounced solemnly. "Who wants to stay behind?"

Nobody wanted to stay behind. Pucky grinned. "Okay, then we'll all go. I would advise you however to put on some rubber boots and the oldest clothes you can find. The road is difficult and wet. We'll all look like pigs afterwards."

Eberhardt frowned. "I should actually be doing the dishes..." he began.

"Heck, no you just want to get out of this strenuous march," Pucky reprimanded him. "Well, there is always one guy who wants to have special treatment. Permission granted!" mocked the mouse-beaver.

As Tiff looked around for some suitable clothes to wear he caught a glance from Pucky. He did not understand right away what the little fellow meant by it but when he suddenly found himself removed nearly 300 feet toward the interior of the big cave, and when seconds later he was joined there by the two girls and Hump, he decided it would be better to wait for Pucky's explanations.

The mouse-beaver pointed triumphantly in the direction of the weak glow of light from whence the unmistakable sounds of swishing water could faintly be heard. A tin plate made a clattering sound.

"Somebody *has* to keep things in shipshape order in our quarters," the little mouse-beaver declared, "or should it have been again up *to me* to do the dishes when we get back? —But don't worry, the road isn't bad at all, I was just trying to scare off Eberhardt —Do you have your flashlight with you, Tiff?"

"I'm never without it, you little rascal you."

"Fine, we'll need it. We'll make our way on foot from this point on. It isn't very far. The road will not get narrower. The semi-sleepers use it every spring when they migrate to the surface of the planet."

"They can walk to the surface?" Milly said wide-eyed with wonder. "What are they?"

"Felicita will be especially interested in them," promised Pucky but he was obviously not willing at the moment to say any more about the matter.

"But Pucky, Felicita is a botanist, she is mainly interested in plants and not in zoology."

"You'll be mighty surprised," reiterated Pucky and waddled off. He used his broad tail like a rudder and it helped him to walk upright like a human being. It provided balance and supported him whenever he would stop. "Watch out, don't bump your head. This corridor is alright for walking but once in awhile there are some low hanging rock outcroppings. The semi-sleepers aren't any taller than I myself."

"Why do you always call them semi-sleepers?" Tiff wanted to know. "You can tell us that much at least."

"I might," Pucky smiled cunningly. "They are sleeping but again, they are not. Their body is asleep but their mind remains awake. Tell me, don't you notice anything yet?"

"Are we supposed to be mind readers?" Milly asked. "The semi-sleepers are capable of being noticed even by non-telepaths, that's what's so special about them. Let me know at once if you feel something strange, something—well, something different."

Felicita had stopped. "I'm afraid," she said.

Pucky whirled around as if something had bitten his tail. "You are afraid, Felicita? Afraid? Is this a strong sensation?"

The girl seemed undecided. "I'm simply afraid, that's all."

Hump cleared his throat and took her head, holding it between his own two large ones. "Don't be frightened, honey, I'm here with you."

Felicita smiled bravely. Tiff grinned. He glanced at Milly and their eyes met in secret agreement. "How nice this monster Hump can be if he loves the right girl. I like him much better when he behaves this way."

Hump mumbled something incomprehensible and turned to Pucky. "Well, where are your pretty citizens of this iceworld sleeping?"

Pucky kept on waddling ahead. "Whether they are pretty or not still remains to be seen. After all, tastes differ." And with an oblique glance in Felicita's direction he added: "Thank goodness!"

\* \* \* \*

The fleet of the Mounders was approaching Terra's Moon.

Topthor, somewhat filled with misgivings after his conversation with the Earthman whom he believed to be Rhodan's proxy, had instructed his commanders not to let their direction finders out of their eyes for even a single second. He was in constant communication with Grogham.

"I wonder if they really meant it when they warned us, Topthor? What if they really are as powerful as they want us to believe? What if they actually do possess another ship of the same type as the *Stardust*, armed with the same weapons? We might have been mistaken..."

"Nonsense!" Topthor cut him off in midsentence. "Under no circumstances can we allow anyone to resist us. What would that lead to? Other people might find out about such a rebellious attitude and get silly ideas of raising their custom duties or trying their own hand at galactic trading. We would lose our monopoly. No, unless we assert ourselves as the masters of galactic trade, all traders can pack up and go home—wherever that might be. And we would be out of a job, for what convoys of valuable goods would there be left to protect for us?"

Grogham didn't avert his eyes from the screen. "You are right, Topthor, of course. But I can't help

feeling very alarmed. I can't forget how quickly that Rhodan wiped out our five ships."

Topthor did not reply. Grogham's words reminded him of the first defeat he had suffered in his long life. He still was at a loss to explain how Rhodan had managed to destroy five of his battleships before the two enemies had engaged in a proper battle. Rhodan must possess a weapon beyond anyone's power of conception. This weapon could pass right through all powerful energy screens and penetrate inside the battleships where they would set off a horrible, all-devastating explosion.

He was startled out of his reverie by a sudden shout from Grogham. "Look there—the Terranians! The giant spacesphere of the Arkonides! Those traitors have made common cause with the lowly Earthling."

The *Stardust* came zooming in at almost insane speed, then circled around Topthor's fleet keeping at a safe distance from it. For the present it did not look as if an attack was impending.

Topthor checked his instruments. "Continue on the same course, Grogham. We are going in for a landing. Do not attack. Wait until they open fire on us."

He remembered only too well that Rhodan would not destroy his enemy's ships until they had first opened up with hostilities. Maybe the commander of this enemy ship shared Rhodan's point of view in this respect.

Of course he had no way of knowing that this commander actually *was* Rhodan in person. Neither could he know that Rhodan considered this imminent landing manoeuvre already an hostile act with the implicit consent of the Immortal who had put the tele-transmitters at his disposal.

The Earth's moon was gliding by over to the left. The green-blue globe of Terra rapidly grew larger, for Topthor still had not issued the command to slow down. The 11 giant spacecraft continued their unflagging advance toward that planet which the galactic traders intended to incorporate in their colonial realm.

Topthor was not especially surprised when an excessive loud voice suddenly sounded above all his loud-speakers aboard. It was the same cold hard voice he was already familiar with. It must be that Freyt again, who had earlier made such an unyielding impression.

"Topthor, I warned you! Keep your hands off Earth! We are ready to enter into free trade relations with the galactic traders but we are not willing to submit ourselves to your terms."

"We'll start negotiating after we land on Earth!" replied Topthor, although he felt none too happy at the thought. "Our weapons will not speak unless forced to."

"Nobody is stupid enough to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, as we say here on Earth, Topthor. You only pretend to come in peace. Your landing on our planet is a hostile act. I'm warning you a second time! You have exactly 30 seconds left to clear away from here."

Topthor stared at the Earth which constantly kept increasing in size. He could distinguish the various continents from each other and recognized the big cities, the white ribbons of the big roads linking towns, the glittering network of the railroads, the expansive cultivated areas. Down there were all the signs of a thriving civilization; these people were carrying on trade and industry, profits were being made—this was too tempting an opportunity to pass up so easily.

"Why won't you allow any negotiations on your planet?"

"We have our reasons, specifically reasons of a tactical nature. And foremost it is a question of principle." Of course Rhodan could not admit that there were a sufficient number of other motives not to permit the Springers under any circumstances to land on Earth. For Earth was not yet officially united, did not yet own a powerful spacefleet with which it was possible to ward off potential attacks of entire galactic civilizations. Earth's might was still based on a bluff, for the *Stardust* was the only genuine battleship at Rhodan's disposal. "I am warning you now for the last time, Topthor! Turn around before it is too late. Five seconds to go!"

However Topthor let these precious seconds pass too.

Unmoving he sat in front of the frontal screen on which everything was to be seen which was of interest to him; the Earth, the gigantic spacesphere and his own 10 battle cruisers. He was beset by doubts for the first time in his life. He was not sure whether he was doing the right thing - or whether he was making a mistake.

But Rhodan quickly relieved him of this uncertainty.

Topthor suddenly saw how two of his ships began to glow from the inside and simply broke apart. The molten wreckage fell heavily toward the planet, whose gravitational pull had become effective in the mean-time.

Inside less than 10 seconds Topthor lost two ships despite the fact that the spacesphere had made not a single movement which would lead to believe it was about to make an attack. And still, only this space-sphere could have accomplished this feat.

Now the frontal screen showed Rhodan's face. "Well, Topthor, you still want to land on Earth or have you changed your mind? I'm giving you a final chance."

But Topthor did not want a final chance. He still believed in his own superiority. So far his ships had not fired a single shot. He never so much as looked at Rhodan and never even stopped to think how that Terranian he believed to be Rhodan had managed to hook up with his own television network. Regardless of the fact that his commands could be heard as well as seen by the unwelcomed outsider, he roared full of fury: "Grogham—attack! Simultaneous general attack! Torpedoes, energy ray cannons! Deploy all available weapons!"

Then once more he looked at the screen and gazed into the Earthling's eyes, now grown flint-like in their steely stare.

"You have no one to blame but yourself. Topthor," said Rhodan and his voice had the hard ring of metal. "I'll spare you and Grogham—not out of pity or leniency but merely because I want some one of the Mounder clan to survive, so that the other Springers can learn what fate awaits them if they come to Earth with notions of conquering us. Terra is far stronger than all the war-like civilizations of the Milky Way, Topthor. And there is another message you can carry back to your race: we are prepared to live in peaceful coexistence with anyone but we'll annihilate ruthlessly all who attack us. The empire of the Arkonides is still living—as well as its laws that serve the preservation of peace."

Topthor's eyes narrowed as he waited for Grogham to pass on and carry out his orders. But before Grogham could do anything at all, Topthor lost two more of his ships, which without any noticeable reason suddenly dissolved into their atomic particles.

With the rest of his seven spaceships, the Mounder tried to take his opponent by surprise in a desperate all-out attack. But the torpedoes detonated before they could reach the spacesphere's hull and the concentrated beams of the energy ray cannons flowed off harmlessly from the invisible protective shell around the *Stardust* .

And then there were only five of Topthor's ships.

Topthor's mind refused to accept the reality of this catastrophe. It was unheard of that anyone in the universe could simply break through energy screens as if they did not exist. These Terranians must possess some mysterious method by which they could change their enemies from one state of condition to another—from matter to pure energy. But how could that be accomplished without touching the protective screen?

Topthor found no answer to his question and now he had only three battle cruisers left.

Then his instinct of survival won out over his ambition. "Grogham—let's leave! Emergency transition! Rendezvous with Eztat!"

And his huge hand slammed down on the lever which would carry him away to safety.

Grogham followed suit but the last ship of the Mounders could not escape its doom. It evaporated high up above Earth's atmosphere.

Never before in his life had Perry Rhodan struck so hard and pitilessly.

But he had to do it for the sake of mankind's survival—and he was determined that the human race should go on living free from alien invaders' rule.

#### **4/ THE IMPLACABLE PUCKY**

Although Orlgans was the first to discover the Terranians and also to establish contact with them, he submitted to the will and to the orders of his clan patriarch Eztat who now has assumed the direct chief command. The Springers were not at all used to doing battle, for they were foremost a nation of traders mainly interested in business deals. If in the pursuit of their activities it turned out that they had to fight in order to accomplish their goals, they simply called upon the Mounders to come to their assistance, paid the agreed upon wages—and were rid of them again in no time.

