

For 13 years Perry Rhodan promised to take Thora and Khrest, the Arkonides back to their own parent planetary system. In five hyper-transitions the great spaceship Ganymede takes Perry, Thora and Khrest To Arkon.

But in between comes interception! The Ganymede is forced to land on Naat. Rhodan and his friends are captured, and their ship immobilized beneath insurmountable energy fields.

They must contact the Akonide authority on Naat to negotiate their release so that they may go on to their goal. And if Perry, Thora and Khrest get to Arkon, the Arkonides will find that things have radically changed for them at home during their absence.

1/ THE METHANE BREATHERS OF MOTUN

‘A monster! - she’s a monster ship!’ Reginald Bell, Perry Rhodan’s righthand man, was overcome with awe and reverence as he stood at the base of a tall slender spaceship and stared up towards its apex. The great stellar vessel made the short red bristles on his head stand up almost as if in a salute to its man-made magnificence.

The object of Bell’s overwhelming emotion was the *Ganymede*, the New Power’s latest space-destined giant. It seemed slender only towards someone situated at its base; as Bell was, and looking up; for the foreshortened perspective was deceptive. In actuality the ship was a gigantic cylinder over 2500 feet tall and 600 feet in diameter. Originally the total length had been only about 2380 feet but a sharply tapering nose-cone measuring another 200 had been added in the shops at Terrania.

The *Ganymede* stood on four legs projecting from its enormous tail-fins. A massive metal monster, a colossus so huge that one could scarcely imagine its titanic tonnage could ever move an inch off the ground . . . let alone leap for the stars.

‘A monster,’ Rhodan observed, ‘as long as you don’t compare her with the *Stardust* .’

But the *Stardust* stood six miles away and its mighty spherical body appeared only a relatively dull disc against the violet sky of late evening.

‘So we’re flying to Arkon,’ said Bell, switching to a new topic without removing his eyes from the *Ganymede*. ‘And in this ship!’

‘That’s right, Rhodan affirmed. ‘In this ship.’

‘Why not the *Stardust*?’

‘Because it’s an Arkonide ship. If I pay a call on Mr. Thompson, whom I’ve never seen before, I’m not going to go wearing a suit that once belonged to him and say: "I know this is really your suit but because I

took it from somebody else and not from you, I'm going to keep it." That wouldn't be very diplomatic, would it?'

'You're so right,' Bell readily admitted. 'Okay, great - we'll fly the *Ganymede* to Arkon. We'll land there and say: "We've come from Earth and we've brought with us two shipwrecked people from your planet. - Now help us so our world won't fall into the hands of the Springers." - Right?'

Rhodan laughed. 'I wish I knew how things will go when we get to Arkon but if they don't get too complicated I'll remember your suggestion!'

The day of departure was fast approaching!

Thora and Khrest, the Arkonides, were the first to move into their new quarters aboard the gigantic *Ganymede*. It looked as if they hoped their early move would somehow prevent any further postponement.

It was a new Thora that Perry saw these days. Her radiant red eyes sparkling with vivacity, she was beautiful, like an alien goddess. The obstinacy that had been the most outstanding trait in her character over the last 13 years had prevented Rhodan from realizing that he loved her. Now it was becoming obvious to him with pressing clarity.

Direction of the purely technical preparations fell to Bell and he carried out his tasks with the inexhaustible zeal of a man about to embark on a great adventure and hardly able to wait.

Bell oversaw the transfer of one of the two teletransmitters - the most important weapon of all - from the *Stardust* to the *Ganymede*. He also made sure that the structural compensator, a device found on board the *Ganymede* when it was commandeered from the Springers, lived up to what its name promised.

It did, producing a protective field that absorbed the disturbance of the space-time continuum which betrayed the transition of a spaceship. As long as the structural compensator was in operation, no one would be able to locate the *Ganymede* by any disturbance it caused in the fabric of space.

Bell also took care of installing 27 three-man destroyers in the newly-added ship's nose, as well as the loading of two *Gazelle* -class scouts. The latter were flat, discus-shaped craft, considerably thicker at the centre than at the edges, and were 90 feet long and over 50 feet wide.

Col. Freyt, nominal commander of the *Ganymede*, supervised the boarding of its thousand man crew, seeing to it that all were able to find their way about and knew where their posts were.

The preparations for the launch required a week, a short time considering the size and importance of the undertaking. Rhodan had been forced to compromise between the haste demanded by the threat of the Springers against the Earth and the care necessary for an expedition like this one.

The schedule was held to. Despite the shortness of time allowed for preparation, a comprehensive series of tests concluded five hours before liftoff showed that everything aboard the ship was in order and ready to go.

* * *

Arkon lay in the middle of Globular Cluster M-13, some 34,000 light-years from the Earth.

The *Ganymede* was not capable of bridging such an enormous distance in a single spring through hyperspace so Rhodan planned for five hypertrans leaps altogether. The last one would end on the periphery of the star cluster. While the first four springs would proceed under cover of the fabricompensator, the fifth would not. No one on Arkon was to get the impression an enemy was attempting to steal into the very heart of the Empire but that last hypertrans *wassupposed* to be detected.

The first four transitions took place without incident. The distances that separated one trans-point from another were identical each time; every new leap added 6800 light-years to the distance between the *Ganymede* and the Earth.

The last transition began. Rhodan ordered the ship on maximum alert.

* * *

The pain faded away.

The shrill howling of the alarm pulled everyone back into consciousness.

Someone cried out - no one knew who. A cry of admiration: 'The observation screen! Look at them!'

The large panoramic screen depicted the entire region of space before them. There, pointed to by the ship's nose glistened a globe of brightness, a carpet of radiance in which individual light sources could no longer be distinguished. A cloud of stars, incredibly huge, stars more splendid than man's eyes had ever seen them before.

M-13!

Core of the Great Imperium, hundreds of thousands of tars protecting the heart of the Empire - Arkon.

In comparison, the other areas on the screen seemed empty and deserted. The normal concentrations of stars in the Galaxy faded and looked dark beside the brilliance of the star cluster.

Minutes passed by. All aboard took time out to gaze in astonishment at the wonder on the screens. The crew had almost forgotten why it had come here in the first place.

Then the crackling of the telecom broke the silence. 'Something's wrong sir!'

Perry Rhodan reacted at once, forgetting the marvel depicted on the videoscreens. '*What's wrong?*'

'The hypercom receivers have been picking up continuous broadcasts ever since that last transition. If I may say so, we're getting one heck of a jumble on our equipment!'

‘Have you been able to locate the senders?’

‘No, sir. Concerted direction-finding isn’t possible because the broadcasts overlap so much. We would need a third reference point to try any triangulations in locating the sources.’

‘Continue your observations, then,’ Rhodan told the radio operator. Then he directed a series of short and precise commands to the ship’s piloting crew: ‘Stop the ship! Activate the defence screens full strength! Gun posts, remain fully occupied!’

The *Ganymede* came to a halt.

Almost directly in the ship’s path, 50 light-minutes ahead, shone the star most removed from the star cluster, a planetless red giant.

Silence deepened in the control room. Every eye was fixed on the panoramic screen. Every mind tried to grasp what was going on out there.

Out there the . . . in an alien, unknown region of space.

* * *

‘The photometer registers a weak reflection of light in Phi 182, Theta 21 on the star spectrum, but there’s a slight blue shift. The reflection is coming closer to us!’

Glances flew to the indicated point. If the direction towards the globular cluster could be labelled ‘ahead’, then the point lay in the rear.

Eyes found nothing. Eyes are not photometers.

Rhodan ordered the radio crew to pipe incoming signals over a receiver in the control room. A second later, a hodgepodge of noises filled the air. Everything in the sound spectrum from deep, monotonous humming to a barely audible, high-pitched twittering was represented.

Hyper-space messages, coded and scrambled. No one not knowing either the code or the scrambling pattern could decipher them.

The directional antenna indicated that a part of the broadcasts was coming from the area in which the photometer had spotted the faint reflection.

Something was approaching the star cluster at a considerable speed.

But what?

Khrest, the arkonide, was asked to come to the control room but even he was unable to determine what was moving out in the void.

An hour passed. The light reflection had approached to a distance of 20 light-minutes. Meanwhile it had become clear that the object would pass well away from the *Ganymede*, barring any change of direction.

Rhodan breathed easier.

The object's destination was not the *Ganymede* !

Then - for only a fraction of a second - a light flashed on the upper half of the panoramic screen. Despite its short duration, its brilliance attracted everyone's attention. A hair-thin green shot out from the spot where the light had been and crossed the entire screen. It was lost in the radiance of the stars, then appeared again and finally exploded into a second flash.

Another thread of light flared in the neighbourhood of the second flash and sped in the direction from which the first thread had come. Rhodan and his men waited breathlessly for the second detonation but none came. The streak of light hurtled millions of miles through space, ultimately fading out in the glare of the star cluster.

'Missed!' rumbled Bell, breaking the spell that had taken hold of the men.

There was no more doubt about it: the *Ganymede* had emerged from its fifth transition into the middle of a space battle!

'We're going to stay passive,' Rhodan instructed. 'We don't know who's fighting who out there; in any case, we aren't involved.'

The situation was ghostly: coloured threads of light flitted across the screen while dazzling explosions flared, all in complete silence.

Khrest was at a loss. 'Of course there are a large number of races who are not in agreement with the Arkon Empire,' he admitted. 'Any power will have its opponents. I have never tried to hide the fact that over the past centuries the Arkonides have brought to bear the force necessary to deal with rebellions. But how should I know what is going on out there? I cannot even say for sure whether Arkonide ships are taking part or not.'

The uncertainty dragged on while the desire for information grew. Rhodan sensed his own nervousness increase and knew that his men were not any less affected. 'Reg?' he said.

Reginald Bell raised his head, his eyes shining with a daredevilish spirit. 'Yeah ... should I—?'

Rhodan nodded. 'We can't wait here for days on end. We need information, so take the *Gazelle I* and find out what's going on out there.'

With nimble hands Bell activated the intercom and informed Lt. Tiffloor, under whose command the auxiliary vessel stood, ordering the *Gazelle I* and its crew to be ready for launch in 15 minutes.

'Don't pull any rash stunts while you're out there,' Rhodan warned Bell. 'We don't want ant shooting - we just want to know what's going on.'

Bell shook his head scornfully. 'Don't worry! I'm the most cautious man in the world.'

The last comment brought grins to the faces of the other men in the control room. They knew Bell's fiery

temperament well.

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With its 10 man crew, the *Gazelle I* bore all the marks of a small spaceship. She was equipped with hyper-engines and could make transitions of short distance. Her energy supplies allowed an effective action radius of about 500 light-years.

The small ship's weaponry was enough to fight a war with the entire Earth and win. Yet Bell doubted that the events now taking place at the edge of Globular Cluster M-13 could be measured by Earthly standards.

The *Gazelle I* had left the massive body of the *Ganymede* a few minutes before and with maximum acceleration had reached a speed 80% of light. It bulleted through space in the direction of the weak light reflection which had been observed on the *Ganymede*'s photometer as moving towards the star cluster.

Bell sat at the side of Tifflor, the young lieutenant. Tifflor flew the ship while Bell kept watch over the radar equipment.

At a distance of light-minutes, the radar finder sounded for the first time. As the object drew nearer, it broke up into a cloud of spaceships, moving at terrific speed.

'Distance, 100 light-seconds!' Tifflor reported.

'Let's get closer!' Bell demanded. 'I want to see them on video. Drop our speed!'

'They'll shoot at us sir!' Tifflor objected, glancing at Bell from the side.

'So they will, will they?' growled Bell. 'Does that make you afraid?'

Had he not been restrained by the shoulder strap, Tifflor would have leaped to his feet. 'Sir, I—'

Bell gestured with his free hand. 'Alright, excuse me! I didn't mean it like that. Of course you're not afraid, now slow down!'

Tifflor obeyed.

Faint shadows appeared on the videoscreen – spaceship hulls reflecting the light of the star cluster.

'Good lord!' he murmured. 'Those spaceships are something else!'

Thanks to the intensive hypno-training, Reginald Bell possessed the entire sum of Arkonide knowledge. He knew the ship-types of the Empire as well as any Arkonide - or, since the human mind was more capable than the Arkonide, perhaps even better.

But what he saw here before him was more than he could register in a few seconds. Roughly estimated, the armada was comprised of about 380 vessels. The largest of them was around half the size of the

Ganymede and the smallest only a weakly glowing point, certainly no bigger than the *Gazelle I*.

There were ship-types that had been modern in arkonide galatronics thousands of years before and others that Bell did not recognise at all because they were apparently not of Arkonide construction.

In any event, the *Gazelle I* was facing Arkonides.

After Tiffloor's short braking, the small craft flew at only 7% of light. Some seconds passed before the *Gazelle I* had overflowed the entire width of the fleet. The aliens were operating cautiously: by leaving large gaps between their ships, they made it difficult for enemies to aim accurately.

The *Gazelle I* was not fired upon. Tiffloor breathed easier when the light-points of the 380 ships had shifted to the rear viewscreen.

Bell looked at him and grinned. 'I hope you enjoyed that. We have to go back through them again!'

'Yes, sir!' answered Tiffloor tersely and began to manoeuvre the *Gazelle I*. Inside of five minutes he had the ship going back the way it had come. With even less speed than before, he flew low over the widely spread formation.

One of the crew suddenly yelled from his position in a gun-post. 'They're shooting at us, sir!'

A wide, glaringly lit streak traced itself across the videoscreen. Tiffloor's hand shot to the control panel in an attempt to begin evasive action. But the energy mass zipped harmlessly past, only barely activating the defence screen. A few thousand miles away, the energy struck an alien ship squarely.

The effect was shocking. For a few instants the vessel seemed like a balloon into which someone was glowing strongly. The hull began to glow. Finally the ship blew apart, scattering a rain of radiant white fragments in all directions. Then, the space where the starship had once been was empty.

Bell gasped. 'Get us out of here!'

Tiffloor reacted in a flash. At maximum acceleration and in a tight curve, the *Gazelle I* sped out of its dangerous proximity to the alien fleet.

More masses of sheer energy streaked across the void, painting their trails in glowing streaks on the videoscreens and rushed on to find their victims among the alien ships.

Blazing debris sprayed constantly on all sides, seemingly to the observers aboard the *Gazelle I* to change their colour as the ship raced on at an increasing speed – the Doppler Effect was what astronomers on Earth had called the phenomenon.

'Stop!' Bell ordered.

The *Gazelle I* was two and a half light-minutes from the fleet now under attack. Those ships still remaining altered their speed and direction, hoping to elude the heavy fire. The fleet broke up and scattered in all directions. The flashing energy masses found only emptiness at the end of the trajectories. Then the invisible enemy ceased to fire.

'What was your order, sir?' asked Tiffloor.

‘Wait!’ Answered Bell brusquely. ‘Turn the radio receiver onto the general frequency.’

Tifflor nodded. It was clear what Bell had in mind. Survivors were to be found after every battle, even space battles. If some members of the crew of a destroyed ship had survived a direct hit and floated helplessly in space, then he would turn on the emergency sender on his spacesuit and call for help.

Four minutes later, the *Gazelle I* picked up the first distress signal. Out of the receiver poured the stammering words of an incomprehensible language, mixed in with background radio static. The direction-finder needed only a few minutes to fix the location of the sender with the automatically operating antennae. The *Gazelle I* started off once more.

Slowly and cautiously the ship approached the site of the recent battle. Half of the gun-crews had been instructed to watch for energy-masses. Since most types of rays had velocities no faster than 99% of light, the *Gazelle I*, with its unheard-of turning ability, had a good chance of dodging any offensive burst of energy aimed at it.

Bell stared at the radar screen. The antennae oscillated without interruption, manifesting itself in a constant series of green bands moving across the screen.

There!

A bright spot lit up in a green band, paled at the antenna swung away and lit up again when it came back.

Tifflor changed course. The ship neared the indicated point with the speed of an Earthly automobile. A faint reflection appeared on the videoscreen.

Tifflor, the painstakingly trained officer of the Terranian Space Academy, guided the ship with the swiftness, accuracy and confidence of an experienced captain. He was in his element. Bell had laid down the general guidelines for the operation but now *he* gave the orders. ‘Two men leave the ship and pick up the man out there!’

The two crewmen nearest to the airlock left their places, sealed their spacesuits and disappeared into the small chamber. A minute later they appeared on the videoscreen as shapeless, inflated figures, floating leisurely towards the reflection.

Tifflor maintained radio contact. Both of the soldiers outside transmitted reports at regular intervals.

‘Distance still 200 yards, sir. We can see the man plainly.’

‘Hurry!’ Tifflor ordered. His glance went apprehensively to the screen. The area was dangerous and the distant, unknown ships could spot the *Gazelle I* at any time and open fire again.

‘We’re there, sir.’ announced the voice of one of the two soldiers.

‘Bring the man in!’ Tifflor ordered.

‘Yes, sir, but ...’

‘But what?’

Gasping. Coughing. ‘It’s ... not a ... man ... at all, sir!’

‘Then what is it?’

‘A ... well, something.’

Tifflor grew angry. ‘Is it an intelligent being or not?’

‘Probably, sir. Only ... it looks so odd.’

