

The Arkonide Empire – overstretched and undermanned, but still capable of reducing the entire solar system to a radioactive cloud.

This, the Positronicon will do – if the Zarlt of Zalit reveals the Earth's co-ordinates.

But the Mooffs control the mind of the Zarlt – so who controls the Mooffs?

Perry Rhodan must find out. But first he must become...

THE GIANT'S PARTNER

1/ PLOT PERILOUS

A ROBOT RULER!

Regal didn't like the idea of being ruled by a machine—but it was an absolute certainty that a positronic brain was preferable to the dictatorship of a Zarlt who called himself Demesor.

And that was why the Zarlt of Zalit had to die.

Rogal stood absolutely still in the darkness and listened. Complete silence. Nothing moved. He must have been mistaken about the imaginary sound.

The stone walls exuded a cold dampness that hung heavy in his chest. The air was foul and stifling. Somewhere could be heard the monotonous dripping of water into a puddle.

Many passages led into the palace of the Zarlt, the tyrant of Zalit, 4th planet of the giant red sun Voga, less than 3 light-years from Arkon. This subterranean tunnel was one of the entrance ways but known only to a few of the confidants of Zalit's rightful ruler—who had been murdered many weeks before.

Rogal checked his belt to reassure himself that his raygun still rested firmly there, then felt his way further along the passageway. He didn't dare make a light now, even though the palace guard probably was not aware of the secret egress. If the former bodyguard of the dead Zarlt Elton had not lied, this corridor led directly into the sleeping chamber of Zarlt Demesor, who had risen from spacefleet officer to absolute ruler of Zalit.

Rogal instinctively clenched his fists as he thought of the dictator. The despot's name was the embodiment of double treason: first he had ordered the previous Zarl't's assassination and second he had conceived a plan to revolt against the Arkonide Empire, over which he was Vice-Imperator. Granted, his vice-imperatorship was in name only, but the robotic rulership of the giant Brain could only be a temporary state of affairs, certainly not justification for betrayal of the Empire.

Following his reflective pause, Rogal crept on further. Yes, he thought, what he had in mind was not a crime but an act of justice, a bold stroke which would free his world from the dictatorship of a power-mad tyrant.

Suddenly... muffled footsteps above. Receding... hesitating a moment... returning. Halting directly overhead. Rogal had the uncanny feeling that someone was looking down at him straight through the stone ceiling.

A cold shudder ran down his back; terror clutched his heart in a painful grip. Then—grateful relief:*what tricks the imagination can play!* Naturally the other person could not see him... it was purest chance that a guard happened to be on patrol above the passage.

Rogal moved forward again and sighed as his groping hands found a smooth obstruction. —The door?

The obstruction was made of wood, just as the bodyguard had described. Rogal's fingers searched till they found the small knob, then hesitated. What lay behind the door? Someone waiting there to apprehend him, warned by that mysterious instinct which often prolongs the lives of many tyrants? Or did the secret passage only continue to the spiral stairs between the walls, leading upward?

He pressed an anxious ear against the wooden surface and listened intently, eyes tight shut. —No sound.

Slowly he turned the knob. The door opened. It remained dark. He stepped through and left the door ajar. He knew that from this side there was no possibility of opening the door. Under no circumstance could he close it if he didn't want to rob himself of the only escape route. Cautiously he groped farther until his feet encountered the first step of the stairs. He breathed a sigh of relief.*So the bodyguard had told the truth.* Now there were exactly 368 steps to the sleeping chamber of Demesor.

He paused at step 200 to take a breather. This was of course not a true spiral stairway but rather more like a rising zig-zag passageway with stairs. Like all buildings on Zalit, the Zarl't's palace had been erected in the form of a funnel. The stem of the funnel comprised a circular area having a diameter of about 150 feet. From there the arena-like terraces rose outward and upward at a 45° angle, reaching a height of some 500 feet. At the upper extremity the diameter was about 750 feet. The individual circular levels on the funnel's interior had floor-to-ceiling windows. The Zalite architecture came from Arkon in keeping with the fact that the Zalites themselves were descendants of the Arkonides.

For the first time Rogal dared to turn on his flashlight for a moment to get his bearings. His reddish-brown skin resembled that of an American Indian on Earth. His thick mane of hair reflected coppery tones. In his right hand was the strangely formed weapon which was to end the life of the Zarl't. The stairs led farther upwards. He heard again the sound somewhere of evenly paced footsteps, which would recede, come closer, then grow fainter again. The palace must be swarming with guards. Like all dictators, Demesor was suspicious.

Rogal smiled grimly and turned off his light. The darkness seemed to double its intensity. His hand searched for the wall and then he continued on his way. It was clear to him that he was placing his life on

the line: the Zarlt would not spare him if he caught him. He also knew that before he died they would try to get everything out of him they could. They would become aware that he possessed friends, friends who could become dangerous to the State. Especially they might be interested in learning the identity of the chief of the underground resistance movement. Rogal was determined that he would take his own life before they would have the opportunity to question him completely.

He came to the last step. It ended at a cold, smooth wall of stone. Once more Rogal took the risk of lighting his pocket lamp. The depression he had been told to look for was so small that he would never have been able to discover it through blind searching. The first pressure would open a narrow view-slit. The second pressure would open the secret door that would give him access to the tyrant's bedroom.

The lamp went out. Rogal had seen enough. He waited until his eyes had again accustomed themselves to the darkness. Then he pressed a finger into the small depression. A barely audible humming was heard. A weak ray of light struck his eyes. Cautiously he pressed his right eye to the view-slot.

He looked into a large room that was dimly illuminated by indirect lighting in the ceiling. Directly opposite him was a wide bed, in which lay a man. He lay under warm covers which revealed only his head. The contours of his body were clearly recognizable.

The Zarlt, Demesor.

Rogal had seen his face often enough in the holo-films. Only too well did he know the hard, yet again so friendly features of the tyrant. There, then, lay the man who would be traitor to Zalit and the Empire, asleep and unsuspecting. In this moment Rogal was assailed by a sense of being a traitor himself but he overcame this moralizing.

Was it actually murder, to free an entire world of a man who threatened to bring it only misfortune and war? Wasn't one dead man better than many millions? One could not use the recourses of Law to get at the dictator, so did anything remain other than to resort to violent means to procure again a respect for justice?

Rogal gripped his weapon and pressed again.

The secret door slid silently into the hollow wall, giving free entrance. Rogal knew that a certain built-in timing device would close the door again in two minutes. It was a precautionary measure to prevent unauthorized persons from discovering the secret door through which one could leave the palace unobserved or enter it.

Demesor lay defenceless before him, not 15 feet away. Rogal still hesitated. He took three, four steps, lifted the weapon and aimed at the sleeper. The dim light of the lamps was sufficient for making a good identification of the Zarlt's features. *How restfully this man slept, who had on his conscience the death of the rightful Ruler.* One could almost imagine that he did not even breathe.

Already a minute had passed.

The index finger touched the trigger and drew it back.

A narrow, greenish ray of energy shot with the speed of light to the sleeper's face and covered it with a fiery corona of lightning flashes. To Rogal's horror, he saw that the face began to melt. It flowed completely apart and ran in glowing rivulets into the pillows, sizzled and crackled through the covers and dropped heavily onto the floor.

The Zarlt was *melting* ...!

Rogal stared at the incomprehensible sight before him. His hand began to tremble. The beam of energy wandered aimlessly about the room, set the window curtains on fire and finally flickered out.

On one side of the room, a door burst open. Three or four men stormed into the bedroom, charged the assassin and tore his weapon from him. Rogal did not defend himself. Still uncomprehendingly, he stared at the Zarlt, whom he had killed. What happened to him now seemed meaningless, if he had only set Zalit free.

But the Zarlt had certainly died strangely...

Rough hands forced his arms behind him. With one last look toward the wall, Rogal saw the secret door close soundlessly. At least the guards did not know how he had gotten into this room. They could beat their brains out trying to find out.

He allowed himself to be led out of the sleeping chamber without resistance. He wondered briefly that no one looked at the dead man. Were the guards so indifferent to the death of their tyrant? They shoved him through an adjacent room and then into the broad, circular corridor.

Somewhere an alarm system buzzed. Doors were pulled open and curious faces stared seconds long at the group hurrying past. Then the doors closed again. It was never good for a person to see too much. The buzzing died out.

Rogal's four captors stopped at a certain door. One of them knocked. A voice answered sullenly and then the door opened. A man stepped into the corridor and regarded the strange group and their prisoner with sleep-swollen eyes.

Rogal felt as if an iron hand had gripped his heart.

He stared into a pair of eyes that turned suddenly cold and pitiless—the eyes of Zarlt Demesor...

* * * *

"He should have been back before now, if everything went well." The voice sounded at once worried and yet tinged with a feeble ray of hope. It belonged to an elderly man who sat in a comfortable chair in front of an electropyro and warmed his feet. Five other Zalites were present, all of whom gave evidence of having spent a sleepless night.

"He could be behind schedule, Zernif," said one of them consolingly. "Maybe he has to wait before he can operate. There are so many possibilities that we're not able to reckon with..."

"And if the worst of them happens? If the attempt goes awry and Rogal is captured? What then? If he doesn't have a chance to kill himself—if he betrays us?"

The other shook his head. "Rogal is one of our best men. He is always cautious and works according to

plan. He would never place himself in unnecessary danger."

* * * *

Old Zernif, former commanding officer of the Zalite spacefleet and Admiral to the dead Zarl, waved his hand uncertainly. "The time is up. It's long past midnight. Rogal didn't make it back. The precautionary measures we discussed must now be faced. If we are discovered in our rendezvous here, Zalit is lost. Then even the Strangers will not be able to help us."

The Strangers—!

For a brief moment the rebels recalled to mind the Strangers who had stolen an Arkonide battleship and come to their world. They had placed themselves in contact with Zarl and appeared to be mixed up in his plans. The truth was, however—and Rogal especially had claimed this—they did not approve of the Zarl's traitorous intentions.

"One way or another, we should get out of here, whether or not Rogal has succeeded. If Demesor escapes the assassination attempt, it'll be bad for us. He has no mercy and will kill us all."

"If he can find us!" said Zernif with a meaningful nod. He stroked his copper-coloured beard, which gave him a venerable appearance. "But if they force Rogal to confess, that could easily happen."

"Rogal would die first!"

"And if he doesn't have time to die?"

Silence.

Admiral Zernif sighed. "We will wait another half hour, then we will disappear. If Rogal still makes it, he will know where to find us."

The prescribed half-hour ran out without any sign of Rogal.

The leaders of the resistance movement prepared to disband. They knew that the secret passage into the palace now had little value for them. They would have to disappear if they did not want to be taken here by surprise by the henchmen of the Zarl. They took their weapons, both light and heavy calibre ray-beamers of Arkonide design, and set the time fuse on the high-explosive bomb which would blast away the old and deserted building—and along with it the exit of the secret passage.

Suddenly a noise was heard coming from somewhere in the wall. Someone groped uncertainly through rubble and tapped at certain places against the walls. Zernif listened. At first his startled eyes reflected joy and hope but now they narrowed in suspicion.

"That's Rogal!" said someone happily. "He'd better hurry. The bomb goes off in 30 minutes."

"*Perhaps* it is Rogal," murmured Admiral Zernif, while concealing the shakiness of his voice. "Why doesn't he give the pre-arranged signal?"

No one answered him.

If the person creeping toward them were indeed Rogal, then he would give the recognition signal—3 consecutive knocks on the wall before opening the secret door. If the door opened without this signal, then it could not be Rogal who approached their hiding place.

The men glanced silently at each other. Their hands reached automatically for their weapons and drew them. Swift fingers released the safety locks. Six gun muzzles were aimed at the spot in the wall where the door was concealed.

No sound eluded their suddenly attentive ears now. A number of men had to be gathered behind the stone wall: the foot shuffling revealed this. Now it was certain that Rogal's attempt had met with disaster. Worse yet, the Zarl't's executioners had discovered the secret passage. Whether this was Rogal's fault or not remained to be seen.

Zernif whispered, "Conceal yourselves so that they don't see us. First we have to know how many they are. We will open fire only when they have all come out of the passage. Do you understand?"

The 5 men nodded. They darted behind empty boxes and mouldy pieces of furniture. The electropyro had already cooled off but a trace of its pleasant warmth still lingered in the room. Nevertheless, the conspirators began to shiver.

The time-fuse ticked away in the background: 20 minutes to go, then this whole place would be blasted to fragments. In the wall before them there was a clicking sound and then it began to open. One part of the wall slid to the right, the other to the left. A figure became visible.

Rogal!

He gazed with strangely empty and expressionless eyes into the room and appeared to see nothing. Behind him, men in colourful uniforms appeared with cocked rayguns in their hands. They shoved Rogal into the room and when nothing happened they followed him. All together there were 12 palace guards, inclusive of 2 members of the Zarl't's feared secret police.

Adm. Zernif recognized them at once and many of the others as well. He aimed his weapon at the 2 secret police officers and shouted, "For freedom and the Empire!"

He fired.

His 5 companions had only waited for his command. Without voicing a challenge, they sprang from cover and opened fire on the 12 soldiers of the Zarl't. One of them hurried forward a few steps in spite of the danger and pulled Rogal out of the line of fire. Without a glance behind him, he shoved Rogal to the ground, and only then did he turn to again face the enemy.

60 seconds later it was all over. The 12 palace guards were dead, with 2 of the rebels fallen. Zernif had picked up a glancing shot in the arm, which did not prevent him from appearing quite satisfied. But there was yet no reason for satisfaction.

Rogal still lay where he had fallen. He looked around him uncomprehendingly. One look into his strangely staring and expressionless eyes convinced Zernif that he had not consciously betrayed them. Something had happened to him. If his hunch was confirmed, then Rogal was as good as dead—or in

another sense: He'd be better off dead!

Now there was no time to waste.

In 15 minutes the bomb would detonate, leaving not a trace of the old building.

"Take care of Rogal, we have to take him with us. Perhaps we can learn something from him. We have to hurry."

Outside the night was dark. In the distance gleamed the lights of Tagnor, the capital city of Zalit, comprising 30 million inhabitants. Only a few steps behind the bushes in the park and then they clambered into their hidden vehicle. The engine started humming. A few curves ahead and they would reach the arterial road. The tempo increased.

Suddenly a giant jet of flame shot into the dark sky, a blast of concussion swept over the parkland and the deafening report of the explosion followed.

The secret passage to the palace of the Zarlt was no more.

2/ RHODAN AND THE REGENT

The spaceport of Tagnor was more than 12 miles wide. This seemed large but was actually small when one considered the unimaginable load of traffic that dominated the area. Almost every minute, freighters, passenger liners and fighting ships and cruisers of the Zalite fleet were taking off or landing. It all gave the impression of an overloaded beehive.

At least that was the opinion of Reginald Bell. His bulky figure lounged in a fragile-looking seat before the control console of the panoramic indicator screens, by means of which he could scan all the goings-on of the spaceport. Now and then a satisfied grin spread over his broad features, and more than anything else his smoothed down stubbly hair was an indicator that this was no occasion for alarm.

He was not alone in the mammoth control central of the *Titan*, as they had named the stolen battleship. Measuring approximately one mile in diameter, it was the largest known spacesphere in the universe, the latest product of Arkonide technology.

Perry Rhodan's almost ascetic figure leaned against the navigation console and he appeared to feel at ease in this position. His lean face revealed a mixture of suspense and serenity. It was as if all troubles had fallen away from him, or at least as if none of them were plaguing him just now—because there were more than enough to go around.

"That, if I am permitted to make the observation, is an all-out fleet deployment," said Bell musingly, as though indifferent to it all. But an inner concern was in his voice.

Rhodan nodded casually. "You named it, my friend," he murmured. "Question is, under whose orders—the robot brain on Arkon or the Zarlt."

Bell refrained from answering, because he couldn't. He resumed scanning with the screens and dedicated himself to the assigned task.

The *Titan* lay on the border of the spaceport, close to the highway leading to Tagnor. The bottom half of the mighty sphere rested in a vacated hangar, which had been placed zealously at their disposal by the Zarlt. Of course, not without ulterior motives: he still kept on hoping that Rhodan would reveal to him the secret of how he had broken through the defence ring of the Arkon System.

He had been hoping this already for several weeks without any results and finally his patience seemed to be exhausted. Rhodan was waiting calmly for the precise moment when the Zarlt would drop his mask.

The door opened and in waddled a king-size Mickey Mouse with a rusty brown pelt. It was perhaps 3 feet long, had large ears, a pointed snout and a broad, flat beaver tail. In its brown eyes sparkled a trace of devilry.

The curious creature squeaked "Hello!" in purest Intercosmo and made itself comfortable on a couch. It watched Bell pensively for awhile but he studiously ignored it, concentrating on his videoscreens. Eventually it sighed resignedly and turned to Rhodan to complete the announcement it had started to make. "More Mooffs have arrived."

This attracted Rhodan's attention. "Who's bringing them in?"

"Ships of the Zarlt's fleet but I found out that they are not the ones who are responsible for the actual transport. They're trans-shipping cargo from alien ships out on the edge of the System."

"Aha!" Rhodan said. "I was afraid of that. The unknown Masters haven't given up yet."

"Do you want Tama and me to continue our mission?"

Rhodan nodded briefly. In his opinion it was a senseless massacre if more Mooffs continued to be brought to this world as replacements; but on the other hand the situation would become dangerous if the Mooffs gained the upper hand. It was at least necessary to keep their number from growing any larger.

The Mooffs—!

They represented the basic problem. Someone who remained shrewdly in the background was causing the telepathically endowed methane-breathers to be brought to Zalit, already packed in appropriate glass pressure chambers, in which the 5-foot jellyfish creatures crouched. In addition to telepathy, they commanded a certain suggestive faculty, although by Earthly standards somewhat weak. In spite of this they had succeeded in bringing the Zarlt and the ruling echelons of Zalit under their influence—which they had been commissioned to do. The Zarlt was thus meant to conquer the Arkonide Empire for an unknown race of beings—this much Rhodan had learned already but not a thing more.