This time however the situation was entirely different. This case dealt with a thus far completely unknown planet, by the name of Terra, whose inhabitants had leapt forward all of a sudden to become one of the space travelling races. They had found support by the Arkonides in their endeavours. It was definitely a world worthwhile exploiting commercially.

If other clans should find out about this discovery, Eztat was bound to forfeit his hoped for trade monopoly. Therefore Eztat had made up his mind to battle it out on his own against Earth and Rhodan. It seemed more difficult than one would have believed. And to top it all off, the Mounders had turned up after all, but Eztat was not sure whether they knew Terra's position. They might be just bluffing.

Well, Tophthor had promised to let himself be heard from.

These were the thoughts passing through Organs' mind as he was orbiting in ever narrowing circles around the iceworld. Now and then he had his energy cannons fire some rounds at the ice mountains and bare rocks, although this seemed a totally senseless enterprise. The motivation for these useless acts was of a purely psychological nature.

Organs cringed at the thought of destroying this inhabitable planet by starting an unextinguishable atomic conflagration. This measure was permissible only if one's own safety depended on it. This was not at all the case here. In his fury, Ezztak wanted to annihilate an entire world, simply because he wanted to revenge himself on five Earthlings who had led him by the nose.

Organs hadn't much to do. He needed only to land on any odd place on this planet, so cruelly and unnecessarily condemned to death, and to plant a time bomb which would be detonated after the landing party had safely escaped. But once exploded, the bomb would release a chain reaction which would continue as long as there was any solid matter present on this planet. The reaction proceeded slowly. Days would pass before the planet would be completely changed into a fiery sun—but once started, the process was irreversible.

There was nothing that could save the condemned second planet of the Beta-Albireo system from its doom.

Yet Organs was still hesitating.

In case the Supreme Court of the Traders should call Ezztak to account for his deed, Organs too would be held responsible by law and subject to the same punishment. They would say he ought to have refused to execute this insane order which wiped out a world capable of development. But what on the other hand would have happened to him if he had disobeyed Ezztak's instructions? Wouldn't he have brought down the patriarchs' ire on himself? Wouldn't the old man have caused him untold difficulties forever?

Organs was breathing heavily as he stared at the icy desert whizzing past below his spaceship. Was there anything down there that actually could be destroyed? Ice and snow, that was all. Any living beings? Only those five Earthlings. Otherwise, nothing.

He shrugged his shoulders and grasped the controls. He executed a sharp turn which brought the ship to the North pole where it touched down gently in the deep snow. But the snow was not resilient; it was hard and frozen over.

Organs switched on the intercom. He waited until the first officer of the *ORLA XI* came on, then said:

"Report to me here at central command, Raganzt. We have to carry out a mission."

Organs had no idea, however, that he had already halfway executed Ezztak's orders, for one of his randomly fired energy shots at the surface of the iceworld had by now set in motion a series of catastrophic events.

\* \* \* \*

Cadet Klaus Eberhardt had cleared away the washed dishes and amused himself by asking RB-013 totally superfluous questions. He was lying comfortably on a blanket, stretched out in front of the robot's feet, which supplied a constant pleasant warmth. "Are you feeling cold, Aubrey?" he queried the machine man. The robot had been baptized Aubrey by the five members of the expedition. "After all, you have no one to keep you warm."

"A very logical question, provided I were a living organism," retorted RB-013 Aubrey. "Since I am not anything of the kind, your question is illogical."

"I was merely asking for lack of something better to do," apologized Eberhardt. "It's so boring if the others aren't here. It's enough to get scared."

"This too is illogical," reprimanded the robot with a slightly rusty sounding voice. "The danger would not be any less if the other four were here with you now."

Eberhardt sighed. "Man alive, can't you even once forget that you are only an automaton? Haven't you any feelings and don't you know something besides logic?"

"You call me 'man,' you forgetful creature! I am RB-013, built in Terrania with the serial number..."

"Oh, I know all that!" moaned Eberhardt, regretting ever having started such a conversation with this miserable Mr Know-It-All. "It was just a slip of the tongue; I'm sorry."

Suddenly the young cadet heard a shrill whistling noise, an eerie howling—and then he was inundated by a wave of almost unbearable heat. The blankets they had hung up between the boxes were torn away and flung against the rocky wall. But although the blankets no longer screened off the light intruding from the exit as before, it still was dark at the spot which led to the outside surface. Nor did any icy polar air stream into the cave, as should be expected now. On the contrary, the temperature was rising.

Aubrey automatically turned off the heat and took his blanket. He slowly sat up. "What was that? What happened?"

A clearly audible clicking noise came from the robot's inside, a sure sign that he was consulting his positronic brain. Then he said. "The cave entrance has been closed off by heat rays. There are two logical indications for this: first the rising temperature inside the cave and second the absence of daylight. Thirdly it should be mentioned that the icy draught is also missing. My thermometer shows a temperature of 70° Fahrenheit. That is rather unusual. But again it is not so unusual if my conclusions are correct."

Eberhardt grew pale at the realization what these conclusions were. "The cave is sealed off from the outside?" He rose to his feet. "Is that what you mean to say? By heat rays? The Springers?"

"Probably. Who else could have done it? Their energy rays melted the rock and the cave entrance was then sealed off from the outside when the molten rock masses began to congeal again. I suppose this happened by sheer accident."

"Some consolation," whispered Eberhardt, noticing how sticky the air had become. "How thick is the wall?"

"This can be ascertained only when Pucky returns." Now suddenly the thought of his comrades and the



girls crossed his mind. "Good heavens, the others! I wonder where they are now? I hope nothing happened to them!"

"They are safer than us here," Aubrey reassured him. "Let's just wait here quietly till they get back. Meanwhile we are perfectly safe here. At least I'm saving energy now because it is not so cold in here as before."

"And how about the air? What are we supposed to breathe if there is no new supply of fresh air coming in from the outside?"

Aubrey raised one of his four arms and pointed in the direction where Pucky and his friends had disappeared. "There is a constant new current of air with the right amount of oxygen streaming in here from over there. It even makes it unnecessary that I switch on my air renewal aggregate."

Eberhardt stared into the dark corridor. "Fresh air? From there? How's that possible?"

For the first time the robot was at a loss what to answer. "I do not know," he admitted. "I have no clues to find an explanation for this phenomenon."

Eberhardt sank down again on his blanket and seemed to forget that he had become a prisoner of the cave. "Thank God!" he moaned contentedly. "I finally did it, I stumped the expert!"

\* \* \* \*

Tiff came to a halt and inhaled deeply several times. "I believe it has become much warmer. I'm also wondering how the air can be so surprisingly fresh down here so deep below the surface. Is there any explanation for this, Pucky?"

But the little mouse-beaver energetically shook his head. "Don't try to spoil my surprise," he declared. "Of course there is a very good reason for this but you'll find out in due time. Just be patient. Don't you feel anything else?"

Felicita pointed ahead into the darkness. "Where are you leading us, Pucky? How far is it still? I'm really afraid."

"So you are afraid," remarked Pucky and seemed to be quite pleased. "That's exactly what I expected. You are the most sensitive of the group and therefore our best guinea-pig."

Tiff's forehead suddenly showed a deep furrow. "Now listen, Pucky. I admit you have some remarkable talents, but let's not overdo things here. You are indulging in mysterious hints but you don't intend in the least to give us any explanations. I'm quite positive you know exactly what's going on here. Why don't you tell us what this all is supposed to mean?"

Pucky grinned; he was quite obviously very amused. Tiff's remonstrations made not the least impression on him. "Don't begrudge me a little fun. Tiff. Isn't it enough for you if I guarantee that this is absolutely not dangerous? If Felicita experiences fear, this only confirms my theory. All of you will soon feel that same fear. I'm telling you that beforehand so that you will be forewarned. These are the thoughts of the

semi-sleepers, which your brain receives like an antenna. You are feeling the fear of someone else, not your own emotions."

Tiff had listened attentively. The deep furrow had cleared away from his forehead. "Now you have revealed part of your surprise to us," he stated, "how about the rest?"

Pucky pushed out his lone incisor. "Under no circumstances!" he protested energetically. "Or else I'll transport myself back to the cave and help Klaus with the dishes."

Milly grew frightened. "Please don't do that, Pucky! You can't abandon us down here now. I promise I'll tickle your tummy for one solid hour tonight if you like."

Pucky grinned. "Okay, I accept the offer." He nodded his little mouse head graciously. "Let's continue on our way! It can't be much farther now."

Tiff reacted with surprise. "I thought you knew where it is?"

"Of course I do, but do you really believe I walked all this way before? I just made a few sample stops here and there. That's why I don't know how far it is. But if I am not mistaken we should see the light just around the next corner."

Tiff stopped suddenly in his tracks. Hump, who could not see too well as they had only one flashlight and who besides was preoccupied with his thoughts, bumped into him. Both men cursed. Then Tiff got ahold of himself. "Light?" he asked.

Pucky nodded impatiently and—seemingly-with regret. "Yes, light. Now you made me give away another part of the secret. From now on I'll just keep my mouth shut."

He marched ahead without bothering to check whether the others were following him or not. But they hadn't much choice but to follow the little guy. Hump muttered something about 'lack of upbringing' which obviously referred to the mouse-beaver's bad manners. Tiff silently agreed with Hump but didn't express his thoughts. The girls also were silent as they kept walking along.

Soon they reached the turn in the road Pucky had mentioned earlier. The path widened. A light was shining ahead.

"I declare!" Milly cried out and shivered all over. "A light! Pucky, how can there be a light down here so deep underground? Is it artificial?"

"I don't know," replied the mouse-beaver, who looked like a magnified Micky Mouse in the uncertain light. It sounded for once as if he were speaking the truth.

So they refrained from posing further questions, merely concentrating on following Pucky, who was waddling ahead with increased speed.

The corridor became wider and higher. Tiff estimated that they had been walking a good half mile. Since the floor had been all the way very gently down-hill, they should now be some 150 feet below the surface of the ground. And certainly much deeper if the path had led inside a mountain.

The light grew brighter.

At last Pucky took a final step and entered a huge hall. With a dramatic gesture he lifted his arms and made an all-encompassing motion. At this moment he looked like a pocket Napoleon. Under different conditions Tiff would scarcely have denied himself the pleasure of making some snide remark but he kept quiet now.

For he was struck dumb by the sight that presented itself to his eyes.

Also the others had come to a halt and stood there, their mouths hanging wide open in surprise. Were they dreaming? But the waves of panicky fear which swept over them made these dreams appear very realistic indeed.

They were standing in a hall whose diameter must have been several hundred yards. Exactly in its centre sparkled the smooth expanse of a small lake with a fountain spouting forth in the middle. The fountain was not very high but the thin jet of water was sprayed evenly so that a light rain came drizzling down in all directions. The rocky walls of the hall were of irregular shape and showed no signs of any artificial treatment or changes. The various niches seemed to have been created by nature as well as the fountain and its spray.

And the light also seemed a work of nature!

The four human beings just stood there, staring upwards to where in the middle of the ceiling a shining sun could be perceived. The sun was round but not so evenly round that it would have resembled a real sun. It was much more like a huge diamond which glowed from the inside out while spreading light and warmth. Only now did Tiff notice how warm it was down here. Not overly warm or even hot but nevertheless around 35°.

"How did the light get here, Pucky?" asked Tiff.

"Forget about the light now, there's plenty of time for that later. Haven't you noticed anything else, Tiff?"