Tifflor had a few severe words on the tip of his tongue but at length thought better of uttering them. Instead he ordered: ‘Bring *it* in – fast!’

The brightness of the three light-points on the video increased. Contours became discernible: two clumsy plump but nevertheless human figures, and a third, box-shaped form.

Silence reigned in the ship until the sounds of the men entering the airlock could be heard.

Bell watched the control lights over the door to the inner lock and nodded to Tifflor when a row of green lights lit up. ‘Now fly back to the *Ganymede* as fast as you can move!’

Tifflor began to manipulate the controls. As the *Gazelle I* started into motion, the two soldiers came out of the airlock. Carefully they set down on the floor the large bundle which they pantingly carried.

Bell unfastened his safety-belt, stepped around the control panel and examined the alien thing from all sides. He decided that the light grey, leathery casing was probably not part of the creature itself but rather its spacesuit, although he couldn’t discern any seams. Upon a closer look, he found an area about a foot square where a sort of silvery plexiglass plate broke through the leathery hull and allowed a view inside. There, Bell saw a shapeless outline, striped in light and dark grey – that which the two soldiers had refused to call a ‘man’.

Bell tapped on the small transparent plate but there was no response from inside. The creature was either unconscious or dead.

‘Get us out of here – fast!’ said Bell to Tifflor on a low tone.

Tifflor nodded, his face grim.

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Rhodan was notified when the *Gazelle I* was brought aboard the *Ganymede*. Khrest stood by him, watching the manoeuvre intently. Tifflor demonstrated his ability as a space pilot; he performed his tasks quickly but with high regard for safety.

The space battle around the *Ganymede* raged on. The scattering of the alien fleet had apparently been only one single action within the far vaster conflict.

Rhodan turned to Khrest. 'Would you like to take over the examination? I think you would be the best one to handle it.'

Khrest assented and Rhodan added: 'Let me know as soon as you find out anything!'

Khrest went out and waited in the corridor in front of the control room until two of Tifflo's men brought the alien being down by way of the antigrav lift.

'Take him into the laboratory, please,' said Khrest.

While the load was being brought in, Khrest set into operation those instruments he needed for the examination. He deemed it especially important to fill one of the experimental chambers built into the back wall of the laboratory with a methane atmosphere at considerable pressure: Khrest knew the race to which the helpless, dark and light grey-striped being belonged.

He opened the leathery spacesuit near the experimental chamber, towed the limp and shapeless body into the airlock with all possible speed, drew the air out and allowed a fresh stream of methane to wash around the strange-looking body.

A row of instruments installed in the chamber recorded and reported the alien body's functions. From what Khrest read, only that organ which could be compared with the human heart was performing any noticeable activity.

The alien was dying. Its body temperature was too low. The heating system in its spacesuit had apparently broken down.

Knowing exactly what had to be done, Khrest set the instruments to their next task. A deep humming filled the room as the encephalograph machine began to work. Its mission: to register the last fading brain waves from the methane-being and translate them into a positronic programme.

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The trend in which the space battle was developing was unmistakable: the ship formations suddenly drew closer together and the photometers picked up a dozen more reflections.

And in the middle of all the formations lay the *Ganymede*.

They were still condemned to waiting. They could do nothing more than adjust the defence screen up to maximum so that a chance hit from one of the two powerful energy bursts exchanged by the battling fleets would cause no damage.

Khrest came back after an hour. It seemed to Rhodan that he was more earnest than usual. He had in his hand a pair of plastic tapes which had been converted into impulse-carriers and laid them on the control panel in front of Rhodan.

'Well?' asked Rhodan.

‘It was a Motuner,’ answered Khrest.

‘Was?’

‘Yes,’ Khrest nodded. ‘He died from being chilled. It was too late for me to help him.’

Rhodan pondered, searching through the confusion of information imparted to him by hypno-training for what he knew about the Motuners.

They were a non-humanoid race of methane-breathers inhabiting the planets of an extensive solar system at the edge of the globular cluster. At the time of their takeover by the Great Imperium, they were already possessed of a highly developed technology. And never throughout their history were they the most docile members of the Empire. The high level of their own civilization and the natural antipathy of the non-humanoid towards the humanoid had on occasion motivated the Motuners to fight for the freedom of their own part of the Empire.

‘Who are they fighting with?’ Rhodan asked.

‘A great Arkonide fleet,’ Khrest replied. ‘According to my examination of the Motuner, the rebellion had hardly begun when a mighty Arkonide fleet appeared over the main planet and blasted its surface into an ocean of molten lava. Then the units of the Motuner fleet stationed on the remaining planet set forth into battle. That is what we are seeing on the videoscreen. There is no doubt, however, that this rebellion will end with the final destruction of the Motuners.’

Rhodan looked surprised. ‘Arkon is becoming vigorous then?’

Khrest sank into one of the free seats, his movement one of dejection and resignation. ‘You cannot understand it as well as I can,’ he said softly. ‘True, you have all of Arkon’s knowledge but you don’t have the emotional impressions I took with me the day Thora and I took off from Arkon in our research cruiser. If the Motuners had been in revolt then, no Arkonide would have bothered himself about it. Motun is situated 46 light-years from Arkon. the Arkonides knew that the Motuners could do as they pleased because the automatic security measures protected the heart of the Empire. The rebels would not be able to attack the important colonial worlds – to say nothing of Arkon itself! The Arkonides would have merely continued to lay under the factors—’

‘The factors?’

‘The fictive-projectors ... waiting for the Motuners’ fervour to fade away of its own accord.’

‘But now ... this here ... this colossal activity ... ?’

Rhodan let a little time pass before answering. ‘Thirteen years have gone by since you started out, Khrest,’ he then commented. ‘Don’t you believe that ...’

‘Thirteen years!’ Khrest protested. ‘Do you think 13 years are enough for the nature of an ancient people to change so drastically?’

Rhodan thought about it. ‘Certainly this isn’t the result of any natural developments,’ he admitted. ‘Perhaps there’s been an invasion - perhaps even Arkon itself has been attacked - and the situation left the arkonides no other choice than to awaken from their lethargy?’

With a sad smile Khrest gestured negatively. He had a reply on his lips - a reply that a people doomed to destruction does not turn from its downward path and would sooner accept ruin than defend itself. But before he could say even the first word, all hell broke loose.

Alarm whistles shrilled their ugly, bone-rattling tones, filling the ship for some seconds with a painful racket. When the whistles died away, a voice yelled from the intercom:

‘There’s a large unit of ships in direct flight towards the *Ganymede* ! Distance, three light-seconds; speed, 0.05 light! Contact in 60 seconds!’

2/ DETOUR TO NAAT

Rhodan’s first glance took in the dial reading for the defence screen energy level: the light point quivered on the red spot. Greater power could not be fed to the screen now.

The *Ganymede* was protected against every conceivable stress it might have to bear in battle but the fleet approaching from space consisted of more than 3800 ships. Even the strongest defence field could not stand up to the fire from that many ships.

Khrest had stood up and retreated to the background in the control room; he knew that others had to take over in such situations.

In the passing of a second, the control-room crew became the oath-bound combat brotherhood it was always was in times of the highest danger. Each of the officers stood or sat at his place, waiting for Rhodan’s orders with an excitement he could repress only with difficulty

Even in the haste, Rhodan had not lost his sense of consistency. The radar took 10 seconds to perceive the form of the onrushing ships and conclude that they were of Arkonide origin. Rhodan needed 10 more seconds to send the code signal that, according to Khrest and Thora, would convince the Arkonide ship crew that they had a fellow Arkonide in front of them. And he required just two further seconds to realize that the Arkonide ships had not registered the broadcast and even less considered changing their dangerous course.

The fleet opened fire on the *Ganymede* 20 seconds after the first alert. Hundreds of tightly bunched rays shot through space. Some missed their target altogether and others scored, causing the defence screen to glow.

‘Gunpost i, ready to fire!’ Rhodan ordered.

Gunpost 1 was the teletransmitter, the most effective weapon aboard the ship.

Confirmation from Gunpost 1 came in less than a second.

‘Shoot in direction Phi Null at medium energy,’ Rhodan directed. ‘Fire!’

With his right hand he pushed the throttle to its ‘Full Speed’ position. The *Ganymede* moved out, racing

at maximum acceleration towards the giant fleet. With the help of the mysterious energy lines. The transmitter, it slashed its way through the alien lines. The transmitter seized its target, catapulted it through hyperspace and made it appear again at a point whose distance and direction could be chosen by appropriate regulation of the quality and polarity of the energy supplied to the device.

A broad lane opened up before the *Ganymede* while the defence screen continued to glow under concentrated fire of the Arkonide ships. But the Arkonides quickly recognised the danger that was storming towards them. The fleet broke up as the ships scattered in all directions to make aiming more difficult for the enemy. the direct hits lighting up the *Ganymede*'s defence screen became less frequent.

The Terran ship shot through the breach at maximum acceleration and hardly two minutes after the first alarm warning found itself in safety on the other side of the enemy lines. The sudden change in the *Ganymede*'s position undoubtedly threw the Arkonide guncrews into disorder all down the line, since they had to turn their weapons so sharply.

The Arkonide fleet reformed and turned its flight in the original direction. A few seconds later the first ray blasts could be seen, detonating blazing explosions in the deepness of space. The Arkonides received return fire but from a comparison of shots fired by their side it was easy to tell that the Motuners were hopelessly inferior.

The 3800 battleships - minus the one displaced by the teletransmitter into another region of space - went for the rest of the Motuner fleet in one furious burst. The Arkonides left behind them a blazing welter of glowing ship-wrecks, which merged on the videoscreen into a luminous yellowish-red cloud.

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After half an hour, Rhodan decided to resume the journey. Considering the uproar current in the outer reaches of the star cluster, it seemed to him a good idea not to expose the *Ganymede* to any more danger. Rather, the ship would cross the remaining 45 light-years in one last jump through hyperspace. Because of the high concentration of matter in the centre of M-13, the preliminary calculations of data for the jump required an increased amount of information and a correspondingly increased amount of time.

Meanwhile the ship remained on maximum alert. It was hard to say with any certainty that the Arkonides, once they had so rigorously cleared the Motuners out of space, would not remember the first enemy and come looking for him.

Thora burst in on the preparations for the transition, interrupting Rhodan's thoughts even though they were concerned with other matters. Something seemed to have exited her beyond all bounds. As she swiftly strode the length of the control room, her long white hair fairly flew behind her. Rhodan smiled at her as she came up.

'Those were Arkonide ships, weren't they?' Thora demanded.

Oh yes, thought Rhodan. *She's been watching everything on her own videoscreen and now she's come in here to tell me how I could have handled everything so much better.* 'Yes,' he admitted.

'Then why didn't you identify yourself?'

‘I did! With the code message, as a matter of fact.’

Thora was bewildered. The fire in her reddish eyes burned a little softer. ‘And they didn’t...’

‘Answer? No, they didn’t. On the contrary: they started shooting!’

Thora let her arms sink limply. Anger and fervour had flown, leaving only helplessness behind.

Khrest stood up in the corner where he had been sitting for the last half hour, wordlessly and motionlessly watching the astounding and shocking events out in space. He walked over to Thora, who turned to him, in her eyes the great unanswered question.

Khrest stood at her side and nodded gravely. ‘It isn’t any easier for us than for you,’ he said in Arkonidean. ‘We don’t have any idea what happened.’

‘But...’ said Thora.

‘Some really fundamental change must have taken place on Arkon and in the Empire during your absence,’ Rhodan put in. ‘Since this change, Arkonide ship commanders have apparently been ordered to look upon anything that gets in their way as an enemy. Not even the old code signals are good anymore.’

‘And...what do you plan to do now?’ asked Khrest.

Thora’s terrified face answered before anyone else; *Turn around, fly back home!*

Rhodan laughed gently. ‘Now, don’t be afraid. We wanted to go to Arkon and we still want to go there. We’re going to make a sixth transition into the centre of the cluster.’

‘But there’s something I want to tell you: the way things look now; it’s considerably more probable that we’ll be annihilated by your friends out there than that we’ll reach Arkon without a fight.’

* * *

‘King Salomo penetrated the mysterious land of Ophir step by step while day after day of travel went past, all the time drawing closer to the gorgeous gold-filled palace of the King of Saba!’

Rhodan looked smilingly to the side and watched his friend and co-pilot murmur the verses to Salomo and the King of Saba to himself for the third time. ‘Rather romantic, isn’t it?’ Rhodan teased.

Bell did not look up from the videoscreen. ‘This makes me think of being in a movie theatre. Take a look at that—’ He made a wide-ranging gesture indicating the entire surface of the panoramic screen - ‘and just listen *to this!*’ He pointed to the telecom receiver built into the panel before him. The instrument was tuned to the general frequency and was picking up every broadcast emitted by any sender in this section of space.

The view offered by the video was indeed fabulous. The stars were so close together that in places they blended into solid walls of light. In other areas they formed a tightly woven network of incredible brilliance.

It was a sky such as a Terran had never before beheld.

That coming out of the hypercom receiver was a jumble of at least a hundred thousand simultaneous conversations. When one considered that the normal range for the usual hypercom was only about 15 light-years, then he had to assume that the majority of these conversations were taking place within a radius of 15 light-years around the *Ganymede*. When one further assumed that of all the ships underway at the moment only a tenth at most were transmitting, then he was faced with the conclusion that within a theoretical sphere 38 light-years in diameter, with the *Ganymede* as a centre point, there was at least one million ships.

An impressive number.

Reginald Bell began to understand what Rhodan meant when he said that even with all its decadence and decay the Arkonide Imperium would still be far more immense and magnificent than any Earthly mind could imagine.

But with the irritation with which Bell usually reacted to strong impressions, he pushed aside feelings of his own smallness and worthlessness and advanced the audacious opinion about King Salomo that—

‘But as he had drawn near enough, he saw that the gold was in reality only brass; his courage returned and with only the troops in his advance guard, he defeated the Queen of Saba’s mighty host.’

Then he turned to Rhodan, saying with a sardonic grin: ‘So much for the Mythology Hour - what do we do now?’

Rhodan indicated the screen. ‘We’re waiting for the evaluations. According to our calculations, we came out of the transition 38 light-hours from Arkon’s sun. What we see from here concurs with the information on Khrest’s old charts. Since so much has changed in the meantime, however, I don’t want to run any risks. So the charts are being checked out one more time. It’s quite possible that the Arkonides have built a new spacefort and we’ll run right into it if we aren’t careful.’

Bell frowned. ‘And there’s the so-called "Outer-Defence Ring" too, right?’

‘Yes, but not in this area. The outermost ring is beyond the orbit of the planet farthest from Arkon in the Arkonide system, between 15 and 20 light-hours from the central sun.’

Bell read a row of instruments. ‘We’re making 0.2 light,’ he determined. ‘We’re within communication range of the outer ring. Should we call them?’

Rhodan nodded. ‘Of course. We’ll transmit everything we can to convince them that we’re coming with peaceful intentions.’

‘Aha. I hope it helps somewhat!’

* * *

Checking over the charts had resulted in no new discoveries. The Arkonides had added no new units to their series of space stations. A part of the 5000 platforms armed with the heaviest gunnery could be made out. The *Ganymede* now approached the Ring at 60% of light.

The antennae broadcasted the ship's code signal unceasingly along with other radio messages.

The platforms should have answered - at least, Khrest had maintained, under normal circumstances. But they did not. They moved silently along their orbits and no one could say what they would do if, without clearance from the automatic senders, the *Ganymede* attempted to crash through the Ring anyway and speed on towards the heart of the Great Imperium. One of the giant battle-platforms grew slowly on the videoscreen. In the strange perspective of space, which permitted no judgement of distance without instruments, it seemed to grow in seconds from a tiny shining point into an enormous monster next to which the *Ganymede* was only a mere lifeboat.

For a fraction of a second the eyes caught the threatening openings of the ray turrets.

Then the fire-storm broke out of all cannons. A glistening wall of vast, concentrated energy shot out at the *Ganymede*. The defence screen generators howled under the impact of terrific force: the ship was knocked to and fro like an old wooden skiff on a stormy sea.

Naked fear gripped the hearts of all men aboard.

The last energy remaining to the driving engines snatched the ship forward. A vigorous burst of acceleration put the incessant ray-blasts from the gun turrets behind the *Ganymede* for some seconds, wasting their energy on empty space. Then the automatic aiming devices sensed their error and set the ray-cannons in a new direction. By then, the Terran ship was already more than 120,000 miles away and the defence screen, which had barely stood up under the first barrage, now absorbed the shots racing in from the rear with no hardship.

The ship's pitching stopped. The *Ganymede* rushed on into the alien solar system with a glowing defence field, leaving the destructive ring of battle-platforms behind.

Rhodan's hoarse, hard voice startled the crewmen from their terror. 'For the time being, we'll be on maximum alert readiness! Further attacks are to be expected. Attack reports are to be relayed to the control room immediately!'

But there were no attacks.

Khrest cowered in his seat at the sidewall of the control room. Fear-stricken, he was as pale as an albino. Rhodan turned to him, forcing a little smile in the hope of calming the Arkonide. Khrest did not reply but terror was written on his face.

Yet, the space before the *Ganymede* appeared free. The mighty Imperium had given the alien intruders a short break in which to catch their breath.

