

Perry Rhodan is on a secret mission on a planet of Arkonide descendants. With him, on a mile-long 'liberated' space battleship is the extraordinary Pucky, and the imperious Thora.

But new mysteries arise on the planet Zalit.

The Zalites are coppery-skinned aliens with copper-green hair. Their planet has become the base of the 'Watchdogs'—telepathic, marine methane-breathing creatures from another world who establish themselves on Zalit for unknown purposes.

What are their aims? Are they malevolent? A new and fantastic challenge for Perry Rhodan and his mutant allies...

This is the stirring story of—

CHALLENGE OF THE UNKNOWN

1/ THE BRAIN MUST BE BEFRIENDED

"A PLANESHIP!" Reginald Bell declared. "I don't call this a spaceship any more—it's a regular planet!" Perry Rhodan's aide was panting with exhaustion as he let himself be engulfed by the black gullet of the antigrav cylinder. Lieutenant Julian Tifflo, his eyes shut tight, followed suit. "And we're living *inside* this planet!"

"You're absolutely right, Mr. Bell." Tifflo—also known as Tiff—uttered these words with great effort while the speed of their falls was automatically braked till their descents gradually changed to gentle floating. "Sometimes I think I'll lose my way in this monster of a ship."

"Which of course is the reason for all these constant alarm drills," Bell enlightened him. "We're *supposed* to learn how to find our way around in this maze." His healthy red complexion deepened several degrees. Above his broad moonlike face bristled his reddish hair, while anger and amusement alternately fought for supremacy in his watery-blue eyes. "I'll never master it!"

Tifflo simply nodded his head, remaining silent. They had been ordered to report to station H 35, wherever that might be. 'H' probably stood for 'hangar', indicating that location might be found in the

vicinity of the outer wall of the giant craft. Inside the antigravitor they were falling toward the hull but fervently hoped they hadn't chosen the wrong side for this would mean they had made a detour of at least a mile and a half.

They came to a sudden halt. Before them stretched a brightly lit corridor marked H. *Well, at least we got that much right*, thought Bell, relieved, and left the antigrav tunnel. Close by one of the technicians was taking it easy and regarding the new arrivals with obvious interest. Bell made his way toward him, asked: "Say, pal, could you tell us where we might find H 35? We're new here—"

"Hey, Reggie!" came a voice out of nowhere, reverberating through the semi-circular corridor whose ends disappeared from sight in a gentle curve. "Since when are you permitted to cheat?"

Tiffloor flinched. His eyes frantically sought the hidden lens of the intercom-camera which transmitted their images to the command centre. He could detect nothing. Slightly perplexed, he glanced at Bell but the redhead made an innocent face, shaking his head vigorously as he addressed the invisible speaker:

"And you call that fair to spy on us, Perry? No one can find their way in this confounded maze of corridors, elevators, hangars, floors and compartments. A bit of help ought to be okay under the circumstances. I wouldn't be so petty, Perry, and—"

"Wouldn't you? How about yesterday!" came another rebuke from the air, this time accompanied by a subdued giggle, which caused Bell's face to turn deep-red with fury. "You were in charge of the emergency drill then. When John Marshall couldn't find out at once where he was supposed to go and wanted to get some information, you made such a fuss and screamed at him so that the poor fellow almost had a nervous breakdown. How could he guess there were hidden cameras even in the restrooms."

Tiffloor grinned, relieved, not so much because of the photographic surveillance in the lavatories but because he assumed that Perry Rhodan didn't take it too seriously that they had tried to cheat a little.

But Bell remained furious. "What business had Marshall to be in that place during an alarm?" he wanted to know angrily. "Next time everybody might..."

"Enough of that!" he was cut short in mid-sentence. "I'll give you another two minutes to find department H 35. We'll all meet in the command centre in half an hour. Is that clear?"

"Okay, okay," growled Bell and turned around and looked at Tiffloor. "Come along, Tiff. We'll find that dam place without anybody's help... aha, here's number 34. Then 35 can't be much farther."

And he was right.

Before their time had run out they managed to place the palms of their hands against the lock of a door which opened in response to their body warmth. There was a big sign reading H 35 on that door.

It was a hangar.

Most of the huge ball was taken up by a giant sphere whose diameter was nearly 180 feet. A spaceship of the guppy type. Faster-than-light, easy to manoeuvre, heavily armed and equipped with powerful protective shields.

"Thank heavens!" said Tiffloor and announced his name to the officer in charge. "Not a second too soon."

"Nor too late!" observed Bell, highly pleased, stating his name although the officer knew very well who he was. "And now let's get back to the command centre. If we don't hurry we can starve before we get there. The next alarm drill is scheduled for five hours from now—unless something unforeseen should happen, of course."

* * * *

Two very different monsters were hovering apparently motionless in the infinite cosmos which was completely filled by stars, leaving not a single dark spot in a great blaze of light. This confusion of suns presented an unusual sight to a human being familiar only with the nocturnal sky above Earth. But the sun of Arkon was 34,000 light-years from Earth. It was located in the globular cluster M 13, which consisted of over 30,000 stars packed into a relatively small space 99 light-years across. Some suns were so close together that they might be mistaken for twin stars, which, of course, was not the case from an astronomical point of view.

Arkon was situated almost at the centre of this globular cluster and three light-years away from the two monsters which were circling a gigantic red sun at a distance of 12 billion miles.

With one single leap through hyperspace Rhodan had fled from the Arkonides' sphere of influence, hoping to gain sufficient time here in the vicinity of the giant red sun to familiarize his crew with the captured *Titan*. Under these circumstances it had seemed too risky to return immediately to Earth with their new acquisition.

The captured *Titan* was one of the monsters.

It had the same spherical shape as the old *Stardust*, although it was twice as big. With a diameter of nearly one mile, the super-battleship of the Arkonides eclipsed anything Rhodan or any other human being had been able to imagine. Its engines and armament generally resembled that found in the old *Stardust*, except for greater size and extent. There was nothing in the known universe capable of penetrating the protective screen of the giant sphere.

Two bulges to the north and to the south of the sphere's equator were formed by the hangars housing the 40 guppies, the 180 foot wide space spheres, which could be ready for immediate action at any time. The guppies carried a crew of at least 15 men.

Moving quite close to the *Titan*, in their orbit around the red giant sun, was the spaceship *Ganymede*. She looked almost dainty, although she was some 2500 feet long and 600 feet wide at her thickest part. But not only her size distinguished her from the captured battleship which Rhodan had named *Titan*: she was cylinder-shaped rather than spherical.

There was a crew of 300 men aboard the *Ganymede* who were spared the drill manoeuvres to which the 700 people manning the *Titan* were forced to submit, for the *Titan* had been seized by Rhodan just a few days ago.

The *Titan*'s control centre was twice the size of the one on the *Stardust*, which had remained back on Earth. There was a mind-boggling profusion of instruments and control panels whose function would have

remained incomprehensible to Rhodan if he had not passed through the Arkonide hypno-training. This way it took only a few hours until he had learned to control the ship and could do whatever he wanted very much to the dismay of the most gigantic of all positronic brains in the universe, which in actuality was the, ruler of the empire of the decadent Arkonides.

For that had been the greatest surprise to Perry Rhodan: neither the Arkonides nor their Emperor but a giant positronic computer administered the mightiest star realm ever in the history of the universe. This was the only reason that galactic empire had not broken up a long time ago.

Rhodan was standing, his back leaning against one of the control panels, and contemplating his closest collaborators and friends whom he had requested to appear in the control centre after the latest emergency drill was over and they had time for a quick snack in the mess hall.

Representing the Mutant Corps was the telepath John Marshall, originally from Australia. He was standing beside Thora, whose dreams of a glorious return to Arkon had been so abruptly shattered. Her tall, slender figure revealed nothing of the keen disappointment that had almost destroyed her emotionally. On the contrary: Rhodan thought he had never seen the white-haired, golden-eyed Arkonide woman look so determined and full of vigour as at this very moment. Also Khrest, her older companion and leader of the expedition that 13 years ago had crash-landed on Earth's moon, seemed to have awakened from a long and refreshing sleep.

Rhodan noted this change for the better with a sense of relief. At first he had feared their painful disappointment would have a disastrous effect on his friends but now it became evident that just the opposite had been the case.

Col. Freyt, now commander of the *Ganymede* was also present. His external appearance resembled that of Perry Rhodan, which always filled him with secret pride and gave Bell a chance occasionally to tease him in a good-natured way.

Bell and Tiffloor were standing side by side. The young lieutenant, former cadet of the Terranian Space Academy, had gained the full confidence of his superiors and had become part of the 'family', a term frequently used by Bell. Many missions together had resulted in a close friendship between the two men.

And of course, there was Pucky!

Three feet tall, covered with a rust-brown fur, Pucky resembled a giant-sized mouse with a broad, flat beaver-tail. His brown eyes with their endearing look had given him the nickname 'the monster with the guileless glance'. For he was a monster, at least as regards his special abilities. He liked to be known as an animal, since he refused categorically to be compared with a human being—an insult in his eyes. Pucky had stolen aboard the *Stardust* when it landed on the Planet of the Dying Sun. There Pucky began to deploy his telekinetic gift in a playful manner. Nobody at that time had any inkling that he also possessed the gift of telepathy and teleportation. Not even Pucky himself was aware of his talents. Not until he had been thoroughly trained by Rhodan's other mutants had his talents properly emerged and then been improved.

Today Pucky was counted among Rhodan's best and most capable friends.

He was sitting upright, his back leaning against the wall. His sole incisor, slightly protruding, lent a roguish grin to his cute pointed mouse-face. A look of impatience had replaced the usual expression of devotion in his eyes.

And then Pucky said in faultless Intercosmo: "If I'm not mistaken everyone is here now. Can't we finally get started? I'd like to know where we're at and what our plans are."

His voice rang out in high-pitched, chirping notes. Bell grinned and inconspicuously poked Tifflor in the ribs.

"Isn't it marvellous to have Pucky around? I just saved myself asking that dumb question."

Rhodan smiled in Pucky's direction and threw a brief glance of warning at Bell. There was no time now for the customary squabbles which usually would end with Bell's getting the short end of it.

"Let's examine our situation," Rhodan began. "The red giant sun is not registered in our terrestrial star catalogues and will therefore be named by us. Our calculations so far have shown that it is being orbited by 15 planets, of which several are inhabited or at least sparsely settled. We are not quite sure but the fourth planet appears to be main world of this solar system. So far we haven't been discovered, which is not surprising considering all this traffic."

"Traffic?" Tifflor asked, failing to understand.

"Yes, traffic. Don't forget, lieutenant, we are here at the centre of a huge star realm. The three light-years distance to Arkon is practically negligible. In any case, we're much safer here than in some deserted sector of the galaxy where every transition is bound to be noted at once. Here, however, it was merely one among many others. Nobody has become aware of our arrival here. For that reason I believe it'll be right to continue with the training of our crews before we make plans for our flight back home to Earth—if at all."

Bell stepped forward. He believed there was a question he ought to ask for the benefit of all concerned. "Why should we stay here any longer? Haven't we accomplished our mission by doing our best to help Thora and Khrest return to Arkon? Why don't *you* ask them if they're still interested in remaining any longer in this section of the Milky Way, which is so decadent and robot ruled."

"You really think we accomplished our mission, Reg? I don't. What did we find out? A computer, built once upon a time by superior Arkonide intellects, is now ruling the mighty star realm by force and cold logic. Without this positronic brain this realm would no longer exist. But even the Brain can make mistakes. We've seen proof of that—and without that proof we wouldn't be alive today. The Brain was wrong. Therefore we are justified to assume that it would be worth while trying to bring about some mutual agreement. How do we know the robot regent didn't already order a battleship to fly to Earth in order to destroy it? And all this, of course, in the interest of safeguarding the interests of the Arkonide Empire! The positronic brain might have found out about Terra's location in the universe—naturally we don't know for sure. If our old enemies the Galactic Traders should have betrayed Terra's position to the Arkonides, we must be on our guard. The question we are facing now is simply: shall we attempt to bring about an agreement with the Brain or shall we return to Earth as soon as we have familiarized ourselves with this ship and have learned to manoeuvre it? There is no other alternative."

Thora, who had seemed to want to say something for quite a while, spoke up: "We shall not remain undetected for long here in this area. The ship was stolen. Perry, you mustn't believe that this fact will be accepted without any counter measures. It won't be long until the Brain has discovered our whereabouts."

"How long?"

"Days, perhaps even weeks. It all depends where they begin their search. It will also depend on the inhabitants of this red star system. And by the way, Perry, there's no need to find a new name for the red sun: we call it Voga. Voga has 15 planets. The fourth planet is the main world and is known as Zalit. So far the Zalites have always been loyal subjects of our Empire. And I see no reason why this should have changed."

"Is Zalit suitable for oxygen breathers?"

"Like most habitable worlds it has an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere. Some 15 thousand years ago Zalit was settled by our Arkonide ancestors. This makes the Zalites direct descendants of the Arkonides. Their planet's close proximity to Arkon ensures us their absolute loyalty."

Rhodan did not fail to notice the implied threat in Thora's remark but this threat was not intended for him.

"We don't know in what way things might have changed here," he cautioned. "Just remember, Thora, all that has happened on Arkon during these past 13 years since you left. Your ruling dynasty came to an end; you and Khrest have been ostracized from Arkonide society because a new reign took over your government. Don't you think it possible that something similar might have occurred here on Zalit?"

"In that case Zalit would no longer exist!"

Khrest nodded his head in agreement. "Thora is right, Perry. There would be no more Zalit."

Bell could no longer restrain his opinion. "How come?" he wanted to know. "Or do you mean to say that these ridiculous Arkonides, that no one can even take seriously, had the courage to attack another system and to destroy it? They'd much rather spend their time in front of their television sets staring at abstract colour lines. They do nothing but let things take their own course."

"Not quite," interjected Rhodan. "The problem is that they leave everything to the gigantic and organically thinking positronicon, which rules the empire. And this mechanical brain rarely makes a wrong decision. Sorry, Bell, but Thora is right. If Zalit exists we must regard it as proof of their continued loyalty to the Empire."

"And?"

"That means if we should meet them we have to remain on our guard. My foremost concern is to gain the robot brain's confidence. We know it is acting according to an ancient special programming and that it is precisely informed about Arkon's situation. It therefore knows what degree of decadence befell its former builders and it is consequently interested in ferreting out those still capable of thinking and to 'awaken' them. Compared to the rest of their compatriots, we ought to characterize Khrest and Thora as youthful firebrands. That's why they were again acknowledged by the Brain, although not unconditionally accepted. I'm convinced that I, too, could be approved by the robot brain, if I could prove to it the sincerity of my intentions toward Arkon."

"Acknowledged—as what?" interjected Col. Freyt, who had thus far refrained from any remarks. "As an Arkonide perhaps?"

Rhodan smiled. "Come, come now, dear Colonel! As a member of a loyal, second-class nation, what else? But it would do. That way I could keep the ship and move about freely within the Empire. Terra would not be endangered any more and would be indirectly protected by Arkon."

Freyt's uneasiness vanished. "I believe I'm beginning to understand what you're driving at, Rhodan."

"Pleased to hear that, Colonel. Mightily pleased. Under these circumstances you'll also understand why I'm so interested to see my crew get over with their training period as fast as possible. The *Titan* must be ready for action when the decision will be made. We still don't know the ship properly. Sure, it's the *Stardust*'s counterpart, except twice its size and power. But there are certain differences we mustn't ignore. It happened only yesterday during one of the drills that one of our radio officers got so hopelessly lost in this labyrinth that when he was found in a part of the part which had never been explored before, four hours later, he had become a total nervous wreck. You can't imagine what that means: a sphere with a diameter of one mile. Theoretically it would be possible to pack Earth's entire population inside, if you'd jam them in like sardines in a can."

"Theoretically!" came Bell's rumbling voice from the background. "And theoretically you can't count either on becoming friends with a robot brain."

"In any case, we've got to give it a try before it gets the crazy idea of sending a robot-guided battleship to the area of our solar system. I realize we've left Maj. Deringhouse and Nyssen in charge back on Terra and they are well capable of defending Earth—but we don't know what weapons will be used to attack them."

"I don't believe," Thora suddenly entered the conversation, "that the Brain knows Earth's location."

Rhodan's eyebrows shot up. "Why not, Thora?"

For a single second their eyes met and melded. Rhodan's spine tingled. *How deep were her eyes! How soulful this woman could look who had perpetually kept him at arm's length all these past 13 years.* Ever since Arkon, had rejected Thora, she and Perry had begun to come so much closer to each other. Suddenly they were real allies, pursuing the same goal.

The barrier that had separated them for 13 years had broken.

"Otherwise the Brain would have made other decisions and treated us very differently. Most likely it would have killed you, Perry. I couldn't say exactly but I believe it does not know Earth's position."

"That would be a strategic advantage for us," stated Col. Freyt.

"Quite right, Colonel," agreed Rhodan. "By the way, as soon as this discussion is over you may return to the Ganymede. Further instructions will follow, if necessary, via radio contact. There's no danger in that because normal radio waves take three years to reach Arkon." Rhodan turned again to Thora. "What do these Zalites look like?"

She answered without hesitation. "As I already pointed out, they have descended from the Arkonides and therefore have the same appearance."

"I know a race that also descended from the Arkonides but hasn't the slightest resemblance any longer to their forefathers."

"You are referring to the Mounders, the special guard troops of the Springers. They have lived on a world with almost three times the gravity of Arkon for many thousands of years. But in that respect Zalit differs only very little from Arkon. The only difference in the Zalites' outer appearance is their

brownish-red skin and their copper-coloured hair, that sometimes will show a greenish cast. This has something to do with their solar radiation. They are highly intelligent, have mastered space travel and are by far not so decadent as my own people. Till now Zalit was considered to be the most faithful and dependable of all our colonies."