Nevertheless it was enough to burden him with a weighty decision.

The mighty galactic empire of the Arkonides was not ruled by humans but by the largest positronic brain of the known universe. Quite aside from the fact that it's difficult to show sympathy for a machine, the robot Regent of Arkon had not treated Rhodan very well. He pursued him and regarded him as a sort of Public Enemy #1. The Arkonides themselves, decadent and indolent bon vivants, concerned themselves very little with happenings within the Empire. They relinquished all responsibility to the robot brain and were convinced that it ruled as they would rule. There was actually some sense to this and yet Rhodan

could not quite buy the idea that hundreds of intelligent races were dependent on the logical decisions of a robot.

For these reasons it had seemed at first reasonable to him that the Zarlt of Zalit should seek to destroy the Brain and take over the government of the Empire himself. But then the Mooffs had come upon the scene. At first it was believed that they were the principal string-pullers behind the events. They dominated the Zalites' minds and provoked them to revolution against Arkon. And then even that deduction proved to be erroneous. The Mooffs functioned under the orders, or pressure of unknown entities, who intended by this means to harvest the fruits of revolt. Aside from all this, it was revealed that the Zarlt was an assassin and a tyrant who would have become a criminal even without any suggestive assistance from the Mooffs.

Rhodan now perceived his opportunity to prove to the robot brain of Arkon that he stood on the side of the Empire and did not intend to add to his troubles. He had arrived at this point in his deliberations when Bell broke the silence.

"The communications centre is buzzing, Perry. You want to look-see or should I go...?"

"Thanks. You stick with the screens. I'm on my way."

The communications centre was in an adjacent section.

"What's up?"

One of the Com officers handed Rhodan a dispatch. "A message from Major Deringhouse. Hyperspace transmission."

Major Deringhouse! Rhodan took the dispatch without reading it immediately. He returned to the command centre, where Bell looked at him expectantly. Deringhouse commanded the spacefleet of Earth and stood in battle readiness. Nevertheless, the robot brain could have learned from the Springers the planet of Rhodan's origin. And if this were the case, the Earth would be in the greatest danger. A single robot ship using Arkonide gravitation bombs—could convert the Solar System into a radioactive cloud.

Then again, the Earth was 34,000 light-years away...

Against the danger of source detection, Deringhouse had sent the hyperspace message from an arbitrary point in the Milky Way.

Bell asked, "Well?"

Rhodan looked at the dispatch. He read it aloud: "To Perry Rhodan, Arkon Sector. Re your inquiry Springer leak. Venusian positronic brain fed all available data. Computation gives 99.08% certainty Springers have not revealed Earth position to Arkon. Lots of luck. Here all quiet and set. Deringhouse."

Bell gave an audible sigh of relief. "So the good old Earth is still with us! A lot of times you can forget that she's an eternity away. Light takes 34,000 years to get from here to there."

Rhodan interrupted him. "No lectures just now, please. That message is no guarantee Earth's out of danger indefinitely. On the contrary! The robot brain on Arkon is searching for us. If the Zarlt gets tired of our game, he can reveal our location. So in one stroke he can demonstrate his loyalty to the Brain and make it easier for him to outsmart it later."

"Why don't we beat him to the punch," suggested Bell. He grinned confidently. "Let's tip the Zarl't's hand. Then the robot brain will be our friend and maybe it'll make us a present of this stolen ship."

"I can't see it quite your way but something like it," admitted Rhodan. "But don't let's forget that the Mooffs are behind the Zarl't and behind the Mooffs again are hiding some unknown entities. To find the latter is our true mission." He paused for a few instants but before Bell could manage to put in a word, Rhodan continued: "In my opinion it will be best to solve this task step by step. And the first step is: the Zarl't! We should approach this problem from the inside, though. John Marshall has established contact with the leader of the underground movement, a former admiral named Zernif. We'll lend him our support in his plans."

"And what are those plans?"

"To avenge the murder of the old Zarl't and to install his rightful successor."

Bell glanced up. "Does the new Zarl't acknowledge the rule of the robot brain over the Arkonide Empire?"

"Yes, he does, because there is no better solution available at present. The Arkonides are no longer capable of ruling an empire with a diameter of nearly 230 light-years."

"That means we'll be helping the Brain?"

Rhodan stared at the wall. "Yes." He spoke softly and with an undertone of resignation.

* * * *

Perry Rhodan's Mutant Corps constituted the greatest mental power bloc in the known sector of the Milky Way's margin. Through the constant pollution of Earth's atmosphere in the past decades considerable changes had been caused in the brain structure of some people who had been born during and after that time. These changes made them mutants. Whether these acquired traits were inheritable had not yet been determined.

The mutants were of 2 types: positive and negative. It depended on the political use made of their special talents which group they fell into: all the members of Rhodan's Mutant Corps, naturally, were of the positive variety, numbering among them telepaths, radiopaths, teleporters, seers, hypno-suggestors, frequency detectors and telekins. One of the mutants was even capable of releasing atomic explosions over great distances by the sheer power of his will.

The telepath John Marshall was the official head of the Mutant Corps. Originally a native of Australia and now a citizen of the New Power, he had always been a champion of the unification of Earth. Now since this goal had been achieved and Earth was no longer divided by squabbling factions, Marshall accompanied Rhodan on his flight to Arkon.

Marshall's Mutant Corp had gone with him. Pucky, the little mouse-beaver, was of course a member of this elite organization. He was not only a telepath but a telekin and teleporter. These manifold

parapsychological talents automatically caused Pucky to be regarded as a universal genius, a fact of which he was inordinately proud. Despite this little 'human' weakness (he prided himself on being an animal) everybody was very fond of the little guy whom Rhodan had found on the Planet of the Dying Sun.

Pucky and Tama Yokida, the Japanese Telekin, were presently engaged in an important task: to eliminate the dangerous Mooffs whose suggestive powers exerted a detrimental influence on the Zalites. The two mutants combined their telekinetic talents to alter the molecular structure of the pressure chambers in which the Mooffs were housed. They concentrated their efforts on a single spot which caused a leak through which the life-supporting methane atmosphere escaped, resulting in death for the Mooffs.

The daily alarm drills had come to an end. Rhodan was satisfied that each member of his crew was sufficiently familiar with the giant ship to reach any place needed for a particular purpose at optimum speed—no small feat considering the volume of a mile-wide hollow sphere.

The two Arkonides Thora and Khrest were with Rhodan in the command centre. The tall Arkonide white-haired woman with the golden eyes was quietly sitting in her armchair, her gaze steadily fixed on Perry Rhodan. Khrest was standing near Thora's chair. He, too, was an albino type, like the rest of his race. Nothing seemed to unite him any longer with his own people ever since his clan had been deposed from its position as the ruling class. For the past 6 years the robot brain had assumed the reign over the Empire—and Emperor Orcast XXI was nothing but a puppet.

13 years ago, Thora and Khrest had crash-landed on Terra's moon and had placed in Rhodan's hands the means needed to make Earth a cosmic power factor.

Rhodan came directly to the point. "The Zarlt has finally dropped his mask. I have just learned that though he has not revealed our exact position to the robot brain, he has however indicated in his message to Arkon that his spacefleet has succeeded in tracking down our location. He has requested reinforcements in the form of robot-guided battleships. This was followed by a radioed warning directed at us, forbidding us to take off from here."

"All this seems to make no sense to me," remarked Khrest. "Why doesn't he simply tell the Brain where we are?"

Rhodan smiled. "Just try and put yourself in Demesor's shoes, then you won't have any trouble figuring this out. Demesor wants to outwit the robot brain in order to seize power himself. The *Titan* is Arkon's mightiest ship but it is in our possession. What profit will Demesor derive if the Brain takes the *Titan* away from us? That's why he is requesting reinforcements, so that he can capture the *Titan* for himself. Next he probably intends to push forward to Arkon for he assumes, after all, that we penetrated the fortress barrier only with the help of the *Titan*. And how could he possibly know the truth: that we accomplished this feat only thanks to the tele-transmitter aboard the *Ganymede*?"

"Of course, that's it," said Khrest, remembering how they had started out from Earth with the *Ganymede* and that they had stolen the *Titan* only afterwards. "Well, Perry, it looks as if the Zarlt has sadly misjudged the situation—fortunately for us."

"I'm quite concerned that he doesn't find out his mistake for the time being," replied Rhodan. "It's far more important to us to convince the Brain on Arkon of our loyalty. Would you have any suggestions, Khrest?"

But before Khrest had a chance to answer, Thora interjected: "Why don't we simply establish contact with the Brain?"

Rhodan turned to the beautiful Arkonide woman with a friendly smile. "We've already tried that but the Brain doesn't react. Could be that it is not constantly tuned in on hyperwave radio reception. Perhaps we ought to come closer to Arkon."

"To Arkon?"

"Why not?"

"I believe," said Khrest, "that it is not so much the actual distance that prevents the robot brain from receiving you, I'm more inclined to assume that the Zalites have placed a magnetic barrier—bell around their planet which has a polarizing effect. Incoming transmissions pass through unhindered while outgoing messages are held back. The process is of course also reversible. This would explain why the Brain has remained silent."

"This means it would be enough," stated Rhodan, "if we were to merely pass beyond Zalit's atmosphere in order to establish contact with the Brain on Arkon."

"Theoretically—yes!" Khrest confirmed.

Rhodan paused to reflect for a moment. "You're probably right. But if we give it a try we shouldn't forego the proof." He turned around to face the control panel. He depressed a button. A voice came on.

"Send John Marshall at once to the command centre!" Rhodan informed the man on the other end of the intercom. "It's urgent! And have Lt. Tifflor come too."

He turned off the intercom and turned to the two Arkonides, explaining: "Even a robot brain should not be expected to believe a stranger's word of honor."

"Have you worked out some plan already?" inquired Thora.

Rhodan nodded to confirm her assumption. He could not help gazing at her severe yet beautiful face longer than he actually intended. What a change had come over her! He could scarcely believe that only 13 years ago she had regarded mankind as a barbarian, uncivilized race. Her arrogance had been limitless and her hatred without precedent. And now that she recognized how lifeless the spiritual inheritance of the Arkonides had become and how vital on the other hand the young race of Earthlings was, an inner transformation had taken place in the proud woman which manifested itself not only in a revision of her entire view of life but also especially in her personal attitude toward Perry Rhodan.

Previously Rhodan had only suspected it but today he was certain that he was secretly in love with Thora. However this love was doomed to remain unfulfilled for an eternity was separating them. There was no longer the abyss of a 10,000-year-old culture standing between them—but eternity. For Rhodan had been given the life-prolonging biological cell-shower from the Immortal, which had been denied to Thora. Rhodan was no longer growing old; however, Thora...

He interrupted his reverie. At this time there was no solution for this problem nor any answer for his questions. Some day, however, as he realized, a decision must be made. He was longing for that day as much as he was afraid of it.

"Yes, Thora, I've a plan. We'll pay a visit to the robot brain."

"How?"

"We'll go by the Gazelle."

"With the long distance reconnaissance craft? To pass through the ring of fortifications?"

Rhodan smiled and shook his head. "Not a visit in person, Thora. We'll move away for just a few light hours to get beyond the radio-barrier belt. Then we'll establish video connection with the Brain. We want the Zarlt to remain in the dark about all this so we'll have the Gazelle catapulted from the *Ganymede* with the help of the tele-transmitter."

"A splendid idea, Perry," Khrest commented. "I'm in favour of it. But what will you tell the robot brain?"

"The truth. I'll also give it my explicit acknowledgement as regent of the Empire."

Thora looked crestfallen. "You want us to express our consent that Arkon is no longer ruled by our own people but by a robot?"

"First of all, we have no choice in the matter, and secondly I don't consider the Brain's reign to be a disadvantage for the Arkonide Empire. Just look at that Orcast, Thora. Do you honestly believe he could hold the decaying realm together?"

"Certainly not Orcast," Thora agreed. A bright glow came into her golden eyes. "But the Zoltral clan is not so decadent!"

Thora and Khrest were members of the Zoltral clan.

"There will come a time when the Zoltrals will rule again," Rhodan said emphatically. "At that moment we can still negotiate for the Brain to abdicate. But right now it is imperative that we win the robot brain's confidence."

Thora's gaze rested for a long while on Rhodan. Then she lowered her head. "I'm afraid I have to admit you are right, Perry. When will we start?"

Rhodan did not answer for at that precise moment John Marshall and Lt. Tiffior entered the command centre. Tiff, as he was generally known, greatly resembled Rhodan, although he was 20 years his junior. He had excelled in several special missions and enjoyed Rhodan's unlimited confidence.

The door closed quietly behind the two men.

Rhodan greeted them with a brief nod and made a terse announcement: "Tiff, get in touch with Col. Freyt and have him get the Gazelle ready for launching. The crew will consist of Thora, Khrest, Pucky and myself. John Marshall is to try to get Admiral Zernif to come here; if necessary he's to use Ras Tschubai's help. During my absence Bell will be in charge of the Titan. That's all. We'll meet on the Gazelle in exactly two hours. Any questions?"

"I've got to stay behind?" murmured Bell greatly disappointed. "Why should I remain here where nothing is going to happen anyway."

"How can you be so sure of that, Reg?" Rhodan said in a serious tone. When I'm gone I must be absolutely sure I have a reliable commander aboard the *Titan*. I can't take any risks with a ship like her."

Bell was halfway convinced and no longer offered any argument. After all, Rhodan had entrusted him with their prize conquest.

* * * *

Once back safely in their hidden headquarters, Zernif and his friends finally had an opportunity to take care of Rogal. The would-be assassin who had returned under such mysterious circumstances was obviously still under the influence of a severe shock. He kept staring blankly straight ahead and his tightly compressed lips remained sealed. He did not answer any questions.

They were all sitting around him trying in vain to coax some explanation from their mute friend. Had the attempted assassination been a complete failure? Or had he been able at least to fire a shot at the despot? Had he been caught before he had reached the Zarlt's bedchamber? Had he been betrayed?

With his eyes wide open Rogal continued staring directly at the bright light.

Admiral Zernif sighed. "It's senseless. We should let him rest for a few days perhaps. We'll soon enough find out if the plot miscarried or if the Zarlt was killed. Maybe the Strangers might give us some advice. Perry Rhodan has some peculiar people with him. We know some of them."

Suddenly the conspirators were startled by a noise coming from the middle of the room. Nobody could possibly have entered unnoticed. Their headquarters were located 30 feet below the ground, close to the city. Their safety precautions had never failed them before.

Their startled eyes beheld a sight which caused cold showers of fear to run down their spines: two human figures had materialized out of the void.

Zernif knew one of them. He called himself John Marshall. He was one of Rhodan's men. The very mysterious stranger who seemed to be on their side although he had so far not rendered any assistance to the rebels' cause. The second man was totally unfamiliar to Zernif. His almost black skin frightened them. Was he also part of Rhodan's entourage?

Zernif regained his composure. He moved his hand away from his weapon. "You—how did you get here?"

"With my friend's help. This is Ras Tschubai; he's a teleporter."

Zernif stood up. For awhile he forgot Rogal. The other rebels did not relax the constant vigilance to which they had owed their life so far.

"How did you find us?"

"That wasn't difficult for us, Zernif. We've come to ask for your help."

"My help? How could we possibly help you, you who are mightier than even the Zarlt?"

"You'll find out in due time. —Isn't that Rogal? What is the matter with him? He looks as if he were under a hypnotic command."

"We think it's the after-effect of a severe psychic shock. We must find out what happened to him."

Marshall's eyes narrowed to a fine slit. His first thought was that the Mooffs had succeeded in breaking through Rogal's natural defensive barrier. "How did this all come about?"

Zernif hesitated a moment. He had no idea that Marshall was already reading his thoughts and therefore knew what had happened. Then Zernif decided not to hold back the truth. With a few words he informed the Strangers of their attempt on the Zarlt's life.

"You mean last night," remarked Marshall. "Then you have failed in your plan. This very morning the Zarlt has issued new orders which quite openly are directed against us. Maybe he assumes that his guests are responsible for the incident. And this is the way that Rogal looked when he returned?" Marshall glanced over in the would-be assassin's direction. The man had not budged. He was still staring at the bright source of light. "May I examine him?"

This was of course only a pretext. Marshall simply wanted an opportunity to probe Rogal's thoughts undisturbed. Marshall was frightened when he encountered the strong defensive mental barrier which effectively barred Marshall's efforts to penetrate into Rogal's mind. Only André Noir, the hypno of the Mutant Corps, could help in this situation.

Marshall turned toward Ras Tschubai. "Can you transport me, Zernif and Regal simultaneously to the *Titan*?"

The teleporter shook his head negatively. "It's too risky. I suggest I bring you separately to the ship. That won't take much longer anyway."

"Okay," replied Marshall. Then he began to give a more detailed explanation to the assembled rebels as to why they had come to see them in their hide-away. Finally he added: "We'll take Rogal along with us and see what we can do for him."

Then Marshall pulled out a tiny radio set and handed it to Zernif. "This is for you. You can reach Rhodan with it any time. Stay tuned in for our messages. And now let's first take care of Rogal."

The men watched in silent awe how the dark-skinned Stranger vanished together with Rogal. Hardly 10 seconds had passed when Ras Tschubai rematerialised in the room to pick up Zernif. Marshall's turn came last.

The rest of the rebels remained behind, all silent. They kept their eyes fixed on the little box which gave off a faint humming sound. This was their last link with the outside world.

* * * *

The tele-transmitter." Rhodan had obtained from the planet Wanderer was a miraculous affair. Matter of any kind—regardless whether atom bombs or human beings—could be transported within a fraction of a second via the fifth dimension to any place desired. There had never before existed a more perfect weapon throughout the entire universe. The most powerful protective energy screens with which the largest spacecraft might surround themselves proved to be useless when dematerialised bombs were teleported and detonated inside the ships.