Rhodan stood up and, walking past his officers' working areas, gave each man an encouraging and calming word. He stood in front of Khrest, waiting until the Arkonide eventually noticed his presence in his fear, and said: 'I'm placing the entire communications system at the disposal of you and Thora. You

know how to use the equipment. Try to speak with Arkon! Make your people understand that we aren't coming as enemies! And do it successfully or all of us are lost!

Khrest nodded in confusion, stood up and left the room. Rhodan watched him go, then called Thora and asked her to help Khrest.

Even so, it looked like she could use a great deal of help herself.

* * *

After the last shots from the outermost fortress ring had been left far in the rear, Rhodan dropped the *Ganymede's* speed. It was senseless to tear through the solar system at 90% of light. Caution was necessary, even if such caution would require more time and thus increase the chances of the *Ganymede* being attacked again before reaching Arkon's orbit.

Thora and Khrest had been trying for some minutes to contact their home world over the hypercom. Up to now there had been no success. Arkon did not reply.

Suspicion grew in Rhodan's mind. Arkon did not reply! Had the world of the Arkonides fallen victim to some catastrophe? Had a war wiped out Arkonkind?

Nonsense, thought Rhodan, quashing his own fear. What about that fleet that was so fearsomely clearing the Motuners out of another sector of space? Where could it have come from?

Or perhaps not nonsense after all: could not robot-guided ships have escaped the general collapse and, with the obstinacy of unreasoning machines, continue to carry out their missions even though those who had assigned them the missions were no longer alive?

Had the *Ganymede* come too late?

Rhodan sought confirmation. With the help of the small programme calculator standing by his desk, he encoded the question: 'Have there been any robot-guided vessels among the Arkonide ships we have had contact with in the last 10 hours?'

The question was transmitted to the central computer; Rhodan asked that the answer be relayed back to him as quickly as possible.

He assumed that Positronicon would not come to a definite answer before 15 minutes had gone by.

In those 15 minutes—

The crackling of the intercom circuit startled Rhodan. The navigation officer's shout burst throughout the room: 'Transition in the immediate vicinity! Battleship of the *Stardust* class - visible with the naked eye!'

A threatening black shadow had slid over a pan of the luminous carpet of stars - at first a small hole in space, then a ball and finally an enormous, perfectly round disc blocking the view completely from the *Ganymede* in its direction.

Rhodan tensed his muscles as though he had to bear the brunt of the first shot himself. And then it came - the greenish energy mass from a disintegrator. It struck the *Ganymede*'s defence screen directly above the guidance fins, lighting up the field with a harsh brilliance.

Rhodan turned the *Ganymede* with a lightning-swift manoeuvre, bringing her to one side and leaving the next disintegrator salvo behind. But the giant ship was not to be shaken by the dodge: almost effortlessly it followed every move the *Ganymede* made, reducing the distance between it and the Terran ship to about 12 miles. The Arkonides continued their unceasing bombardment of the *Ganymede* with all possible types of weaponry.

The screaming inferno of the defence screen generators began anew. New shocks jolted the *Ganymede* - the antigrav neutralizers could no longer absorb the alien blasts. Men were knocked out of their seats, thrown through the air, slammed against walls.

Rhodan flew one manoeuvre after the other. Occasionally the strain bore so heavily on his arm that he would accidentally move a knob he did not intend and the *Ganymede* would shoot off in some new, unplanned direction.

About a quarter of the barrage missed the ship in this fashion but the defence screen would stand up under even three-quarters of the space-giant's full fire-power for only another few minutes.

Rhodan came to a decision. "All gunposts ready to fire! Gunpost 1, exercise care in range-finding!"

The crewmen breathed easier.

Finally! Something was finally happening!

Finally they could show the Arkonide colossus out there just who it was dealing with.

What was it? A giant ship?

Ho Ho - for giant ships we have very special giant weapons! Take this teletransmitter for instance, which could catapult an entire planet if need be ...

What's this? Order rescinded? Hold your fire?

Why?

Because when things had looked bleakest, Thora's desperate voice had come on over the intercom. It had been faint amid the commotion raging throughout the ship but her words had nevertheless been understandable: 'Don't shoot, for Life's sake! Countermand that order! We've contacted Arkon!'

A last jolt struck the *Ganymede*, setting her spinning within her flaming defence field. The stars on the videoscreen became long streaks.

Rhodan braked the movement with a brief counter-thrust, brought the picture on the screens back in order and surveyed the situation.

Where was the battleship?

Gone! Disappeared! The starry mass of the globular cluster gleamed in all its extravagant glory but the colossus was no longer there. Once again, the *Ganymede* had a free view in all directions.

‘I knew it!’ muttered Reginald Bell. ‘It was all only a dream!’

The crew laughed. A trifle hysterically, to be sure, but their tension was being relieved.

A new waiting period began for the *Ganymede*. Because the evasive manoeuvring had brought the ship close to the outer fortress ring again, Rhodan undertook a small course correction.

On the videoscreen, Arkon’s sun blazed in blinding beauty. Black filters had to be pulled down over the screen so the view could be tolerated.

The *Ganymede* was still nine hours away from Arkon’s orbit. The orbit of the outermost planet lay behind her.

But even so close to the goal, no one could answer the question - what had happened on Arkon? What influence had made the decadent, lethargic Arkonides so bloodthirsty that they shot at strange guests without warning?

Thora and Khrest had spoken directly with Arkon, recording the exchange on a tape which they brought with them into the control room to play for Perry Rhodan.

Rhodan watched them as they busied themselves with the tape player. Khrest seemed as fearful and confused as he had half an hour before when he left the chamber. And Thora’s hands trembled. She started the machine with a sudden jerk that nearly broke the switch.

Rhodan was surprised.

A deep silence ruled in the control room when the recorded voices poured out of the loudspeaker. All of the officers understood the Arkonide language as well as their own, thanks to hypno-training.

Khrest: ‘This is Khrest of the Zoltral family speaking, member of the Aetron Expedition which left Arkon eleven (Arkonide) years ago. With Thora of the same family and second surviving member of the expedition, I found myself aboard the ship of an alien power which wishes to return us to Arkon. We request permission to land.’

That was cautiously phrased, Rhodan thought. If Khrest had been convinced that conditions on Arkon were the same when he left, he would have demanded permission to land instead of requesting it. The Zoltral family was the ruling dynasty.

Khrest’s appeal was repeated several times. After the second repetition, the uproar caused by the evasive manoeuvre to escape the Arkonide battleship could be heard on the tape. It was possible to hear the shrieking generators and, now and then, Rhodan’s commanding voice over the intercom, whose circuit was required to be continuously open during a state of alarm.

Khrest had to repeat five times before he received the first sign of a reply. By then his voice indicated that he had given up almost all hope.

A strange indifferent voice said: ‘Arkon to Khrest of the Family of Zoltral. You are now no longer included in the search-lists. Wait for an escort ship!’

At that moment Thora had entered in. Judging from her voice, her energy reserves were much greater than Khrest's. 'An escort ship!' she hissed wildly. 'What you've sent out to us is a battleship! If you don't recall it immediately, the commander of our ship will have to destroy it!'

Rhodan looked up in astonishment. His glance sought Thora but she was looking down at the floor.

The indifferent voice emerged once more from the loudspeaker: 'That is impossible. No one can destroy an Arkonide battleship!'

'You'll soon find out somebody can, you fool!'

At that moment, Rhodan's command to the gunposts was audible in the background.

'However,' continued the strange voice, 'we will call back the battleship. Do not do anything before our escort ship has arrived. End of message.'

Rhodan knew the rest himself. Thora had asked him to rescind the order to fire and then the battleship had vanished.

Rhodan looked at the two Arkonides. 'This isn't what you had expected?' he asked in Arkonese.

Khrest did not move but Thora's head snapped upright. 'You know that as well as we do!' she hissed angrily.

Rhodan nodded. 'Yes ... but perhaps the lack of respect towards your family name is a good sign - for the entire Arkonide race, I mean. You shouldn't draw any all-to-dark conclusions from just the fact that they refused to use the titles "Noble" or "Excellency".'

Thora did not agree. 'You're only saying that to comfort us,' she claimed. 'But you know as well as I do that a whole world would have to fall before an Arkonide of subordinate rank would refuse to address a member of the ruling dynasty with the appropriate title!'

Rhodan looked at her thoughtfully. 'Perhaps an entire world *has* fallen,' he said gently.

A discussion probably would have ensued from that had not the navigation officer, who still knew nothing of the communication with Arkon, reported in a cracked voice another transition in the immediate vicinity.

Bell was the one to tell him his excitement was for naught. 'Calm down,' he instructed the officer. 'We've been expecting this one.'

Rhodan called the crews away from the gunposts. Only Gunpost 1, the teletransmitter, remained manned. Rhodan didn't want to run the risk that in this important moment - the most important, perhaps, in the history of mankind - one of the men would lose his nerve. On the other hand, he *had* to keep at least one weapon manned,

The huge ball approached swiftly. Rhodan watched the operation. The Arkonide pilot was a master of his craft. He approached almost yard by yard until a gulf of only 2400 feet stretched between the equatorial rim of his ship and the *Ganymede's* outer hull. The defence screens touched and the point of contact lit up brightly.

Reginald Bell could no longer restrain his impatience 'I've never seen such cheek!' he growled angrily. 'Why is he trying to crowd us so close?'

Rhodan shrugged, smiling. 'Ask him!'

Bell did not wait for Rhodan to say it twice. His temper having gotten the best of him, he threw the telecom switch, turned the antenna in the direction of the Arkonide spacesphere and gave the Arkonide transmission code.

The videoscreen lit up and humming bands began to form into a picture. Bell started to speak in Arkonidean even before he saw to whom he was speaking, '*Sporogaar Gahmet quiet okan Arkon-gar!* Space-cruiser *Ganymede* to unidentified Arkon-ship! What kind of crazy ... oh!'

The image on the screen had become dear. Shocked, Bell took a step backwards and stared at it. Out of squinting eyes he saw a creature that, judging from the instruments shown around him, must have been at least nine feet tall. The being stood back far enough from the camera that his entire body could be seen on the screen.

It belonged without a doubt to a humanoid race. It had two legs, thick as Egyptian temple columns, and two long arms, which dangled in an oddly loose manner. The head - now, it was a head even if it was a geometrically exact, hairless sphere. Three eye-openings and a broad but comically thin-lipped mouth had been chiselled in the head's front surface. There was no nose.

While Bell was still gripped by his fright, Thora suddenly moaned. 'My God! Naats! They're letting Naats on board Arkonide ships!'

Rhodan quickly remembered the suspicion he had held an hour before. Had it been the Naats, the colonial people from the system's fifth planet, who had struck the Imperium's death-blow? Had the Naats taken over the rule - these ape-like creatures who moved about on all fours when they did not have a ship's metal planking directly beneath their feet? Of course the Naats were more intelligent than one would suspect from their appearance. Had the Naats been instructed to ignore broadcast code messages?

Reginald Bell had recovered from his shock. '*Shatanaro*,' he started again; 'I'd like to know what your crazy manoeuvre's supposed to do! You're endangering both *plugar* - both ships!'

The giant Naat had watched the scene on his videoscreen rather stupidly. He answered Bell's question, however, as casually as though he conversed with Terrans several times a day. 'There's no other way I can tow you.'

'Tow?' fumed Bell. 'We can move by ourselves! We don't need your towing service!'

'Then do you know where you're supposed to land?' asked the Naat.

'*Wewant* to land on Arkon and that's just what we're going to do!'

Rhodan gestured to Bell, who stepped back, still quivering with rage, and let his commander have his place. 'Rhodan, *kadar ao Gahmet*. Commander of the *Ganymede* ,' Rhodan announced. 'Who are you and what are your instructions?'

The Naat seemed a trace more interested when he saw Rhodan's tall figure in contrast to Bell's and heard his terse, calm questions. 'I am Novaal,' he answered readily, 'leader of this Imperium battleship. I have the assignment of bringing your ship safely to Naat and landing it at the Naatral spaceport.'

Rhodan remembered his training. Naat was a world the size of Jupiter with a climate like that of Mars. The gravity was murderous. The planet was a desert world, one which caused the Arkonides amazement that it was able to bear life at all and intelligent life at that.

'I have two Arkonide passengers aboard,' Rhodan interjected, positioning himself so that Khrest and Thora came in camera-range. 'I believe that you will have difficulties, Novaal, if you don't provide the means for sending the two of them on to Arkon by the quickest way. I assume you are acquainted with the name Zoltral.'

Novall made a slight movement that could have been a hint of a bow. As a matter of fact, there was a gesture of respect and courtesy in Arkonide etiquette that did resemble the Earthly bow to a strong degree.

But the Naat's voice still sounded indifferent, even careless, when he said: '*Tzaro*- I'm sorry but I can't fulfil your request. I've been instructed to bring you to Naat. The appropriate authorities on Arkon are informed of the presence of two Arkonides on board your ship.'

'And how are you taking us to Naat?'

'Tractor-beam,' answered Novaal simply.

Rhodan considered for only a quarter of a second. Then he nodded in agreement. '*Ep*. At the moment. I don't have any objections. Certainly what you have to do is important. But I'm warning you - if it becomes clear that you have something shady up your sleeve, then I'll make you along with your ship disappear!'

It could not be seen if the threat made any impression on the Naat. He agreed - '*Epon!*' - and broke off the conversation.

Thora did not even allow Perry time to turn around. 'Why didn't you demand that we be brought to Arkon at once? Why did you agree to his conditions so readily? 'Why didn't you threaten him? Why ...'

'Why should I have?' Rhodan interrupted brusquely. 'Should I risk all our lives needlessly?'

'Needlessly? I want to go to Arkon, not Naat!'

'So do the rest of us. But apparently our presence is not desired on Arkon at this time.'

'What do I care about that?' Thora raged on. 'I am a Khasurn and *noklavaka djenvorbix* * Naat is going to tell me what to do!'

But Rhodan's look was so compelling that the fervour in her eyes sagged in midsentence and she stared at the tall man fearfully.

'Why don't you want to understand,' he asked, at once gentle, pointed and soothing, 'that 13 Terran years have gone by since you last saw Arkon? Why don't you want to understand that a great deal can happen in 13 years and that in the case of Arkon, a great deal apparently *has* happened. I don't want to

wound your pride but isn't it possible that the Zoltral family is no longer as highly regarded as it was at the time you left Arkon?'

Thora dropped her eyes. She stood motionless for awhile; the Rhodan nodded encouragingly to Khrest and the white-haired Arkonide led the woman to a seat.

Rhodan returned to his own seat and in clipped words informed the crew of what had occurred. He maintained Gunpost 1 as the single occupied post and enjoined the men to maximum vigilance.

By the time Novaal seemed to have applied his tractor-beam in the right position and with the right effect. The instruments indicated a moderate speed of travel although the output of the *Ganymede's* generators had not changed.

Rhodan watched the operation attentively. After some minutes, however, he was certain that the giant Novaal was a careful man and that if the Naat continued in such a cautious manner, nothing would happen to the *Ganymede* while it was caught in the tractor-beam.

Rhodan seemed to be the only person aboard, though who was content with the way things were going. The displeasure of the control room officers with their commander's appeasement tactics could be read on their faces. The only one who could risk voicing an opinion was Reginald Bell. Sighing, he said: 'Who would have thought it? We dreamed of a triumphal parade but in reality we're being towed like an old jalopy!'

3/ TRAPPED ON NAAT

Novaal took several hours to accelerate the linked ships to a velocity calculated to make them arrive at Naat in 10 more hours.

Thora had left the Command Centre and retreated to her cabin. Khrest, who had been at her side and calmed her down, returned as soon as he convinced himself that it was safe to leave her alone.

Ever since Rhodan had conducted the conversation with Novaal, the Arkonide scientist seemed to have snapped out of his dejected mood and his spirit was buoyed up again. Apparently the multitude of secrets surrounding Arkon had exceeded his capacity for feelings of distress and had begun to stimulate his scientific interest. 'You know,' Khrest said to Rhodan, who sat at his control panel carefully checking his instruments, 'there's one thing in particular that has struck me as rather strange.'

He spoke English. Rhodan took a reading and quickly jotted it down on a scrap of paper. Then he turned to Khrest. 'What's that, please?'

'Novaal used the word "reekha" to describe his rank, or "leader" in your language. There was no such rank in my time. The actual commanding officer in charge of a battleship was called "hasathor", meaning admiral, or more commonly "vercayhor", the Commander. A Leader is a person who could be the chief of a ground station ... but aboard a spaceship?' Khrest shook his head.

'Can you draw any conclusions from it?' Rhodan asked.

Khrest spread out his hands. 'I can make a guess. Novaal, the so-called leader, is perhaps subordinated to a higher ranking officer aboard the battleship, someone who has as yet not put in an appearance.'

Rhodan looked sceptical and inquired: 'I don't know if this is really the proper explanation for it. Wouldn't it make more sense to conclude that the power of the government has been usurped by a new ruler who has decreed new names for the old designations?'

Khrest was stunned. 'For heaven's sake! A revolt? Aren't you going too far?'

He was interrupted by the telecom. A monotonous voice said: 'Positronic Sector to Commander. The answer to your question is affirmative, sir. Probability 89.5%.'

