

Spaceship Titan—the most powerful craft in the known universe. It can travel at the speed of light, can even avoid the coordinate scanners of the robot brain of Arkon.

Or can it?

Honor—a parched and inhospitable globe.

Here Perry Rhodan must seek temporary sanctuary from the positronicon, and the insidious menace of the Mooffs.

But here too Perry and his Mutants must battle to prevent the break-up of the Arkonide Empire—and survive the mysterious threat that lurks within the Thatrel System...

This is the stirring story of—

SOS: Spaceship Titan

1/ X MINUS ZERO!

SPACESHIP *Ganymede* —60 seconds from blastoff.

X minus 60.

The gigantic hull of the mighty spacer stretched into the sky. The cloud ceiling over the spaceport was 1500 feet but the great bird of space pierced it, its streamlined bill reappearing at close to 2500 altitude.

X minus 50.

Dense cloud formations drifted past the faintly gleaming fuselage at about half its height, concealing its upper structure and somehow magnifying its 600-foot diameter to more massive proportions than usual. The ship gave the impression of being some great tower out of ancient time. There where it pierced the drifting cloud cover was an impression of centuries-old battlements but its colossal tail fins finally forced a full perception of the ship's imposing proportions.

X minus 40.

The frantic agitation in the *Ganymede* 's command centre had subsided. The programmed computer

directed the work and timing of all mechanical operations of the ship. Lift-off for Earth was imminent. The clouds and the bow of the spacer were still reflecting the light of the red sun Voga, a supergiant solar beacon, celestial energy source for 15 planets. The giant tail fins still rested on the synthetic surface of the launch base at Tagnor.

Tagnor, the immense spaceport, was the largest on Zalit, fourth planet of the Voga System. Here, more than 15,000 years ago, the first Arkonide ships had landed and begun to colonize this sector of the universe. For 15,000 years the ships of space had landed and taken off—but they had only been stellar travellers of the Arkon Empire or those of its satellites, never visitors from the unknown vastness of the outer void.

The *Ganymede* was not Arkonide in origin; she did not belong to the world of Star Cluster M-13; her home was Earth.

X minus 20 to Lift-off for Terrania!

Soon the Earthship would thrust aloft into space and the wonder of the unimaginable beauty where thousands of suns gleamed out of the supernal abyss like phosphorescent starfish, suns coalescing in veils of colour to alleviate the awesome ebony maw of the Universe and transform this corner of the Cosmos into some enchanted boulevard of cascading fire fountains.

M-13-star cluster—34,000 light-years distant from Earth, a domain of more than 100,000 stars—that was Arkon. And Zalit, 4th planet of the Voga System within M-13, was only one of many worlds that had been colonized by Arkon in millennia past.

X minus 10. In 10 seconds the mighty *Ganymede* would rise and leave this alien Empire—an infinitesimal mote in the infinite. Colonel Freyt made this mental comparison while glancing at the countdown indicators and watching the second hand tick toward X minus zero. He was flying back to the speck of nothingness in the void by order of Perry Rhodan but—here he squared his chest and a gleam of pride came into his eyes—he would return to M-13 together with the Chief and turn this empire of a hundred thousand stars upside down.

It was the final second. The big panoramic observation screen revealed the spaceport of Tagnor. Hundreds of spacers were lined up down below but Col. Freyt only had eyes for one of them—the *Titan*—and again as always the impact of the tremendous sphere sent a tingle down his spine.

There! X minus Zero... and Lift-off!

In the midst of a thundering and roaring from its engines, the ship seemed to rise with carefree ease. It lifted slowly into the cloud ceiling. The drifting clouds appeared to be a tenacious substance into which the ship gradually pierced its way until the tail fins disappeared from view.

Then came the shock-boom from the force of the blast-off which shoved the *Ganymede* aloft. The cloud cover was rent asunder, roiling and tattering aside into shreds. A gigantic hole opened up, through which the red sun of Voga spilled its radiance over Tagnor, and in the centre of this blinding montage of light the rising spaceship was boldly etched in all of its imposing magnitude.

It continued to accelerate and to recede, hurtling outward into the sunset, until in a final flash of light it disappeared.

Slowly, the mile-wide gap closed in the cloud-cover over Tagnor...

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"Whoosh! and away!" said Reginald Bell, leaning way back in his armchair. He watched the panoramic observation screen in the *Titan*'s command centre with hands locked behind his head.

The *Ganymede* was no longer visible on the panob. The final dim flash of light had been a farewell of the departing ship to the crew of the *Titan*, which remained behind on Tagnor.

Bell made himself comfortable. For the moment he was content with the situation. The *Ganymede* was streaking toward its hypertransit point, from where it would reach the Earth in a few instantaneous jumps. There were a thousand hypno-trained specialists in readiness, every one of them a highly qualified man in his field, and all of them impatient to return on the *Ganymede* to form the crew of the biggest space fighter of the galaxies, the *Titan*.

And here in this super spacesphere sat Reginald Bell. Slightly on the roly-poly side, given to bursts of temper, a daredevil but a heck of an honest guy. He was Perry Rhodan's best friend, his deputy, a man firm as a rock.

He turned his head toward the pilot's seat to look at Perry Rhodan. Here beside him was a man who had the means at his disposal to be lord and master of the Earth, yet to whom the thought had never occurred. But Perry had another goal—one of the distant future: to make Earth the centre of the galaxy! This lost speck in a remote arm of the Milky Way, this dust in the Universe, would take over Arkon's role, relieve the decadent Arkonides of their mission, which they no longer could accomplish, and then finally extend civilization to all the worlds of the Universe.

Bell watched him. Rhodan was tensely alert. He flipped a control switch, always ready to do what was needed when others were still in a shock mode. The next moment he sat there relaxed and waited for a report from the Hyper-Sensor section.

The coordinate-detection beams from the *Titan* were monitoring the *Ganymede*'s Right. The Hyper-Sensors were triggered to detect the moment when the earthbound ship would make a hypertransition, thus warping the structure of surrounding space.

"Did you say something, Reg?" asked Rhodan, glancing at him earnestly.

Bell suddenly straightened up and replied a bit peevishly. "I sort of had a feeling I made an observation that the *Ganymede* had just whooshed off, Perry!"

"Interesting, Reg, but not relevant. Col. Freyt has a hypertran compensator at his disposal but we don't. He can 'whoosh off, as you put it, but we have to wait awhile until we have such equipment, so we can't enjoy the luxury of 'whooshing off' just now—although it would be such a joy, don't you think, my friend?"

Rhodan's first words had alerted Bell and both levity and petulance ceased. His eyes darted around the giant command central of the ship and he sighed wearily.

The *Titan* was in his opinion the ultimate of all ships in known space but this command centre was, in his opinion, a nightmare. There was no one who would be able to read and comprehend all the indicators and instruments simultaneously. The *Titan*, a sphere having an approximate diameter of one mile, was the crowning achievement of Arkonide spaceship technology. The huge command central was in the form of a hall-like cupola whose walls bristled with indicators and meters and all sorts of automatic visual data readouts and scanners. Somewhere in all this jungle Perry Rhodan had spotted something of vital importance, something which Bell, naturally, had overlooked.

"I give up," whispered Bell. "What is it?"

"Pan-vidscreen, sector Beta-slash-eight!"

Behind Perry Rhodan stood the Arkonide, Khrest, his tall figure impressive and his intellectually sensitive features as always unforgettable. And now he, too, noted for the first time the designated area on the seamless panob screen. Bell saw the three blips in sector Beta-slash-eight and took comfort in the fact that even the top Arkonide scientist had needed Rhodan's suggestion to make the discovery.

"Spacers." Bell tried to sound casual but was unsuccessful as usual. He stole a sidelong glance at Perry, who smirked knowingly. He knew his chubby friend too well to be bluffed by him.

"Where's the comp data?" That was Perry Rhodan, the man in charge. He knew that the range and bearing computations for the trajectories of the three spaceships must have been retrieved by now if the bogey-tracker at the scan console were anything but a zombie.

The comp data readout began to crawl across the screen.

Perry and Bell exchanged glances. Their grim expressions slowly changed to looks of relief.

Rhodan turned to Khrest. "Well, we may have been recognized by the robot brain on Arkon but it doesn't quite trust us yet."

"A computer brain—a machine, Perry!" the old Arkonide argued contemptuously. "A machine is not human. A positronicon cannot know the value of Terranian integrity."

Perry Rhodan couldn't suppress a smile. "Thanks for the compliment, Khrest, but you exaggerate. We're not that honest. I don't even blame the positronicon for sending spacers after my *Ganymede* to check out the hypertransition. Between real friends there shouldn't be any secrets. Your fine mechanical Regent of Arkon seems to know that. It may have already questioned our motive for keeping the position of our home world a secret and as a logical consequence may have started to doubt our expressed readiness to support the Arkonide Empire."

"But *you* are supporting it," replied Khrest, somewhat shaken.

Perry could answer with unblemished conscience. "Yes, but not as unselfishly honest as the duty between friends demands. I have never for a second abandoned the plan to conquer Arkon's empire for the Earth."

At that moment an announcement from the Hyper-Sensor section blatted out over the speaker: "*Ganymede* transition executed under standard coordinate data. Hypertran compensator not used. Message received pulse-coded. Over to Com Control and out."

Through a rash of contact-switching and speaker cracklings, Communications Control followed up with: "To Commander-in-Chief. Three unidentified spacecraft on *Ganymede* course. Coordinate comp readout: origin, Arkon. End of message. Col. Freyt."

"Well?" asked Rhodan, and waited for Khrest's answer.

Khrest turned his eyes from the screen back to Rhodan, not able to suppress a trace of admiration. "Your suspicion was right, Perry. This Machine, the Lord of the Arkonide Empire, seems to mistrust you."

"And it will distrust us even more when the three spacers have to report that they've lost the *Ganymede* after the first hyperjump. The memory banks tell the Positronicon what I have proven once before—that we can execute transitions that escape its coordinate scanners. Khrest, I don't want to risk a fight with the reigning robot brain. Discretion is the better part of valour, at least until Col. Freyt returns with his thousand specialists and a jumbo-sized hypertran compensator for the *Titan*. Then I'll be ready to take up again the conversation with your robot, and not before. For that reason we shall leave Tagnor, too. Agreed, Reggy?"

Bell had taken another look at the great command centre, with a nostalgic appreciation of the good old *Stardust II*. The cockpit there had been a harmoniously constructed unit which could be handled in emergencies by two or three men. But to attempt to control this command centre with three men would be sheer madness—a guaranteed fiasco.

"Reg," Perry called to his friend a second time. "I'm asking you if you agree we should whoosh off."

It was unusual procedure for Perry but so was the situation with the gigantic *Titan*. The colossal spherical spacer was understaffed and whatever potential was contained in the ship could hardly be put in operation with their skeleton crew.

Bell was considering this when he answered, "Sure, I agree—but even if I'm accused of grouching I still don't like that corner of the universe we've chosen to hide in. I have a hunch about it but don't ask me why...!"

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The *Titan*'s proposed 'whoosh-off' did not materialize immediately. A million small trifles that were of great importance to the inhabitants of the planet Zalit kept Perry Rhodan on the ground for a few days.

Nobody talked any more about Zarlt Demesor, the ex-dictator who had lost his life in an attempt to take over the Arkonide Empire. On the other hand, the Mooffs were not only the daily subject of conversation but still caused a constant alert to be maintained. The search for these non-humanoids left no stone unturned.

The Zalites had not quite recovered from the panic caused by these jellyfish-like creatures. The Mooffs were intelligent beings of a non-humanoid race who had evolved in a world with a methane gas atmosphere. At least on Zalit they had lived in high-pressure spherical tanks which were filled with methane. But the question remained, who had brought them to Zalit in the first place?

For Bell there wasn't any doubt on that subject. "Definitely those stellar gypsies," he had declared; "the galactic traders! They offered the Mooffs to the power mad Zarlt. Of course he had no idea that he was only a tool for their purposes and he imported the telepathic monstrosities en masse to Zalit. His dream had been to send an armada of spacers with crews under mental control into a battle of total destruction against Arkon and the robot brain—incidentally, Perry, are the three Mooff specimens on board the *Titan* completely secured and their security foolproof?"

Perry answered curtly with another question. "Have you ever found anything on board the *Titan* that wasn't?"

Bell's grin in return meant that no reply was needed. He simply pointed to the centre of the control room. There were still traces of some object, which had been organically fused and inter-blended, with the composition of the Arkonide steel decking. For a moment Perry did a take at him, wondering—then remembered the almost hopeless fight that the twin-headed mutant, Ivan Ivanovich Goratschin, had waged with the control automaton here in the command centre.

This control automaton had been the all-powerful tool of the robot brain on Arkon, so powerful that its reach had no limit in the universe. Producing its own energy, built for the sole purpose of executing the orders of the mammoth positronicon, it also had the means of blowing up the *Titan* if it fell into enemy hands. But Goratschin had brought his unfathomable mental powers to bear on the automaton, causing fusion of enough calcium atoms to destroy it from within.

All this was on Rhodan's mind as signals from the propulsion drive section began to arrive. Micro-speakers rattled sequenced 'All Clear' announcements. Green lights climbed the checkout panels swiftly. In Bell's area it was the same: race of sounds, parity lights, indicator flashes. Only a brain with Arkonide schooling could control the mammoth complex.

A barely perceptible vibration ran through the space giant. The huge sphere, built of Arkon steel and supported by a ring of telescopic struts, seemed to keen toward the jump into outer space. It had the capability of accelerating to the speed of light within 10 minutes.

Eight days prior, the *Ganymede* had lifted off for Earth. Now in only a few minutes the *Titan* would leave this world behind.

The power generators began to whine under maximum load. More and more greens and all clears flaked through the countdown system. The force-field projectors signalled their readiness to start up. Also the powerful H-field generators poised themselves in their coils for activation. These served to repel meteors and other flying debris in spaceflight. If activated here on the ground, they could cut a clean swath through the spaceport for a radius of 7 miles.

Rhodan never ceased to be overwhelmed with admiration for the know-how of the Arkonides. In palmier days what they had accomplished had been incredible. But now they were decadent, having allowed their magnificent galactic empire to degenerate until finally, only 6 years ago, they had accepted the mammoth robot brain as their overlord.

Rhodan knew that the Arkonides' empire of multiple worlds was what might be termed 'ready for plucking', yet he had no visions of coming here as a bloody conqueror to leave behind a trail of ruins and misery. Rather, he would build and create, not with the Arkonides but with Earthlings, with the young and the daring, with his own kind.

His vision of the future was interrupted by the accelerating signal traffic of the countdown process. The ship's master positronicon was in full operation.

"Lift-off commit!"

The X-count dwindled rapidly.

The propulsion units revved up to full power readiness. Breaker banks poised for cut-in.

"X minus Zero... Lift-off!"

A massive sphere almost one mile in diameter, the *Titan* became weightless and floated upward, retracting its huge multiple struts. The incredible became credible, perforce, because there it was: the most tremendous spaceship in the known universe was rising and gaining speed, until it finally hurtled into space.

The planet fell behind. Space seemed to rush past them, deepening to a well of blackness behind. And in that well the sun Voga appeared like a reddish cyclopean eye, balefully watching their departure. Then came the vaulted splendour of Star Cluster M-13, a bursting pinwheel of coruscating fire to light the demonic abyss.

"What a ship!" sighed Bell. "What a wonder world around us!"

The two Arkonides, Thora and Khrest, stood between the two seats occupied by Rhodan and Bell. They knew these wonders; this had been their home. Thirteen years before, they had left the star cluster of the Empire to explore the galaxies in search of 'Pel', the Planet of Eternal Life. Their journey had ended in disaster on Earth's moon. For 13 years they had been able to observe closely how the people of a 'barbaric' Earth had developed and matured, under the leadership of Perry Rhodan. Earthlings would soon be ready to take over the reins from the Arkonides.

Thora and Khrest were too intellectually sensitive to think of Earthlings as 'Lords of the Universe' but they did believe that the Earthmen would finally achieve domination of the galaxies, where their own people had failed. It was Perry Rhodan who had finally discovered the planet Wanderer, their long-sought World of Eternal Life. Yet, ironically, it had been he and Reginald Bell who were chosen to be treated with the coveted biological cell shower, a rejuvenating process. They would not age for at least another 6 decades. Whereas they, the Arkonides who had researched this ages-old myth of their race, had not been accepted for this special honour. And now here was an Earthman, his life prolonged, in command of the greatest spaceship in the galaxies—an ally of the Arkonide Empire! Thora and Khrest shared these thoughts mutually. They relived in memory the past 13 years in a foreign world, plus their return to Arkon. They had become strangers in their own home world. Instead of Arkonides reigning there, a mammoth robot brain was in charge and revolutionary flare-ups in satellite galaxies were quelled without mercy by robot-manned Arkonide spacers.

"Transition in 12 minutes!" the ship's positronicon announced through all speakers.

The *Titan* shot through the star cluster at eight-tenths speol (speed of light). The panoramic vid-screen pictured the passing stars, a world of wonder that always fascinated. But on board the *Titan* there was no room now for romanticists. The nav computation data spilling out of the positronicon became audible. Star Cluster M-13, more than 230 light-years in diameter, was a flight-channel 'freeway system' for the spacers. Within this relatively limited' space, nine-tenths of all Empire space traffic sped from one star to the next. Hyper-transitions were being recorded almost with pulse-beat frequency.

Suddenly Perry Rhodan began cursing under his breath, which didn't happen very often. He had spotted two bogey blips on the observation screen, and in response to his instant keying the console for I.D., electronic symbols marked the screen, showing the blips to be spacers tied to his own trajectory.

His Commander's voice demanded, "Where's that comp data!"

The scan operator returned quickly with: "Approach from Phi 34°, Alpha 18; value 1-0-7; 45 point acceleration; 300 miles per second. Speed oh-point-8 light. Objects: 2. Type: Empire ships. End of read-out."

What happened next had not been programmed. With lightning swiftness, Rhodan switched over to manual flight mode for emergencies. The mighty ship's positronicon seemed to disconnect and fall silent. It was no longer in control of the *Titan*.

"Okay, my nose-y friend," murmured Rhodan, referring to the robot brain on Arkon, "we shall see!" His hand seemed to casually brush across the acceleration adjuster keyboard.