Rhodan had been listening attentively to Thora's words. He looked at her intently and finally asked: "There seems to be some contradiction, Thora: assuming the *Zalites* are not decadent but on the contrary enterprising and intelligent, why then would they remain the obedient vassals of an inferior nation?"

A shadow flitted across Thora's face. "I've already told you that Arkon is only three light-years away from Zalit. In case of a rebellion against the empire, the robot brain would show them no mercy. And the *Zalites* are well aware of this. They'd never dare to rebel openly against Arkon."

"I understand, Thora," Rhodan remarked. What he had surmised earlier he now found confirmed by her explanations. The *Zalites* might possibly turn out to become his allies.

All of a sudden John Marshall rose from his chair. His eyes assumed a strange, fixed expression. Rhodan knew at once what this meant: Marshall was receiving a telepathic message. But who was it from? A mutant aboard the *Titan* ?

"What's the matter, John?"

But before Marshall could reply, Pucky had jumped forward, squeaking in a shrill voice: "The *Ganymede* ! She's moving away from us!"

Marshall was so surprised that he could barely manage a brief confirmative nod. For a moment he seemed to have forgotten that he wasn't the only telepath in the command centre.

"What's going on?" Col. Freyt called out. After all, being the commander of the other ship he had to be sure that she was circling around the sun Voga in a stable orbit, the same as the *Titan* . "The *Ganymede* can't move away from the *Titan* ! Not until her engines have been started up."

"But she's doing it all the same!" insisted John. "I received the thought impulses of an officer standing in the *Ganymede* 's control centre as he was making this observation. He'll report in shortly!"

Indeed it was hardly three seconds till the intercom began to hum.

Rhodan bounded halfway across the room to switch on the receiver. A few more seconds passed and the videoscreen lit up. A young man's worried face appeared on it.

Col. Freyt stepped next to Rhodan.

"What's happened, Lt. Marten? How can it be possible that the *Ganymede* is moving away from the *Titan* when

"You know about it?" Marten wondered out loud, quite perplexed. But then he understood as soon as he caught sight of the two telepaths Marshall and Pucky. "Aha—I see. Was I thinking so strongly? Yes, sir, it seems the *Ganymede* has left its orbital path and is moving closer to the red sun. I'm at a loss to find any explanation for this and I am waiting for your orders..."

"Just a minute!" Rhodan interjected and switched on additional direct optical observation screens. "First

we have to make sure what is actually taking place here. Maybe it's just an illusion..."

"It's definitely not an illusion, sir!" Lt. Marten exclaimed desperately, seeing that nobody would believe his words. "We are definitely moving away from you."

Rhodan did not reply. He waited until the observation screens lit up. There was a long wide row across the wall reflecting an image of the world outside the ship.

The *Titan* was still circling the red sun in the same orbit as heretofore, while the *Ganymede* indeed moved away toward the giant red sun with considerable acceleration.

"Don't do anything!" Rhodan instructed the lieutenant. "Wait until you receive further orders from me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," came the reply but Lt. Marten's face made it obvious he'd prefer not to have understood. Waiting passively was definitely not one of his great attributes.

Rhodan turned to Bell.

"Feed the following problem at top speed to the navigational brain: "Did the *Titan* leave its orbit around Voga? If the answer is positive: by how much? Now hurry up, Reg!"

"The *Titan*?" Bell stammered, bewildered. "You mean the *Ganymede*, don't you, Perry?"

"You heard me right the first time. The *Titan* is what I'm interested to find out. Ever heard anything about optical illusions or the relativity principle, old boy? If you try to watch something with just your unaided eye you can't ascertain whether *we* or the *others* are actively moving away. And since we seem to be moving in the direction of Arkon I have some well-founded doubts about the whole affair. Get it?"

The sudden silence in the control centre was sufficient proof that they had indeed understood him.

* * * *

The calculations indicated plainly that the *Titan* had been drawn out of the gravitational field of the giant sun by invisible and immeasurable forces. On the other hand, the *Ganymede* orbited afar in unchanged free fall around the entire giant system.

As Bell showed him the positronicon's figures, Rhodan flipped on the intercom. He only nodded and waited for the com system to warm up. Various pushbuttons provided connections with all sections of the ship, so that his voice could be heard everywhere.

"Attention, all hands!" Rhodan began. His grey-eyed lean countenance was tense, revealing the iron will ready not only to take on human enemies but also, if necessary, a giant robot brain. "By all indications, we've strayed within range of a powerful tractor beam. In view of the fact that we're being deviated toward Arkon, we can assume the transmitter is in that area. So much for the facts. All hands will repair immediately to battle stations. We may be attacked as soon as our position is known. I want five guppies manned and held ready for use. Further orders will follow." He cut off the intercom and established video

connection with the *Ganymede*. "Lieutenant Marten? Your status remains quo. Do not attempt any tactic at this time. While Col. Freyt is on board the *Titan*, you have the command of the *Ganymede*. Please confirm..."

"Very well, sir!" came the brisk reply, before Rhodan cut off.

Bell sat in the co-pilot seat in front of the navigation controls. Nothing coming from the direction of Arkon escaped him on the scanner screen. Apparently he was expecting a unit of the Arkonide fleet to appear at any moment.

Thora and Khrest appeared to be uncertain. Colonel Freyt joined them and attempted to learn what he could concerning the probable nature of the tractor beam that had ensnared the *Titan*. John Marshall and Tiff carried on a low-voiced conversation. Pucky was nowhere to be seen: he had probably left the control room inconspicuously in order to go his own way again.

Rhodan suddenly fired up the propulsion engines which encircled the ship. The giant impulse converters developed such a thrust that the *Titan* could accelerate from 375 miles per second to the speed of light within a short span of 10 minutes. The tremendous inertial pressure, equivalent to 60,000 Earth gravities, was not noticeable because of the automatic field generators. Rhodan slowly activated each thrust unit that was turned toward Arkon.

Bell came to life, swamped by new results. The navigation computer flashed the first new data. The distance to the red sun Voga was increasing proportionately. Even when Rhodan permitted the impulse converters to work harder, thus increasing the repulsion force against Arkon, nothing changed. It was as though the *Titan*'s propulsion had simply been neutralized.

Rhodan frowned, gravely concerned. He threw Bell a quick glance, hesitated a moment, then threw in full power.

Inside the giant sphere the vibration and humming of the wide-open converters increased. It rumbled in everyone's ears. Everyone's heartbeat became almost painfully audible and seemed to be the pulse of a mighty universe. Under their feet, the deck began to tremble. The *Titan* struggled with all its power against the uncanny force that had gripped her and was now bent on dragging her toward Arkon.

Bell depressed several keys. The navigation computer began to bum and a few seconds later a thin strip of glistening metal popped out onto the console.

The embossed numerals were clear and distinct.

They were receding with undiminished velocity from Voga. Rhodan shut down the engines. He spoke into the sudden silence. "The robot brain is stronger than we are. So what now...?"

Col. Freyt then proceeded to demonstrate his reasoning powers. "We have to know whether or not the *Titan* alone can be gripped by the tractor beam. In any case, the *Ganymede* is free of it. If the guppies are also free, we could use a couple of them to abandon the *Titan* and go back to the *Ganymede*."

Rhodan was hesitant. "Granted, that's one way of rescuing ourselves—but at the cost of losing the mightiest ship in the universe. I still believe that Earth will one day make use of this ship. Should we, then, for the sake of expediency, just lightly surrender her?"

"What's the use, now that we've fallen into Arkon's power?"

"Nowhere," admitted Rhodan matter-of-factly. "But I don't intend to surrender myself to the uncertain captivity we've just run away from. Nor do I intend to give up so quickly now. There must still be *some* way of outwitting that Brain. In any case, I'm not calling the cards until I can come up with a trump hand."

"A trump hand?"

"Exactly. It'll just have to come to me, somehow."

Freyt didn't answer. He gazed silently at the videoscreen and observed that Voga was already beginning to shrink in size. The *Titan*'s velocity must have increased considerably. Only a tiny point of light indicated the presence of the *Ganymede*.

Suddenly, Tiff said, "Do you think that the robot brain's radiation can be measured?"

Rhodan looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"If its transmission field density can be determined, then at least we'd know if it's only trained on the Titan or if it has been sent arbitrarily into space and has caught us by mere accident, completely in an unfocused beam."

Rhodan brightened appreciatively and turned to Bell. "What do your instrument's say? I mean in particular the outside electromagnetic radiometers."

Two minutes later they knew. The tractor beam intensity was measurable. By this means it could be determined where and when and in what strength the transmitted energy was present. A hurried connection was made with the *Ganymede*. A quick investigation revealed that the identical tractor intensity also impinged upon the former Springer ship but completely without effect.

This was the deciding factor that had to be put into application.

With his inimitable logic, Rhodan proceeded to do so. "Very well. So we know that only the *Titan* responds to the will of the robot brain and not the *Ganymede*. Therefore, it's reasonably safe to conclude that a special circuitry, some sort of electronic device, exists on board this ship, which can be energized by the Brain even at a distance of three light-years. Once this circuit is activated, then the tractor beam becomes effective—but *only* then. So we're faced with the problem of finding that infernal device and deactivating it." He gave Col. Freyt a challenging look. "Well now, Colonel, do you still think it would be better to bail out and run to the *Ganymede* and abandon this magnificent ship..."

Freyt modified his previous stand. "Well, of course we can't try to keep her. It would be preferable, I'll admit..."

Rhodan smiled, then immediately became grim as he received Bell's next navigation figures. Since the last reading, the *Titan*'s velocity had doubled.

"So how are we going to locate this blankety-blank gadget?" Bell growled. "In a ship that's a whole world by itself..."

"Inasmuch as the converters are still working properly, I'd say that the only logical place would be between the drive chambers and the outside radiation shielding," Rhodan answered. "In that way we can

narrow down the search area." He looked about him. "Incidentally, where's Pucky?"

It was the first time anyone had noticed that the mouse-beaver was no longer in the control room.

Ruefully, John Marshall remarked, "I can't pick up his mental impulses. He must have screened them off

"Maybe he's sitting on the—" Bell started to say but cut short when he saw Thora. He wasn't able to suppress a tiny smirk, however, because the suggestion invoked a comical vision.

"Perhaps," Marshall suggested, "Anne Sloane can help us."

Anne Sloane was a very good telekinetic in the Mutant Corps who had already demonstrated that her faculties were quite comparable to Pucky's. Unfortunately, she did not have the technical comprehension of the quick-learning mouse-beaver.

"Pucky can't have disappeared," replied Rhodan. He assented a bit hesitantly. "Alright, Marshall, you'd better get hold of Anne."

When the telepath had left the control room, Freyt asked, "Why didn't you call Miss Sloane on the intercom?"

"Because I don't want to make the crew any more jittery than they are," replied Rhodan. "They're not accustomed to the ship. The *Titan* hasn't yet won their confidence, which can only happen after we've come through a successful test under fire." He looked at the scopes. "And this may be our baptism."

John Marshall returned in a few minutes wearing an indescribably vacuous expression. The man's countenance seemed hysterically funny to Bell but the seriousness of the situation moved him to a commendable self-control.

Rhodan was surprised. "What happened? You look as if someone just stole your emergency rations."

"Anne Sloane—she wasn't there. Pucky just picked her up 10 minutes ago. He also took Wuriu Sengu with him."

Sengu was the Japanese member of the Mutant Corps, who was known as the 'seer' because of his wild talent for seeing through solid matter.

"Well, that's not so bad," commented Rhodan. "He and Miss Sloane and Sengu are already moving ahead on this, on their own. That's a little more like him..."

"How did he know about it?" asked Col. Freyt, bewildered. "He'd already left the control room when we made those measurements."

"He's a telepath and is definitely following our conversation. He decided to do the necessary, and I'll admit he did the smart thing to back himself up with reinforcements and to think of our seer. So I think we can relax and wait to see what will happen. And it won't be too long before we know more."

Rhodan proved to be right.

Bell had just gotten up and was talking to Col. Freyt when the air in the control room began suddenly to shimmer and the figure of the mouse-beaver took on a solid form. Without paying anyone the slightest

heed, he waddled to the control console and slithered with a flop into Bell's empty seat. His white incisor tooth gleamed triumphantly. Pucky was grinning.

Rhodan waited patiently while Bell began scolding in the background, not in very complimentary terms. He quieted suddenly, however, when Pucky turned around ominously, raised his left paw and pointed toward the ceiling. Bell was not anxious to have another demonstration of the fact that telekinetics are stronger than normal mortals—in spite of the benefits of the biological cell shower.

Reassured, Pucky turned once more to Rhodan. "The circuit was located just under the outer ring bulge and was hermetically sealed. With the best instruments and the most powerful cutting torches, we would have required months to get through the dense arkonite panels. Wuriu located the receiver. Together with Anne I was able to disconnect it and make sure it was jammed." Pucky was still grinning. "It was only possible through telekinesis. I can assume that the designers didn't reckon with that."

"Well done," praised Rhodan. He stroked the silky pelt of the mouse-beaver's neck almost caressingly. "Sometimes I think I'd never make it without you."

Pucky ceased grinning. The incisor tooth disappeared quickly. Almost humbly, the little fellow bowed his head and placed his face on Rhodan's hands, which he had drawn to him with a paw. Then he straightened up and turned around. "I am going to show you right now, Reginald, which of us is the bigger hypocrite. You have just earned yourself another lesson." And before anyone could intercept him, Pucky had slipped out of the seat and gone over to Bell. With his startled victim, who hadn't been able to bridle his thoughts, he disappeared without a trace. He and Pucky were transferred elsewhere.

Col. Freyt appeared to be very nonplussed. "Will somebody give me a playback on that...?"

Rhodan smiled and signalled for data from the navigation computer. "You have to get used to that, Colonel. Pucky and Bell are the best of friends, except that they won't admit it. If I know that mouse-beaver, he's giving his friend a little education so that he can relax for a few days. Ah—the new data." He took the foil in his hand and nodded with satisfaction. "Now we're down to our initial free fall velocity. That can be changed."

Once again the impulse-converter droned into life but this time not in vain. In the course of a few seconds the wild flight of the *Titan* toward Arkon was arrested and the return course reinstated. Only two minutes later the *Ganymede* was back in visual range.

The instruments indicated that the distant robot brain's tractor beams were still everywhere in evidence, except that now they could find no anchorage. Thereby it was taken as a proof that their location was not known and that they had merely fallen accidentally within range of the tractor beam's indiscriminate transmission.

When the *Titan* drifted within close range of the *Ganymede* and locked into its former orbit, Pucky popped up in the control room. He acted very innocent and gave no answer to questions regarding Bell. Only when further discussions ensued without bringing Bell to light, Rhodan began to worry. He had not been in his cabin. Had he again gone off on his own into his journeys of exploration? His aversion to the great size of the *Titan* was well known, so the latter possibility seemed unlikely. However, Pucky continued his silence. Even Marshall failed to uncover anything because the mouse-beaver had screened off his mind.

It was not until six hours later that one of the technicians, making his rounds through the corridors of the sphere's inner segments, heard unusual knocking sounds coming from one of the unused portions of the

ship. He followed the sound while conjuring up in his mind unsuspected monsters that had probably taken up their abode somewhere in the depths of the gigantic spaceship. The pounding emerged from the area of the men's lavs. In between these sounds, an uncanny bowling was heard, as though coming from someone who no longer could decide whether to give vent to rage or despair.

The technician stood in front of a closed door. The fairly simple lock mechanism could only be operated from the outside if not barricaded on the inside. The designers of the *Titan* were only human, after all. So was the technician. He felt compassion mingled with a heroic urge to discovery.

He drew his weapon and opened the door. Cautiously he sprang back and raised the weapon but then lowered it when he recognized the pitiable human wretch who after six hours of despairful waiting could finally leave the small room that normally was not intended for such an extended sojourn.

It was Bell who had been missed for so long. No one could surmise just how he had come to be trapped in a room that was locked from the outside. Only Rhodan and the other crew members in the control room had their suspicions.

And other than Bell there was only one who knew what had really happened—Pucky, with his innocent stare. He, however, was as reticent as Reg.

2/ A TERRIFYING MONSTROSITY

The automatic ship's calendar, which had by now been set for Earth time, indicated the 17th of June. Since yesterday, nothing had changed.

The *Titan*'s communication centre operated routinely at full capacity. The receivers were in a permanent scanning mode in order to detect and record all possible information emanating from Arkon. The hypertrans sensors picked up all variations in the surrounding area and registered all such data in the computer memory bank. From such technical inputs a constant was derived, which indicated an hourly average of 500 hyper-transits within the system of Voga. It was no wonder, then, that the *Titan* had not been discovered.

Gradually, Rhodan began to piece together an assessment of their situation. The robot brain on Arkon had issued a red alert to no avail. All fighting forces stationed in star cluster M-13 had been ordered to report the space giants appearance immediately. A direct engagement was not recommended, as the robot brain was only too well aware of the invulnerability of the stolen ship in the hands of a shrewd commander. It had already recognized in Rhodan a commander of such calibre.

Thus the greatest search mission ever seen in this part of the Milky Way had been unleashed. Moreover, no one had the slightest reason to suspect that a similar situation had once occurred in another part of the galaxy.

Rhodan was waiting it out. As long as he remained undetected, he had time to continue training his crew. Only when this training was completed could he make further plans. Then the eventual return to Earth would cease to be a problem. But before all that, he had to accomplish one thing more: he had to make the robot brain understand that he was a friend of the Empire.

A new message came in. The communications chief sent it through to him:

SECTOR BM-G-Y-378-J. STRONG HYTRANS INDICATIONS IN DIRECTION OF CN-G-76-K. NONE OF OUR OWN UNITS THERE. SEARCH PROCEEDING. MAY BE SEVERAL SHIPS. END OF MESSAGE.

No signature. No clues. Just the one piece of raw data.