Today, however, Rhodan used the transmitter for peaceful purposes: namely, to teleport the Gazelle far out into space so that nobody would be aware of this transaction. The Gazelle was a long-distance reconnaissance craft. In appearance it resembled a flying saucer with a diameter of 90 feet. Its range was 500 light-years. It was armed with energy-rich pulse-ray cannons of Arkonide origin.

Tiff announced that the Gazelle was ready for action.

Thora, Khrest, Marshall and Zernif had already come aboard. Rhodan was still waiting for Pucky, who was supposed to arrive at any moment now. Rhodan was talking to Col. Freyt, the commander of the *Ganymede* .

"If you and the *Titan* should be attacked, defend yourselves. The *Ganymede* will move out into deep space and await orders at the prearranged location. Nobody will be able to find you since your transition leap cannot be tracked by any space-warp sensor. Of course the situation is different as regards the *Titan* , so she'll remain where she is."

"Don't worry," Freyt reassured him, "I know how to take care of myself and so does Bell."

Rhodan was about to reply when Pucky suddenly materialized.

"Here I am!" chirped the little mouse-beaver quite unnecessarily since everyone could plainly see him. "I was busy attacking a whole transport of Mooffs. Tama was with me, of course. I sent Tama and Ras on their way again."

"We've been waiting for you," replied Rhodan. Then he turned to Col. Freyt and took leave of him: "See you later, Colonel."

Pucky followed Rhodan into the Gazelle. The long range reconnaissance craft stood in the *Ganymede* 's hangar. The tele-transmitter would hurl it 3 light-months out into space. Neither human eye nor most technically perfected instrument could register the transition.

All settled in their seats. The hatch closed automatically. The countdown to liftoff began. The ship started and at the same instant the transition took place.

Rhodan blinked his eyes as he came out of the transition syndrome. He was almost blinded by a sea of brightly glittering stars. Arkon was in the midst of the globular star cluster M-13, 34,000 light-years distant from Earth. The stars were crowded together, giving a totally different appearance to space than Rhodan was used to from the vicinity of his own solar system. There was hardly a dark spot to be found and the Milky Way grew dim against the radiant splendour of the myriad of suns.

Rhodan looked at his gauges. They were now 3 lims from the red giant sun Voga. The Zarlt was bound to assume they were still inside the *Titan* . Things would be different, of course, when they'd return again to Zalit.

A few brief manipulations and the hyper-radio set was warming up. Rhodan waited until the screens lit up. A crackling sound came from the loudspeaker as the sound system came on. They knew the robot brain's hypercom frequency. For the moment, though, there seemed to be hyper-radio silence.

"We should call the Brain," Thora suggested. Her initial hesitant attitude had now given way to never dreamt of energy and strength of purpose. "Then we'll find out how it will react."

Zernif, the former admiral of Zalit's spacefleet, seemed in a doubtful frame of mind.

"I really don't know what I'm supposed to do here. There's nothing I could tell the robot brain."

"Oh yes there is," protested Rhodan. "There are quite a few things which are of great interest to the Brain. You are our star witness and I'm convinced the Brain can distinguish lies from truth: and since it's not telepathic it accomplishes this, thanks to its logic circuits."

"It's actually a fascinating notion," Khrest entered the discussion, "to have a gigantic star empire ruled by a robot. So many changes have taken place these past 13 years after a period of 10,000 years when nothing of special importance happened. Sometimes I even have my doubts if this new form of government is indeed disadvantageous for Arkon."

Rhodan's eyebrows shot up. "Do you mean to say that you recognize the robot brain's reign—you, Khrest, a member of the deposed ruling clan?"

"Not exactly; all I wanted to say is that I prefer the Brain to Orcast XXI who in my opinion is nothing but a dreamer and an indolent hedonist."

"Well, if you put it that way I can see your point," admitted Rhodan who was busy now observing the large videoscreen that was crisscrossed by coloured abstract patterns. This was accompanied by nonsensical noise fragments emanating from the loudspeakers. "I presume we're already receiving some transmissions from the Brain. They are encoded and not intended for us."

"Yes," confirmed Khrest, "the Brain is in constant communication with all the main worlds of the Empire. It's capable of carrying on thousands of simultaneous conversations."

"On the same wave band?" said Rhodan doubtfully.

Khrest nodded his head in affirmation.

Rhodan pondered for a few seconds then abruptly activated the transmitter. He took a deep breath and began to speak: "This is Perry Rhodan from Terra. I am calling the regent of the Arkonide Empire! Answer, please! This is urgent!"

Three times he repeated the message. Then he turned his attention again to the receiver and the videoscreen.

Thora and Khrest were staring spellbound at the continuing colour pattern on the screen. Tiff, who mainly was busy making optical observations of the surrounding outer space, could feel the tense atmosphere charged with suspense in the command centre. Zernif, on the other hand, was waiting patiently and resignedly for whatever might happen.

Only Pucky did not seem to share in the general excitement. He was sitting on one of the couches, his

eyes half-closed. He gave the impression of being almost asleep. But those who knew Pucky realized only too well that he was concentration personified.

Rhodan shook his head in despair. "The Brain *must* hear us," he said. "Why don't we get an answer?" Then he repeated his message once more and added: "I urgently request confirmation of receipt of our message. It is of vital importance to the continued existence of the Empire."

The coloured pattern speeded up its rhythm. The howling noise from the loudspeaker grew even stronger. But that was all.

"At least some kind of a reaction," Rhodan murmured, still dissatisfied. "But I don't know what to make of it. How are we supposed to know the code the Brain uses in its transmission?"

"You might try explaining the situation to the Brain," Thora suggested. "Tell it that we are not familiar with the key. Request an uncoded text."

A good suggestion, thought Rhodan and he repeated his broadcast, emphasizing they were totally unfamiliar with the code.

Inside the command centre the tension reached breaking point.

The coloured pattern on the videoscreen stopped moving. There was a sharp crackle in the loudspeaker, then the nonsensical sounds ceased. A cold, impersonal voice could be heard throughout the entire central.

The voice spoke in the language of the Arkonides: "I have connected both our transmitters to a special channel where a coded message is not required. Nobody can listen in to this conversation. Will you start."

"Can you see me?" asked Rhodan.

A brief pause, then the stationary colour pattern vanished from the screen. It soon reappeared, moved around and began to form a plastic image. This process was accompanied by the sound of the cold mechanical voice.

"I can see you the same as you presently will be able to see me. You are two and three quarters light-years—according to your count—distant from my location. Where is the stolen ship?"

Now the image on the screen was completed. Rhodan saw an outsize hall without any clues as to where it might be located. A gigantic hemisphere of glittering metal stood in the centre of this room, which was otherwise empty. The hemisphere had an approximate diameter of 150 feet and most likely contained the robot brain. It was impossible to guess what lay underneath the hemisphere. The height of the structure was 25 feet.

Rhodan had waited many years for this moment when he would be face to face with the regent of the Arkonide Empire but not even in his wildest dreams had he imagined it would look like this—a metallic hemisphere.

Rhodan answered the question of the robot brain. "The stolen ship is waiting for me at a safe place, Regent. In case I fail to return, the ship would be forever lost to the Empire."

"It is not my intention to detain you here," came the Brain's icy retort. "The situation would be different if you had come in the stolen ship. What do you want?"

"To convince you that I am not your opponent."

"You will have great difficulty doing that," doubted the metal monster. Abruptly the Brain changed the topic of conversation. "I can see two Arkonides at your side. Are they Thora and Khrest, who received partial recognition from me?"

"That's correct, Regent," said Rhodan. "They formerly belonged to the ruling class of Arkon."

"The Zoltral clan represented no advantage to the Arkonide Empire," remarked the ice-cold voice. "Ever since I seized power some 6 years ago the Arkonide Empire has gone from strength to strength."

Rhodan was secretly astonished that the robot should experience something akin to pride. However, those who can feel pride are not averse to other stirrings. Perhaps the robot brain was even capable of emotions...?

"Nobody would doubt that," Rhodan replied. "But you must admit that the Zoltral clan is working far more effectively and stronger for the Empire than the Orcast clan would ever be capable of doing."

"This is exactly why I replaced Orcast," came the Brain's prompt reply. "He would have let the Empire go to rack and ruin."

"A final question, Regent, regarding the Empire: Why don't you acknowledge me as the Empire's friend? Do you believe I plan to harm the Empire? Didn't I bring back Thora and Khrest?"

The answer came immediately: "You are my greatest adversary, judging from a point of view of personal power. As far as the Empire is concerned you are my ally, until now, at least. You see, I am in a dilemma. Are you surprised that I confess to that?"

"Yes," said Rhodan, "I'm surprised."

"I admit this conflict merely so that you can understand my mode of action. And now: why did you enter into communication with me?"

"I wanted to tell you where I am hiding the stolen ship."

A pause ensued for the first time. Evidently the Brain needed some time to handle this bit of information and to envision all its potential outcomes. This procedure would have taken hours for a human being but it consumed barely 10 seconds for the Brain. Then came the reply: "Why?"

This was a clear indication it had been unable to find a satisfactory, logical answer.

No wonder, thought Rhodan to himself. *Nobody could accomplish that feat.*

"In order to prove to you that I am your friend, I christened the stolen ship the *Titan* and I consider it as a loan. You'll get it back whenever you want. Please note the following data for your information: the *Titan* is now at the spaceport of Tagnor, the capital of the planet Zalit in the Voga System, three light-months away from my present location."

"Impossible," came the prompt reply. "I would know it if this were the case."

Rhodan permitted himself a gentle smile resembling indulgence.

"Why would you have to know that? Which factor would guarantee this? Perhaps a factor by the name of Zarlt?"

"Correct. The Zarlt of Zalit. is vice-imperator of the Empire. A ship of the *Titan*'s dimensions would be noticed if it were in the spaceport of Tagnor. And the Zarlt would report this to me. I gave orders to hunt down this stolen ship. There is only one logical conclusion: you are lying! The *Titan* is hidden somewhere else."

"A false conclusion!" countered Rhodan. He seemed to enjoy this conversation. "You have neglected to consider that somebody else might be lying. Such as the Zarlt, for instance."

"Zarlt Elton is absolutely loyal to me."

"Quite possible," Rhodan admitted calmly. "But what good will that do you if Elton has been dead for quite a number of weeks?"

Another brief pause. Then: "Why was I not informed of his death?"

"Because his murderers thought this unwise. Besides, it would have interfered with their plans if the Regent of the Empire found out that Zalit intends to assume rule over the Realm of the Arkonides."

"Murderer?" That was all. Even a robot brain could be amazed.

"Zarlt Elton was murdered. The new Zarlt is Demesor, a former officer of the spacefleet. He has planned the annihilation of the robot brain of Arkon."

"That is absurd!" came the unruffled voice over the loudspeaker. "Nobody can destroy me."

"Oh yes they can!" Rhodan contradicted coldly. "It's possible! Though Demesor cannot do it. That's why he asked for my help. Does it make sense now why Demesor didn't inform you of the *Titan*'s whereabouts?"

"Considering these aspects it would be logical and therefore understandable. My question is, on the other hand: *do you* speak the truth? Who can give me a satisfactory answer to that?"

"Perhaps Admiral Zernif," said Rhodan, 2 pointing to the man from Zalit. "He served the Empire under Zarlt Elton but fell into disgrace when Demesor came to power. It was only by chance that his life was spared. He together with other Zalites who are faithful subjects of the Empire have founded a resistance movement with the goal of restoring order on Zalit—an order devoted to the interests of the Empire."

Another pause of 10 seconds followed. Then the robot Brain's impersonal voice came over the loudspeaker: "I have checked out all information about Admiral Zernif. His personal integrity is above all suspicion. The same was the case with Demesor."

"Why *was* in the case of Demesor?"

"Because I have just determined that Demesor was sent to the space academy instead of his far more

qualified brother. That was 30 Zalit-years ago. In all probability he was threatening his brother at the time. Besides, according to the data checked out by me, his brother fell victim to some unexplained accident some time later. It is well known that he was a loyal adherent to the Empire."

Rhodan sighed with relief. The robot brain was working fast and with icy efficiency.

"And what are your conclusions, Regent?"

"That you are speaking the truth. What does Zernif have to say to all this?"

Zernif stepped forward and stared at the glittering metal dome. "I want to confirm Rhodan's statements. I also would like to emphasize that our Empire is in danger. Demesor has organized a military dictatorship on Zalit and has imposed total censorship on all kinds of news. But my underground movement will do away with Demesor and install the legitimate successor of the former, rightful Zarlt."

"Thank you," said the Brain, "I believe you since there is no other alternative left. And what is your involvement in this affair, Rhodan?"

"Demesor requested my help but I have kept stalling all the time. He protected me and the *Titan* because he thought he had found an ally against you. Demesor wanted to find out from me how I managed to break through the protective barrier around Arkon."

"This is something I'd also like to learn from you," replied the robot brain.

Rhodan smiled. "You'll find out about it later on, Regent. All I can tell you now is that it was done with the aid of a weapon which is not known on Arkon. The weapon comes from the Planet of Eternal Life."

"This Planet is nothing but a vague theory."

"No, Regent, it's a fact!" retorted Rhodan. "I was there myself and obtained relative immortality which however was denied Thora and Khrest. But let's return to what we were discussing before, Regent: Demesor is a traitor and must be rendered harmless. However he is not the sole guilty party. Do you know who the Mooffs are?"

"Yes, relatively primitive and definitely harmless creatures living on a methane world within the Empire. They are telepaths and weak suggestors. What is their role in events on Zalit?"

"There are many thousands of Mooffs on Zalit and they have assumed power over the minds of the Zalites. Although the treacherous Zarlt does not realize it, the Mooffs are his best allies in his desire to conquer the Empire."

"That is absurd! It would never occur to the Mooffs to dabble in politics. They are harmless creatures totally devoid of any ambitions. As I have already pointed out they are telepaths and suggestors but they..."

"Nobody pretends that these plans have originated with the Mooffs; they are nothing but pawns in this galactic game of chess. Some mightier mind is behind all this. He uses the Mooffs to gain influence over the Zalites with whose help he then wants to conquer the Empire."

"And who is this unknown entity?"

"This is something, Regent, that I don't know," Rhodan hesitated. "Nobody is sure whether he really exists. But what you just were saying about the Mooffs seems to make it more plausible that he actually does exist. My men are fighting against the Mooffs for, several weeks now—and they are doing this to preserve the Empire, Regent!"

"What is your motivation to help the Empire survive?"

Now Thora who had listened quietly all along pressed forward. "The Terrans are our allies, Regent. We helped them when they were attacked by the Mind Snatchers and the Springers. Why then shouldn't they come now to our assistance when we need it?"

Rhodan was secretly amazed at Thora's voluntary intervention on behalf of the human race. He could not have wished for a better spokesman.

"The Springers?" There was another slight pause by the robot brain. "Their intentions are not the best toward the Arkonide Empire. It's quite possible theoretically that they are behind the Mooffs and the plans of the Zarlt."

Rhodan felt as if suddenly a veil had been removed from his eyes. The Springers! The galactic traders! It would be in line with their character to send others ahead and let them pull the chestnuts out of the fire. But on the other hand the Springers lacked the feeling of solidarity which was paramount for the success of such an enterprise.

"Maybe—it could be the Springers," said Rhodan with reservation in his voice. "Some day we'll find out if that is really the case." Rhodan paused for a second, then continued: "Now that I have informed you where the *Titan* can be found I'd like to suggest a fair proposition to you."

"Yes, I'm listening."

Rhodan took a deep breath. Then he said: "You'll leave the *Titan* in my hands and call off the pursuit. In exchange I'll vouch to restore order on Zalit and to see to it that the legitimate Zarlt will be installed in his office."

"Give me a little time," requested the robot brain.

The image remained constant on the videoscreen. There was a steady, uniform humming to be heard from the loudspeaker. Three light-years away the positronic memory banks began to function. New data were transferred, stored anew and the results weighed against each other.

The robot brain made its decision.

The result came 15 seconds after it had requested a brief delay.

"I accept your proposition, Perry Rhodan. The *Titan* will remain in your possession as a loan as long as you will be working for the Empire. The pursuit will be called off immediately. Still, I'll keep an eye on you. But the moment Demesor is punished and the unknown entity behind the Mooffs exposed, the *Titan* will belong to you forever. Will you accept?"

"I accept, Regent. Will Thora and Khrest be permitted to return to Arkon?"

"No, I don't want to!" called out Thora. Rhodan looked at her in disbelief. But before he could say

anything the robot brain spoke up: "Thora and Khrest may return to Arkon at any time. However, I desire that they remain on the *Titan* —in a leading position."

"Agreed," Rhodan confirmed.

"There is something else I want to ask you," said the robot brain.

"Go ahead!" Rhodan waited for the question to come. He had no idea what the Brain might want to know from him. Therefore it was no wonder that he was utterly taken by surprise when the Brain inquired: "Are you a descendant of the Arkonides?"

For a moment Rhodan was dumbfounded. He had expected anything but that question. After all, the Brain ought to be in a much better position to answer that than he could at this stage.

"It is not known whether the Terrans descend from the Arkonides," he replied. "By rights this fact ought to be recorded in the central files on Arkon."

"I do not know what kind of a world Terra is and where it is located."

And you're not going to find out so soon, Rhodan thought as he suddenly realized what was behind the Regent's line of questioning: the Brain wanted to learn Earth's position...!

"Terra is not part of the Empire, Regent. I don't know how far your colonizing expeditions once were advancing but it's quite possible one of these ships was driven off course and landed on our world. One of these days we'll be able to give a satisfactory answer to this question."

"They obviously are descendants of the same line as the Arkonides. A parallel evolution is most improbable. It would be too great a coincidence if 2 identical intelligent life forms would develop independent of each other. Well, enough of that."

Rhodan contemplated the glistening hemisphere for a few moments. "In any case, Regent, you seem to know more than you care to admit."