In the same moment the boosters cut in and shoved the *Titan* to full acceleration, which brought an octave higher pitch to the already whining inertial-thrust absorbers.

Again Rhodan waited for the comp data. He demanded it this time with an exaggerated politeness.

From the speaker came a sound of heavy breathing, then the scan operator's tense voice: "Uh, distance 250,000 miles, sir!"

"Thank you *very* much," replied Rhodan and added a general comment, both to persons present and over the com system: "Nav computation and scanner section has three delayed-action marks in succession. For the necessary 100% precision, special practice drills will be scheduled in the near future. Gentlemen, I cannot always spare the time to request the comp data readouts. Has it occurred to you that in many vital situations we're going to be faced with we're just not going to keep on top of it unless everybody, and I mean everybody, works with the top level of efficiency!"

The two following Empire spacers, now accurately pinpointed to the coordinate scanners and magnified on the observation screen, appeared to approach even faster than before. Bell grunted his anger, offended by this spying action of the mammoth robot brain on Arkon.

A sparkle appeared in Rhodan's eyes, a rare and winsome gleaming that seemed capable of melting all resistance. Obviously this was aimed at the machine intelligence he was opposing, as though across a game board politely. He didn't mind the distrust of the robot positronicon. After all, he had taken off with the most powerful battle-spacer known. The robot brain had not voluntarily lent him the *Titan* as his own private taxi. Rhodan had simply appropriated the top-level piece of ordinance, so brand spanking new that it had only passed through a few preliminary flight tests.

Perry knew that no act of human kindness or warm buddy system had caused the positronicon to leave this prize in his hands. A positronicon had no emotions, merely a cold-pulsing sea of tight little logic gates. So home-base had concluded: there was only one crew capable of handling this ship now and that team worked under leadership of this alien, Perry Rhodan.

"What are you dabbling with over there?" asked Bell, slightly confused, as he leaned curiously toward Perry.

"Just running a little test, Reg. Don't look now but our automatic guidance system is still operating, even though I hit the override just prior to making a hyper-transit jump. Now what I'd like to see is how fast it's going to cross-compensate for a series of little 'dabbling' as you call them."

Bell took a deep breath. Thora and Khrest also reacted gravely.

Thora, who at one time had commanded an Arkonide expedition ship, that same vessel that had been stranded on Earth's moon, softly placed a hand on Perry's shoulder. The touch of the aristocratic Arkonide woman sent a tremor down his spine. Never in 13 years of close contact had he ever experienced her physical touch.

"Yes?" He looked up at her.

"Perry—what you are demanding from the ship's computer brain is beyond its potential performance limit. For the hypertransit, it would require an entire new progr—"

She was interrupted by the high, ear-shattering speaker voice of the automaton: "X minus 17... X minus 8... X minus 1..."

Thora, Khrest and everybody else standing in the command central fled to any seat they could find.

Perry was barely able to hear the final "X minus Zero!" The awful twinge at the nape of the neck slammed in on him. Then fifth-dimensional hyperspace streamed whispering and hissing tonelessly from all sides into the control cupola of the *Titan*—extinguishing everything: life, matter, energy. It devoured everything, swept it all away. The normal world ceased to exist.

The two Empire ships had been tailgating the *Titan* closely. Their hyper-sensor equipment registered the transit jump of the giant spacesphere through hyperspace and captured exact co-ordinates.

2/ HIDEOUT IN THE THATREL SYSTEM

"Okay, that's enough!" groaned Bell. He closed his eyes in a painful grimace and rubbed the nape of his neck.

The *Titan* had just completed the fourth short hyperjump. Perry and he were the first to recover enough to go back into action.

"We'll see," muttered Rhodan to himself, non-committally.

The micro-speaker hissed briefly. Then came the comp data from the hyper-sensor scans, calculated from the moment of their first transit.

"Five jumps measured, sir!" announced the scan officer triumphantly. "Each with a distance of 8 LIMS (light minutes) and 14-point-6 light-seconds..."

"Thank you," replied Rhodan and turned off the intercom.

Bell shook his head wonderingly. "But man, did you see that heavy space traffic? I'd sure like to have some good statistics on the actual number of spacecraft operating in that star cluster!"

Thora called to him from her seat. "I recall that, 13 years ago, we had more than 3 million of them," she said. She and Bell had often exchanged rejoinders and squelches but this one caught Bell short for an answer.

"Threemillion !" he moaned and kept repeating it.

The figure startled Rhodan and disturbed him but he concealed his reaction. *Good Lord!* he thought. *Over 3 million space ships and yet they've let all their accomplishments decay...* The whole crew in the command centre had heard Thora's remark and showed their astonishment. No doubt they were thinking it a utopian dream to attempt a conquest of such an incredible empire.

"So what!?" Perry looked straight into Thora's eyes. She lost her self-assurance under his glance.

Perry was not conceited but just now his memory awakened concerning how he alone had been able to outwit the mighty positronic brain on Arkon. And yet this robot brain was more powerful than he—a million times more powerful. The total incalculable might and power of Star Cluster M-13 stood behind it. This Brain was no decadent bon vivant of an Arkonide. It had drive, a desire for action. But it had been outwitted by a single individual. That was why Rhodan was merely concerned but not vanquished by Thora's statistic.

"No more hyper-transits!" Rhodan's order was transmitted to every deck of the *Titan* and into every sector. He was convinced that Arkon had lost his trail. Those two Empire ships tagging so close behind were also in a heavy traffic channel and had probably lost him at the third hytrans. "Enter flight program for the Thatrel System," he also ordered.

Reginald Bell began sulking. "I wish I could figure out why the name of that system gives me the wild willies. Hey, Perry—who dusted off *that* particular corner of the star maps for us?"

"You ought to remember, Reg. It was Thora."

"No, this is the first time you told me who. Anyway, she knows best, I guess. How far is this place from Arkon?"

"47 light-years. But you should remember all that, Reggy. You were with us when we went through the star catalogue searching for the Thatrel System. What gives with you, chum?"

"Nothing, Perry, it's just a funny feeling about that place, that's all."

"You should take something for it!" Perry spoke in harsher tones than he intended but Bell had upset him with his foreboding. He had hoped after all these past turbulent days to subside into a period of relaxation.

The Second Officer in charge of ship EDP positronics and programming announced: "Sir, the flight program for Thatrel System is in operation and trajectory set for new course. Difference to co-ordinates is 0.0003. Distance from Honor is 34.62 light-hours at current velocity of 0.76 light..."

At slightly more than three-fourths speed, the *Titan* sped toward the obscure Thatrel System. Three insignificant planets circled a small, pale-red sun there. According to the star catalogue prepared by the Arkonides, the second world was inhabited but by a degenerated population. Rhodan wondered if the already degenerated Arkonides were calling these descendants of their race degenerate, what was in store for them on this planet Honor?

For two days Perry kept up his precautionary observations on the space behind him without any course change, while edging farther and farther from the customary shipping routes of the Arkonide spacers. He wanted to make sure that the mechanical Regent of Arkon had not discovered his whereabouts and that none of the many spacers that had crossed their course at a distance might have reported them to Arkon. His precautions were well understood by everyone on board the *Titan*, since Rhodan was no friend of chance contingencies and went out of his way to avoid them.

At 10:43 ship time the command was finally given to take a direct course to the Thatrel System. The *Titan* hurtled toward its destination at almost the speed of light. Slightly less than 13 hours later the remote solar system appeared before them on the panoramic videoscreen.

The spectroanalyst harrumphed derisively as he analysed the small sun's light rays. Rhodan compared results with the values listed in the Arkonide catalogue.

He was standing in the main conference room of the *Titan*, surrounded by Bell, Khrest and Thora. The conference room was commensurate in its dimensions with the extravagant size of the *Titan*. Bell had derisively dubbed it the Ballroom because he frowned on pomp and ceremony and extensive talks and meetings.

"Perry, why not just make a 'Mars' landing on this clod; you won't find anything there. You don't have to make a big project with the catalogue—I found a Galactic Routing and Time-Table in the library. You ought to take a look at it. There's not a single shipping route that touches this corner of the Big Deep."

"Then this place is exactly what we need, Reg. You keep forgetting we could hardly powder our noses on Zalit without a hundred spies watching us. And don't blame me now if I'm still suspicious of the Zalites. After their revolt they were all too friendly with Arkon. Can you tell me how we can install the new hypertrans compensator without being caught at it? Right now on this trip it's been brought home to us how important the compensator is to us. Instead of going through multiple jumps we could have said goodbye to Arkon with a single transition. That's why I'm glad that Thora has recommended this deserted 'corner' in your Big Deep for us. The installation has to be kept a complete secret. I'd like to have at least a couple of aces up my sleeve in this game we're playing against the robot brain on Arkon."

Bell felt rebuked and started rebelling. "So how many aces are 3 million spaceships? You going to overlook that...?"

"On the contrary, my dear Reg!" Perry was all smiles. "Since I have learned how many spacers there are in M-13, I have been able to shelve our project for new spacer construction."

"You intend to do some more skyjacking, Perry?" Bell was perplexed. When he noticed Thora and Khrest grinning, he became angry. He could see no reason for the hilarity and he blustered, "Skyjacked is the right word, my friends, let's face it. The *Titan* was skyjacked! You have to draw the line somewhere and face facts!"

"But Reg—you of all people!" Rhodan interrupted, his eyes dancing with concealed delight. "To become so sensitive on this particular subject! What's come over you, pal? Need I remind you of a few small

items concerning 'skyjacking', where you have drawn a line longer than the universe...? For instance, I well remember—"

"Okay!" Bell's excitement had subsided as he saw Perry's trend of argument. "I pass!"

"Alright, Reg," Perry answered. "But I still can't have you thinking of us as common thieves. Don't forget that we came as friends to Arkon and you saw what happened when we reached Star Cluster M-13! Besides, when I suggested that our project for new spacer construction had become superfluous, I was thinking of the day when the Arkonides would become our best friends and would supply us with as many spacers as we need. Then what you prophesied in our conversation with Khrest a few days ago will become reality. Okay? Are we back to a mutual understanding...?"

"Yeah, I'd say so. Except for this Thatrel System. I'm not exactly hysterical but this sun gives me the creeps

3/ BURNED OUT WORLD

Honor, the second planet of the Thatrel System, presented a dry and choleric aspect. The panob screen of the *Titan* revealed it in all its shrivelled ugliness.

"Where are the cities?" asked John Marshall, who was Rhodan's best telepath and since the days of the New Power his most faithful follower.

"Honor has no cities," explained Rhodan. "A world where you don't find any raw materials, no minerals to speak of and beset by a miserable climate, is fast forgotten."

How bad the climatic conditions were became clearly visible on the screen. A tremendous sandstorm raged over its scorched, desert-like surface. From this distance it looked like a burning ball in a close-fitting shroud of white smoke. The orbiting speed of the *Titan* pulled the scene of the sandstorm slowly across the videoseen. A mighty mountain range came into view. The ship's electromagnetic triangulators scanned the peaks as having a mean altitude of over 12,000 feet. Thus was the horrifying aspect of this parched and inhospitable globe, with its gaunt, barren mountain range stretching from the northeast in a giant bow to southwest.

"Well!" exclaimed Bell. "What do you know?—a river!" He pointed out a serpentine line that curled around the base of the mountains and ended in a small lake.

The *Titan* continued its freefall orbit around Honor. The mountain range moved slowly across the observation screen. When it terminated, a different type of terrain was presented. Here a greenish-grey colouring appeared, too green to be called grey yet too drab to be termed colourful.

Perry Rhodan wished ruefully that he were fully staffed and thought of the large botanical research department on Deck 17, just now inoperable.

"I wonder what this greenish grey area could be?" said Khrest and turned to Thora. When he saw her expression, he remained silent, watching her critically. The tall, elegant and aristocratic Thora seemed to

be totally gripped in stunned contemplation of the desolate view below. A puzzled frown appeared to replace the regal serenity to which everyone was accustomed. Finally she felt Khrest's questioning surveillance.

She shook her head as if to clear it of unpleasant thoughts. "Could this ugly discolouration be an extended forest?" she asked in return.

"Home, Home on the Range!" sang Bell tauntingly as an expression of old-fashioned American tastes for landscapes, which this one certainly didn't satisfy. "Where the deer and the antelope..." His voice trailed off under their combined scrutiny.

Far ahead on the horizon appeared a few more rivers, all ending in small lakes and basins, but no trace of an ocean. Honor was a dry planet. It was a single inhospitable continent. Slowly the nocturnal hemisphere appeared where darkness seemed to enshroud the ugliness in secret shame.

"Well, anyway," Bell tried to cheer himself up, "it's better to land here after a hyper-transit than smack-dab in the middle of a space battle! But I still don't dig this king-size Death Valley!"

Thus was a second name given to Honor...

* * * *

Perry Rhodan's decision to land after the first orbit of Honor was based on his conviction that further delay could expose them to possible tracking by other ships, thus heightening the danger of discovery by the robot brain of Arkon.

Perry had set his eye on the rugged mountain range with its steep cordillera climbing to over 12,000 feet. He ordered the landing as soon as the ship moved into the daylight side of the planet. Bell groaned as the barren, burnt-out world with its hopeless terrain seemed to take over the control room. Perry himself was visited by certain foreboding but he was sure that his *Titan*, even though understaffed and unprepared for galactic battles, was strong enough to spar a few rounds with any local fleet of spacers.

During the orbiting of Honor the planet had also continued to revolve, so that the *Titan*'s landing window had shifted farther southwest, right onto the lake and the river mouth. Rhodan took the controls. He wanted to become as familiar with this colossus as he was with the *Stardust II*. He switched over to visual approach. Bell grinned companionably from his co-pilot seat, knowing Perry's mood at the moment.

All the operating gear and generating equipment in the equatorial bulge of the sphere began to thrum and howl; the awesome power reactors began to shriek. Millions of elements were in action to guide the steel giant. It took a course straight toward a fixed spot, like a bullet hitting the bulls-eye, because a single pilot was at the helm.

For a short while Perry enjoyed himself with the *Titan* as though he were a child with a new toy. Bell saw in his friend an illustration of the adage about the true man being half a child, and he was glad. Because in Perry this child-in-man awakened was the fountain of his regeneration.

Now the *Titan* hovered between the lake and the first rugged mountains whose shadows darkened the observation screen. The ship glided slowly under the protective cliff wall. Perry pushed another button. Out of the lower hemisphere of the ship, the giant telescopic landing struts extended themselves like a forest of *Titan* ic, outstretched fingers, equipped with pads on the ends.

"Sheesh! Some soil condition down there!" muttered Bell with a frown of apprehension. He was thinking of the multi-million ton weight of the *Titan* .

"Nice of you to remind me," called Perry. "I'll compensate for our tonnage with the grav-beams."

Bell grunted his surprise. "What'd I say...?"

"You were seeing our strut pads sinking into that sandy soil and the *Titan* 's base becoming a part of the landscape, weren't you?"

Bell grinned his relief. "Maybe you've been around our telepaths too long, Perry!"

A bright, blinking panel light indicated that the *Titan* had made contact with the ground. Safe landing accomplished

4/ MESSENGERS FROM THE STARS

Col. Freyt, commander of the *Ganymede* , faced his colleague across their back-to-back desk in Terrania. He inspected the dispatches, which Col. Klein had silently pushed over to him, and was heard to cuss softly in Arkonide slang. "Sklargot!"

"Klein," he complained, "what gives with you people here on Earth? This is slower than Arkonide scheduling! At this rate I'll never make it to Honor on time. Why the devil does it take your plants so long to deliver the goods?"

Col. Klein, Perry Rhodan's deputy on Earth when the Chief was in outer space, shook his head in stem deliberation. "Freyt, you've told me so much about that industrial planet of Arkon 3 that you've lost your perspective of Terrestrial conditions. Don't forget that the hypertrans-compensator is an invention of the Galactic Traders. To build this miracle device we have to convert a whole group of our heavy industries! What I mean, this order's not for any run-of-the-mill compensator—it's a monster! It can't be done from one day to the next—we're not on Arkon 3. Earth isn't one big domino-row of factories."

"Sorry, Klein, that doesn't help me," retorted Freyt. "In my last coded hyper-gram I announced my arrival time on Honor. I just have to be there on time. Now I've got to have some reassurance from you because I don't like our vulnerability out there."

Klein arched a brow at him. "With the ship Perry's driving?" he turned to look through the windows at the tremendous spaceport of Terrania. There the 24-hundred-foot diameter sphere of the *Stardust II* sat on its telescopic struts next to the towering *Ganymede* , with all of the powerful space cruisers sitting on the ground behind them. It was obvious that Klein was picturing in his mind how the overwhelming size of the *Titan* would dwarf all this by comparison. He turned back, querulously. "Are you kidding?"

"Klein, my friend, you're looking through rose-coloured glasses! Sure, Rhodan's ship has the right name—she's a *Titan*, all right. But the whole Arkonide Empire isn't kindergarten. We're talking about more than 100,000 suns and a flock of satellite galaxies, all governed by a giant computer brain that covers an area of about 4000 square miles!"

"Where's the logic to all of this, Freyt?" Klein interrupted him. "Is the Thatrel System and the planet Honor so insignificant? Isn't the *Titan* itself a factor of unconquerability? What can happen to Rhodan on Honor? Nothing! After all, he has a 700-man crew on board—and the Chief has demonstrated many times that he can get the mostest out of the leastest. So if the hytrans compensator should arrive a few days later, where's the disaster...?"

Freyt drummed his fingers on the desk. "All that's very nice, Klein—it makes a nice big breeze—but it's not going to let me sleep nights! I know you mean well but I can't fit it all in with what's going on out yonder. Rhodan may not even *be* on Honor any more. Who knows? And what can he do without the compensator? Any Arkon ship can figure his transitions. On his next jump the whole bunch could catch up with him. Don't forget the Springers, the Galactic Traders—*not* to mention the Mooffs!"

"On that subject you haven't briefed me very much," said Klein, hoping for a distraction at the moment.

Freyt got up and gazed reflectively out the window at the wide panorama of Terrania, Capital City of the New Power, located in the midst of the Gobi Desert—power centre of Earth.