Rhodan wrinkled his brow. 'The answer to my ...' he murmured dubiously. 'Oh yes! The question whether the Arkonide battleship formations consisted units under the control of robots! I almost forgot. Than you!'

He paused and looked at Khrest. 'What do you think of it?' he demanded. 'The positronic brain is convinced that the Arkonide vessels which blasted the fleet of the Motuners to smithereens were robots.'

Khrest had already perked up his ears when he heard the word 'positronic'. 'Robots?' he exclaimed in astonishment. 'Of course there are many robot ships. They are not very difficult to build. But the battle against the Motuners was found 46 light-years away from Arkon. To steer ships by remote control from such a distance they'd have to be equipped with much better guidance mechanism than I know.' He shook his head. 'No, I'm afraid the positronic brain is in error.'

Rhodan shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, it computed the probability for a different solution 10 10.5%,' Rhodan replied with an enigmatic smile and got up. 'Let's make a test,' he said loud enough for everybody in the room to hear. 'It concerns the Imperium battleship which has us in tow and its commander.'

His listeners looked astonished.

'What's the output of the tractor-beam?' Rhodan inquired.

Bell glanced at the dial of the gauge before him. '20 million megawatts.'

Rhodan returned to his seat. 'We're going to accelerate in the reverse direction for one-thousandth of a second,' he announced. 'What we want to know is how the Imperium ship reacts to it. I require a graphic record with chronological notations. Keep in mind that we've got no intention of getting away from the fellow.'

He sat down and fastened his shoulder belts. 'X minus five minutes,' he said tersely.

Nobody knew what it was all about and all nerves were on edge in the Command Centre.

An acceleration period of one-thousandth of a second's duration was something which could no be manually regulated by Rhodan. He programmed the least possible accelerating interval and fed it into the automatic pilot, setting it for the desired time.

A breathless silence reigned in the Command Centre All eyes were fastened on Rhodan's stern, calm

face.

The experiment itself was anything but a great revelation. Nothing happened except that the control lamps of the engines flashed so quickly that the eye barely registered it. The acceleration thrust was absorbed by the neutralizers and nothing was changed of the distance between the *Ganymede* and the tractor ship.

Rhodan released his safety belts. 'Bring me the transcript of the measuring instruments,' he demanded with barely concealed excitement.

The instrument whirred and emitted plastic strips with coloured graphs made by the scribes. Rhodan collected them on his console and sorted them out. 'Distance between the ships?' he asked in the middle of it.

'4380 feet between centres of gravity.'

Rhodan marked several of the plastic strips and put the others aside as Khrest and Bell stood behind him looking over his shoulder.

'Here,' Rhodan pointed out, 'is the acceleration impulse we've emitted. The time scale has been expanded so that 10 inches correspond to one-thousandth of a second. Now let's take a look at what the tractor did. Up to here it operated at 20 million megawatts. At this point, 9 micro-seconds after the start of our impulse, that is 9-millionths of a second, the tractor output abruptly jumps to 50 million megawatts. Do you see? These are the first 20 million plus 38 million to compensate for our 38 million megawatts. There the tractor output reverts again to its former value - again 9 microseconds after the end of our impulse. Does that make it clear?'

Reginald Bell was little impressed whereas Khrest grasped the meaning of the experiment instantaneously. Bell muttered wryly, 'It's clear, alright. But what are you trying to say?'

Rhodan looked at him gravely and tapped on the measuring strips. 'Nine microseconds is exactly the time a light mean travels from the *Ganymede* to the tractor ship and back again. It means that the manoeuvre could not be reduced. Therefore the conclusion is inevitable that at least the technical conduct of the Arkonide ship is in the hands of a robot.'

Bell gulped and stared at Rhodan with wide eyes. 'That ... that monster,' he gasped, 'is a ...'

'Not Novaal,' Rhodan corrected him. 'But it goes to show that whoever has the sayso on board the tractor ship must be a robot.'

He left Bell standing with his mouth agape and turned smilingly to Khrest. 'Perhaps you'll now judge the opinion of the positronic brain with a little less scepticism. It's beginning to look as if somebody on Arkon has had enough of his decadent, indolent countrymen and manned the battleships with robots and soldiers from the colonies in their stead.'

* * *

Novaal himself didn't seem to have noticed the incident. At any rate he said nothing about it. This was one more clue for Rhodan that his assumption was correct.

During the next 10 hours the pair of ships moved close enough to Naat, the fifth world of the system, that the planet increased from a point of light on the observation screen of the *Ganymede* to a shining disk, then turned from a disk into a yellow-stained globe into which both ships were about to plunge.

Rhodan's feelings had been stirred by a certain excitement which he tried to conceal from the others for fear of appearing too childish or hopelessly romantic. He was thrilled by the thought of setting foot for the first time on a world belonging to the Arkonide stellar system proper.

Here he was on the threshold of the Great Empire, the heart of the mightiest realm in the history of the Galaxy as far as the memory of intelligent beings reached back in the past.

Although he was only approaching the fifth planet, Naat, a dusty world inhabited by ape-like people with an extra eye, he now was no more than a few astronomic units away from the innermost heart-chamber of Arkon.

Rhodan was in a state of great expectations as if he were about to enter the outer court of an imposing palace shrouded in mysteries and he couldn't help thinking that it was a sentimental, child-like attitude. For these very reasons he preferred to keep his feelings to himself.

He saw that his men betrayed different emotions. With furrowed brows and unconcealed aversion they studied the picture of a dusty desert stretched at their feet where a storm of considerable magnitude raised dense yellow-red clouds of swirling dust.

There was scarcely a building in sight. The tractor ship first had to perform a navigational manoeuvre before the first signs of civilized habitations appeared on the observation screens of the *Ganymede*.

A city rose into view, yellow and grey as the rest of the planet. Hemispheric houses, some with towers protruding from the top, stood in rows after rows forming drab streets, straight as an arrow, between them - a sign of a civilization which had grown too rapidly.

A huge landing field surrounded by the usual buildings for space traffic control was spread outside the city.

At the opposite end they discerned a corner of green land. Undamaged by the dust and the storm, the fresh colours of a park brightened the optical screens. Rhodan guessed that it was the place where the Arkonides lived who had come to Naat to maintain the authority of the Great Empire.

Novaal - or rather the robot who was in charge of the vessel - steered the *Ganymede* to a safe landing. The sensitive instruments of the ship didn't register the slightest irregularity as the tremendous torpedo was finally firmly placed on its support columns under the rear fins and stood vertically on the field.

The neutralizers counteracted without any difficulty whatsoever the terrific gravity of the planet and Earthlike conditions prevailed throughout the *Ganymede*.

Rhodan took his eyes off the observation screen. 'Here we are!' he said with resignation.

* * *

Hours passed and nothing happened. At first Rhodan continuously watched the panoramic screen, waiting for somebody to show some interest in the alien ship. The telecom and hypercom receivers were constantly tuned in for the expected message.

However nobody came and the telecom remained silent except for a few distant communications which didn't concern the *Ganymede*.

Rhodan finally assigned regular monitors to the observation screens and audio receivers and went to sleep after instructing his aides to wake him up as soon as any new development occurred.

He slept undisturbed if not very well. Six hours later he got up again and found everything exactly the way he had left it - the picture screen empty and the receiver dead. Somebody had put the *Ganymede* on a virtually empty spaceport and forgotten about it.

However there was someone else aboard the Terranian ship who was far from reconciled with the present circumstances and had waited for hours to tell her complaints to the responsible person.

Thora. When she found Rhodan she was close to tears. 'Why don't we do something,' she swallowed helplessly with big, imploring eyes.

'Like what?' Rhodan asked gently.

'Start up again, broadcast a message, fire a warning shot - what do I know? - anything!'

Rhodan turned around to Col. Freyt, the Commander of the *Ganymede*, who sat before the pilot control panel. 'Try to call the tractor ship over there on the telecom, Freyt!'

Freyt adjusted the directional antenna in an effort to contact the ship. He had to repeat his call five times before he received an answer and Novaal's face appeared on the videoseen.

Freyt got up and made room for Rhodan.

'Why is it that nobody pays attention to us?' Rhodan inquired.

'I don't know,' Novaal replied. 'What did you expect?'

The question made Rhodan laugh. 'I'd like to know why I'm here and how long it'll take.'

'You're here on orders of the Arkonide Administration,' Novaal explained.

'That's no reason,' Rhodan retorted sharply. 'At least not for me.'

'You better call Sergh,' Novaal advised him.

'Who's Sergh?'

'He's the Arkonide Administrator of Naat.'

‘Will he answer via telecom?’

‘If he doesn’t you’re out of luck because I don’t know the frequency of his office.’

‘Oh well,’ Rhodan murmured. ‘Thank you!’

He ended the conversation and turned to Thora. ‘Do you know anybody by the name of Sergh?’

Thora shook her head. Rhodan rotated the antenna in the direction of the green spot they had seen beyond the spaceport shortly before they landed. He broadened the range of his transceiver to minimize a failure of communication. Then he spoke into the mike: ‘The Commander of the ship *Ganymede* wishes to speak to the Administrator Sergh.’

He repeated the call at regular intervals. After he had done so 38 times without getting the slightest response from him, he shouted angrily: ‘The Commander of the ship *Ganymede* wishes to speak to the Administrator Sergh and if that jerk doesn’t answer at once the *Ganymede* will decide to leave this planet without waiting for that Arkonide slowpoke!’

However the Administrator was apparently so occupied with other business that he failed to respond to this gross insult.

Rhodan switched off the telecom and addressed his officers. ‘Prepare for take off! Freyt, instruct the crew! I’ll take care of the programming.’

The ship sprang to life. The men rushed to their posts and 10 minutes later the *Ganymede* was ready to be launched as soon as Rhodan finished his blastoff programme.

The fruitless attempt to contact the Administrator and the effrontery he had been dealt by having been kept waiting for many hours on the spaceport where he had no intention of landing in the first place, raised Rhodan’s hackles. He acted on the spur of the moment without giving consideration to what might happen if the ship took off against the expressed will of the Arkonides.

The gun turrets were manned and as long as the spaceport remained as empty as it was, the *Ganymede* had a good chance of leaving the inhospitable planet behind.

‘Attention! All systems go!’ Rhodan commanded.

Control lamps lit up and machines began to hum throughout the ship. A warning signal started to whistle. Rhodan increased the energy of the engines. Other warning instruments joined the alarm and the sound of the machinery changed. It rose to a whining crescendo, stopped for a fraction of a second and returned with a howl as Rhodan shifted to maximum output.

Rhodan kept all aggregates running at full capacity for a whole minute. They screeched and roared as if attempting to move an entire world.

The *Ganymede* didn’t budge from the spot.

Rhodan furiously slammed down the aggregate switch with his fist. ‘Stop!’ he shouted. ‘Get me the data on the force-field holding us back!’

The officer in charge of the launching operations reported at once. 'Variable magnitude, sir! Energy level exceeds thrust of our engines by 50% at any time.'

Rhodan lowered his head.

You've been a fool, he thought dejectedly. The Arkonides didn't bring you here to let you fly away a few hours later. How could you believe they didn't have the means of holding you back? You and your beautiful ship!

He raised his head and stared at the observation screen. The landing field in the proximity of the *Ganymede* was flat without exposed contours of any sort. And yet there had to be some powerful projectors below the ground capable of producing the unbelievable amount of energy required for the forces retaining his ship.

What next? Deploy his weapons? Bombard the landing field till all projectors were destroyed?

No, he had other options still open to him. Rhodan's dismay diminished at the same rate as a new plan took shape in his mind.

* * *

Night fell over Naat.

A horrendous storm had been the first indication that the day was nearing its end. Wind velocities up to 250 miles per hour were pouring eerily in the outside microphones. Nightfall was also accompanied by a drop of temperature to minus 100°.

The nocturnal darkness was made complete by an impenetrable dust layer carried along by the storm. Otherwise, Rhodan thought, night time in this corner of the galaxy would be as bright as a Swedish midsummer night - due to the enormous density and brightness of the stars.

Rhodan had thoroughly prepared his next mission. He had learned from Khrest and Thora, at least roughly, how the Naat cities were planned and what the park-like areas looked like where the few Arkonides resided. Col. Freyt had been informed as to his part of the undertaking; he knew that for a few hours at least, if not several days, he would have to carry on his shoulders the entire responsibility that was the lot of a ship commander with a crew of a thousand men. In addition he was also responsible for the welfare of the three persons who were about to leave the *Ganymede*: Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bell and Tako Kakuta.

Rhodan had been unwilling to entrust this mission to anyone but himself and to those of his co-workers he knew best. He planned to pay a personal visit to Sergh, the Arkonide administrator.

There had been a lively discussion about Rhodan's plan. Thora and Khrest were of the opinion such an idea was fraught with great danger: Rhodan and his companions might risk their lives. Apparently the Arkonides regarded the *Ganymede* and its entire crew as their prisoners. They would definitely object if these prisoners should leave their 'prison' and if it was for nothing more than paying a visit to their jail keeper.

Rhodan had to admit that his two Arkonide friends were probably right but he had gone on to explain that he had to carry out this plan regardless of the danger it would entail. In Bell he had, naturally, found an ally who whole-heartedly supported this enterprise.

Tako Kakuta, the little Japanese with the round babyface, had expressed his approval with a trusting smile but that was as far as he participated in that discussion.

Three hours after darkness had fallen, Rhodan and his two companions were ready to leave. They were wearing Arkonide transportsuits - those miracle devices which enveloped their wearer like a garment and were equipped with most potent micro-generator capable of producing their own field of gravity, a deflector shield which would bend away light-rays, thus rendering its wearer invisible and also a protective screen from which missiles and all types of energy and heat-rays would bounce off.

They left the shift through the airlock in the rear but dispensed with dropping the wide escalator band to the ground for very obvious reasons, although it would have enabled them to reach the ground in a comfortable manner. Instead they entrusted their weight, increased 2·8 times due to this world's higher gravitational pull, to the artificial gravity of their suits.

There was a definite limit to the neutralizers built into their transportsuits. Their potential stopped at 3 Gs, therefore Naat's gravity strained the micro-generators to their utmost limit.

Rhodan had taken all of this into account. They would have to abstain from gliding along in a comfortable, safe fashion during this trip - all the more since in case an overload in one of the systems would occur it would tap the energy reserves of another system. So that if the protective energy screen had to bounce off more direct hits than its generator was equipped to handle, the latter simply borrowed power from the generator of the deflector and the artificial gravity field. Thus it could happen that if a hit was sustained during a flight, the wearer of the transportsuit might suddenly drop to the ground or else become visible again.

But far more urgent than Rhodan's command to walk all the way from the *Ganymede* to the administrator's residence, a distance of some 18 miles, had been his admonition:

'Till now we've been used that our transportsuits impressed everyone everywhere as miracle weapons. None of our opponents to this day possessed anything similar - except for the Springers.

'But remember, these are Arkonide products and we are dealing here with Arkonides. You can be sure that the Arkonides won't regard their own invention that they've been used to for a long time, as anything extraordinary or miraculous. So beware! Never think you're invulnerable or invincible because your suits make you invisible or ward off all shots directed at you!'

Bearing in mind his own warning, Rhodan expected the first crisis in this dangerous enterprise might occur the moment they'd leave the protective shadow of the *Ganymede* .

Rhodan and his two companions marched some 100 feet away from their spaceship, their weapons cradled in their arms, ready for action.

While they were standing there and waiting they could hear the howling storm and the crackling of the dust through the outside microphones of their helmets. The noise made them nervous because it drowned out any other sound. But Rhodan insisted they stay there for fully 10 minutes in order to get adjusted to this enervating barrage of their ears.

Nothing happened to them during this time. Either no one had noticed them or else they were not interested in stopping them yet at this point.

However there was no doubt in Rhodan's mind that their progress was bound to be challenged at some place at some time. He announced to Freyt: 'Phase B!'

That was the code they had agreed upon. Phase A of the undertaking had been completed the instant it became clear that no obstacle obstructed the path Rhodan and his two companions had to take. The reason for this code and the general instructions to speak as briefly and precisely as possible lay in an obvious consideration: the Arkonides - or even the Naats - could listen in to their telecommunications once they had found out the frequency band on which the Earth instruments were operating. But they did not know the language Rhodan was speaking. The Arkonides' efficient instruments would be capable of reconstructing the English language if they intercepted sufficient data. To prevent them from obtaining enough material on which to base their detective work, Rhodan had insisted on using a code and limiting themselves to the tersest remarks.

Communication between the three dauntless Earthmen, however, was not affected by all this. They used the conventional electromagnetic senders and receivers which could be switched over to a minimal range if necessary.

Rhodan led the little group across the wide landing field. The only clue as to how to behave, apart from what he had heard from Thora and Khrest, was what he remembered from his earlier hypno-schooling, namely that Arkonides who were working as administration officials on galactic colonies led a carefree, unrestricted life. They resided away from the native population inside lavishly artificial parks created regardless of cost. The peculiar-looking dwelling places built according to Arkonide architectural designs rose from the park's green expanses. Rhodan knew that a monitoring system was installed at the edges of the parkland. This system reported to a central registering mechanism anyone entering the compound. His task now was therefore to deceive or circumvent this monitoring systems. Rhodan was of the opinion that this should not prove too difficult to do.