Bell, who had finally recovered from his personal adventure, handed the dispatch back to Rhodan. "So? We've had this information for hours already. It can hardly be intended for us."

"Nobody's saying it is but at some time or other there may be a piece of data traffic that involves us. So we always have to be prepared."

Bell rubbed his chin. "I can't see why you insist on sweating it out here when we have a terrific chance to just disappear without being detected. Why not let the Brain think whatever it wants about us? The main thing is, we're outside its domain."

Rhodan gave him a cold smile. "Who would venture to say how extensive the sphere of influence of such a robot brain may be?"

"Well, the nebula, or star cluster, is just about a hundred light-years in diameter. I'd say that ought to be *enough* territory for the monster."

"In all probability it isn't. The security of the Empire is top priority. We probably endanger that security. I'm convinced that in case of any threat the sphere of the brain's influence isn't going to be limited to a specific number of light-years. I'm further convinced that if it recognizes a need for defensive action, and if it knows our home-base position, it could attack and destroy the Earth in about a half hour's time. Does the magnitude of our precarious position sink in?"

Reg revealed his dawning fear but nevertheless gave a rebuttal. "So, granted all that, what do you gain by staying here? It's not going to make the Brain more lenient. Don't forget, we've stolen an Empire ship."

"If we can prove that it was done for the good of the Empire, the robot brain won't be able to reject the logic of it. The only chore to accomplish here is—to prove it!"

"And how do you propose to do that?"

As Rhodan was about to answer, one of the communications officers came into the control room.

"Sir, turn on your optical scanner. A ship is approaching from the Voga system."

Rhodan made a lightning move to the manual grips and swung the visual scanner, manoeuvring the servomechanism for direct viewing outside. Only then did he speak. "Only one ship? How big is it?"

"I don't believe it can classify as a threat, sir. It's hardly 300 feet long, flying at light-velocity. Considering delay for deceleration, it should intercept us in about a half hour."

"Thank you," said Rhodan, noticing his screen coming on. "Monitor for any incoming signal from them

and advise me at once."

Again he turned his attention to the videoscreens, on which the universe gradually emerged. In such a glittering star field it was difficult to resolve the ship optically. Bell switched on the vernier finder, which utilized a principle similar to radar. It was then only a matter of a few seconds to find the alien ship. After an adjustment of the magnification, it finally stood out clearly discernible on the vernier screen. It was in fact only 300 feet long, torpedo shaped and at its widest spot about 75 feet in diameter. A row of lighted portholes seemed to indicate that no great emphasis was being placed on secrecy. This was also corroborated by the line of its course. it steered directly toward the *Titan* .

Bell's eyes narrowed. "It seems we have ourselves some company. Do you think they take us for an Empire ship?"

"Word must have gotten around about the theft by now," reasoned Rhodan. He established connection with the *Ganymede* which hovered only a mile and a quarter away. Lieutenant Marten answered. Rhodan asked him to inform Col. Freyt immediately and call him to the intercom.

Without disconnecting, he turned to Bell. "The alien commander knows very well whom he is facing and that's why I'm surprised at his behaviour. To say the least, it's a bit reckless."

"I'm really waiting for *this* fellow!" enthused Reg.

Col. Freyt appeared on the screen. "We've already sighted him," he said, obviously referring to the alien. "He comes from the System, a Zalite if I'm not mistaken."

"Most likely a Zalite," Rhodan acknowledged. "In any case have the *Ganymede* ready to defend itself. We don't know what weapons the Zalites have at their disposal. Don't wait for my command if you are threatened. Destroy the alien only in self-defence. Understood?"

"Understood. Only in self-defence."

Rhodan snapped off the connection. He could depend on Freyt. He plugged the ship's intercom into the Mutant Corps' quarters. John Marshall answered.

"This is Control," said Rhodan. "Marshall, I want you and the Corps to stand by for a sortie. Send Ralph Marten and Pucky up here, on the double. Also, alert Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta for second standby. Over and out."

The last two named were the teleporters who by the power of will could transfer themselves to any desired location. On the other hand, Ralph Marten possessed another faculty which offered a most undetectable method of reconnaissance: he was the remote optical spy of the Corps. He was capable of shutting out his own personal ego and of seeing and hearing through the eyes and ears of other beings. Without any cognizance of the person concerned, Marten's mind could dwell in him and utilize the whole physical vehicle of his unsuspecting host.

"Why Ralph Marten?" Bell asked curiously. "Surely you don't intend to pay the alien an *indirect* visit?"

"Why not?" retorted Rhodan, as in that moment the subject of conversation stepped into the control room with Pucky. The mouse-beaver cast Bell a pleasant look, waddled to the seat next to him and clambered into it. Ralph Marten waited politely at the door until Rhodan signalled him to sit down next to him.

"An alien spaceship is approaching the *Titan* ," Perry explained, since Marten was not a telepath. "I'd like to know who's on board and what's on their minds. Pucky, haven't you picked up any of their vibes yet?"

"Yes, but very strange ones," the mouse-beaver deliberated calmly. "I can't make anything out of them."

"No usable thought patterns?"

"Only a few, but they're being blanketed by a stronger mental impulse that I can't fathom. Do you want me to pop over there? The distance has narrowed down and the ship is approaching now at only about 1600 feet per second."

"How did you know that?"

Pucky grinned. "It says so on your vernier panel."

Rhodan was red-faced for having asked an unnecessary question but it could happen even to him. In the past few minutes he hadn't been watching the alien ship.

"Marten, I'd like you to try on one of those aliens for size. Slip into one of them and take a peep at what goes on over there. Better pick out somebody unimportant. Meanwhile, Pucky will keep his feelers out and maybe we can finally come up with some kind of identification. I can't really believe they've sent us a shipload of nuts."

Ralph Marten leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes. Seconds later he seemed to be in rigor mortis. His breathing was very shallow and he had hardly any trace of a pulse. He was already many miles away in the other ship.

Pucky sighed and plunged again into his task, trying to seek out the aliens with his far-probing telepathic tendrils. His sensitive brain actually picked up an astonishing flak of thought impulses, some of which indeed carried a semblance of reason. But as before, a pattern of abstract thought was superimposed over them, from which he was not able to gain any useful intelligence.

And then he sensed something*else* . . .

Something groped cautiously and testingly for his brain—still hesitant, as though blind and making a haphazard probe. He was shaken by this and instantly screened himself without betraying his presence. The alien mentality continued searching, appeared to detect nothing—and withdrew.

Now Pucky was aware of the game they were playing. He shook himself and looked at Rhodan reflectively. "There's ESP involved here. Telepaths and maybe some low-calibre hypnotists. It doesn't surprise me, though."

Rhodan was astonished. "Thora has never mentioned that the Zalites had parapsychic capabilities. Hm-m-m. That's very strange. Pucky, are you sure?"

"Quite certain, Rhodan. You can count on it because one of them just tried to find me. But it was a sort of blind groping. If I were a hypnotist I'd very definitely be able to enter somebody's brain and influence them. But these *psi* -freaks on the alien ship are apparently only able to do it if their prey is also detectable visually."

"We'll have to wait for Marten's report—he's already coming to again.

Ralph Marten groaned and suddenly opened his eyes. He seemed to awaken from a dream that was anything but pleasant. In his questioning glance there was even a trace of terror.

"Thank God!" he muttered in relief and straightened up slightly. "That one I didn't expect!"

"Give us your report," Rhodan urged. "We don't have much time."

"As soon as I was able to see again," said Marten, "I observed humans around me. They looked the same as we, except for reddish-brown skin and copper-coloured hair; and they didn't seem to harbour any kind of hostile thoughts toward us. But that isn't what shook me; it's that everything looked blurry, as if I were seeing through water. And that was it—I was in a glass tank! More exactly, the body I had transferred to was in this tank."

Rhodan hardly understood a word of what Marten was telling him but he didn't interrupt. He realized that any answers to his unspoken questions would be forthcoming if Marten had them.

"I attempted to analyse myself, to figure out what kind of being I had slipped into, but I couldn't I had an impression of being a fish in an aquarium. And maybe that was it. The people that passed in front of my field of vision didn't seem to pay any attention to me so I figured that I must have chosen the body of a very unimportant entity. However, I can go back any time and give it another try—"

"Wait, Marten, that won't be necessary," Rhodan interrupted. "The important thing is, they Don't seem to have any intentions of attacking us. —Pucky, anything new?"

The mouse-beaver reaffirmed his contention. "There are psi faculties present there. I am sensing quite plainly that they are trying to plant suggestions in me."

"So you're telling us there aren't any telepaths, just hypnotists who can take over another person's will?"

"Both!" chirped Pucky quickly, and added, "But after a couple of very pitiful attempts on their part, I'd say they're not going to make it."

Rhodan looked at the videoscreen. The alien ship had come closer now and it came to a full stop. It was less than six miles distant from the *Titan*.

The com operator entered the control room. "Radio contact from the alien ship," he announced. "The commander is requesting to come on board."

Rhodan considered this for several seconds. then nodded. "Alright. Give him my permission. But he must come alone. Let the ship come in at lock 17. Give them some light markers for docking."

The operator disappeared. The docking manoeuvre began.

Rhodan turned to Pucky. "Go back to the mutants," he said, "and stand by. Keep a sharp lookout for any Zalite attempts to bring us under their mental control. Have Marshall join me here in the command centre. As soon as the alien commander is on board, I want teleporters Ras Tschubai and the Japanese to go on board the other ship and have a look around. If possible, unobserved. Understood?"

"I understand, sir!" he squeaked, and hobbled away. He forgot completely that he could teleport. He seemed to have been a bit shaken by the alien ESP probes. Ralph Marten followed him.

Rhodan had Thora and Khrest come into the control room. Together with Bell and the telepath John Marshall, they waited for the alien commander.

Ras Tschubai measured six feet six inches in height, which was the sole indication of his descent from a line of warlike Sudanese chieftains. Once when his life was in danger he discovered his capability of wishing himself to another location. A lion had sprung at him—but the lion's claws swiped through empty air. Ras Tschubai disappeared, finding himself about 1800 miles away in his home village. It was in this manner that his career as a teleporter began.

The case had been similar with Tako Kakuta. The delicate Japanese had discovered his extraordinary faculty as a result of a catastrophe and had kept it a secret until he became a part of Rhodan's Mutant Corps.

When these two received their orders, they responded at once. The teleport leap to the alien ship where it was docked against the *Titan*'s hull was a minor detail; it would be another matter to remain undetected by its alien crew. They worked separately. While Tako concentrated on the after-deck areas, Ras took on the middle portion of the ship.

As he materialized and his vision cleared, he was able to determine with relief that he was alone. In this particular room were all kinds of equipment, the purpose of which at first eluded him. Since he saw no portholes he deduced that he must be deep inside, away from the outer hull.

He decided to start a routine search. The room had two doors. One of these was easily opened by pushing against it and he found himself in a corridor containing a number of doors. He didn't dare open any of them so he went onward, ready at any second to quickly dematerialise.

The forward opening was a bulkhead door, obviously leading to a continuation of the corridors. He hesitated a moment before he swung it open. The passage behind it was clear. He stood with his back to the wall and listened. Somewhere ahead he heard human voices. They conversed in Intercosmo. Thanks to hypno-schooling, he had mastered this Esperanto of space. In spite of this, however, he couldn't understand a single word of the present conversation. Yet it devolved on him to learn what he could about the Zalites on this ship.

Cautiously he stalked onward until he could hear the voices more clearly. They emerged from one of the rooms behind one of the numerous doors. Inwardly triggered to teleport, he pressed an ear against the smooth surface. Now he could understand them.

"...we are probably putting our foot in it..."

The unknown speaker did not say this in so many words but the sense of it was the same. Another voice answered, "Hemor certainly must know what he's doing. He's operating under orders of the Zarlt. And *he* must know very well what he's about."

"I'll grant you that but you can't play games with the Empire. If it's detected that we're being deceptive, there'll be a whole fleet on our necks. We should avoid such an eventuality."

"Our opportunity is unique. just remember that this alien from the Universe has outwitted the great Brain!"

"My very point! And now the Zarlt thinks he'll be even smarter. To me, its a rash undertaking."

A slight pause ensued. Tschubai heard footsteps coming toward the door. He drew back and looked for an exit so he could avoid having to teleport. But there was little time to decide. The door was shoved open and a head appeared in the corridor.

Tschubai wouldn't have ventured to say later whether or not the Zalite had seen him. He dematerialised in the same second and simultaneously concentrated on the bow section, where the alien ship's control room would be located. It was a big risk but he had the assurance of knowing that he could disappear again at any moment if he ran into any people.

He was lucky.

While his vision returned and he readied himself for another transfer, he perceived that he was alone. Surrounding him completely was—the Universe.

But it was filled with air and he could breathe.

Fortunately, his initial fear that his direction had gone wrong and that he had landed in the vacuum of space, was unfounded. Much to his amazement he stood in the middle of a sphere-like room, the walls and deck and ceiling of which consisted of transparent material. Probably an observation room.

To the right of him he saw the massive hull of the *Titan* towering above. A human figure walked briskly through a plastic boarding tube to the other vessel, under escort of several officers: probably the alien commander whom Rhodan wished to interview.

Ras observed with some relief that only one door gave access to the observation room. He hurried to it and risked a quick look into the corridor beyond. It was empty. From this direction there was nothing to fear. He closed the door and tamed around.

And then he saw the monster.

* * * *

From the beginning, Tako had not fared so well.

When he materialized he found himself in the midst of a group of people who were engaged in a highly agitated debate. Without exception they were Zalites and they wore smudged and soiled work clothes, indicating that in all probability they were members of the technical personnel.

Tako didn't have the presence of mind to disappear immediately. Now that he'd been discovered, perhaps he didn't consider the fact overly important, since naturally it would be impossible for them to capture him.

The excited discussion stopped abruptly. The men turned to him with a general raising of brows. They stared in speechless amazement at this strange apparition which had popped up in their midst and who

nonetheless seemed to be composed of flesh and blood. Tako was inwardly amused but maintained a hard and grim expression, which of course was in tremendous contrast to his very delicate frame.

One of the Zalites, a hefty fellow in green trousers, came up to Tako and took hold of him, his face a mixture of fear and curiosity.

Tako pushed his hand away. "*Okapka!*" he warned in Intercosmo. "Don't touch me!"

The Zalite understood him. "*Tono*—who are you?" he asked, and added suspiciously, "*Alda*—where do you come from?"

"Perhaps I can make myself invisible," retorted Tako. He pushed the nearest Zalite aside and walked leisurely through the opened passage between them to the nearest door. "With your permission, I'll just take a look at your ship."

He opened the door. No one stopped him. They simply stood and stared at him, unable to believe the evidence of their eyes. Only when Tako was already halfway into the corridor and had the door just about closed behind him did the reaction set in. They came storming and crowding into the narrow opening like commandos and sought to grasp him. But they grasped at empty air.

Tako dematerialised and sprang toward the middle of the ship but had the misfortune of arriving precisely in the spot that Ras had just vacated seconds before. Thus it happened that the officer who was just emerging into the corridor became witness to an event that might require years for his reason ever to explain.

At first he saw a black monstrosity that suddenly began to shimmer and dissolve into the air. Certainly this was a most uncanny phenomenon that defied explanation, because the black apparition had no sooner become invisible than here was another form materializing in its place. The form of Tako.

With a cry of alarm the officer drew back and clanged the door shut behind him. Puzzled by the unusually fast reaction of the Zalite, Tako concentrated on seeking out Ras. He reasoned that he must be somewhere about, barring the unexpected.

He had hardly taken 10 steps before the alarms began to shrill through the entire ship. The sirens had an unpleasantly high tone to them which was painful to human eardrums. It was enough to wake the dead.

Tako cursed his luck and raced along the corridor. Actually he had accomplished nothing other than to panic these people into a full alarm. Rhodan wasn't going to be too happy about it but the damage was done. He figured he might just as well return to the Titan, as Ras might have done already.

So Tako teleported.

* * * *

Ras Tschubai froze in his tracks. He had thought he was alone in the bubble chamber but he was not.

The creature was approximately five feet high and about three feet wide and somewhat circular in shape,

reminding Ras of a giant jellyfish. Beneath its body he was aware of an indeterminate number of short feet which appeared to be as flabby as the rest of the horrible shape. The whole mess was topped off by a ball-shaped head as though plunked into the middle of a pudding. Large, knob-like eyes stared at him with baleful intent.

The most curious part of the situation was that the weird creature squatted in a glass container which appeared to be hermetically sealed on all sides. Ras recognized it at once as a spherical pressure chamber. Silvery metal pipes connected the container with an apparatus that was similar to an oxygen tank. An under-chassis of simple construction completed the picture.

Ras remained motionless and regarded the creature, sensing that it actually would not harm him. This was the only reason he stayed. He had an awareness of having discovered something very important.

Where do you come from?

Ras was very familiar with telepathy. Often enough he had practiced it with John Marshall and the mentalists of the Corps. The projected thought stood clearly in his mind. The monster was a telepath.

He ignored the question and took a few steps closer to the container, coming within about six feet of it. The cold, searching eyes made him wary; a certain threat emanated from them, the nature of which Ras was not able yet to determine. He was wondering what Rhodan would make of *this* discovery

Who is Rhodan? came the next question.

Ras was apprehensive now. If this beast could read thoughts, then the situation became dangerous. He strained to apply the training he had received, to screen his mind from telepathic surveillance. He must have succeeded as the next thought seemed to confirm.

Why do you screen yourself? There can thus be no communication between us.

Ras decided not to waste the unusual opportunity. He concentrated: *What—who are you?*

I am Mooff

, came the answer, along with a powerful thrust at the teleporter's mind. Ras suddenly felt impelled to come nearer to the pressure chamber. When he took a step closer, the mental thrust strengthened perceptibly.

Somewhere in the depths of him alarms began to sound.

