

Long ago, the Peacelord of the Universe had prevented the robot battleships of Arkon from converting Talamon the Mounder's fighter craft into a gas cloud.

In doing so, he sowed the seeds of his own destruction, for 200 ships of the Mounder fleet are ready once again, armed, and ready to attack...

And the most dreaded of the Galactic Traders, the Springers, have devised a scheme so hideous that for Perry Rhodan and the New Power annihilation seems a certainty...

This is the stirring story of—

PROJECT: EARTHSAVE

1/ THE ROBOT REGENT DECIDES

THE WITCHES CAULDRON of the Arkonide Empire—the planet Aralon—was not ready to admit defeat. The 4th world revolving around the small yellowish sun Kesnar—30 light-years from Arkon—this home of the Aras was not inclined to abandon a business cynosure craftily developed over thousands of years. A catastrophe of planetary proportions might conceivably alter the course of generations. But not a meddling Earthling!

Or so the Aras thought. But the Earthling in question was not just any son of Terra, he was the leader of the New Power. The Administrator for Earth.

He was Perry Rhodan.

The Aras, acknowledged geniuses in all fields of medicine, were as stubborn and tenacious as the Galactic Traders. For, in fact, they were galactic traders. They sold their miracle medicaments at exorbitant prices at the same time they went to great pains to insure that no permanent cure was effected, that diseases did not entirely disappear from any planet. In short, they were ruthless profiteers.

But for the first time the Aras were confronted with an 'ailment' that threatened their unsavoury medical machinations. If not radically checked, financial ruin would be the inevitable result of this 'infection'.

This 'infection' had a name.

It was Perry Rhodan.

The Peacelord had inflicted on the scurrilous physicians the first defeat they had ever known since inaugurating their millennia-old medical racket.

Chief Inspector Gegul, responsible for Aralon security, was startled out of his thoughts as Arga Tasla, his female assistant, entered his office soundlessly on cat's feet and silently presented him with a dispatch:

"HYPERSENSOR TRACKING: TIME 8:75:03.1. TRACKPOINT 105 TRIANGULATED FROM 103 & 106. ARKON DESTINATION FOR FLEET TRANSITING FROM 13.64 DEGREES AT 8:75:03.1 HOURS, PERRY RHODAN COMMANDING."

Gegul's voice shook. Whether he exclaimed "Aargh!" or "Arga!" it was difficult to determine for he did not look up while scowling at the name on the dispatch: Perry Rhodan.

Caught in the doorway, Arga replied: "Yes?"

"Get me Ma-elz and Bro-nud! I want to see those good-for-nothings up here in 10 minutes!"

They were there in 9. After entering the chief's office, they stood waiting respectfully till recognized.

"Sit down, sit down!" Gegul growled at them, indicating chairs with a careless gesture, and they eased their tall frames onto the seats. The Chief Inspector came directly to the point. "Rhodan has made a hypertransit to Arkon. For the moment we're out of immediate danger. But we found out the hard way that he works hand in glove with the Regent! Now what's our situation? Not one shipload of patients can be found on Aralon! And I prophesy to you here and now that this catastrophe will spread to the limits of the Galaxy if we don't succeed in destroying this Rhodan!"

"But we don't have any fighting spaceships," interjected Ma-elz hastily.

"Nor do we need any!" shouted Gegul.

"You mean—germ warfare?" stammered Bro-nud.

Ma-elz, thinking he was ahead of the game, proudly asked: "What virus will we use?"

Gegul sneered disgustedly at his underlings. "Can't you ask anything else? All either of you do is babble worn-out ideas. Why is it nobody can come up with one sensible notion? Why!"

Embarrassed by their apparent ineptitude, Ma-elz and Bro-nud did not oblige their boss arriving at the right answer. At this moment, both would have paid much for an inkling of what the Chief Inspector had in mind.

After a few seconds of fruitless waiting, Gegul said, "Naturally, no one can see the most obvious and simple."

Sunning himself in the magnificence of his own ingenuity, he was overbearing in the role he now played as the super shrewd but lenient Chief. He leaned forward and beckoned Ma-elz and Bro-nud to him, holding further words until they stood before him at his desk. "Gentlemen," he began, "this is my plan..." And Ma-elz and Bro-nud listened breathlessly.

Chief Inspector Gegul's plan was in fact ingenious.

Indeed, the downfall of Perry Rhodan now seemed to be inevitable, as well as the downfall of the planet of his origin!

* * * *

Talamon the Mounder gave a friendly smile to the Galactic Traders' courier. The man had arrived half an hour before on his flagship, "just to sound out Talamon's opinion."

The Mounders were the warriors among the Galactic Traders. If the Springers didn't happen to come to terms with a certain planet, and if this world preferred not to be completely enslaved, then the Mounders would take care of the matter—in return for a handsome fee.

They had differentiated themselves long ago from the Springers because their home world was a planet of extraordinary gravity. This gravitational pull had placed its mark upon them physically: the ordinary Mounder weighed a thousand pounds, was 7 feet tall and about 5 feet wide—which produced a strange effect but a figure that was in no sense of the word deformed.

Next to the government ships of the Empire, the Mounders possessed the best space fighter craft. Similar to the Springers, they also lived in clans. The courier for the Galactic Traders had come to probe the Clan Chief Talamon.

Talamon's clan was quite impressive. He had over 200 fighter ships at his disposal. That Talamon still possessed them and was still alive was something he had Perry Rhodan to thank for.

And the courier asked him, what did he make of Perry Rhodan?

"A great deal!" answered Talamon without deliberation, yet he maintained his best poker face.

This answer the courier had least expected. He appeared to be shocked. Talamon grinned at him good-naturedly and with a trace of pity.

"But, Talamon, that cannot be your true attitude!"

Then Talamon moved his 13 hundred pounds of live weight with an agility which none might have thought him capable of. His poker face disappeared; instead he was now menacing and his deep bass voice bellowed at the courier so that it resounded within the confines of the cabin: "What do you want me to do, consider Perry Rhodan as just a passing meteor—a little falling star? Do you know that your question is an impertinence? Have you forgotten already how Perry Rhodan leashed the Arkonide robot fleet to come thundering through space at us? I, Talamon, was at the brink of destruction with my entire fleet! Do you take that for nothing, courier? And whoever can equal what Perry Rhodan has done—is he to be considered a nothing?"

The courier recoiled like a singed worm. Talamon observed this and ignored it. He let the fellow simmer a bit. He was going to have to come clean and confess why no expense and effort had been spared to seek him, Talamon, personally at a distance of 2000 light-years from Arkon. He might have done so more cheaply by use of hyperspace communication.

"Alright, courier—what do you want? Out with it! What am I supposed to do? And what are the Springers ready to pay for it?"

"I come from Siptar," said the courier.

"Will that one never die?" growled Talamon, intimating that Siptar was the oldest of the clan chieftains among the Springers.

"Before that I was with Vontran, Talamon. Siptar and Vontran have lost many supporters and kinsmen on Goszul's Planet..."

"So?" The squarishly built, green-skinned Talamon grinned and waited.

"There is a persistent rumour concerning the bomb explosion on Goszul's Planet during the great gathering of the clans. It is said that this Perry Rhodan had a finger in it..."