He was far more concerned about the safety installations of the individual houses - house was actually a misnomer for these structures resembled funnels which were balanced on a stem. It was easy to figure out that the administrator's house had been especially well safeguarded. Tako Kakuta, the teleporter, was therefore probably the the reason Perry Rhodan had selected the Japanese to accompany him on this dangerous mission.

At the end of two and a half hours, during which they had been steadily marching toward their goal, Rhodan peered through the ultra-red telescope sight of his raygun - they had to leave all other weapons behind for fear of being too restricted in their mobility - and saw the flat, circular buildings which marked the edge of the landing field. Beyond, rose the thick wall of trees and bushes forming a living fence around the Arkonide living compound.

The round houses were not guarded and appeared to be vacant. They reinforced the impression transmitted generally by this landing field that the time had long since passed when this tremendous spaceport had functioned as an important base in the galactic empire of the Arkonides.

The little troop passed unhindered between two flat, circular houses. The men stopped some 100 feet before the living fence.

'Phase B, Part 2!' Rhodan said.

From the *Ganymede* came Col. Freyt's reply: two short and one long blast from a whistle.

Rhodan turned to the teleporter. 'Tako, now it's your turn!'

'Yes, sir!'

The tall, thick bushes weakened the fury of the storm. Rhodan observed Tako while he stood there staring at these bushes as if he were searching for something in them. Suddenly the teleporter's body seemed to dissolve and vanished completely.

Tako had 'jumped'. He had used his parapsychical gift of teleportation to overcome the invisible border of the Arkonide monitoring system. Now if nothing untoward had happened to him meanwhile, he should be far inside the parkland.

Rhodan let three minutes go by. At the end of this time, Tako announced his presence via his helmet telecom. He gently cleared his throat, according to the prearranged signal.

And Rhodan reported to Col. Freyt: 'Phase B. Immediately!'

Tako, however, turned on his heels on the spot where he had landed after executing his telejump, and marched back, with long strides, directly to where Rhodan and Bell were waiting for him. Twenty minutes after he had vanished into thin air, Tako reappeared amongst the bushes. Rhodan walked toward him, close to the line where the range of the monitoring system extended.

Tako kept coming closer and closer till, the penultimate instant before the two men touched, he telejumped for the second time. Rhodan quickly stepped across the danger line, making certain not to arouse the suspicions of the monitoring system which was registering now as before the presence of one person only inside its active range.

Since the Japanese was coming from the inner regions of the parkland, he must therefore not seem suspect to the monitor. Although the instrument registered his presence when he approached the border, it nevertheless did not set off an alarm. Now, since Tako had jumped once again far inside the park, the monitor could not distinguish Rhodan from the Japanese. Moreover, Rhodan hoped the monitor would not be puzzled why some one who had just marched halfway across the park right up to the frontier, had suddenly changed his mind and, instead of crossing to the outside, had made a quick about-face and walked back to where he had just started from.

Rhodan was endeavouring to leave the border behind as fast as his legs would carry him. For he intended to give Bell the chance to enter the Arkonide compound in the same manner as he had just done. Thus Rhodan marched half a mile in a straight line away from the border to a point where the sensors of the monitor would no longer be effective.

But meanwhile, Tako Kakuta was once again on his way toward the border. He emerged from a section of the compound which must seem inconspicuous to the monitor. He repeated the same manoeuvre as before and vanished from the picture the same moment that Bell was crossing the border line. As far as the monitor was concerned nothing had changed: there was only *one* man registered within its active range.

Reginald Bell followed Rhodan's trail, which was clearly visible in the tall grass. For a while he was bothered by something, some noise whose origin he could not pinpoint. Until he figured it out: it was not

some sound but rather the absence of a noise. He could no longer hear the roaring of the storm!

Bell could not believe that the storm had actually subsided. Presumably there was some method by which the Arkonides could exclude the unpleasant weather conditions of their host planet from within their own living area. Bell felt a certain admiration for the refined methods of the Arkonides in attaining personal comfort.

After a quarter of an hour he found Rhodan. Rhodan was seated on the grass under a tremendous, exotic tree, peering through the telescopic sight of his impulse weapon. Bell almost stumbled over him; the Arkonides had, obviously, made no attempt to alleviate the darkness in their park.

‘Fantastic picture,’ murmured Rhodan.

Bell looked around; no trace of Tako yet. He stretched himself out on the ground, levelled the automatic disintegration gun to a fairly comfortable position and turned the infra-red viewer on.

He didn’t get a picture in true colours. The reflected rays appeared stark white against a black background, producing an extraordinary spectacle.

Bell had known what to expect as he had knowledge of the Arkonide civilization. He knew that the Arkonides built their houses in the shape of gigantic funnels. They had based their architecture on psychological observations. They had concluded that the funnel shape provided a maximum of individuality and privacy for the residents.

But Bell was not prepared for this breathtaking view. He saw the exotic silhouettes of bushes and trees in a pale white glow contrasted by the glaring illumination of the randomly spaced funnels.

They varied in size like pebbles on the beach. There were small bungalows, gracefully hidden behind bushes, funnel buildings 38 to 100 feet high and finally colossal constructions rising more than 380 feet into the sky.

These funnels ascending from narrow, sometimes quite large stems represented marvels of proficiency in statics and use of materials.

Here was proof that the Arkonide civilization had forced technology to be the servant and not the master.

Suddenly the Japanese emerged in front of Rhodan and Bell.

‘Ready?’ asked Rhodan.

‘Yes, sir,’ answered Tako. ‘I studied most of the buildings closely. If Sergh, as we assume, lives in the biggest, we will have to turn toward the right.’

‘How far?’

‘About four miles.’

‘Blast!’ cursed Bell. ‘Four miles! Like ducks in a shooting gallery.’

‘Let’s hope the Arkonides are asleep,’ said Rhodan firmly. ‘They are not alarmed, because the monitor

system did not react. The situation won't be critical till we get into Sergh's house.'

4/ PHASE D

Sergh's palace - if indeed this was his palace - was bound to induce agoraphobia in anyone standing near the stem of the funnel-shaped building as he happened to be glancing upwards along its outward-sloping walls.

Sergh's building was the only one whose walls were gleaming with a softly palescent light. It had served as a beacon in the night, pointing the way for Rhodan and his companions when they were still two miles away. Sergh's funnel-house was also one of the few buildings from whose slanted walls some elevated roadways occasionally would branch off. They were supported by huge pillars and led across the park to other buildings or to the city of Naatral.

Rhodan estimated the height of the funnel-building to be roughly 500 feet. Most likely it contained not only Sergh's living quarters but also the most important offices of the administration.

So far, Rhodan's advance had come off without any difficulties. From time to time the outside mikes had transmitted some noises which seemed to have been caused by Arkonide vehicles. But at no time had the intruders seen any of these vehicles nor had they ever laid eyes on any of the Arkonides.

The *Ganymede* had nothing new to report.

Besides the elevated roadways that connected Sergh's funnel-house with the outside world, it had also the usual entrance gate located in the funnel's stem. The bottom of this wide portal was situated six feet above the ground and could probably be entered by a drawbridge-like arrangement typical of this type of architecture.

For a moment Rhodan toyed with the notion of approaching this portal close enough for the electronic announcer to be activated, then to wait until Sergh or his servants would lower the folding transport ramp and open the door. But he quickly dismissed this idea. This was not the right time for fooling around, he reminded himself.

Now they were standing 90 feet away from the wall of the stem. Rhodan knew that the electronic announcer would react as soon as a visitor approached within 40 feet of it.

For a quarter of an hour they silently watched the immense building but there was no indication whether its inhabitants inside were asleep or awake. The funnel walls isolated it from the outside so that nothing of what was going on in its interior could be perceived by an outside observer.

'What are we waiting for?' Bell finally asked impatiently. 'We're just wasting our precious time!'

Rhodan motioned to Tako and called out softly: 'Now listen carefully, Tako! Here is a brief rundown on the most important data you need to know: the funnel is hollow, its inside walls are constructed like terraces. The lowest terraced walls usually consist of landscaped areas and gardens. The upper levels contain administrative facilities and living quarters that sometimes open directly to the interior of the funnel

and sometimes are screened off by walls. Don't go there assuming you'll encounter a dwelling similar to what we have on Earth. The funnel forms a world all its own and from the inside it probably looks even bigger than from the outside.

'And above all: use your weapon only in case it's a matter of life or death and if you have no chance of teleporting yourself out of there! Is that clear, Tako?'

'Perfectly clear, sir!'

'Alright. I'll expect you back in 15 minutes for your first report!'

'Yes, sir!'

While the last word was still reverberating in the receivers, Tako had already vanished.

* * *

Tako Kakuta's first impression when he landed on the other side of the funnel-building's walls was that of being seized by a strong force pushing him violently upwards, causing him to slam into the ceiling of one of the inside terraces affixed to the funnel-walls.

He was stunned by the impact but soon recovered and realized that this misfortune had been caused by the different gravitational conditions inside the Arkonides' living space. They had restored the same gravitational pull here that existed on their home planet, which corresponded approximately to that of Earth. Tako's Arkonide transportsuit, however, had been adjusted to the 2.8 G's prevalent on the planet Naat.

tako made the necessary adjustments and sank gently down into a soft flowerbed.

Cautiously he crept toward a nearby bush to take cover. Then he looked around to orient himself in his new surroundings.

The interior of the funnel was brightly lit. Tako had landed on the lowest floor - at the very bottom of the funnel-stem. The lowest floor formed the base for the terrace storeys above it; it was circular in shape and had the same diameter as the funnel-stem, which it closed off like a lid cover.

This circle whose diameter was some 90 feet across had been landscaped like a garden. Tako raised his helmet a bit in order to get a truer impression of his surroundings. A thousand breathtaking, bewildering odours overwhelmed him and made him sneeze.

Narrow pathways crisscrossed the maze formed by flowers, trees and bushes. Tako heard the sound of murmuring water. The Arkonides had probably put in a little artificial brook in their garden.

Tako's glance travelled upwards after he had seen his fill of the beautiful scenery around him. The funnel walls rose powerfully yet daintily, diverging as they rose higher and higher, finally seeming to vanish at the top edge of an intensely black circle.

The sky! The dark nocturnal sky of Naat. Tako Kakuta felt somewhat reassured when he realized that even in the midst of this almost decadent splendour he was not entirely cut off from the natural environment. Being able to look at the sky, even if it was reduced to a mere black spot, chased away some of the anxiety he had experienced awhile earlier.

He carefully studied the structure of the terraced storeys of the funnel house. He estimated the height of the individual terraces to be approximately 12 to 15 feet, accordingly these funnel walls were divided into 40 to 50 terraces which were arranged on top of each other.

The various terraced storeys offered a pleasantly diversified sight. Open niches alternated with glass walls and windows. Occasionally some platforms jutted out from the regular arrangement of the circular terrace walls, obviously serving as lookout points or landing platforms for incoming airplanes.

The park where Tako had landed extended also across the three lowest terraced storeys, partially in the form of hanging gardens which made the contours of the terraces disappear behind opulently spreading greenery. Strange looking structures and sculptures peered out from among the plants. Tako was sure they were part of the many foot-bridges and platforms the Arkonides had built in this verdure so that the inhabitants could stroll about in the fresh air if so inclined.

He tried to locate stairwells or vertical corridors that connected the various levels with each other but in vain. They were probably situated at the back, directly at the funnel wall, therefore invisible from where Tako was standing now.

Tako consulted his watch. He had spent roughly 10 minutes looking around and taking an inventory of the terrain. Now he knew what the interior of the funnel-building looked like, at least superficially. He wondered why he hadn't seen a single Arkonide so far.

Were they all asleep?

Tako risked a second, very short jump, and landed on the fifth floor terrace. The park and the gardens were lying below. From his vantage point he could now see the brook and the little pond whose babbling noises he heard before.

He was standing on a section of the corridor whose side facing the funnel interior was open except for a three-foot high balustrade. On either side of the balustrade, however, rose high walls reaching all the way up to the beginning of the next terrace above. The open section of this corridor was closed off by doors from the adjoining rooms.

Tako turned to the right and was pleased to note that the door - as all Arkonide doors are wont to do — opened automatically as soon as he approached to within three feet of it.

The room beyond the door was brightly lit. Along the window wall Tako noticed several consoles whose levers, switches and gauges indicated that these were telecom transmitters. A few isolated armchairs were standing in the middle of the room. The opposite wall was covered by a row of videoscreens. 'The ceiling near this wall revealed a circular opening. Quickly, Tako walked over to this wall, positioned himself directly below the circular opening in the ceiling. Immediately, just as he had expected, he felt the gentle pull of the artificial gravity field. He needed only to push off with a gentle effort and the field would have carried him safe and sound up to the next floor. An antigrav lift, Tako thought, with which he was quite familiar from the terrestrial spaceships.

Another glance at his watch reminded Tako that it was high time to return to the spot where he had left

Rhodan and Bell. Fourteen minutes had gone by since he had parted company with them.

He closed his eyes and concentrated on the spot where the two were waiting for his return. Then he jumped.

* * *

Sergh of Telfron, from the House of the Hugal, stationed on Naat according to the Emperor's wise decision, generally had not the slightest idea what time of the day it was at the present moment outside the walls of his funnel-building. Being an Arkonide, and moreover belonging to a highly respected family, he would have considered it ridiculous or repulsive - according to his mood of the moment - if anyone had harboured the thought that he, Sergh, might arrange his day according to Nature's arbitrary division of light and darkness.

Sergh's actions were guided solely by his own needs and desires. He had not even the faintest idea how great an advantage he was enjoying compared to the Naats as well as to most of his fellow Arkonides who belonged to a lower social class: he held a public appointment which was actually carried out by smoothly working machines and a large staff of subalterns. He was residing in a funnel house far more luxurious than those on Arkon; it was much larger, better equipped and more lavishly furnished. All that was required of him as far as his office was concerned was his mere presence. For the rest of his time he spent indulging in his various hobbies.

He did not over exert himself in the pursuit of his pleasures either. His main occupation consisted in playing the 'simultan game', which was enjoyed in a reclining position. This was naturally a most appropriate posture for those decadent and lethargic members of the Arkonide race.

Every day, for a few hours, Sergh would at least temporarily assume an upright position and visit the magnificent gardens of the lower floors. There he used to while away the time stretched out in the grass or rocking himself gently on one of the hanging walkways while engaging in pleasant conversation with one of his subalterns or some visitor.

And this was exactly what he was doing at the moment He had chosen his young deputy, Ghorn, for today's little outing. This choice had evoked little enthusiasm from Ghorn, since it involved leaving his comfortable couch, and most of all his fictive-screen, on which his thoughts would create abstract geometrics that were dancing and gliding in colourful patterns, following the rules of the simultan-game. But seeing that Sergh was the only person whose word really counted in this palace, Ghorn refrained - despite his lethargy - from leaving any of Sergh's wishes unfulfilled.

Together they were floating down through a series of anti-grav shafts till they reached the lowest floor. They came to the little babbling brook which emptied into a small pond. They reclined on the grassy bank of the little pond.

'Ghorn,' asked Sergh, 'why do you suppose it is easy to produce a blue figure with 13 angles but never a red one when we play the simultan-game?'

Ghorn breathed a sigh of relief. He had secretly feared his boss would bring up a far more boring topic of conversation. 'I don't know for sure, sir,' he answered readily. But I suppose that such a thought

pattern simply cannot be formed by our brains. A red 13-angled figure corresponds to a configuration of our thought centres which cannot be achieved by Arkonide brains.'

Sergh seemed intrigued by this brilliant notion. 'Interesting, most interesting,' he muttered. 'This is very close to my own explanation of this puzzling phenomenon.' He slightly raised himself on his elbows and peered over to a flowerbed with long-stemmed Fareh blossoms. 'I am convinced,' he continued after this major effort, 'we might obtain many novel aspects if we could induce alien intelligences to participate in a simultan-game. We could even go so far as to force some aliens to play the game. I am thinking of the Naats ...'

He drifted off into a reverie. Ghorn waited the correct period of time as required by proper Arkonide etiquette before he added respectfully: 'It might even be feasible to condition non-intelligent life forms in such a manner that their primitive brain-wave patterns could be registered by the simulator.'

Sergh congratulated himself on his splendid choice when he had asked his deputy Ghorn to accompany him down to the park. No doubt this was one of the young man's rare, good days. His ideas were fascinating.

Just imagine the magnificent display of colours and shapes, Sergh quickly thought to himself, *if Ghorn's present thoughts could be fed into a simulator!*

'Yes, indeed,' Sergh spoke aloud, 'that wouldn't be a bad idea. Someone ought to investigate if such an experiment would work in reality. - Yes, indeed, a striking notion ...'

That remark was as far as he would commit himself. He carefully concealed any display of the enthusiasm this splendid idea generated in him.

Ghorn, on the other hand, was thinking: *I bet you'll find out soon, you old phokx. And if the experiment should succeed, no one would dare doubt any longer that the idea originated in your brain.*

'The instinctual pattern of a Vnathian serpent-fish ought to look sensational on the picture screen ...' murmured Sergh.