"What do you mean by that?"

Rhodan smiled and gave Thora a reassuring glance. "You calculated our distance from Arkon to be 2.75 light-years according to *our* way of telling time. How do you happen to know how long one year lasts on my home world?"

The robot brain's answer came without an instant's hesitation: "I intercepted your radio messages which sufficed to calculate your units of measurement. Still, this did not enable me to ascertain the position of your home planet. Some day you'll tell me where it is."

"It's possible," Rhodan admitted. "A final question: if necessary, can I get in touch with you at any time?"

"Yes, at any time, on the same frequency. Thank you, Perry Rhodan." The screen was suddenly dark again.

Rhodan sank into a nearby chair. Deep furrows lined his forehead. "The Regent of the Arkonide Empire—thanks me." he murmured, his voice filled with doubt. "Can that be true, Khrest? Thora? Can we trust the Brain? Is the Regent on the level with us or is this just some devilish trick?"

Thora stepped closer to Rhodan and put her hand on his shoulder. "I don't think so, Perry. A positronic brain does not engage in lies and underhanded practices. It is fully aware of its own strengths which would be only lessened if it resorted to lies and underhanded practices. The Brain has sincerely recognized you as its ally, in my opinion. Thus we have accomplished the first step that will lead to our reconquering the Empire."

Rhodan looked squarely into the Arkonide woman's eyes. "But not against the Brain's wishes! If some day in the future the Brain will be convinced that either mankind or the Arkonides will once more be capable of resuming the rulership, it will not fight against such insight. On the contrary, it will help us."

"Let's hope that the future will justify your present optimism, Perry," Khrest remarked calmly. "What is our next move? Back to Zalit?"

"Yes, of course. They are waiting for us. We'll return immediately."

"I'm looking forward to a solemn reception by the Zarlit," squealed Pucky in his corner where he had been intently following the whole conversation with the Brain.

"He'll hardly find the time for that," replied Rhodan as he exchanged a quick glance with Tiff who was readying the co-ordinates for the return jump. "After all, don't forget there's an underground resistance movement on Zalit." Rhodan consulted his wristwatch. "In exactly 5 hours all hell will break loose on the fourth planet of the Voga System. The Zarlit will have his hands full trying to deploy his entire fighting forces in order to catch the men who'll be blasting to pieces army and space fleet installations everywhere. This whole uproar will permit us to land unnoticed and without interference at the outer edge of the spaceport."

Pucky cocked his head and gave a knowing wink with his right eye.

"Are we going to help the rebels after we return? How about a little fist fight with the secret police...?"

Rhodan shook his head and said regretfully: "Sorry, Pucky! No fights of any kind! We are the Zarlit's guests. We may even have to help him quell the revolt."

"What?" yapped Pucky, gasping for air. He quickly tried to probe Rhodan's thoughts but encountered a firm defence shield. He was forced to resort to a direct question: "Friends of the Zarlit? It doesn't make sense."

"True. The main thing is that it won't make any sense to the Zarlit either," explained Rhodan. "That's exactly what I want."

Rhodan turned to Tiff. "Are we ready for transition?"

"In 2 minutes. We'll emerge from hyperspace 4 light-hours from Zalit. Travelling top speed we'll manage to arrive on Zalit. right on the dot when we're expected back."

Rhodan nodded his head in a silent answer. He had difficulty in not breaking out laughing as he watched the little mouse-beaver's face do a slow burn.

Mouse-beavers look very funny when they feel outraged...

3/ THE PLOT TO TRAP PERRY

André Noir straightened up, totally exhausted. He wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead. He looked into John Marshall's questioning eyes.

"Well?"

"A very intensive hypno-block. Applied by the Mooffs, most likely. Perhaps also done through purely technical means. I've no idea how far advanced the Zalites are in this respect. Anyhow, I can neutralize this block. Rogal will again be his normal self in about 10 minutes."

"Excellent," Marshall rejoiced. "Now I can carry out Perry Rhodan's commission and mobilize the rebels. They are supposed to cause a lot of trouble for the Zarlt at a certain hour."

Marshall left the sickbay presided over by Dr. Haggard and left the patient in the care of the hypno André Noir.

Upon Marshall's return 2 hours later he found Rogal already sitting in the mess hall. He had completely recovered and greeted him with a bright cheerful look. He gave the impression that a tremendous load had been removed from his mind.

"You are Marshall, the telepath—oh, yes, I recognize you. I was told that we are here on Perry Rhodan's ship. What happened to my friends? Have they been...?"

"No, Rogal, everything is just fine. The Zarlt's 12 soldiers that accompanied you were killed as they reached the end of the secret passage. Now I would like to hear your story. What happened?"

Rogal's face grew sombre. "I failed in my mission," he blamed himself. "I made my way easily to the sleeping chamber of the Zarlt. I saw him lying in his bed. I shot him and everything seemed to go according to plan. Suddenly the Zarlt's bodyguards appeared and arrested me. Ten minutes later I was brought before the Zarlt—very much alive although I had just witnessed his death."

Marshall directed a questioning glance at Noir but the hypno smiled back in resignation accompanied by a declining little wave of his hand.

Rogal shook his head from side to side. "No, Marshall, I am not crazy, although I thought then I'd lost my mind. A short while earlier I had personally killed the Zarlt and now he was miraculously risen from the dead. I had seen his face dissolve and now it was completely restored without any scars. That's when the truth dawned on me: the Zarlt had a double—a robot created in his image. This robot was what I saw resting in the old Zarlt's bedroom. His men must have guessed there was some secret passage and so didn't want to incur any risks. When I killed the robot an alarm was activated—and I was caught in the trap. Everything went so fast that no time was left for me to take my own life, as should have been my duty."

"We're very glad you didn't commit suicide," said Marshall with a reassuring smile to the Zalite. "Your sacrifice would have been in vain. You didn't betray any secrets—and even if you had, your friends

would have been prepared for it. Anyhow, now we know that the Zarlt has been alerted. Also, that he has or rather had a robot as his doppelganger. Your mission was a success just for this revelation alone. You can be sure, the dictator's days are numbered. We're only waiting for him to openly confront us in a hostile manner. That's when we can go into action."

"And when will that be?"

"Tomorrow at the latest. Right now Rhodan is somewhere in deep space between here and Arkon in order to negotiate with the robot brain. Let's hope he'll bring back good news."

Rogal broke into a wide grin. A load must have lifted off his mind. "Can I join my friends again?"

"Of course. We'll bring you back to them. Another question: what did the Zarlt do with you after you had been apprehended?"

"I was taken to a cellar for an interrogation. But the Zarlt suddenly changed his mind. He had me transferred to a room that housed 12 Mooffs in their containers. I can't recall anything that happened afterwards. I don't know what took place in there."

"Hmm, the Mooffs. Tell me, Rogal, do you have an idea who or what these Mooffs actually are?"

Rogal nodded his head in affirmation. "Every kid on Zalit knows that! They are used by the ruling class as living lie detectors because they can read minds. Nobody dares think freely any more; the Mooff spies are listening in to all our thoughts. These monsters are a great threat to individual freedom."

"Have you realized that?" Marshall wondered out loud. Now he knew that the Mooffs' suggestive powers had remained unrecognized. The Zalites had no idea that the Mooffs were the actual initiators of the planned rebellion against the Empire. "Then the first step to freedom should not be difficult for you: the Mooffs must be destroyed!"

"You've already started this task," remarked Rogal. "Your mutants killed almost all the Mooffs we had on Zalit. But they're being replaced by new shipments every day now."

"Kill the Mooffs!" urged Marshall. "They mean ruin for Zalit. Maybe they are not the guilty ones but we cannot determine that. The Mooffs themselves seem to be victims of some coercion. They will not reveal anything, not even if threatened by death. Destroy the pressurized containers and the Mooffs will die. And now, Rogal, we'll return you to your friends. Ras Tschubai, our friend here, will take care of that. He knows where your headquarters are located at present. Goodbye Rogal."

The teleporter Tschubai tapped Rogal on the shoulder and proceeded to explain briefly how the transport would take place.

With a friendly farewell wave Marshall left the mess hall and was on his way to see Reginald Bell in the command centre.

Bell was terribly bored. He hated nothing worse than having to sit and wait. Some of the mutants had left in order to establish contact with the rebels and show them how the Mooffs could be rendered harmless. So far the reports that had come in indicated that the instruction had been a great success.

Nevertheless, time was working against Rhodan and his friends.

The Zarlt was intent on annihilating the robot brain on Arkon, if the moment was opportune—even without the Mooffs' suggestions. However Rhodan did not volunteer to reveal how the fortress barrier around Arkon could be pierced.

Still, there were other ways of finding out!

The Zarlt summoned his confidants to a conference in his palace. One of these, who ranked high in the Zarlt's esteem, was an officer by the name of Hemor. He already knew Perry Rhodan in person. Further there was Milfor, chief of the Armed Forces, a power-thirsty Zalite willing to seize the slim chance of becoming the Zarlt in case something unforeseen should happen to Demesor. Finally, Cenets and Orbson completed the group, all former accomplices of the self-proclaimed Zarlt.

The 5 men were sitting in an isolated room located on the top floor of the palace. From there could be enjoyed a marvellous view of the entire spaceport area. The place was literally crawling with spacecraft of all kinds, for the greatest part of the fleet had been ordered to Tagnor by the Zarlt. He wanted to prevent at all costs that Rhodan would escape with his gigantic spacesphere, once his suspicion was aroused.

Milfor looked at Demesor with distrust in his eyes. "Why did you summon us to appear here today? We are well aware what we are supposed to do!"

"I'm confident that you know your task, Milfor," said Demesor, "but I have decided to change our tactics. How long has it been by now that we are waiting for Rhodan finally to divulge his secrets to us? It has been weeks, in case you've forgotten! Should we permit several more weeks to go by, waiting inactively? No! We must proceed to act now!"

Milfor was about to say something but then decided against it. Instead, Cenets spoke up: "To act? What do you mean by that? Are we supposed to attack Arkon without knowing how strong the Brain really is? Do we have sufficient data about the depth and nature of the ring of fortifications around Arkon? Is it possible to bypass it if we resort to a jump through hyperspace?"

"So far we have no information," admitted Demesor, "but it won't be long till we'll obtain it. Rhodan will reveal his secrets."

"I'm afraid we'll have to wait a very long time for Rhodan to do that. He definitely hasn't the least intention to tell us what he knows."

"Certainly he doesn't intend to reveal all out of his own free will," said Demesor. "But we can 'persuade' him—by force!"

Milfor looked up. His eyes began to glitter. Force! That was his kind of language. A cold smile played around his hard mouth. "That sounds better, Demesor. Force! That's the only way. But how do you plan to impose our will on Rhodan? He is very smart and has unusually capable friends, they say. Even the Mooffs can't read his thoughts."

"We'll invite him for a conference," suggested Demesor. "Our robots will subdue him by force in case the Zalites can't accomplish this by themselves. Once he's down in the palace vaults I guarantee he'll learn to talk. My scientists will see to that."

"What if he doesn't come alone?" Cenets remarked cautiously.

The Zarlt answered with a derisive smile. "Our robots can handle 10 men like Rhodan, Cenets. Don't you worry about that. And then once we've learned how to penetrate unhindered into the Arkon System, we'll act. The days of the robot rule are numbered—long live the Zalite Empire of Arkon!"

"Long live the Zalite Empire!" the whispered voices of the other 4 men confirmed the new battle-cry of Zarlt Demesor's conspiracy.

* * * *

Admiral Zernif's friends opened the attack exactly at the appointed hour.

Important government buildings and especially those of the all-powerful spacefleet were blown up in and around Tagnor. Even one of the bigger ships exploded on the landing field. Fortunately there was no loss of life since the crew was busy with outside repairs.

The Zarlt's military forces were openly assaulted as they were patrolling civilian neighbourhoods. A considerable number of Demesor's hirelings were killed while the citizens looked on impassively.

Factories situated in the rural districts went up in the air and entire armament works were destroyed. It became evident how well the rebels had prepared this coup, how effectively they were organized. Such a revolt could never have been hatched inside a few hours. They must have planned a similar uprising for quite some time. Rhodan's initiative had merely hastened the course of events.

The Zarlt sounded the alarm. Smaller units of the spacefleet were diverted to their original home ports. Transporters brought troops from remote areas in order to nip the rebellion in the bud.

Hard as the Zarlt's forces tried to seize the revolutionaries they were always too late; they could never find a trace of the saboteurs who seemed to vanish into thin air as soon as their acts had been perpetrated. Nobody admitted to having seen them; nobody could furnish the slightest clue.

Amidst all this chaos, no one paid any attention when a small, disk-shaped ship came shooting down from the evening sky toward the edge of the space-landing field, quickly to disappear in the open landing hatch of the 2500-foot-tall *Ganymede*.

The landing manoeuvre had been accomplished undisturbed and unnoticed. The same instant all sabotage acts ceased abruptly all over Zalit.

Calm returned as if there had never been a resistance movement.

* * * *

The night passed without any incidents.

The following morning around 11 o'clock a car approached the *Titan*. It stopped close to the lower entrance hatch. An officer got out of the car, gazed upwards, probably in the hope that someone would notice him.

It was his good luck that this very moment Sgt. Harnahan by sheer coincidence decided to switch on the video-spy in the entrance hatch. He saw the colourful uniform of the Zalite. At first he believed this gaudy object to be a gigantic parrot but he quickly realized his mistake. The officers on Zalite always looked as if they had come straight from a masquerade.

Sgt. Harnahan shrugged his shoulders. He didn't care if the Zalites would even adorn themselves with medals from head to toe.

But what business had this guy being here? For a moment Sgt. Harnahan pondered whether it was prohibited, opening this hatch. He could not recall ever having heard of any such ruling. After all, the entrance was more than 30 feet above the concrete-covered ground of the landing field. There was hardly any danger unless the fellow down there happened to be a record high-jumping athlete.

Harnahan let the airlock slide aside a bit, until a gap just large enough to stick his head through opened up.

"No pedlars or agents allowed here!" he shouted down.

The officer of the Zarlt was so startled that he jumped back a couple of feet. It was Hemor who had not counted on such a rude reception. He knew that Rhodan's men could speak Intercosmo.

"I'm coming on behalf of the Zarlt," he called back, ignoring the disrespectful warning. "Rodantokvil. I want to talk to Rhodan."

"Mr. Rhodan to you!" roared Harnahan, who suddenly remembered that one should place great value on good manners. "Wait a moment, I'll go and ask him."

And before Hemor could make a reply, the hatch was shut again. The Zalite was boiling with rage but he managed not to show it. The Zarlt had insisted on composure. Composure and patience. There would be plenty of opportunity later on to make Rhodan suffer for his impudence.

Thus Hemor was left standing all alone—waiting and waiting.

Harnahan was in no particular hurry.

Using a variety of elevators he finally reached the command centre from where he called Rhodan via intercom. Rhodan was still in his cabin after having spent half the night with the mutants, busily discussing the next phase of action.

"Who wants to talk to me?" he tried to ascertain, amazed. "An officer?"

"He pretends he was sent by the Zarlt," Harnahan informed the face peering at him from the videoscreen. "He says it's urgent."

Rhodan jumped out of bed. "Tell him to wait. Don't let him inside the ship. I'll go and see him."

"Alone?"

"Of course, or do you think I'm afraid of a single Zalite officer? You can watch me from the entrance hatch."

Harnahan switched off the intercom and returned to the starting point of his adventure. The gaily-bedecked officer was still waiting at the same spot; his legs seemed ready to drop off.

"Hey, you, down there!" Harnahan hailed him and opened the airlock hatch all the way. He sat down on the threshold, let his legs dangle over the side. "You are supposed to wait. Rhodan will soon join you."

That was a bit exaggerated for Rhodan took his own good time. After all, he had just got up. He had a leisurely breakfast after he had made sure, by way of the external viewer, who had come to call on him. He had met Hemor before. He was the officer who had discovered him at the border regions of the system and who had escorted him to Zalit. It might be advisable perhaps to take Marshall along: he could check up on Hemor's thoughts.

But then Rhodan decided against this plan. He was after all familiar with Demesor's intentions. Besides, Marshall needed to get some rest after the latest sortie.

Rhodan arrived at the lock, gently tapped Harnahan on the shoulder. The sergeant was so startled that he lost his balance and would have fallen all the way to the ground if Rhodan had not caught hold of him at the last moment.

"You scare easy, don't you?" Rhodan sounded surprised.

Harnahan quickly regained control of himself. "No, sir. I got sleepy watching that parrot down there. He has such a bored face."

Rhodan laughed. "Let down the ramp. I'll have a closer look at that funny-looking bird."

Hemor was patiently waiting and finally his persistence paid off. Rhodan had arrived to take the first step inside the trap that had been prepared for him.

Hemor walked over to the hated alien visitor on his home planet who threatened to wreck all their carefully laid plans. "No need to apologize," he began politely with an obliging smile. "The Zarlt also doesn't always have time for unannounced visitors." That was a veiled hint and a direct threat at the same time. "The Zarlt would be pleased to receive you tonight as his guest. No festivities, just an important discussion of the situation."

Rhodan feigned surprise: "A discussion of the situation? In what manner am I involved in the situation on Zalit?"

Hemor blinked his eyes against the bright midday sun. "A great deal, I suppose. Since you choose not to reveal your secret to the Zarlt we'll just have to attack the Brain without your assistance. The Zarlt wishes to inform you of his plans and to request you to depart from Zalit. But he wishes to tell you all this himself. I should not steal a march on him with this information."

But this was exactly what Hemor had just done. And on purpose! He wanted to arouse Rhodan's curiosity. His move seemed to be a success.

"Aha, you finally are going to attack Arkon... And I'm supposed to leave Zalit? The robot brain will

start hunting me down."

"It will be too busy coping with us," asserted a very self-assured Hemor. "We are of the opinion that it will no longer bother you once we are through with it."