Talamon's unrestrained laughter silenced the courier. Tears ran down the green-hued cheeks of the Mounder. The longer Talamon laughed, the more disconcerted the courier became—and irritated, until finally he lost his temper and shouted: "What's there to laugh about?"

Abruptly, Talamon calmed down. "True," he conceded to the courier, "this is no laughing matter. The catastrophe on Goszul's Planet has been a terrible thing but to try to link Perry Rhodan to it... Look, courier, I'll put it to you this way: Before when you asked me what I made of Perry Rhodan—how much importance, in other words, did I attach to him—I said 'very much'. That didn't sit very well with you; but like it or not, there is no other answer. Perry Rhodan is a factor that all of us must reckon with."

"Then you brought in your rumour and I laughed. Do you have any idea of *why* I laughed? Because with your stupid rumour you unconsciously admitted that the Springers attach *agreat deal* of importance to Perry Rhodan. Now, does it make sense?"

"Then we are in accord," replied the courier with an eel-like elusiveness.

Talamon stared at him in amazement. Then, emphatically, he said, "Young man, let's be out with it, once and for all, or I'll have to demonstrate what it means for me to become unpleasant! The fact is, you've come here to pit me against Perry Rhodan. Yes or no?"

"Yes."

"The first straight answer but an interesting one. Well, courier, I suggest you just lay the whole thing out for old Talamon and I will listen..."

* * * *

The *Titan* and the *Ganymede* made a thundering emergence back into the normal Cosmos from hyperspace. The robot brain on Arkon with its supersensitive hypersensor tracking system undoubtedly detected them at once because Rhodan had deliberately sought out a 'quiet' sector of Star Cluster M-13

as the end point of his hyper transition course.

All hands began to recover from the shock of the transition. As always, the first to shake off the after effects were Perry Rhodan and his friend Reginald Bell. Before them, as revealed by the gigantic circular video screen gallery of the *Titan*, the myriad suns of this cluster system sparkled with indescribable splendour. This glistening and shining and streaming of all colours and nuances of stellar light was in itself a most magnificent signboard for the great Empire of the Arkonides.

"If only they weren't such dumbbells!" sighed Bell.

"Be careful, Fatso!" Perry called to him in low tones.

Behind them stood the Arkonide Khrest, and a little farther off Thora, refined, shrewd and temperamental Arkonide woman—both of them of the highest social level of the stellar empire whose suns now gleamed before them.

Bell was an honest fellow and a daredevil. He turned to Thora with a grin on his wide face. "Any objections?" he asked her.

With imperious composure, she replied, "It's about time, Bell, you think of something new."

Bell only grunted and turned to Perry. "Aren't you going to put in a call to that old Bucket of Bolts," he asked, "so that you can request a leave of absence?"

To refer to the giant robot brain on Arkon as a 'bucket of bolts' was more than just irreverent, yet the two Arkonides did not in any way reveal that they resented Perry Rhodan's second-in-command for having used the expression.

Pucky sat at one side of Bell. He murmured lightly: "Okay—so 'bucket of bolts', is it? My friend, you seem to have all the delicate sensitivity of a bull rhinoceros!"

Hearty laughter resounded through the Control Centre of the *Titan*. Pucky the mouse-beaver, the telepath and many other entities in one, had baptized his squarishly built friend Reginald Bell with the name of 'bull rhinoceros'. It fit so well that several of the men in the more than 30-man crew in the room were laughing with tears in their eyes. And this was joined by the bell-like tones of Thora's laughter. Even Khrest, unable to suppress his amusement, held a hand over his mouth to cover his smile. Perry Rhodan shook with inner mirth

"You rotten little mouse!" Bell yelled above the laughter and made a grab for Pucky.

But he grasped at thin air. As swift as lightning, the mouse-beaver had removed himself by means of his usual teleportation. Pucky landed in Thora's arms. Into the sudden stillness following Bell's shriek came the mouse-beaver's lisping question: "Thora, are you petting me because you approve of the new name I gave him—bull rhinoceros?"

Regrettably, this little human episode was abruptly throttled by a sharp announcement over the speaker from Com-Control Centre: "Robot Fleet OGG-06 is requesting the Code-for-the-Day."

Which catapulted everyone back into stark reality.

Rhodan merely nodded by way of response. But his nod was visible on the videoscreens of the

Com-Control Centre. The *Titan*, the most gigantic spherical spaceship in the galaxy, having a diameter of approximately one-mile, transmitted its Code-for-the-Day.

The clear signal was returned by Arkon's robot fleet OGG-06. Having been identified as a ship of the Empire, the *Titan* was allowed to pass. The robot ships accompanied it and the *Ganymede* at 0.8 the speed of light toward the outer space ramparts of the defence belt which surrounded Arkon I, II & III, an orbiting network of floating battle stations which constituted an impregnable stellar fortress.

The *Titan* was a masterpiece of Arkonide spaceship engineering. Deep within the massive sphere was heard the roaring and deep-throated bellowing and humming of giant converters, transformers, magnetic field generators and apparatuses and machines of unimaginable dimensions and sophistication. The mandatory personnel strength was 1500 men, in order to make of the *Titan* the most powerful, battle-ready and dangerous warship in the Milky Way.

The hyperspace transceiver equipment was warmed up and ready.

A point of development had arrived, which Perry Rhodan wished to discuss with the robot brain on Arkon. After transmission of the recognition signal, the robot Regent confirmed its reception. Incapable of any human emotion, and reacting only to cold, factual logic, the giant positronic brain waited.

Even Perry Rhodan who was preparing to conquer the universe for the Earth, did not presume to keep the 5000 square-mile Brain waiting. He knew his limitations! And again this was a trait that elevated him from the common run of men.

Rhodan submitted his report—short, sure and precise. In the process, he did not say everything, but what he did say had to carry the stamp of factuality for the cold logic of the giant positronic brain.

No counter-question was received. Only a whisper of static emerged from the hypercom speakers. The robot Regent waited. The report had been thoroughly taken apart, broken down, checked out, researched, investigated, evaluated and confirmed—revealing that the communication had not yet been concluded.

After a short pause, Rhodan continued: "I am asking for permission to return to Earth with the *Titan*. It was demonstrated in our recent encounter with the Mounder fleet of Talamon that I can't get by with a standard crew complement of 1500 men. We Earthmen cannot be expected to have the same level of intelligence quotient that has been normal to the Arkonides, even though a small percentage of the *Titan*'s crew has demonstrated above average ability. In order to raise this space vessel to the power factor that is commensurate with its design and construction, it is absolutely necessary to increase the personnel complement level. On Terra I will find the necessary help. I ask that you check the logic of my request."

The hypercom speakers were silent for 3 minutes. Then came the robot brain's answer. "Leave of absence is granted!" boomed the speakers.

The *Titan* cut the connection. Perry Rhodan turned his head to look at Bell.

The latter grinned with satisfaction. "Well, you tricked the old bucket of bolts pretty good!" he enthused. "If it only knew" He stopped, staring at Perry questioningly. "Aren't you glad that you put it over?"

"No! In spite of the answer, we haven't anything to be overjoyed about, Bell."

Rhodan's words rang soberly through the Control Central. Bell gazed at his friend reflectively. Perry was

correct in his statement. There was really no basis for a celebration. Like a silent spectre conjured up by the recent Aras incident, Terra itself came once more into the focal point. The *Arasalso* were Galactic Traders and the Galactic Traders were and still remained one of the Earth's most threatening dangers.