And since Ghorn had already started to give away freely his best thoughts, he objected: 'I am less fastidious, sir ... or more pretentious, perhaps. I'd be interested to observe the emotional or nervous activity of a flower projected on the simultan-game screen. What a marvellous picture could result if the simulator would register and project visually for us the emotional interplay of such a harmonious creature!'

In case Ghorn had counted on enticing Sergh to an even greater display of enthusiasm than before with this new suggestion, he was quickly disappointed. Sergh, who long since had languidly resumed his reclining position, once more raised himself up on his elbows, looked again over to the flower beds and remarked in a rather unexpected unfriendly tone of voice: 'Somebody has been trampling around in my Fareh flowerbed! If I only knew who committed such a savage act I'd condemn him to wrestle with a Naat.'

Ghorn felt cold shivers down his spine. For any Arkonide who had lost his immunity because of some criminal act and who was condemned to a wrestling match with a Naat, this meant death! The Naats considered such matches a sacred sport and all Arkonide attempts - long since abandoned - at civilizing the barbarian Naats had failed miserably in this respect: the victorious Naat would invariably kill the

defeated opponent in such a wrestling match.

Ghorn stood up to have a closer look at the flower bed. He walked over while Sergh, halfway raised up on his elbows, watched him curiously. The flowerbed was a mess. It looked as if somebody had fallen down into it from a considerable height and had landed flat on his back. Ghorn fully appreciated Sergh's anger. These Fareh flowers were considered one of the most expensive ornamental plants. They came from a poisonous swamp more than 10,000 light-years away and the men who made this long and perilous voyage, only to gather up these greatly coveted plants, demanded a very high price for their trouble.

Ghorn advanced to the spot where the unknown person's feet had dug into the soft ground. From here he could no longer see Sergh. His view was blocked by many thick bushes. He could only hear the pleasant murmuring of the little brook which emptied into the pond.

Now he noticed footprints in the soft soil of the flowerbed. They were strangely shaped that Ghorn began to become excited, an emotion he very rarely experienced.

Each footprint measured some 9 to 10 inches. That was much shorter than the usual length of an Arkonide foot. Besides, not only was it considerably shorter but also of a disgusting width.

Might have been caused by the fact that the stranger was wearing some footgear, pondered Gorn.

But *who* would wear such ugly shoes?

No Arkonide, decided Ghorn.

But nobody except Arkonides were permitted to enter the funnel building. Therefore some one must have stolen inside without permission.

But automatic announcers were failproof. There was no possibility of tampering with them from the outside - unless the entire house were destroyed.

Ghorn emerged running from the cluster of bushes, a feat which seemed to frighten Sergh. Ghorn reported his findings to the administrator, who rose from the ground with a great deal of moaning and groaning. With a very cross face he walked slowly, as befitted a man of his station in life, over to the flowerbed and inspected the damage and the footprints.

The sight of the tracks strangely enough seemed to cheer him up. He pursued the trail beyond the trampled flowerbed right up to the spot where they suddenly ceased. Sergh turned around and with a malicious smile said to Ghorn: 'A stranger has intruded into our funnel-house. *A clever* stranger, my friend. We'll have some fun now to watch him and see what he is doing inside the building. Too bad he seems to have the bodybuild of an Arkonide or at least of a Naat. As I said before, I'd have preferred a Vnatolian serpent-fish. But of course it's too much to expect a serpent-fish to have intelligence and to be clever besides.

'Come along, Ghorn! Let's see where our unknown intruder is!'

* * *

Since Perry Rhodan had found out now from Tako that at least for the time being this funnel-house showed no sign of life or activity, he did not hesitate to apply the information he had acquired through the Arkonide hypno-training.

He knew that the automatic door mechanisms which regulated the opening and closing of the entrance gate to the funnel-house were installed in the upper end of the funnel-stem - below the floor of the garden that Tako had inspected immediately after he had telejumped inside the building a while ago.

‘The mechanism is located there in an engine room,’ Rhodan explained to Tako, ‘And since the Arkonides have always been such wizards when they first installed these machines, no repairs are ever necessary. So nobody is staying in this engine room.’

"When you teleport yourself back in there, Tako, and find yourself surrounded uncomfortably close by machines, don't worry! Just find the switch I already described to you and break the circuit for half a minute!"

Tako repeated Rhodan's order almost word for word. Then he disappeared.

Rhodan announced to the *Ganymede* : ‘Phase D!’

Then he turned to Bell and said: ‘When Tako cuts the circuit, the entrance gate will slide open over there. As long as it is open, the automatic announcer will not function. So hop to it and get inside as long as Tako has his fingers on that machine!’

Bell's first reply consisted merely of an assenting grunt. Then, ‘Don't worry, Perry,’ he added after a few seconds. ‘Believe me, I have ants in my pants. The moment that thing budes as much as an inch I'll take off like a super rocket.’

The seconds seemed to be creeping at a snail's pace, Rhodan was aware that his friend Reg was just about to add some other impatient comment but before Bell could utter the first word a change occurred in the fluorescent glow of the opposite funnel walls: a black gap appeared between the portal and the wall of the funnel stem.

Bell had not made any vain promises. He took off like a bat out of Trans-Helvania and arrived so quickly at his destination that for a moment Rhodan feared the automatic announcer might still have registered the beginning of Bell's take-off.

The gate was not yet completely opened - Arkonide portals like their builders customarily would take their own sweet time - but Bell, all loaded down with his heavy disintegrator weapon, hastily forced his way through the narrow chink, then with a mechanical movement of his hand adjusted the neutralizer to the weaker gravity. Once inside, still panting from exertion, he called over his helmet speaker: ‘Perry, hurry up! It's touch and go!’

But Rhodan did not rush. He knew how long half a minute seemed for his friend, all worried that the seconds would run out prematurely. Calmly he passed through the meanwhile completely opened portal, stepped beside Bell and waited till Tako in the engine room above them would take care of dosing the two panels of the portal once again.

Then he looked around.

The interior of the funnel stem was a circular hall 90 feet across. What he saw corresponded to the image he remembered from his hypno-schooling. Precious wall hangings, a flood of multicoloured lights emanating from invisible sources, three-dimensional paintings covering the 38 foot high ceiling. The artwork gave testimony to an eccentric imagination. Any visitor entering this room would already be overwhelmed by the opulent taste of the landlord before he had seen any of the actual living quarters.

The symmetry of the ceiling was interrupted by a dark hole, lying somewhat off centre. It was perfectly round and measured 9 feet across, *Wide enough* thought Rhodan sarcastically, *to let an entire company pass through within a few seconds*.

Bell looked up at the hole with a questioning expression.

‘Go on!’ Rhodan urged. ‘Get a move on, Reg!’

Bell bestowed a glance filled with sheer disgust upon his friend. ‘I’ve been waiting all this time for you finally to say something!’

With five long strides he reached the spot directly below the hole, gazed up into it as if striking careful aim and gently pushed off with a shove of his right leg. He was seized by the suction of the anti-grav field which pulled him upwards. Four seconds later he had disappeared through the hole.

Rhodan followed him without hesitating. The coloured light in the entrance hall grew dark as soon as he had passed the hole in the ceiling.

Bell was waiting for him. Tako, who had followed Rhodan’s orders, was now standing beside Bell. Rhodan took time om to praise the little Japanese mutant for the exemplary execution of his latest job. Tako acknowledged this gratefully, smiling all over his wide, round, baby face.

The room they were in now represented the second progressive level that would acquaint a guest with the financial and social standing of his host. Unlike the entrance hall, this room had some furniture. Several armchairs, arranged in a random pattern typical for the Arkonides’ taste, invited the visitor for a first rest pause. Hardly visible, circular grooves in the floor indicated where automatic serving tables were installed. A halfway uttered order expressed by the guest sufficed to raise these serving tables bearing the desired food or object to within easy reach, which was regulated by the way the armchair had been adjusted.

The room was in the shape of a triangle. Its diameter was less than that of the funnel stem and its ceiling was just 10 feet high. This was an indication that behind the walls were housed the multitude of servo-mechanisms which permitted the Arkonide inhabitant to lead the kind of life he desired.

The hole of the anti-grav shaft was again not properly centred in the ceiling. Neither was it located straight above the hole through which Rhodan and Bell had just emerged.

There followed a number of additional rooms - each one smaller, more intimate and more lavishly furnished than the preceding one. There was no mistaking the owner’s obvious intention to prepare his visitor step by step for the splendour of his actual living quarters.

Rhodan and his companions passed altogether through six such halls, rooms and chambers before they penetrated through the ceiling of a small room and finally reached the lowest floor of the funnel’s interior, which was covered with greenery and flowers whose perfume pervaded even to the inside of their

helmets, filters notwithstanding.

‘We know,’ Rhodan said calmly after having concluded an inspection of their surroundings, ‘that the Arkonides prefer locating their living quarters in the upper storeys of such a building. And up there is where we’ll have to search for the administrator. Therefore we must get as fast as possible beyond the 38th floor. To save time we’ll have to separate and carry out individually our task at hand . . . at least till we’ll have found the administrator.

‘Don’t be over-impressed by all this splendour and riches! Search for Sergh and don’t stop any place where he obviously wouldn’t be! You realize we are facing a much more important mission here than investigating what the interior of an Arkonide funnel building looks like.

‘The *Ganymede* has been immobilized; it can’t budge from the spaceport. We want to set it free in order to fly to Arkon. We must reach Arkon because Terra needs help.

‘Just keep this in mind!’

The admonition sounded so urgent, that not even the usually disrespectful Bell dared make a remark.

* * *

Sergh’s idea of placing the unknown intruders under surveillance caused a great deal of unrest in the usually very quiet house. Ghorn, who was in charge of this action for the funnel’s interior, was much busier than he cared to be.

But when he wanted to deliver in person an important bit of news to his superior, Sergh was carrying on a telecom conversation which seemed to be even more important and more exciting; for Ghorn had hardly opened his mouth to start his report - ‘They have separated, sir! Would you like to . . .’ - than Sergh waved him off impatiently and hissed: ‘Shh! I’m just talking with Arkon!’

Ghorn withdrew. He was uncertain what he was supposed to do now. Telecom talks with Arkon were as rare as green blossoms. Maybe Sergh would no longer be interested in surveying these strange intruders after he’d finished that conversation. And since the whole burden of this enterprise rested on Ghorn’s shoulders, he was naturally most willing to forget about the whole thing, stop the surveillance and leave the strangers to their fate of getting caught by the automatic traps which Ghorn had checked out and found to be working again faultlessly.

But one could never be sure about Sergh!

While Ghorn returned to his observation post on the 40th floor, he was pondering woefully how much it would behoove him to become an administrator. Not necessarily right on as important a world as Naat; Ghorn was well aware that these administrative positions were reserved for the members of the most respected families. But Vnatol would do nicely for him. Then he’d be able to supply Sergh with his much-loved serpent-fishes - and more important yet, he could be his own lord and master.

But the good old days were long since gone when the galactic empire was growing and another administrator was needed every day. The kind of position Ghorn wanted was rarely available.

Ghorn was so preoccupied with these sad thoughts that upon his return to the control room he failed to notice immediately that a whole row of lights had gone dark on the panel which indicated the proper functioning of the various mechanical gadgets and installations. He sat down at the control console and stated that the automatic search instruments had meanwhile lost sight of the strange intruders. He tried to locate them again.

While he was busy turning knobs and flipping switches, systematically letting pass in review on the videoscreen before him every room on every floor, he accidentally glanced over to the light panel. Now he reacted quite startled as saw the darkened row of light bulbs. He bent over his instruments and was surprised to note they were in perfect working order, although his light panel told a different story.

He felt confused and a bit helpless. He stood up to investigate what might have gone wrong with this light panel. But as soon as he came to within two feet of it the darkened row of lights flared up again.

Ghorn wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He moved back a step - and the lamps went out again. He stepped closer to the light panel and the lights shone brightly once again.

Ghorn's confusion gave way to a mild sensation of fear. But calmly, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, he returned to his console and continued his work. He did not feel reassured that the burning lamps on the light panel were clearly visible now.

He kept fiddling with the buttons, switches and levers of his control panel until suddenly the light went out in the entire room, a heavy shutter moved across the window opening toward the interior side of the funnel-house and an impenetrable darkness spread throughout the small room.

Ghorn had only a vague idea of the danger he was exposing himself to. He realized that the automatic safety guard instruments, which were part of each room of the funnel, might react too slowly if the picture he had of the current situation were correct.

But like all Arkonides - and in this he was no different from Sergh, his lord and master - he loved the sensation of nervous titillation and was less concerned with the danger.

A trait, which from a human point of view, was a symptom of hysteria rather than a sign of courage.

He kept on manipulating the controls on his panel. He was so familiar with the arrangements in this small room that he could easily manage even in the dark. The videoscreens and the monitor lamps had grown dark together with the control room's illumination.

A pale, flickering light suddenly penetrated the black room. The light seemed to come from nowhere and for a while didn't go anywhere; but then there appeared on the wall opposite Ghorn's seat a circular, 9 foot high spot of iridescent light which reached from the floor to the ceiling.

Inside this light spot appeared the silhouette of an odd-looking figure. It was too small for an Arkonide - although its two arms, two legs and a head were in the right place - too fat to be attractive and so shapeless that Ghorn arrived at the conclusion that what he was seeing in the shaft of light was not a silhouette of the creature's own figure but rather that of its wrap or garment.

Ghorn saw that the stranger held something cradled in his arm. The thing had a short handle. Ghorn believed this to be a weapon of some kind. His unwarranted courage swiftly left him.

He wanted to say something - something reassuring perhaps that would make the stranger refrain from shooting. But the same instant the figure moved its arm quickly toward its bulbous top and the shapeless sphere that Ghorn had believed to be its head slipped aside revealing a rather round skull. Despite his growing fear, Ghorn still managed to notice with amazement that this head was adorned with short bristles instead of the usual long hair.

Ghorn once more was just about to speak but the unknown creature beat him to it: 'Alright!' it said. 'Turn on the light, will you!'

Ghorn realized that the stranger spoke a somewhat crude yet correct version of the Arkonide language. Obediently Ghorn threw a few light switches. The shutters in front of the window vanished and the light came on again.

Ghorn turned away from his control panel and looked at the intruder who was now standing behind him and over to one side. He realized now what had caused the control lamps to go out a little while ago; the intruder had positioned himself too close to the light panel, causing it to go dark, and had then stepped aside when he noticed that Ghorn's suspicions had been roused.

Ghorn looked into a round, grim face. Above the forehead rose vertically a thatch of dirty-red hair bristles. Ghorn saw that the stranger's weapon was not aimed directly at him. The intruder seemed to feel very sure of himself.

'What ... what do you want?' stuttered Ghorn.

The intruder continued grinning fiercely. 'I want to talk with the administrator. Are you the administrator by chance?'

Ghorn's hands fluttered rather helplessly as he signalled a silent 'No.' Then timidly he added: 'I am Ghorn.'

The stranger almost imperceptibly bowed his head. It struck Ghorn that this was not exactly a sign of politeness but rather was intended to be ironic. 'My name is Bell,' the intruder replied. 'Reginald Bell.' He pronounced the alien-sounding syllables of his name so fluently that Ghorn quickly dismissed the notion he might after all be dealing here with some poor misshapen Arkonide, especially since the man was wearing clothing of Arkonide design.

What was the stranger's origin? wondered Ghorn silently.

The intruder who called himself Bell pulled up a chair and sat down. 'Get in touch with your administrator,' Bell began. 'Ask him to come here. Then I and two of my friends who will shortly join us here will have a talk with Sergh.'

Ghorn's voice was filled with desperation. 'If you should have even the vaguest concept of our mode of living,' he implored Bell, 'you'd imagine what will happen to me if I ...'

'I almost forgot,' interrupted Bell disdainfully. 'Sergh would ban you to some horrible desert planet, if not worse. - Alright, then - announce me to him. My friends and I will go and see him together with you.'

Ghorn seized upon this suggestion like a starving man a husk of corn.

The stranger represented a definite threat and Ghorn was convinced Sergh would share his impression

once he laid eyes on him. It had definitely been a mistake when the administrator had decided to limit himself to mere observation of these intruders. Such creatures were dangerous; in one minute they proposed as many new ideas as an Arkonide would in perhaps one whole day. They were reeking of unnatural activity.

Ghorn knew that Sergh's private apartments were equipped with a profusion of automatic safety devices. The moment the intruder and his friends - who apparently were foolish enough to insist on a private face-to-face conversation with the administrator - would cross his threshold, they were doomed.

Ghorn tried to locate the administrator. He was feverish with an unaccustomed impatience and hoped Sergh would not happen to be in one of his private rooms just now, for none of the search instruments would reach him there.

Out of the corner of his eye Ghorn was aware that Bell had in the meantime pulled up his helmet again. Ghorn heard him mumble a few words in an alien language. The Arkonide assumed that Bell was communicating with his two friends.

Then Ghorn's attention was attracted by Sergh's face as it came on, looking tired and bored as usual on the picture screen. Ghorn heard a swift movement behind his back and knew it would be a matter of life or death for him to avoid letting Sergh catch a glimpse of the stranger. He rapidly made the necessary adjustments on his videose. Ghorn noticed that Sergh was still sitting before the same telecom as during their earlier brief conversation, when Ghorn had tried in vain to announce to his boss that the intruders had become separated.