"The Mooffs," he began. "Those monstrosities are something of a galactic riddle.

* * * *

34,000 light-years removed from Terrania, Perry Rhodan was saying practically the same thing to Khrest. "The Mooffs have been and still remain a puzzle—not their existence, as such, but that they succeeded in bringing a whole world under their hypnotic power. There's a strange contradiction here. They're too stupid to act on their own initiative. In fact I sometimes think they're not fully evolved—a child race of monsters not yet matured. So the ultimate question is: who talked the Zarlt into using the Mooffs? Who would you say, Khrest?"

Khrest as well as Thora could be counted among those few remaining Arkonides of the elite who had not fallen prey to the disease of indolence which was degenerating the Empire. They were all standing in Rhodan's large private quarters.

Khrest observed Rhodan's tall figure for several moments. "Bell has mentioned—" He smirked slightly at Rhodan's frown of puzzlement. "Bell feels that it's the Springers. At first I had the same suspicion but later I became a bit dissuaded from the idea. You might say *themodus operandi* does not fit. This procedure of using the Mooffs somehow doesn't align itself with the mentality of the Galactic Traders. They are in a way more straightforward, if you can use the word in connection with the Springers..." He paused as Perry started to smile.

"Khrest, you're being very coy in your statements but it sums it up pretty well. The Springers seem to be in the clear where the Mooffs are concerned. But the riddle remains: who's trying to break up your

Empire? The Galactic Traders have shown themselves to be a little sneaky in that regard, since they gave false or half-true reports about Earth and us Earthlings to the robot brain on Arkon. Just as we are trying to search down the origin of the Mooffs, your robot emperor has been trying to guess where in the galaxy he can find the Earth, and how we Earthlings fit into it. Speaking of Mooffs, I have a new puzzle. How is it that Bell can't remember the meeting we had where Thora made her suggestion to come to this place, as a preferred hideout for waiting until the hytrans compensator—"

"Bell too?" asked Khrest startled.

"There's somebody else, Khrest?"

"Thora."

"Who says?"

"She herself, Perry. Yesterday after we landed, she confessed to me her confusion. She has no idea now as to why she should have recommended Honor!"

Rhodan was incredulous. "Khrest, you've got to be joking!"

"Unfortunately not, Perry."

A light bulb came on for Perry. He suddenly realized that it wasn't Reginald Bell's nature to have sensed such revulsion for the Thatrel System. It wasn't like him at all. He wasn't the nervous type or sensitive at all to premonitions.

"Khrest, let's visit the library!" Perry was on his way even as he suggested it. Khrest followed.

They had to use three different grav-lifts to get there. It required 10 minutes.

The library constituted an entire deck section. It bore no resemblance to a Terrestrial library since there were no books to speak of. It was, rather, a futuristic data retrieval system. Rhodan went over to the data request control console. He had to accustom himself to this stupendous information bank, which was of course larger than that of the *Stardust II*. But after a few seconds, data began to be delivered from a micro-jungle of a hundred million memory cores, at lightning speed and in precise response to the inquiry. Throughout the veritable 'acreage' of drums, discs and registers, the microcircuit readout beads by the hundreds were culling the information. The data readout terminals consisted of both video-screen and voice speaker. They could both see the data spilling out on the screen before them and hear it spoken aloud.

"Gravitation 0.7 of Arkon One. Atmospheric conditions..." It rattled on in regard to oxygen content, temperature, humidity, meteorology, geological structure and so forth, adding charts and graphs. 'Primeval world,' it continued. "Settled by Arkonides 14,643 years ago. Final group of immigrants landed on Honor only 18 years later. Empirical Council rejected a climatic reconditioning project because costs outweighed gains due to poor natural resources..."

Perry winked at Khrest. "The holy bureaucracy again: on Earth, on Arkon—everywhere!"

Then came the unusual part of the report: "121 years after the first immigration to Honor the entire Thatrel System was declared 'Off Limits' for all spacers. This ban has not been lifted,"

The flow of data stopped. That *was* concerning Honor. Yet Perry had ordered an exhaustive report on the subject.

"Is that supposed to be the end of message, Khrest?" he asked tensely.

Khrest was thoroughly familiar with the Arkonide positronic equipment and was able to state with assurance, "That is all, Perry. There might be some trivialities concerning old time-tables but if anything of importance were contained in memory it would have been code-keyed for register selection."

"But—" Rhodan protested, "a ban of all spacer traffic and no mention of the reason why? Apparently this 'Death Valley', as Bell calls it, is suspected of harbouring some kind of danger..." He broke off, suddenly recalling that 15,000 years ago the Arkonides were merely classifying as 'dangerous' an imminent nova explosion!

"Come on, Khrest—let's go!" Rhodan stormed from the library, again followed by Khrest. The way back took only 6 minutes, with Khrest somewhat out of breath.

Rhodan called for a mobilization of all specialists on board. He thundered orders through the ship-wide P.A. system.

"Clear interceptor Gazelle for immediate takeoff!"

"Complete atmospheric analysis!"

"Send out robot sounders for core-samplings... use Arkonide programming and specifications."

"Make full scan of magnetic fields and planetary radiation. I want everything absolutely complete, re-evaluated and double-checked! Send all results immediately to Command Centre, when and as available!"

Then Rhodan buzzed Bell in his quarters. Bell was sleeping, as evidenced by snoring worthy of a tyrex that fed back over the P.A. But nobody laughed.

"Bell! To Command Central, on the double!"

"Coming!"

"I'm declaring an emergency Condition 2 for the *Titan* !"

Sirens started throughout the ship, but in the undulating pattern that signified it *was not* a Condition 1.

From the hangar: "Gazelle clear for lock launch!"

"Roger, Gazelle—and away!"

Khrest was filled with admiration for Rhodan. He didn't forget a thing. He worked with the precision of a positronic—perhaps even more effectively. He was a man of Earth. Khrest had learned what that meant and it touched him with a certain sense of envy, thinking of the decadence of his own people. Now here he sat next to the man who was preparing to conquer the Empire for Earthlings.

The next report hit the speakers: "Probes in action... all areas covered!"

Rhodan confirmed and barked new orders into the mike.

Now the video scanning section reported hastily. Their special Arkonide observation equipment was capable of focussing on the slightest exterior detail of terrain, all the way to the horizon. "Sir, we're picking up movement near the lake shore. Good lord—it's people, sir! They're emerging from a narrow canyon. The first of them are moving toward the ship. No doubt about it—they're humans. Must be Arkonides, even though they look like a bunch of hobos. We count about a hundred of them..."

Tests, probes and samplings were processed through with lightning speed. One department after the other reported results and evaluations of their assignments. Bell had taken his place next to Perry and both men were reduced to mere nods and glances as they divided the workload and registered incoming data into the ship's positronicon.

Rhodan still found the time to mobilize his Mutant Corps. He didn't tell them much over the intercom. Each of them knew his own field of specialization. Hypno, esper, telekin, teleporter... Rhodan's flashing thought-processes omitted nothing. John Marshall, somewhere in the interior of the mighty *Titan*, received his mental impulses, took notes and passed the orders along to the other mutants.

The group of obviously very degenerate human colonists moved slowly closer to the ship. The mutants examined their mental condition, dissected their innermost thoughts and feelings.

All probe equipment and personnel had returned. Most of the results of tests had been analysed and evaluated with a clinical accuracy.

"No danger!"

"Nothing threatening in this area!"

"Safe."

"Fauna and flora harmless."

Thus, the urgently desired reports one after the other.

Bell began to grumble. "Sounds just a shade too goody nice! Even if our trained watchdogs wag their tails and howl their praises, this whole Death Valley cemetery can go to blazes. I wish we'd left it in its grave..."

Perry heard him without a smile. He remembered Khrest's disturbing story about Thora's lapse of memory.

The *Titan* remained under a Condition 2 alert.

Perry Rhodan personally was just about in Condition 1. Fourteen thousand years ago Arkon had banned this system from any kind of contact—and this ban had never been lifted. Where could the danger be hidden, which even the Arkonides had not been able to master...?

* * * *

All 4 of them sat in front of the observation screen in the cabin: Rhodan, Bell, Thora and Khrest. The instrument was focussed to the maximum of sharpness, giving close-ups of the people who squatted apathetically near the base of the spacesphere.

They were tall, slim, almost skinny people. An outstanding peculiarity was their total baldness, plus a strange sadness in their deep-seated eyes. Their skin had a brownish-red complexion, again reflecting the washed-out colouration that marked Honor's ugliness.

"Those poor devils are in rags," observed Bell. "Looks like they're ready for the Midnight Mission!"

"Could *they* represent the hidden danger here?" queried Khrest.

Thora blushed, which was rare for the otherwise proud Arkonide woman. She exchanged glances with Perry and once more lifted her shoulders in despair and let them fall again. "I don't know! I don't know! I just haven't the slightest idea why I suggested this system as a rendezvous point for us with the *Ganymede*. I don't know anything about Honor; I'm sure I've never before heard or read anything about the system. That's what's so frightening—and now this ban against landing here...!"

On an impulse, Perry put his hand on Thora's arm. His voice, as he spoke to her, had a calming effect. "Thora, maybe all of us rely too much on the reliability of Arkonide data. Didn't we occasionally find cases where information was missing? Let's assume for the moment that the ban was actually lifted, say, 10,000 years ago. Perhaps the data wasn't ever registered—an omission that would be understandable in view of the hopelessly worthless condition of this small system. Maybe we're worrying too much!"

Bell got up. He put his hands in his pockets and said, emphatically, "Perry, so help me if *you're* not the puzzle now! What kind of a circus is this, where everybody wants to play clown? Thora here—she puts in a big plug for coming here to this Death Valley planet and now she knows nothing about it! And I'm supposed to be witness to a confab where we all agreed Col. Freyt would meet us here. So what happens? You of all people—you can smell a rat a thousand light-years away—you're covering all this with a flowery veil! You can't be serious, Perry—it just doesn't add up!"

Perry was still holding Thora's arm but his thoughts were elsewhere. He looked at Bell and expressed a new thought that came to him. "Are those three Mooffs still in their isolation section?"

"They are—at least as of an hour ago," declared Bell. "I always keep my distance from those beauties—but I don't think the Mooffs are involved in this. The whole game is way too foxy for those overblown squids. Perry, I'd be more likely to put my finger on those dauntless gypsies of the starways—the Springers! Somebody is hypnotizing us. Somebody who might remember that we stole their newest merchant ship and converted it to the *Ganymede*. Maybe this unknown entity is gunning now for the *Titan*, in exchange for it!"

None of the three men had been watching Thora. She had remained motionless under the touch of Perry's hand on her arm. Physical contact with him had caused a thrill of happiness. She had never before experienced such a sense of elation and a compulsion grew within her to rise up and embrace him, to place her face against his and to throw her arms around him. She had been ready to let go and surrender to these impulses when Bell's thundering discourse had caused something like a short-circuit and brought her back to reality.

The electricity died. She felt an implosion into emptiness. But the men were more intensely involved than ever in their discussion—even arguments in Bell's favour.

Then came Rhodan's rebuttal. "One of our mutants would be able to sense hypnotic interference. No, Reggie, I'm more than ever convinced that we're the victims of an error in the Arkonide filing system. The ban on Honor must have been lifted long ago!"

"What about Thora's boo-boo—her lapse of memory? And how about my own?" asked Bell righteously.

Neither Perry nor Khrest had an answer.

Bell went to the door of Perry's cabin but paused at the threshold to repeat his warning. "This whole Death Valley planet spells trouble, Perry, take my word. Somewhere disaster is brewing for us. I just hope the *Titan* doesn't get blown out from under us!"

Perry took another look at the data from the positronicon: Honor was a harmless world. It only registered seven-tenths of 1% open for error. He took a deep breath and nodded to Khrest, who stood next to him. "The crew can leave the ship and make contact with the inhabitants. But secondary alert condition remains in effect for a third of the gun crew."

* * * *

Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bell and Khrest were strangely disturbed as they looked out the door of the airlock and watched the crowd gathered around the *Titan*'s great landing struts.

"Half-starved," Perry observed as he studied the way they devoured the food he had sent down to them. He and his companions moved down the personnel ramp and came to a stop at the bottom.

Three natives, who were unmistakably Arkonide descendants, approached them with a look of unconcealed gratitude in their deep-set eyes. Perry thought he recognized a semblance of ancient uniforms in the pitifully tattered rags that hung from their limbs but before he could ask Khrest about it the delegation knelt before them and extracted gift offerings from their shredded clothing: blooming Honorian plants.

"Black flowers!" exclaimed Khrest in some amazement and all three of the men from the *Titan* seemed to edge back with a slight instinctive movement of withdrawal.

"Thank you, messengers from the stars!" Their words were hard to understand but had obviously been derived from the Arkonide language. Then to Perry's consternation they prostrated themselves before him, their thin, naked arms outstretched toward him and pushing the strange black flowers onto the ramp at his feet.

"Please stand up!" Rhodan urged. "We are no more than you!"

The natives listened curiously to the sound of his words. Had he awakened in them a memory of the past in which they had once been proud Arkonides?

Other personnel from the *Titan*, standing on several other landing ramps, were observing all this and paying particular attention to the astonishing black flowers. Rhodan himself was fascinated by the subtle, velvety glimmer of the dusky blooms. Even Khrest, who had seen so many unbelievable marvels on strange worlds in the course of his long life, could not take his eyes from their esoteric beauty.

Rhodan forced himself out of the spell and looked for his mutants, who had taken up a position behind him and were making their final test-probes. John Marshall gave him an almost imperceptible nod, meaning that these people checked out as absolutely harmless.

Rhodan then followed an impulse to stretch out his hand to the timorous Arkonide before him, in whose mysterious gaze was almost an expression of worship.

The *Titan*'s crewmen descending on three of the other personnel ramps were witnesses to this and they took it for a signal to mix with the natives, who spoke a very broken dialect. It was found that with increased conversational practice, however, communication became easier. The strange inhabitants referred to themselves as 'the Approved Ones,' of which Perry and Khrest took casual note—but Bell took exception.

"That sounds like some kind of a cult to me," he grumbled. "A lot of those people have some pretty loose shingles—I'd keep an eye open!"

In spite of this, he took an active interest in their needs. The 'Approved' lived from the meagre products of the Honor soil. They were very shy and humble and did not think that their small community in a nearby canyon was worthy of being seen by their visitors.

Rhodan had his robot workers break out clothing supplies for distribution among the natives. Very timidly, they approached the treasures which the robots spread on the ground before them. They seemed to be of a disposition to always allow their fellows to go ahead of them and they slowly accepted a limited amount of the clothing articles with such a lack of avidity that Rhodan almost became impatient with them.

He turned to the telepath, John Marshall. "Are all these 'Approved Ones' in a state of hypnosis or something?"

Marshall was a bit troubled that he could not formulate a clear answer. "No, sir—it's just their way. They think about as slowly as they move. In the last few minutes I haven't picked up any feelings of happiness or sadness or any kind of emotion at all, for that matter."

Rhodan perceived within himself a vague foreboding. He restated his question. "Are there any dangerous thoughts?"

"No, sir, not a single dangerous impulse. In fact, their thoughts are practically asleep. I think their thoughts get drowsy in proportion to the fullness of their stomachs."

Decadent Arkonides!—thought Rhodan. These descendants of a once glorious race had sunk to a level lower than barbarians, driven now only by the basic animal desire of filling their stomachs.

Now the crowd drifted slowly back toward the lake. They completely ignored the men from the *Titan*. Carrying articles of the new clothing on their arms, they moved sluggishly, foot by foot, as in a slow-motion picture. The ship's crew was startled by the silent procession. They hadn't expected this

after the unique reception.

Some fairly harsh judgments were heard. "Those Honus are pretty weird—not all there, that's for sure!" They had an aversion to the term 'Approved Ones' as though it made them uneasy. They didn't realize that their commander shared their apprehension.

Because Rhodan was thinking that all this seemed a bit too harmless—*too* innocent... Then, too, it was a ponderable improbability that their thoughts should go to sleep just because their stomachs were full.

* * * *

Two hours later the crowd was back milling about among the *Titan*'s landing struts. Perry was in no mood to mix with them again and besides it wasn't any pleasure to carry oxygen equipment around outside in the thin, oxygen-starved atmosphere.

When he tried to find Bell on shipboard, the airlock control reported him outside. Perry summoned Khrest instead. "I'd like to make a reconnaissance flight in the *Gazelle*. Would you like to come along?"

Khrest nodded his pleased affirmation but pointed with a smile to the videoscreen, which pictured the outside activity down among the landing struts. "Take a look at that, Perry. Aren't those cute little animals they have?"

An inner alarm sounded in Rhodan. He flipped a switch and contacted the airlock again. "Where are the mutants?" The answer came back from Lock Control No. 8 that some of them were outside, including John Marshall.

"Advise John Marshall immediately," he ordered in no uncertain tones. "I want those animals checked out at once! Bring some of them up to the lab!"

Khrest seemed oblivious to Perry's apprehension. He laughed aloud when Bell appeared on the screen, tenderly pressing one of the little creatures against his chest. The cute little bear-like animals measured about a foot in length.

"Such wonderfully big, sad eyes," commented Khrest, mostly to himself.

Perry felt that he had had it with big sad beautiful eyes for one day. Somewhere there lurked a potential danger and now he saw its possibility in these little animals that the Honor "purified" had distributed among the crew. He personally reminded the standby gunner crews that they were still on secondary alert.

Marshall's report came in: "No thought impulses—completely harmless little bears with pink paws and funny big noses. No trace of intelligence."

Bell heard this report via his com set in his respirator and then proceeded to add lyrical praises about his little pet, which was scrabble-pawing about his neck with little wet kisses. "This little guy talks like a parrot, Perry. He can even cuss—and he answers to the name I gave him! It's..."

Rhodan switched without comment to the lab. The results were in: "Sir, tests are completed. The little bear-like animals are completely harmless. Intelligence potential, zero. If you'll pardon the expression, sir, just plain stupid! End of report."