Topthor the Mounder knew the location of the Solar System; the mammoth brain on Arkon did not know it! Within Star Cluster M-13 alone were several thousand Springer ships, each one a fortress in its own right. And what did Earth have to match against this power?

Nothing!

It was Perry Rhodan's strong point that he did not overestimate himself. And it was his greatest concern that very shortly the Springers might fly a massive attack against Terra, the 'Planet of Unrest', and turn it into a sun, leaving it to die in atomic fire.

For this reason he wanted to fly back to Earth along with the *Ganymede*. His representation to the robot brain to the effect that the *Titan* was not adequately manned was a flimsy cover-up from the start. The great automation was too shrewd to be fooled in such a primitive manner. Rhodan knew that the Brain was looking for any opportunity to discover the exact coordinates of Earth, by means of a hypertransition of the *Titan* and the *Ganymede*. What the robot brain did not know and could not know was the fact that both the *Titan* and the *Ganymede* were equipped with hypersensor compensators, developed by the Galactic Traders, which made any tracking of a transition jump impossible.

Bell attempted to dispel the mood of apprehension. He said angrily, "So let's get with it and do what we have to, so those star gypsies won't be celebrating either! Want me to set up the first transition, Perry?"

Perry Rhodan nodded his head.

2/ RHODAN'S RUSE

The green-skinned, massive face of Talamon grinned at Perry Rhodan through the view screen. A few minutes before, Rhodan had announced himself over the Mounders' hyperspace frequency. Now the mighty space battleship poked itself out of the cosmic darkness and slowly locked its velocity to that of the *Titan*.

"I'm coming over, Perry Rhodan!" Talamon announced after a brief greeting. Then his image faded from the screen. On board the *Tal VI*, the connection had been shut off.

Rhodan called the *Ganymede* over ship's radio com. "Hold preparations for transition in abeyance," he ordered. "But keep all calculations available."

Then he looked at Bell. "Tell John Marshall and Pucky to get in here."

In the same moment the air in front of Rhodan flickered and out of it emerged the mouse-beaver. He grinned happily with his single incisor tooth and prepared to make himself comfortable in Perry's lap.

"Pucky," said Perry with slight reproach, "we are receiving an official visitor."

Pucky floated in a sailing glide to the farthest corner of the Control Central. No one laughed. A very serious reason had to be attached to the sudden appearance of the Mounder, just when the *Titan* and the *Ganymede* were ready to set a transition course for Earth. It was not until the Aralon engagement that Talamon had become Perry Rhodan's friend but that friendship still remained to be proven.

Did he come now as a friend?

Rhodan understood Khrest's worried glance. They both had the same idea. For this reason, Pucky and John Marshall had to be present during this discussion. By means of their telepathic faculties they had to evaluate the honesty of Talamon's thoughts.

"A beautiful ship!" This was his first word of praise for the *Titan* after he had taken a look around in the Control Central. And he added, "Soon it will not be a beautiful ship any more." Thereby he let the cat out of the bag.

Perry Rhodan received John Marshall's signal. Talamon was not concealing anything. He had come here for the sole purpose of warning him.

"One moment, Talamon!" Bell had placed a hand on his shoulder but with the other he opened the intercom channel both on board and to the *Ganymede*. He called into the microphone: "Top security space surveillance! Use all countermeasures against tracking!" He turned again to the Mounder, who responded to the instructions with a pleased grin. "Direct your ship to come between our two vessels. It would be well to avoid certain curious questions from other sources by giving them the least possible excuse Will you give the order to your ship?"

The Mounder's grin widened. "If you humans from the Earth are all such cold, cautious calculators on top of being daredevils, then I'm sorry for the Springers already!... Of course I'll direct my ship between you!"

The manoeuvre could be followed on the great gallery screens of the *Titan* as Talamon's heavily armed *Tal VI* executed a long, silent curve and elegantly locked its course within the tracking shelter thus provided.

Speaking casually yet barely concealing his concern as he surveyed Perry Rhodan, Talamon said, "Yes, the Aras on Aralon are mad at you. From a commercial standpoint, I can understand them, but ever since I have learned that these medical bandits inflict us with all sorts of diseases in order to follow up with exorbitant prices for their cures, I don't like to even talk about them. To make a long story short:

"The Ara clans, who are scattered everywhere in the Galaxy, have been alerted by Aralon. Sickness and disease have been suddenly on the increase all over. The Springers have been threatened with a boycott on selling them any medications, so the Galactic Traders are faced with a price tag: they are being blackmailed into flying an attack on Terra in order to turn it into a sun."

"Has the attack flight started yet?" Rhodan's counter question was so casually and pleasantly delivered that it brought the 1300-pound Talamon up staring out of his special seat.

Perry glossed over the subject almost indifferently; Bell sweated. Once more a typical Rhodan bluff had been demonstrated. Without saying so, Perry had more or less asserted: "We will repulse any attack!" He had taken a lot of wind out of the Mounder's sails.

Rhodan repeated the question. "Well, Talamon, are the Springers already en route with their attack?"

"No. Even the Springers are not so easily humbled. And without a gathering of the clans' patriarchs, an action of this nature cannot be started. But the Aras have brought the Traders this far: within a short time there will be a patriarchal summit meeting. Where? Nobody knows that yet. Even the courier who came to probe my own sentiments in the matter did not know."

"3 approach flights!" announced the officer from the tracking station. "One ship with strong scanning sweep. Distance, 0.325 lims. Velocity, 0.21 under speol. Transmitting coded signal to a second vessel. Code signal deciphered! It is a part of the Mounder Talamon's fleet!"

A broad laugh spread over his face and he showed Rhodan and Bell his undisguised admiration. "Now you've got me to wondering if my 3 ships can find me!"

Perry almost carelessly extended him his hand. "I'm betting my *Titan* against your flagship, Talamon, that they won't find us."

The Mounder shook his head ponderously. He hid his massive hands behind his back, emitted a crafty chuckle and countered: "Rhodan, it's already gotten around how you came by the *Titan*. No—I'm not betting. I still have use for my ship!" In the next moment he sobered. "Aren't you concerned over the Aras' plan? I'm not playing the prophet when I assure you that the Medical Masters will force the Springers to destroy the Earth. Nor am I just an old bearer of tales, Rhodan. I have come in order to help you and your home planet!"

Perry Rhodan saw John Marshall's fingers make the sign of counting money. Rhodan laughed softly and asked, "And what will your friendship cost me, Talamon?"

"Glorious Milky Way!" enthused the Mounder. "Both of us make perfect partners! Even with the Arkonides I have yet to come so quickly to the core of the matter!"

"They're all asleep on one foot," observed Bell, referring to the Arkonides.

Suddenly Talamon's eyes took on a ferret-like swiftness of movement as they probed shrewdly into these two men of such divergent character and appearance. Perry and Bell presented him with poker faces. This common accord between them gave the crafty, 1300 pound fox certain food for thought.

Pensively he said, "I am gradually beginning to understand why it is that any of us who have something to do with the Arkon Empire usually draw the short end, against you. But let's discuss prices. You know, once in awhile I have to give my clan a bit to eat here and there, and to keep 200 ships in attack readiness—that costs something! The risk I take personally is not calculated in the cost, not in the least..."