Felicita was not so interested in the phenomenon of the strange light, for which she could find no explanation. She directed her attention to the niches in the rock walls. Suddenly she cried out. But it was not a frightened shout or one filled with horror, rather an exclamation of enormous surprise.

The others temporarily forgot all about the sun in the rocky roof and looked in the direction of Felicita's outstretched arm. Pucky was standing there, his front-paws crossed on his furry chest, leaning on his broad tail and grinning widely.

"Flowers!" stammered Felicita and advanced a few steps toward the next niche some 60 feet away. "Real flowers—here, deep underground!"

There was no denying the fact that these were flowers, Tiff thought to himself. The young botanist was right. The niches were filled with a rank growth of colourful, tulip-like plants, with an abundance and luxuriousness such as usually found in the tropical jungle. They grew so closely together that not another plant could have found room there. A strong perfume emanated from them and pervaded the entire hall. Tiff wondered briefly why he hadn't noticed this earlier.

"Come!" urged Pucky. "Have a closer look at this botanical garden. It's well worthwhile."

Hump, disgruntled as usual, was growling: "I thought we were supposed to visit the half-sleeping intelligences of this world and now we have landed in a tulip garden!"

"Flowers on this iceworld are a miracle in itself," admonished Tiff. "Why should we pass up looking at a miracle? Felicita will be especially interested to examine these growths."

Pucky seemed to have not the slightest intention of ever stopping grinning today.

Tiff followed Felicita, who had gone ahead to the next niche; she was now bending down a little to have a closer look at the blooming tulips. The rest of the group followed suit, since there seemed nothing better to do.

The plants resembled tulips indeed, greatly enlarged tulips, which would have been the pride and joy of any horticulturist on Earth. The long stems carried magnificent blossoms, which however were closed. The typical tulip shape was unmistakable. Red and orange dominated but there were also blue, yellow and violet flowers. The stems ended in roots which disappeared into seemingly cultivated earth. It almost looked as if a thoughtful gardener had prepared the ground with skilled and loving care.

Felicita straightened up again. "These are flowers, definitely—maybe some variation of tulips. I wonder how they got here? Somebody must have planted them."

"The semi-sleepers?" Tiff suggested cautiously.

Pucky stopped grinning. He shook his head. "I thought the same thing at first, Tiff. I imagined the semi-sleepers were flower lovers—but I was wrong to a certain degree. Why don't you examine these flowers more thoroughly, Felicita? Doesn't something strike you there?"

The young botanist bent over once more to inspect the large petals. She didn't need to bend low for the flowers rose to a height of almost three feet. Her eyes narrowed as she noticed the fine but firmly closed clefts which were arranged around the calyx. Each petal, she noted, had such a cleft.

"Maybe these are carnivorous plants," she ventured but it was easy to see that she was not too convinced of this notion. "In any case, they possess openings which they can open or close at will."

Pucky suddenly gave forth with peals of squeaky laughter and started to dance around a circle with his short little legs. He emitted shrill sounds probably as an indication of his joy.

"You guessed it!" he snorted finally, while Tiff and Hump looked at each other in rare agreement, both probably filled with the same thought. They obviously were assuming that the mouse-beaver had lost his mind.

But they were soon to learn that this was not at all the case. For when Pucky had finally calmed down he said: "Correct, correct! They can open or close these openings whenever they please. But these are no oral orifices, they are not used for eating. On the contrary. Just watch now what's going to happen, then you'll finally find out for yourselves."

He stepped next to Felicita and touched one of the flowers with his velvety paws. Slowly he kept stroking the red petals. He was so careful and gentle that it was as if he were caressing his sweetheart.

And the miracle happened.

The caressed tulip opened its tiny slits.

The four human beings stared awestruck into an eye which gazed at them inquisitively!

"May I present the semi-sleepers to you?" asked Pucky and he bowed and scraped in his best manner.

Organs was watching as his first officer and several other members of his crew placed the bomb inside the ice. First they melted a deep hole with the aid of heat rays until the snow turned to ice. The pit filled with water but this played no great role in their planned enterprise, since water was just as much matter as ice or snow.

Then Raganzt bent down over the bomb and set the clockwork in motion. With the help of a rope they lowered the deadly instrument of total annihilation down the hole.

Organs still kept silent. He had passed on the irresponsible order but he made no attempt to prevent its execution. And it was not too late yet. Not until 30 minutes from this moment would the chain reaction be released. If that were to take place in space the chain reaction would soon be stopped for matter was too thinly spread there to maintain this process.

But Organs did not think of these things now. He wanted to get away as soon as possible from this planet which soon would be turned into hell—a hell created by his own hand.

Organs together with Raganzt and the other men returned to their ship. Once inside the command centre he established radio communication with Ezztak and reported the execution of his commands.

The patriarch expressed his satisfaction but could not conceal his anxiety. "Return at once. We just received a radio message from Topthor. He had to flee from Terra in emergency transition. His battle fleet has been destroyed except for two vessels. He refuses to help us and has decided to return to his base."

Organs had meanwhile overcome his initial shock.

"He refuses?" he whispered perplexed. "A Mounder refuses to fight for money? Then something terrible must have happened."

"He had 16 ships originally—and now he has only two left. And to top it all off—he was fighting against only one Terranian."

"Rhodan!"

"Yes, against Rhodan. I'm afraid he'll give us too plenty of trouble. It might be advisable to withdraw."

"Without rendering him harmless first?" Organs could not believe the sudden change of mind his patriarch had undergone. "That would mean defeat."

"We'd come back later on. The Terranians are too underdeveloped to resist the Springers for any great length of time. Only the fact that some Arkonides came to their assistance made them seemingly superior. But this is not the only matter at stake. This Rhodan knows the position of the Eternal Planet. He must share this secret with me.

"Is he willing to do that?" doubted Organs with complete justification.

"He will have to—some day!" asserted Ezztak with self-assurance. "I'll return with a gigantic fleet and..."

His face vanished from the picture screen but the voice communication remained uninterrupted. Orlgans could hear some frightened voices call out, then a few shouted commands. Finally after some minutes filled with suspense Ezztak's face reappeared on the screen. Fear and uncertainty, but also death-defying determination, flickered in the eyes of the grey-thatched patriarch.

"Orlgans, hurry! Start at once but be careful when you join us. The two Terranian cruisers have renewed their attack and this time they really mean business. They possess amazing weapons. We are defending ourselves but it almost seems they received new orders. We can't get rid of them."

"Perhaps we could take them by surprise if we come from another direction," suggested Orlgans but he was immediately seized by remorse for ever having made such an offer. Wasn't it madness for him alone to attack the two cruisers if Ezztak's fleet couldn't manage to drive them off?

"Try it," Orlgans encouraged the old man while issuing orders in between. "But withdraw in case you are attacked."

The patriarch nodded briefly, then the screen went dark again.

Orlgans waited a few seconds, then his hands flew swiftly across the buttons and leavers of the automated controls. A soft hum came from the interior of the ship. For a moment Orlgans was wondering where the other ship might be that was supposed to accompany him on this mission but then he reassured himself with the thought that after all somebody had to take charge of aerial coverage. Peculiar, though, that he could not establish any contact with them.

The *ORLA XI* took off.

Down below in the eternal ice a rectangular, black hole remained, harbouring death for this world. He shuddered while he imagined what soon was going to take place down there. A normal atomic explosion would generate such heat that snow and ice would melt within a wide radius. But here it was not the question of a simple atomic explosion. At first the lighter elements would be transformed and then change into energy. Then the heavier elements would follow until finally the heart of the planet would metamorphose into the centre of a flaming hell. Then the system of Beta-Albireo would have a new sun.

Despite Ezztak's orders, Orlgans felt he had every reason to again use delaying tactics. He was not too tempted to enter into battle with the two cruisers; he would be more than happy if the Terranian ships would have left the scene by the time he arrived in that area.

While he was leisurely gliding above the white expanse of unending sheets of snow and ice, not in the least intending to gain altitude, something very strange happened some 50 miles from the death bomb.

Raganzt had left the command centre when Orlgans suddenly became aware of another presence in the room. He knew he was no longer alone; he sensed that someone was standing right behind him watching closely what he was doing.

He whirled around abruptly—and stared at the strangest creature he had ever laid eyes on.

It was about three feet tall, looked like a gigantic mouse, had a broad tail on which it leaned and it regarded him with gentle eyes.

Pucky!

Naturally, Orlgans had no idea who Pucky was and what Pucky could do. As far as Orlgans was concerned the odd intruder was some animal which gave no indication whether it was dangerous or peaceful. For an instant Orlgans thought this must be an inhabitant of this hostile world who had managed to steal aboard unnoticed after the *ORLA XI* had landed near the north pole. He was soon cured of this notion when Pucky introduced himself.

"*Kek!* So that's what a murderer looks like!" said Pucky in perfect interkosmo.

Orlgans turned pale when the animal began to speak. He was not so much startled by what the animal was saying but that it could *speak* seemed inconceivable to him. For a moment Orlgans forgot that there were many intelligent races in the universe that didn't necessarily have the appearance of the humanoid races.

"*Kivu?* Who are you?" he asked, still totally shocked and dumbfounded. He had completely forgotten his raygun which dangled from his belt.

"My *Karani* call me Pucky—and one of these friends is Perry Rhodan. Ah, you are puzzled how I got inside your ship? No cause for wonder: I am a teleporter. Yes, and a telepath, too. Upsetting? Sorry; I can't help that."

"What do you want?" groaned Orlgans.

"You murderer are asking what I want?"

"Why do you keep calling me a murderer?"

"Because you plan to destroy a world inhabited by living creatures—intelligent life, Orlgans! You must be punished for this!"

"Eztzak gave the order, he will have to justify his deeds before the Supreme Court, not I..."

"We don't hold the Springers' court of justice in high esteem," chirped Pucky. "We do the punishing ourselves."

Orlgans' face was as white as the cliffs of Dover. His right hand whipped down to his belt but his pistol was faster. All on its own, it slipped out of his holster and rose to the ceiling of the room, where it stuck as if someone were holding it there.

"*Soki!*" Pucky said sarcastically. "Sorry, I forgot to mention that I am also a telekin. As I said already, I have come to carry out a judgment."

"I demand to be brought to trial in a proper manner and before a properly authorised court!" shouted Orlgans in the hope someone might hear him. "Nobody can be executed without being rightfully sentenced!"

"Judgment has been pronounced already; the sentence is—*Grot!*"

"Death?!" The Springer recoiled. "Who usurps the right to sentence me to death?"

"Not you alone but your entire crew!" Pucky enlightened him. "And would you like to know who

condemned you to die? Alright, you shall know it: those whom you have condemned to die—and you have pronounced a death sentence on an entire world!"

"An entire world?" Organs was honestly surprised. "But this planet contains nothing but ice and snow. Nobody can exist here."

"You are wrong!" Pucky's voice suddenly became shrill and furious. The hair on the back of his neck resembled porcupine needles. "This world is inhabited by the semi-sleepers, a highly intelligent race in comparison with others of their kind on other worlds. They know that there is a bomb at the North pole which will detonate any moment now. They know that a chain reaction will result which is irreversible. They know they have to die because their world is coming to an end. And they have authorized me to punish their murderer."

Organs had listened with increasing amazement. Now and then he threw a glance at the pistol which was hanging from the ceiling and out of his reach. There was life on this world? He had not considered such a possibility.

Did this relieve him from his guilt?

Pucky shook his head. "No, Organs, not at all. The judgment of the semi-sleepers is legal and valid."