Was Hemor speaking the truth? Rhodan regretted now that he had come without Marshall. He couldn't decline the Zarlt's invitation, that would look too suspicious. He had to keep pretending that he fully trusted the Zarlt, still hoping to become his partner in the battle against the robot brain. Rhodan decided to change the topic of conversation.

"What happened yesterday? We observed several explosions in the city and a great deal of activity of your spacefleet. Was there any trouble?"

"A few minor incidents, nothing important. The Zarlt will tell you all about it if you are interested. May, I inform him that you accept his invitation?"

"I accept and will bring along some of my advisers."

"Come 2 hours before sunset," Hemor said in parting and walked over to his car. Without looking back even once he got into his car and motioned to his driver. The vehicle set itself in motion immediately, driving toward the edge of the landing field where the exit led onto the main road toward the city.

The official Zalite car, which was constantly ready for Rhodan's use, was waiting as usual in its old place. Tonight it would carry them to the Zarlt's palace.

Suddenly Rhodan was overcome by a strong doubt as to whether his generous host's intention that the car would also bring them back again to the *Titan* ...

* * * *

The day passed quietly.

Ras Tschubai was travelling around with Tama Yokida, putting Mooff after Mooff out of action. John Marshall, accompanied by Admiral Zernif and the teleporter Tako Kakuta, had rushed from one rebel hide-away to the next in order to make preparations for the final revolt against the Zarlt. The various commando troops were all in a state of readiness. A brief message would propel them into action. Each group had been outfitted with a special receiver which would transmit the signal for attack.

Zernif returned with Marshall to the *Titan*. He would lead the action from the giant spacesphere.

3 hours before sunset Rhodan called a meeting in the mess hall of the mutants. In addition there were present the 2 Arkonides, Bell and Lt. Tiffloor as liaison officer to the *Ganymede*.

"The Zarlt has invited me to a discussion of the current situation on Zalit. Bell and Marshall will accompany me there. Needle-ray guns will be our only weapons. To be quite frank: I smell a rat. Therefore the Mutant Corps will remain in a state of constant readiness for immediate action. John Marshall's liaison will be Betty Toufry. Listen, Betty, you must stay in uninterrupted telepathic contact

with Marshall, is that clear?" Rhodan waited until the still very young girl—a gifted telepath and telekin—had nodded her head in agreement. Then he continued. "Thora will assume the command of the *Titan*. At the first sign of a serious attack you are to take off! Yes, Thora, I said take off! Execute a transition across 2 light-years to a point in space whose co-ordinates are to be found on the navigation desk. Colonel Freyt will be informed by Tiff. Neither the *Titan* nor the *Ganymede* must be exposed to any danger although it is difficult to imagine that their protecting forcefields could be penetrated. But I am foremost concerned that no unnecessary bloodshed will occur."

Pucky, who had been lying in a comfortable armchair, all coiled up and apparently disinterested in what was going on, stretched to his full length of one yard. A furtive reproach was in his clever brown eyes. "And how about us?" he asked. "Are we supposed to take off with the *Titan* while all the action is going to be here on *Zalit*?"

Smiling, Rhodan shook his head. "Who said any such thing? Before the *Titan* departs, the teleporters will transport all members of the Mutant Corps to the prepared hide-outs of the rebels. This will also include Zernif. Then all operations against the *Zarlt* will start immediately. Everything is ready. Only the exact time is not yet determined. That depends entirely on the *Zarlt*..."

Pucky breathed a sigh of relief. "And I was sure we were supposed to sleep while you would carry on with your mission here on *Zalit* all by yourself."

Rhodan's smile vanished abruptly. "I have a feeling that I couldn't manage by myself, Pucky. A decision may be made tonight..."

The creature was round, with a diameter of 3 feet and about as tall as wide. It squatted without moving in a pressurized container, which was filled with a dense methane atmosphere. This was the life-sustaining environment for the Mooffs.

The container was standing in a closed room inside the *Zarlt*'s palace, not far from the small hall where the discussion with Rhodan was scheduled to take place.

As was his daily custom, the Mooff carefully probed the thoughts of all the *Zalites* who were present in the *Zarlt*'s palace. There was no traitor among them, he quickly ascertained. Then he started concentrating on the *Zarlt* and suggested his thought-image to him: *Zarlt Demesor, what are your plans for tonight?*

Demesor was in his private quarters getting dressed when he 'saw' the question. He could literally perceive it like some physical object before his mind's eye. He realized that one of the Mooffs was trying to get in touch with him. They were faithful and dependable servants.

I have invited Perry Rhodan. You are to survey his thoughts and inform me if he has come with treacherous intentions.

The *Zarlt* knew that the Mooff could understand him. The confirmation followed promptly. *Rhodan is Zalit's enemy. He must be killed. We'll help you with it. But you must proceed very cautiously. Some of his companions are very capable telepaths. They can read your thoughts. I'll therefore take care that you as well as all others who know of your project will receive a defence-block to shield your minds.*

Demesor was happy to learn that his vague notion about Rhodan's friends numbering some telepaths among them was now borne out by the Mooff. He appreciated the Mooff's warning. "Thank you," he

said out loud. "This means that Rhodan won't have any forewarning what we have in store for him?"

He won't have the faintest inkling until the moment you start acting. And then it'll be too late for him to do anything about it. After you have taken him prisoner, have him brought to me. To the big hall of the telepaths. Don't forget!

For a moment Demesor believed he heard some threat expressed with this demand but his doubts were quickly dispelled; they totally vanished. Why, of course, the Mooff was right if he wished to reserve for himself the right to cross-examine Rhodan. A telepath was much better qualified to dig out secrets from his prisoners.

Zarlt Demesor smiled.

He was actually looking forward to this very promising evening.

4/ GOLDEN GIRLS WITH HEARTS OF STEEL

Bell was busy checking on the perfect fit of his uniform. "I wonder if there'll be some girls at the Zarlt's party tonight?" He tried to make his voice sound very casual while he was vigorously brushing his stiff red hair-bristles in the vain hope of making them lie smoothly along the contours of his head. "After all, there must be some girls living on Zalit."

"Red-skinned beauties with copper-coloured hair?" Rhodan shook his head and winked an eye at Marshall, who was impatiently waiting at the door. "I'm afraid the Zarlt is too preoccupied with worrying about certain other matters to find time to make sure we can indulge in pleasant female company. You'll just have to do without the ladies."

"They probably don't have any pretty girls anyway!" Bell gave up brushing his unruly hair in disgust.

"Sounds like sour skapes (Exceedingly bitter Venusian lemon-size snow white berries) to me," growled Marshall, who grew more impatient by the second. "I'd like to know if that's all that is bothering you, Reggie."

"That's all," Bell confirmed with a wide grin.

Rhodan checked the charge of his small needle-beamer before he stashed it away in his rear pocket. Then he motioned to his 2 friends. "Ready to leave? Okay, then let's go."

3 minutes later, the exit hatch closed behind them with a dull thud. The Zarlt's car was waiting for them. They climbed aboard and the car drove off quickly across the field until it reached the main road leading to the city. They were travelling along the highway at breakneck speed toward the silhouette of the distant capital of Zalit. Soon the outlines of the characteristic funnel-shaped buildings were clearly discernible against the bright sky. It was 2 hours till sunset.

Now they were driving through the suburbs with their many parks and green pleasure belts. Rhodan knew that this area was crisscrossed with subterranean passages and rooms where the rebels were lying

in wait for the signal to attack. Marshall needed only send out a telepathic command which would be received and transmitted by Betty Toufry for the revolution to start...

But this point was still in the future. It all depended on the Zarlt's actions—but nobody knew what his exact plans actually were.

The palace came into sight. Its tall walls rose to a height of 450 feet, easily surpassing all other buildings around it. The palace walls reared upward and out at an angle to the ground. Their red hues were intensified by the slanting rays of the setting sun, Voga. Rhodan noticed that the usual guard posts near the palace portal had not been reinforced. This seemed almost suspicious, considered in the light of the events which had taken place the previous day. Glancing swiftly to the side he also realized that there was a new Mooff inside the pressurized container standing on the wide lawn—its former inhabitant had been exterminated by the action of his Mutant Corps.

Perry Rhodan could already feel the probing thoughts and attempted suggestions by the new replacement: the usual request to hand over to the guard post all weapons that the visitor might be bringing along. The strength of this hypno-command was almost negligible. Rhodan and his 2 companions simply ignored it.

The car came to a halt.

"That driver could at least open the car doors for us," grumbled Bell, using the English language, "seeing we're not being welcomed like regular guests with a little reception committee."

"It's not customary here," Rhodan enlightened him as he got out of the car. "Besides, this is not an official visit, just an ordinary 'friendly' call."

"We'll know afterwards if everything is just 'friendly' here," Bell countered with distrust. "I have a feeling..."

He could not elaborate further what these feelings were. He was interrupted by the appearance of 3 gaudily uniformed Zalites who stepped forth from the inner portal. Their shouldered arms aroused anything else but reassuring feelings in Rhodan and his friends. Both gunstocks and barrels were profusely ornamented with gold and silver; the slings were elaborately embroidered.

"For heaven's sake!" exclaimed Bell. "Looks like an operetta—are we supposed to be playing extras with a walk-on part?"

Marshall suppressed a grin. He searched quickly in the thoughts of the 3 guards but encountered nothing but very superficial impressions. The first one thought of anything but the task at hand. He couldn't be less interested in receiving the Zarlt's visitors, who meant nothing to him. The second was busy figuring out what practical joke he could play on his wife's brother. The third post...

The third post had no thoughts whatsoever! Marshall noted, perplexed.

There was no time, however, for Marshall to ponder this psychological curiosity for the 3 guards stopped in front of them, presented arms, smartly executed an about-face and began to march slowly into the building. With a quick nod Rhodan urged his friends to follow. The little procession advanced solemnly to the nearest elevator, which brought them to a higher floor. Here they were taken over by 3 other operetta soldiers. Marshall had no opportunity to check out their thoughts because he suddenly sensed strong impulses originating from various directions. He was certain that these were not any hypno

commands and that therefore he was the only person to notice them. But before he could make sure what the meaning of these impulses could be, they weakened and vanished. The whole interlude lasted barely 30 seconds.

They were following their soldier guides through a long, slightly curved corridor. All the while, Marshall was frantically racking his brain trying to grasp the significance of these thought impulses. Were they an attempt by the Mooffs to probe the visitors' minds? In that case the Mooffs already had found out who their enemies were.

But hadn't they always been aware of this fact?

The 3 guards came to a halt. Again they presented arms. A door opened. A small hall could be seen with a table in its centre: 5 persons were seated at this table. In the background rose a flat podium framed by colourful curtains.

4 of the assembled Zalites remained seated. Only the Zarlt rose and walked toward his guests, his hand outstretched in greeting. "Welcome, Perry Rhodan. You are on time."

Rhodan shook hands but did not return his host's firm grasp. Bell and Marshall were welcomed in the same manner. Bell grimaced as if he had touched something repulsive. The Zarlt did not seem to notice.

"May I introduce you to my officers. You have already met some of them—Hemor and Cenets. This is Milfor, Chief of Armament. Orbson is the commanding Admiral of our space patrols. Now, please be seated. I have arranged a small dinner party in your honor. It's more conducive to negotiations."

Rhodan sat down in the centre, flanked on either side by Marshall and Bell. Demesor took the seat directly opposite Perry Rhodan. The Zarlt had Hemor and Milfor to his right while Cenets and Orbson were to his left.

While the company was still exchanging some polite small talk, Marshall experienced his first big disappointment. He concentrated on his task to explore the thoughts in the Zalites' subconscious mind. He started out with Demesor.

He encountered a defence-block erected by one of the Mooffs.

It could not be anything else because non-telepaths were unable to shield off their thoughts on their own without many years of special training. Moreover, a certain parapsychic talent was needed for this feat. And this is what the Mooffs had in ample supply. This meant then that they had already inserted themselves in the proceedings.

Next he tried out the 4 officers but found out quickly that the situation was similar in their case as with the Zarlt: it was impossible for him to read the thoughts of the 5 Zalites sitting across the table from him. This was a handicap nobody had taken into account. And Marshall least of all. He had to warn Rhodan, who was a telepath with a limited range of abilities.

"No, just a few accidents," said the Zarlt at this moment in answer to Rhodan's question what the cause of yesterday's disturbances had been. "Negligence. Such things will happen occasionally. Those derelict in their duty have already been punished."

Rhodan smiled in silent acknowledgment. The same instant he was receiving Marshall's telepathic message and warning. Not only that the minds of the Zarlt and his vassals remained inaccessible but a

new danger was added: the Mooffs could read the Earthmen's thoughts and could of course take the necessary steps. A defence screen was the only way to prevent that.

Rhodan, Marshall and Bell quickly erected a barrier around their mind while Marshall, in addition, continued to break through the Zarlt's block in order to reach the actual point of origin, the Mooff suggestor.

Servants brought platters heaped with local fruit and various beverages. Rhodan preferred to drink fruit juices while Bell indulged in the heavy Zalit wines. He took great delight in watching the pretty servant girls who came to replenish their empty glasses.

The Zalit girls were indeed very pretty. The Zarlt had good taste, even Bell, the connoisseur, had to admit. The red-skinned girls walked around gracefully and made sure that the glasses were always full. Bell kept imbibing heavily, just to be able to admire the magnificent movements whose even rhythm began to fascinate him.

"You like them, do you?" the Zarlt inquired with a smile. And as Bell absentmindedly nodded his approval, the Zarlt added: "They can do more than just serve at table."

This remark startled Bell.

"Oh, no... that's not what I meant," the Zarlt laughed in amusement. "They can also dance—that's what I intended to say."

"Can you read thoughts?" Bell burst out. For a fleeting moment his cheeks blushed deeply in embarrassment. Rhodan came to his assistance in order to extricate him from this tight spot.

"Your remark was a bit ambiguous, Zarlt," Rhodan said with a friendly reproach that nobody took seriously. "But we have no objections to a little dance performance."

"Let's first discuss pertinent matters of strategy." Demesor felt impelled to broach the urgent subject that had induced his guests to accept tonight's invitation. "I'm referring to our common action against Arkon."

Rhodan's eyebrows shot up. "Against Arkon?" he echoed in wonder.

"Of course I mean to say against the robot brain," the Zarlt corrected himself. "It's only because of our love for the Empire that we want to remove the rule of a robot. You can appreciate this even if you are at home in another system—even in another part of the galaxy presumably."

Clever, clever, boy, thought Rhodan to himself. Now I'm supposed to think of Earth and give away its position. Then the Mooffs—presuming they can read my mind—will know what they're after. Or rather their masters on whose behalf they're acting. Demesor probably doesn't even know why he made that remark. He's just an unwitting puppet in the hands of the Mooffs.

"True, my system is not part of the Arkonide Empire and therefore its fate needn't concern me. Unfortunately, however, I became embroiled in its affairs. The Brain is after me and I need some protection which you were kind enough to offer me. I am in your debt."

Milfor leaned forward and directed an icy glance at Rhodan. "Isn't it time now to express your appreciation in more than a few polite words?"

It was plainly evident that the Zarlt did not care for this direct approach. He tried to mediate. "I'm sure Milfor didn't mean it that way, Rhodan. Naturally, I'm also counting on it that you'll assist us in our enterprise. After all, you made a promise to that effect. As you know, we are mainly concerned with the fortified ring around Arkon. It seems impossible to penetrate it. But you were successful."

This was a question even though phrased in terms of a statement.

Bell drained his goblet and motioned to the beauty with the coppery hair. He drank in her graceful movements almost more appreciatively than the wine she poured for him. It wasn't entirely by chance when he brushed his hand against her temptingly red-brown arm. Her skin was taut, smooth—and cold.

The Zarlt noticed this little incident. He called out to the girl, speaking sharply in an unknown tongue. She bowed humbly and moved quickly away. Demesor apologized to Bell. "Forgive this slave girl for bothering you. It was just a blunder."

"Oh, not at all," said Bell: "please don't punish her for it. They are really awfully pretty, your girls."

"Zarlt Demesor," Rhodan addressed his host, "do you really think that your reign over the Empire would benefit it more than that of the robot brain?"

For a moment Demesor seemed dumbfounded by this round-about rebuff. His suspicions that Rhodan did not intend to help him with his plans seemed to be borne out by this remark. Maybe the stranger no longer needed protection from the robot brain. Or there might be some other reasons?

He managed a sour smile. "It's always disadvantageous for intelligent beings if they are dominated by a machine—and it's especially humiliating for them."

"But a machine can make faster and usually better decisions, you must admit. Otherwise we would not employ robots in our service."

"Robots?" asked Demesor. Rhodan thought he detected some signs of fear flitting across the Zarlt's features. But then Demesor smiled again as if nothing had happened. "True, but only, as you say, when they are *our* servants and not the other way around. That's a very important difference. We must not be ruled by them; they must obey us."

"If they are more capable than we, then the situation will change radically," Rhodan prophesied calmly. "This is what happened in the case of Arkon."

The Zarlt leaned closer. "Do you mean to say that the robot brain on Arkon was justified when it eliminated the Arkonides' reign?"

Once again it took several seconds until Demesor could digest this statement. "The Arkonides are decadent and no longer qualified to administer their huge realm," he finally admitted, willing to make a compromise. "However, don't you agree that the Brain ought to have looked around for some better regents before it replaced them with its own rule?"

"Who can tell," Rhodan smiled knowingly. "Maybe it *did* search first for a suitable human replacement. But at that time Elton was still the Zarlt of Zalit. Perhaps Elton was rejected by the Brain as an unsuitable choice."

Perry was very diplomatic.

Demesor clapped his hands quickly 4 times. "Let the girls entertain us with some dancing," he said, in a more generous mood now. Then he changed back to some more serious business. "I'd like to get a clear reply from you to this question: can we count on your assistance when we attack Arkon a week from now?"