Perry Rhodan coldly upset the other's strategy. "When I issued the command to the robot battleships of the Arkon fleet *not* to convert the ships of the Mounder Talamon into gas clouds, I ran a risk that is beyond the most astronomical evaluation!... Talamon, did I demand a price for that?"

"Perry," responded Talamon reproachfully, "is this any way to talk to an old man?"

"Why not?" asked Rhodan, retaining the sharp tone in his voice. "We humans are fond of speaking the truth, even though at times it is painful! Name us your price, Talamon!"

John Marshall got up and approached the 3 men in the midst of their bargaining. Rhodan looked at his best telepath and questioned him curtly. "What is it, Marshall?"

He understood his chief's signal. "Sir, I was to remind you that you wanted to speak to the robot brain on Arkon..."

This was code; deciphered, it meant: "Until now I have not discovered any deceitful or insidious thought in Talamon's mind."

Rhodan motioned Marshall away. "There is time for that. Thank you."

Talamon had heard every word and put things together with lightning swiftness. "Do you want to insure the aid of the Empire, Rhodan Then don't forget that the Springers are *also* Arkonides!"

Bell cut in angrily. "One bunch is asleep at the switch," he said, "and the others are robber barons! Talamon, what kind of a race do you call yourselves, with such wide extremes? You know, we're really concerned about you!"

The Mounder had no other recourse but to take Bell's protest seriously. From his performance it could be deduced that the Earth was one big spaceport and that Perry Rhodan's power was of gigantic proportions.

"Name your price, Talamon!" demanded Rhodan and congratulated himself that Bell was taking part in the dealings. It was Bell who'd been able to soften up the Mounder and to bring him down from the idea of holding out unconditionally for a big profit.

"Considering temporarily an unlimited defence at full battle strength—that is exactly 218 ships, Rhodan—I'd say 10 million!"

"What is the cost of a ton of Arkon T-steel?" came Perry's question.

"Arkon T-steel? T-steel, the kind that is used to build spaceships?" Talamon sharpened his ears.

"Yes. I have 3 or 400 million tons of it to sell."

"*Howmuch?*"

Perry Rhodan got up. For the moment he regarded the business discussion as having ended. "Take this matter up with your clan and see if you think it would be an interesting piece of business for you. If so, then I'm sure we can work out an arrangement 'among friends' whereby I will receive *from* you some quantity of extra millions, Talamon—above and beyond your hiring out price for the defence of Terra... When will we be meeting again?"

* * * *

Chief Inspector Gegul stood before the Council of Physicians on Aralon and delivered his report.

In recent days the Ara had aged years. A colossal responsibility lay upon his shoulders. He had been commissioned to apply pressure to all Springer clans and—if required—to extort the patriarchs with the suggestion that under certain circumstances there might not be any further deliveries of medical supplies and services.

Gegul had been forced to fall back on the intergalactic information services. His own organization did not possess sufficient means and power to be able to ‘process’ the entirety of the Trader clans within just a few days.

In spite of the exertions and pressures which had not permitted him any sleep in days, he stood proudly before the Council of Physicians, who listened to his accomplishments with ever-increasing pleasure. Gegul only reported his successes. Now and then he would sneer or snicker cynically when he portrayed how this or that patriarch was swayed to the Aras’ point of view by the suggestion that it was possible to inflict the entire clan with a fatal sickness within a matter of days, and that then the Aras would have to decline his plea for a cure because such treatments and services could only be available in the future to friends and allies of the Aras.

"When will the meeting of the patriarchs take place and where?" asked Dumeh, who was chairman of the Physicians’ Council today.

"In 8 days," replied Gegul. "In 8 days on Laros..."

"Laros?" interjected Santek, surprised. He looked at Gegul sharply. "On Laros, where we carry on our biological experiments? Gegul, have you been forsaken by all the star gods, that you should recommend the 18th moon of the Gonom System as a meeting place?"

Gegul lost much of his proud bearing. "With your permission, I should like to set forth the reasons that influenced me to select Laros as the rendezvous point for the Springer patriarchs. I have acted upon the consideration that some months ago the clan elders of the Galactic Traders gathered together in a summit meeting on Goszul’s Planet in System 221-Tatlira in order to come to a decision regarding Perry Rhodan. The great assembly ended in the explosion of an atom bomb.

"The Springers’ desperate attempt to set foot again on Goszul’s Planet led them to be afflicted with a mysterious disease which we Aras at first considered harmless. In spite of this, Goszul’s Planet has been classified until today a ‘forbidden world’. These occurrences, which have never been explained, could be attributed to Perry Rhodan by insinuation but there are no proofs of it. On Laros, however, we have the means to impede, block off or destroy unauthorized intrusions or influences of any kind which would seek to disturb the progress of the patriarchal gathering.

"These considerations have caused me to choose the 18th moon of the Planet Gom, in the Gonom System, as the point of rendezvous for the patriarchs and the Mounders."

Gegul felt considerably relieved when he observed Santek’s diabolical grin. Even Dumeh revealed a favourable attitude.

"Has chief biologist Keklos been informed, Gegul?" asked Dumeh affably.

The Chief Inspector made a light bow. "Chief Biologist Keklos has been instructed and is in agreement with my provisions."

In Gegul’s eyes was a light of triumph...

* * * *

Topthor, Talamon's friend and Perry Rhodan's bitterest foe, was torn out of his sleep. Tattol stood beside his bed.

"Sir, the Mounders' Headquarters demands to speak with you!" he said excitedly and still shook the clan chieftain's arm.

"Yes, so?" grumbled Topthor. "Whoever wants to talk to me must also be able to wait! Tell Headquarters I'll be there in good time."

He was not especially in a hurry to come to the hyperspace communicator. The massive man dressed leisurely. He pondered on what the central exchange might want to know from him. It was clear to him that this would be no attack assignment, capable of bringing in several millions. Battle assignments usually came to him on top priority level.

He moved slowly to the Control Central. The last bulkhead door sprang open automatically. From a distance he saw the pale flickering of the viewscreen. It was the typical pattern of a hyperspace transmission.

Puffing slightly, he slumped down into the pilot's seat. "Topthor here!" he bellowed into the microphone.

"Headquarters!" The single word rang from the micro-speaker. On the screen appeared the familiar face of Sirger, the second eldest of the Darfnur Clan.

"Alright, let's have it," growled the green-skinned giant, disgruntled.

"Our message is coming over scramble-code, Topthor."

Topthor perked up. Whenever scramble-code and a hyperspace transmission were combined, something important was always in the wind. A trace of interest animated his face, which for this old one was significant. Then, however, his facial muscles relaxed very swiftly as Headquarters instructed him as to the date and place of the patriarchs' gathering.

"And for this I was awakened?" the oldster growled.

In the Mounders' Headquarters, Sirger casually asked, "Sir, are you no longer interested in Perry Rhodan

If there was one opponent's name that Topthor could never forget, it was the name of this enemy, Perry Rhodan! "What about Rhodan?!" He roared into the microphone so loudly that Sirger, several thousand light-years away, instantly turned down his receiver volume.