"Khrest!" The Arkonide started at Perry's sharp tone and gave him his attention. "I've heard the word 'harmless' around here more times in one day than I have in three solid years. Sounds like a broken record. Don't you think it's peculiar?" He would have been more satisfied if the reports on the midget bears had been less positive. He cogitated a moment, then decided. "Khrest, lets get under way. I can't relax until I've checked out every comer of this planet." He hit three intercom buttons at the same time. "Lt. Tiffloor, on the double to hangar 71 Pucky—I'll meet you in the Gazelle, ready for take-off I Wuriu. Sengu...!"

"Sir!" responded the Mutant Corps' special 'seer.'

"Please report immediately to hangar 7!"

Perry made one last communication. He called Bell.

"Hm-m—yes?" mumbled Reg into his mike and he listened only with half an ear to Perry's announcement concerning the reconnaissance flight over Honor in the Gazelle. "Okay," he replied patronizingly. "Take a good look at 'Death Valley' *forme* ... Maybe you'll be as sick and tired of it as I am. At least there's some consolation in Hannibal."

"Who?" Perry wondered if he had understood him correctly.

"Hannibal, that's who. Come on, Hannibal, say 'chow hound' so Perry will know who I'm talking about!"

"Reg, report to Command Centre," commanded Perry and fought with a shake of his head to suppress a chuckle.

5/ GRAVEYARD OF DEAD SPACESHIPS

The Japanese Wuriu Sengu, except for his slight build, looked like a fairly average man. Nothing betrayed his special faculty of 'seer.' Even now as he stood in the big #7 hangar next to the long-range reconnaissance craft and waited for Perry Rhodan, there was nothing about him to signify anything abnormal.

Wuriu Sengu had the astonishing ability to adjust the lenses and shape of his eyes in such a way that he could in fact look right through the molecular structure of matter. The corresponding area of his brain regulated his perception in such a manner as to enlarge intervening matter millions of times to a point of 'attenuation' so that he could see through to the target object and observe it in its normal size.

He did not flinch when the air in front of him flickered and gradually condensed into a comical-looking animal about 3 feet tall and appearing to be an odd mixture of mouse and beaver. This was Pucky, a lieutenant in Rhodan's Mutant Corps—even though he could not actually be called a mutant since his

peculiar attributes did not represent a mutation of his own unusual species. His smooth, reddish-brown fur was always well groomed. His pointed snout gave him a 'slick' expression, backed up by a hint of uncommon intelligence in his eyes. Instead of having a proper mouse tail, his posterior section was decorated by a strong, furry beaver tail.

"Oh—you're here already, too?" Pucky remarked in Arkonide, although he could have stated the rhetorical question as well in Intercosmo or in English.

Pucky could refer to himself with pride as an 'animal' but he was endowed with a surprising amount of human intelligence in addition to some capabilities which made him a top-flight parapsychic. If required, Pucky could take his tasks seriously and execute them exactly to the finest detail. But woe betide the victim of any of his practical jokes if his extreme playfulness got the upper hand! With the exception of Perry Rhodan for whom he held an awed respect. Yet Perry was his best friend.

Almost at the same instant, Rhodan arrived with Khrest and Julian Tifflo. The young lieutenant did not cut much of a figure between the two tall men but Perry Rhodan, leader of the New Power, was well aware of his talents. He knew he could always rely on this youth.

Pucky was just telling Sengu that these little Hono bears were repugnant to him. "They stink!" he said in disgust. "Didn't you smell them, Wuriu?"

"One of these days, Pucky," the Japanese grinned, "that sensitive nose of yours is going to kill you. I don't know whether the little bears smell or—"

"Stink, Wuriu, stink!" corrected Pucky, saying the words loud enough to catch Rhodan's ear.

"Who stinks?" he asked of Pucky.

"All of them, Chief, all those little bears! I had to teleport myself away from them because I couldn't take it!"

Instantly Perry put himself in contact with Bell, who was in the Command Centre.

"Yes," responded Bell. "Hey, Perry, you want to hear how Hannibal can say—"

No, Perry didn't want to hear. "What I want to know," he interrupted, "is whether or not that little Hannibal of yours stinks!"

"Does *hewhat!*?" Bell's voice fairly barked in the speaker. "Hannibal does not stink or even smell! Who started a dirty rumour like that? According to the Honos, these little guys are even housebroken. Now who started this lie about 'stinking', Perry?"

Rhodan grinned slightly. "I believe it was a friend of yours by the name of Pucky."

The speaker roared. "Pucky! As soon as I get around to it I'm going to wring that little carrot-eater's neck!"

Perry also yelled "Pucky!"—but for a different reason, and too late.

Pucky had taken temporary leave in one of his skilled teleporter jumps. His destination was made audibly clear in Rhodan's micro-speaker. Considering Pucky's other gift of powerful telekinesis, it could

be assumed from the ruckus that Reginald Bell was by now suspended somewhere near the high ceiling of the Command Centre and was receiving instructions in stunt flying from the mouse-beaver.

Bell was Pucky's favourite target for such playful jokes. They understood one another famously and both were always baiting each other. Bell of course always fared second best because the mouse-beaver was a strong parapsychic and Bell was only Perry's deputy.

Suddenly a shadowy form appeared in front of Perry and Pucky solidified into view. "Lt. Pucky reporting back from defensive attack mission, sir!" The mouse-beaver demonstrated a grin by exposing his shiny incisor tooth.

"What a dirtyrat!" yelled Bell through the speaker.

"Hey, Fatso!" warned Pucky into Perry's micro-com. "You want some more loop-the-loops?"

The small speaker was so distorted by Bell's following tirade that the rasping clamour veiled what might have been some very challenging cusswords. Even Khrest had to laugh uproariously.

Rhodan was in good spirits as everyone boarded the Gazelle. The thickly disc-shaped fuselage was a hundred feet in diameter and 60 feet from keel-pole to top. As a long-range scout and reconnaissance ship, it could fly faster than the speed of light and had an effective range of 500 light-years. It carried a battery of high-power energy-beam weapons against pursuing spacers.

All operating gear and power units on the Gazelle had been warmed up ready for take-off for some time. Perry got into the pilot seat and activated first phase, which caused the airlock to close automatically. In second phase, the *Titan*'s heavy outer lock hatch opened, giving the Gazelle free access to the sky. In final phase, the take-off hardly caused any vibration. The inertial field generators counteracted an otherwise lethal force of acceleration as the spacedrive units bore the Gazelle in a constant climb toward its 15,000-foot course above and beyond the lake.

* * * *

The rugged mountain range with its inhospitable valleys had been left behind. Before them a broad new terrain extended and soon they discerned the beginnings of the greyish-green area they had observed from space. Julian Tifflor sat behind Perry and worked the range-azimuth scanner. Khrest kept an eye on the videoscreen and its fast-moving panorama of Honur. Nothing important had been reported yet.

Perry guided the scoutship to within 300 feet of the greenish foliage below, which stretched before them like a loosely woven carpet. Then, at 150 feet altitude, the Gazelle came to a halt, supported by its antigrav fields. Now they could clearly see the Honur jungle at close range.

"I'd like to know what's under the surface of all that verdure," ventured Khrest.

Wuriu Sengu now felt called upon to perform. He concentrated his vision in the desired direction and encountered few obstacles: an inch or two of Arkon steel and the green roof of foliage. "I see animals," he announced. "A whole pack. Their bodies are covered with scales. They are generally horrifying in their appearance but the most hideous part is a long drill that grows out of their heads in place of a nose!"

"A drill?" Perry asked, amazed.

"Yes—a spiral-shaped thing that turns! Wow, you should see them! They drill into the trunks of the trees. The material seems to be of a viscous, leathery consistency. Huh?—they are drilling for water. One of them has punctured a water artery in a trunk and it gushes out in a stream about a foot wide. They sure drink it fast!"

"How big are these animals?" Perry interrupted. "Would you say three feet long?"

"Three feet! Would you believe *sixty*, sir?" answered Wuriu.

Perry started. "Sixty! How is that possible? These umbrella-shaped trees aren't even 60 feet high, and—"

"Sir!" Wuriu Sengu stuttered in his confusion, having to contradict Perry Rhodan. "The trees are all over 300 feet high!"

"That can't be true!" argued Julian Tifflor. "Ship's altimeter registers exactly 152.4 feet from the surface!"

"That I'm going to have to check out," said Perry.

He dropped the Gazelle to a lower level until it just grazed the flat treetops, then simulated a 'hard' landing.

"Contact!" reported Tifflor.

A light tremor went through the Gazelle. Rhodan cast an inquiring glance at Khrest. Cautiously he cut the antigravs and there resulted only a slight settling shock. "How is that possible?" he asked, knowing that the full weight of the ship was resting on the treetop.

Wuriu Sengu shouted a warning. "Watch out, sir! The tree is about to break any minute—it's swelling like a balloon!"

Perry held a light control-finger on the antigrav breaker bar, ready to activate with split-second timing. But he was fascinated by the unheard-of strength of the tree beneath them.

"Now!" yelled Sengu.

A short shock went through the scoutship. They were aware of the long-forgotten gravity sensation of an elevator—then the antigravs shot into full power, bringing the weight of the Gazelle to zero. The treetop that had shown such an uncanny holding power disintegrated as though in a biological chain reaction. Nothing remained but a dirty grey dust cloud. However, a thick jet of water shot up and exploded against the antigrav field banks, then gushed in a wide spray over the neighbouring treetops. Suddenly, strange and weird colours flickered across the umbrella rooftops where the spray had touched them. Fluorescent hues appeared and disappeared then came a familiar velvety blackness, followed by a return of the ugly greyish-green colouration.

"And there's the final process," observed Khrest, indicating the edges of the umbrella roofs. They moved slowly, simultaneously from all sides, toward the hole created by exploded tree. A few minutes later the foliage under the Gazelle presented a tightly packed surface—so solid that Tifflor's altimeter gave a

wrong reading again.

"You got that figured out yet?" asked Perry.

"Yes, sir," beamed Tifflor. "Each umbrella roof presents an ionic field tension of some kind and that of course reflects back the electromagnetics of the regular altimeter. I can only get a true ground reading with a sonic probe."

* * * *

The ominous primeval jungle extended more than 1200 miles. Beyond it rose a hilly terrain consisting of vast boulder-strewn slopes and valleys which were reminiscent of glacial moraines on Earth. But here their dimensions were more gigantic."

The explorers in the Gazelle continued in vain to look for signs of settlements or signs of human habitation. On one occasion they hovered over a swarm of giant centipede-like creatures which moved about casually until one of them noticed the scoutship. What happened then seemed to be beyond explanation. They found themselves in a flak of sand and stones—in a veritable dust cloud. This phenomenon lasted several minutes. Men the air cleared they saw nothing beneath them other than the lifeless and barren boulder-strewn hillsides.

"Where are all those squiggly things?" asked Tifflor, amazed.

Their Japanese seer smiled knowingly. "That aerial debris was from their frantic effort to dig underground. They are already about 30 feet beneath the surface."

Perry and Khrest exchanged glances of near resignation. Honor was a hopeless, dry and crazy world, yet offered no specific danger to them.

They flew into the night portion of the globe. As the last light disappeared behind them, Perry set the Gazelle down and sent a short message to the *Titan*. Bell seemed to be right in the Com Central because he answered personally and apparently in the best of spirits.

By noon the next day they had completed reconnoitring Honor, except for the South Polar Region—apparently just as hot and dry as all other regions they had seen.

"Honor is one big Death Valley alright," commented Perry, who was bored enough to be thinking wistfully of the *Titan* again.

Scanning the entire planet with its strange flora and stranger fauna had become almost intolerably monotonous. Everything lived only to catch the nightly dew. It was all a permanent struggle for water. The Gazelle was flying along in the only direction left to them, to the south, and was slowly approaching the last unexplored section.

Suddenly Rhodan straightened up, staring ahead. "Khrest, what's that? Are those buildings?"

They had expected anything but a metropolis. The scoutship accelerated so swiftly that without its

energy-shield deflectors the atmosphere would have become like a wall of cement. Rhodan bit top atmospheric speed, in his desire to examine the towering structures ahead.

The Gazelle clove like an arrow toward the visual targets. The picture on the panob grew with crystal clarity.

"Spaceships!"

The Gazelle pulled out of its dive and headed skyward on a perpendicular course.

"Tiff!" Perry called, using the young lieutenant's nickname. "Have they tracked us?"

Tiffloor was too busy to notice the compliment of friendship Perry had paid him. He also knew there were more than amenities on the Chief's mind just now and why the booster impulse generators had been cut in. He worked with a swift precision, almost like a robot, because of the crisis attached to the question. There could hardly be any doubt that the ships had tracked them and he knew what *that* meant.

By the time the Gazelle passed a 600-mile altitude, Tiff could not believe the results of his instruments. "Sir... I can't—and I mean I just can't pick up any tracking scans at all!"

Wuriu Sengu interrupted. "Sir?"

"Well? Well? Out with it, Sengu!" he snapped, having overcome his initial enthusiasm.

"I can perceive only deserted, destroyed and looted spaceships! Its a spacer cemetery!"

The announcement coincided with the cadet's findings. The Gazelle had topped an altitude of over 1000 miles. Rhodan made a 180° back-loop and the Gazelle shot straight downward. The planet seemed to hurtle upward to meet them. Braking decelerators, inertial shocks screaming, the air howling past them—all experienced a thousand times before, yet always new again. Honor again lost its spherical shape and flattened out beneath them, spreading out swiftly into an immense, flat surface.

Then the deceleration Gazelle was drifting toward the endless graveyard of spaceships lying at Honor's South Pole.

6/ TEDDY BEARS OF TROY

The small portable respirator hissed softly, providing Rhodan's lungs with oxygen. He stood alone in the scoutship's airlock and brooded over the incredible scene of the spaceship cemetery before him. Khrest had been with him a few moments before, attempting to take the thin air without a backpack respirator. He had gotten short of wind, however, and had returned for breathing equipment with a grumbling complaint about growing old.

Sengu, Tiff and Pucky sat inside the Gazelle behind the weapon consoles. All fighting equipment was in firing position, made ready against this immense conglomeration of rotting spacers, and capable of unleashing their annihilating power at a moment's notice.

Perry Rhodan continued a steadfast surveillance of this picture of ghastly devastation and decay. Arkon steel, capable of resisting more than 50,000° of temperature and supposedly able to retain its gleaming satin finish indefinitely—but here it was, all dulled down, rusted and dead! He was looking at nothing but dead spacers—derelicts of the void...

He had given up trying to count them. The giant ship hulls were piled up clear to the horizon. Side by side or facing each other, leaning against each other or even lying on top of one another. Some had sunk two-thirds into the ground due to the thrust of their huge weight. Their skins had taken on the dirty colour of the soil. So this was the final resting-place of all ships that had defied the ban against Honor landings.

"Good Lord!" Perry whispered half to himself. "How could all this have happened...?" He heard a sound behind him and turned to see Khrest emerging from the lock, now wearing his respirator.

Khrest had heard his question and replied, "So this is the way it all ends..."

Their position was about half a mile removed from the hull of the first ship. Knowing that Pucky was scanning his outer thoughts as a matter of course, Rhodan projected to him with an order to join them and to bring Sengu along but to leave Tiff for cover at his weapon console.

Pucky appeared instantly in a tiny teleport leap.

The Japanese mutant had to walk like a normal man, through the airlock. "Sir," he reported simultaneously, "I have been unable to discover any trace of life or robots in these ships—only stripped cabins and command centres."

"No mental impulses detected, sir!" Pucky made a poor attempt to mimic the military tone of the Japanese. Then he asked, "Shall I make a little snooping foray?"

"All right, Pucky, but don't take any chances," Rhodan warned. But the air flickered simultaneously and the mouse-beaver disappeared. Pucky had teleported himself into his solo mission.

"Okay, lets go," said Perry, and the remaining party moved out toward the long, silent array of derelicts.

They soon stood in the slightly canted control central of a stripped-out spacer. When they walked down the decks, their footsteps reverberated hollowly. The metallic reflections of sound seemed to merge into a mocking whisper of warning: "Wait! Soon it will be your turn!"

They examined the next deck, and the next, and everywhere their feverish gaze encountered the same spectacle of completely cannibalized wreckage. Anything and everything that had not been integrally joined to the Arkon steel of ceiling, decks and bulkheads had been dismantled, ripped out and taken away by unknowns. Traces of their work were everywhere to be seen, but not a single clue as to *who* they were.

Khrest shuddered inwardly and looked questioningly at Rhodan. The chief's face was frozen in a mask of deliberation as he desperately probed the problem of this obvious but evasive menace. He could find no answer. The dust under their feet was more than 6-inches deep—a fine, powdery dust, as dry as the planet itself. The dust cover spread out before them in all directions without a sign of having been recently disturbed.

"No footprints of the Honos here," Rhodan observed. "And yet there has to be a connection between

them and this spaceship cannibalizing. But *what*? —can you tell me, Khrest?"

The Arkonide's failure to answer the question only emphasized the hopelessness of the case. "My advice is to get back to the *Titan* and get it off the ground while you can. We can meet Freyt in orbit. Its better to take a chance of being tracked by other ships than to let the *Titan* end up one of these days like a squashed beetle in this bug-pile of empty carcasses."

"What do you mean—get off the ground while we can? You're an Arkonide and you know I have to weigh what you say, Khrest. Do you think it's too late, already?"

Khrest made a deprecating gesture with his hands. "Perry, this is no time to favour Arkonide knowledge or any other. Just don't lose sight of where we are—a graveyard! When we approached this place on foot, I had a chance to look over those wrecks and make some sort of a classification of them. About one third of these dead spacers are first line warships cruisers, battleships, interceptors, all of them almost invincible fighter ships—yet they are grounded here in the same helpless condition as the merchant ships, freighters and nondescript trading scows from the backwaters of the universe. If I hadn't discovered some of the Galactic Traders' vessels in the same junk pile, I might at least have suspected the Springers for this horrifying spectacle of devastation."

Khrest and Rhodan suddenly felt the grip of Wuriu Sengu's hands on their arms as he came to them in startled excitement. The 'seer' had just had a ghoulish vision. His special eyes had penetrated more decks of the spacer, to the cabins in the bow of the ship.

"I see skeletons," he half-whispered. "In every personnel cabin there are skeletons—it's creepy! Hundreds of them... and I'm seeing more of them... and more...!"