But not only inside him: the sirens also rang in his ears. The shrilling sound was physically real; it rang through the entire ship. He heard the sound of running feet. They approached the observation chamber. He heard doors banging open, a storm of shouted questions.

Danger!

Ras concentrated on the *Titan* and sprang. That is, he intended to make the teleport jump but something held him, preventing him from dematerialising. It was as though a thousand invisible eyes clutched after him and his brain. The mental thrust became stronger, accompanied by an order to stay. The monster was trying to hypnotize him.

The magnitude of the trap he'd fallen into began to dawn on Tschubai. He had to break loose from it or

he would endanger not only Rhodan but all humanity. The prime commandment of the Terranian astronauts was never to betray mankind, even at the cost of one's own life.

Well, it hadn't *quite* come to that point!

He strained with every ounce of concentration of which he was capable, forcing himself to think of Rhodan in the control room. He envisioned Rhodan before him, realizing the terrible danger to which he, too, was now exposed. It seemed to repeat for him the scene in the jungle when the great carnivore had leapt toward him. Only this time there was no lion but a terrifying monstrosity, a telepathic thing that was his enemy and possessed strong powers of suggestion.

But his efforts succeeded.

As someone burst through the door of the observation chamber, he dematerialised. He found himself staring at the back of an unknown person who faced Rhodan and seemed not to notice his arrival.

3/ THE REAL RULERS

John Marshall met the visitor in the airlock and escorted him through numberless corridors and antigrav lifts to the central control room. This way he found sufficient opportunity to sound out the thoughts of their guest and give them a thorough analysis. The Zalite had no inkling of this. He was not a telepath, as John could easily perceive. This was surprising because Pucky had insisted that telepaths dwelled on board the other ship.

Waiting for the visitor were Rhodan, the two Arkonides and Bell. Pucky located himself nearby in the communications section; it seemed better, for the time being, for him to remain in the background.

Rhodan stood up as John Marshall and the stranger entered. The Zalite didn't make too bad an impression but there was something in his eyes that Rhodan didn't like. His copper-coloured hair was long and slightly wavy. Even here under the artificial lighting his skin appeared reddish-brown and tanned. He was wearing a type of uniform that bore gold and silver insignia.

"You requested a parley with me," said Rhodan, opening the discussion.

"I am Hemor, commandant of the small ship that the Zarlt has dispatched to you. I am commissioned to present certain proposals to you, which I trust you are ready to accept."

Rhodan's brows raised. "That will depend on the nature of the proposals," he replied. In his tone was a challenge, which did not escape Hemor.

With what appeared to be considerable self-confidence, Hemor began. "You have stolen this spaceship from Arkon. The entire Empire is hunting for you. Until now, no one knew where you were located."

"But you do."

"Only we!" nodded Hemor with a cold smile. "It was pure chance but the fact is—we know. However,

don't let this be of concern, as we have no intention of making your position known to Arkon. The Zarlt wishes to speak with you."

"Who is the Zarlt?"

The Zalite couldn't subdue his astonishment. He seemed to have taken it for granted that every intelligence in the Universe was aware of the Zarlt's identity.

"He is ruler of the Voga system and Vice-Imperator of Arkon, therefore second in command to the Emperor himself. He is Admiral Demesor and he awaits you now in Tagnor, the capital of Zalit, which is the fourth planet of the Voga system."

"And what does he want of me?" Rhodan's voice was cool and deliberate. He comported himself as though this were the most insignificant of occasions, hardly worthy of attention. Inwardly he was anxious to learn what the Vice-Imperator of the Arkonide Empire was after.

"I am not empowered to discuss the matter—other than trivialities, perhaps. You have questions?"

Rhodan glanced briefly at John Marshall and the telepath nodded to him. "Has the robot brain on Arkon declared me an enemy of the State?"

Hemor took a few seconds to answer. "Not expressly, but it pursues you with every means at its disposal. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes, thank you, Second question: What has your Zarlt to do with this? Why doesn't he follow the orders of the Brain?"

I am not empowered to answer that."

John Marshall in his corner nodded imperceptibly. Rhodan shrugged his shoulders. "Very well, I'll soon find out. What happens if I Don't accept the invitation?"

Hemor smiled faintly. "Our entire fleet is on alert. To the present moment, they have been under orders to conduct you to Zalit, which they will do, provided that a counter-order is not given. This counter-order will not come from me but from my second in command if I am not back within a certain time. You can see that we have taken all eventualities into consideration."

Rhodan praised the Zalite's circumspection. "Indeed you have! But I think that further questions would not be of any use here. I will therefore listen to what your Zarlt has to tell me."

Hemor's face lighted with relief. A load had lifted from his chest. Then he glanced at Thora and Khrest, who had remained silent until now. "I did not know this ship harboured Arkonides. Nothing of this was ever mentioned."

Khrest made a deprecating gesture. "Does it matter?" he asked, casually.

The door opened and the communications chief entered the command centre. "A fleet is approaching from the System," he announced. "It consists of at least 200 units, which are falling into attack formation."

Rhodan gave Hemor a questioning look.

The Zalite smiled. "Only a precautionary measure, nothing more. But you will accompany us, if I have understood you correctly. Am I now permitted to return to my vessel?"

At this moment the figure of Ras Tschubai materialized directly behind Hemor. For a second Ras appeared to be confused, then he grasped the meaning of Rhodan's silent signal and turned toward the wall. Everyone except the Zalite had witnessed his return out of nothingness.

"You are free to do so," Rhodan replied. "Is the landing field on Zalit clearly marked?"

"You need only to follow me," said Hemor. He made a curt bow and turned around. He glanced questioningly at Marshall, who had conducted him here. Then without further ado he strode into the corridor, followed by the telepath.

Rhodan gazed after him reflectively.

Bell was stirred up. "That guy sure has his nose in the air. He has the kind of face that makes you want to punch it. I'd like to know what's on his mind."

"We'll learn that as soon as Marshall gets back. Now will you kindly let the Titan follow the small ship. Issue the necessary instructions to Col. Freyt. So let's take a closer look at Zalit and the Zarlt. I have a strange hunch."

"I, too," said Khrest from the other side of the room. "It appears to me that the Zalites are not as dependable as we had always assumed. Perhaps we can demonstrate our services to the Empire."

"That," said Rhodan, "is exactly what I intend to do."

Three minutes later John Marshall returned to the command central and overheard the last words of Ras Tschubai's report: "...this jellyfish thing was trying to take possession of my will. I took off immediately but I'm afraid I was seen. At least the ship alarm was activated."

"No matter," Rhodan reassured him. "They certainly don't know they were dealing with a teleporter. What became of Tako?"

Pucky came waddling into the room. "He's back" he chirped. "Scared a number of men half to death and then sneaked out." He turned to Marshall. "Willyou make the report? I also picked up what Hemor was thinking."

"Alright. Correct me if I forget anything." Marshall looked at Rhodan. "I took him back to the airlock. He wants you to know that the flight to Zalit will begin in three minutes. We are to maintain synchronous velocity. Now as to what he was thinking... Actually, not too much. I could just get a little—maybe Pucky had more luck—to the effect, anyway, that the Zarlt wants to try, with our help, to play a trick on the robot brain. He does not seem to be well disposed toward the Empire."

"Just what I thought!" sighed Khrest.

Rhodan smiled. "It's not too surprising. Who wants to be ruled by machines? Do you have anything else of significance, Marshall?"

"Not particularly. just once, though, this Hemor thought about a certain *Mooff* but I don't know who that is."

"We know about that already. Ras has encountered this Mooff. It's an animal of some kind."

"Some kind is right!" shrilled Pucky. "That's the beast whose thoughts were superimposed on those of the Zalites. That's why I didn't pick up much from them. In any case, the Mooff is a telepath and suggestive hypnotist."

"Yes, and I'm a star witness to that!" put in Ras.

Bell was not concerned with the discussion. He waited out the three minutes and then cut in the engines. Slowly and carefully, he followed the comparatively tiny ship, noting at the same time that the *Ganymede* also slipped out of its orbit. The ships pressed on toward the giant red sun with a moderate acceleration. The entire fleet followed at a respectful distance.

"What is this Mooff?" asked Rhodan.

"I have never in my life heard of a Mooff," said Khrest. "They must be of recent origin among us."

"My guess is, they're a kind of talisman," surmised Ras, "like a magic mascot or something. What else would be the reason for dragging along a thing like that in your ship? Besides, the Mooffs only seem to be able to exist in a special atmosphere, because they have to stay in a pressure chamber."

"That was the aquarium that Marten was looking through. He evidently zeroed right in on the Mooff."

"Of course," asserted Pucky. "The Mooff sends out the strongest vibes. It's no wonder that Marten slipped right into him."

Rhodan added it all up. "So, a talisman—hm-m, perhaps. I think there's more there than meets the eye. And it may well be that we're in for a surprise."

Bell turned around. "I'll buy that!" he agreed. Obviously he referred to the Zalite fighting ships. "Maybe they're no threat to us but I wouldn't like to be on the *Ganymede* just now."

Rhodan rejected any thought of acute danger. "No one will attack us. The Zarlt is too curious about meeting us. Up to that point we are safe."

Suddenly Pucky straightened up. He looked quickly at Marshall and then said softly, "Try not to think consciously of what I'm saying but try to surround your mind with a defensive screen. Someone is trying to read our thoughts! A good telepath but not yet in our class. There's not only one—there are many. In fact, very many..."

Rhodan's eyes narrowed. For a moment he seemed uncertain, then he whispered as though to himself: "Somewhere a terrible danger threatens—quite definitely, and I can guess what it is. But this danger doesn't carry the label of Zalite! It has another name."

"*Mooff!*" said John Marshall decisively.

Rhodan nodded. "Yes, I believe so. The Mooff is the real source of our danger."

Pucky shook his mouse-eared head so violently that he came near to losing his balance and falling off his fat hindquarters. "No, not *the* Mooff! At least 200 Mooffs! There's one of them on each of the Zalite

ships!"

No one had any comment to offer.

* * * *

The city of Tagnor covered the surface equivalent to a small country on Earth. Compared to the eight billion inhabitants on the entire planet of Zalit, Tagnor's 30 million citizens did not seem to be too startling a population. As on the planet of Arkon, the curious funnel-shaped buildings dominated. Below at the stem of each was the entrance, which led one into a secluded world. One was surrounded by the far slanting walls on whose circular terraces lay colourful gardens and beautiful decorative verandas. Then private dwellings, each individually secluded and separated from the next by another garden. The funnel form of the buildings conformed with the need of the Arkonides to live as much alone and undisturbed as possible. The Zalites, being descended from the Arkonides, had taken over and preserved the old customs.

The red-hued giant cone of the government palace dominated the scene with a splendour that overshadowed even the spaceport. Even while approaching from high altitude, it made an impression on Rhodan, and as if by chance one of the Zalites on board the small pilotship was thinking of the palace. Marshall passed the information on to Rhodan.

There also resided the Zarlt.

The landing field was of gigantic proportions. It was bordered by mighty buildings all the way to the horizon. It was a full 12 miles wide. When the escort fleet descended and made an orderly landing in formation, Rhodan realized that even this field was none too spacious.

The *Titan* touched down as lightly as a weightless ball. The antigrav beams supported it until the telescoping landing struts had found a solid anchorage. Rhodan did not venture to cut off the antigravs entirely; he feared that the incredible weight of the *Titan* might get them all halfstuck in the surface of the planet. Allowing the antigravs to remain at partial strength reduced the effective weight of the vessel to half.

A strangely shaped torpedo car curved to a parking position and waited patiently until the visitors were disposed to leave their ship. Rhodan's plans had already been formulated.

"Khrest, Bell and John Marshall will accompany me. It's better if there are only a few of us—as few as possible. I think it's best for Thora to remain here on board. Lieutenant Tiffloor, you stay here at command centre and keep in touch with me. I'll take the miniature wrist-transmitter and leave it on. That way you'll be continuously advised of what's going on out there. If anybody tries to get us into a trap, you're to move in with the mutants. Is that clear?"

"What about the *Ganymede*?"

"On standby for instant take-off. That means split at the first sign of attack. The *Titan* stays; it can defend

itself. I feel, however, that we don't have to fear such eventualities. The Zalites have other plans."

"And I?" Pucky squatted near the door with eyes pleading so hard that it almost melted Rhodan's resolve.

But Rhodan shook his head negatively. "It won't work, Pucky—not today! We don't want the Zalites to know more than is absolutely necessary. Besides, somebody has to lead the mutants in case of an attack. You can understand that you are very urgently needed here on board. I'd like to be certain you're my reinforcement backup—a solid insurance policy, see?"

The mouse-beaver understood. He gave Bell a scornful look askance and waddled out of the command centre as if to say that of course Bell should go with Rhodan instead of him!—since Bell's presence on board the *Titan* was of absolute insignificance! He was heard tittering ecstatically to himself in the exit passage, a sure sign Rhodan had genuinely meant it when he voiced such a comparison.

"Do we go armed?" asked Bell.

"Small needle rayguns in our pockets should be enough," advised Rhodan. "Anything else would be senseless."

After traversing a number of lifts and passages, the landing trio arrived at the ground exit station next to the ring of retraction struts. As the outer lock opened, a gangway ladder lowered automatically. Rhodan was the first to set foot on the alien world. His trained senses immediately detected the very slight gravitational difference from that of Earth. The air was clear and invigorating. Perhaps a trace of extra oxygen but otherwise completely normal. The ground consisted of a hard smooth substance resembling concrete but seamless and perfectly even.

The torpedo car approached them and stood waiting nearby. A husky Zalite emerged and opened the hatchlike door for them. *Just like on Earth*, thought Rhodan grimly, though nothing else reminded him that this was actually a state visit.

The trip through the city left them no time for conversation. They marvelled at the well-planned highways, the magnificent parks, the numerous funnel-shaped structures and the brisk traffic. One might have felt that he had been transported back to a planet of Arkon, were he not continuously confronted with the spectacle of the very animated and lively Zalites. It was these people around them who made all the difference.

Instead of being like the tired and degenerated Arkonides who relegated all work to robots and to the positronic Brain, the people on Zalit were alive. Here was an air of enterprise and accomplishment; it could be seen in the city dwellers' happy faces that they were completely content with their lot. There was nothing here of the brooding melancholy of the Arkonides; on the contrary, the visitors frequently observed small laughing groups of Zalites strolling about and enjoying their parks.

Rhodan glanced unobtrusively at Khrest. Gazing through the car's window, the Arkonide was taking it all in. Not a feature of his face moved but Rhodan had a good idea of what was passing through the other's mind. And the conclusions to be drawn from such cogitations would certainly not be pleasing to Khrest.

The government palace came into sight.

Although it had made a mighty impression from a distance, it now surpassed Rhodan's expectations. The stem base upon which the entire funnel-shaped structure stood was more than 150 feet in diameter. The upper rim must have measured close to 1000 feet in diameter, with an approximate height of 450 feet. The walls slanted outward at a 45° angle and were smoothly flush with the rows of windows.

Two bemedalled officers met Rhodan and his companions and led them into the palace. The inner courtyard was like an extensive garden. Flower beds fringed a well tended lawn, which was criss-crossed with narrow pathways. And exactly in the centre of the lawn stood

"Careful!" warned Marshall in English. "It's a Mooff!"

Rhodan had already spotted the creature. In the garden's centre was a huge bell-jar container such as Tschubai had described. From inside this the bulking jellyfish thing goggled out at them with its motionless button eyes. It was as though it were inspecting all visitors to the palace.

Rhodan experienced a completely involuntary desire to hand over his as yet undetected needle raygun to the two officers. For a moment he wondered at the occurrence of such a curious idea but then he observed that Bell was on the verge of putting the impulse into action. Slowly and hesitantly, he was about to withdraw his weapon. Rhodan stopped him in time.

"Somebody is trying to control our wills," he said, also in English. "It has to be that Mooff over there. He's checking to see that no one enters the palace armed. I'm beginning to have a suspicion that the Zalites use these Mooffs as telepathic watchdogs..."

He didn't know how erroneous his suspicion was.

* * * *

The Zarlt did not seem disposed to grandiose airs or any conspicuous life-style, or at least if he were he was dispensing with it at the moment. He sat behind a long, broad table that was covered with communications equipment and the corresponding control panels. In between were stacks and clusters of documents, papers and writing utensils and materials. He appeared to be an extremely busy man who took personal responsibility for this important work, which spoke in his favour.

As he observed his guests, his eyes certainly transmitted nothing that was conducive to trust. There was something harried and restless about them. They projected a thirst for power and the absolute certainty of achieving any goal decided upon.

He invited Rhodan and his companions to be seated. The table was between them. There was no one other than the Zarlt and themselves in the large room, the walls of which supported a number of large videoscreens unlighted at the moment. Rhodan maintained a cool composure as he surveyed the Zarlt. The almost gigantically proportioned man was wearing a resplendently colourful uniform that somehow did not fit his intrinsic nature. It seemed to express a trivial, playful attitude which was definitely not characteristic for the Zarlt.

He came directly to the point. 'You have stolen a cruiser from the Empire—the newest and most

modern of its arsenal. You are being hunted, and one day you will be caught—that is, if you don't have the foresight to acquire some powerful friends. We, the Zalites, could be your friends."

Rhodan kept his gaze levelled on the Zarlt "Why?" he asked.

The Ruler smiled gently but his eyes remained hard. "I will be frank and not waste words. A short while ago I succeeded in eliminating the puppet supporter of the Arkonides. The fleet officers were on my side. We were not and are not willing to carry out the orders of a robot brain. Formerly the Empire was ruled by the Arkonide Emperor but today there is only a machine."

"Isn't a machine a guarantee that no mistakes will be made?" suggested Rhodan.

"No! *Your* presence here right now is sufficient proof of that!"

The point could not be disputed. Nevertheless...

"Does not the Brain administer the Empire in accordance with the Arkonides, and therefore in accord with their allies, Zarlt Demesor?"