"Sir, do you not know then, what has happened on Aralon?" asked Sirger, astonished. "The whole Milky Way is talking about it!"

This was a slight exaggeration, since Topthor knew nothing of the subject. "Why should I know everything, Sirger? I was with my ships, 28000 light-years away in the Galaxy, taking care of a minor detail. A minor detail that cost me 6 ships!"

He did not say what the minor detail was that he had to dispose of but Sirger could put the picture together in his own mind. He reported in concise sentences how badly Perry Rhodan had beaten the Aras in their game. In the course of it, Talamon's name was mentioned.

"What?" roared Topthor once more, "Talamon backed out? You're lying!"

Sirger did not choose to be bawled out and told he was a liar so he formulated his answer in such a manner that Topthor began to swallow hard. He asked him in a friendly tone what he might have done in Talamon's place if he had seen himself suddenly surrounded by Arkon's robot fleet.

"Arkon got mixed up in this? The Robot Regent?" It was too much for Topthor to grasp. "This is all too twisted up, Sirger. End of transmission!"

Topthor cut off but he did not disconnect the hyper-transmitter. "Put me in touch with Talamon—and I mean now!"

But Talamon's flagship, *Tal VI*, did not reply. Only a ship of his fleet answered but no one seemed to know the present whereabouts of the clan chief.

Finally, Topthor cut off the space channels entirely. "Strange," he told himself. "Talamon leaves no instructions behind and does not answer on his own frequency. Something doesn't seem right. But it couldn't be—"

Then his receiver puffed in the next hyperspace message. Again it was Headquarters and once more Sirger's face appeared on the screen. "Sir, can you tell us where we might find your friend Talamon?"

Topthor stared in stupefaction at the screen. They didn't know how to find Talamon either? He became more disturbed. He could not escape the constant thought of Talamon *and* Perry Rhodan!

He was very anxious for his friend Talamon and worried because of Perry Rhodan...

* * * *

Talamon returned from his third conference with Perry Rhodan. His admiration for this man had increased to almost boundless proportions and he did not seek to conceal this fact from his own clan members and followers. But he did not meet with agreement in all sectors; especially Ocxal was against any connection with Perry Rhodan.

"If Cekztel sees through your game, Talamon," he warned, "there will be no Talamon Clan any more."

Talamon had an amused smile for this. "For that reason, Cekztel must not be informed," he said. Then he quickly dropped the subject. "But you don't have to take part in this big deal, Ocxal. I have settled with Rhodan. It's set."

But Ocxal *wanted* to take part in the 'big deal'. It had to do with this almost unimaginable quantity of Arkon T-steel scrap metal and when the business was consummated each clan member had a considerable sum in prospect.

"So where may this material be had?" By his question Ocxal displayed his interest in the business.

Talamon grinned at all of them in succession. He anticipated their startled reactions. He had stared incredulously as Perry Rhodan had answered the same question for him: "*OnHonor!*"

"Where? On Honor?" A note of horror crept into Gresja's voice.

Talamon grinned and nodded.

"And are we to suppose that exposing ourselves to the Honor Plague is part of the deal? This disease of euphoric madness?" asked Ocxal sharply.

"*Youare* blockheads!" Now old Talamon delivered his rebuttal. "Up till now I'm the one who has brought in the choice business deals and closed them. Afterwards, all you did was stash the money away. Do you think I'm so decrepit already that I wouldn't have thought of the Honor Plague? But Rhodan didn't forget it either. That's why he wasn't risking anything by telling me where this scrap pile is. We're only able to take a remote look at the graveyard of ships on this forbidden planet. For the moment, there seems to be plenty for everybody. We will take an inventory and make a rough estimate. If I understood Rhodan correctly in our last meeting, we don't have to pay him a thing. We are merely to keep our hands off of 5 large freighters and one Arkon battlecruiser. These he wants to reserve for himself... Now, my clan brothers, is that a piece of business or isn't it?" said Talamon triumphantly.

Ocxal thought of the plague which had afflicted 700 of the *Titan*'s crew—a hyper-euphoria contracted from little bear-like animals they had taken on board as pets.

"Rhodan will give us the antidote. Ocxal. Have you forgotten that he was on Aralon with a shipload of sick crewmembers? Are any of them sick now?"

Ocxal studied his Patriarch reflectively. He did not like the youthful fire in Talamon's eyes. He had to put the brakes on him or he could lead the whole clan to destruction. "If Cekztel, the Chief of all the clans, harbours the slightest suspicion, he will root us all out and exterminate us. And if Topthor gets wind of this, he will forget whose friend he is! He hates Perry Rhodan with every bone in his body!"

Talamon's face hardened. "And to make sure the thought won't occur to you to pass the word along to Cekztel or Topthor radio silence will continue to be in force now as it was before our meeting."

He got up and went to his cabin. Meanwhile he had Perry Rhodan on his mind even more than the 'big deal'. More and more clearly, Talamon came to understand that as long as he himself remained honourable, he had found in Rhodan the truest of all his friends.

* * * *

A call to stations sounded on board the *Ganymede* .

Col. Freyt, Commander of the half-mile long battleship, had returned a few minutes before from a conference with the Chief. With lightning swiftness, 500 men occupied their positions. In the stem section of the ship, the power machinery and converters came to life.

The *Ganymede* was readied for departure. Only the officers in the Control Central knew the destination. The battleship gradually began to accelerate. The distance from the spacesphere *Titan* increased more and more. The rate of acceleration was under the control of the ship's positronic computer.

Col. Freyt sat with seeming indifference in the pilot seat and watched the great panoramic viewscreen. The *Titan* , 10 minutes before, had become a tiny point of light there, and disappeared. Talamon's *Tal VI* , completely blended into and enveloped by the counter-detection screening of the giant sphere, was in the process of transmitting a pulse-coded message over Rhodan's superpowerful ship's transmitter.

As the *Ganymede* 's receiver caught the transmission there was a single 'pip!' of sound from the speakers. Col. Freyt turned around to his computer officer. The latter merely nodded, nothing more. Freyt asked no questions. He knew that all pertinent data concerning hypertransition coördinates and timing factors were being collected in the memory section of the positronicon for retrieval.

'Pip!' The micro-speakers in the Control Centre emitted the sound a second time. It was an answer to the pulse-burst message from the *Tal VI* . One of the ships from Talamon's fleet had called back.

The closed circuit screen connected with Communications flared up before Freyt. His Com Officer put through the rectified and deciphered pulse-code message. Again the Commander only nodded. The picture on the screen flickered out and its corresponding loud speaker cut off.

Shortly thereafter, the detected location was automatically delivered. A time and place was presented, toward which the *Ganymede* flew, at three-fourths speol (light speed).

Freyt cast a second quizzical glance at the positronicon officer.

"33 minutes yet, Colonel," announced the latter.

With the first set of tracking coördinates they had detected, the *Ganymede* had changed its course to 8 degrees 32 seconds Phi. The ship's powerful inertial compensators virtually ate up the impact of the increased centrifugal forces as the big space fighter changed abruptly from the old course to the new. The only evidence of the course change was shown visually on the panoramic viewscreen. A few distant suns disappeared off the upper edge of the screen and at the same time a few more stars popped into view along the lower edge.