The Springer captain looked at the screen. "We're landing—what's going on? Where are we landing?"

"I have seized control of the ship," Pucky informed him. "It will touch down some 180 miles from the North pole. The bomb will explode in three minutes. You have 180 seconds to abandon your ship. There is no time left to send an emergency call to Eztat—for this craft will blow up in less than three minutes. Do you understand, Organs?"

Organs understood, even if he couldn't imagine how his ship could go up in air. But still, he had witnessed a few examples of such wizardry.

The ship touched down very gently.

"Inform your crew to clear out of here instantly!" Pucky ordered. "They won't have time to take along any food. But that won't matter: you'll just have to go hungry till the atomic conflagration overtakes you."

Organs was shaking uncontrollably. "But this is cruel! You can't leave us to such a horrible fate. You'd better kill us at once..."

"I'll make sure you have a few pistols at your disposal," Pucky reassured him mercilessly. "Whoever wants to use them, may suit himself. I won't hold anybody back. But this is as far as I can help you. A dying race uttered its last wish—and I am merely carrying it out. That's all."

Hardly a minute and a half later Pucky watched from a nearby mountaintop how Organs and his crew proceeded to evacuate their ship. Some men were rather slow and reluctant to do so. But the scheduled time limit did not allow them to take along any food or gear. Raganzt, who tried to call Eztat from the communication centre, discovered that the current had been cut off. Pucky had not overlooked a thing.

And then the ship began to glow. It started at the bow and spread rapidly. The first aggregates detonated. The moment the ship's arsenal was reached by the all-devouring fire, a final explosion rent the ship apart.



Several of the Springers were still too close to the ship and were covered by huge chunks of wreckage and debris. The rest of the crew took to their heels and ran for their lives. Pucky noted angrily that they ran in the direction of the equator, not the North Pole.

They would have to run mighty fast if they wanted to escape the atomic fury which this instant was unleashed at the North pole.

## 5/ SNOWMAN MELTS

"The semi-sleepers—flowers?"

Tiff uttered these words in total unbelief and looked at Felicitia, expecting to get an answer from the young botanist. But it was Pucky who supplied the explanation.

"I had quite a talk with them, Tiff, and I think I have learned practically all there is to know about them. During summer they live on the surface and in winter they return here. The fountain supplies the water and the soil the nourishment they need. Up above shines the eternal sun but even the semi-sleepers have no idea how it got there. But they do know at least that there are similar suns in other caves. They say the Gods created them. I suppose these were their ancestors who were at a higher level of technical development but who perished at a later date."

"How do they get to the surface when summer comes?" Hump inquired. There was a trace of sarcasm in his voice. "Or do they take a walk through the cave in order to reach the outside world?"

Pucky remained quite serious. "Yes, they do walk. They have dainty feet, which serve them at the same time as roots. They can sink their feet into the soil and absorb water and food through them. In summer they lead a downright nomadic life; they wander from place to place and this is also the time of fertilization. The semi-sleepers are multi-sexual. Every five members of their race—you probably noticed that their petals are of five different colours—form a unit."

Tiff bent forward. His face was one giant question mark. "How do you converse with them? Are they telepaths?"

"Yes, very much so. They receive thoughts over great distances and are even capable of picking up those coming from the deeps of the universe. This is their only entertainment during the long years of their semi-sleeping state."

"How old can they grow?"

"Up to 200 years—Earth time. That means they live for one Snowman summer and one winter."

All of a sudden Pucky cocked his head and seemed to listen to something. His incisor had disappeared behind his lips and made no attempt now to become visible again.

Then Pucky stepped over to the red tulip whose five eyes were wide open and looked straight at him.

There was a striking resemblance between the eyes of the tulip and those of Pucky. They not only shared the same brown colour but also the same expression of kindness, loyalty and sincerity.

For nearly three minutes Pucky remained in the same posture without moving. Then he raised his head. "If you try hard you'll understand her thoughts. I regret but I must leave you here alone for five minutes. So horrible has happened. The Springers have started an atomic conflagration on this planet, which cannot be stopped. They have placed a bomb which will detonate in five minutes. I can't remove it since the process has already started in the interior of the bomb. Any dematerialisation would lead to a catastrophe. It is too late. This world is doomed—I can only avenge it."

And then the four human beings were alone with the semi-sleepers. Pucky had vanished without any ado in order to execute the death sentence pronounced by the tulip flowers.

Tiff was trying to inject some sense of reality in this dreamlike situation. The plant was still fixing him with unflinching eyes when he suddenly started to feel that it was talking to him. It was like a gentle probing of his brain, a cautious exploration of his conscious mind.

"You are creatures of goodwill," said the semi-sleeper without making a sound. "You didn't know either that this world is inhabited. Your enemies want to destroy you, therefore they destroy our entire planet. They are wicked and mean."

"They will be punished for this," murmured Tiff, realizing how little this fact would comfort the unfortunate tulips. He saw that both girls as well as Hump were standing stockstill and listened intently. They too must be able to understand the soundless voice.

"Yes, they will die—but our whole race will perish along with them. The history of us semi-sleepers, as you have named us—is nearing its end."

"If we had a ship and could save our own lives, we could take you along—at least a sufficient number of you so that your race need not die out," said Tiff. At the same time he was aware that these peculiar alien creatures would not be the only ones to die. Unless Perry Rhodan hurried to their rescue, he as well as his friends were doomed to share the fate of the tulips. "We shouldn't abandon all hope yet."

"Tiff!" interrupted Felicita, who had understood everything. "We ought to try and save some of these semi-sleepers. If Rhodan arrives in time we could save this race from total extinction. After our rescue we will certainly find some new uninhabited world where they could make a fresh start."

Tiff nodded in assent and bent down to the waking semi-sleeper. "Did you understand? We'll make an attempt to preserve your race. But this is going to be a most difficult decision for all of you. We can—if at all—take only very few of you along with us. Who will make the selection?"

The wave of panic swelled and reached a crest but the thoughts of the red tulip managed to drown it out.

"We all love life but the survival of the race is more important than individual survival. I shall make the decision. I'll chose 50 healthy young specimens of the race. They will go with you."

"Go?" asked Tiff, puzzled.

"You have some boxes, I read in your thoughts. One of these boxes will be enough to accommodate the chosen members of our race. They are not heavy. It will not be at all difficult for your friend Pucky to transport them in his peculiar fashion. Later, many thousands of years hence, the Terranians will have a

grateful ally who will be forever in your debt—our descendants."

"Let's wait till Pucky returns," suggested Tiff. "Meanwhile we want to learn everything we need to know about you. Do you breathe in carbon dioxide?"

"Yes, and we breathe out oxygen," confirmed the red tulip. "But only as long as the sun is shining—or our artificial sun during our long winter."

"You are related to our plants on Earth," stated Tiff and saw that Felicita was wandering from niche to niche, gently pulling one of the tulips out of the ground. The flowers had very long roots which rolled up immediately once they lost contact with the soil.

"This way they will take up least space," said the red tulip in its silent fashion. "They can endure many days without food or water. And if they are not exposed to extreme conditions they will not die."

"I promise if we are saved they will be saved with us," Tiff said solemnly.

In the meantime Felicita had finished pulling 50 plants from the soil and had arranged them in a bundle. The eyes of the plant population remained closed but the four human beings felt an intensification of panic-stricken thoughts sweeping over them like ocean waves, now weaker, now stronger, in regular intervals. It was the desperate death song of a race doomed soon to perish.

Suddenly, without any preceding announcement, Pucky returned. His normally so kindly looking brown eyes sparkled now with something Tiff had never before seen in them: hatred.

"The murderers of this planet will perish with it," he said in a shrill voice. "I have annihilated their ship and they have no means of leaving this planet. According to what I could read in Orlgans' mind, Eztak is too busy elsewhere to come to his assistance. Besides, the patriarch does not know what has taken place here. He believes Orlgans is on his way back after having accomplished his accursed mission. Although he has carried out this vile deed, the murderer will not go free, he will die together with his victims."

"And how about us?" asked Tiff. "Won't we die with them?"

Pucky did not respond to this question. Instead he said: "Something else has happened. A Springer ship, probably Orlgans' battlecruiser, made a direct hit with a ray cannon on the entrance to our cave. The rock melted. We are imprisoned inside the cave. For me this presents no obstacle, for I can teleport myself to the outside. But I cannot transport you through a solid rock wall which seals us off from the outside world."

Tiff looked very frightened. "We are cut off?" He sighed in desperation. "That's all we needed! What's going to happen now?"

Felicita joined them. In her arms she carried the last bundle of tulips. She had heard Pucky's last words. "Sealed off from the outside world?" she repeated. "This means the semi-sleepers are also lost—at least those we hoped to save."

"We still have Aubrey, our robot," said Hump without much hope. "Maybe he can help us."

"Definitely," chirped Pucky. "We have at least two days time left before the atomic fire will reach the equator. Aubrey has enough energy to break through the rock wall. It is true, we'll have to count on a tremendous generation of heat, but the cave is fortunately deep enough. Aubrey can shield himself

effectively from the heat."

"And once we reach the outside all we need is Perry Rhodan," Milly remarked timidly. "If only he knew our situation here he would rush to our aid, I'm sure."

"Rhodan has enough worries of his own right now," said Tiff, but he didn't sound very convincing. "Sure he'll remember us—if he has time."

"He does have time!" Pucky terminated the discussion. "I don't think he'll leave us here in the lurch."

Felicita wanted to complete her task. "Pucky, can you fetch a longish box to accommodate the semi-sleepers we want to take along? We promised..."

"I know all about it," interrupted Pucky. "Wait a moment."

And he left them alone for the second time. Organs realized that he and his men were lost unless help reached them.

A blinding flash of light from the north had told him that the fateful chain reaction had begun. Panic-stricken, he and his men fled south after the ship had exploded. In a forced march he travelled almost 25 miles through the icy desert during the first day. Behind them followed the threatening spectre of the raging atomic fire which gave evidence of its existence by newly born rivers which rushed south despite the freezing cold. It had become warmer as Organs could read on his arm instrument, although the temperature was still hovering around  $-60^{\circ}$ . The rivers froze again but the heated water masses flowed over them, soon themselves to freeze in turn.

The ice barriers made it more difficult to continue with their march.

Night fell when the two suns sank below the horizon. But instead of cooling off it became warmer. The rivers no longer froze over but rushed southwards. They filled the wide shallow valleys with a gurgling, steaming flood of water, which here and there flowed into the many subterranean caves, drowning all life existing underground.

As dawn broke and the suns rose, a horrifying red glow shone near the northern horizon. The temperature had climbed to  $32^{\circ}$  and the snow began melting everywhere. The rivers were rising.

Organs and his men tried to gain higher ground. After a long and strenuous march they reached a plateau which was covered by a thin layer of ice. The terrain fell off steeply to one side, thus effectively draining the tabletop area. They would be safe from drowning up here.

However—was this actually an advantage?

Organs stopped and looked to the north where the fiery glow had intensified. The whole sky seemed to be burning. Gigantic columns of whirling flames raced like tornado funnels in the direction of the planet's rotation. The waves of the new ocean were surging around the base of the plateau. The Springers realized now that their mountaintop had become an island in a huge ocean. They were cut off from any chance of retreating to a different area. They were definitely doomed.

Raganzt, his features distorted with frustration and horror, gazed toward the northern sky.