"You know my name?"

"Hemor confided it to me."

"Ah, yes—Hemor. You are Rhodan?"

"I am."

"And how do you come to have an Arkonide In your company?"

The Zarlt had been regarding Khrest with suspicion.

"Perhaps," said Rhodan, "there are also Arkonides who think like the Zarlt of Zalit."

The Zarlt nodded slowly. He seemed to take no interest in Bell or Marshall. "Good. Let us continue. You can see, then, that I'm not overly fond of being ruled by the Machine. I am—in name only—the Vice-Emperor. My goal is to be the Emperor!"

That was plain enough. Rhodan sensed something wrong here. He was a complete stranger to the Zarlt. To say the very least, it seemed most unusual for the man to lay before him his most secret plans.

"Why do you divulge all this to me, Demesor? Don't you think I could cause you some damage?"

"No, that you would not do. Have you not, yourself, observed on Arkon how decadent those once proud people have become? Have you not, yourself, outsmarted the robot brain and thus realized that it is not perfect? No, I do not believe that you will thwart my plans. Besides that, you need our help. Here on Zalit you are offered a refuge where you may stay with your stolen vessel as long as you see fit to do so. I require only a small favour in return."

"And that is?" asked Rhodan cautiously.

"How were you able to oppose the will of the robot brain and get through the outer blockade belt of the

Arkonides?"

Aha!, thought Rhodan. *So that's it!* It went without saying that he could never reveal to the Zalite the fact that the coup he referred to had only been possible with the help of the tele-transmitters. In the first place, the Zalites: did not possess such a transmitter—such equipment was only on board the *Ganymede*—and secondly, there was no intention of donating one to them.

"That is personal and proprietary information," he said carefully. "Perhaps I might see my way clear at a later time to share it with you, after we get to know each other better."

The Zarlt sought to conceal his anger. "I am confiding in you, Rhodan, but you're not doing the same with me. Very well, time will alter that. In any case, it is my sworn intention to do away with the robot brain." He watched Rhodan searchingly. "Will you help me in this where you can?"

Rhodan was aware of Khrest and Bell watching him now. The Zarlt had asked a direct question—how should he answer?

"Do you expect an immediate answer or will you concede a period for consideration? I give you my word that we will undertake no action in the meantime."

The Zarlt hesitated but finally he agreed. "Very well. I suggest you take a good look at Tagnor and convince yourself that the Zalite people are fully capable of supplanting the degenerate Arkonides. I will expect your decision within two days."

He pressed a button beneath his writing panel; a door opened behind Rhodan and someone entered. "Omor, you will escort our guests to the car that is to transport them to the spaceport." Turning again to Rhodan, he added, "The car remains at your disposal. Perhaps tomorrow, if my time allows, I will come out there and return the compliment of your visit."

"You are always welcome," replied Rhodan and got up.

* * * *

Half an hour later, when they took the lift up to the command centre of the *Titan*, Colonel Freyt was waiting for them. He seemed to be very agitated about something. Thora and Pucky sat on a couch in one corner; the tender hand of the Arkonide woman moved loving fingers through the fur of the mouse-beaver, who grunted his satisfaction at even intervals and appeared to have forgotten all of his problems. When Rhodan and his companions entered, he straightened up and swept Marshall with a brief surveillance, sounding out his thoughts.

He chirped casually, "You report first, John. I have time." And he lay back and closed his eyes. Thora was left no recourse other than to resume her previous activity.

Rhodan greeted Freyt but signalled him off when he wanted to talk. "Wait, Colonel. First I have to ask Marshall some questions. During our little journey into town we didn't dare because we were under telepathic surveillance. Well, Marshall, what is your impression of the Zarlt? Does he speak the truth?"

"You're going to be surprised—he speaks the truth. He did not withhold anything from you and in no instance did he lie."

Rhodan seemed to be disappointed—and on the other hand not. "Good. Then we know where we stand. The Zarlt wants power over the decaying Empire. Since his people are more energetic and capable than the race of the Arkonides, there would presumably be no particular disadvantage to speak of—yet in spite of it all I have second thoughts. The Zalites are basically of a provincial mould; I don't know if they can learn to think in cosmic terms. In rulership of the Empire they see only their own advantage. Am I right, Marshall?"

"Correct. I have the same impression. But don't you think they might change for the better, once they have the responsibility of such power?"

Rhodan smiled. "Never! Anybody who is accustomed to restricted provincial thinking won't change from one day to another into a cosmopolitan. Oh, of course it's possible—but I have an uneasy feeling about this. If I only knew what it was that keeps me from trusting the Zarlt. . . In my presence he did not he to me, that is true. And yet it seems to me that what he said was not what he thought. . ."

"I was able to monitor him," defended Marshall. "He said exactly what he was thinking."

Rhodan shook his head. "Strange, really very strange." He looked at Colonel Freyt. "Well? What's eating you? Has something happened?"

"Plenty!" complained Freyt, his face darkening slightly. "My men have lost their marbles—some of them, anyway."

"Huh?"

"Yes. Admittedly harmless stuff but anyway I don't get it. They do nutty things and then when you ask them about it, presumably they don't know what you're talking about. I keep bumping into the craziest sleepwalkers."

"Sleepwalkers?" Rhodan became very thoughtful.

Pucky straightened up on the couch and revealed his incisor tooth. The mouse-beaver was grinning somewhat disrespectfully.

"That's right, and when you talk to them they wake up as if from a trance. There's something tilty going on here."

Rhodan looked over at Pucky. "What's so funny, Pucky? If you know something, lets have it!"

Pucky slid from the couch and marched gravely to the middle of the room, where he dropped back comfortably on his hindquarters and maintained his balance by means of his tail, which he used as a prop.

"First time anybody asked me," he gave them to know, meanwhile continuing his impertinent grinning, which almost made Bell blow his top. "Naturally, the cause of it all is the Mooffs."

"I just about expected that," said Rhodan, "but I want to know more. Pucky, you say they're trying to hypnotize us?"

"Yes, but they don't make out too well with us. The Zalites are more profitable targets."

This jolted Rhodan perceptibly. "What did you say, Pucky? The Zalites? That I don't follow. The way we see it, the Zalites have been keeping the Mooffs as some kind of a talisman or watchdogs. When we entered the palace, one of the Mooffs tried to disarm us by means of suggestion."

"It figures!" chirped Pucky happily, as if this especially pleased him. Suddenly, however, his incisor disappeared. He became quite sober and alert. "I've had sufficient opportunity to study the Mooffs in the past few hours. I discovered that they are making a ceaseless effort to influence us. I finally succeeded in spying on one of them and I learned something: it isn't the Zalites who are masters over the Mooffs *but the reverse! They rule the Zalites.* They are the ones who got rid of the old Zarlt and brought Demesor into power. With his help they hope to destroy the robot brain on Arkon and wrest power over the Empire for themselves. It's the *Mooffs* who want to supersede the Arkonides—the Zalites only *think* it's their idea."

Rhodan studied Pucky for some time. Nobody spoke. Khrest seemed to chew nervously at his lower lip, attempting to conceal his uneasiness. The situation had altered itself in a single moment.

Rhodan recognized this at once. If he had been hesitant and uncertain before as to whether or not the rulership of the Zalites over the Empire would be advantageous to the many unknown races existing within the Realm, now he knew with one hundred percent certainty that rulership by the monster jellyfishes would mean certain ruin of all humanoid races.

Therefore, the decision was not difficult. "Pucky, do the Zalites know that they're only acting as puppets? Have they any inkling at all that they are under the influence of the Mooffs?"

"Not the slightest. They hold themselves to be masters of their System. They believe the Mooffs to be a sort of house pet. Officially they are used as interpreters in case of encountering alien races who don't speak Intercosmo or who can't speak at all. That's when the Mooffs go to work."

Rhodan noticed Khrest's uneasiness and smiled. "You can relax, Khrest. Our decision can only be that there isn't any question in this special case but what we'll have to be on the side of the robot brain! We can never permit an inhuman species to rule humanity. So the Zarlt is a double traitor. Well, well have to act accordingly. And for now we'd better forget about the return to Earth." He frowned thoughtfully. "I'd just like to know where the Mooffs got the idea of overthrowing the Empire. Pucky, what the devil *are* these Mooffs?"

The mouse-beaver had moved to a more comfortable situation, having plopped himself into one of the seats. Fully aware now of his importance, he took advantage of the opportunity. "There can hardly be any dumber creatures than the Mooffs," he revealed to his anxious listeners. "Not being able to speak, they had to be telepaths from birth. Later they developed the power of suggestion, but—as I've already indicated—they're botchy at it. The Zalites are easily influenced and so they seemed to be made for the overthrow attempt. With normal humans—not to mention mutants—they have difficulties, and it confuses them no end."

"You're saying the Mooffs are stupid?" asked Bell, amazed.

Pucky nodded seriously. "Quite correct, they are stupid—but that's not so surprising. There are a lot of stupid people who would like to have absolute domination over others but who can't understand that they're just not made for it. The dumber they are, the greater their complexes and their thirst for power."

After this ambiguous lecture, he turned again to Rhodan. "The Mooffs have no idea about technical things and know nothing about space travel but they are on an Zalite ships. The real lords of the Voga System are the Mooffs, not the Zalites."

"I don't understand what's been going on here in the past 13 years," said Thora, entering into the discussion. "Naturally I'm acquainted with the Mooffs through hearsay. They lived on a planet that was located within the Empire. We left them in peace because they were of no particular use. And—"

"Apparently," said Rhodan, "they have a practical application after all."

Pucky's ears came up suddenly. He straightened up quite stiffly in his seat and turned his clever eyes toward Rhodan. Then the incisor appeared once more. He was grinning.

"Practical application?" he drawled, then whistled so shrilly that Bell clapped his ears shut in desperation. "Rhodan, I think you've hit on the magic words for solving the riddle!"

No one wondered more than Rhodan over this observation but he asked no further question.

4/ PUCKY'S POTENT PLAN

The Zarlt was very pleased when Rhodan called on him the very next day.

Rhodan played his strongest hand. "I know the secret of the Arkonide blockade screen. Moreover, I was also successful in disproving the alleged infallibility of the Brain through my escape. This offers the proof that Man is stronger and more intelligent than this positronic brain that rules the Empire. However, in order to carry out any decisive attack against the Brain, more careful preparations are necessary. It may be that I was just lucky the first time, and we shouldn't depend on it the second time around. This is why I wish to become fully familiar with my new ship, which I have christened the *Titan*. Give me a few weeks to train my crew, then we can carry out the attack together."

The Zarlt was still dubious. "Why is it that you now offer me more assistance than I originally requested? What particular interest is it you have in the Empire? Where is your home world?"

It is not in the realm of the Empire," said Rhodan, answering the last question first. "But if in the future I should have dealings or contacts with the Empire, I'd prefer that it be under leadership of humans, not a robot brain. Is that a sufficient reason for you?"

This time the Zarlt nodded agreement. "Yes, that has a logical ring to it. So—you will assist me?"

"You can rest assured that I will act in the interest of the Empire. Incidentally—who are the Mooffs?"

A shadow of surprise crossed the monarch's face. "What do you know of the Mooffs?"

Rhodan smiled. "They are everywhere in evidence, Demesor. Why all these elaborate procedures when it's obvious that Nature didn't intend for them to live on this world? Where were they imported from?"

"Our expeditions discovered them on a lonely, isolated planet. They are telepaths and we use them as interpreters. Also as lie detectors, if need be. For example, using a Mooff, I could test out every word you are telling me. As you can see, they have very practical applications for us."

"Yes, I can well imagine said Rhodan, getting up. "Well, then, I suppose I can expect a visit from you on the Titan in the next day or so. Certainly you must be interested in getting acquainted with an Arkonide ship."

"With pleasure, Rhodan will be there."

* * * *

In the *Titan* there were still entire decks which had not been fully investigated. The fact that the space giant represented an almost exact magnification of the familiar *Stardust* was of some help. Nevertheless, Rhodan refused to neglect a daily alarm drill so that the crew would have every possible opportunity to become familiar with the *Titan* in every detail. It was determined that the existing arsenal of mounted and ready weapons would be sufficient in themselves to destroy an entire solar system in a matter of seconds, including a variegated selection of methods. In addition to these, the awesome gravitation bombs lay safely secured in storage—a weapon which had not previously been put to use by the Arkonides. They had the capability of simply tearing a planet out of the space-time-continuum, and causing it to disappear.

What would happen if the Mooffs got hold of these weapons? The answer was obvious and it served to give the final touch to Rhodan's plan of action.

While Bell was occupied with the task of running officers and crew from bulkhead to bulkhead of the *Titan*—striving to establish the shortest possible timing of the trial runs—a discussion took place in the command centre. Aside from Khrest and Thora, the best of the mutants were there, especially those who were to be involved in the sortie that was being planned. In addition, Col. Freyt and Lt. Tifflor were present, along with the physician Dr. Haggard who also functioned as a specialist in biology.

Rhodan checked his notes and began. "We have the following situation: The Zarlt has come into a position of influence by making his own power play and not with the help of the Mooffs. They came into the act later, as I have learned. From the beginning, Demesor entertained the idea of overthrowing the Emperor and ruling the Empire himself. To do that, of course, the first task would be to put the robot brain out of action somehow. This consideration in itself was sufficient to gain him friends and supporters on Zalit. But the Zalites were ready for the fight merely because they didn't buy the idea of being ruled by a machine—they had no interest in waging a battle for the sake of power alone."

Khrest quietly added his approval. "Frankly speaking," he said, "I am not overjoyed with the thought that the Empire lies in the hands of a robot." Thora nodded her agreement. Both of them had valid grounds for being dissatisfied with the present status.

"So far, so good," Rhodan continued. "Unfortunately, other circumstances enter into this which make the task more difficult. We have to carry on as though we are supporting the Zarlt, so that we can gain time. We have to remember, though, that though we intend to help the Brain and thereby the Empire, the Brain is still our opponent—that is, as long as it does not make a logical assessment of our honourable intentions. And this will happen if we can provide for a reestablishment of the normal situation on Zalit.

One condition involved there is to get rid of the Mooffs. They rule Zalit with their power of suggestion—and none of the indigenous inhabitants is aware of this fact. Not even the Zarl.

Col. Freyt shook his head gravely. "How many Mooffs are there on this planet?"

Rhodan shrugged. "We Don't know but certainly there are thousands of them—at least enough to keep 8 billion Zalites in check."

Pucky stirred as if to speak and Rhodan gave him his attention. He had come to realize in the past few days that the mouse-beaver was becoming surprisingly informative. Whenever he spoke nowadays, he was capable of creating a sensation.

"They haven't succeeded entirely," he chirped in his thin little voice. "There are some Zalites who are still smarting over the old Zarl's assassination and who want to take revenge. They are loyally disposed to the Empire and even are willing to be held in tutelage by the robot brain. It is their opinion that the Brain is more rational than Demesor, the new Zarl."

"That's very interesting," remarked Rhodan gratefully, then pondered over it. "We'll have to take a look at these other Zalites when we get a chance. From what you say, they seem to possess a stronger mental resistance than the others."

"The Mooffs are primarily concerned with the Zalites' ruling class," Pucky explained. "If we can render the Mooffs harmless, Zalit is free."

Haggard raised his hand. Under a blond mane of hair, his usually affable countenance was touched by a fleeting shadow of concern. "Render them harmless? How do you pull the teeth of a jellyfish? They squat in their powerful pressure chambers and, as we've just been able to determine, they breathe a poisonous mixture of gases. Chiefly methane."

Rhodan glanced at John Marshall. "Dr. Haggard is right. We'll have to brainstorm a way of doing them in. Of course if we destroy their pressure chambers, they will die. But we can't just board every ship and plant detonations in those containers. Not to mention thousands of other Mooff chambers spread all over the planet."

"I've been working on it," enthused Pucky.

"I figured you would," smiled Rhodan. "Is that why you've brought Tama Yokida with you?"

"Have you also taken up mind reading?" asked the mousebeaver, making a mock show of amazement "Tama is precisely the person we need."

"A telekin?" Frank Haggard expressed astonishment.

Rhodan now gave Pucky support because he was beginning to suspect what the mouse-beaver was planning—it was once again a combination teamwork between two mutants whose special faculties were needed to complement each other. He reminded the others, aside from Haggard, of a half-forgotten fact: "Tama is not only capable of telekinesis; with sufficient concentration, he can also transform matter. In the Salt Sea near Terrania there is a rock that is covered with several pounds of gold. It was Tama who changed the outer layer of the rock to gold. Okay, Pucky, lay out your plan. I don't want to spoil your punch-line."

"Much obliged! Pucky attempted to make a courtly bow but would have fallen out of his chair in the process if Thora hadn't caught him at the last moment. "The whole thing is quite simple. All I have to do is trace down a Mooff and pinpoint his location. Then I take Tama, teleport with him as close as possible to the monster in question and conceal myself. From his position, Tama will work a transformation on the pressure chamber, one that is hardly noticeable except that its wall thickness will be diminished in a certain spot. The methane gases will leak through—and the Mooff will depart this sorry world. That's all. No explosions, no commotion, nothing."

It seemed to be clear to everyone. Nobody had a rebuttal offer. Only Ras Tschubai had a comment, which he made with some reproach. "And the rest of us? What do we do—sit in the bleachers and watch?"

Pucky grinned as only a mouse-beaver can. "By no means, Ras! You're all going to have a lot to do—in fact, a heck of a lot."

"Such as—?"

"Why not join the crew in the emergency drills? it's high time you got acquainted with our little boat—am I right, Rhodan?"

Rhodan withheld his direct response to the question. He did not want to hurt anyone's feelings.

"But the Zalites will notice that something is wrong," put in Lt. Tifflor. "If the Mooffs all start to die on their hands..."