No man in the Control Central had the time or desire to admire the rarely seen entirety of the sparkling mass of Star Cluster M-13. Today it could not draw the men into its spell: They were flying an armed mission! They were heading directly for the ship they had detected and which now could not be let out of their tracking range.

The *Ganymede* 's velocity approached 0.9 fight speed.

Col. Freyt sat almost negligently in the pilot's seat. Years ago he had sat with a similarly apparent indolence in Rhodan's one-man interceptors and had flown the most dangerous missions.

A brilliant flash of light jolted Freyt back to reality; the automatic tracking and navigational system had cut off the *Ganymede*'s acceleration. The vast battleship with its wide-flaring stern fins went into free fall, gliding toward the pinpointed coordinates of the other ship.

Now the optical system picked it up from midship. On an auxiliary screen to Freyt's left, a cylindrical spaceship was brought into piercingly sharp focus. In the same moment the ship was identified. Lt. Feller announced: "The *TAL 153* ...!"

The bellowing of alarms drowned out everything else on the ship. Meanwhile the hypertran-sensor trackers crowded their own alarm. Out of the void from hyperspace 3 ships had emerged in dangerous proximity to the *Ganymede*.

"That's all we needed now," observed Col. Freyt calmly. But then came his orders. "Inform the Chief!" That was for Com Control. "Defensive fire with all weapons if we are attacked!" This order rang out at all battle stations. Simultaneously the gun ports opened up.

The *Ganymede* was ready for battle.

But who were these 3 spacers which had emerged out of a hypertransition and now held their courses locked to that of the battleship?

"Springer ships!" The message shot through simultaneously from Tracking and from Optical Observation.

Freyt shouted into a microphone for radio transmission: "*TAL 153* must get out of here at once!"

"Transition!" rasped Lt. Dreyfuss' voice from Hyper Sensor Tracking. "*TAL 153* in hyperjump!"

From station Dora-8 came the cool voice of the Fire Control Officer. "Attack from Green 45!" Battle station Dora-8 was located where the curve of stern fin #1 harmoniously joined the ship's hull.

In the machine rooms of the battleship the turbines howled to a higher pitch; thousands of connections were changed, cut, or activated; the final converters began to roar; and the power stations provided all battle positions with an excess of energy.

Dora-8 fired for 3 seconds' duration.

"Our optical system is good!" Freyt praised the men who sat amidship and accomplished the skilful feat of making the 3 cylindrical vessels visible on the special screen. The gunnery crew at Dora-8 also drew praise. The propulsion section of one of the 3 Springer ships disappeared. It had taken a full half-second of the powerful disintegrator beams.

"New transition!" panted Lt. Dreyfuss and his surprise increased as he added, "The *TAL 153* has come back...!"

A high-decibel announcement thundered out of the Com Control. "Pulse-code message from the *153*! Deciphered text follows!"

Now at last Col. Freyt was beginning to perceive why the fighter ship from Talamon's fleet had returned and was taking part in the battle: This ship from the clan of the Mounders was attacking the *Ganymede*! Three powerful disintegrator beams were aimed at Freyt's battleship but all 3 bolts of destruction missed and didn't so much as touch the strong defence screens of the 2500-foot spacer.

The fire crew at battle stations cursed bitterly in their rage. Had their curses been weapons they wouldn't have left a hair on either Talamon or his clan.

In the midst of this Col. Freyt's voice came over the P.A. system. "Simulated attack only, on the *TAL 153* ! Just slice within a hairbreadth. But I want you to turn those Springer ships into scrap heaps!"

Finally the rectified pulse-code message from the *TAL 153* piped through, deciphered: "We are flying a feint attack!" That was all—nothing more.

At the same moment the defence screen of the *Ganymede* was shaken by 8 hits. A cascade of light flashes flared up as the energy field warped slightly in its effort to absorb the impact of ravening forces.

"What the devil!" roared gunnery officer Bredhus from Bertha-5.

The *TAL 153* had faked a protective move, shoving itself in front of a Springer ship with just a fraction of a second to spare, in order to save its drive engines from destruction.

Col. Freyt, who was following the battle with keenest attention on the panoramic viewscreen, smiled knowingly. The *TAL 153* was putting up a good front and the *Ganymede* was laying it on hard. The two Trader ships which were still intact simply had to believe that a fighter ship of the Mounders was taking their side in a battle with the *Ganymede* ...

* * * *

By chance Talamon found himself on board the *Titan* as the space battle between the *Ganymede* and the 3 Springer ships broke out about 30 light-minutes away. The participation of the *TAL 153* , her prior disappearance into hyperspace and her return shortly thereafter—these manoeuvres were clearly indicated by the tracking equipment.

"Well?" asked Perry Rhodan, adding nothing more as he glanced at the squarish bulk of Talamon. He referred to the action some 300 million miles distant in which the *TAL 153* fired 3 disintegrator beams simultaneously at the *Ganymede* and missed.

Talamon straightened himself up slightly. "In my clan there are no traitors, Perry Rhodan!" In this brief statement was an expression of that power which each patriarch wielded over his clan. What the patriarch commanded became Law for all.

"Isn't it a curious coincidence that these 3 Trader ships should show up?" asked Reginald Bell but without a trace of the congeniality he so often displayed.

Then the *Titan* also received the pulse-coded message of the *TAL 153* . Just as Talamon was composing a sharp rejoinder, the deciphered words came through: "We are flying a feint attack!"

Impulsively, Bell reached out his hand to the patriarch. "No offence, Talamon, but a little healthy suspicion serves to clear the air once in awhile!"

Talamon took the hand and shook it cautiously, breathing a bit heavily. "I hardly believed my own eyes when I saw the *TAL 153* attack the *Ganymede* but—"

"No buts!" interjected Rhodan. "The feint attack on Freyt's ship is the only way to fool the Springers and to let you work with me without bringing your clan under suspicion... Talamon, I think we're still going to become good friends!"

* * * *

The longer the battle lasted the more concerned Col. Freyt became about his assignment. Actually, the *TAL 153* made it very difficult for him to end the unequal combat. With each minute the danger increased that the Springer clans with their allied flotillas would appear, because the two cylindrical ships that were still in action were transmitting an uninterrupted stream of distress signals.

The *Ganymede* vibrated slightly. A tremor ran through the giant ship: 8 or 9 gun positions had fired simultaneously. The darkness of the void broke into planes of glistening light fingers that fanned out, shooting into the Deep and striking the Springer ships.

Two orange clouds of fire erupted in all directions, producing a rain of molten metal. Hellish lightning marked the detonation of converter energies and the heavy, short-circuiting collapse of magnetic fields. All 3 of the cylindrical ships of the Galactic Traders were devoid of stern sections. As derelicts they went reeling away in free fall and their crews inside awaited their deaths. It was the way the Springers themselves treated their foes: complete annihilation.

And to make things worse, here came this monster spherical spacer thundering out of nowhere. The *Titan* was there! The battleship *TAL 153* must have gone into shock at the appearance of the mile-thick spacer. With reckless acceleration it blasted away from the area. The survivors in the Trader ships thus witnessed it all in graphic detail. They could understand the flight of the Mounders and now awaited their deaths more than ever.