"Sengu, take a look at the next spacer, too advised Rhodan. Now he understood how the destruction had come to these ships.

From inside!

The seer confirmed his suspicions. "The crew cabins of the next 3 ships are empty—only filled with dust, and over there it's not just inches deep but maybe as much as 3 feet deep! Anyway, in the fourth ship I'm picking up a slew of skeletons again. My God! It must have been a battleship or a passenger ship! There must be more than a thousand bodies!"

"Thanks, Sengu," Rhodan said with a slightly hoarse voice. "It's alright."

At this moment the air before them danced in familiar shimmers, the dust swirled up around them and they heard Pucky's squeaky shout. —Lousy dam dust!" He made the equivalent of a 3-point precision landing, exactly in front of Rhodan, Khrest and Sengu. He stood on his hind legs, supported by his beaver tail, and tried to make a military salute. "Chief—' and this time he spoke English, I have never seen so many skeletons in my life! Where I thought there weren't any I found them under the dust piles. The Arkonides must have all been nudists or something. I couldn't find a stitch of clothing on them. Then just by accident I came across the spaceport."

"Uh—the *what*, did you say, Pucky?" Perry asked, spurred suddenly to new attentiveness. "An actual spaceport?"

"Not a modern one, Chief. It's just a cleared place, mirror smooth, and the ground must have been treated. It's harder than cement."

"Pucky, ask Tiff to bring the Gazelle over here," Rhodan ordered. He had left strict orders for radio silence.

"Okay, Boss!" Pucky grinned with his single incisor—and shimmered away into nothing.

The 3 men hadn't left the derelict's command central before Pucky reported back from his leap to the Gazelle.

"He's coming," he lisped.

Then he tried to lift up his broad beaver tail to avoid stirring up dust clouds. But with all of Pucky's many skills, this act was beyond his capacity. With a cussword he had learned from Bell, he teleported himself out of the scavenger-stripped spaceship.

Shortly thereafter the Gazelle soared into view and landed. The airlock opened and the personnel ramp lowered. Everyone walked through the airlock with the exception of Pucky again, who made one of his 'leaps' to the inside. Then, while Rhodan piloted, Pucky gave him the course to the spaceport he had discovered.

Rhodan set the Gazelle down flawlessly and gave orders to Tiff for soil samples.

"I can do it better and faster," proposed Pucky. He took a geological core probe with him in a teleport jump and soon came back with samples of the cement-like surface composition.

Meanwhile, Rhodan and Khrest had reached conclusions about the area. This single emergency spaceport was the reason the wrecks were concentrated here and not scattered all over the planet. This was the only place to set down spacers with any consistent facility or without having to compensate weight with operative antigrav units as in the present case of the *Titan*. It appeared that the pirates flew the seized ships to this place to ransack all installations and transfer the spoils to their own spacers.

"Tiff, contact the *Titan*!" Perry ordered. He knew now that low-band terrestrial-type frequencies would not be picked up by anyone here on Honor, so it was safe. Only long distance hyperspace transmissions would be dangerous.

Julian Tiff, seemed to have anticipated the order, making the contact immediately. Seconds later, the call was answered by Reginald Bell, who was the *Titan*'s commander in Perry's absence.

Bell was heard bubbling with a strange sort of euphoria. "Hi, Perry! What's cooking?" he chuckled merrily.

Perry was noncommittal. "Everything secure on board, Reg?"

"Couldn't be better! Everybody here is having a ball! It's only when I have to look at these poor 'Approved' kooks that it spoils the fun around here. Anything new over there, Boss?"

"No... Nothing new, Reggie—thank you."

Khrest, Tiff, and Sengu were puzzled by Rhodan's reply but Pucky was already reading his thoughts.

"Do you want me to take a jump over there, Chief, to see what is really going on?"

Rhodan met the puzzled stares of his companions, then absorbed the knowing look in Pucky's sharp little mouse eyes—loyal and full of concern. "I don't think so, Pucky. We'd better do it together!"

The scoutship lifted lightly away and once more the wind shrieked and roared about them as the atmosphere was parted by the forcefields. Again the *Gazelle* shot at full thrust into its course. It hurtled toward the main base, where the *Titan* rested in the shadow of the 12,000-foot mountain wall beside the lake. To Perry Rhodan, the *Gazelle* was crawling. Each second seemed like a week of precious time.

He sensed that something of a deadly and sinister nature was developing on board the *Titan*. Bell's words had been laced with unwarranted merriment and even the Com Officer near him had been heard chuckling in the background. Most alarming of all was Bell's reference to everyone's 'having a ball'. What could it mean?

Khrest sat with his head between his hands, staring at the command deck. Tifflor and Sengu exchanged puzzled looks behind Perry's back. Even Pucky had lost his customary grin. . .

* * * *

On board the *Titan*, Bell responded once more to a call from Rhodan. "Perry! What gives?" he grinned happily into the mike, while petting the little creature called Hannibal.

From the *Gazelle*,—Rhodan repeated his previous question. "Are you sure everything is alright there, Reggie?"

"Couldn't be better!" chuckled Bell ecstatically. And like a broken record replay, he repeated his enthusiastic statement as before, with a reference again to everyone's 'having a ball.'

"What's on the burner, Chief?" he asked.

"Nothing much, Reggie—nothing much. . ."

Bell, lounging in a seat by the communications console, turned his broad, laughing face up to John Marshall, the telepath. "Boy, will he be surprised when he gets here!" He chuckled and pushed Hannibal's little pink paw away from his nose, which the little fellow seemed to be using as a drum. "Hannibal, you sweet little rascal, you leave my nose alone!" he gently chided the little bear. "Hey, John—what name did you give to your little guy?"

Marshall kept his pet under his coat. "I call him Tannhauser."

"Hm-m. . . Sounds like the make of some car."

"*Wagner's* Tannhauser, Reggie!" Marshall enlightened Rhodan's chief deputy amicably with a broad smile—a smile that was weirdly foreign to the mutant's nature.

Bell had supported his legs on the console and now Hannibal was using them for little gymnastics. "Oh sure! Wagner. How could I forget! But I never knew his son's name was Tannhauser, John. You'll have

to tell me about that, man! Come on—to heck with the duty bit, pall *The Titan*'s sitting pretty here. If there's any old thing to be done, Perry will take care of it. You can count on him. Yeah, and on us, too! Right, John?"

"Right, buddy! Now I think we're getting into the swing! You know, I feel so good that I could hug the whole world!"

Bell made a grand, inviting gesture with a sweep of his hand. "You just be my guest, baby! But I get dibs on some when you're through. Hey, did I ever tell you about my hobby, John? It's a real ball, you'll see when I—"

"Hello... Reggie," came a gentle whisper from the entrance to the Command Centre. It was Thora, who winked warmly at Bell.

"Thora my angel! What can I do for you?" Bell called. He tucked Hannibal under an arm and got leisurely to his feet.

Thora beamed her sweetest smile at him. "I was thinking, Chubby dear... how about having a big shipboard party, with singing and dancing? Wouldn't you like that?"

Bell's Hannibal was now on his master's shoulder, from which vantage point he stuck his tongue out at Thora. Which seemed to be a signal for Marshall's pet to emerge from under the latter's coat and squeak like a parrot: "One, two and three, my dear... and who is going to bring the beer? One, two and three—"

Thora's little female bear sat on her shoulder and squeaked its enthusiasm, while tumbling her hair-do loose. Bell sauntered over to her, still laughing. "They make a lot of racket but who cares? We're all having fun! You know, that party idea is so great, Thora, I think you deserve a little kiss!"

This was a cue for her little bear, who parroted: "Little kiss! Little kiss!"

Thora gaily emitted a peal of laughter. "Haven't you heard who gets my little kisses? Only Ladolfina gets them! Isn't she adorable? But your little Hannibal is a pretty little boy. And what's your friend's name, John?"

"Tannhauser, Thora. Don't you think he has the Tannhauser look?"

"I'm sorry!" objected Bell with mock severity. "But he doesn't look like a car. Wasn't Tannhauser a Ford make or was it Dusenberg?" Seeing that this gag lost a bit of momentum in the rising mood of gaiety, he decided to improve the general morale and shouted: "Kids, I tell you what! Lees all take a vote over the ship's P.A.—to everybody! Let's see who's in favour of a real bash of a party on board, okay? Hold on... stand by now...!" He contacted the Com Central and laughed into the mike as he made his proposition. "Hey, fellas!" he called in English. "Make a general announcement that we want to know who all is for a real super party on board. Patch it to the outside speakers, too. Inform the rest of the boys out there!"

The Com crew response was immediate. "A party, Fats? Hey, that's great! We'll round 'em all up in a minute—or can you wait that long?"

"You better believe it!" laughed Bell and scratched Hannibal happily. "But hurry it up, boys! We want this fiesta in full swing when Perry walks in. Man! Is he ever in for a surprise...!"

* * * *

"*Aw hat*, sir?" said Julian Tiffloor in confusion. He widened his eyes incredulously when he realized that this was actually Reginald Bell who had just invited him over the radio to a dance festival on board the *Titan*.

"Chief!" begged Pucky, tugging at Rhodan's arm. "Can't I take a fast jump over there?"

Rhodan stabbed at him in his mind with an emphatic *no* !

Pucky, slightly embarrassed, let go of Rhodan's sleeve and waddled into a corner. The *Gazelle* still needed half an hour to get to the *Titan* and dock in hangar #7.

Rhodan handed the controls over to Tiffloor. "Take it, Tiff!"

Without a word, Tiffloor moved into the pilot's seat and, without a word, Khrest and Rhodan exited from the control room. The sliding hatch slid into place in the bulkhead behind them. This type of ship was built for one purpose only: utility. There was no cozy wardroom or lounging corner. Perry and Khrest seated themselves in a couple of gun-crew cradles.

"Why don't you want to send Pucky into the *Titan*?" asked Khrest, discouraged.

"So that he can get infected, too? Shall I lose him along with all the rest?" Perry's retort was unusually fraught with emotion.

"You relate the euphoric conditions in the *Titan* to an infection?"

"You *call* it euphoria, Khrest—it's *sacting* like a disease! We don't know which analysis is correct but one thing is sure: Bell has lost all rational awareness of his condition and is now blindly revelling in some sort of induced rapture."

"You're still pretty close to a medical definition of euphoria," said Khrest. "Perry, may I add something to that?"

"Khrest, what else is there to add—if you consider the skeletons in those spaceships?"

Perry Rhodan saw himself in the place of the famous king of Troy, who fell victim to the noble 'gift' of the Greeks—a large wooden horse. When the horse was opened, out poured the conquering Greeks. The planet of Honor had presented him with a lethal gift and thus defeated him. The cemetery of spaceships at the southern pole had shown him the destiny of his crew. Soon the *Titan* would be one of those wrecks and in the *Titan* would be 700 skeletons!

While at this very moment the doomed *Titan* rang with the sounds of merriment and celebration...

"The Dance of Death!" muttered Rhodan. "And Bell named his grave the Valley of Death. This is it!" His words contained the whole story, this he knew full well. He stood on the ruins of his own Troy. A dream

of universal conquest was lost.

He had lost the *Titan* .

Khrest echoed his words, "Dance of Death..." His eyes were moist.

Perry, I beg you to let me jump!" pleaded Pucky again. "It's much too dangerous for you to go there!"

Perry had Tiffloor land the *Gazelle* within about 900 feet of the *Titan* . Radio ship's intercom brought no answer from the larger ship's Com Central. After the general invitation to the party, the *Titan* 's communications and P.A. went dead. Perry finally stood on the shore of the lake, looking up at the giant sphere. Up there behind the impervious skin of Arkon steel was his Command Centre. He felt impotent, helpless, deprived of all power. It was out of reach... too far... too high...

"Dance of Death!" There was a tremor in his voice as he repeated the phrase.

Pucky, the little mouse-beaver, sat forlornly beside him. Pucky, the telepathic, telekinetic teleporter. Heaven knew what other abilities might lie undeveloped within him! Pucky had never ceased imploring Rhodan to let him teleport into the *Titan* .

Again and again he was refused.

Again and again he begged.

"No! No! A hundred times *no* , Pucky! What do you want in the ship? Do you want to get infected too? I have to go myself! I have to find out what made them sick. Otherwise we will only find them as skeletons. Do you want to see them all dead?"

"Does old Fatso have to die, too?" the mouse-beaver asked. He sounded like a frightened child, openly betraying his strong fraternal feelings for Reginald Bell.

"Yes—Reggie, too." Perry stroked Pucky's head, looked down into his honest, intelligent mouse eyes and said, "You stay here. Keep locked in on my thought-train. Do the right thing, Pucky—whatever it is—do it fast and well. If you let me down today, our last hope is buried."

In all these years Pucky had never been spoken to before by Perry in quite this tone. He penetrated Rhodan's inner thoughts and found only despair. "Is it really as bad as that?" he asked but received no reply.

A little mouse-beaver in a suit of fur. Pucky, born on a planet called *Vagabond*, was a miracle among the stars. He might call himself an animal but he was really a class unto himself. His character was one step beyond that of humans. Pucky was good by nature, while humans must wage continuous battle against themselves.

"On your toes, Pucky!" With these words, Perry departed in the direction of the *Titan* .

"Sure thing, Perry!" the mouse-beaver called after him and sat in tense concentration.

When still at a distance, Perry could hear the laughter and howling of his crew. In these tragic sounds a sane man could detect the unmistakable artificiality of the ecstatic merrymaking. In a sharp contrast to this, the 'Approved' people squatted motionlessly among the landing struts of the mighty spherical spacer

and ignored the joyous abandon of the crew. They stared with absolute lethargy into the sand. Some of them gently pressed the comical little bears against their chests, utterly lost to the world.

Perry had taken note of the presence of the Honos while the *Gazelle* was landing. They had filled him with resentful suspicion, as they had Khrest. Both men in their own minds had independently come to a conclusion that these 'Approved Ones' were the cause of the epidemic that now gripped the *Titan*'s crew.

Rhodan slowly approached the nearest one, while the awful, macabre laughter kept on roaring through the one ramp-gate that still remained lower.

The Hono was holding onto his little bear. He seemed to be asleep but when Perry came to a stop in front of him he lifted his head, then held out the bear to him and said in his broken Arkonide, "Take my small gift, Your Excellency! Bless me by accepting my offer!"

In spite of his grim preoccupation, Perry suddenly recalled the sneering statement that Pucky had made concerning these bears: that to his supersensitive snout they stank! Perry stepped back involuntarily, surprised at his own reaction. Thus rebuked, the Hono retracted his little beast and stared at the distant horizon. His thin lips seemed to be mumbling prayers. The deep-set eyes of the 'Approved One' overflowed softly in sorrow. Indistinctly Perry thought he caught a murmur of something pertaining to 'gods'.

Rhodan flinched at the new burst of howling and wild shouts of exultation from his men inside the ship. He turned toward the ramp, still evading the Hono. But a new thought was emerging: he and Khrest had been in contact with the Honos and had even received flowers from the first delegation. But neither of them had been affected by the disease. Nor had any of the men in the *Gazelle* become sick.

He suddenly shouted it. "The *BEARS* —!"

He didn't realize that he stood between two of the 'Approved' and the *Titan* with his mouth wide open and shouting. The *Titan* appeared to spin around before him... faster and faster...

There was a buzzing in his ears.

He, Perry Rhodan, who had dreamed the dream of conquering the Universe, the man with the incredibly quick reactions, he who had welded the Earth into a single state without using brute force—here he almost broke down at the terrible realization of what he had let slip by him—when he finally recognized what had carried the plague aboard the *Titan* !

"Your Worthiness... bless me by accepting my offering!" A very young, almost pretty Approved girl stood before him imploringly. She had eyes only for Rhodan as she held up the small bear in trembling expectation.

Rhodan was just emerging from the most terrible shock of his life. He gripped his hypno-raygun. "Get back!" He brushed the girl aside, ignoring her desperate eyes.

The little bears, that was it! He kept repeating this to himself as he hurried toward the ramp. The animals had been the carriers of the disease and had brought it with them on board! Through those little creatures, all those spacers at the cemetery had been burned out from *within* . But then what? Who had flown all these ships to the pole? Who had cannibalized them? Who! These stupid, emaciated figures? These dull-witted, degenerate Arkonides?

Suddenly the scales fell from his eyes.

They called themselves the 'Approved'. The import of it struck him. The *Approved Ones* were immune to the plague carried by the harmless-appearing little animals! They were the descendants of those original settlers who had lived through this deadly rapturous disease. To what avail those Arkonides had outlived the sickness 14,000 years ago was sadly obvious now in these poor, decrepit, dim-witted descendants.

At the ramp he raised the hypno-gun high. "Stand back!" he ordered and aimed the gun at his men.

At the vanguard of these men was Kitai Ishibashi his best hypno. He shouted frantically as he ran to meet Perry. His little pet sat on his shoulder. On his face was a distorted grin as his slanted eyes sparkled. "Perry, what can I do for you? You can have everything except my little Shiguti. But where's your pet, old boy? Wait now and I'll just get you one! Perry, wait! Why do you run away? Come back!"

Perry had made a fast retreat, leaping from the ramp. He passed the pillars of the landing struts, evading the clustered groups of the Approved and ran back to Pucky. Only in his vicinity did he slow his pace, the hypno-gun still in his hand. Pucky gave him a hopelessly demoralized look.

* * * *

They had tried once more, all three together, to enter the *Titan*. Again they had been received by the celebrating and dancing men. All were holding out their little deadly bears to them for petting. And once more the hypno-rayguns were of no avail.

"Fire!" Perry had shouted to Khrest and Tiffior. He had drawn his own gun and started to beam the hypno-rays against Ras Tschubai.

The big black teleporter registered no reaction from it. Khrest's and Tiffs rayguns did not show any effect, either. At the last moment, Rhodan ordered a retreat, just in time to escape the wild, howling mob and their animals.

Now they were gathered in a depressed huddle in the scoutship's control room. They sat together, brooding in silence. Wuriu Sengu hung his head, afraid to look up, because Perry had squelched him with icy tones and told him to shut up when he suggested making a third try using shock weapons.

"I cannot shoot at my men and I *will* not shoot at them as long as there is a spark of hope for another solution!"