Ghorn formulated his request very carefully: 'Sir, if your time will permit I'd like to present to you an important problem.'

Sergh was not that tired that such a proposal would have annoyed him now. He remembered the fine thoughts which Ghorn had explained a couple of hours earlier and he displayed some measure of interest. 'I wouldn't mind,' he answered, stifling a yawn. 'We can continue our conversation in my vide room. Will you come right away?'

'Of course, sir,' Ghorn answered eagerly. 'I won't make you wait!'

Sergh cut the connection. Ghorn heard Bell's voice growling behind his back: 'Don't be in such a hurry, friend! My two companions must get here first.'

Ghorn did not reply but remained seated very quietly.

A little while later the door opened but nobody entered the room. The door closed again and two figures seemed to grow out of the void.

Ghorn turned around abruptly and started at the two. He saw a small man with a yellow complexion, slant eyes and a constant smile on his face. He perceived another man, almost as tall as an Arkonide, whose face was serious and who aroused fear in Ghorn the way he looked at him out of his icy-grey eyes.

Ghorn realized that instant that the third man was the most dangerous of these intruders.

The man with the steely glance addressed Ghorn now in a faultless, accent-free Arkonide dialect: '*Paqpaq!* Let's go, then! Or are you waiting for something else?'

5/ AFOUL OF A MENTO-FUSE

Ever since the beginning of Phase D, Col. Freyt had not heard a word from Rhodan. However he wasn't worried about that, for in case Rhodan would encounter serious difficulties they had arranged a special emergency signal and it would take a set of extraordinary circumstances, which Freyt believed to be most unlikely, for Rhodan not to be able to send the prearranged S.O.S.

In any case, Freyt was constantly at his post to do all in his power should he receive Rhodan's appeal for help. Freyt was extremely tired, his eyes were burning and his head would droop down on his chest from time to time - but he stayed at his post.

When the telecom's warning signal buzzed, Freyt's hand shot forward, hit the red release button squarely and his red-rimmed eyes fixed the image that began to take shape on the screen.

What he saw there was not the no-picture-sign which he had expected from Rhodan, since he, Bell and Tako could carry with them no visual image transmitter on their mission. Instead Col. Freyt saw appear on the screen a bullet-shaped, hairless skull covered with leathery, black skin, staring at him out of three eyes with a most disinterested expression.

Freyt concealed the repulsion he felt towards the gigantic Naat.

'This is Novaal speaking,' announced the Naat with a toneless voice. 'I have a message for you.'

Freyt nodded his head and said: 'I'm listening!'

'The Exalted Administrator instructed me to inform you that it would suit him to receive a visit from the two Arkonides you have on board. Would you kindly pass this message on to them.'

Freyt knew what he owed his position. 'I shall let them know,' he answered. 'They will have to decide for themselves if this visit will also suit them.'

Novaal's dark face turned into a grimace. Freyt was not sure whether this grimace was supposed to be a grin; in any case, for just a moment, he felt more sympathetic toward the Naat than he had before.

Freyt informed Thora and Khrest, who were staying in their private rooms aboard the *Ganymede*, about this conversation. Khrest reacted with calm to it, while Thora's eyes were spitting fire, just as Freyt expected.

Col. Freyt was rather surprised when barely half an hour later the two Arkonides got in touch with him and declared they would accept the invitation.

Freyt's face grew sombre as he replied: 'As far as I understood there was no mention of an invitation. But I'll be happy to forward your decision.'

* * *

Sergh was lying on a couch covered with precious Seveloth fur from Uthalls. Vibrations of constantly changing frequency and intensity were coursing through his body, which aroused in him a high degree of physical comfort and delight. Sergh was projecting a few bored thoughts onto the fictiv-screen.

The result was miserable. Boredom and poor concentration combined to produce a monotonous, dull green which moved slowly and with sleep-inducing paucity of configurations across the screen.

Sergh was none too pleased with himself.

Too much-work during these past few hours!

The door announcer began to hum. Sergh's hand fell limply down beside the couch and pressed the response button. On a little video-receiver next to the big fictive-screen appeared Ghorn's face. Quite unnecessarily the warning device on the opposite wall announced that he was carrying no weapons.

'Oh, it's you,' sighed Sergh with an insulting lack of enthusiasm. 'Did you make an appointment?'

'Yes, sir.' Ghorn nodded his head with astonishing eagerness.

'Come in!'

Ghorn's picture faded from the video-receiver screen. The door opened automatically upon registering Ghorn's word impulses. Sergh could hear Ghorn enter the anteroom.

Was this only Ghorn? It sounded as if—

Sergh raised himself up on his elbows and glanced at the door. The simultan-game ended in a disharmony of colours and forms.

The door opened. Ghorn came in - his face an anxious mixture of slyness and a bad conscience.

And behind him—!

Sergh sat up startled and uttered a scream filled with utmost indignation. This was the first scream that had come from his lips ever since he had been a child

Having cried out, the administrator lacked any further strength for the time being to make any more utterances. His mouth hanging open, he stared at the three men who had entered his room together with Ghorn.

Only some time later did he remember that he had instructed Ghorn to put under surveillance the unknown intruder who had so barbarically treated his precious Fareh flowers, and that at some moment Ghorn had begun to report about having located three intruders instead of the single one Sergh had at first assumed.

In the meantime a call had arrived from Arkon and Sergh had had to bother his poor tired head with

other things.

But now, since he had remembered all this, he quickly regained his emotional equilibrium. He smiled at the strangers and said: 'I'm pleased to see you up close and not from such a distance. It was quite amusing to watch you groping your way along into the house.'

One of the three, the fat man of medium height, was just about to push his helmet from his head. Sergh heard a hissing sound as the stranger inhaled the air. Sergh took this to be a sign that he had succeeded in startling the stranger.

But none of the other two gave evidence of a similar reaction. The smallest one with the yellow skin kept on smiling and in the grey eyes of the tallest intruder stood the same frightening hardness as earlier when Sergh had first laid eyes on him. 'You have observed us?' he asked, apparently without much interest.

Sergh felt annoyed that the stranger did not address him with his proper title. But the pleasure and thrill Sergh was presently experiencing made him forget this lack of good manners. 'Yes,' he admitted, 'we had you under surveillance. From the moment you trampled in my French flowerbed.'

Rhodan looked at Bell and Tako. The Japanese bowed slightly and apologized in English: 'This is probably my fault, sir. I fell into a flowerbed when I made my first telejump into the funnel-house.'

Rhodan dismissed this with a negligent wave of his hand. 'Fine.' He turned to the administrator. 'Then you have found out meanwhile who we are and you probably can guess why we have come here.'

Sergh was honestly perplexed. 'Oh, no,' he protested 'I know nothing about either of these two points. Both of us - my deputy Ghorn and I myself - have felt an extraordinary pleasure in observing you ...'

'You already said that!' Rhodan interrupted him so sharply that Sergh jumped with fright. 'I am the commander of the spaceship you are holding captive without and justification on your spaceport. I demand the immediate release of my ship!'

Sergh experienced fear. NevEr before had he heard a man speak so sharply in his presence - so full of energy and vitality. The man with the steely-grey eyes radiated so much dynamism that Sergh could feel it almost physically. He felt deeply frightened.

'Your ship is not detained by me,' countered Sergh, hardly noticing that he was about to offer an apology. 'I received orders to detain your ship and there is nothing I can do about them ...'

Bell stepped forward. Rhodan did not restrain him. Sergh had gotten off his couch in the meantime. Bell to avert his eyes slightly.

'*Fyrka-jyrka*. Now hear this, my good man!' Bell started to grumble in his crude rendition of the Arkonide language. 'We aren't interested in who actually issued these orders to keep the *Ganymede* tied down to the ground. We're only interested in who can set our ship free again. And you are it! And that's why we're going to stay here till we get news from our ship that it's en route *here* to pick us up and fly with us to Arkon! *Kao?* Understand?'

Sergh could feel the stranger's breath in his face. It was nauseating. At the same time he heard his loud, forceful voice, which frightened him. He was only half aware that Ghorn - to whom nobody any longer seemed to pay attention - had stepped over to the wall.

Sergh felt a bit relieved. Foe undoubtedly Ghorn would release the emergency signal—

Bell whirled around on his heel when he noticed that Sergh's glance had moved over to one side for a fraction of a second.

'Hey, you *-glaig-glaig!* Hold it right there!' he shouted furiously at Ghorn. The deputy had already raised his hand to depress the emergency button. 'Yes, I know if nobody prevented you from pressing that button this place would be filled with some kind of gas and alarm would be sounded somewhere!'

Ghorn's face turned ashen. His hand sank at his side as if suddenly it had grown too heavy for him.

Sergh felt so weak that he slid down once more onto the couch in a prone position. Automatically the vibrator began to work but this time the administrator experienced nothing but nervousness as the usually soothing vibrations penetrated his body.

'You understood what we want,' Rhodan said firmly. 'So act accordingly. There is more involved for us than you could guess. We don't care at all about stepping on the Exalted Administrator's toes to reach our goal!'

Sergh waved his soft hands in futile, mollifying movements, 'Wait, wait!' he panted. 'Just wait a few minutes! I'm expecting some guests, in whose presence I'll explain what the situation really is like. But permit a little breather to an old man!'

'Alright,' Rhodan agreed. 'WE'll wait. But just remember one thing: if either of you should try to cross us - it will be the sorriest day of your lives!'

* * *

It was actually not so much the present circumstances that struck terror into Sergh's heart. After all, being an Arkonide he had at his disposal such superior means that in the long run he felt confident of coping with any dangerous situation.

That he would choose capitulation at this moment was due to his first confrontation with living beings who pursued their goals with such incredible determination and vitality.

Sergh had never any doubts that he could easily get the better of these unwelcome intruders.

But he first needed some peace and quiet. His Arkonide brain, the result of many centuries of continuous decadence, had not escaped unscathed from this deteriorating process. The Arkonides' thought processes had slowed down. Sergh required a pause in which he could recall all the possibilities at his disposal in order to get rid of these strangers.

But not for a single instant had the conviction left him that he was always master of the situation.

His assertion, however, that he was expecting some guests and that he intended to give them some explanations which in turn would also touch upon the questions the strange intruder had posed, was absolutely true.

Sergh stretched all the way out on his divan, placed his limp arms gingerly alongside his body, closed his eyes and started to meditate.

Ghorn and the three strangers meanwhile sat down. An oppressive silence fell over Sergh's simultan-game room.

* * *

Taking into consideration all Thora and Khrest had seen during the past hours and days, they entered Sergh's funnel palace without any illusions what welcome would await them there. They fully realized they would not find the kind of reception due to members of the famous clan of the Zoltral.

Hardly had they entered the entrance hall when a metallic voice rudely ordered them to make their way as fast as possible to the 35th floor - this taught them a painful lesson that their expectations had been still too high after all.

They were even refused the customary welcome drink - a symbol rather than an actual drink - which was always offered to even the most humble visitors. Thora and Khrest floated upwards through the anti-grav shafts. Viewing all the familiar splendours around them inside the funnel-building, they felt only the sharp pangs of melancholy, and after they had reached the 35th floor, as they had been commanded to do, their nostalgic mood had given way to deep depression and hopelessness similar to that time when the immortal collective-being on the planet Wanderer had refused to give them the biological cell-shower which could have bestowed eternal life on them.

Doors opened automatically when they approached, pointing the path they were to follow in a most impersonal manner. Not a single inhabitant of this huge building was to be seen anywhere.

They passed through the small anteroom leading to Sergh's simultan-game chamber and Thora stopped short when the door slid aside permitting her a full view of the room.

Rhodan rose to his feet the moment he heard steps approaching and took up a position next to the door. He was afraid Ghorn might use the general distraction which would accompany the visitors' entrance to release some emergency alarm signal.

But Ghorn was still paralysed with fear. He did not budge.

'Rhodan ... you ... ?' Thora said startled.

Rhodan greeted her with a silent nod and pointed to a chair. 'Have a seat!' he invited her. 'That man over there on the couch has something to tell us and I presume he has meanwhile gathered up sufficient strength.'

Sergh slowly turned over on his side and eyed the two Arkonides from head to toe.

'On your feet!' Thora ordered sharply, 'When you're talking to one of the Zoltrals!'

A tired smile came over Sergh's face but he remained lying on his couch. 'This is one of the things,' he said casually, 'that I was going to tell you. The Zoltral clan is finished on Arkon!'

Thora and Khrest seemed to have expected something of the kind. Thora sank back into the chair Rhodan had offered her.

'Tell me everything and start at the beginning!' Thora requested.

'And put your feet on the floor! That's the least you can do!' growled Bell. 'I can't stand people stretched out on their backs who talk to me.'

To everyone's surprise, Sergh obeyed Bell's command, but Rhodan looked at Bell in silent disapproval as if to say: *no use creating artificial trouble*.

'Also the Zoltrals,' Sergh began in a bored tone of voice, 'didn't know that already many years ago some wise men devised a mechanism for Arkon and its Empire which would be set in motion at that moment when our nation's decadence and lethargy would reach such a degree as to endanger the continued existence of our galactic realm.'

'And this moment,' here Sergh paused for a few seconds, cleared his throat circumspectly before he went on, 'arrived six years ago. Obeying certain cues and special evaluation procedures, which no one has bothered investigating, the mightiest of all positronic computers ever built proceeded to take over as ruler of the Arkonide Empire and Arkon itself.'

'At the same time that the machine was taking charge of the most important administrative duties, it also relieved the ruling dynasty of its offices and privileges. The Zoltrals were forced to abdicate and a new ruler acceded to the throne. And because our race descended to its lowest point during the reign of the Zoltrals, necessitating assumption of power by the positronic brain, this clan has also fallen into disfavour ... so that you two are barely tolerated from that day on.'

'Just remember that and don't ever try again to force an old man to stand, just because you belong to that Zoltral family.'

'But despite all that I have recently received the news that you will be permitted to visit our home planet. In a few hours a spaceship will land here at our spaceport to pick you up and take you to Arkon. How long you can stay there and what you may do there, you'll find out once you arrive.'

Totally exhausted from his long speech, Sergh reclined on his side and closed his eyes. Thora was sitting stiff-backed in her chair, while Khrest stood behind her, leaning against the seat for support.

'A machine ... !' moaned Khrest.

Sergh nodded with a bored expression. 'Yes, and it does its work far better than any previous imperator of the Zoltrals could ever manage. The machine equips all spaceships with robots and needn't worry about the crews since Naats and other races can be taken aboard to work there under the watchful eyes of these robot masters.'

Thora's old temper flared up. 'We know well enough,' she hissed, 'that most imperators were no good. But it cannot be left up to a machine to change that sad state of affairs! This positronic brain is the beginning of the end. The rule of that machine will bring swift ruin to our galactic empire, while it would take several thousands of years to die of senile decrepitude if it had been left under the imperators'

reign.'

Sergh was not in the least bit interested. 'You'd better hurry up,' he suggested in a weary voice, 'or else you might miss the spaceship from Arkon! The positronic won't wait, and if you should miss this opportunity you'll never again get another chance to obtain landing permission on Arkon.'

And what will happen to the ship that brought us here?' Thora inquired angrily.

'Why should *you* worry about that?' Sergh asked in turn.

Thora glanced at Rhodan, who reassured her in English. 'Don't worry about us! Try to get to Arkon. Maybe we'll make it there meanwhile on our own; and if we shouldn't succeed, you might be better able to help us if you are already there!'

Thora rose from her chair. 'We're leaving!' she said to Sergh, and Rhodan could hear from her voice how close she was to bursting into tears.

'Yes, do leave,' murmured Sergh without bothering to look at her.

Rhodan attempted to wave to Thora as a sign of encouragement, while she and Khrest were leaving the room; but she did not look back in his direction. His hand was arrested in midair without completing his farewell gesture.

And once more Rhodan and his companions were left alone with the tired administrator and his scared deputy.

* * *

Sergh moaned and looked at Rhodan and his two friends. 'I thought you'd left together with the two Arkonides.' It was impossible to know whether he meant this seriously; his voice sounded as bored as ever.

Rhodan got up. 'That's where you are wrong,' he said icily. 'You know why we came here to see you and you also know that we won't leave until you've met our demands.'

'A few slaps might make him understand quicker,' suggested Bell. 'Otherwise he won't be completely awake in another live hours to understand what's wanted from him.'

Rhodan nodded and carefully contemplated Sergh's face as if he were trying to pick the best spot to hit him. 'Yes, that's a great idea, Bell,' he answered.

Sergh reacted with amazing speed. His passivity vanished instantaneously as he jumped off the couch.

'Sorry, sorry ... I didn't mean it that way!' he protested with an embarrassed smile. 'Although it would undoubtedly be rather interesting to find out what emotions are evoked if one is physically punished - what an atavistic method, hitting someone in the face! - but I'm afraid it might be painful, so I'd rather after all...'

‘Go on, go on!’ Rhodan encouraged him. ‘But when we leave this room, you and your deputy will come with us. I’m certain nobody will bother us as long as the Exalted Administrator is at the end of my impulse gun!’