"Well make them think it's some sort of a Mooff epidemic," Pucky interrupted quickly.

"You have a free hand," Rhodan told Pucky, who puffed out his chest with pride, "but under the condition that you carry out this undertaking so that the Zalites will have no suspicion of our part in it. That is extremely important."

"That point is quite clear," twittered Pucky. "In the long run, though, I suppose it won't hurt if a pressure chamber explodes here and there—to relieve the monotony or provide a diversion. Okay, Tama, let's get started. We're going to deprive the Zalites of their sweet little pets.

Without waiting for any further remarks, Pucky slipped out of the seat and hopped over to the diminutive Japanese. He took him by the hand and marched out of the control room. Ras Tschubai watched them enviously.

Rhodan brought the discussion to an end. "And we will prepare ourselves for the Zarlt's visit. He will only be accompanied by one officer, who is his closest confidant. We already know him. His name is Hemor."

* * * *

The systematic elimination of the Mooffs on board Zalite cruiser MRO did not work out quite as planned. A chance incident was involved that generated interesting elements of surprise—though not for

Pucky and Tama. The two mutants materialized amidstships and succeeded in reaching the observation cupola on top of the cruiser without being detected. This was where each Mooff was usually housed. The room was empty except for the bell jar in which the Mooff crouched watchfully, playing out his thoughts over the crew who were engaged on a routine flight. He was monitoring them and ever ready to renew his suggestive commands wherever necessary.

Pucky released Tama, who was not able to teleport by himself, and was therefore dependent upon the mousebeaver. They approached the methane chamber and observed the monstrosity it contained. They knew their business. In the course of the past four hours, 30 Mooffs had died.

"Well, old friend," said Pucky half aloud, and deliberately returned the fixed stare of the creature's black knobby eyes, "you can dust off your last will and testament now..."

Naturally the Mooff hadn't the slightest intimation of what a will or testament might be but Pucky didn't make any effort to screen off his thoughts. Clearly, the Mooff read the intent in the brain of this curious lifeform in front of him. And he was ready to defend himself.

Tama was the first to sense the on surging wave of brutal menace that emanated from the thing and he attempted to screen it out. Immediately the heavy menace grew weaker in intensity and finally it faded away. The suggestive power of the Mooff was not strong enough to penetrate such a defence screen.

Pucky possessed even greater defences. He giggled and showed his incisor tooth. "Don't strain yourself!" he chirped. "Do you have a last wish?"

The Mooff must have noticed that his forces did not suffice. He resorted to threats. *Who are you, you alien midget? Then, visibly resolved: If you dare to harm a Mooff, you will suffer a terrible punishment!*

"Who will punish me?" asked Pucky, happy to find a Mooff at last who was more 'chatty' than the others.

You will find out—when it is too late.

Once more the suggestive wave of menace surged against them, with no better results than before.

"Why do you wish to conquer the Empire—and why do the Zalites have to do it for you?"

The first impression received was one of astonishment. Then came the clear reply: *You know? Then you also know that the Zalites are to us what we are to the Masters.*

Pucky sharpened his ears, which for him was a superfluous action. "The Masters? Who are the Masters?"

Ah—this you do not know...?

Then the Mooff closed its mind, as though aware of having divulged too much and fearful of doing any more damage. Pucky tried to tease more information out of the monster but realized that it was fruitless. Disgruntled, he finally waddled away from the chamber and signalled Tama to proceed. Armed with what he now knew, he would fare better with another and unsuspecting Mooff.

Tama concentrated on the matter of the pressure-chamber walls. He focussed his power on a selected

spot and began to partially disintegrate it. It transformed itself slowly into energy and noticeably heated the room. A place developed on the wall of the chamber where the molecular cohesion was so thin that the pressurized gas inside could press through without much restriction. The poisonous methane gas escaped with a soft whistling sound—depriving the Mooff of its vital life-breath.

The jellyfish became uneasy. Pucky received panicky impressions which quickly became weaker. Once the creature attempted to stand up but collapsed immediately. Now it looked like a stranded mess of jelly unsightly and repellent.

Pucky took Tama's hand. "We'd better disappear. This stuff isn't for our lungs."

The air shimmered momentarily—and then the dying Mooff was alone.

At the same moment it seemed to the First Officer of the *MRO* as if he had suddenly been relieved of a long-standing continuous headache. He wondered briefly why it hadn't occurred to him until now that that was the trouble but he was grateful nevertheless for the relief. On his customary round, seconds later just as Pucky and Tama dematerialised he entered the observation room. He dug into his pocket and pulled out a small packet, which contained narrow, stick-like rolls of aromatic plant leaves, bearing a not too superficial resemblance to Terranian cigars. From the other pocket he extracted his electric lighter. He sniffed. *Funny smell in here*, he thought—*like rotten tree stumps*.

The Mooff appeared to be asleep. It lay huddled in a heap within the transparent chamber and was motionless.

Shaking his head, the First Officer poked a cigar between his lips and activated the trigger of the lighter. The electric spark struck the fuel-dampened wick, a tiny flame flared up—and with an irresistible force the officer was catapulted outside into the corridor, through a door that, to his good fortune, had been left ajar. A blast of flame raged searingly past him and rebounded from the next bulkhead hatchdoor.

Still dazed, the Zalite lay on the floor for several moments. Then, as the heat abated, he sat up. Nothing was broken but his uniform had been singed. What in the devil happened? An explosion? He remembered the lighter. When he flipped its spark trigger, a blinding flash occurred and he was shot clear out of the observation room. If the exploding gases had not been able to expend their force through the open door—He didn't dare dwell on what the results could have been—a ruptured cupola, with him and the Mooff jetting into empty space.

The Mooff!

Running feet became audible; then the hatchway was slammed open and several men rushed into the passageway, helping the First Officer to his feet. Five minutes later they knew. The Mooff was dead and the container was filled with normal atmosphere. No trace of methane gas. In the tank, no leaks. An incomprehensible occurrence. There was no explanation.

The Commanding Officer immediately established contact with the other ships and soon learned that on most of them the Mooffs had also died in the same inexplicable manner. In each case it was asphyxiation, because no Mooff-sustaining atmosphere was left in the containers. It had evaporated somehow, without any leaks being in evidence.

Methane and oxygen produced an explosive mixture of gases. At least this was some kind of explanation for the explosion on board the *MRO*.

Everything else remained a mystery.

* * * *

No one on Zalit surmised that a violent battle had been kindled. Least of all, the Zarlt. He waited impatiently for Rhodan's final word but didn't dare press the issue further. With considerable discomfort he had to permit Rhodan and his people to have free movement on Zalit, and allow them to study the inhabitants. He also had no inkling that in this activity Rhodan was pursuing a very definite purpose.

It was John Marshall who was able to find the first of the uninfluenced Zalites. A brief telepathic checkout revealed that the latter possessed a weak, natural defence screen which had prevented the Mooffs from subjecting these Zalites to their will.

While Marshall got under way with André Noir, the Mutant Corps hypnotist, to contact the secret resistance group, Rhodan was afflicted with an increasing anxiety over the possible countermeasures the robot brain might have resorted to.

Bell tried to reassure him. "I just can't imagine it would attack Earth. Thora's of the opinion that our astronomical position has remained unknown. The Springers haven't any reason for revealing that position to the Arkonides, who are their hereditary enemies. If they did, they'd hurt themselves as well."

"What they can't have they'll destroy," argued Rhodan doubtfully. "They can't have us and they can't destroy us. So it's all the same to them if somebody else annihilates us."

Thora and Khrest exchanged glances. "You can't abandon us now," Thora pleaded. "The Empire is in a crisis, Even the robot brain itself is unaware that the enemy stands at its door. The Zalites are permitted to land on Arkon without restriction—as long as they do not arouse suspicion—and the Zarlt is very much too clever for that. If he runs out of patience and refuses to wait any longer, he will one day resort to ruses and violence. Perhaps he will succeed in his intent. Until then there might not be any more Mooffs there who could advise him."

"Don't forget," warned Khrest, "that it's not the Mooffs alone. There are already expedition ships of the Zarlt en route to pick up more Mooffs. Pucky and Tama just can't work fast enough to keep ahead of the reinforcements. This is not a solution!"

"Let's wait and see what Marshall comes up with, Khrest. Maybe the Zarlt can be overthrown by his own people."

"And if so? The Mooffs will find a substitute. It will be an endless struggle, for which you above all will no doubt have the least time. Think of Terra..."

Rhodan smiled. "Thank you for reminding me. Reg, I want to send a radio message to Deringhouse. Prepare the hyper-transmitter and encode the text we discussed. Short pulse bursts in the format stipulated. We'll have to risk it."

Khrest was doubtful. "Isn't that a bit rash, Perry? As you know, the Arkonides have very sensitive detection equipment. The answer Deringhouse sends you will make it possible for them to determine

exactly the point of origin of the transmission. And then they will know the Earth's position."

"We've thought of that," Rhodan replied casually. "Deringhouse won't be answering from the Earth but from a point in the Milky Way which is at least 2000 light-years removed from the Earth. The robot brain will search there in vain for our home planet."

Now it was Khrest's turn to give a courteous smile. "Are you sure you've thought of everything, Perry?"

"I hope so, Khrest. I certainly hope so."

Bell went into the communications room and prepared the transmitter. The other door opened and in came Pucky and Tama. They both appeared to be exhausted, which in view of their arduous labours was not to be wondered at. The mousebeaver simply squatted on the floor and leaned his back against the wall. Tama sat down in one of the empty seats.

"The Mooffs' epidemic is spreading," declared Pucky wearily. "They're dying like flies. But at least some of them have not died in vain."

"So?" Rhodan could not suppress new interest. "How come?"

"I picked up something from them—especially from the Mooffs who had a fear of dying. But they couldn't tell me anything more than what they knew."

"Keep talking," Rhodan directed. The mouse-beaver had made an impressive pause.

"The Zalites are supposed to attack the Empire for the Mooffs and put the robot brain out of commission. Then the Zarlit is supposed to become the first Emperor. Naturally the Zarlit will only carry on in accordance with the Mooffs' orders—something the Zarlit, on the other hand, is not aware of. But it's a little more complicated than that. The Mooffs, in their turn, are following the orders of another faction, which remains in the background. It is for them that the Mooffs send the Zalites into battle. The Mooffs are only a connecting link between the Zalites and the real stringpullers, the so-called Masters."

"I suspected as much," said Rhodan. "What would the helpless Mooffs be able to do with a galactic empire? And who are these masters?"

Pucky was depressed. "Unfortunately we couldn't find out. The Mooffs themselves didn't seem to know. They may be under a hypno-block; I can't determine it. In any case, they are nothing but instruments in the hands of powerful Masters."

"And these Masters," reflected Rhodan, "will soon realize that things on Zalit aren't running as smoothly as planned. Then maybe they'll come out of hiding and betray themselves."

"Possible, but hardly probable." The mouse-beaver shook his furry head so emphatically that his ears flopped. "Not once have the Mooffs ever seen the Masters; otherwise they could have described them to me. I don't believe the Masters would be that careless."

Bell came with a prepared dispatch and handed it to Rhodan. He cast a sidelong glance at Pucky, grinned and raised a hand. "Truce!"

"You just wait!" growled Pucky threateningly and closed his eyes as though he could not endure the sight of his old friend. Actually, he was just too tired to spar with him as usual.

Rhodan took the uncoded text and read:

TO MAJ. DERINGHOUSE, TERRA... REQUEST IMMEDIATE REPORT FROM AGREED POSITION, IF ALL IN ORDER LOCATE ALIEN HYPERTRANSITS AT ONCE OUR RETURN DELAYED... CONSIDER PROBABLE EARTH ATTACK AND PUSH DEFENCES ALL POSSIBLE... RHODAN.

He returned the dispatch to Bell and nodded assent. "Transmit and stand by for reception. The reply can't get here for a couple of hours because Deringhouse will need time to prepare it That is—if everything is normal."

Bell exited the command central. Rhodan turned to Pucky, to continue the conversation, but it was already too late: the mouse-beaver lay stretched out on the deck and emitted intermittent little noises that reminded one of the purring of a cat

He had fallen asleep.

5/ THE MOOFFS ARE DYING

(AND THORA IS COMING TO LIFE)

To a certain degree Rogal had succeeded in evaluating correctly the situation on Zalit. He was only an ordinary technician working in one of the large plants where detail parts were produced for standard television equipment. He had little free time but what he did have he utilized in political activity. This was not out of any thirst for power or any particular desire to emerge from the darkness of anonymity but rather due to a genuine concern.

His friends knew as well as he did that the new Zarlt had not come into power by legal means. Of course the sudden death of the old Zarlt was never openly declared to be a political assassination but the omission was merely an open formality. The officers who had penetrated the palace in the night and killed him now occupied important and influential positions and had never been punished. In spite of these things, the official government decree of the new Zarlt declared that it had been death due to natural causes.

Rogal knew that this assertion was a lie.

Yes, and then came the Mooffs. A ship brought them in. They put them in pressure-containers so that they could live here on Zalit. At first they were considered to be some new toy for the fleet officers but later their importance came to be recognized. The Mooffs could read the thoughts of the Zalites and could communicate telepathically. Everybody who could afford it bought himself a Mooff. With its help they could then even control their neighbours' thoughts.

And that was the first danger that emerged.

The arrests and imprisonments began. Anyone who was not in accord with the new Zarlt was traced

down by the Mooffs and betrayed. The Mooffs mixed quite openly in politics and placed themselves on the side of the new government, which consisted almost entirely of officers of the spacefleet.

From that time on, Rogal hated the Mooffs.

He found friends and adherents who were not in agreement with the direction the government was taking. They wished to be and to remain loyal subjects of the Empire, even though it was guided by a mechanical creation. This seemed in any case to be better than to recognize the new Zarlt in his assumed position.

So it was that the resistance movement came into being. It suffered many setbacks but nevertheless it continued to grow stronger and more influential.

Its greatest enemy was and remained the Mooffs.

* * * *

When Rogal entered the small basement room, most of his friends were already present. He greeted them and perceived in their faces the signs of renewed confidence which he had missed for so long.

"The Mooffs are dying!" came a loud, clear shout. "They are dying everywhere—and nobody knows what makes them die."

"That's right," smiled Rogal. "Soon they will cease to be a threat."

"But transport ships are already going out to bring back replacements. The Government can't exist without the telepathic Mooffs. They would lose control over us. Since the Mooffs started dying, the influx of members in the resistance movement has increased ten times over."

"That's understandable," Rogal explained to his friends. "As traitors disappear, so does fear in the hearts of the timid."

He did not know that there was also another reason for the new influx of supporters. The Zalites who had been freed from the suggestive influence of the Mooffs were able to recognize now with sudden clarity the great danger in which the System found itself. They were determined to overthrow the Zarlt—and now there was no mental compulsion against it.

"Do you think the aliens have anything to do with what's happening?" someone asked.

"The strangers? What do we know of them? They are guests of the Zarlt. Besides, they stole an Empire ship. I don't think we can look to them for anything. And the *last* thing I'd give them credit for is the death of the Mooffs."

"Perhaps you are mistaken, Rogal." From the entrance of the room, the voice came loud and clear. "Judge us after you have come to know us."

Heads swung around and eyes stared at the two men who stood in the doorway, calmly and fearlessly

returning glance for glance. They wore inconspicuous uniforms and carried strange-looking weapons in their belts. Rogal recognized them. He had seen the TV newscasts often enough.

The Strangers.

For a moment a sense of panic consumed him. Were they entirely lost? If his instincts concerning these strangers was valid, the answer was yes. But hadn't the Stranger himself said that he could perhaps be mistaken?

He decided to stake everything on one move. He had really nothing to lose, since the discovery of their group here by the Strangers already meant that their plans were known.

"You come to us?" he asked, after collecting himself. "Why?"

"Perhaps to help you," said John Marshall, while reading a mixture of doubt and hope in Rogal's mind.

André Noir next to him began immediately to analyse the natural mental screening ability of the men who were gathered there. Within a few seconds he knew that without exception he would be able to control their wills if their attitude required it

"Help us?—how?"

"By reestablishing Zalit as a world in which living is worth while. You can see that I am being quite frank and open with you. May I expect the same from you?"

"How is it that you know our intentions? You are aliens here and an enemy to the Empire—the same as the Zarlt. How can we trust you?"

"Appearances are deceiving, Rogal. You, yourselves, appear to the outside world as loyal subjects of Demesor, yet you are his enemy. Why shouldn't we also be able to appear as enemies of the Empire—and yet be its friends?"

Rogal had to admit there was something in this argument to commend it. "And do you have proof of your—ah assumption?"

Marshall smiled. "You are merely one resistance group among many that are scattered all over the planet of Zalit. You have very little contact with each other because of your need to guard against the traitorous intervention of the Mooffs. I am in a position to establish contact between all these groups and so to strengthen and unite the resistance. Would that be sufficient to demonstrate my good will and loyalty?"

"And if you have the intention of handing us all over to the Zarlt?"

"I could do that without dealing with you. I know who the other groups and their leaders are. If I were against you, you'd have been apprehended long before now. However, our goal happens to be to overthrow this dictator Zarlt through the rightful supporters of the assassinated Ruler. And your goal is the same."

Rogal could see that the Stranger was not lying. He moved warily toward him and reached out his hand. "I want to trust you, stranger. It may be that we can reach the goal more swiftly together. So now—what about the Mooffs?"

Marshall did not intend to explain the true nature of the Mooffs to his new friends. "The Mooffs are the Zarlt's cohorts. They help him to keep control over the thoughts of his subjects. The Mooffs are traitors and have to be eliminated. We have already begun this task."

Rogal's face brightened. "So we do have you to thank for the mass deaths of the Mooffs? Tell me how you do it—we want to help. Victory for our cause will not be in sight until the last Mooff is dead."

"Leave the Mooffs to us; for you there is other work," said Marshall, with a knowing look at André Noir. "Are we permitted to attend your meeting here? We can work this out together."