"We are finished," he stated, trying to give a firm ring to his voice. "We are sitting in a trap. If only there

were trees on this place here we could build a raft. The currents of this ocean would carry us to the south."

"We'll all burn alive here," nodded Organs with a trembling voice. "This planet is going to die a terrible death."

"And we'll roast alive along with it," said Raganzt, unless Eztak comes in time to rescue us. We are already one day overdue. He ought to be aware that something unforeseen has happened to us."

"He knows the planet is burning. Maybe he thinks we are already lost. Look here, Raganzt—the atomic fire! It approaches faster than anyone can run in the other direction to save himself. And the temperature keeps rising. We're still protected by the air conditioning in our spacesuits. But this too will fall shortly and they'll be utterly useless."

The ocean that was rolling and heaving around the rocky coast began to steam more and more. At some spots the water began to boil. The two suns had long since vanished behind the increasingly dense cloud banks, which mercifully hid from the stars in the sky the face of the planet struggling in the last throes of death.

The ground under their feet grew hot. Nobody could remain standing more than half a minute on the same spot. The last remnants of the ice had long since melted.

An immense curtain of fire was racing toward them from the north. The chain reaction had seized not only the land and the water but also the atmosphere. The air was burning. It changed to energy.

The iceworld was coming to an end.

When the raging hell reached the mountain and the preceding wave of heat swept across the plateau they encountered no trace of life.

Organs and the crew who shared his guilt had died a death they had intended for others.

## **6/ THE LONGEST HOUR**

It was not easy for Eztak to remain calm. The lightning attacks carried out by the two Terranian cruisers, gigantic spheres 600 feet across, fully occupied his attention. Organs had not yet returned and the commander of the other vessel that had accompanied him could not supply any reason for this delay. Radio contact had suddenly been interrupted, though this in itself might not be of any consequence as even the most refined technology could suddenly run into snags. Besides, there wasn't much time for Eztak to speculate a great deal about Organs' failure to return as promised. In any case, he had carried out his mission: the second planet of the Beta-Albireo system was burning. The atomic conflagration had started at the North pole and was spreading evenly toward the equator.

This should be a lesson for that fellow Rhodan. He should learn that nobody could cross the plans of galactic Traders and remain unpunished.

Etztak had already lost two of his ships when he received a second radio message from Tophthor the Mounder. It was a brief announcement.

"To Etztak, patriarch of the clan of Etztak! Received latest offer. Must decline. No longer prepared to fight. Rhodan's forces hopelessly superior. Advise you retreat.

Tophthor

Clan of the Mounders'

Foaming with rage, Etztak stared at the radiogram that had arrived from a star system over 15,000 light-years distant. So Tophthor and the rest of his miserable fleet had turned tail in order to save their skin! Etztak felt let down.

While he was still brooding over this bad news and realizing that he was now standing alone, he noticed a sudden draught of air in his command centre.

That was unusual, for all the doors were closed and there was no one besides himself in the room.

At least not until just a second ago.

Horrorstruck, Etztak stared at the dark-skinned ghost who had materialized from the void and now bowed politely with a broad grin. The apparition wore a uniform but no spacesuit. Dark hair curled over its black brow. Big brown eyes twinkling with amusement; two rows of gleaming white teeth were visible between its half-opened lips. The ghost held a piece of white paper in its dark hands.

"Don't be frightened, Etztak," the spectre addressed him in impeccable interkosmo. "My name is Ras Tschubai and I am a member of Perry Rhodan's Mutant Corps. My commander has sent me to give you this ultimatum. By the way, I am a teleporter, so it was very easy for me to penetrate your ship."

Etztak had, of course, heard about such intelligences who had mastered teleportation, and his experiences with the human race in particular had taught him that these Earthlings had developed some amazing talents. Gradually he overcame his shock.

"Rhodan sends you?" Etztak reassured himself. His instruments had not indicated any recent space rupture, therefore Rhodan could not be in the vicinity as far as he knew. "Why doesn't he come himself?"

"I wouldn't be so keen on it if I were you," responded the sturdy black man and handed the paper to Etztak. "First read that, then we'll talk."

Etztak took the note. With one glance he recognized the handwriting as being in interkosmo. No wonder these Terranians, who until recently had been totally unknown, had mastered this language if the Arkonides had been their teachers.

Without paying any further attention to Ras Tschubai, Etztak read:

"To Etztak, patriarch of the Springers clan! I have destroyed the battlefleet of the Mounders, sparing only Tophthor and Grogham, so that they can warn the rest of their clan never to approach Earth again—except as bearers of a flag of truce. You, too, Etztak are offered a last chance. Provided you start your retreat within 10 hours, no harm will befall you. I'll arrive in the Beta-Albireo system in 10 hours in order to pick up my men from the second planet. If you should still be there I'll annihilate you.

Beware of any further attacks against the second planet. My two cruisers are instructed to prevent you from any acts of aggression against the iceworld."

"You have 10 hours. Use this time wisely. Once you see my ship it'll be too late.

Perry Rhodan

Terra."

Etztak read the message twice before he slowly put the piece of paper on the table. He sat down. For a moment he seemed to have forgotten the presence of the black Earthling.

Could it be true that Rhodan didn't know yet that an inextinguishable atomic conflagration was raging on the second planet? Could he indeed not be as omniscient as one was almost led to believe?

Ras Tschubai cleared his throat. "My commander wishes an answer. I am instructed to communicate your reply as soon as I return to the cruiser."

Etztak narrowed his eyes and said stubbornly, "I want to talk to Rhodan in person."

"Why? There's nothing to discuss or negotiate."

"Don't be so sure. I have a vital piece of information for him."

"Give it to me, it's all the same, I'll pass it on to him within five minutes."

"I wish to communicate directly with Rhodan."

Ras shrugged his shoulders. "I'll tell him so but I doubt it'll help. If I may give you some good advice, Etztak: do what Rhodan recommends. There is no other way for you."

Etztak did not reply; he looked straight into Ras Tschubai's face, trying to probe for information, but in vain.

And then the black man suddenly dissolved in the air right in front of Etztak's eyes. Vanished.

Etztak hesitated not a single second. He established direct video communication with his ships. When the commanders appeared on the screens, gazing expectantly at their patriarch, he spoke to them in their own special dialect:

"The Terranians have given us an ultimatum. They give us 10 hours to disappear from here. I'd like to hear your opinions."

Very soon Etztak was to find out that there was a great deal of disagreement in his clan. The majority suggested ignoring the ultimatum and proceeding to an attack on Terra. But there were also others who seemed more prudent. They advised immediate return to the clan's base in order to prepare for a methodical campaign.

Etztak listened patiently to their various opinions as was customary in his clan. Everyone was entitled to make suggestions but in the final analysis it was the patriarch who made the decisions.

He was not at all pleased to hear what the more prudent commanders recommended.

"If we accept the demands of the Terranians," he countered after everyone had his say, "we admit defeat. We, the Traders of the galaxy, capitulate before beings who discovered the secrets of space travel only a short while ago. We have been traversing the universe for 5000 thousand years, if we don't count the era of our Arkonide ancestors. It is as though a wise old man were to submit to the suggestions of a small child. And if it would mean death, I can't do it. Everything inside me violently resists such a course of action. Who, after all, is this Rhodan who has set this ultimatum? An upstart, a favourite of decadent Arkonides who have become infatuated with him and his home planet."

"Rhodan knows the position of the Planet of Eternal Life," said one of the commanders. "For thousands of years this planet has been the object of desperate search by all the nations of the galaxy—and Rhodan has found it!"

"Maybe it was just a matter of luck—but good fortune is a very fickle thing, it doesn't last forever," replied Eztak angrily. "Should we capitulate simply because the Earthling got lucky?"

"No," said the commander. "Not because of that but because there are said to exist secrets on the Planet of Eternal Life which might render their discoverers the rulers of the Milky Ways. Who knows, Rhodan may have found these secrets!"

Eztak's face looked grim. "Perhaps. But this would also mean it is high time to wrest these secrets away from him. Anyone who knows the secrets of Pel—the Planet of Eternal Life—and doesn't belong to our race, constitutes a danger to the galaxy." He paused for a brief moment and then continued. "I must warn all those who are overly cautious not to make blind decisions. I am in favour of holding out and continuing the fight. I'll abide by the wishes of the majority. Please, let me hear what you have decided!"

Their decision was unanimous. Eztak and his clan would fight and, if necessary, to the last ship.

"But one of us will have to carry the warning to the galaxy," one of the commanders pointed out. "In case Rhodan should actually succeed in wiping us out..."

"Tophthor has already fled and will do all that's necessary. Don't worry, Heratz, even if all of us perish, the galaxy has been warned. We will be avenged."

An icy silence fell over all the faces on the screens, till one of the Springers said rather sarcastically: "That won't bring any of us back to life again."

Eztak gave no answer. He switched off the instruments and out of narrowed, grim eyes gazed down at the world that was condemned to death.

\* \* \* \*

The heavy cruiser *Solar System* separated from its companion ship *Terra* and diminished its speed. Ras Tschubai had delivered his message to Eztak and made a report to Rhodan. The radio message was brief and matter-of-fact.



The reason Maj. Nyssen slowed down and cautiously approached the second planet was only too obvious. The planet's surface showed a most frightening change.

At first the pole started to burst into flames. Major Nyssen thought at first this might be due to an over-dimensional atomic explosion intended, perhaps, to melt down the ice cap. He felt no alarm. But then, when the fire began to spread and slowly but constantly devoured all in its path toward the south, he became suspicious.

He was seized by a monstrous thought.

While Ras was still busy bringing his message to the radio centre Nyssen informed Capt. McClears on *Terra* of his plan and instructed him not to ease up with his nuisance raids against the Springers.

"I'll rejoin you as quickly as possible but it is vitally important to find out what's going on down there on the iceworld. Remember, we have some of our people down there."

The closer the *Solar System* came to the second planet, the more his suspicions turned into certainty. It definitely looked as if an all-devouring atomic fire were raging down there.

This could not be due to some natural cause. If indeed this was an atomic conflagration, then it could have only been set by the Springers. Because they couldn't cope with five members of Rhodan's crew, they destroyed an entire world.

Nyssen was seized by a violent anger. If he had now confronted Ezztak in person it would have been very easy for him to strangle the old man with his bare hands.

But then he remembered Tiff—and the two girls.

Twice he circled the iceworld without discovering the slightest trace of the missing persons. This was not too surprising for he had not enough time for a thorough search. And thus it was also possible that he missed locating Organs and his crew.

In any case, he convinced himself that the second planet of the double sun Beta-Albireo was just about to transform itself into the system's third sun. Unless some immediate measures were taken, Tiff, Eberhardt, Hump, the two girls and Pucky would be past help.

But what could he do? The five missing persons didn't answer any radio calls—maybe they were not permitted to. After all, what could Nyssen know of Rhodan's intentions when he sent Tiff and his friends on a secret mission in the fight against the Springers?

There was only one possibility and Maj. Nyssen seized on it. He left the raging atomic hell quickly behind and advanced into deep space. One light-hour away from Beta-Albireo II he established video communication with Rhodan.

\* \* \* \*

Sleepy-eyed, Bell left his cabin and joined Rhodan in the command centre of the *Stardust*. The

redheaded, stocky astronaut eyed his friend with unconcealed distrust. "One of these days you could let me know on the Q-T how you can manage without sleep. If people would just leave me alone I wouldn't wake up for two months."