6 of the girls obeyed the Zarl's command and obediently marched up to the stage. Soft music could now be heard coming from the loudspeakers. The melodies were alluring and full of unusual harmony.

"Finally things are getting a bit more interesting," Bell commented, obviously not at all concerned with the problems that seemed to weigh so heavily on the Zarl's mind. Bell turned to get a better view of the stage. He was lucky: the Zarl had taken care that his guests were exactly facing the podium.

Rhodan, on the other hand, decided to make an end to all this beating around the bush. "I'll give you a straight reply, Zarl Demesor: we will not help you in your undertaking—and this for a very simple reason. And I'll tell you what it is. If you aren't capable of overcoming the barrier obstacle around Arkon on your own, then you can't be capable either of ruling the Empire. Did I spell that out clear enough for you now?"

It was more than clear, it was an open effrontery.

The Zarl swallowed the insult.

His smile changed to a grim expression but he threw a glance of warning to his officers requesting them not to act hastily. "We're sorry to hear that," he uttered with some effort. "We're sorry indeed. You'll understand, of course, that we can't regard you any longer as our guests under the circumstances. You'll leave Zalit this evening with a transition toward the edge of this galaxy. Our spacewarp sensors will make sure that you really do obey these orders."

Rhodan appeared quite unruffled as he declared: "If that is your wish, Zarl, we'll leave this very night. And under the circumstances..." he rose from the table "...it obviously makes no sense for us to remain any longer here in your company."

Bell did not get up. He stared fascinated at the stage where the 6 girls had just started to dance. The caressing melody seemed to meld the lithe bodies which moved so harmoniously as if they had been made from the same mould. They resembled each other to such a degree that Bell could no longer tell which of these dancing girls had kept pouring wine for him.

Rhodan sighed and sat down again.

Marshall smiled faintly. He, too, was interested in the girls. Perhaps *they* knew something...? Something very strange happened to him for the second time this evening. When he started to probe the dancing girls' minds he did not encounter a defence shield but something else. He could not say what it was, only that he had experienced it earlier. Where had that been?

Now he remembered. Outside the portal when the 3 operatta-type officers had greeted them. One had been thinking of his brother-in-law, the other of some trivia—and the third had not been thinking of anything whatsoever.

That's what it was!

These 6 dancing girls weren't thinking of anything either!

They weren't thinking at all!

His attention was diverted momentarily. The music had changed. Its rhythm was wilder and faster. The girls flung their legs up in the air and began to stomp on the floor with ever-increasing speed. Bell was sitting rooted to the spot, a picture of total absorption. He didn't take his eyes off the girls for a single second.

Now they descended from the stage and approached the guests with gliding steps. They danced around them in a playful manner, skilfully evading Bell's grasping hands.

Marshall resumed his previous train of thoughts but when he found the solution barely 3 seconds later it was already too late.

The girls had assumed positions, a pair behind each visitor's chair. Before Rhodan realized what was going on, and before he could receive Marshall's telepathic warning, he was encircled from behind by metal clamps which pressed his arms close to his body.

Marshall and Bell shared his fate.

Poor Reggie! All his illusions were suddenly shattered. He felt these adorable girls so close to him but there wasn't anything he could do about it. The skin of the 2 girls who were holding him so tight was smooth and cold.

As cold as steel!

"They are robots," Marshall said aloud. The steel-wool had sure been pulled over their eyes!

Bell's red hair bristles stood on end like a porcupine. He made vain efforts to turn his head so that he could see the faces of his deceptive guards.

The Zarlt stood up. "Let's end this foolish game," he said coldly. "We have been listening too long to your promises. It's finished. If you care to go on living you'll have to reveal your secrets to us. But before you start talking we'll go to another room. Do you carry weapons?"

"Why don't you have the 'girls' search us," suggested Bell, who was getting more and more furious after overcoming his initial shock.

They had no choice but to remain motionless as they were being disarmed. The steel arms of the masquerading robots permitted no resistance. Rhodan did not feel alarmed. He knew that Marshall had long since sent the danger signal to the *Titan*. The battle had begun.

"My grandmother always used to say," Bell stated, enraged, "that a harmless fellow like myself would some day be taken in by some no good vamp. But she certainly had no idea that it would be a make-believe female with a heart of steel!"

"Sooner or later you'd have noticed the difference, I'm sure," murmured Marshall, half in fun.

The Zarlt and the officers motioned to the 6 robots and gave them an order in a strange language. Then Rhodan and his companions were lifted effortlessly by the strong steel arms of the pretty 'girls' and

carried out of the hall.

* * * *

The 3 teleporters Tako Kakuta, Ras Tschubai and Pucky had their hands full transporting all the members of the Mutant Corps into the various hide-outs of the rebel forces. The whole transaction was accomplished in 10 minutes and the *Titan* was left without any mutants.

For the first time Thora and Khrest found themselves all alone in the gigantic ship apart from the crew which had no possible way to interfere in any plans the 2 Arkonides might carry out.

One year ago, Thora would have used this opportunity to seize the spacesphere and flee to Arkon, as she once had actually attempted to do. Now everything was different.

Khrest seemed to have guessed her thoughts for he smiled gently. "You like Rhodan, don't you, Thora? Just admit it, if I'm right. By the way, I'm also very fond of him."

"It probably wouldn't be quite the same if when we returned to Arkon we had found the same conditions we used to know," she indirectly confirmed Khrest's conjecture. "This way however..."

"We couldn't wish for any better friend and ally, Thora. He dealt so much more effectively with the robot brain than all the Arkonides put together during the past 6 years. If we were to lose Rhodan it would also mean losing our own future. He entrusted the *Titan* to our care. Do you realize that this is a very important vote of confidence in us?"

"Yes," Thora said simply. "I know. And I shall justify his trust in us. Rhodan and his friends are on this planet here, the treacherous Zarlt has arrested him and I have no chance now to show him how much I would like to come to his assistance. And worse still, I may have to flee from this planet with the *Titan* as promised. It seems like treason to me to run away and leave him here a prisoner in the Zarlt's power."

"It would amount to treason if we would act against his orders," Khrest tried to calm the lovely Arkonide woman. He examined the videoscreens which showed an outside view of the spaceport. "Why don't you get some sleep, Thora? I'll be on guard and I promise to wake you if anything should happen."

"To sleep?" wondered Thora. "How can I sleep if he is in danger?"

Khrest's face expressed astonishment. "Are you that worried about him?"

She silently nodded her head in affirmation. It was a frank and brave gesture.

"You must get some rest, to be strong when the hour of decision arrives. The moment of truth may not be long in coming. I want to prove to Rhodan that he can rely on us—and that we can still fight—if necessary. Please, Thora, leave me alone now."

The platinum-haired enigma stared at him reflectively for a few instants, then obediently left the command centre.

Khrest knew he could reach her with a single touch of a button. There was no spatial separation on the Titan in this respect.

He stayed alone in the cencom and prepared himself for a long wait during the night.

He was wrong. This night turned out to be quite short after all.

* * * *

Kitai Ishibashi was the second hypno of the Mutant Corps. He could impose his will so forcefully on other people that they were absolutely convinced they were acting on their own initiative. He together with Pucky and the seer Wuriu Sengu (who could look right through solid matter) were in an underground hideaway of the rebels. It was located in a park on the outskirts of the city.

Pucky endeavoured not to lose contact with Marshall. This was no easy task since the telepath's thought vibrations were superimposed by foreign impulses which kept constantly growing stronger. It was a logical guess that these impulses originated with the Mooffs.

They are bringing us to the basement vaults of the palace. Marshall informed his fellow telepaths: "For the time being there is no real danger but Rhodan's orders are that Zernif is to act according to plan. I can't receive you very well, friends, the Mooffs are too near now—there seems to be a large number of them. And I don't know if you understand me. In any case: we are 30 feet below ground in a large, well-lit vault. Just a moment—wait for further announcements. I can't now..."

Pucky was furious. He growled: "Oh, confound it! What's going on now? Wuriu, can't you see anything?"

The seer shook his head. "Too great a distance, Pucky—I'm no wizard. Can't we get a bit nearer to the palace?"

The mouse-beaver wanted to answer but he remained silent because new impulses, stronger and more intense, began to penetrate his brain.

They didn't come from Marshall. They didn't come from anyone known to Pucky.

He was jerked out of his musings by the shrill sound of the receiver which connected them with the *Titan*.

It was Khrest.

"Attention everybody! The *Titan* is being attacked by strong enemy forces. We'll take off in accordance with orders and wait at the agreed-on point in deep space. Colonel Freyt will take the *Ganymede* to safety. Lots of luck! And spring the trap to set Rhodan free! It's up to you to save his life and the future of the Empire. Everything depends on you now!"

Khrest switched off the receiver, Pucky settled back on his hind legs and used his broad beaver tail for additional support to make sure he wouldn't lose his balance. His eyes were filled with a silent question

he didn't dare express. He briefly established communication with the other telepaths, who were staying with various other rebel groups, to make sure they had all heard Khrest's communiqué.

This bulletin had established one fact: the Zarlt had dispensed with any pretenses. He was attacking openly both the *Titan* and the *Ganymede*. He had taken Perry Rhodan prisoner.

Pucky emitted a shrill dissonant whistle. Then he said in his incredibly high-pitched voice:

"Gentlemen! Rebel friends! Rogal! Now you'll have a chance to prove what you have learned! The revolution has begun! We'll overthrow Demesor and his henchmen and liberate Perry Rhodan—well, what are you waiting for?"

Rogal stared with admiration at the little mouse-beaver whom he saw today for the first time. He still could not comprehend why such a creature could be more intelligent than a Zalite. Then he forced himself to break away from this so fascinating spectacle, turned to his comrades-in-arms and exclaimed enthusiastically:

"Long live the Empire! Long live Perry Rhodan!"

Pucky quickly covered his huge ears with his paws as a resounding response reverberated through the underground vault.

How miserable to have such big ears and to be a telepath...!

5/ THE BITTEREST BATTLE OF PERRYS LIFE

Bell screamed and raged as the 2 robot girls were carrying him out of the small hall. How differently he had envisioned this secretly planned rendezvous would turn out. Why must he always arrive at such hasty conclusions...?

Rhodan and Marshall were just as enraged but they remained calm and collected in face of this hopeless situation. Physical strength alone could not prevail if one wanted to outwit a robot, even if it was fashioned in the shape of a pretty girl.

An elevator carried them downstairs. One story below the official ground floor the elevator stopped. Demesor walked ahead to lead the way. They went along many-branched corridors which formed a complete subterranean domain 30 feet below ground level. Dim light came from the ceiling and spread a ghostly glow. Rhodan began to wonder what lay in store for them.

Torture in order to wrest their secrets from them?

If their captors were planning to use torture then definitely not the kind favoured in the Middle Ages back on Earth but rather a cleverly hatched technological method of probing their brains where lies and false information were no longer possible. And after all, there were the Mooffs who could easily

determine the veracity of all evidence obtained...

The Mooffs...!

Suddenly the scales fell from Rhodan's eyes. He felt an increasingly stronger pressure inside his skull and the beginning of a terrific headache. Bell had ceased struggling. He hung limply in the arms of the seductive girls who in reality were only soulless robots. Marshall behaved in a passive manner. He appeared to be listening to something.

The Mooffs were the driving force behind the Zarlt's sudden activity. That's what it was!

Rhodan became aware of increased probing of his brain, all coming from the same direction—from straight ahead.

Their captors were taking them to the Mooffs...?

Despite his hardly enviable situation Rhodan hastily managed to develop a theory. Experience had taught them that a single Mooff did not possess sufficient suggestive powers to force its will upon an Earthman. The Mooffs were good telepaths but not as effective in their role as suggestors.

But what would happen, Rhodan continued his stream of thoughts, if 4 or 5 Mooffs would simultaneously concentrate their efforts on one single Earthling's mind? Would the 5 fold increased energy suffice to bring their victim under their will?

The Mooffs seemed to have made identical deliberations and to be convinced of a positive outcome, for Rhodan was certain now that it wasn't just one but at least 4 or 5 Mooffs that tried to examine his mind.

That was an eventuality he had failed to take into consideration.

And this very eventuality constituted a tremendous threat.

He communicated this assumption to Marshall, who received the news with a very worried expression. But then no more time was left to make any further reflections on their situation.

The Zarlt came to a halt in front of a door. Milfor started to grin in a frankly sadistic manner and nudged Bell in the ribs. The redhead responded with an outraged roar. Demesor opened the door and led the way. The 4 officers and the 6 robots with their captives followed.

Rhodan saw that his fears had not been unfounded.

They entered a big, high-ceilinged vault which was lit up by bright lamps. Along the back wall stood a long row of pressure-tight containers holding about one dozen Mooffs. Glistening pipes connected the pressure chambers with a regeneration aggregate which continuously renewed the methane atmosphere the Mooffs needed for breathing. The alien creatures—huge jellyfish some 4-5 feet in height and measuring 3 feet across—sat motionless inside their containers and gaped with their fixed button-eyes at the arrivals.

Rhodan felt a wave of suggestive impulses wash over him. With what little powers of concentration were left to him he fought against the violent forces beamed at his brain. The 4 arms of the robot girls constrained him so tight that he was unable to move. True, there was nothing to be accomplished if he tried to use physical strength.

Now the Zarlt's voice broke in. "Rhodan, how did you succeed in overcoming the outer ring of fortifications around Arkon? Speak up or I'll hand you over to my scientists."

Rhodan remembered that the Zarlt had no inkling of the Mooffs' suggestive talents. The Zarlt believed he would simply check on the veracity of Rhodan's statements with the help of the Mooffs. He did not realize that he himself was in the power of the jelly-fish creatures who caused him to act according to their own designs. Demesor and his 4 officers were no different in this respect from Rhodan and his 2 companions—they too were prisoners of the Mooffs.

However these 5 Zalites would not have changed their basic views even without the Mooffs' suggestions. And it was this fact alone which confirmed the sentence which had long since been pronounced and was waiting now to be finally carried out.

"You won't find out anything from me, Zarlt," said Rhodan.

The beams of suggestive forces which had temporarily eased became stronger again. Rhodan noticed that neither Bell nor Marshall were affected by it—but then he needed his undivided concentration to meet the renewed assault of the Mooffs.

It was a silent duel. Only Rhodan understood the question that suddenly was present in his brain:

Do you know who we are? Why are you trying to fight us off?

Because I know who you are!

Rhodan was simply thinking this phrase and he knew that the 12 Mooffs understood him. It was the first time that he was establishing a direct contact with his opponent though the circumstances were not of his own choosing nor to his liking.

You will tell the Zarlt how it is possible to attack Arkon!

Why should I? A person like Demesor is not capable of ruling the Arkonide Empire. Or is it rather that you want to obtain this information?

Yes, we want to find this out from you!

On whose behalf?

For a few marvellous seconds all suggestive impulses disappeared, the pressure in his brain vanished. It seemed the 12 Mooffs had withdrawn in order to consult with each other. Rhodan made use of this wonderful reprieve to send a swift thought message to Marshall: *What's going on with our mutants? Are the rebels attacking? Do they know what has happened to us? Hurry up and answer me aloud in English! I can't concentrate sufficiently in order to receive your thoughts directly.*

"Mutant Corps in action! Rebellion starting! Assault on the *Titan* has begun. Another half an hour, Pucky thinks..."

He could not finish. Milfor approached and hit Marshall in the mouth with his fist.

"You aren't supposed to talk with each other!" Demesor commanded furiously. "Only when you are

asked. And I have put a question to you, Rhodan!"

"Just go on waiting for an answer!" Rhodan suggested coldly while he calculated what might happen in this next half hour. Of course, there was always the possibility of simply telling the truth to Demesor. What good would the information do him unless he had a tele-transmitter." Besides, Demesor's reign—if all went according to plan—would last only another 30 minutes. —But then Rhodan's unflinching pride and unshakable will to triumph over his adversaries won out. "You can wait till you fry in hell!"

Demesor had perfect self-control, or maybe the Mooffs gave him an order not to lose his temper. Anyhow, he remained silent and kept watching the events unfolding in front of his eyes.

Now the Mooffs proceeded ruthlessly. They resumed their assault on Rhodan with combined and concentrated forces. A tidal wave of painful thought impulses stormed against Rhodan's brain, threatening to drown it under their weight. Rhodan's mental capacities had been greatly reinforced thanks to Khrest's hypno-training. Thus he managed to erect a thought-shield which weakened the incoming impulses of the Mooffs. Nevertheless it was a superhuman effort to resist them.

Rhodan fought the bitterest battle of his life.

His opponents remained immobile inside their transparent boxes, relatively harmless and totally defenceless foes—provided their intended victim had full use of his arms and legs. They were mute by nature and therefore communicated only via telepathy; in their home world they had developed parapsychological abilities which constituted an unimaginable force—if applied in coordination.

Rhodan realized now that they had underestimated the Mooffs—unless the latter had only recently learned to deploy their suggestive forces according to some predestined plan at the proper time.

Time...

Rhodan knew he had to gain time. He could sense his resistance fade away under the onslaught of the alien monsters' suggestive impulses. He tried to maintain his mental defences with every fibre of his being. He was still holding out. But for how much longer...?

He almost collapsed as the Mooffs abruptly withdrew. Just like a man who is throwing his full weight against a door which suddenly gives way.

25 minutes to go!

Marshall's eyes assumed a fixed stare. Rhodan realized that the Mooffs had selected another victim. Perhaps they might try later on once more with him but they seemed more interested in finding the weakest of their 3 prisoners.

The Zalites remained quiet. They appeared as if seized by a spell, unaware what was going on before their eyes. Rhodan felt no pity for them. He pictured in his mind's eye what would happen to the Empire if they would seize power and eliminate the robot brain from its present position as ruler. It would be a reign of puppets, moving to the strings held by the Mooffs who again in turn were acting according to the commands of some mightier and more clever unknown third party.

No!

Misplaced compassion might bring about the fall of an empire and serfdom for hundreds of worlds.