Khrest was completely enmeshed in a web of despair. Perry felt it and it added to his own hopelessness. The Wooden Horse that had destroyed his Troy was comical teddy bear

He struggled to collect himself.

He thought of the Mooffs, the methane-breathing creatures who had been used by the Unknowns in an attempt to topple the Arkonide Empire. He had discovered them on Zalit and he and his men had

destroyed them in fierce fighting. Could it be that these Unknowns who had imported the Mooffs were the same unknown pirates of the spaceships down there at the southern pole of the planet?

He turned to the Arkonide. "Khrest, when will they come?"

The Arkonide was aroused from his brooding. "Who? You mean help from Arkon?"

"Help from *Arkon* !" echoed Rhodan surprised. "Khrest, have you forgotten the Arkonide law that prohibits any help to a spacer that lands on a forbidden planet and runs into trouble, under pain of death and the rescuing ship's destruction in outer space? Have you really forgotten that law, Khrest?"

The great scientist asked with a halting voice, "Terry, does it really pay to remember anything, instead of forgetting everything?"

I think, perhaps, this time you are right, Khrest!"

Perry's fit of dejection seemed to be the final downfall.

But it served to stir the Arkonide to a resuscitation of his stubbornness—he whose kin had fallen prey to decadence, who could no longer compete with the will and energy of the human race.

"Perry, have you forgotten the *Ganymede* ? And there is still the *Stardust II* , the interceptors, the *Terra* , the *Solar System* and the *Centurion* !"

Here, certainly, was the brave music of distant drums but it found no echo...

"There is only one other model of the *Titan* class, Khrest, and that stands on Arkon. There it will remain to eternity, because your Empire cannot produce men capable of manning and operating such a spherical spacer. And I?—I will be condemned and prosecuted by the Empire. These Unknowns will of course see to it that Arkon will be informed of my disaster on Honor. And then, Khrest—what...!"

"Rhodan, you torture yourself!" retorted the Arkonide. "Until today you have always found a solution in every desperate situation. Why should there be none in our present dilemma?"

"Have I ever lost the most faithful of all dedicated men, Khrest? What is the loss of the *Titan* ? Nothing! I can be completely indifferent to that. But can you realize what it means to lose Reginald Bell, to know that in a few days, maybe hours, my friend will be dead? And with Reggie go 700 others! Each one of them a thousand times more precious than the entire *Titan* . Life can't be replaced and I have the death of 700 men on my conscience—not to mention Thora! All this drives me out of my mind! Khrest, I've simply *had* it!"

"Perry, my friend, what you're saying can't be true!" the Arkonide protested bitterly, in his face an expression of pleading desperation.

"They'll all die, Khrest. Don't forget the skeletons in those rotted spacers we saw—in that graveyard of the damned!"

Khrest struggled desperately in his mind against this logic. He sought to change the subject. "Perry, you started to ask a question. Who is supposed to arrive? What do you mean?"

"The vultures, Khrest! The scavengers who will penetrate the *Titan* after all life is extinguished. The

bandits who will fly the *Titan* to that Death Valley of a cemetery and take out her entrails! They are the ones I am waiting for—only for them alone!"

"And then what?"

"Do I have to answer that, Khrest? Don't you know me better? I'll be thinking of Bell and Thora and all the others. I will make a clean sweep of the vultures and enjoy it until I am snuffed out and atomized!"

"I will be at your side," said Khrest, solemnly. "You can count on that..."

* * * *

Night fell over Honor. The temperature dropped but not indefinitely. The Approved Ones continued to squat lethargically between the giant landing struts of the *Titan*. Occasionally the night breeze would carry the sound of laughter and singing from the senselessly enraptured crew.

The Gazelle was immersed in total silence. The night hours crept by. Finally dawn broke as the sun Thatrel appeared on the horizon and began to raise the temperature again. Between the struts sat the Honos. The euphorically maddened drunks of the *Titan* danced on, affectionately clutching death to their bosoms, oblivious to the fact they were about to die.

700 people, overtaken by an incredible delirium of joyfulness, danced and sang, forgot eating and drinking, didn't feel hunger or thirst... were compelled to give away the best that they owned, to cater to the other fellow's whims, to make everyone's life a bed of roses—this urge became overwhelming, lunatic—lethal!

By now many of them were stumbling in exhaustion from deck to deck or riding aimlessly up and down in the grav-lifts, unable to croak a single sound because of over-strained vocal chords—which they didn't even notice. The world was too chromatic and gorgeous, too psychedelically wonderful. The rapture streamed and pulsated continuously in their veins. Everyone had 700 friends and the desire to make 700 friends ecstatically happy.

The little bears slept and wakened in their arms. They kissed their new masters tenderly and playfully behind the ears, on the napes of their necks, on their hands. They chatted like parrots and had wonderful little button eyes like felt-pelted teddy bears. These affectionate little beasts could rotate their eyes in such a droll manner as to always provoke a frantically insane hilarity from their owners.

"Stop it, Sengu! Stop it!" yelled Rhodan, covering his ears in order not to hear any more of the 'seer's' report.

Wuriu Sengu was grateful for his command. He wiped sweat from his brow and took a deep breath. For the first time he had put his abilities to the test, he cursed his special talent—for he had seen hell. The *Titan* was hell. It was populated by madmen. Not a sane one among them, all laughing themselves to death in a maddan *se macabre*, completely oblivious to this devil's Mardi Gras that was whirling them to the graves.

He had also seen Bell but he refrained from picturing to Rhodan how horrible Bell looked.

"Sengu, go to sleep!" Rhodan's order sounded sharp and was like an unwarranted slap in the face.

"Sir," stammered Sengu, mortified, "I assure you I did not exaggerate. As a matter of fact—"

"Sengu," Perry interrupted, "I'm sorry—I didn't mean it that way. I know you must have seen much more than you let us know about and I'm grateful for that. It's just that you probably need a rest now."

In this hour of his greatest despair, he still revealed a little of the old Perry Rhodan—his unique quality of leadership. He knew how to thank a man at the least expected moment and he had strengthened a friendship just now. Khrest watched him closely. The spark of hope was still alive. He rejected the idea that Perry had given up. This man from Terra was stronger than he had estimated himself to be.

"Sir!" Tiffloor called from his tracking console.

Perry slowly lifted his head as one waking from a dream. "Yes, Tiff?"

"Sir, there's a blip... we're tracking a ship out there."

"That's the one I'm waiting for, Tiff."

Perry's tone and manner were a disappointment, which the young lieutenant's expression revealed. He had thought this announcement would give a lift to the Chief. Instead, Rhodan moved to the tracker with a slow, almost casual motion. Tiffloor leaned to one side so that Perry could inspect the screen and the sweeping arm of light crossing the constant blip,

"Stay where you are, Tiff," Rhodan said. "A minute doesn't matter. It'll take a while for the ship to get here. Okay—thanks!"

Returning to the pilot's seat, a new thought occurred to him. He placed a hand on the mouse-beaver's furry back. "Pucky, did you touch those little Hono bears or not?"

"You might say they touched *me*," answered Pucky, his eyes still sparkling resentment. "They even played with my tail!"

"Lieutenant, why haven't you gotten ill?"

Pucky was a lieutenant in Rhodan's Mutant Corps but it was the first time he had heard his title used. He puffed up proudly, gave a little salute and reported in a military tone: "Sir, I have not been infected because I am an animal, sir! And because I sensed immediately how awful those little beasts smell!"

For the first time the trace of a smile touched Rhodan's weary countenance. He studied Pucky thoughtfully. "How long were you in contact with them?"

Khrest, Tiff and Sengu followed this conversation with rising attentiveness. Perry's voice was taking on more and more of its old, familiar tone.

"Ten minutes, Perry. Maybe a quarter of an hour, until I couldn't take that foul odour any longer." Here again was the mouse-beaver's reference to the malodorous effluvium the bears were emitting.

"How did they smell, Pucky?"

"The word is *stink*, Chief!" Pucky squeaked angrily.

Perry laughed easily now. "No gentlemen uses that expression, Pucky!"

"Well, I'm no gentleman, Boss, I'm an animal! But you just let me take a jump into the *Titan* and I'll stop saying 'stink'!"

This was pure blackmail but coming from this small furry creature it was farcical.

Perry gave in. "Alright, I'll let you do that, but wait till I tell you when. Now try to describe that odour exactly, Pucky..."

The mouse-beaver proved to be an excellent analyst. His detailed description gave a precise idea of the odour.

"It's a gas!" was Khrest's opinion.

Rhodan still had some doubts. It could also be some aromatic matter or even dust-like emissions." And then, without transition, he called over to Tiffloor: "Don't let up on that tracking, Tiff! I want to know when that ship gets behind the planet..."

Khrest's face brightened. This was the old Perry Rhodan, who never overlooked any detail. His order that he should be notified when the planet would be between them and the alien ship was an obvious sign that Perry Rhodan had not yet thrown in the kowel (an Arkonide playing card cancelling a hand.)

"Khrest, do you know of any aromatic or dust-like particles that are toxic or infectious?"

"Quite a few. Most of them destroy the ganglion cells and what this means in terms of destruction to the central nervous system needs no explanation. But I'm afraid that Arkonide medicine had to surrender before the final ramparts of the human brain!"

Perry was grim again as he thought of Bell's destiny and the fate of the other 700 men and Thora. "Khrest, we should try a fast flight to Arkon and—"

The Arkonide had to cut him short. "Perry, you're applying Terrestrial standards to Arkon."

"How's that?"

"Within the entire Globular Cluster M-13 there are neither unknown worlds nor unknown poisons which destroy the central nervous system. If you should contact a physician and describe the symptoms of the crew's illness, you would decree your own death penalty, which would be carried out immediately! You would be delivering the damning evidence that you had returned from a banned planet!"

"Don't you know any physician you could trust personally, Khrest?" Rhodan tried to arouse the Arkonide from his phlegmatic temperament.

Khrest returned him a slow, sad smile of resignation. "Perry, I know only cowards and fools. *You* must do the job!"

"I'm no physician," Perry retorted, heatedly. "Maybe I know the difference between apolar and unipolar

ganglions but that's about all."

"Sir," interrupted Tiff, "the planet has now completely eclipsed the approaching spaceship."

Perry acknowledged this calmly, then said to Khrest, "Well discuss this further." He turned his attention to the pilot's controls and fired up the drive units.

The Gazelle hovered closely near the ground, moving directly toward the 12,000-foot escarpment which it then scaled in a swift, perpendicular sweep. Julian Tiff, who considered himself a fair scoutship ace, involuntarily held his breath a few times when Rhodan manoeuvred around unexpected brooding crags with the skill of a rope dancer. There was no need of these close-clipped manoeuvres because the Gazelle's powerful repulsion buffer forcefields could take care of such situations. But for the master of the New Power, these aids didn't exist. He made the highest demands on himself and hated to use these automatic gadget as a crutch. The Gazelle soared above the mountain pass, sped between two dangerously close peaks and turned in an incredibly sharp curve over an unknown valley.

"Tiff, I'm looking for a gorge where the Gazelle would fit in snugly—or better yet, some overhanging rock or even a cave!"

"Sir, I have one! Course NNE, 3° past green. Altitude, 1850 feet! Do you see it?"

"Already going in, Tiff. Thanks!"

How good that sounded! Perry's strong tone of voice ran through the ship. The Chief was at the helm!

He virtually played with the scoutship. Khrest was so elated that he turned to Tiff and they both laughed in their relief. There was a flicker in the air and Pucky appeared from a short leap. He didn't want to miss the fun of this flight and he grinned with his single rodent's incisor tooth.

Sengu alone did not share their mood. His vision still reeled with the sight of the inferno, of the hellish merrymaking inside the *Titan*, and he couldn't forget the spectacle of Reginald Bell in his cadaverous condition.

Then the lights came on in the ship. Rhodan manoeuvred the Gazelle into a tremendous cave. The vessel was cloaked in complete darkness. It landed smoothly, without a bump or jar.

"Khrest! Pucky! Put on your spacesuits! Tiff, you stay here on guard in the pilot's position. But pull out immediately at the slightest radio signal from me. Meeting place is the mountain pass we just came through. Sengu—stand by for a special assignment. All clear?"

7/ ROBOT SHIPS FROM HELL

Each Arkonide spacesuit was a marvel in itself but it had become a routine to the two men to wear them. Pucky, however, squeaked angrily because he didn't have his own suit at hand. He had to slip into a monstrous one, in which he could have taken a bath.

"Don't take it too hard, Pucky," Rhodan told him, placatingly. "If things work out today, I'll let you 'play' to your heart's desire. How would you like that, my friend?"

To hear the word 'friend' from Perry himself was the greatest reward for Pucky and the prospect of being able to 'play' gave him indescribable satisfaction. Rhodan had promised it!

"Is that for sure, Boss?" Pucky asked, trying to confirm the promise. "That I'll get a chance to 'play'?"

Perry laughed grimly. "It seems to me that it may be a sheer necessity for you to play!"

"Okay, Boss, I can use it. I need a real workout! I only hope we don't lay a rotten egg!"

"Pucky!" Rhodan reprimanded him while he fastened his spacesuit. "You know, your speaking habits are getting worse every days!"

"Yes, Boss, that comes from going around in bad company with Bell. I just hope we can get the poor guy out of all that lousy horse—"

"Pucky! Now watch it! One doesn't use that word. You should be ashamed to say it in Khrest's company!"

"Do I know it?" asked Khrest, grateful that Pucky's earthy expressions served to relax Perry.

"Sure you do!" insisted the furry little rascal. "You were there when I pulled Bell out of his chair and put him through a gimlet fling. That's when you heard him yell at me to cut out the horse—"

Perry exploded. "*Pucky, I'm warning you—!*"

But they couldn't stop the little fellow. In a pouting chirp, he said, "Ask Khrest what Bell said. He knows it!"

The Arkonide volunteered: "I recall Bell shouting to cut out the horse feathers. Is that considered bad language on Earth, Perry?"

Rhodan struggled to keep a straight face as he watched the innocent sad look in Pucky's eyes. "Is that what he really said?"

"You don't believe me?" asked Khrest with a poker face.

"No!"

"Neither do I."

The Arkonide grinned at him while Pucky manoeuvred himself in his suit to the airlock. Then all 3 exited through the lock.

They did not touch the floor of the cave but floated out into the valley, borne by the flying spacesuits. The wonder suits could also generate an energy-deflection shield and make the wearer invisible. The only disadvantage to this was that it prevented them from seeing one another. Micro-nuclear generators produced the energy to feed the deflection fields and activate the gravo-neutralisers that made them float.

Shortly before they reached their target, Perry ordered: "Activate deflector shields!"

Now cloaked in invisibility, they touched the rocky ground. They moved close to each other, touching hands in order to keep in contact. From their vantage point they saw that the alien ship had landed.

"It has a cylindrical shape!" Rhodan said this through his teeth as he stared dourly at the ship in the distance. It had a length of about 600 feet and a 150-foot diameter. It has touched down within a few miles of the *Titan* .

The alien ship had completed its approach and had landed more swiftly than anticipated. This fact and its appearance brought to mind the Galactic Traders, also known as Springers. They had also been descendants of the Arkonides but had made themselves independent many thousand of years ago. Having no fixed home planet or system allegiance, they spent their entire lives in the spacers. They lived in them with their families but they were also the shrewdest of merchants, even trading entire planets. As a presumed little sideline, they had once attempted to loot a certain ridiculously minor-sized world called Earth—but that had been prevented: a certain Perry Rhodan had given the Springers such a beating that they had to run for their lives.

And now Rhodan saw a Springer ship standing near the contaminated *Titan* . Springers always flew cylindrical spacers. That shape was typical of their ships.

"So it's the Traders after all!" Khrest muttered in agitation. "I really had not considered them capable of a crime like this."

Pucky maintained a remarkable silence. He never took his eyes off this alien spacer which had approached with such lightning speed from interstellar space and manoeuvred to a landing in such an unbelievably short time.

"Well, Khrest, there is still another point to consider. Who notified this spacer? Where on Honur is the transmitter located that could send the message? And specifically who made the transmission? One of the Honos? I'll say no to that. But I will venture to guess that a hidden Trader control station here has put these angels of death on our trail!"

Khrest was inspired to say, "Perry, today you are once more the old Perry Rhodan. Thank Heaven for that!" However, he could not see Perry's sad smile because they were invisible to each other.

"Yesterday I lived through the darkest hour of my life, Khrest. I just couldn't go on. I was desperate. In fact, I still am. Maybe yesterday I had more time for brooding than I do now. The responsibility for the crew threatened to suffocate me. Yes, Khrest, yesterday I turned coward. I can never forget that hour. After all, I'm only human. I had become almost physically helpless, not knowing if I even breathed. But it's human nature never to give up hope as long as there's a breath... and now, Khrest, I am breathing—deeply and strongly!"

This confession was deeply moving to the Arkonide, being forced to admire the man who had courage to admit his own weaknesses. What Arkonide could ever do that? None!

"Pucky," said Rhodan, "scan the ship."

The mouse-beaver understood. Using his telepathic skills, he searched the intervening space between himself and the alien ship, attempting to perceive any new thought impulses.

Discouraged, he had to report: "I'm not receiving any actual brain-wave patterns. I've rarely observed such a confused outpouring. All I get is garbled—it's an unintelligible mess!"

Invisible in their spacesuits, they all remained silent. They observed the area between the two distant ships. They could see the Honos still squatting apathetically on the ground, appearing as mere dots among the *Titan*'s struts. But not a single Hono made a move toward the cylindrical spacer.

"Anything from the *Titan*, Pucky?"

"Sick brainwave patterns. They are dancing and simply enjoying themselves to death!"

"The death part will have to wait!" challenged Perry, his new will daring to change the unchangeable into a happier course.

Khrest asked over the short-range radio-com: "Perry, I'm not sure—is the alien ship really a Springer spacer? I'm troubled by the shape of that hull. It seems slightly different."

A sudden new occurrence made this conversation superfluous.

Out of the spacer emerged a marching line of robots!

* * * *

Tiff sat with Wuriu Sengu in the small control room of the reconnaissance ship. They had gradually begun a conversation. They talked about Perry's morale breakdown of the previous day and of the infected or poisoned crew of the *Titan*.