"The sins of our youth come back to haunt us in our old age," Rhodan smiled mockingly. "Play now, pay later."

Bell stared at him as if he were about to have an apoplectic fit. "Do you mean to say, my friend, that I'm an old man at the age of 37?"

Rhodan was still smiling. "Relatively speaking you're a few years older than that, pal. But in regard to the follies of your youth, one can never be sure you won't commit them all over again. I'm just thinking of a certain Stella Rallas..."

"Wait a minute!" roared Bell in horror and couldn't keep his hair from standing upright like the stiff bristles of a hairbrush. This porcupine act, quite involuntary on Bell's part, took place every time he got very furious or someone reminded him of some embarrassing event he'd prefer to forget—such as now for instance the affair with the divine film star Rallas.

"But what's the matter with you?" Rhodan inquired, feigning compassion. "She was such a gorgeous creature, wasn't she?"

But Bell was not too interested in that now. Of course, she had been very beautiful, that apparition the Immortal had conjured up from the void and had smuggled into his cabin. But she was nothing but a joke, the kind the Immortal liked to play on his unsuspecting visitors to his planet on the edge of eternity. Bell preferred not to think of this embarrassing incident.

"That's all you have to tell me?" Bell growled. "That's why you waked me up to come see you?"

Rhodan turned serious. "Not just that, Reggie, of course. There are some other reasons. I just had Ras Tschubai deliver an ultimatum to Ezztak in person. It expires in 10 hours. Sure, I could make the jump to Beta-Albireo right now, but I want to leave the Springers enough time to think this matter over thoroughly. In the meantime there won't be any more attacks on the iceworld, which means that Tiff and his friends are safe for the time being. That leaves us sufficient time to return to Earth where some urgent matters demand my attention."

"In 10 hours?" Bell sounded very doubtful. "That's a very short time."

"Long enough for me to give some instructions to Col. Freyt," replied Rhodan. "Who knows when we'll next get back from Beta-Albireo."

Bell remained sceptical. "So that Thora and Khrest can bug us about it being high time we bring them back to Arkon, their home planet? Hum, I don't know..."

Rhodan had no chance to express his opinion on this painful subject; a red alarm signal flared up. The radio communication centre wished to speak to the commander.

Rhodan switched on the intercom. "Rhodan here, what's the matter?"

"Emergency call from cruiser *Solar System* ."

Rhodan threw a quick glance of warning to Bell "Contact!" he ordered.

"It's a hyper-video communication," explained the officer on duty, interrupting. Seconds later Rhodan's special scope lit up. Major Nyssen's worried-looking face appeared. Rhodan nodded a brief greeting. "You're contacting me via hyperscope reserved for extreme emergencies. Are the Springers attacking?"

"They're defending themselves in the usual manner," Nyssen said as he shook his head. "No, this is not why I am calling you." He continued: "Tiff and the others are in great danger. The Springers have started an atomic conflagration on Snowman!"

"A chain reaction?" Rhodan asked, fearing to confirm what he had heard. Bell's hair began its famous routine again, making his head resemble a red hedgehog. "You mean to say the Springers are unscrupulous enough to annihilate an entire world?"

"Unfortunately there can be no doubt about it, sir. I have been able to see it with my own eyes. The fire began at the North pole and is approaching the equator with unbelievable speed."

"According to the latest reports Tiff is at the equator," said Rhodan, greatly perturbed.

"I have been unable to find him during my search sir. He seems to have vanished from the face of the planet. But this won't help him either. The whole planet is doomed. The ice masses have melted. Mighty streams have joined to form entire oceans, which are already boiling in the temperate zones."

"I have issued an ultimatum to Ezztak," began Rhodan, but Nyssen cut in sharply.

"In far less than 10 hours the atomic fires will have swept across the equator. You mustn't wait that long, sir, unless you want to leave Tiff and his companions to a horrible fate. I would attempt their rescue but the Springers are alerted, they attacked me with seven ships when I made my second reconnaissance flight."

Rhodan waved off Bell, who desperately was trying to put in a word.

"This cancels my ultimatum to Ezztak. It seems anyhow he had no intention of heeding my warning. Would he attack you otherwise? Well, then, let him learn his lesson: what happens to those who attack our Earth. Major Nyssen, keep looking for a sign of life from Tiff. I'll be there in 10 minutes with the *Stardust*. And the Springers better watch out!"

The screen grew dark again and Maj. Nyssen's much-relieved face disappeared.

"But that's...!" said Bell. But that was all he managed to bring to his lips.

"Yes, that is devilish, irresponsible! The ice planet is inhabited. The semi-sleepers are living inside the warm caves. I don't know who they are except some information from Tiff that they possess a certain type of intelligence and are good-natured. In any case, they are a peaceful race that never harmed anybody. And now this race is doomed to extinction because an old man won't admit that he suffered a defeat. He'll pay dearly for that some day!"

Before Bell had a chance to reply, Rhodan requested the positronic brain to calculate the coordinates for the transition. The distance was 320 light-years, which presented no problem. This time however it was most important that the calculations be absolutely precise, for they couldn't afford to waste even a single minute after their rematerialisation in order to ascertain their position.

Hardly five minutes had passed when the positronic brain ejected the metal foil containing the requested information. Rhodan picked it up and fed it into the navigation robot who from this moment on assumed command of the giant ship.

Rhodan waited until the machine's metallic voice announced:

"Direction unchanged. Speed unchanged. Transition in three minutes. Coördinates known. Count down starts with 60 seconds to zero."

Bell groaned. "And I had to be waked up just for that! Couldn't you have let me sleep through the transition at least—!"

Finally Rhodan's features relaxed a little. The deep lines disappeared and his eyes twinkled ironically. "It wouldn't have done you much good, Reg. The actual jump lasts only a few seconds."

"At my age," countered Bell with a nasty glance in the direction of his friend, who was two years his senior, "every second of sleep counts." He threw himself down into the chair of the copilot and stared at the second hand of the clock. "Let alone at your age!"

At this moment the metallic voice of the robot started the count down.

"Sixty seconds... 59... 58..."

\* \* \* \*

It took almost five minutes before Aubrey could acquaint the anxiously waiting group with his decision. This much time was needed by the positronic brain to weigh all possibilities against each other and discover the optimum solution:

"Pucky has found out that an atomic fire is approaching the equator from a northerly direction. The outside temperature has risen to over 32°. The ice is melting in the north and the water pushing southward. Only the fact that our entrance was sealed off by the ray cannon shot has so far saved us from drowning. There is only one way out left for us: upwards!"

Tiff and the others stared at the solid rock ceiling. "But there are at least 90 feet of natural rock above us, Aubrey," he said hopelessly.

"True, but also probably no water," replied robot RB-013. "We must try it. Withdraw to the entrance of the cave, because the cave floor slopes up in that direction. In case water should seep in, close the helmets of your spacesuits. If it gets too much, you may have to dive through the water."

"Through a shaft filled with water—90 feet up?"

"If necessary—yes. There is no alternative. We cannot summon any help since we are screened off by the rock. If we don't help ourselves we'll all be lost. And even if I am only a robot, I don't look forward to rot and rust in water."

Pucky threw a glance at the box with the semi-sleepers. "Water won't harm them too much, besides the box can be made air-and-water tight. But this wouldn't be too good for them in the long run."

"Let's get going," said the robot. "There isn't much time left. Once the rock begins to glow it will be too late."

"Okay," said Tiff to the robot, "we'll advance toward the old entrance. And you watch out that you don't burn yourself."

"Don't worry about me," answered Aubrey, "my air conditioning unit can take a lot of heat."

They moved away from RB-013 who set to work at once. Both his energy rayguns ate into the solid rock, which became liquid and fell to the ground in heavy drops. The largest part however evaporated. The gases, heavier than the air, flowed lazily off in the direction of the large tulip caves. For the waiting semi-sleepers these would be the first messengers of approaching death.

Tiff came to a halt in front of the fused rock walls of the former entrance to the cave. Hump, now strangely quiet, leaned against a promontory. Eberhardt sat down on the box containing the flowers. Both girls looked at each other with terrified eyes. Only Pucky remained calm. He nodded reassuringly toward Tiff and said:

"I want to make sure how things are on the outside. If only I knew where the cruisers are I could risk a jump to reach them. But it's too dangerous to make a blind leap. Perhaps one of the telepaths will hear my call. I'll be back soon." And with that Pucky disappeared.

The group he left behind looked at each other without saying a word. They were all preoccupied with the same thought: would Pucky succeed in establishing contact with the cruisers?

Time passed slowly. The gases of the evaporating metals and the steadily rising heat penetrated even to this isolated part of the cave. Once when Tiff touched his hand to the rock of the outer wall he quickly withdrew it, uttering a cry of amazement.

The rock was warm to the touch.

Pucky stayed away 10 minutes, then suddenly reappeared amidst the group. His fur was wet and sleek and he emitted a shrill whistling sound which signified extreme disapproval. He was absolutely furious.

"What happened, Pucky?" asked Tiff and Milly simultaneously.

Pucky regarded them out of his sad brown eyes. "Don't ask me that, friends, the answer would bitterly disappoint you—but I can't leave you in the dark on our situation. Do you know where we are? No, you couldn't guess. So I'll tell you: at the bottom of an ocean!"

"What did you say?" asked Eberhardt, almost toppling off his box in excitement. "Where did you say?"

"I wouldn't believe it either if I hadn't been outside. When I rematerialised I found myself under water. Luckily for me, I had just taken a deep breath before I started to teleport. I was naturally too perplexed to immediately risk another jump for I might have leapt too high into the air above the water and would have plunged down perhaps 50 feet—I didn't like the idea. So I simply let myself drift up to the surface of the ocean which is about 100 feet deep. Only the top of our mountain can still be seen."

"The water will come down into our cave when Aubrey pushes through to the surface," stated Hump. "He must stop at once drilling through the rock."

"That's crazy," said Tiff. "Or do you want to suffocate down here?"

"Burn to death!" corrected Pucky with a dead serious mien. "No, we have no other choice: we must go through the water to reach the outside. By the way, the water is already pleasantly warm. I guess it will be boiling in about 10 hours.

For a moment a frightened hush fell over the little group. Then Tiff spoke up: "I'll tell Aubrey to hurry up. Wait here."

He closed the helmet of his spacesuit and switched on his oxygen supply. Determined, he walked over to the spot where Aubrey had disappeared into the rock. There was still a constant flow of liquefied metal oozing down. RB-013 was not to be seen. Tiff used his helmet sender to establish communication with the robot.

"Hello, RB-013. Where are you?"

"Exactly 19 feet above the bottom," came the prompt reply. "In one hour I'll push through to the surface."

"Pucky was just outside," said Tiff. "The mountain is already under water."

"We had to count on that!

"The water is starting to heat up!"

A few seconds silence, then: "I'll work faster. We'll make it."

"Fill returned to his friends, whose faces displayed little joy or confidence. "One more hour," explained Tiff after he had opened his helmet. "As soon as the water breaks through we'll know."

Pucky slipped into his spacesuit. "I don't feel like taking another bath," he said. "Even if it's nice and warm!"

Already the first minute of their long wait seemed like an eternity.

And an hour has 60 minutes...

## **7/ FIREWORLD**

The patriarch attacked.

He was convinced he needn't worry about Rhodan for the next few hours, therefore he wanted to use

this time to get rid of the pesky two cruisers. He deployed his Clan's entire fleet in order to destroy Rhodan's two ships.