Alarmed, Rhodan turned his attention to Marshall who, being a telepath, had enough experience and energy to ward off the Mooffs' assault.

Scarcely 4 minutes later the jellyfish creatures gave up their attempt.

Before they attacked their third victim, Rhodan sent thoughts in Marshall's direction. *Call Pucky! Urge him to hurry up! Only Pucky can help us now!*

Now it was Bell's turn...

He, too, had gone through the hypno-schooling of the Arkonides, which had tremendously enlarged his knowledge. Yet the capacity of his mental defences was not sufficient to entirely ward off the Mooffs' attack.

His face was contorted with pain. Beads of perspiration covered his forehead as the agonizing impulses threatened to corrode his brain. His lips began to stammer helplessly and his eyes no longer perceived where his body was.

The hall of the telepaths... had chosen its victim!

* * * *

The drive pulse aggregates of the *Titan* suddenly came to life. Thora gave the signal for all-out alarm. The crew, which meanwhile had been perfectly drilled, rendered the gigantic spacecraft ready for immediate defensive action within 4 minutes.

However orders were to avoid a battle where mainly innocent victims would be killed. Therefore flight was the only possibility to foil the attack by the Zalite fleet.

In the next hangar the *Ganymede* was lifting off on the meanwhile activated gravitational fields and soon shot with unimaginable speed up into the dark skies of Zalit. A few seconds—then the 2400-foot-long space ship had vanished.

Blinding flashes came from the cannons at the edge of the landing field. Dazzling energy beams chased after the fleeing spaceship but glanced off ineffectively from its defence screens. Now the batteries swung around and bombarded the *Titan*.

Thora observed how the energy rays burst on impact on her protective forcefields and then scattered in all directions. Farther away in the background the first destroyers of the Zalite fleet lifted off, intent on attacking the *Titan* from above.

She switched on the intercom.

"Attention! Calling all hands! We'll start in 10 seconds! Top acceleration with all neutralizers running. Transition in 11 minutes!"

Thora didn't know how many of the hostile ships were already aloft above the spaceport, ready to

attack; she only knew that she was leaving Rhodan behind on this world—and she was doing this because he wanted her to. She felt a coward but she had to bring this ship to safety—and she had to spare the life of the enemies.

5 seconds, to go.

She was seized by the most intense dilemma of emotions she had ever experienced. Her right index finger slowly sank lower over the starting button. She would depress it firmly, the Arkonide reactors would release their energies—and the giant vessel would be hurled into the black sky with incredible force—into a sky which in reality was not black but a confusion of glittering stars.

The last second seemed to last longer than any before.

But now it too had passed and then all hell broke loose on the landing field of Tagnor.

The *Titan* shot up into the night sky and effortlessly broke through the echelons of the waiting destroyers. The protective screens surrounding the Zalite ships were nullified when the energy bell enveloping Rhodan's battleship impinged on them while passing through. Unsteady, like withered leaves, 10, 20 destroyers tumbled out of the sky, down to the ground where they smashed, breaking up in a huge jet of flame. The suction of the mile-wide sphere alone destroyed 3 energy-cannon emplacements and the underground installations on the landing field.

Thora was unaware of all this. She kept staring at the videoscreens and hardly paid attention to Lt. Tiffior, who silently was sitting in his navigation-seat a few yards away from the Arkonide woman, never once taking his eyes off her.

Tiff had no idea what the true reasons were for Thora's pent-up anger; he assumed her eagerness to be due to her desire to annihilate the foe. It did not occur to him that Rhodan might be responsible for Thora's vile temper.

Then the planet sank away below the *Titan*, soon to be swallowed up by the deeps of space. As soon as the speed of light was attained the transition took place.

When the *Titan* returned from hyperspace into the 4th dimension, the *Ganymede* was standing at a distance of about 0.005 light-seconds from the emerging *Titan*, so precise were the calculations even though both ships had covered a distance of exactly 2 light-years in the meantime.

* * * *

Pucky materialized in front of the awestruck eyes of the rebels. To his great regret he had no time to bask in the light of their obvious admiration. Rhodan's desperate appeal for help was still too fresh in his memory.

"Adm. Zernif," urged the mouse-beaver, "would you have in your possession a detailed map of the Zarl's palace? Especially of its underground installations? It's most pressing!"

The leader of the rebels motioned a man to come closer.

"When you found the secret passage didn't you make a plan?"

"Of course. Rogal has it."

"Thank you!" twittered Pucky—and vanished.

A very perplexed Zernif and several wide open mouths remained behind.

Pucky knew where Rogal was at the moment, namely in the farthest advanced post of the rebel hide-outs, barely 300 feet before the palace entrance. A corridor connected the 2 rebel centres.

But Pucky felt too rushed to run this distance—his short legs were most unsuitable for such efforts. He simply concentrated his thoughts on his destination—and jumped.

As a precaution he landed on the surface, in this case in a park.

All seemed quiet. The red glow of the nearby palace tempted Pucky to act on his own hook but then reason won out—and prudence.

Who knew where he might land if he were to jump at random?

Two additional teleportation attempts brought him to the hideout. Rogal almost fell off the stool on which he had just sat down. The other Zalites. stared at Pucky as if they were seeing a ghost. Despite the serious situation Pucky grinned back and, pleased about the commotion he had created, he displayed his incisor. Then he emitted a loud and dissonant whistle, waddled over to Rogal and chirped:

"I need the map of the palace—I'm especially interested in the layout of the basement. Rhodan is in danger."

Rogal jumped up. He began searching through his pockets but could not find the plan. He looked puzzled. Then he remembered.

"I don't have the map. It's probably still in the old headquarters where we were earlier and..."

He spoke into empty space. Pucky was no longer present. While Rogal was still completing his sentence the little mouse-beaver was already carrying out a search in the old headquarters and found the map in the breast pocket of a uniform jacket draped over the back of a chair. He executed a short leap to visit briefly with Wuriu Sengu and Kitai Ishibashi. The 2 mutants were very unhappy to be condemned to sit around inactively, unable to be of any help.

"Where have you been all this time?" growled Sengu. "What's the matter with Rhodan?"

"He's been taken prisoner, don't you know?" Pucky countered saucily, then studied the map. A little while later his bared incisor revealed its owner's mood had changed and become more optimistic. "We must come to his aid before it is too late. The Mooffs' suggestive thought streams are superimposed on Marshall's telepathic impulses. I can't receive him any more. This is why I fetched this plan; it will help me calculate properly where to jump. I'm going back alone again to explore the territory. Then I'll return to pick up Wuriu. And, as soon as we know precisely where the prisoners and the Mooffs are holed up, I'll come to fetch Kitai—then we'll attack. Is that clear?"

A little confused, the 2 Japanese mutants shook their heads. Although they had known Pucky for quite some time already it still impressed them as strange when an oversized Mickey Mouse asked 2 adult men if they understood something.

Pucky misinterpreted their head shaking.

"I want to know if you get me...!"

Eagerly and still confused the 2 men nodded their heads in affirmation but Pucky had once more disappeared.

After all, he could read minds...

6/ MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Pucky studied the map very carefully.

He was squatting on his broad hind parts, holding the paper in his front paws, which resembled human hands although they were much smaller and very hairy. Looking at this little fellow one would be hard put to believe that he generally surpassed human beings in talents and intelligence. There was no other mutant besides the little mouse-beaver who simultaneously mastered telepathy, telekinetics and teleportation. Pucky's IQ was comparable to Rhodan's although he had never had the advantage of receiving as thorough a hypno-training as his adored human friend. His greatest strength lay, however, in his inconspicuous outer appearance.

An animal—yet superior to man...

Pucky's high voice said in shrill tones:

"It's exactly 758 feet from here to the palace entrance. The last time I could track Marshall's thought-streams I pinpointed his location at some 750 feet away. This indicates clearly that the underground vault is situated in our direction. Thus we know the direction. I'll jump to the Palace, 30 feet below the surface and approximately for a distance of 750 feet. This ought to permit me to materialize at the spot where Marshall, and presumably also Rhodan and Bell, were a few minutes ago."

Wuriu demurred. "Hadn't I better come along? After all I can see through solid walls."

"I'll pick you up shortly." Pucky nodded reassuringly at him—and vanished.

When his eyes could see again, he found himself standing in a corridor not far from an elevator door. All was quiet; not a sound to be heard.

But Pucky did not have to rely on his sense of hearing. His sensitive brain reacted immediately. But Rhodan's and Marshall's brains were strongly overlain by the alien impulses emanating from the Mooffs. Their intensity indicated that he was only a short distance removed from their source. The captives might be hidden behind the next door.

Pucky made a return leap and fetched Wuriu Sengu first and Kitai Ishibashi next.

The two Japanese mutants had drawn their small but powerful pulse rayguns. Pucky dispensed with any weapon.

"Well, Wuriu, can you see anything?"

Marshall's thought-streams, Pucky ascertained now, had been completely submerged in the whirlpool of the Mooffs' impulses. Even Pucky could feel how powerful the attempt of the jellyfish-telepaths was to subdue the Earthman under their will.

And then, suddenly, Marshall was free from this torture. The third and this time decisive assault on Bell had begun. There was no doubt that the Mooffs would be successful with him.

Marshall at once established contact with Pucky, whose probing thought-approaches he perceived again once the Mooffs had turned their attention away from him.

Where are you, Pucky? They're working Reggie over now. He won't be able to hold out for long. Answer me...

The mouse-beaver was waiting for the seer's report. Wuriu suddenly nodded his head while he stared at the nearest wall. "I can see them," he whispered excitedly. "Hardly 30 feet from here. That door over there!" He pointed to the second door. "They seem to have concentrated on Bell now. What business have those pretty girls participating in this whole affair?"

"What girls?" Pucky wanted to know. He fondly remembered girls: they were much better at gently stroking his fur and softly scratching him all over. Much better than lazy, self-centred men. "There are girls in there?"

"Yes. They are holding down Rhodan, Marshall and Bell," Wuriu reported, astonished. He could not get over this strange sight. "Now Bell is no longer trying to fight back."

"Won't do him any harm to have his brain convolutions cleaned out a bit," Pucky warbled mischievously. In reality he thought quite differently. The Mooffs were in for something! Then he beamed a thought in Marshall's direction: *We'll attack in seconds!*

Proceed with caution! came Marshall's thought-reply. *The Zarlt and his officers have our weapons. The 6 robots must be put out of action. The Mooffs...*

Robots? Wuriu hasn't seen any robots.

They are built like pretty girls. We fell into their trap.

Pucky looked completely perplexed. What a pity that no one could appreciate this funny sight! Then he spoke grimly: "Wuriu! Kitai! You know your job. Kitai will concentrate on the Mooffs and make sure that their emission of suggestions will be interrupted long enough till I can take care of them. Wuriu, you'll be in charge of the Zalites. And I..." and Pucky grinned, flashing his incisor, looking very content, I'll devote myself to the lovely handmaidens."

"Who...?" Wuriu gaped dumbfounded. "The handmaidens?"

"So what!" growled the little mouse-beaver as he stopped in front of the door. "Or has any of you ever witnessed when *I couldn't* handle 6 girls at the same time?"

The Japanese mutants fell silent, perplexed. Indeed, they had never witnessed such a sight.

* * * *

Bell's mental and physical collapse was nearly complete. The only reason he remained standing upright were the strong arms of the seductive robot girls encircling and supporting his body. The 5 Zalites stood aside waiting with stoic calm what would happen next. One of the 12 Mooffs seemed to have them under his control, for their powers of resistance were far weaker than those of the Earthmen.

Rhodan and Marshall were entirely free of any hypnotic onslaught. At least 11 Mooffs were concentrating their efforts on poor Bell, who couldn't possibly withstand this assault.

"Unless Pucky gets here soon," Rhodan murmured, "I don't know what might happen."

"They're already outside in the corridor," Marshall whispered back. "In a few seconds..."

Kitai materialized in the hall together with Pucky. The latter however vanished at once. One second later he returned with Wuriu Sengu, whose pulse raygun went immediately into action. The Zalites never knew that they were dying. They had no chance whatsoever to defend themselves.

Kitai was a quite capable suggestor. Measured by the Mooffs' standards he seemed a veritable giant. Before the jellyfish-creatures could register any change and then to adapt to it, they were attacked and shaken by such powerful impulses that they let go immediately of their victim. Bell hung limply in the arms of the robot girls. His eyes were closed but he was alive.

Pucky focused first telekinetic energy beams on the 2 robots who held Rhodan in their tight embrace. He forced their arms apart, slowly, inch by inch until Rhodan managed to free himself. The pretty guards remained standing there, immobilized in a rigid posture. Pucky could of course not keep up this trick indefinitely. There were too many other tasks to be accomplished. He motioned to Wuriu without looking at him.

"Play your beamer on the robots—regardless how darling they look."

Seconds later the 2 dancing girls had changed into small heaps of molten metal and plastic.

"Brrrr," Pucky shivered, shaking his fur like a wet dog. "Who would've thought that pretty girls look like *that* on the inside!"

Marshall was set free next and his guards were annihilated.

Then it was Bell's turn.

In his case Pucky had to be very careful that his friend would not slump to the ground like a sack of

potatoes the moment the robots would release their grip on him. But fortunately for Pucky, Bell regained consciousness just in time.

He opened his eyes and grasped the situation with one glance—and managed a distorted grin.

Aha—Pucky, naturally! Whenever Pucky gets wind of some girls you can't hold him back.

For an instant the mouse-beaver was so startled about this monstrous claim that he didn't react. But then he displayed his incisor and waved to Bell in a generous manner.

"I won't contend your right to keep them all to yourself! Thanks for nothing!" With these words Pucky turned to Rhodan. "And now let's eliminate these Mooffs, Lord and Master."

Kitai had meanwhile succeeded in bringing the Mooffs entirely under his power. The strange creatures seemed to be paralysed and squatted motionless inside their containers. They appeared to guess what fate was in store for them.

"Pucky!" Bell roared desperately. "Rescue me from these monsters!"

Slowly the mouse-beaver turned around, regarded the idyll with shiny incisor and bristling fur. He seemed to be highly amused to see Bell held tight in the embrace of 2 pretty females.

"Have you had enough?" he inquired with mock solicitousness.

"Just get me out of here—you can keep them if you like. Maybe you can program them for fur-tickling—or whatever you please."

Pucky giggled. It sounded rather silly.

"Thanks, no. Not interested in training these lifeless dolls. I know somebody who is better qualified for such a serious task as fur-tickling."

"You don't mean..." Bell began to say jealously but Pucky cut him off:

"I mean *you*, old pal! If I set you free you must promise to spend at least 5 hours with me and..."

"I promise! I promise! Please, hurry!"

The moment Bell was released from the robot girls' steely embrace he staggered over to Kitai, borrowed his pulse raygun and walked back to the 2 robots, who had remained completely passive. The Zarlt, the master they had obeyed, was dead.

Bell held the gun right directly in front of the phony faces of the dancing girls.

"And now I'll finish you off, you... you. He could not find the right word to express his disgust. "You'll never again foster stupid thoughts and desires in honest men, I promise you! Go on, turn around! Get going!" But the 2 darlings did not react. They remained quiet and motionless as they were. "Well, have it your way! Farewell and say hello from me to the others in robot heaven!"

While the graceful figures dissolved in smoking plastic and molten metal, Bell held his nose, horrified at the stench and moaned:

"And to think that I almost... no! It's inconceivable! What a flop...!"

Pucky had watched with interest but then he grew tired of the whole farce. He waddled over to Kitai. "I'll simply lift the Mooffs in their cages up to the ceiling and then let them drop to the ground. The methane atmosphere will escape from the containers and they'll die a gentle death."

Rhodan who had not commented so far, now joined the conversation.

"We aren't going to kill them, Pucky. It will be better if Kitai is going to suggest to them firmly that they'll have to serve a new master from now on. They are to remain passive until we'll come and fetch them. There's plenty of room in the *Titan* for 12 Mooffs."

Bell's eyes looked like 2 huge watery-blue marbles as he stammered: "Do you... want to... install a zoo... in the *Titan*, Perry? Why?"

Perry laughed. "Sometimes you really can act dense, Reggie. You know we aren't so much interested in the Mooffs themselves..."

"That's why!"

"...but far more in the unknown strangers who had them brought to Zalit. Maybe time will make them a little more communicative. That's why I'm getting myself a little zoo. Get it?"

"Do I look that stupid?" replied Bell sharply. He seemed to be fully recovered. Pucky giggled.

"I thought I suffered from visual disturbances," he remarked with mock seriousness. Bell stared at him surprised but he was too preoccupied with his own thoughts to notice the dig at him.

Rhodan glanced briefly at the wall where the Zarlt and his officers had been standing.

"I suppose hell must have broken loose outside by now. I think we'd better inform Adm. Zernif of the Zarlt's death. This might save the lives of thousands of Zalite citizens. If they hear that the tyrant has been overthrown they'll lay down their arms. In this respect Wuriu did a good deed, although I wasn't at all in agreement at first with having the guilty ones punished this way."

Marshall had been listening quietly with his 'inner ear'. Now he lifted his head.

"The rebels are storming the palace. They are overrunning anything in their way—palace guards, soldiers, personnel..."

"Let's hurry!" Rhodan urged. "We mustn't lose any time in announcing to the Zalites that we have shaken off their tyrant's yoke. And I personally feel a great urge to have another talk with an old friend of mine..."

"An old friend of yours? Who would that be?" Bell wanted to know.

"Who else but our giant partner, the robot brain of Arkon!"

Thora had slept for a few hours when she was awakened by Lt. Tiffloor.

* * * *

"Pardon me, Madam. Khrest asked me to tell you in person to come to the command centre right away."

Thora sat up in her bed. "What's going on, Tiff?"

"Nothing, Madam. Nothing so far."

Thora refrained from further questions. She waited until Tiff had closed her cabin door behind him, then got up. A few minutes later she joined Khrest in the command centre.