Rogal nodded his agreement, then walked to the front of the room and took over the podium. He opened the proceedings and the meeting began.

* * * *

It was eight hours before the *Titan*'s hyperspace receiver registered the first return impulses. They came from a distance of 32,000 light-years. Without any corresponding time lapse, the coded transmission leapt across the unimaginable abyss through the fifth dimension, converting only to normal space within the receiver itself. Major Deringhouse, now Commander-in-Chief of the Terranian Space Fleet under the insignia of the New Power, had received Rhodan's message and sent the following answer:

TO PERRY RHODAN, ARKON SECTOR: ALL PEACEFUL IN TERRA SECTOR. NO HYTRANS. FLEET IN READINESS. BEST LUCK! DERINGHOUSE.

If Rhodan wanted to be honest with himself, he had to admit that a great weight was lifted from him. It appeared that the robot brain on Arkon had not initiated any action against Earth. Thora was right after all, even though final proof of her conjecture was still missing. In any case, Rhodan's expedition now had the time at its disposal to bring its purposes here to a satisfactory conclusion.

Half of the *Titan* lay in an underground hangar with an open sliding roof, while the upper half was camouflaged so that it could not be recognized. This offered the search ships of the robot brain very little prospect of discovering the stolen super battleship.

That is, if no one were to betray what was really going on on Zalit...

The Zarlt was not to be trusted. It was true that he was still operating under the persistent hypnotic orders of the Mooffs but in his heart and as a free man his own thoughts were not any different. The Mooffs could not have found themselves a more suitable instrument. The goals were the same, even though, perhaps, the planned procedures were different. If it should occur to the Zarlt that it might be timely to win recognition from the robot brain through a worthy deed, he would betray Rhodan without a twinge of conscience. Rhodan had considered the idea of bringing him under the hypnotic control of the mutants but then had resisted the temptation. Each day more Mooffs could arrive and if the new ones perceived that the Opposition also had hypnotists the situation would become more complicated. The as yet Unknown Adversary who was using the Mooffs to make the Zalites take over the Arkonide Empire must have no idea of the true strength of his Opponent.

The communications man had left. Bell was occupied with one of his cherished emergency drills. Thora

had entered the command central unnoticed. For awhile she stood near the door and observed Rhodan, who sat in his pilot seat immersed in his thoughts.

For 13 years this Terranian had held her in custody and obstructed her longed-for return to Arkon. She had been all but convinced that she would never forgive him for this imprisonment but now she wasn't quite sure of where she stood.

The return to Arkon had been a bitter disappointment. She looked back on it with reluctance. The many reproaches that she had intended to voice to Rhodan had never been spoken. She had to admit that he had been right in designating the Arkonides as decadent and incompetent. His harsh judgment of them had been justified by their single act of entrusting the responsibility for an entire galactic empire to a positronic brain.

Without turning his head, Rhodan spoke into the silence. "You aren't disturbing me, Thora. Come and join me. I'd like to talk to you."

She walked toward him slowly, the proud figure erect, an indefinable expression on her face. Her hair, almost white, framed her delicate head, contrasting unnaturally with her tanned complexion. Thirteen years of Earth sun had left their mark. Something gleamed in her golden eyes that Rhodan had never seen before.

"So it seems our purposes are at odds," she murmured.

"But I think not, thank God, our viewpoints," Rhodan replied. "Please, sit down, Thora. Incidentally, you were right: the robot brain hasn't sent a single ship to Earth. I wonder if it was a matter of choice or of not knowing the Earth's position?"

"The latter," she said, and sat down next to him. "Believe me, if it knew the position, the Earth would be as good as lost. A robot brain has no feelings."

"But hopefully it can think logically. It had to recognize that I am not an enemy of the Empire."

"So far you've not given it any reason for thinking otherwise. Anyone who does not abide by its regulations is an enemy of the Empire. You have even stolen one of its ships.

"And if I only did it in order to serve the Empire?"

Thora smiled dubiously. "You'll have to prove that to the Brain first, Perry. don't you think that's difficult—even hopeless...?"

Rhodan shook his head. "Not at all! The Mooffs came into the picture at just the right moment. If we succeed in making Zalit a sister world to Arkon again, that should no doubt suffice as a proof of our loyalty to the Empire."

Her smile deepened. "It suffices with me already, Perry. I have no doubts as to your good intentions. What matters is, if the Brain agrees with me."

You are a logical thinker, Thora—so is the Brain. So your mutual conclusions must also come out the same. Let's wait it out. Actually, there was a different matter I wanted to discuss with you." After a pause, he continued resolutely. "Thora, how do you assess your future?"

Her smile disappeared as though wiped away by an invisible hand. "My future?" A shadow flitted across her face. "What future is there for me on Arkon? My dynasty is all but extinguished. Khrest and I are as exiles, even though some have recognized us either through need or in other indirect ways. I'll be frank, Perry... if I had to make the choice today between being Arkonide or Terranian—it would not be too difficult."

This was a shocking statement when one recalled how proud this Arkonide aristocrat had been and how much she had scorned the 'barbaric' Terranians. The reversal of attitude was understandable but it seemed to Rhodan too sudden. He suspected a pitfall, a cloven hoof somewhere.

"A Terranian?" he asked thoughtfully and looked at her. She returned his gaze freely and openly. There was something akin to pleading in her eyes, which he did not understand. "Thora, don't you consider Terranians to be far beneath you?"

"Not any more, Perry. Sometimes I even wonder if it may not be the reverse. Did not the Immortal express something of that nature?"

The Immortal! Suddenly Rhodan thought he knew what was activating Thora. The secret Immortal, the unfathomable being of living energy that existed on the artificial planet, Wanderer, had withheld from the Arkonides the life-rejuvenating biological cell-shower. He had given it only to Rhodan and Bell.

Because they were Terranians!

His smile was touched with bitterness. "I understand you, Thora, but I don't know whether the Immortal could be bribed."

She drew back from him slightly. "No, Perry, you mustn't think that!" Eternal life is not the only enticement that beckons to me. Arkon has disillusioned me to a point where I have hardly wanted to live at all, much less live forever. No, I have had over a decade of opportunity to be among Terranians. I have directly witnessed how they have accomplished in 13 years as much as we did in thousands. And I have often given deep consideration to the question of how great a regeneration the Empire would undergo if it were ruled by Arkonides or a robot brain but by Terranians..."

Rhodan didn't answer. He sensed that she spoke the truth. And it was so incredible to him that he needed a few moments to grasp it. Finally his wits returned to him. "In that case, you know that your race would forfeit its ruling position," he reminded her. "You are an Arkonide, Thora. Naturally you could become a Terranian, on paper, but in your heart you would forever remain what you are: Arkonide! Would such a state of affairs permit you to be happy?"

She smiled again, this time in a more womanly way. A trace of tenderness touched her lips and the golden eyes glistened. "Happy? Why should I not be able to find happiness?" she asked, and she looked past Rhodan.

It seemed to him as though his heart were in a vice. Suddenly it was as if scales fell from his eyes and only by the severest effort was he able to conceal his reaction. Cautiously he searched her face and her eyes—but he found no confirmation there for his preposterous supposition.

He was just about to brace himself for a reply when the door banged open and Bell marched into the control centre with a thumping stride. For several seconds his voice failed him when he saw Rhodan and Thora sitting so intimately together but then he regained his self-control.

"Emergency drill completed!" he announced in an exaggerated military manner. I have scheduled the next drill for this evening. Sir, the crew knows the *Titan* now almost better than their pants pockets."

Rhodan awakened as if from a dream. He looked at Bell distractedly and nodded. "Very well, Reg. Next drill this evening."

Bell remained where he was. "Something wrong?" he asked, anxiously.

Rhodan smiled. "No, it's nothing—at least nothing that should concern you."

I see!" said Bell, who didn't see at all. He glanced quickly at Thora, shook his head and departed. He closed the door sharply and his footsteps rang in the passageway beyond.

Rhodan turned once more to Thora. The mood was gone. Her mouth was set as sternly as ever and the splendid light that had given him his first hint was lacking. Now she was the old Thora again. But he also knew that there was another Thora, whom one would have to consider with care.

A Thora with a heart...

* * * *

Pucky and Tama Yokida did not return to the ship until evening. Their first business brought them to Rhodan who was eating supper in the Officer's Mess with Thora, Khrest, Bell and the mutants. Lieutenant Tiffloor and Frank Haggard sat in a corner playing chess.

The mouse-beaver saluted and sat down on his hindquarters. "Special mission completed!" he announced. "During the past two weeks all Mooffs present on *Zalit* have been exterminated, as far as we could locate them. The scientists are beating their brains out trying to figure how those pressurized glass containers for the Mooffs became porous—but I guess they're not going to get any answers."

"What about the ships of the spacefleet?"

Pucky shrugged his shoulders and almost lost his balance. "As far as was possible, we covered that also and knocked out the Mooffs. Naturally other ships are still returning from patrol flights with live Mooffs on board."

"That has to be blocked also," Rhodan ordered, and patted the mouse-beaver on the back. "You will continue the mission. The Mooffs have to be eliminated. Their Masters must begin to believe that the climate on *Zalit* isn't healthy for them—in both senses of the word. When the transports arrive with more Mooffs, they have to be processed immediately."

"Will do," responded Pucky, stretching his small body. This brought his eyes to a level with the spread of food on the table. "I'm hungry."

"Over here!" called Bell, from the other end of the table. "We scrounged up a couple of carrots for you from the *Ganymede*'s freezer compartment and brought them over"

The mouse-beaver's ears shot up and he teleported to the empty seat next to Bell.

Two seconds later Bell was hanging from the mess hall's ceiling, straining in vain to be free of Pucky's stream of telekinetic energy. He paddled with his arms and legs and promised to send someone immediately to the *Ganymede* to get the carrots, and it was only a joke anyway, and...

Pucky was oblivious to Reg's babbling. With death-defying avidity, he gnawed on the bones of an unfamiliar animal that served as sustenance to the Arkonides.

He would have preferred the carrots.

* * * *

John Marshall confirmed Rhodan's assessment of the situation. "The influx of adherents to the now-united resistance movement has increased tenfold now that the Mooffs are dying off and their suggestive powers are failing. The Zalites hate the Zarl, who had their old Ruler assassinated in order to usurp his power. On the one hand they aren't overjoyed at the prospect of a guardianship through the Arkonide positronic brain but on the other hand they are astute enough to prefer that to rulership by the new Zarl. They know that then the Empire would be lost, because they know their weaknesses."

"The Zalites are a remarkable people," said André Noir, the hypnotist. "Those who have been freed from the Mooffs. Don't seem to need any new inducement to support the cause, as long as none of them are officers close to the Zarl. The latter, I would say, need some special treatment."

"Not yet!" warned Rhodan. "The Zalites must remain free to make their own decisions. I want the Zarl to keep on with his game and not suspect that we are responsible for the death of the Mooffs. He must continue under the impression that we are enemies of the Empire and are hiding from the search patrols of the robot brain."

John Marshall probed Rhodan's mind but to his chagrin encountered an impenetrable defence screen. Rhodan smiled at him.

Bell, who had been released by Pucky and was no longer stuck to the ceiling, agitated for swifter action. "Perry, just suppose we put the ruling class of the Zalites under hypnotic control—they'd do what we told them to. With one stroke the jig would be up and Zalit would be free. The robot brain would be grateful to us and..."

"...and we would never know who is behind the plan to destroy the Brain, Reg! No, that wouldn't work. The Zarl must continue to be free and operate according to his own judgment, otherwise the real manipulators will get suspicious. They are the ones I want to unmask, whoever the devil they are. The Zarl is nothing but a puppet. If we cut the string he's dangling from, we won't know who's making him dance. So fine—we knock out the Mooffs. We also support the Freedom Fighters. But with that we've reached our limit. For the time being at least."

"If I understand you correctly, the Zarl will be permitted to execute his plan, so that..."

"No, he'll carry out only the first steps of his plan, no more. At the moment we unmask the true

manipulators behind the scene, we strike, and we rescue the Empire. I won't go further than that."

"Have you decided, then, to rescue the Empire?" injected Khrest. In his voice was not a particle of suspicion.

"Yes," said Rhodan.

Khrest locked his gaze on him. "For whom?" he asked, pleasantly.

Rhodan did not speak but his answering smile was equally pleasant.

6/ "THE ZARLT MUST DIE!"

For the second time Zarl Demesor visited the *Titan* —and he did not come alone. He brought several officers with him, who appeared to Rhodan to be acting as bodyguards.

The Zarl was unable to entirely conceal his uneasiness. Of course he was very friendly and charming but a closer look at him revealed that heavy thunderclouds of trouble were looming on the horizon of his future plans. Naturally he knew nothing of the decisive role of the Mooffs; for him they were nothing other than welcome assistants in the fight against the growing dissatisfaction of his people. How was he going to be able to investigate the secret thoughts of his subjects, now, if no more telepathic Mooffs were available?

He marched in to Rhodan, who waited for him in the mess room. He did not pay any attention to John Marshall, who stood at one side, little knowing that at this moment his thoughts and intentions were being subjected to a careful analysis.

"Much time has passed since you came to our world," he began the conversation after the greetings were over with. "You still maintain your silence and will not reveal to me how you were able to get through Arkon's blockade belt?"

Rhodan smiled calmly. "Zarl Demesor, you seem to consider it a simple task to eliminate the robot brain. I must warn you that even if you should succeed you would still have to face the powerful Arkonide fleet, not to mention the robot-guided fighting units that will take action independently of the robot brain. I do not believe that you have the slightest chance of conquering the Empire."

"Who suggests that I want to conquer it? I want only to free it from the tyranny of a machine, that's all."

"A praiseworthy goal," Rhodan admitted. "And am I to help you reach it?"

"Naturally! Isn't the Brain your opponent? Isn't it pursuing you like a deadly nemesis? I can't see what objections you could have to being my ally."

"Discretion alone might force me to that, Zarl. And one other thing: What's the status with your own people? Can you depend fully and completely on their support?"

The Zarlt nodded confidently. "Yes, I can! The Zalites are peace-loving but they also stand ready to fight where their freedom is involved."

Rhodan glanced briefly at Marshall. The silent signal between them went unnoticed. The Zarlt was lying. He was well aware that a majority of the Zalites stood against him. No one approved of his intention to attack the robot brain.

"The internal affairs of Zalit do not concern me," said Rhodan. I will reveal the method of penetrating Arkon's defence ring when the time comes. When it is time to do so, Zarlt—not a second sooner."

A shadow of resentment swept across the reddish-brown face but Demesor controlled himself perfectly. "I have time, until your confidence becomes firm. As a sign of my friendship, today I am giving a celebration in the red palace and I wish to invite you and your officers. You have been with us many weeks without having had an opportunity to get acquainted with Zalites under more festive circumstances. Will you accept?"

"Why not. How many of my people may I take?"

"That's entirely up to you, of course. I presume you will be bringing only your closest friends. One thing more: today I was visited by a personal courier from Arkon, who was making investigations. The robot brain has a basis for deducing that your fight from Arkon was in this direction. I denied this most energetically and claimed never to have observed your presence within our System."

"I thank you for that," replied Rhodan, who already knew that the Zarlt was lying. Not a single courier ship had landed on Zalit this day, nor had any such questioning occurred. In actuality, the robot brain didn't have the slightest clue as to where Rhodan had flown with the stolen ship.

"Today I will place two limousines at your disposal," the Zarlt promised. "Only members of the Government will take part in the festivities. I must ask you to take this circumstance into consideration, in the selection of your retinue."

Rhodan promised to comply, although it could not alter his own objectives. It was most important that he should give the Zarlt a sense of superiority. The man must be made to feel strong and secure in his plans. Rhodan didn't know to what extent the unknown Masters of this game were backed up by spies on Zalit—if any. Perhaps the Mooffs represented the only contact between them and the Zarlt. But then again, perhaps not.

The Zarlt turned to other subjects and expressed a desire to inspect the ship. Rhodan had no objections and advised Bell, who accepted the assignment happily, since he welcomed any diversion that could add colour to a sometimes monotonous tour of duty.

Rhodan used his workload as an excuse to be alone with Marshall, who apprised him of the most secret thought processes going on in the minds of the Zarlt and his intentions had not changed in the slightest. He Demesor was now free of any and all Mooff influences, his intentions had not changed in the slightest. He planned now as he had before, to destroy the robot brain and, as Emperor, to take over the mighty galactic empire of the Arkonides.

* * * *

To his sorrow, Bell had to remain behind in the *Titan*. Rhodan made it clear to him that he could not leave the ship without proper protection for it. Bell knew the vessel inside out and was therefore the logical man to take over the command, should anything unforeseen happen. That pacified him a little. His grumblings subsided to some degree, although not entirely.

With utmost care, Rhodan picked out the people who were to accompany him. In addition to Thora, Khrest and Dr. Haggard, he included the mutants John Marshall, Ras Tschubai and André Noir—seven persons in all.

Teleser Ralph Marten relaxed in his cabin but tarried mentally in the red palace. He took over the body of a certain Milfor, who was responsible for the Zalit fleet ordnance. Seeing and listening through the Zalite's eyes and ears, he could take part in the festivities without being observed, and thus, if necessary, could notify Bell at any time.

Rhodan sat in the first car with Thora and the mutants. Frank Haggard and Khrest took the second car. The two men had formed a deep friendship, based largely on the fact that Haggard had saved Khrest from the certain death of leukaemia 13 years ago. The Australian physician was a specialist in blood diseases and had discovered the serum that had brought the fear of this terrible sickness on Earth to an end.

The solo trip to the city for just the two of them was no accident. Khrest had manoeuvred it this way and was not concerned whether Rhodan was suspicious or not. Thora had taken an unusually zealous interest in getting Khrest and Haggard alone together.

Rhodan's limousine led the way; the driver of the second car followed.