Maj. Nyssen guessed the patriarch's two-fold plan. Eztak wanted to be free of his two opponents before the final battle with Rhodan would begin but at the same time he wished to prevent them from helping Rhodan's people who were lost on the iceworld in flames.

"Capt. McClears," Nyssen began his teletalk with the battlecruiser *Terra*. "Try to divert the Springers' attention from the *Solar System* and prevent them from following me. I must do all I can to find Tiff."

"You can rely on me, sir," answered McClears and threw a worried glance at the other picture screen where he could see how the Springer ships prepared to take up battle positions. This time they seemed to mean business. "I'll do my best to keep them at bay. When is Rhodan coming?"

"He should arrive any moment now. In case I don't have an opportunity to get in touch directly with him, please inform him where I am. Is that clear?"

"Yes, everything clear, sir!" replied McClears, with a stiff smile adding: "We'll show them!"

Nyssen smiled back, then McClears watched how the *Solar System* raced with insane acceleration toward the flaming world and dived into the dense cloud cover as if it were an ocean.

The same instant the first atomic torpedoes detonated in the protective energy screens of the *Terra*. The concentrated barrage of the Springers had started.

And in the same second the heavy cruiser changed into the perfect battle instrument it was intended for originally. Round after round of deadly missiles left the gigantic belly of the cruiser. The enemy's energy screens would collapse if more than five simultaneous hits were achieved. Then followed the beamed energy rays which accomplished the same effect if they were carefully concentrated and aimed on one spot.

But despite these individual successes the forces of the Springers were too overpowering. They skilfully evaded the *Terra*'s assault and tried to manoeuvre themselves in the most favourable position for launching their own missiles. McClears realized that they tried to manoeuvre him into a position in their centre in order to place him under a crossfire barrage of energy coming simultaneously from 20 ships. This would suffice to annihilate the giant spacesphere.

This very instant also a mighty space rupture occurred in the space-time continuum, which was registered by the *Terra*'s structure sensors. Somewhere close by a ship must have slipped back from hyperspace into normal space.

And then friend and foe saw it at the same time.

From the depths of space came racing the gigantic sphere, gleaming ominously.

Perry Rhodan arrived on the battlefield to turn the outcome in his favour.

For one fateful moment Eztak was thunderstruck, long enough to permit McClears to wipe out two enemy ships—waiting for a command from their battle leader—in a surprise sortie. But then the Springers fled in retreat to reform in a new defence line some distance away. They apparently were determined to face an encounter even with the *Stardust*.

Rhodan took his time. The life of his men was more important to him than the Springers. He established communication with the *Solar System* .

"Where is Maj. Nyssen?" was his first question.

"Trying to rescue Tiff," explained McClears. "So far not a trace of him can be found."

"Can you distract Eztak sufficiently from following me, Captain?"

"I'll try my best. What are your plans?"

"To look for Tiff! Marshall is aboard the *Solar System* , isn't he?"

"Yes, sir. Also some of the other mutants."

"Right now I'm only interested in the telepath. He at least should be able to get in touch with Pucky."

"Right, sir. I'll keep Eztak busy. When will you be back?"

"As soon as I've found Tiff," said Rhodan and cut off the communication. The *Stardust* drove at top speed toward the boiling surface of Snowman, that was on the verge of changing into a flaming hell.

\* \* \* \*

RB-013 climbed down from the vertical shaft. A thin trickle of warm water followed him. Tiff noticed this with some surprise.

"What is that supposed to mean, Aubrey? Why so little water?"

"I've only loosened the last rock immediately below the surface, so that the incoming masses of water would not dash me violently down to the bottom of the shaft. Pucky must try to do the rest of this job. Here at the highest place of the cave we are safe for the time being. We have to wait until all will be filled with water. I have no idea how long this will take."

"That's right," confirmed Tiff, "we can't struggle up-stream. But it might take hours till these subterranean passages and caverns will be totally inundated."

"No, it won't take that long," protested the robot. You underestimate the force of the water. It will pour down the shaft and into the caves with such tremendous power that the walls of the shaft will erode more and more every second. By the time the water will reach us here the shaft will have a diameter of many yards."

Eberhardt looked quizzically at the machine man. "And how about you, RB-013? Can you swim?"

"Better than you all," declared Aubrey. "My recoil jets develop a thrust of..."



"Then you'd better stay in the rear," decided Tiff. "Well, Pucky, what are you waiting for?"

Pucky first made a face as if to say "Why do I always have to be the fall guy?" but then he sat down on one of the empty boxes and began to concentrate. His powerful mental emanations rushed up along the shaft until they met with the resistance of the last rock that had only been loosened by RB-013. Then they fastened on the obstacle, a circular lid several square yards in size and half a yard thick. It was not easy to lift this against the pressure of the water and then push it aside.

The result of the successfully completed action was noticeable instantly.

With an ear-splitting roar the ocean rushed into the underground empty space. The water hurled down the shaft, dammed up for a second at its lowest point, then ran right off into the lower cave.

Within a few minutes it would reach the semi-sleepers.

Eberhardt, who was sitting on the box containing the 50 tulips destined to insure the survival of their own race, suddenly sat up as straight as a bolt. His eyes mirrored fear and horror. His hands started trembling.

"Oh Lord!" he stammered, "oh Lord—how terrible, how horrifying!" His body doubled up, convulsed with pain. He would have toppled over and fallen to the ground if Hump, standing next to him, hadn't caught him in time.

The same instant the two girls were seized by the panic wave which emanated from the dying semi-sleepers. The thoughts of the race at death's door stormed against the brains of the human beings filling them with their terror-struck emotions and their sadness. Only Hump and Tiff seemed to be somewhat immune against this overwhelming wave. And of course Pucky.

"If only I could screen off their brains," lamented the little mouse-beaver. "But unfortunately I can't. They won't be free of these feelings of panic and fear until the semi-sleepers die from drowning. Only their death will save us from this torment."

"Can't you find help in some other way?" panted Tiff who was holding Milly in his arms trying to calm her down. "Telekinesis!"

"The water!" Pucky reminded him, but then jumped up abruptly. "You are right, I should give it a try. But we must still wait. I wonder how long the tulip-flowers can hold out under water? If I only knew..."

He disappeared from sight—returned 10 seconds later, his spacesuit dripping with water.

"The cave is half filled with water. The artificial sun is extinguished. It won't be long now till the life of this strange race will be snuffed out too. But, wait a moment, will you? I want to have a look at what the situation is like outside."

He closed his helmet—and dematerialised. This time it took nearly three minutes till he reappeared. His face was radiant with joy.

"We are saved, my friends—if we can manage to get to the surface. Major Nyssen is nearby. I could establish communication with John Marshall, the telepath. He is on board the *Solar System*. He can also hear your implanted cell-sender, Tiff, now all of a sudden."

"Why couldn't he hear it before?"

Pucky shrugged his fur-covered shoulders. "I don't know for sure. The signals from your sender might have been drowned out by the mental fear impulses of the dying race. Now the poor tulips are almost dead and your sender comes through clearer and stronger. I have no other explanation."

"I'll have to ask Rhodan all about this sender," murmured Tiff with a thoughtful air. "In any case, it saved our lives."

"Not yet," chirped Pucky and gazed down in the direction of the cave. The loud roar of the intruding water back there had died down to a gentle gurgling sound. The water level was rising noticeably and inundated the higher ground near the shaft where the little group was waiting. Eberhardt and the two girls had regained their composure.

"The mountaintop is still above water," continued Pucky. "We must get to it. The shaft is 90 feet long. Above it are another 30 feet of water. The mountain peak is still 600 feet away once we reach the surface of the water."

Tiff fastened his helmet and signalled to the others. "The time has come, friends. Now we've got to swim."

"I'll carry the two girls to safety," said Pucky. "Then I'll help Eberhardt. You two, Tiff and Hump, have to try it on your own. As soon as I'm through with the others I'll come to your assistance, if you should need it. How about you, Aubrey?"

"Thanks for your kind inquiry," replied the robot. "Though I loathe water, I'm confident I'll make it on my own. Then later on the island I'll be able to dry out."

Pucky made a face, then watched as the water reached their feet and soon rose to their knees. He closed his helmet and switched on his radio set. The others followed suit. Tiff took the box with the 50 semi-sleepers.

The water kept rising faster now. Pucky was the first to disappear below the harmlessly rippling surface. Then the others followed. They felt like divers who had ventured into a cave below the bottom of an ocean and who were not sure whether they would ever see daylight again.

The water reached the rocky ceiling now. At the same time all became quiet around them.

"The time has come," Tiff said for the second time. He made a few awkward swimming strokes, then floated toward the shaft in which the water was now standing still, no longer offering any resistance. "I'll go first."

"When you get up there, signal us," suggested Pucky. "Then I'll follow with Milly. Hump, stay behind Tiff."

From that moment on Tiff was on his own. He reached the shaft and looked up. Far away, he believed he saw a weak light. Probably the sky, he thought. He clasped the almost weightless box close to his body. He knew he had to hurry otherwise the last specimen of a strange and wonderful race might drown.

He pushed off from the ground and floated upwards. He helped along with slight paddling movements of his legs; he was astonished how easy it was. He manipulated with his left hand so that he would not bump

into any rocky ledges. Aubrey had been right: the shaft now had a diameter of 15 feet.

The light above him grew brighter and suddenly he was at the bottom of an immense ocean. There was nothing but water all around him. Underneath him gaped the black hole of the cave from which Hump was emerging now.

"Pucky, the shaft is free," announced Tiff. "You can come up whenever you're ready."

"Try to get to the island," said Pucky.

Tiff emerged on the surface of the water. He almost lost the box which suddenly regained its full weight. He saw Hump's head beside him.

"Help me hold that box," Tiff asked his friend. "Let's hold it above the surface so that the water can run off. Otherwise they might drown."

Hump made a face but he complied immediately with Tiff's request. Swimming side by side they pressed forward to the rocky coast of the little island.

"Me of all people!" grumbled Hump. "I've never cared for flowers in all my life."

Tiff did not reply. In vain he endeavoured to find a sign in the cloud-covered sky that they were being expected. But there was not a trace of the *Solar System*. Why didn't the ship come now to their aid when they needed it most? It wouldn't be long now till this little island would be flooded by the steadily rising waters of the ocean.

Now Tiff became aware how warm the water actually was. He estimated the temperature to be at least 86°F. He hoped this would not be dangerous for the tulip creatures.

His feet touched ground. A few steps and he came up on dry land. Milly and Felicita were already waiting for them. Pucky had worked fast. Now he was on his way to fetch Eberhardt.

Five minutes later they were standing on the highest point of the little island and peered over to where they knew the under-water shaft should be. They were waiting for Aubrey.

The arrival of the robot was announced by a foaming water mountain which was formed by his drive-aggregates. Then the metal monster came gliding through the waves like a real submarine and landed safely on the island.

All had long since opened their helmets and breathed the warm sultry air of the dying planet. Aubrey generated an almost unbearable heat. Hump was complaining: "Can't you turn on the cooling system? It's warm enough as it is without you contributing to the heat here."

"I'm sorry. Water doesn't agree with me. Unless I dry myself out at once, I'll get rusty spots."

"Oh, you'll be overhauled anyhow—provided they find us in time," Tiff added with a worried face. He kept looking steadily up into the grey sky where the clouds were swirling in heavy opaque banks, obscuring any view. "I sure would like to know where Nyssen is." He turned to Pucky. "What's Marshall saying?"