The Arkonide scientist hardly turned his head when Thora entered. Tiff sat before the navigational-brain, gathering up some foils of information from it. All panoramic videoscreens were switched on, totally depicting the image of deep space surrounding the *Titan* .

Thora recognized the small Arkonide robot-scoutships, also larger battle units and cruisers. Farther in the background were lurking gigantic battleships of the *Stardust* type, spacespheres with a diameter of 2400 feet.

"What's that supposed to be?" Thora asked. Her eyes were busy trying to locate the *Ganymede* . The giant torpedo was hovering apparently motionless some miles away from the *Titan* . In reality the 2 ships were moving in free fall toward the sun Voga. "Are they attacking us? Are these the Zarlt's ships?"

For an instant Khrest took his eyes off the instrument panel.

"So far, no attack, Thora. These are battle units of the Empire. All are robot-guided vessels. I haven't figured out yet what all of this means. I wonder if the robot brain on Arkon is ignoring its agreements with Rhodan?"

Thora did not answer. She calmly studied the array of the Arkonide fleet. There was an icy glitter in her eyes. When finally she started to speak her voice sounded cold and determined. "Arkon's fleet! If they dare attack us we'll teach them a fine lesson, Khrest, which neither Orcast nor the Brain will ever forget. We have in our possession the mightiest ship of the entire universe—and we'll never let go of it!"

Khrest managed an astonished smile.

"But there hasn't been any attack so far. I've been trying to establish radio communication with the commanding officer—who or whatever might be the commander of this fleet. Perhaps he or it has not yet received the Regent's new orders. It's quite possible in the present confusion."

"But in case they attack..." Thora began and Khrest quickly interrupted her.

"Then we'll defend ourselves, of course. Tiff, what is it?"

The young lieutenant seemed to have awaited this question.

"They've fallen in with us, moving along at the same pace. They remain passive. There can be no question of attack. It's... well, it's rather like a surveillance. What do you make of it?"

"I don't know yet," Khrest answered and established video contact with Col. Freyt on the *Ganymede* .

"Red alert, Colonel! At the first sign of aggression, open fire with all you have. Erect protective energy shields. In case of emergency don't hesitate to make fullest use of the tele-transmitter."

"Will do, Khrest."

Two impregnable fortresses were waiting to go into action.

Thora inquired suddenly, "When are we returning to Zalit? We can't go on waiting here indefinitely. There's no way that Rhodan can get in touch with us."

"He has the Mutant Corps and the resistance groups fighting on his side. I'm not worried about him. But I don't like the notion of destroying the Regent's ships. And it does appear..."

"Why don't we ask the Brain?"

Khrest looked at Thora with amazement. Then he slowly nodded his head.

"That's a possibility. Of course! why didn't that occur to me? Tiff, establish communication with the robot brain via hypersender. Thora will help you with it."

This time it took almost 20 minutes till the metal hemisphere became visible on the big screen of the hypercom installation.

The mechanical voice was just as cold and impersonal as during their first conversation. "Contact! Identify yourself!"

"Thora of the Zoltral clan," the Arkonide woman replied testily. "Why are you not abiding by the agreements you made, Regent? Haven't you accorded full freedom of action to Perry Rhodan?"

"Specify your complaint!"

"What *complaint*?" Thora flashed furiously. "Your fleet has encircled us. Do you insist on getting a taste of our weapon arsenal?"

"You are not under attack. You are merely under surveillance. You are free at any time to change location—which I would suggest you do, by the way. Return to Zalit. Rhodan's mission is completed. The Zarlt is dead."

Thora remained speechless for a few moments, then took a deep breath. "The Zarlt is dead? The rebels have won?"

"The traitors and enemies of the Empire have been punished. The new Zarlt will be proclaimed today; his name is Adm. Zernif, if my data are correct. Rhodan expects your immediate return, Thora of the Zoltral clan. Do not make him wait. I expect a detailed report."

The big screen went dark.

Thora hesitated for a short while before she addressed Khrest: "Victory for Rhodan, Khrest! I'm so happy...!"

Khrest smiled. "Did you expect anything else?" Then he turned to Tiff. "Tiff, calculate the co-ordinates and energy impulses for a transition to Zalit. I'll inform Col. Freyt that the *Ganymede* is to follow us shortly afterwards."

Tiff set to work.

Khrest's glance rested for a fraction of a moment on Thora's radiant face, then his hand resolutely grasped the controls.

7/ MOMENTOUS MOMENTS WITH KHREST, PUCKY, REGGIE AND... PERRY & THORA

The rebels had stormed the palace. The officers of the guard had been taken prisoner. Admiral Zernif had issued orders to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. He had learned from Rhodan what role the Mooffs had played. He hoped to see these officers once again become loyal subjects of the Empire after they had been freed from the hypnotic spell of the alien jellyfish.

The news of the Zarlt's death spread like wildfire. Soon all the troops laid down their arms. The fleet units rushed back to Zalit from all over and placed themselves unconditionally under the command of Adm. Zernif who had been proclaimed the new Zarlt of Zalit by the resistance forces.

Within a few hours peace and order had been restored on Zalit. Zernif had assumed the reign on a provisional basis until he could be officially installed as ruler of Zalit. His first official function was to inform the robot brain on Arkon of the recent events. He did not forget to emphasize the decisive role Rhodan had played during the liberation of Zalit.

Then Zernif received Rhodan and his closest friends.

The Mutant Corps was led into a hall where a feast awaited them. Most of the mutants had not been able to participate during this latest mission, which did not prevent them however from enjoying the fabulous delicacies spread out on the dining tables.

Only Rhodan, Bell, Marshall and Pucky were taken to the Zarlt Zernif.

The old Zalite rose when the friends entered and walked toward them, hands outstretched in greeting. "I don't know how to express my heartfelt thanks, Perry Rhodan. You hail from an unknown section of the Milky Way but you have saved the Arkonide Empire. Though I'm not powerful enough ever to pay our debt to you, I'm sure that the Regent will..."

"He's already paid in advance," grinned Bell and pointed over to a window through which a part of the landing field could be seen. A tremendous shadow was just descending softly out of the radiant sky and touched down as lightly as a feather. "The *Titan* —she is the Empire's gift to Perry Rhodan. A truly

princely present."

Rhodan also looked out of the window. He asked Zernif: "Will you send a message of reassurance to the ship? And could you perhaps send for Thora and Khrest and have them brought here?"

Zernif complied with his guest's wishes and had one of his adjutants take care of the matter at once. Then he turned again to his guests. "We still haven't seen the end of our problems. The real instigators of this abortive insurrection against Arkon are the Mooffs. There are enough of them left on our world to cause new trouble."

"You must take care that they can't do that any more," counselled Rhodan. "Have some rooms prepared in the vaults of the palace, properly insulated against radiation and shielded against any outer influences, then install all the Mooffs there. Why should we kill them? They are relatively harmless. I'll have a talk with the Regent. He'll make the proper disposition of them. And be sure to cut off any reinforcements, Zernif," That's important. If you follow this advice Zalit will not fall further victim to the dangerous jellyfish."

"I'll see to it that the proper measures will be taken," promised the new Zarlt. "The recent events were a warning for us. Now we realize what dangers threaten us if we relax our vigilance. Even the greatest positronic brain of the known universe is by no means infallible. Man cannot be entirely replaced."

"I only hope the Brain will also reach this insight. Only then will there still be a future for Arkon."

Adm. Zernif threw a fleeting glance at Pucky. "You have some very capable collaborators," he stated admiringly.

The mouse-beaver sat on a chair, leaning comfortably against its ornate back. His front paws were resting neatly on the tabletop. His incisor was displayed in all its magnificence, speaking plainly of the splendid mood of its owner who, despite his droll appearance, represented an inestimable danger to any enemy.

"If you should ever need our help again began Pucky. But Zernif cut him off with a quick wave of his hand.

"I hope that day will never come, I sincerely do. It was a dreadful time to have to live under the dictatorship of Demesor and his Mooffs."

"How simple things would be if they were indeed his Mooffs," Rhodan remarked dryly. "Unfortunately they are not. But some day this mystery, too, will be solved."

Pucky was still grinning. He seemed to be having a high time. Zernif bent over and gently stroked his rust-red fur. "You must be mighty pleased that all is over now, aren't you?"

Pucky's eyes were radiant with an inner glow. "This is part of it. But I have other reasons to be in such a happy mood, my dear Zarlt. I'm looking forward to a marvellous treat and..."

Unfortunately he could not describe the character of this treat for he was interrupted by Thora's and Khrest's entrance into the dining hall. Their eyes shone with happiness and pride. With heads held high they advanced toward the new Zarlt, bowed lightly and then greeted Rhodan.

"We've already been informed by the robot brain of the events that took place," said Khrest, "and upon

his advice we returned to Zalit. The Regent requests you to get in touch with him immediately. The Regent also confirmed the position of Adm. Zernif as the new Zarlt of Zalit."

"The *Titan* ...?"

"Everything okay. The *Ganymede* is expected to arrive at any moment, too."

Rhodan rose from the table. "Will you forgive me, Zarlt Zernif, if I am thinking of my duty first. I must hurry to the *Titan* and talk to the Regent of the Empire. I'll return in about half an hour. Bell, keep an eye on the Corps. Make sure that there is not too much wine drinking."

Bell made a grimace. "Never mind. I've found out that were being served by regular robots—not pretty girls."

Pucky giggled. Thora appeared consternated. Khrest's face showed plainly that he did not understand. Marshall had a knowing grin.

"My friend speaks out of bitter experience," Rhodan enlightened the Zarlt with a smile. "Till later."

He left the room and closed the door behind him.

Pucky stopped giggling, slid off his chair and waddled to the door. There he turned around and regarded the assembled crowd with a challenging glance. "Well?" he uttered and emitted a shrill whistling sound of expectation. "Do you believe I want to die of thirst? What are we all waiting for?"

And the door opened as if moved by invisible hands.

Solemnly the little mouse-beaver hobbled across the threshold, totally relying on his superb sense of smell. Which, considering his other far-advanced senses, represented an atavistic throwback.

* * * *

The videoscreen started to light up slowly. The glittering cupola appeared, glowing from the inside and shining like silver.

"I've been expecting your call," said the impersonal voice in place of a greeting. "Your activities on Zarlt have convinced me that you are working and thinking in the interest of the Empire. The *Titan* will remain in your possession. Thora and Khrest of the Zoltral clan will be her official commanding officers. For you, Perry Rhodan, I have another task in mind."

Perry Rhodan needed a few seconds to recover from this surprising statement. He had not counted on the robot brain charging him to carry out a mission in its behalf.

"I regret, Regent, but my present task is not yet completed. The Mooffs were merely the *apparent* instigators of the planned attack on Arkon. I must find out who all is behind this scheme."

"This is exactly what I want you to do," the Regent commented in a matter-of-fact tone. "Our plans are

identical. You'll stay one more week, according to your chronology, on Zalit to assist the Zarlt with his clean-up operations. I request another call from you tomorrow. Will you see to it that the 2 Arkonides will be present.

"Then you'll receive further instructions and all the information that I can obtain and pass on to you."

"Do you have any clues at all to who these unknown powers might be?"

"Not so far," admitted the Brain. "You captured alive a larger number of Mooffs, as I learned. Do not take the full dozen along with you aboard the *Titan*, only 3 of them. Thus you might find out something that might be of advantage to us."

Rhodan noted with great interest that the Brain had used the term 'us.' This apparently minor detail seemed to him of the utmost importance. This meant that the Regent was already identifying Perry Rhodan with the Arkonide Empire.

"Thank you for the suggestion, Regent. I'll call you tomorrow at the same time."

"I'll be waiting," came the reply and the screen grew dark again.

Rhodan did not immediately return to Tagnor. For nearly half an hour he stayed alone in the command centre to meditate undisturbed. The overall view began to take shape. Arkon was ruled by a robot but on the other hand it was smart enough to realize that it could not manage without man's help. Perhaps it had been originally programmed this way—who could tell...? In any case, Rhodan was now working quite officially on behalf of the great Brain.

What remarkable progress for mankind!

He returned by car to the Zarlt's festivities.

* * * *

Late in the evening of that day, Khrest visited Rhodan in his private cabin. It was a large, comfortably furnished room equipped with a wraparound screen connected with the outside cameras which were arranged like a circle around the *Titan*. The band of videoscreens served as a soft source of illumination inside Rhodan's cabin.

Rhodan was surprised to see Khrest. The Arkonide scientist brushed his white hair back with his hand and looked for a seat. With a sigh he sat down. "I still wanted to have a word with you, Perry. There was no opportunity all day long."

"We went through a lot of turmoil today," Rhodan admitted with a smile. "Is it about tomorrow's talk with the robot brain?"

"No, Perry, this is about Thora and myself."

"I can't wait to hear what it is."

The scientist seemed to have difficulty in finding the right words. "The robot brain has given you a task to carry out—this is a good sign. It recognizes and approves of you. The same with us, I know. Thora and I have been named official commanders of the *Titan*. But you know as well as I who is actually the commander of this ship. Why this pretense? Why can't the Regent say frankly that you are guiding this spaceship and determining its course?"

"Even a robot may feel bound by tradition," conjectured Rhodan, empathizing with Khrest's anguish. "It's not done to hand over the best and strongest ship of the whole Empire to some alien, particularly since this stranger acquired this prize by stealing it in the first place. On the other hand, the Brain recognizes that the Empire can only profit from an alliance with this person. This explains the compromise. Is that what's worrying you so much that you come to see me in the middle of the night?"

"Not really, Perry. I just wanted to hear your views on this subject. And besides, it's only evening and not night. Thora is also worried about this problem. By the way, Perry... you ought to pay more attention to Thora in future. I believe she has undergone some vital changes. I can almost believe that she is now in agreement with my secret plans. Do you remember? —We discussed this some 13 years ago."

"13 years ago...?" repeated Rhodan slowly. Then he recalled. "You are referring to the plan to reconstruct the Arkonide Empire to its past splendour? I'm not sure that her pride and her strong sense of tradition would ever permit an Earthman to replace the robot brain."

Khrest smiled gently. There was a soft glow in his eyes. "True, not her pride nor her race consciousness—but maybe her love."

"Her love...?"

"Yes, her love for her homeland—and for you, Perry. Or are you blind?"

Rhodan avoided looking straight into his friend's eyes. "Not blind, Khrest. But I never had time for it. Besides, Thora and I are worlds apart and, especially, eternities."

"That can be changed. All that is necessary is the earnest desire for it. Some day you may even be forced to, Perry." He rose and walked to the door. "Good night and—think about what I just said. Now you do have time for it."

Perry stared at the door that had just closed behind his departing friend. Had anyone been present to observe his face, they would have been hard put to describe the expression on it. The Peacelord was far from at peace with himself. Two seconds later he was on his feet, shrugging into his jacket and outside in the corridor, where Khrest was just disappearing around a bend of the hallway.

The antigrav brought Rhodan to the erstwhile main deck in the midsection of the ship. Thora's apartment was close to the mutants' quarters.

Also Bell resided here.

As Rhodan passed Bell's door it opened and Pucky came waddling out. The expression on his face had been described many times before by poets in song and verse: sheer heavenly bliss. He shut Bell's door behind him, chuckling happily while he hobbled down the corridor. Suddenly he did a double take and turned around slowly.

"You, Perry?" Pucky squeaked in mock astonishment. "What are *you* doing here?" There was a roguish twinkle in his limpid brown eyes; his incisor jutted out from between his lips; Pucky grinned as though he had just discovered a whole field of delicious carrots. "Oh, I see! Too late, Rhodan, too late! Am I a telepath or am I not? —well, enjoy yourself! I'm a gentleman and know when to keep my mouth shut!" And with a mischievous giggle and some gay if horribly off key whistling he waddled off and disappeared in the mess hall of the Mutant Corps.

For a moment Rhodan was annoyed that he had not kept his thoughts in check but then his curiosity got the better of him: what in the world had Pucky been doing in Bell's cabin at such a late hour? He retraced his steps and stuck his head inside his best friend's door.

His hair standing on end, Bell stood at the wash basin, cold water running over his wrists. His face held the look of a man condemned to purgatory.

"What happened?!" Perry asked with deep concern. "You didn't have a row with Plucky, did you?"

"A row? With Pucky?" Bell moaned and rubbed his obviously stiff wrists. "Oh, no—quite the contrary. Remember I promised him something? Well, scratching his fur for 5 hours is about as bad as scraping your fingernails on a blackboard for as long a time! I wonder if I've got any fingerprints left? And I've only paid off 2 hours of my debt so far—3 more to go!"

Understanding, Rhodan grinned and began to close the door. Adding a word of sympathy he said, "Get some bandages—and next time be a bit more careful what promises you make. Night!"

He was still smiling when he knocked on Thora's door but now the smile was not one of amusement but... tenderness?

The beautiful Arkonide stared at the most powerful man of the New Power as though she were seeing one of those supernatural entities whose existence she had first heard of on distant Earth—a ghost. "You...?" was all she was capable of murmuring weakly.

Rhodan entered without invitation and closed the cabin door firmly behind him. "Thora, there's something I have to discuss with you..."

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE GIANT'S PARTNER

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

FAR OUT in the Thatrel System; 34,000 light-years from the planet of their birth; the Peacelord of the Universe & His Mutant Corps find no peace of mind—or body—on the planet Honour, whose southern polar region is discovered to be a wild wasteland harbouring a weird fleet of You must read the next

episode to find out.

Do, and you will also find yourself confronted by the same puzzles as perplex Perry & Pucky. Such as: what is the origin of the gelatinous blob-like creatures, the Mooffs? Why are they here, far from their native world? Who are the Honos and what about the nonues?

Who has been exerting a sinister influence on the Zarlt of Zalit and for what dark purpose?

AND WHO is exerting Herculean efforts to take over the stellar empire? Small wonder the deeps of space vibrate to the call of

SOS: SPACESHIP TITAN!

by Kurt Brand