Khrest spoke in English. "I wanted to talk to you, Frank. There's practically no opportunity on the ship to do so. Even here we have to be careful because Marshall still can monitor what we say. So I'm asking you to screen your thoughts. I want to ask you a question which means very much to me and to Thora."

"Well, that's quite a solemn beginning, Khrest," Haggard chided him jokingly. He looked off into the darkening twilight skies of Zalit. Here they sat on an alien planet, 34,000 light-years from Earth, and worried about keeping their Opponent, the robot brain of Arkon, from being destroyed. A tangled mess of a situation, of which only Rhodan could make heads or tails. "Start talking. I'm listening..."

Khrest cautiously sought to reassure himself. "And you will not be shocked at my question?"

"No way, Khrest. Just ask."

Khrest allowed a few seconds to pass. His memory returned to that terrible moment when he stood with Rhodan before the Immortal and asked for eternal life. Since millennia of time the legend of the Planet of Eternal Life had haunted the Empire of Arkon—until the legend became reality and he, Khrest, in company with Rhodan, discovered this planet.

And then the Immortal, a being that represented the group spirit of an entire race, explained in a few sombre words that eternal life could be only for Terranians. He added that the Arkonides had their destiny behind them—and that they had not utilized it. Why should anyone who had not known how to make use of life seek to prolong its natural span? *It*, the Immortal, could see no justification for it.

Then Khrest had submitted without contradiction, although his self-confidence had suffered a bitter blow. It was the same with Thora. In their stead, the Terranian, Rhodan, had received relative immortality—along with this fellow Bell, to whom nothing was sacred.

Khrest sighed. "Frank, with all the means and methods known to you, do you think it would be possible to induce and sustain in the human body a general regeneration of cells?"

Dr. Haggard sank back into the upholstery and looked at Khrest searchingly. He was of course familiar with the events surrounding the planet Wanderer. He also knew that it lay within Rhodan's power to procure relative immortality for each Terranian he cared to recommend to the Immortal. Only the two Arkonides were excluded. The question was—why? Hadn't Thora and Khrest long since given sufficient proof that they had eluded the general degeneration of their race and possessed practically the same degree of energy and determination as the Terranians? Perhaps they would live another 50 or 100 years but what was that compared to millennia?

Haggard suddenly understood how a man condemned to death must feel—yet was not every man born or woman sentenced to this Death from the first breath of his life?

"Khrest, why do you ask me this?"

"I only wish to know whether or not you believe it possible, nothing more. Is there any hope of outwitting the Immortal in some way?"

Haggard gazed at the back of the lead limousine. "That would involve outwitting not only the Immortal but also Rhodan—do you know that?"

"No! We want to achieve immortality by medical means rather than through the mercy of an unfathomable entity that is composed of millions of other beings. If we can succeed in discovering cell regeneration, we will be outsmarting no one. And what we achieve through our own efforts also belongs to us."

"How long has it been," asked Haggard, "since you have been thinking of this possibility?"

Khrest closed his eyes. "For some time now—more precisely, since that moment when Sgt. Harnahan discovered a being on a satellite of the sun Tatlira that is more than a million years old."

Haggard nodded and reminisced. "We know nothing about this creature except that it's shaped like a ball and feeds on light from the stars. It's probably not organic and has another basis of life."

"We know," said Khrest, in a strange tone, "that it is older than any existing civilization. And we also know that it will outlive us and our civilization. Isn't that enough?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that it is probably not as narrow and unbending as the Immortal! It has asked us for help. We could probably name a price. That price would be the secret of its immortality. Wouldn't that be fair?"

Haggard nodded slowly. I see what you mean. It might reveal its secret to us but we couldn't do anything with it because we are an organic life form. Can you live on starlight, Khrest?"

"No," said Khrest regretfully but a strange fire gleamed in his eyes. "But I know that without their light I

would*not* wish to live. Perhaps therein lies some kind of correlation."

Rising in the distance, Haggard saw the cone of the red palace. Colourful searchlights immersed it in a conflagration of giant diadems.

"Yes, perhaps," he admitted almost in a whisper. "We will have to speak more of this. It could be that there is hope for you. For you and Thora."

* * * *

During the greeting of the Zalites' guests and exchange of reception speeches, Marshall and Noir were not idle. The telepath monitored those present unceasingly and was able to determine that these Zalites were, without exception, the faithful cohorts and vassals of the Zarlt. He also fortuitously discovered the murderers of the old Zarlt. They were highly placed personalities in the present Government and a few officers of the Fleet, from whose ranks Zarlt Demesor had emerged.

Meanwhile, André Noir checked the minds of the guests for any chance remnants of hypnotic influence. There was evidently no trace left of Mooff suggestion. The Zalites were free, yet they held to the same plan as before.

At first Ras Tschubai did not have much to do. He kept himself somewhat in the background and was admired by all because of his black complexion. Here there was no racial prejudice. In this respect they were even ahead of the Terranians, who still carried this burdensome heritage around with them.

Khrest and Thora remained silent while mainly Rhodan and Haggard carried on conversations.

And then it came suddenly to Marshall that strange thoughts were mixing with those of the present guests. He was engaged in a conversation with Cenets, Fleet Mobilization Chief, when the extraneous impulses touched his sensitive mental antenna. Unfortunately he was not able to bring the proper amount of concentration into play, because the officer kept asking new questions and waited for the corresponding answers. Not until a telepathic cry for help alerted André Noir, who as a hypno could nevertheless sense such signals even if he couldn't understand them.

With support from Noir, Marshall was able gradually to excuse himself and find a quieter corner of the festively decorated room, where he could dedicate himself more effectively to the impinging thought impulses. At first he assumed that he was dealing with a fresh contingent of Mooffs who were now seeking to reestablish their lost contact but he soon discovered his error.

They were Zalites.

And they were just on the verge of overpowering the guards and breaking into the palace.

* * * *

Rhodan was just speaking with the Zarlt when he noticed Marshall's signal. He thought: *is it very important?* He received an urgent nod for answer. *So important that I can leave the Zarlt standing here?* Another nod from Marshall.

Rhodan excused himself and strode diagonally across the hall. Marshall followed him. They met in an adjacent empty room.

"What is it, John?"

"The rebels! They've overpowered the guards and are invading the palace in large numbers in order to assassinate the Zarlt and his followers. My friend Rogal is leading the raid. We are to be spared from the massacre."

"Where is Noir? He must intervene here immediately before it's too late. If the Zarlt learns of the assault we may not be able to save Rogal and his friends."

"Rogal is counting on our support."

"We can't allow ourselves to do that. Remember it's not merely the Zarlt who's involved. I must find out who the Unknown Masters of the Mooffs are but I can't do that if the Zarlt's plans take a splash prematurely. Where the devil is Noir?"

"Talking to Cenets, one of the officers."

"Get hold of him—quick!"

Rogal's hand was gripping a bomb. Only the pressure of his thumb on the fuse-spring prohibited the detonation. Even if Rogal were killed, the explosive effect of the bomb would blast his murderer with him into oblivion.

Two of his companions had killed the guard at the post to the left of the entrance. One of them took over the dead man's post. One of the rebels already stood on guard on the right side of the portal. The insurgents pressed unhindered into the palace. No Mooff was there to betray them. The Zalites were not telepaths. Two more posts were silently overwhelmed. Now from a distance a murmur of voices emerged from the ground-floor reception hall. Somebody was making a speech.

Rogal smiled coldly to himself, while signalling his compatriots, and continued onward. He would enter the hall and command the strangers from the other solar system to leave the palace at once. Then he would throw the bomb. Zalit would be free again.

There was movement ahead in the corridor. A figure stepped from the door leading to the ball. Erect and fearless, this one strode toward the rebels. Rogal recognized André Noir but the other man beside him was strange to him.

The rebel stood his ground and waited. It was bright enough in the corridor to see both of the strangers plainly. The man accompanying Noir commanded Rogal's undivided interest. The lean and confidently erect figure inspired Rogal with such a respect that he couldn't explain it, and though he sought with a vague motion to banish it, he could not.

Yet withal there was nothing special about this man. Granted, the eyes with their cold grey fire were

noteworthy, also the narrow-lipped mouth. And more than anything, the serene and sovereign movement of the stranger as he now approached him, without apparent concern for the dangerous bomb in the rebels hand.

Noir remained standing several steps in front of Rogal. "My chief wishes to know you, Rogal. Perry Rhodan, this is Rogal."

Rogal had already learned the name from Noir and Marshall. Rhodan was the leader of the expedition that had stolen the ship from the Arkonides. From outward appearances he was an enemy of the Empire but Marshall had emphasized that in actuality he stood on the side of all free Zalites.

Well, however that might be, Rogal didn't hold much with diplomacy. His fist was curled around the bomb. A defiant expression crept into his face. "I have come here in the name of Justice," he said sternly and glared into Rhodan's grey eyes. "The Zarlt must die."

Rhodan nodded in concurrence. "Naturally he must die—but not today, Rogal. The time hasn't come yet. Perhaps it will be others who will finish the work you have begun. If the Zarlt should die today, in a few years you'd have to go through the same process all over again."

"Why?"

Rhodan had no intention of confiding his most strategic conjectures to this Zalite. What did Rogal know of the Mooffs' assignment here? —what would he know of those who lurked behind it all? Certainly much less than he, Rhodan.

"We will explain everything later when the proper point in time has been reached in which to launch the operation. And now, go home, before the Zarlt learns of this assassination attempt. I would not be able to help you just now."

Rogal hesitated. "How did you know about it?"

Rhodan smiled. "We just *knew*, Rogal."

He gave him a friendly nod and tamed around. Without apparent concern for what else might happen behind him, he strode back to the end of the corridor and disappeared again into the reception hall.

Only Noir remained. Inwardly he was ready to put his ability to use but he chose to wait until it was absolutely necessary. Rogal stared at his bomb. At his side stood all of his determined companions. The assassination weapons gleamed in their hands.

"Well?" asked Noir. "Are you going to be smart and wait or have you decided to place violence before wisdom?"

"Wisdom?" grumbled Rogal. "We've knocked out the guards and now we're supposed to give up? Wouldn't that be cowardice? Who can say when another opportunity like this will happen again? No, my friend, we will not be stopped. I will give you and your people five minutes to leave the hall. Then the bomb goes off. The Zarlt must die!"

Noir saw that his arts of persuasion were at an end. Even Rhodan had not been able to do it. So there was no alternative but to provide the rebels with a post-hypnotic block which would let them forget everything that had happened.

And so it was that about 20 seconds later Rogal and his friends retraced their steps, an action which no one could explain afterwards—least of all themselves. When on the next day the killing of the palace guards was announced, no one puzzled over this more than Rogal.

* * * *

"I don't understand anything any more," grumbled Bell, staring reproachfully at Rhodan. "Here these other people came along and wanted to make our work easy for us—and you kept them from doing it. All our troubles would have been over with and the robot brain's troubles too. Zalit would have been free and would have acknowledged its loyalty to the Empire."

"And the robot brain would have recognized immediately that we alone are the responsible ones—don't you see?" Rhodan replied. "No, our situation would not have changed. We would be as we were before, in the positronic eyes of the Machine, an enemy. What kind of a service would that be, anyway, to support a small rebellion? If we wish to prove our loyalty to the Empire, then let it be through a deed whose *omission* would guarantee the robot brain's annihilation."

"The Zarlt wants to do just that!"

Rhodan smiled. "But he does not take action—at least not without me or the Mooffs. The Zarlt by himself is a bungler with a little intelligence. However, in the hands of the Mooffs he is an all-destroying volcano. You can see, Reg, it's still advisable to wait, even if it takes weeks. it's the Opposition's move."

Bell noticed the attitude of agreement among the others and so refrained from further argument. Rhodan probably knew what he was doing.

Pucky waddled straight across the messroom and took Bell by the hand. "When is the next emergency drill? I've heard tell that this time the whole Mutant Corps should take part in it."

Bell's face brightened. The prospect of pacing the mutants, above all, through the thousand sections and compartments of the *Titan* was to him most attractive.

He grinned. "In 10 minutes, Pucky. Of course I insist that all hands will appear promptly and freshly scrubbed. Otherwise, I shall issue the directive that—"

Unfortunately he was interrupted by Rhodan. "Excuse me, Reg, I will conduct the next drill practice. Everyone will participate, including yourself. We must all be familiar with the ship."

"But—"

"No buts! By the way, I don't think it would do you a bit of harm to—ah—come clean yourself. Isn't that what you were ordering Pucky to do?"

The grin disappeared from Bell's face. "Come clean?" he muttered, dumbfounded. Then he shook his head uncomprehendingly and walked out of the messroom, a crestfallen man, to prepare himself for the stupid drill practice.

He only liked it when he himself could direct it from the command centre...

* * * *

The Zalite Orbson, who was commanding officer of the Voga Sector patrol, supervised a trans-shipment of cargo out on the fringe of the System. The heavy transport vessel had just emerged from hyperspace and was to disappear again within a few hours into regions unknown. Its secret assignment took it to a very remote solar system, where there was a giant planet with a field of gravity twice that of Zalit

On this planet dwelled the Mooffs.

Orbson observed the row of glass containers with visible repugnance. He couldn't stomach these jelly-blob looking things very readily but there was something that seemed to dissuade him from showing it. Granted, these Mooffs bore no relation to any civilized life form, but they had proved themselves to be useful. Moreover, the Zarlt had ordered 2000 of them to be imported when those on Zalit had died. The previous glass cupolas had become unusable.

Thus it was not Orbson's place to reason why...

About the time he came into view of the containers, his feeling of repugnance vanished. Without being aware of it, he was once more under the hypnotic control of the Mooffs, who on their part had received new instructions prior to departing from their home planet. And the pledge to carry out a vital future role in the government of the Arkonide Empire.

The freight transfer was concluded smoothly. Orbson's ship returned to Zalit while the transport turned its stem to the star Voga and submerged into the depths of the void.

Zalit was no longer without Mooffs.

The Unknown Masters again stretched out their hands for the Empire.

* * * *

Once more out of breath, Bell stepped into the dark maw of the antigravitor, gasping as he let himself fall, "They shouldn't build spaceships as big as planets!"

Lt. Tiffloor, following suit down the a-g chute, attempted to inject a little levity into the gravity of the situation. "Maybe they didn't *planet* that way!" he suggested.

Bell groaned, more from the pun than the punishment he was taking as their fall began to be braked by the invisible forcefields. Before he had time to retort he landed, stepped into the passageway and heard Rhodan's voice emerging from a nearby speaker: "Battle call! Man all stations! Ordnance drill test! Man

all stations at once!"

Bell grumbled, "Our station is D-135—whatever the heck that means! On this deck—would you believe it? —and 800 yards away! Come on, let's hit it!"

They had to run along the gradually curving corridor as the glide-skids were not operating. Tifflo swore shortly. Bell scolded and groaned, ruefully recalling his role as director of the previous drill tests. *They* had been considerably more pleasant!

From Bell's left a figure appeared in the passage: Ras Tschubai.

Bell breathed a sigh of relief. "Hey, Ras—gimme a hand, will you? How about a little lift to station D-135? That's yours, too!"

"Rhodan wouldn't like that!" warned the cadet as he ran past Ras.

Bell ignored him. "Okay, Ras? We've always been buddies, haven't we? Come on—you're a teleporter, you can get there in a second! With my short legs—"

"*Bowlegs!*" came a reprimanding voice from above.

Bell exercised first his vocabulary, then his feet.

Tschubai stared after the departing figure curiously, shook his head, shot one sly glance at the small ceiling speaker, then dematerialised. and transited to station D-135. There he took his ease while waiting for Bell and Tifflo to arrive.

Five minutes later a redfaced, puffing Reg came panting into view. He glared angrily at Tiff, who had already swung into his gun-cradle beneath a disintegrator, then took up his own position.

A loudspeaker crackled. Rhodan's voice rang through "Excellent! The ship was battle-ready in 10 minutes."

Bell beamed till, after a short pause, Rhodan added: "Tomorrow well try for nine! You'd have to be teleporters to make that—wouldn't you say, Reg? Especially considering *those short legs of yours...* "

"Thanks a thimbleful!" Bell grumbled. He didn't press the issue; he knew what he was in for. Because just the day before, during an early drill, he had forbidden the teleporters to use their special skills. For Pucky, physical movement was very gruelling, and when he had arrived last at his designated station, Bell had kidded the mousebeaver unmercifully, attributing his slowness to his short legs.

If ever the varmint from Vagabond were to learn of Reg's poor performance—! No, the thought was unthinkable.

Naturally, Pucky did find out.

CONTENTS

1/ THE BRAIN MUST BE BEFRIENDED

2/ A TERRIFYING MONSTROSITY

3/ THE REAL RULERS

4/ PUCKY'S POTENT PLAN

5/ THE MOOFFS ARE DYING
(AND THORA IS COMING TO LIFE)

6/ "THE ZARLT MUST DIE!"

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

CHALLENGE OF THE UNKNOWN

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

PERRY, a prisoner of the Zarlt of Zalit, is pressed for the secret of how he & his people penetrated the blockade that rings Arkon. The power mad Zalite might think Rhodan would talk but naturally you know he wouldn't.

But how about Bell—Marshall—are they of less stern stuff than the Peacelord? They are brought into the presence of the telepathic Mooffs—can these alien mind-readers wrest the secret from them?

Pucky & the Suggestor to the rescue!

Incidentally, it is during these perilous times of underground forces at work on Zalit and an assassination attempt on the Zarlt and a threat to the rule of the Robot Brain that Perry & Thora, they—well—it is a 'day' in the 'diary' of the #1 astronaut of the New Power when overpowering emotions are at last expressed and (hint) there are more stars in his eyes than the skies that his spaceship usually plies! To Thora's surprise—

But all will be revealed in the great adventure of—

THE GIANTS PARTNER

By Clark Darlton