"I have no contact with him," said the little mousebeaver regretfully. "He's getting word to Rhodan."

"Rhodan!" whispered Milly and clung desperately to Tiff. "He's our last hope. If he doesn't show up soon..."

They all stared silently at the rising waters—and the red wall that began to glow on the horizon.

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan discovered the *Solar System* within a few moments after emergence from hyperspace. He ordered Marshall to join him aboard the *Stardust* with one of the small space fighter planes. Major Nyssen was requested to return at once to his former position and to help McClears in creating diversionary tactics destined to distract the Springers' attention. Those Traders must be prevented from interfering during Rhodan's rescue action.

Minutes later Marshall stood before Rhodan. "Just at this moment there is no contact with Pucky and Tiff. They are in a cave below the bottom of the ocean but Pucky maintains that they can reach safety—on an island."

"Let's go; we've got no time to lose! Do you know where this island is located?"

"More or less. It's difficult to find your way in this fog."

"Try to pinpoint the location to Tiff's sender. Also watch out for any telepathic calls from Pucky. Bell, set the *Stardust* on its proper course. Every second counts."

As far as Rhodan was concerned for the time being the Springers and the attacking patriarch no longer existed. He was confronted by one paramount problem: to save his people who were facing death on the flaming iceworld.

The giant spacesphere moved at a low altitude over the waves of the steaming ocean, which was already boiling farther north, propelling huge cloud banks skywards. Here and there some jagged rock islands jutted above the surface of the sea but he failed to detect the least sign of life on them.

And then suddenly Marshall cried out: "I've got them—both. Pucky and Tiff! They're very close—they're on the island. Yes, keep on the same course—it should be the next island."

Rhodan looked at the screen. There wasn't much to be seen for the fog grew denser by the second. But then he recognized a dark dot in the swirling masses of steam, water and clouds.

The island. And on it, moving about, were seven tiny dots—five human beings, Pucky and Aubrey the robot.

But the island was far too small. The huge *Stardust* could not possibly come in for a landing on it.

"Ask Pucky if he can transport all of them into the *Stardust*," said Rhodan and let the spacesphere descend as far as possible toward the little island's surface. At the same instant a red light lit up, a signal connecting the radio room with the command centre. Rhodan pushed down a lever. "Yes, what is it?"

"Emergency call from Maj. Nyssen, sir. Eztak has escaped from the two cruisers and is attacking the ice planet with his entire fleet. Nyssen says he is in hot pursuit and trying to attack him from the rear."

"Fine, tell Nyssen to keep up the good work. Show Eztak no mercy. And, also, the old patriarch will be ruthlessly dealt with from now on, tell that to Nyssen."

"Right, sir."

The red light went out.

Bell's mouth became pencil-thin. "We'll fight to the finish?" he asked. Rhodan nodded his head.

"We have no alternative. Marshall, tell Pucky we'll send him a destroyer. I can't jeopardize the *Stardust*'s fighting efficiency in any way now by opening its hatches to receive the rescued group. Tiff will have to try make his way to safety with the destroyer. If necessary they'll have to leave the robot behind."

"But these light destroyers are quite small and have hardly enough room to accommodate three people," objected Bell.

"Sorry, but the cabin will have to do this time for five persons and Pucky, unless our little mouse-beaver would consider teleporting himself directly into the *Stardust* ."

"He won't do that under any circumstances," Bell defended his friend. "He'll want to stay with Tiff."

Rhodan called the ammunitions supply room. "Get both tele-transmitters ready for action! No, this time no atom bombs! A three-man destroyer!"

A puzzled silence. Then the counter question: "A destroyer?"

"Yes, a destroyer! Teletransport one of the small destroyers to the island just below us. Hurry! Here are the data..."

Rhodan waited until suddenly he saw the slender torpedo-shaped destroyer materialize down on the island. Then he sent the *Stardust* shooting toward Eztak's fleet as it emerged with lightning speed from the sky.

\* \* \* \*

Gesturing like a victorious field marshall Pucky pointed to the little area of the island that was still rising out of the ocean.

"Abracadabra-simsalabim... well how much longer will that take?"

"Have you finally lost your marbles?" inquired Hump, worried.

The mouse-beaver shook his head. "Nope! Marshall says Rhodan will send us a destroyer—by

teleportation. Must be some new trick he brought back from Wanderer. He can't tend to us personally as he had intended—the Springers are about to launch an attack."

"A destroyer?" mumbled Tiff and threw a quick glance in Aubrey's direction. "We'll be awfully crowded there."

High above in the clouds overhead the gigantic silhouette of the *Stardust* became visible for a few seconds. Then at exactly the same spot Pucky had just pointed out they watched the destroyer materialize from the void.

Tiff picked up the box with the semi-sleepers, grabbed Milly by the hand and ran toward the sanctuary of the destroyer. He noticed now how hot the rocky ground under his feet had become. It was really a last minute escape.

But before they could reach the small ship an orange coloured energy finger came hissing from the clouds, creating a boiling funnel some distance from them.

"Watch out!" yelled Pucky. "I'm jumping up to the destroyer to open the hatch for you. Keep on running, I'll get you afterwards!"

And that same instant the heavy hatch door swung open. Pucky lost no time. The second energy ray of the attacking Springer ships hit the ground considerably closer. But at the same time the shadow of the *Solar System* appeared and placed the enemy ship under heavy bombardment.

From one second to the next Tiff found himself transported into the tiny cabin of the destroyer. He pushed the box containing the semi-sleepers under a small table along one wall, then darted to the controls.

Milly made her appearance and shortly afterwards Felicita. The engines started vibrating.

Also Hump and Eberhardt materialized in the tiny cockpit, followed by Pucky a few seconds later. It was so terribly crowded inside the cabin that the two girls had to sit on Hump's and Eberhardt's laps.

"Take off!" shrieked Pucky, trying to squeeze himself inside a wall cabinet. "It's high time. The ocean is at the boiling point—and the rocks are scorching hot. It's getting rapidly worse."

As Tiff let the destroyer race into the opaque sky at top acceleration, he suddenly remembered Aubrey.

"Heehee," giggled Pucky from the wall cabinet. "Did you ever get me wrong, my friend! Did you really believe for a moment I'd abandon our life-saver in that hell down there? He's in the engine room. I threw out some of the tool boxes to make room for him. All seems like magic or witchcraft, doesn't it? But that's teleportation for you!"

Tiff grinned with relief. "I'd've been mighty sorry to lose that robot—I've taken a fancy to him."

They shot out into space past some detonating Springer ships, all the while evading the dangerously groping fingers of the energy rays of the enemy. The ice planet fell away beneath them. Actually it could no longer be called an iceworld. It had already turned into a fireworld. Only the south pole was still white with the flood waters of the new oceans were already washing over the icy expanses.

Beta-Albireo's second planet was dying and its whirling cloud masses were like the last breaths of a giant in the throes of agony.

\* \* \* \*

They were assembled before Rhodan and listened to his report. Only the highest officials of Terrania's administration and the leading officers of the space fleet were present.

In addition, of course, Tiff, Hump, Eberhardt, Milly and Felicita.

And naturally Pucky!

The meeting had been called together on the sunroof garden of the administrative building. Above them was the clear blue sky of Earth, unobscured by any cloud. The last rays of the setting sun fell through the glass roof and played on Pucky's glistening fur. The mouse-beaver was standing next to Bell who was caressing his little friend's neck. Bell seemed totally absorbed in this occupation.

Milly and Felicita however could not waste any time now on their little mouse-beaver friend. They devoted their full attention to their human boy friends, Tiff and Hump. Only Eberhardt seemed to remain unchanged; he was still the same old hermit.

"...and thus we had no choice," Rhodan was just saying, "but to make an all-out attack on the Springers' fleet and destroy it. There was nothing that Ezztak could do against the tele-transmitters. He lost one ship after the other till he fled panic-stricken with his last two ships. Our instruments indicated that he carried out a hyperspace jump through 12,000 light-years. I let him escape so he could spread the message that Earth is too dangerous a target for those who want to set out on a mission of conquest."

A wave of murmuring voices passed through the assembly. Rhodan suddenly broke out in a smile and erased the horrible impact of his last remarks by adding: "If we owe thanks to anyone for this victory over a highly intelligent and superbly armed race, we must not forget Cadet Julian Tifflor and his companions. Their courage and willingness to carry out any action required of them during this dangerous enterprise made it possible to deceive the Springers as to our real intentions. And last but not least I want to mention our little friend Pucky who brought this dangerous mission to a successful conclusion. Let me therefore express to all those who contributed to this mission my gratitude as well as that of all mankind."

A question and answer period followed and Rhodan was kept busy for a considerable length of time supplying all desired information.

Bell pulled Pucky aside. The two dissimilar friends stood close to a great glass window which afforded them a magnificent view of Terrania, the world's youngest metropolis and capital of the New Power. Something new had been added to the fabulous view: flower beds had been planted all around the glass veranda. And growing there were giant tulips. Or such they appeared to be at first glance. Five huge tulips of varying shades, stretching their pleasingly shaped calyxes and lovely petals toward the warming rays of the terrestrial sun. Their almond-shaped brown eyes were opened wide as if they wished to get to know better, to observe in smallest detail every aspect of the new planet to which they had been transplanted. A delicate fragrance rose from the flowerbeds, perfuming the air breathed by the people in

the vicinity.

"So these are your semi-sleepers, Pucky," whispered Bell, gently stroking one of the blossoms with his hand. The flower was a red one. In each of the beds there were always five different-coloured tulips. "They are the last remnants of their race. We hope they'll like it here."

"They are very happy to have escaped a horrible death," said Pucky, exposing his incisor and breaking into a joyful grin. "They'll be fruitful—I mean flowerful—and multiply and keep their race alive. It is true, however, that it will take at least another 50 years till the first new—heh, heh-*transplants* will make their appearance. They take their time."

"Half a century?" groaned Bell. "Half a century for a new offshoot of a plant? That definitely wouldn't do for my aunt and her cactus plants."

"Your aunt hasn't as much time as the semi-sleepers—and us."

"Us?" Reg regarded Pucky in a speculative light. "Just how old will you grow? You've never told us."

The setting sun had dipped far below the horizon and now cast a reddish glow everywhere—including the protruding tooth of the mouse-beaver from the planet Vagabond. "You want to know how old I can get? You mean *when will I die?*" He appeared tremendously human as he shrugged his shoulders in a typically man-like gesture. "Well, that's quite uncertain. There is really only one way of determining my lifespan exactly."

"Really?" Reg was falling into the trap. He bent down familiarly to his droll little friend. "And how would that be?"

"*Wait till I'm dead!*" chipped Pucky.

Bell's hand hit only the empty air because Pucky was quicker than his reaction. Before Reg had decided that he was miffed enough to swat him, Pucky had teleported himself to the other side of the hall.

"Wait'll I get my hands on you!" threatened Reg in mock anger.

"I'm too young to die," said Pucky, brushing an imaginary tear from his eye.

## CONTENTS

### [1/ THE SEMI-SLEEPERS](#)

### [2/ "A NEW SUN"](#)



3/ "HANDS OFF EARTH!"

4/ THE IMPLACABLE PUCKY

5/ SNOWMAN MELTS

6/ THE LONGEST HOUR

7/ FIREWORLD

SNOWMAN IN FLAMES

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