However, neither the *Titan* nor the *Ganymede* concerned themselves over the derelicts. Both vessels accelerated and disappeared from the optical view of the shipwrecked observers. Exactly 10 minutes later in the battle area, 14 cylindrical ships emerged out of hyperspace. The space-time continuum warped in tremendous upheaval at the successive impact of 14 transitions in a row. Each of the hytrans arrivals was registered by the *Titan*, which meanwhile had again tucked Talamon's flagship *TAL 6* under cover of its super-powerful ECM and anti-tracking shield.

Rhodan's eyes sparkled. Suppressed laughter trembled on his lips as he looked across at the hypersensor station. The officer who sat tensely at the panel jerked up his head. "Double transition!" he reported, then passed on the coordinate data and transit direction.

Perry Rhodan's suppressed laughter finally surfaced in a thoughtful smirk. He was thinking of the robot brain on Arkon. There, too, this double transition had been measured and now the mammoth robot sat clicking its millions of Arkon relays and waited for the second transit of the *Titan* and the *Ganymede*. It waited in order to finally determine from the transition calculations where in the Galaxy the mysterious Earth was located—the world which Perry Rhodan came from.

Perry Rhodan had out-bluffed the giant positronicon.

In place of the *Titan*, it was the *TAL 153* which had transited together with the *Ganymede* toward the centre of the Milky Way. Meanwhile the *Titan* was able to use this ruse to remain within range of Star Cluster M-13, in order to take care of important matters before returning to the threatened planet, Earth.

The positronic Regent waited in vain for the next hyperspace transition.

It was never registered; the *Ganymede*'s hyper-compensator absorbed the space warpage so that there were no consequent tremors transmitted. While *TAL 153* turned away toward its home sector of the cluster at normal light-speed, Col. Freyt's ship initiated a second hypertransition, which still did not quite point to the side arm of the Milky Way, in which there was a system containing the planet Terra.

3/ "THEY ARE MONSTERS!"

Topthor the Mounder received the information transmitted to him from Headquarters that Perry Rhodan's *Titan* and his *Ganymede* had taken off on a course toward the centre of the Galaxy, which was probably toward their own solar system.

"Sirger," said the green-skinned oldster with a grim smile, "Headquarters is dripping with friendliness it seems—but will somebody please let me know what's hidden behind your sweetness and light?"

The eternally suspicious Topthor could not be taken in so quickly.

Sirger, information officer at Mounder Headquarters, did not strike a convincing pose on the viewscreen. "Sir," he admitted somewhat meekly, "we still cannot reach your friend Talamon."

"Neither can I!" growled Topthor and his mood became worse. He began frankly to have his doubts about Talamon's fate and that of his fleet. "But wasn't there some kind of minor skirmish yesterday between 3 Springer ships and Rhodan's *Ganymede*? Am I not correctly informed? It was reported to me that the *TAL 153*, a battleship from Talamon's fleet, got into the last part of it and fought it out with the *Ganymede*, in order to give the traders' boats a chance to escape but at the last minute this accursed Rhodan showed up in his *Titan*..."

"Sir, all that is valid. We have the identical reports before us. But the *TAL 153* had to retreat when the *Titan* appeared and since then has not given any sign of itself. We are groping completely in the dark."

"Rhodan..." Topthor uttered the name threateningly yet with a note of helplessness. "Wherever that fellow shows up there are always unheard of impossibilities and riddles!... End of message, Sirger. Thanks for the transmission and inquiry."

* * * *

The *Ganymede* had made a lightning swift journey back to Earth. After 3 transit jumps—under detection shielding of the hyper-compensator—it had finally emerged into normal space between Earth and Mars.

Now the mighty *Ganymede* stood firmly on its 4 tail fins and stretched its gigantic fuselage skyward. Its prow disappeared in the heavy cover of clouds which lay over the Gobi Desert.

Clouds over Terrania? Col. Freyt had asked himself this question and had regarded this rare phenomenon as a bad omen, even though he was not superstitious. Terrania, Perry Rhodan's tiny 'springboard' in the Gobi Desert, which had launched him onto the path toward conquering the Universe for the Earth, was the power centre of Terra; for Earthmen it was an unimaginable concentration of might.

Col. Freyt considered this power as the ground car raced swiftly past the heavy cruisers and the *Stardust II*. The facts were the Earth had fewer heavy space cruisers than a man had fingers on his hand! Against this force, the Galactic Traders and the Mounders had a thousand times that much—and when Freyt thought of the engines of power which were at the disposal of the Arkon Empire, he could only shake his head.

"We have a chance of one in a million!" he muttered, half aloud, and felt himself at the point of depression. But he brightened with the recollection of everything that they and Perry Rhodan had experienced and accomplished together in just 15 years. He finally had to admit: "We have never had a better chance—we have Perry Rhodan and the others *do not* !"

It was as though a new strength were being transmitted into him—a power which came to him from over 30,000 light-years away, where Perry Rhodan held forth in the *Titan* ...

Half an hour after Col. Freyt's arrival, the first strategy conference took place.

"Maj. Nyssen, when will the installation of the hyper-compensator be completed on board your vessel the *Solar System* ?"

So it began. Freyt fired question after question at them. He demanded precise answers. The communication wires were almost hot. There were inquiries and check-backs to and from shipyards, laboratories, research plants, worldwide radiotelephone conference calls to the major end-item and staging plants. There was a half-hour period in which two-thirds of global radio and television communications were blocked or commandeered by Terrania.

This was the first and only sign the Earth had that something unusual was in the air. Terrania only exerted its prerogatives on a global jurisdiction level in the case of an extreme top emergency. All satellite stations were in alert condition One. The period of peace and quiet had ended at all defence bases on the planets and on the Moon.

Col. Freyt noted the light of enthusiasm growing in the eyes of his colleagues. But he did not subscribe to this brand of heroism, since he was in possession of a few more of the facts involved. A film from Arkon interrupted the communications network for 10 minutes. A bewildered and uncomprehending audience was bombarded 10 minutes long with *Arkon Power*; they were smothered with it, almost to the point of destruction. The film hammered its message home mercilessly to each man.

After this demonstration, Col. Freyt then brought their focus into reality: "Under the most favourable circumstances, we and the Earth have a chance of about one in a million. Gentlemen, our prospects for success or survival have always been as good or as bad as that until the present moment. If the Aras

should succeed in tying the Galactic Traders in with their goals, whereby the Springers and the Mounders launch an attack against the Earth—and after all, why shouldn't the Aras succeed?—then in a very short time there will not be an Earth any more, but rather, this solar system will possess *two* suns instead of one!

"Don't toy with the idea of using Arkon's strength. The Chief sees in that the one greater danger for the Earth. Because if the great positronicon once learns our location, then nothing will save us from Arkon slavery and servitude under the will of a Machine! If we are not able to help ourselves, we are lost.

"Until tomorrow at the same time, I will await your recommendations pertaining to the situation...!"

* * * *

Pip! The telltale sound of a pulse-coded message was heard over the *Titan*'s hyperspace receiver.

"Chief!" blurted out Cadet Mengs, who was on duty in the Com Central. "Talamon's fleet has gone to its transit station!"

Perry Rhodan ignored the appellation of 'Chief'. He knew that everyone referred to him as such unofficially; nevertheless it was not customary to issue a dispatch to him in this form of address.

He turned his head. Bell sat in the co-pilot's seat. "Hyper-compensator, Bell?"

"Operating!"