Sergh couldn’t agree more. ‘The control board for the generators of the suction field is installed at the bottom of the funnel stem. We must get down there.’

Rhodan gave orders how to proceed. Reginald Bell led the group. He was followed by the Administrator; next came the deputy, while Tako brought up the rear. Rhodan tried to be everywhere at the same time.

The funnel’s interior was still completely deserted. Rhodan suddenly regretted not having brought along with him one of the telepaths who could have told him what Sergh was thinking at any moment.

But when they had set out on this mission it was difficult to know in advance that four men could just as easily have made their way inside Sergh’s funnel palace without being seen as the three of them.

Passing through a series of anti-grav shafts they descended terrace by terrace. Rhodan started to believe finally that Sergh was so intimidated that he’d no longer make an attempt to entrap them.

This evidently was the reason Rhodan’s sense of caution was somewhat relaxed. Moreover, the surprise happened at a place where no one would have expected it - in the middle of an anti-grav shaft.

Sergh exposed himself to an astonishing degree of discomfort in order to rid himself of these bothersome guests. After all, he and Ghorn were in the same spot as the three Terranians, in the centre of the long tunnel when all of a sudden the anti-grav field stopped and changed poles. Everything inside the shaft was pulled downwards with irresistible force, hurled against the floor of the next lower room.

A mento-monitor, one of the few present in the building, had registered Sergh’s urgent, anxious thoughts and had promptly reacted to them. Sergh had chosen this passage on purpose because he knew that its walls had such a built-in monitor.

Sergh and Ghorn lost consciousness as a result of the crash, as did also the slightly-built Japanese. Rhodan and Bell felt only stunned; but before they had a chance to scramble to their feet, paralyzing nerve gas sprayed from needle-thin jets in the ceiling, the floor and the walls. Unconscious and stunned alike were freely inhaling the gas. Rhodan and Bell had not closed their helmets, which could have protected them, since they wanted to be able to speak with the Arkonides - and the jets were working noiselessly.

Within a few seconds Rhodan and Bell were unable to move. They did not become completely unconscious; they still managed to perceive what was going on around them, although all seemed to happen in a daze. Their active thought processes had nearly come to a standstill and their motor impulses were blocked.

After a few minutes, about a dozen helmeted figures emerged from the four anti-grav shafts which all ended in this room. Rhodan was vaguely aware that these helmets were in reality filters which shielded their wearers against the effects of the numbing gas.

The figures picked up the immobilized men and transported them upstairs. Rhodan failed to notice at what point the men carrying Sergh and Ghorn became separated from the rest. But he was fully aware

that the room where both he and his two unconscious companions were eventually deposited, was dark and shut off from the outside world.

He was overcome by fatigue - a result of the nerve gas action - and despite a valiant struggle it took barely a couple of moments before he fell asleep.

* * *

When Rhodan came to again, he had no idea how much time had passed but he noted with satisfaction that the sleep had left him much stronger.

Yet he could move his arms and legs only with great effort and his movements were as slow as if he had been an old, sick man. Still, slow and painful movements were better than none at all!

The room was as dark as before. Not even the tiniest ray of light penetrated inside. As Rhodan was struggling to move his limbs, he heard a rustling sound on the floor from which he concluded that the Arkonides had placed their prisoners on the bare plastic covering.

A mumbling, heavy voice came from the darkness: 'If I could lay my hands on that rickety Administrator I'd let him have it! Perry, is that you?'

'Yes, Reg, that's me!!'

Rhodan was shaking with laughter, which caused a good deal of pain in his weary body. But if Bell was already thinking of revenge then things couldn't be that bad with him.

'What's with Tako?'

'Don't know. Is he here with us?'

'Yes. Can you move?'

'Wait, let me try. Yes, a bit.'

'Then you look for Tako! I have to concentrate and think.'

'Not necessarily, sir!' said a weak, squeaky voice in the darkness. 'I'm awake again.'

'Again!' blustered Bell. 'First he sleeps till all hours of the day, and then ...'

'Quiet!' demanded Rhodan. 'We've more important things to discuss. Tako, can you move okay again?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Listen! We've found out now how hard it is to get your own way with these Arkonides. As decrepit as these people might seem to us, they still have a few more tricks up their sleeves than we

imagine. We don't know what Sergh has planned to do with us. Might be anything from letting us rot here in this dark hole to suddenly setting us free; we simply don't know. In any case, I believe whatever decision Sergh eventually arrives at, he'll want to make sure we don't escape from here. And the only way he can make sure is by periodically repeating the nerve gas paralysis.

'No doubt that must be the same sprinkler system built into the ceiling here as downstairs in the anti-grav tunnel where we got caught in Sergh's trap. Any moment now this paralysing spray might start up again.

'That means we've got to hurry if we want to get out of here.

'Tako?'

'Yes, sir!'

'Find out where we are and how we can get out of here.'

'Yes, sir!'

'But be careful - don't take any unnecessary risks. Just keep in mind: for the time being the Arkonides have not the slightest inkling that we have a teleporter with us here. Rely on your telejumps as a weapon and leave your thermo-raygun here. Hurry, will you, please!'

Tako vanished.

'And what other plans have you for us?' Bell wanted to know.

'Set free the *Ganymede*, of course ... or have you forgotten why we came here?'

'You still plan to do that?'

'Now more than ever. I don't know if Sergh was lying when he claimed the generators for the suction field were down in the funnel stem. But I'm inclined to think he felt so sure of tricking us that he didn't bother to invent some lie. Besides, such installations are usually to be found in the funnel stems.'

'I see. You want us to steal down there and demolish Sergh's switch boxes so he can never again nail down people who have landed on his spaceport with honest intentions.'

'Well, something like that. However *you* will have something else to do in the meantime.'

'I? What?'

'One of us has to stay in Sergh's private apartments while the other two work in the control panel room. Sergh somewhere has a room from where he can keep the whole palace under surveillance. Tako will find that room, then you'll sit there and make sure that nobody stabs us in the back. All clear?'

'Hum, I don't like the idea. Every funnel has search devices. If somebody wants to talk to the Administrator they'll activate this device and let it carry out a thorough search from room to room. And once he gets to the surveillance centre I'll be waiting there like a sitting duck - and the whole balloon will burst.

'No searching device reaches as far as the owner's private rooms, you ought to know that. And

especially a man like Sergh wouldn't let others stick their noses in his private affairs.'

'Alright, I give up,' sighed Bell.

A few second later Tako returned. 'We are here on the 43rd floor, sir. This terrace is built lower than all the others. There is a circular walk, fenced off by a railing toward the funnel's interior. Near its outside there are two circular rows of rooms. The first row has windows opening toward the circular walk but the outermost row has no windows at all. We are in one of these rooms here.'

'Hm, sounds like a prison. Any doors?'

'The usual ones. But the locks are barred; they can't be opened.'

'Any guards?'

'None. The house is as deserted as before.'

'What's the time?'

'The sky is still dark.'

Rhodan got to his feet. It hurt to move. The effects of the nerve gas had not yet vanished and Rhodan would have given a lot if he could have waited here quietly till all the after-effects had word off and he was perfectly fit again.

'Take the heat beamer, Tako, telejump outside and shoot off the lock. Be sure to aim right because the instant the lock's gone an alarm is bound to go off somewhere.'

Tako disappeared once more. Shortly afterwards the room was suddenly filled with an ugly hissing sound and soon grew to a fist-sized hole, finally to be replaced by the wide opening of a door.

Rhodan and Bell rushed out of the room and came to a halt at the window wall which faced the circular walk. Not a single Arkonide was in sight anywhere.

'It's of paramount importance for us to get away from here. They'll come and check up on us. By that time we must have disappeared from here. - Bell, you go with Tako. He'll locate the surveillance room for you. Tako, afterwards you'll join me. I'll be waiting for you in the uppermost room of the funnel stem. You remember that small room, don't you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Fine. Get going, you two!'

Rhodan waited until Tako and Bell had disappeared in the anti-grav tunnel in the back part of the room. Only then did he set out on his own way.

In order to confuse his opponent he did not use the same anti-grav shaft but first shot out two of the windows - which undoubtedly would set off some alarm - ran around the circular wall along the window wall till he got halfway around the funnel's interior, entered by force another room there which once again activated an emergency signal - and used one of the anti-grav tunnels leading downstairs.

He hoped that his strategy of using so many detours, and also causing innumerable warning signals to give off false alarms as he kept shooting out windows, locks and doors, would wreak utter havoc at some central alarm installation. The Arkonides would no longer know what to believe, or at least assume that they were dealing with a much larger number of yet undetected intruders.

Rhodan reached the 10th floor without encountering a single person. But then his luck ran out; all hell seemed to break loose.

As he was running from one shaft to another, a man wearing a uniform shot out of a lower lying tunnel opening. He probably belonged to Sergh's palace guard. Rhodan saw him open his mouth wide in sheer terror. But he also noticed the man's hand move swiftly to his side pocket to get at some weapon or perhaps a telecom instrument he carried there.

Rhodan jumped forward, although he felt he was moving like in a slow motion film. The after-effects of the nerve gas had not yet completely worn off. The Arkonide guard, who by nature and conviction was slow and phlegmatic, almost managed to pull out his weapon, but fortunately Rhodan beat him to it. Cursing angrily because of his snail's pace, Rhodan dealt a mighty blow that lifted the guard off his feet and sent him crashing against the wall, where he crumpled unconscious to the ground.

One floor below, Rhodan ran into a woman. Seeing the stranger, she started to scream, which attracted another Arkonide.

Rhodan dealt first with the man - luckily the slow reacting Arkonides even in an emergency failed to match Rhodan in his current weakened condition. Then he vigorously slapped the woman's face, forcing himself to abandon all gentlemanly feelings, whereupon she fainted, probably more out of indignation than real pain.

Slightly faster - but still not as fast as he was under normal conditions - he stormed on. On every floor he had to fight off at least one or two Arkonides, until he finally reached the anti-grav tunnel leading down into the funnel stem.

With a last, almost regretful glance around the lovely, fragrant gardens, he entrusted himself to the anti-grav field, kept pushing himself off the walls with his hands and feet and shot down into the room where he was supposed to meet Tako Kakuta.

But the Japanese had not yet arrived. There was nothing left for Rhodan but to wait.

* * *

Tako found the room Rhodan had spoken of within a few minutes. It was situated on the same floor as the simultan-game room. Tako described the path leading to it and Bell was confident he would find his way there regardless of what obstacles he'd encounter.

Tako disappeared.

Bell passed through a series of Sergh's private rooms until he finally came to the room Tako had described for him. Bell activated the instruments although there were a few among them with which he

was unfamiliar - and felt greatly relieved once the videoscreens lit up one after the other. He used one of the devices to undertake a thorough search of the uppermost room of the funnel stem. It did not take long until he found Rhodan there together with the Japanese.

Since he did not know whether the search instrument was coupled with an acoustic device, he pulled the helmet of his special suit over his head and spoke into the mike: 'I can see you clearly!'

Rhodan heard the words in his receiver and also closed his helmet.

'Okay,' he said. 'Stay glued to us, will you?'

'You bet!' exclaimed Bell.

* * *

The funnel stem housed altogether some 50 different engine rooms. Rhodan was sure that the room they were looking for was one of the largest among these. Therefore he sent Tako ahead and from every place the teleporter would materialize, he had to send a brief but precise description of the machines he'd see there.

Rhodan knew what he was looking for: a collection of instruments capable of regulating one or more suction field generators. By remote control, of course.

This necessitated first of all a telecom connection over which the guidance signals could be transmitted. Next, a generator was needed for especially high sender energies for the suction field generators on the landing strip of Naatral spaceport generated such strong marginal fields that a normal strength guidance signal could not penetrate all the way to the engines: it was either bounced off the marginal fields or else absorbed by them.

Equipped with this knowledge they had no difficulty finding what they wanted. It took six telejumps till Tako located a big hall from which he sent a quick report corresponding so closely to what Rhodan had in mind that there was no longer any doubt they had reached the right spot.

Tako's voice sounded very distorted because of the manifold interferences that all the machines caused in their telecom. Rhodan had trouble understanding him. 'Tako, somewhere in this room must be another strong telecom instrument! Find it!'

Tako's answer was unintelligible. But in a short while his voice came through loud and clear once more.

'I'm standing directly in front of it, sir! What should I do now?'

'Go back three steps, take aim at it with your thermo-raygun and blast that thing to bits and pieces!'

* * *

Reginald Bell could see both on his videoscreen: Perry Rhodan and the Japanese. Breathless with excitement he watched as Tako was raising his thermo-beamer, took careful aim at the wide front of the telecom box—

He heard the roaring sound in his video receivers as the telecom began to activate its energy reserves. He saw how ‘suddenly the picture changed to violet. He called out: ‘Perry! Tako! Stop! That telecom has a mento-fuse! Don’t ... !‘

It was too late. Both Rhodan and Tako Kakuta reacted too slowly. They lacked the sudden spurt of energy that had soared through Bell’s pain-stricken body. Tako’s finger was already on the trigger and his weapon discharged before he had a chance to react to Bell’s warning shouts.

Something as powerful as a bomb exploded inside Tako’s brain.

Something blinded Rhodan, made him scream in murderous pain and flung him, unconscious to the ground.

Something shot through Bell’s skull, left a burning trail and catapulted him out of his comfortable chair. His senses had completely faded away by the time he hit the ground.

Something took care that this very instant all conscious life was extinguished in the Exalted Administrator Sergh’s house.

6/ PERRY ON THE SPOT

Whatever the mento-fuse had triggered, its after-effects at least were not quite so unpleasant as those of the nerve gas Rhodan had inhaled but a few hours earlier.

Perry opened his eyes and stared, amazed to find that he was in the sickbay of the *Ganymede* .

Two concerned faces bent over him. He recognized Dr. Manoli - Eric, an old friend, one of his companions during his first trip to the moon on the good old *Stardust I* - and the beautiful features of the imperious Thora.

‘Don’t carry on like that, boss - it isn’t that bad!’ the doctor said.

Perry protested: ‘I haven’t said a word!’

Thora inquired, worry and concern clearly showing on her stunning features: ‘How are you feeling, Perry?’

‘Not too bad, considering. What’s going on? Where are Reg and Tako? How did we get here?’

‘Easy, Perry.’ Dr. Manoli tried to calm him - a task perhaps tantamount to trying to tame a tornado with

a paper fan. ‘One thing at a time. First - what’s going on. Well, that’s what we hoped to find out from you. Second: Bell and Kakuta are in a cabin next door. If I know Bell, it won’t be long till he’ll regain consciousness; the Japanese will probably take longer to respond. Third: you arrived here in the arms of some robots. Unmanned gliders delivered you in front of the *Ganymede*. All we had to do was pick you up - they even had adjusted the neutralizers in your transportsuits so that you weren’t harmed by the greater gravitational pull of Naat.’

‘Hm. And what—?’ wondered Rhodan while he rubbed his head, remembering that the pain which had made him faint had come from inside his skull. Manoli understood his gesture.

‘As far as I can tell, you suffered a mental shock. It knocked you unconscious. The cerebral blow was most likely artificially induced. It must have been as powerful as an impulse from a thousand hate-filled suggesters.’

Rhodan stared ahead, still wondering.

‘Does that mean anything to you?’ asked Manoli.

‘I think so,’ Rhodan answered slowly. ‘How about it - can I get up now? I’m feeling...’

‘Sure, I know. You’re feeling as strong as a tyrex and ready to tango. You have my permission as your physician to get out of bed.’

‘Thanks! And how are things with the *Ganymede*? Is she still glued to the ground?’

‘What did you think?’

‘Right - what did I think. Well, please see to it that all officers come to an assembly in the mess hall in half an hour.’

Manoli nodded assent. ‘Will do. By the way - there’s something else.’

‘Yes?’

‘Thora and Khrest - their permission to fly to Arkon has been revoked.’

Rhodan nearly choked. ‘What—! How did that happen?’

‘Quite simply. An imageless telecom call came. A rather haughty voice announced permission had been cancelled, there’d be no ship to come to pick them up. That was all; no explanation, no chance to ask any questions.’

Rhodan’s attention turned to Thora. His features softened, his voice lowered. ‘I’m afraid I’m to blame for this,’ he said softly. ‘You know we attempted to switch off the suction-field generators and we have incriminated you with that. I’m very sorry.’

Thora gently waved aside his apologies. She said in English: ‘Don’t be concerned. It would probably not have been so good for us to return to Arkon in such a humiliating fashion anyway.’

Rhodan’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Do you still believe there’ll be another chance for you to reach Arkon?’

Thora smiled -*a very becoming, coquettish smile* , Perry Thought.

‘Oh, yes, I’m convinced we will,’ she replied

‘Really? And how do you plan to arrange that?’

‘I don’t.’

‘You don’t? Then by what miracle—?’

‘Oh, you consider you have miraculous powers?’

‘Me?’

‘I have confidence in you, Perry. You *will* find some way to do it, Perry - won’t you?’

For some reason, when she put it that way, Perry felt as tall as a tyrex - and twice as strong. For Thora, nothing seemed impossible - even escape from Naat and journey’s end on Arkon. Odds, orders, threats, perils - out of his way!

For Thora, he could not fail.

Perry would prevail!

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TO ARKON

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