"I knew it!" said Tiff, who bore a striking resemblance to Rhodan in spite of his youthful appearance. I knew the Chief wouldn't give in! He never will, as long as he lives. If he never sees Bell again, the tragedy would make him very lonesome, but it will never keep him from his goals." As Tiff spoke, his eyes gleamed with a loyal conviction.

"Tiff, you haven't seen what I saw in the *Titan*," said Wuriu. "The Chief will only find corpses if he ever enters the *Titan* again. They dance, sing and bawl themselves to death. In the midst of a death-rattle they'll be laughing! I didn't know such things were possible. I could understand the Chief very well yesterday when he was at the point of collapse."

The micro-speaker blared suddenly. "Julian Tiff!"

"Lt. Tiff, Sir!"

Perry Rhodan's sharply commanding voice broke through.

* * * *

100 robots marched along the lake toward the *Titan*. They had started their march only a minute before but still more fighting machines emerged from the hull of the cylindrical spacer.

The vultures were attacking...

"Pucky!" The mouse-beaver felt Rhodan's strong hand through the spacesuit.

"Ready to go?" squeaked the little one, all full of enterprise.

"Listen carefully," replied Rhodan. Then he issued long, complicated and detailed orders to the little furry fellow. At the end of it, he said, "So now it depends on you whether or not Reggie and all the others in the ship will have a chance to get well again."

Pucky took one more look at the robots that moved in close formation toward the *Titan*. "Friends," he chirped in their direction, "what our little machines leave unfinished, I will take care of! I'm going to convert you to dive bombers!"

Then Pucky dematerialised in a skilled teleporter jump, disappearing in the direction of the *Titan* ...

* * * *

Slow minutes dragged by. Now two columns of robots were moving along the waterfront, marching steadily toward the *Titan*. To Rhodan and Khrest they seemed to be a distant line of tin soldiers moving along the glimmering edge of the water. The alien ship still disgorged more and more of the articulated fighting machines. A third column was taking shape and moving out.

"They knew what kind of a spaceship they were up against," said Rhodan, gazing meditatively at the *Titan*.

How many days would it take, he thought, until this marvel of Arkonide technology had been reduced to a hollow wreck and left to decay in that graveyard at the pole? Down there marched the demolition commandos—soulless machines, immune to the bears' poison and immune to the emotional factors involved in eliminating 700 people!

"What if Pucky doesn't succeed, Perry?" Khrest pulled him from his thoughts.

Perry Rhodan pulled himself together. "It would be the first time that Pucky had failed us, Khrest. My only worry right now is this massive army of machines. It seems the disembarking phase is finished—or do you still see any robots coming out?"

"It's quieted down. If they'd sent out 10 more columns I think I would have said that any resistance is useless."

"Not I, my friend!" growled Rhodan. "Do you picture me standing by and watching soulless machines smash through 700 diseased and helpless humans, becoming their murderers?"

Khrest's cringing under this retort was mercifully concealed by his deflector shield. "Do you really think these robots will come as butchers among—"

"I know it! I dislike repeating in what condition Wuriu Sengu found those skeletons in the disembowelled ships. Those walking monsters down there carry in their memory banks a program for murder!"

The leading column of robots had put about one-third of the intervening distance behind them when Perry resumed the conversation. "I wonder why that alien spacer didn't land right next to the *Titan*? Why the intervening distance and this time-consuming march? Does that question have only one answer or several?"

"I believe we are looking at a strictly robot ship. The landing would be programmed for a safety distance factor. But I can't see that the question constitutes a problem."

Rhodan answered bitterly: "700 men may pay with their lives for my having overlooked some details before! 700 men on my conscience if they cannot be saved! I knew that Arkon had forbidden any landings here. If I was determined to land, I should at least have sought to determine where the danger lay. Khrest, our present troubles stem from just that—not asking enough questions. Do you understand my concern now about every detail?"

The situation brought out an embarrassing distinction between Arkonide decadence of logic and the aggressiveness of human thinking. Khrest avoided a straight answer and changed the subject.

"For me Pucky is the question. I think we should bury our hopes."

"Why?" asked Rhodan, bluntly. "The robots have not yet reached the ship. They are not yet inside it. They haven't flown it yet to the graveyard nor have they disembowelled it yet. Then only, Khrest, only when our ship has become a useless derelict, will I bury the last hope of repossessing it, of piloting it again and letting it soar out into the universe! At this moment my only concern is the 700 suffering and dying men. In all other respects I am calm—as cool as a cucumber."

The Arkonide took a long, deep breath. "Rhodan, I have known you now more than 13 years but in some situations I will never be able to fathom you completely. For instance now, I don't understand your apparent lack of concern for Pucky. What will happen if the little fellow isn't immune to the bear poison and also falls victim to it?"

"Once an Arkonide, always an Arkonide! Yes, we are as different as day and night in our emotional make-ups. Has a defeat never given you new strength? After suffering a defeat, have you never said, *now* more than ever? I've not only said it, I've tried to act accordingly. Now let's think logically. In his first considerable contact with the little Hono beasts, Pucky was not affected, so it is unlikely that a second contact with them will have any different result. And don't forget, Pucky isn't like us. Even though I'm reluctant to call him an animal, he is not humanoid like you and me. That makes a difference, Khrest. It not only strengthens the safety factor concerning infection or poison, but-uh—Khrest, look there!" Perry gripped Khrest's shoulder and shook him, repeating his name over and over and pointing below...

* * * *

Pucky had materialized at the entrance to the arsenal deck. Hastily he pushed up the burdensome helmet and jumped out of the cumbersome, ill-fitting spacesuit. But he didn't leave the valuable suit on the floor. He pushed it out of sight into one of the wall lockers. "So long!" he yelled and threw the Arkonide marvel into a corner.

The next moment he stood all by himself in the arsenal doorway. He took his bearings. His immediate target was about 1200 feet farther west. He was at the wrong entrance. He concentrated once more and teleported. Almost in the same moment he rematerialised at the western gate of the arsenal. He was facing 5 laughing, staggering crew members that were playing with their little bears like happy children.

A man with fiery red hair welcomed him joyfully. "Little brother mouse baby!" he shouted. "C'mere, let me hug you! Shortly, why haven't we seen you around for such a long time?"

A haggard man next to him offered his little bear to Pucky. "You want me to make a present of him to you, little mutt? You're not much bigger than he is but I'll give him to you. Here—Emperor, give the guy a little kiss!"

Pucky smelled the odour and backed slowly away from the approaching men. Suddenly the haggard man jumped forward and tossed the bear straight at him. But Pucky was faster and instantly employed his power of telekinesis. The bear was stopped in mid-flight by an invisible force. It twisted in midair and landed back in the arms of its owner. Pucky didn't enjoy 'playing' with these sick, insanely laughing men who looked more and more physically depleted.

On his mind was one task—to get them out of his way. They enjoyed the sensation of floating. Their boisterous exultation developed into more insane bursts of laughter as they were thrown by the telekinetic forces toward the antigrav elevators in the centre of the ship.

Just then Pucky saw a group coming out of the elevator—7 or 8 of them. He figured he'd keep them busy so he used the 5 floating men like a ram and pushed them into the approaching group. He had expected to see a free-for-all fight develop but instead a dozen people got up from the floor and played Gaston & Alphonse! He shook his head, watching them brush each other off and, with the politest of smiles, hand each other their lost bears.

"Now I see," Pucky muttered to himself. "They really are all crazy and now I know what this 'euphoria' is. In hell you die of laughter."

This incident had consumed 2 minutes but now he could concentrate on his mission again. He took another teleport leap and landed exactly in front of the mighty steel door, behind which the fighting robots were stored. Perry had explained to him how to unlock the door. The big steel plate slid noiselessly back into the wall, leaving the entrance wide open.

Row upon row stood the most modem and formidable Arkonide automaton fighting machines but Pucky wasn't impressed. He had always called the robots 'tin soldiers.' He went to the first of them to begin the task of activating and programming them.

Rhodan had given him precise instructions what to do, what program had to be switched on, and so forth, and also to make certain that no machine would start marching alone. "And watch especially," Rhodan had carefully admonished him, "that not a single member of the crew gets out of the ship. Pucky, it'll be the end of a long friendship if one single man succeeds in sneaking out!"

The mouse-beaver worked frantically in his solo task. The fighting robots stood very close to each other and he had to go into gymnastics to reach all the program levers and switches. The first 100 were activated. As he turned to the next robot, 100 activated machines started to move at the same time. All at once the heavy metal tread of ultra-modern gladiators reverberated through the ship. In rows of five, 100 Arkonide robots stamped out of the great arsenal hall, clattered along the main passageway and marched toward the central antigravitor.

Simultaneously, Pucky activated his time-perception sensitivity. He had to make sure that he didn't miss the precise second when this unit would pass through the airlock and walk down the ramp to take up the defensive battle with the approaching enemy robots. He did not know then that 300 fighting units were on their way to the *Titan* from the alien cylindrical spacer. But it would have made little difference to Pucky if there had been twice this amount. After all, he himself counted for something in this conflict and he had few inhibitions concerning his own self-estimation.

He slaved ceaselessly on the remaining units. He was only 3 feet tall and the access panels to the robots' program selectors were 6 feet off the deck. He climbed around the bizarre jungle of angular limbs and metal joints like a squirrel. His grip became more practiced, the switching surer and faster. He was not even delayed by a mob of crazed crewmembers who pushed into the armoury. He expedited them outside through use of his telekinetic power.

One of this group was especially insistent and was trying now for the third time to stagger into the arsenal. And in the same moment the 'bell' rang in Pucky's mental time-perceptor. The first hundred-robot unit was near the outer airlock, ready to leave the *Titan*.

The loudly jubilant sick man stood behind him, watching and laughing as the mouse-beaver activated another robot. Suddenly no time was left for Pucky to take care of his uninvited guest. He 'ported' to the steel door, closed it and locked the sick one inside. Then he made a more critical teleport jump to airlock #5, which the robot contingent had been programmed to select for their exit from the great spherical spacer.

When he landed near the exit gate he was confronted with a sight that made him pound his forehead with both little paws and draw from memory all the most useful cusswords that Bell had ever taught him. He was facing at least 50 insanely dancing men in front of the gate. The metallic reverberation of the steel gladiators thundered louder by the moment. 100 pairs of Arkonide steel legs stamped closer with insistent cadence. Pucky felt gripped from all sides, pulled in all directions at once. He was forced to breathe in the stink of the bears, which gave him an urge to regurgitate. He was merrily requested to give all these deadly little beasties a kiss. Suddenly he was aware that a 200-pound man was standing on his beaver tail.

Never having approved of this kind of intimacy, he gave a sudden squeak. However, the euphoric hilarity around him drowned the wailing complaints of the little lieutenant. Finally he had to fall back on borrowed human characteristics: he got mad. The next moment he had the whole dancing mob of 50 suspended from the ceiling. The entire half hundred men with their struggling little bears were glued there, unable to go anywhere, while beneath them the hundred-unit robot contingent marched solemnly past toward the great airlock gate. It opened up and the path to the outside was clear.

Pucky saw the 'Approved Ones' sitting insensibly between the towering landing struts of the *Titan*. As soon as the last robot had cleared the ramp, the gate closed and the ramp retracted automatically into the ship.

Now you can come down again, thought Pucky, referring to the mad mob on the ceiling, whose insane

laughing and shouting was breaking his eardrums. He let them sink gently to the floor, then instantly teleported himself back to the main door of the armoury. He almost got himself killed under the metal foot of a marching robot. He jumped desperately around between the fighting machines which stamped along the main passageway, until he was squeezed and pressed against the wall and watched with horrified eyes as the hundred-unit contingent passed.

What had happened? How had their programs been activated? It was a catastrophe!

As the last of the group marched past him, Pucky jumped on its back in desperation. Rhodan had explained that the programming of these monsters made it impossible for them to attack any crew member of their own ship but Pucky was not too reassured by this, particularly since a crazily gyrating mouse-beaver might not *bein* their program for recognition!

In virtual defiance of death, he clung to the cold steel neck joint of the robot and with acrobatic dexterity managed to check out the thing's program setting. Amazingly, it was correct! With a startled gasp, he jumped ahead to the next one and dangled precariously, checking out the switches. Again correct!

Then he remembered the sick crewman he had locked up in the arsenal room.

If only it works!—he thought and made a jump back into the great armoury hall. The place looked much depleted after the discharge of 200 giant fighting machines. The insane man heard his arrival and looked at him laughingly as he chose a robot at random to switch on its program.

"Oh man!" exclaimed Pucky in a piping squeak of consternation. He sent the laughing man to the ceiling and proceeded to check the programming work the other had performed. By some weird clarity or perversity of the insane, each panel was precisely programmed as intended.

A minute later Pucky and his human companion were programming together. Somehow it had become a fun game to the afflicted man. Pucky even resigned himself to the stink of the little bear. He tried to ignore the man's raucous laughter.

"Don't you think I'm being nice to you, little brother?" the man asked for the tenth time. Occasionally he'd attempt to divert Pucky's attention from the work, inviting him to dance. "Come on, laugh once in a while, little one! Aren't you happy that I'm happy? Because I can be so nice to you and I can help you like this?"

"I'll join you right away, old buddy!" promised Pucky. "Yes-siree, you betcha!" But instead he teleported himself to the airlock.

The second hundred-unit contingent of robots was ready to leave the ship and he was under the strictest orders not to let a single crewman get out.

* * * *

"Rhodan, do you grasp what this, means? There's the third unit of a hundred of our robots marching out of the *Titan* !"

Between Khrest and Rhodan, something stirred in that moment. The mouse-beaver became visible, wearing his own custom-tailored spacesuit. He tried to salute, reporting proudly, "Lt. Pucky, sir—back from first mission! 300 tin men brought into formation! Ready to go for second mission, sir!"

"Pucky...!"

But Pucky had already 'sprung' to his second mission.

"That little hellhound!" raged Perry, helplessly.

Very reserved, very much the aristocrat, Khrest asked, "Do you presume that Pucky knows that epithet?"

As Perry Rhodan sucked air angrily through his teeth and glared below, Khrest grinned silently.

* * * *

Like a giant flaming torch the robot battle raged between the two spaceships. By mere chance the two mechanical armies were equally matched in numbers.

The inferno blazed hotly in the plain by the lake. Constant flashes and a rumbling of battle thunder filled the air. Mushroom clouds rose skyward, colour-gashed by explosion flares. Rhodan and Khrest had to close their eyes repeatedly in spite of their glare shields, half-blinded by the ravening brilliance in spite of the intervening distance.

Each mushroom cloud indicated the disintegration of a fighting machine in that glowing oven of unharnessed atomic hells. The robots stood facing each other in close-packed confrontation, right up to the water's edge. The mass of machines spread all the way to the cliffs, all of them unleashing their terrible forces against each other. Soulless mechanisms, empty of human emotions, programmed to kill the enemy.

Energy shields popped like bubbles; energy beams of all-consuming power converted Arkon steel into gas. The metal legs of the robots stirred up a mist of dust that became glowing fumes and where the ray beams hit the water it evaporated into clouds of steam.

After awhile, Khrest and Rhodan were unable to distinguish between *Titan* robots and enemy machines. The battlefield was constantly changing. Now there seemed to be a breakthrough somewhere in the centre. Rhodan and Khrest held their breaths. Which side was victorious? Suddenly, 8 mushroom clouds spewed simultaneously into the sky and 8 dazzling tongues of flames flared out of them and beyond. Beneath them the ground seemed to waver, converted to gas-like masses of fog. Seconds seemed to drag by once more, into eternity. Hell danced its *Danse Macabre* down there and it seemed to have devoured one living being: Pucky.

Khrest ventured to ask about him but Rhodan kept silent. He wasn't able to detect any, telltale effect of Pucky's presence in the fray. The fighting machines down there were just so many weirdly moving dark spots, either starkly silhouetted by flaring riptides of destruction or engulfed in gases, smoke and thunderclouds. The explosion shockwaves echoed stronger and nearer to the observers' location on the

mountain. The total sound effect became like a sustained roaring of mighty oceans in storm. But they could clearly see that the front moved steadily toward the cylindrical spacer.

"Perry! That must be Pucky!" yelled Khrest indecorously. "There on the right side of the big mushroom cloud! Do you make out those two robots that are airborne, coming at us like jets?"

He heard Rhodan's sudden chuckle of relief. He, too, had discovered the two flying automatons which were soaring directly toward their position. In fact they approached with an uncanny speed. All this could only be the work of the mouse-beaver, who was somewhere near the battle lines, grinning with his single incisor tooth and enjoying his promised 'play time'.

"Watch out!" Khrest warned but there was no danger.

The airborne robots landed 30 feet away from them. It could be seen at once that they'd been reduced to worthless junk. Their positronics had been destroyed. Rhodan and Khrest ran over to them and blended their voices in a simultaneous exclamation: "These are not Springer robots!"

Which brought them back to the question: who had built them?

The Arkonide remarked, "I wish I could answer that. I've never seen this particular make of robot nor have I ever heard of such a design."

"On the other hand, they reveal typical Arkonide qualities," said Rhodan. His eyes were also on the battle below and he was noting its progress. He radioed to Lt. Tiffmor in the Gazelle.

The latter reported back but Rhodan cut him short with a command: "Tiff, launch an attack on the cylinder ship and make it a good one!"

From the radio-com's micro-speaker Tiff's voice returned like a distant trumpet: "Sir that's the only kind I deliver!"

The scoutship shot out of the cave like a bullet, Tiffmor's solo attack was on!

The Gazelle zoomed with a mad acceleration toward the opposite canyon wall. In seconds it would crash against the escarpment that was a thousand feet thick. Wuriu Sengu already saw himself smashed in the wreck but when the death moment passed he dared look at Tiffmor.

Tiff laughed but it was angry laughter. Attack!

The air howled and whined like a tortured creature around the Gazelle. Inside the scoutship the power generators screamed and the inertial shock fields revved, shriekingly to higher frequencies. The Gazelle all but grazed the sheer rock wall in upward flight.

Tiffmor emitted a battle yell without being aware of his voice. He pushed the ship to its utmost and still at only 3000 feet altitude hurtled toward the end of the valley where a black wall loomed. The scoutship streaked faster, then curved to the left, the trajectory not quite as planned because insatiable energy consumers in the ship robbed the inertial boosters of peak power. Push the discus upward! It zoomed skyward toward the 12,000-foot escarpment.

Wuriu Sengu could not comprehend how anyone could fly at such a speed and still aim at the target, located on the other side of the mountain and far below, by the lake. After all, Tiffmor had not seen the

alien spacer, either. Yet he exulted, "Gotcha right on my trackers, baby!"

The Gazelle swept above the crest in a hellishly tight Roller coaster glide—a trick Tiff had learned from Rhodan.

Dive!

There was the cylinder ship!

"Fire!" shouted Tifflor.

Sengu pushed the gang-breakers in. All beam weapons of the scoutship fired in unison. A dazzling torrent of destruction shot into the depths and struck the spacer.

"No defence screen!" they both yelled at once, astounded.

As the energy beams consumed the hull of the strange spacer, gradually melting it, there was not yet a sign of counterattack. The Gazelle's reactors howled to maximum to support the horrendous output of the weapons.

No reaction yet?

Tifflor buzzed the alien vessel within 150 feet before turning. Simultaneously, Perry Rhodan observed the reckless pullout and yelled, "Has Tiff lost his sanity?"

The scoutship flipped upward again in scorching speed then spurted vertically downward using full gravity.

"Fire, Sengu!" shouted the lieutenant.

The ground seemed to expand upward to meet them. The ugly bubbling brown spot on the skin of the spacer became a hole, A hole 30 feet in diameter.

"Fire, Sengu!"

The deadly laser-like beams hissed from the funnel-shaped gun ports in the Gazelle. Inside the ship was a roaring of reactors, a clatter of relays, a hissing of high-tension fields.

"Rhodan!" yelled Khrest but heard Perry's counter cry, over his radio-com.

"Well, the boy can fly!"

"Perry, look! Here comes the counter—Fire!"

The cylinder ship now defended itself. Gun covers fell down. Tremendous funnels opened in a sudden flash. Now if any of the powerful rays were even to graze the Gazelle, it would disintegrate into a cloud of gas.

"Let's split!" was all Tifflor could hiss through his teeth but he laughed maliciously. He'd been able to see the cylinder ship's armament display at the last second on his excellent viewscreen.

Now Wuriu was given a lesson in what was meant by 'splitting'. Tiff took evasive action. He turned the Gazelle to its maximum efficiency and response. Under no circumstance must they offer a target to those massive ray batteries or they were lost. Their defence screens would implode under such fire like a pane of glass under a hammer blow.

There was a narrow cleft in the rock wall. Tiff canted the discus on its side. The cleft was about 75 feet wide according to his scanner. The Gazelle was 55 feet thick and that would leave a 10-foot clearance on either extremity if he sailed through it sideways.

"That's still thicker than a postcard!" yelled Tiff to the Japanese but by then they were through the slot, over the pass and back into the safe area once more.

"Tiff..." sighed the 'seer' but could say no more in the effort to wipe away the sweat.

"Guess I didn't have time for sweat," responded Tiff from behind his controls. "But you sure burnt a nice hole in that old bumblebee!"

The loudspeaker bellowed. It was the Chief, announcing the imminent arrival of Pucky. A second later the mouse-beaver appeared in the scoutship's control room. He opened the helmet of his custom-made spacesuit and chirped energetically, "Hi, guys! Where do you keep the firecrackers?"

"In the lower hold below the engine room," answered Tiff. "How are those robots doing?"

Pucky paused loftily on his way to the engine room. He assumed the required grand manner and declared, "How would you expect? After all, you know, I had a part in the action. As a matter of fact, I'm still trying to find one of those tin soldiers that can survive a fall from 15,000 feet. Until now it has been my observation that it has the effect of turning them into a pile of junk! Cheerio!" And with that he teleported to the bomb arsenal, having been a bit too lazy to walk there. Nor did he return.

Wuriu asked about him. Tiff manoeuvred the ship gently between the mountain peaks and grinned knowingly.

"I'll bet he's already laid his egg in the alien spacer and is far away by now. I've seen the little guy operate on many a mission. He always plays the big bird but he isn't like that at all. He knows exactly what he's doing and—"

The Chief radioed in again. "Tiff, report here immediately. Then we'll move in on the *Titan*!"

* * * *

Within the following 60 seconds fate struck a new blow. Tiff brought the Gazelle to the rendezvous point with what seemed to be unnecessary recklessness. "Chief!" he yelled through the radio-com. "The hyper-sensor here is going crazy! Can't keep track of all the hypertransitions happening all at once—and I've got a slew of direct approach flights on the blipper!"

Perry Rhodan jumped on board followed by a worried Khrest. Pucky came in a teleport jump, as yet uninformed, and winked confidently at his colleagues. But his grinning little incisor tooth quickly

disappeared when he heard Perry's grim tone.

Tiff! Put the Gazelle in Hangar 7!"

"You mean—" Tiff swallowed, confused. "In the *Titan* ?"

"Where else—maybe in the alien ship? That piece of macaroni is ready for the disposal. Come on, lets make it!"

It was only a short hop to the *Titan* but a big one in terms of what it involved. A jump to join 700 insanely infected men—a jump into the devil's dance of the bears! The airlock of Hangar 7 was open, which gave mute testimony to the early inception of the plague of madness among the crew. The *Gazelle* sat down without a shock. Tiff cut down all power banks and controls to zero, then looked questioningly at Rhodan. Perry drew his paralysis gun, significantly.

"We have to use these to open our way into the Command Centre," he said, reluctantly, "It's too late for the hypno-guns. But here is a strict order: all spacesuits will be kept *closed* ! If I see any one of you opening a helmet, I'll hit you with a paralyser—is that clear? We don't know what time is left to get to the Command Centre. That depends on those incoming spacers."

"But the robots!" protested Khrest. "They are still fighting!"

"So? That's what they were built for!"

Rhodan was the first to leave the *Gazelle*.

* * * *

Pucky and 4 men had locked themselves inside the Command Centre. They hoped to forget what it had cost them to get this far. No one spoke. Their task was obvious.

The *Titan* was to be started up! Rhodan, Khrest, Tiff and Sengu—and of course Pucky—were going to attempt to fire up the mighty spherical spacer that was almost a mile in diameter.

5 instead of 1500 men

It was more than a deed of desperation. It was the unheard of—premeditated lunacy! Yet no one uttered a word.

The *Titan*'s big hyper-sensors reported new transitions. They materialized in fleet-unit groupings out of hyperspace, each jump being exactly calculated.

"The first ones will be here in 20 minutes," Tiff reported from the hyper-sensor indicators.

Rhodan's acknowledgement was almost imperceptible. He had to coordinate thousands of details; he had to lift the great bird!

"Khrest! Give me your propulsion units—6, 9 and 12! Why don't they sock in?"

"Power generators!" shouted Khrest.

"Reactors Alpha and Beta up!" chirped Pucky. "Second set waiting on turbine RPM level—soon!"

Tiff dashed from his tracking gear to help Pucky.

Every vital control of the mile-wide sphere was gang-tied into emergency and manual-override mode. Wuriu Sengu felt lost in this vast, surrealistic chamber that bristled with a bewildering jungle of indicators and controls. Perry rushed past him to the inertial absorption field banks. He didn't curse and his face seemed relaxed but he was tense inside. He clamped bar multiples of switches together and shot them all home.

"Perry! All the power reactors are revved up to go!" called Pucky—thus proving again his amazing abilities.

The thunder of all idling engines was menacing. A fine vibration began to build in the giant sphere.

"Tiff! Over here!" yelled Rhodan. "Never mind the hypersensor—we know they're coming! Get into the copilot's seat"

The young lieutenant obeyed instantly, with no time to savour the honour of co-ordinating with his Chief.

"Keep it cool, Tiff," Rhodan encouraged in low tones. He was demonstrating again how he could inspire others to greatest daring, in spite of his own anxieties. He had a knack of casting his spell over everyone.

Controls—controls—antigrav fields: clear—manual interlocks: green—all ship's apertures: safetied. Tiff was working 10 things at a time and missing nothing.

"Perry, the Honos!" Khrest's shout had to compete with the bedlam of awakened machinery, the growl of transformer banks, the oscillating yowl of energy coils, the high song of field generators.

The videoscreens showed the Approved Ones still sitting between the *Titan*'s struts, still squatting there apathetically with their dull expressions.

"Sorry—" Perry was occupied with an intricate control switching sequence. Then he gave an order: "Pucky—get the Honos out of the way. Make sure it's far enough!"

Pucky had no trouble in plucking the Honos out from under the *Titan*'s giant shadow. He simply tossed them to the other side of the lake—of course with gentle landings. "Mission accomplished, Perry!" he said within moments.

Busy as they were, all 4 men did a double take, staring at him. He met their gaze with casual ease,

"Well," he chirped, I had to make it fast. But they've landed over there without a bump. I'd say we're ready to let 'er rip!"

With this there was no argument.

"Lift-off!" ordered Perry Rhodan.

Banks of control keys seemed untenanted; empty seats faced glowing, unoccupied consoles. Beyond the locked steel doors of the Command Central, 700 madmen milled about, staggering from deck to deck in all sections of the spacer.

Rhodan used both hands on the master gang-bar that simultaneously fired all propulsion units and energized the giant defence screens around the ship.

"There goes the cylinder ship!" yelled Sengu.

In the big panoramic observation screen the alien ship was seen to disintegrate in the air, the fragments drifting away like fallen dead leaves.

"Are those glowing dots what's left of the robots?" somebody asked. But no one replied.

Tiff shouted: "The 'tronicon is equalizing the operation, Perry!" Shouting was necessary to be heard above the hellish decibel bombardment of all equipment in full operation and now at last being synchronized by the automatic computer control. All sequence commits had been completed.

The lift-off attempt with only 4 men was insanity. The conclusion seemed foregone. There *wasn't* any lift-off!

"What's gone wrong?"

Why didn't the *Titan* lift up?

Then the signal light flashed for synchronous contact. Green!

A vast hollow roaring superimposed itself over all other sounds and became a deafening voice of thunder. The *Titan* lifted off.

They were on their way!

* * * *

They soared into outer space after all!

The giant spherical spacer hurtled outward at 50% speed, surrounded by its mighty defence screens but weaponless because no extra hands were available to man the firing positions. Those in charge were swamped as even the most sophisticated of computerized systems requires human assistance.

But the automatic tracking scanners were at work. Rhodan had found the extra split-second necessary to turn them on. Khrest emitted a groan of despair when he saw the horde of cylindrical spacers approaching.

Rhodan laughed. "There are more to come yet! That's only the beginning! They knew what pickings were waiting for them on Honor!"

The first attack came from the biggest of the approaching spacers: 6 direct hits shook the *Titan*. But the monster shook it off like water from a wet kog (canine-like Venusian creature) and kept straight on its course. Another ship would have been pulverized by this assault but the *Titan*'s gigantic multiple-laminated defence hardly fluoresced under the energy absorption.

"Attacking units at 43 X, Y 70!" barked Tiff.

In a few minutes it became futile to report the new attack positions. They came from all directions at once. An inferno of energy beams bombarded the *Titan*'s shielding without cessation. The screen fields had twice shown a peak of 80% capacity but they held.

"We won't be able to take many more!" moaned Khrest and then covered his face as 8 more hits boomed against the shields, converting surrounding space into an orgy of light.

Simultaneously the automatic tracking scanners revealed a new reading of still more transitions, 10 LIMS distant.

"Galactic gods!" shouted Khrest. "There are another 80 ships! Where are they coming from?"

"From hell," said Rhodan sarcastically. "Tiff, send a hyperspace-gram to Earth, pulse-coded as usual. Ask where the devil the *Ganymede* got stuck. If she's already en route, call Freyt directly. And while you're at it, don't forget to yell for help!"

Was this the end? Nobody dared even mention a hyper transit jump. With only 4 men to execute the complex fifth-dimensional manoeuvre, it was an impossibility.

The mouse-beaver took his leave from Perry. "These fireworks are getting to me, Boss. If you don't mind, I think I'll start some house-cleaning inside the ship—okay?"

The *Titan* vibrated from heavy hits coming from a new sector. Again from cylindrical spacers.

"Those must all be robot ships!" commented Khrest.

Rhodan nodded. Pucky took this for an answer to his request. He disappeared.

What Pucky meant by house cleaning was a separation of humans from their deadly pets. This required use of the paralysis weapon. It 'got to him' much more than the fireworks outside, to have to gun down his buddy, Bell, and his adored little Hannibal—but Bell had to be saved.

Tiffloor had made immediate contact with the Earth. Terrania reported: "*Ganymede* en route..."

But the *Ganymede* itself cut into the communications. "What's going on out there?" Col. Freyt wanted to know.

Tiff tried to retain his calm as he hypered back: "Immediate help requested. Total crew dying on board. Lt. Pucky and 4 of us under fleet-size attacks, cylindrical spacers. All physicians on standby. Access *Titan* spacesuits only—contamination. This is May Day. SOS! Tiffloor."

* * * *

Emergency alarms sounded through the *Ganymede* .

Col. Freyt announced the reason for it over the PA system, then replayed a taped voice conversation of Tiff's hypergram for staff technical analysis.

The *Ganymede* reached Star Cluster M-13 in 3 transitions. Another jump transported it into the Thatrel System. All gun turrets of the ship were in ready position. All covers were removed from the firing positions and determined gunners swung in their trigger cradles. Perry Rhodan had sent an SOS! No one could imagine what situation had forced the Chief to such an action.

"I'll lay you odds," said the gunner at beam-station 25 to his mate, who handled the sighting gyros, "it sure must be some special kind of hell!"

At the same moment, Col. Freyt's chief tracking-officer picked up an unbelievably large number of spacers ahead. And with the flak of bogey blips came the co-ordinates.

"Thank God—finally!" exclaimed Freyt.

The gigantic *Ganymede* raced into the thick of the space battle. There was obviously no reaction on the part of any of the cylindrical spacers to the emergence of the superior-class battleship.

"Robot ships!" Freyt concluded. His square features hardened. He issued permission to open full fire with all weapons.

"There's the *Titan* !" came a general cry from gunner crews and screen operators.

At that moment the *Titan* was engulfed in a holocaust. A blinding coruscation of pyrotechnics traced deadly fingers of ravening energy over the defence screens of the magnificent Arkonide colossus. It looked like a miniature nova. The *Ganymede*'s crew breathed sighs of relief, then cheered as the *Titan*'s spherical bulk reappeared from the bath of flames, unscathed but dark as an eclipsing moon against the battle-streaked battleground of space.

The power reactors of the *Ganymede* howled. The funnel-shaped ends of the cannon barrels spit death into the cylinder ships. The disintegrating spacers dotted the void with gas clouds. Freyt hit them pitilessly with all his concentrated power. It was a mystery to everyone why the magnificent *Titan* persisted in mere evasive manoeuvres under incessant fire, without once opening up with its giant guns.

The battle of the *Ganymede* against the robot spacers lasted 8 hours. Its 2500-foot hull made it a giant among the others, none of which was longer than 600 feet.

"Good Lord!" Freyt fumed at the videoscreens in his command centre. "Do we have to convert every last one of them into a ruptured sun ball before they quit!?"

He saw 3 more cylindrical ships peel away out of sector Green-28, coming at him in a direct line of attack. Then suddenly they changed their course and turned away.

Half an hour later the space around the *Titan* and the *Ganymede* was empty. The last robot ship, its stern

damaged, lumbered with one-tenth the speed of light into deep space. A certain radio impulse must have directed the rest of the robot fleet to return.

The battle was finished but now a different battle started.

The physicians and 800 spaceship specialists stood ready to enter the *Titan*. The physicians entered first.

They examined Thora, Bell and Sgt. Rous. Rhodan, Khrest, Tiff, Sengu and Pucky waited for hours for the result. The long wait diminished their hopes that the terrestrial physicians could find any clue to the salvation of the infected 700.

Suddenly Pucky broke the silence. "Perry, after I cleaned up the ship with the paralysers, I thought it might be an idea to check up on the Mooffs. But the Mooffs have disappeared! Even the pressure containers they were in are gone. Nobody can tell me there isn't any connection between the Mooffs and the nonues! Mooffs and Hono bears are being used by the same outfit—those hidden, Unknown Ones who've been bugging us. I almost feel sorry for the little stinkers—or do you want them kept alive?"

"Yes, a few of them," said Perry. "But why didn't you tell me the minute you knew the Mooffs were gone? Do you know which of our men released them?"

The medical commission interrupted with a report. The doctors called the disease hyper-euphoria or hallucinogenic rapture, generated by a toxic stimulant emitted by the mini-bears. "The gaseous drug toxicant gradually destroys the ganglionic cells of the central nervous system. It can't be arrested by any of the Arkonide remedies or technologies that we know of. How long the infected patients can live we simply don't know. We recommend, however, that you get rid of the animals immediately, before the men of the *Ganymede* enter the ship."

Perry Rhodan could only nod his agreement, unable to speak. In his stead, Khrest instructed the chief physician. "Take crews in spacesuits into the quarantined area and exterminate the poor contaminated creatures. Just isolate 3 specimens for analysis."

Then they were alone in the huge command central.

Perry Rhodan's gaze was drawn to the panob screen and he stared into deep space. Actually, he looked far deeper yet—his troubled gaze turned inward. His last hope seemed buried. An unknown enemy had destroyed him by a hair's breadth. When would the next blow fall? From what direction?

When would his 700 afflicted men die?

Khrest almost lost his composure as Perry suddenly smacked his fist in his palm and hurled a de, at the Universe: "*I won't have it!*"

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

SOS: Spaceship Titan

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

GOD TREK!

Or God Trap?

The answer, in more ways than one, may lie in the lap of the 'Gods' of Honour.

Honour is a world of difficulties.

The 'Approved People' constitute a puzzle.

Thenonues are a proven menace.

Artificially induced happiness becomes extremely dangerous.

Off bidding somewhere in the arras, an uncertain quantity, are the... Aras.

Very much on scene & en masse is a stinging swarm of remote-controlled *metal* 'insects', a grave danger to Perry and his people.

Watch out! Look sharp! Take care! And—

BEWARE THE MICROBOTS

by

Kurt Mahr