Each event now committed the next in an inexorable chain. The *Titan* was ready for a hyperspace transition. All preparations were completed. Time Zero arrived. Now the mighty positronicon took over all controls. All chance of human error was eliminated.

Then the *Titan* disappeared into hyperspace. The tremendous warpage of the universal fabric, which was detectable in the entire Galaxy with every departure of a vessel from the normal space-time-continuum, this time remained unsensed!

The last great scientific discovery of the Galactic Traders—Earth's and Perry Rhodan's bitterest enemies—was the hyper-compensator, one of which was located within the giant spherical hull of the *Titan*. The ingenious device was first uncovered on board the *Ganymede*, which had been built by the Springers as a battleship and was captured from them by Perry Rhodan. The discovery was made during a complete redesign of the vessel, in which the 4 tail fins and another 120 feet of fuselage were added. By means of an ultimate emergency effort, Earth's industry had been able to imitate the alien technology. But the hyper-compensator that Rhodan had at his disposal on board his spaceship was only a working prototype; it would take some time yet before the Earth would be able to go into mass production of the device.

At a mathematical null-point in time, the *Titan* emerged from hyperspace once more and now hovered in the mysterious silence and darkness of the universe, 8000 light-years removed from the Arkon Empire—far distant from any concentration of stars. Under protection of this boundless solitude, it was safe from discovery by any Springer ship.

Cadet Mengs had reported Talamon's fleet to be at its transit station. In short pulse-bursts, the executive communication of the green-skinned patriarch Talamon had come through on scramble code. With more than 200 battleships, he lay 4000 fathoms deep on the bottom of an ammoniac sea; above which boiled and seethed the poisonous atmosphere of a planetary giant whose diameter exceeded that of Jupiter eight times. It was numbered among those worlds within the Arkonide Empire which were avoided like a stellar plague.

Talamon remained for a period of 36 hours with his ships at the point of hyper-transit. Thus it had been arranged between him and Rhodan. Also it was tacitly understood that the slightest trace of any suspicion must be eradicated suggesting that Perry Rhodan was still present within range of Star Cluster M-13 or that Talamon the Mounder was working *with* Rhodan! Because the *Titan*'s communication centre had intercepted Tophthor's calls, as well as the insistently repeated search signals from Mounder Headquarters, inquiring after Talamon. Among the signals and dispatches which had come through unnoticed, however, was the one that announced the time and place of the meeting of the patriarchs.

A reasonable explanation had been prepared for Talamon's having gone 'under cover', which advertised more or less that his absence gave promise of Talamon's being able, in a short time, to deliver up an enormous quantity of Arkon T-steel.

After some hours, while Perry Rhodan was making an inspection tour through the control stations of his ship, he came upon Cadet Mengs in the Com Central. The Cadet shoved over a stack of deciphered code dispatches and intercepted messages. Rhodan shuffled through them in an almost desultory fashion, until suddenly he reacted. He turned to Bell. "Well. my chubby friend, take a look at that, will you?"

There were 4 dispatches. Bell had no more than gotten to the second one than he started growling angrily. "Are these poison peddlers back messing around already?" After absorbing the fourth message, his eyes were blazing. "If I could lay my hands on this Ara character, Gegul...!" he threatened. "These Aras have got the devil beat! Nothing is sacred to these medics—ha, medics! Murderers is the word! Under the disguise of being healers and good Samaritans, they carry on their dirty business of blackmail and death! Perry, do you know where this planet, Exsar, is located?"

The Arkonide star catalogue gave them the information. The ship's positronicon calculated the hypertransition coördinates. 4375 light-years was not a great distance for the *Titan*. Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bell knew that with this hypertransit jump they would be taking a great risk but they had to convince themselves that the terrible implications of the dispatches were true.

Once more undetected, the *Titan* emerged from hyperspace, taking up a position that was within 18 light-hours from the orbit of Exsar, the 6th of 9 planets encircling a small double sun. Lt. Tiffloor was called up to see the Chief.

Perry Rhodan briefed him as to the nature of the mission. "Lt. Tiffloor, we have to minimize our risk factor as much as possible. So we're going to put you and the *Gazelle* through the tele-transmitter within 10 light minutes of Exsar. You will reach the planet on the night side. This happens to be one of the few actual Springer home worlds. Your landing must not be detected under any circumstances. I want *you alone* to leave the ship, wearing a spacesuit. The suit is important because on Exsar a plague is raging which is taking a daily toll of 200,000 people—that is, the Galactic Traders together with their wives and children. This planet was the only one that refused to send a patriarch delegate to the conference of Springers that's due to take place shortly. In return, the Aras have struck back. With their hellish germ technology, they have contaminated an entire planet with a deadly plague. I have to know if this incredible situation is actually true. You, Tiffloor, must bring me the confirmation that these hyper

dispatches are *not* the babbling of an insane crackpot or a crank." He tapped the 4 message sheets he held in his hand. "The positronic will give you all necessary data. Don't forget that the *Titan* is under cover of its ECM mantle and counter-detection shielding. Is that all clear, Tiffloor?"

"All clear, sir." Lt. Tiffloor saluted. In the leading cadre of Perry Rhodan's New Power, he was the youngest and most promising officer. He was a young man to whom no one might have attributed the capability of reckless daring-do—at least at first glance. But in his way he was very much like his chief, Perry Rhodan.

* * * *

After his landing on Aralon, Chief Inspector Gegul hurried at once to the Medical Council. He had already sent notice of his arrival ahead of him. As he entered the, great anteroom, which was tastefully decorated by a stylized, softly glowing Aras medical symbol, his secretary, Arga Tasla, awaited him.

Gegul nodded to her hastily. His movements expressed both urgency and triumph. He had returned from a personal mission and he wanted to extract the maximum enjoyment of his triumph before the full body of the Council of Physicians. So he did not stop when Arga Tasla came toward him. He practically regarded her approach as an annoyance.

"What is it?" he asked curtly.

"We have intercepted messages originating from the planet Exsar and they indicate—"

"Please!" Gegul interrupted her sharply. Now he was puffed up with self-importance and he motioned her peremptorily to one side. "For now, at least spare me the trivialities. I've just come from Exsar; I know what's going on there at the moment. Within 8 days there will only be a dead plague world called Exsar..."

"Chief Inspector!" she interjected almost imploringly. "We know all of that! But do you know that your operation there is under observation? For hours, hypertransitions have been hammering all over the Galaxy in every direction and every message mentions *your* name, insisting that the plague on Exsar is the work of the Aras of Aralon!"

Gegul's triumph-flushed countenance froze in sudden shock. His eyes widened in amazement as he stared at her. "Does the Council of Physicians have wind of these messages?" he almost stammered.

Before Arga Tasla could answer, the thunder of a spaceship liftoff boomed into the anteroom. Gegul was suddenly galvanized by the noise; he whirled around to the window and saw a ship hurtle skyward in the distance. It bore the ray insignia of Aralon and the markings of a hospital ship.

Filled with a vague foreboding, he asked her, "Where's it going?"

"To Exsar, Inspector. It's been loaded with 84000 tons of serum g/Z 45—our entire supply! 6300 doctors and medical techs are on board. During the last 10 minutes all Aralon transmitters have been broadcasting a denial that we have any connection with the plague on Exsar. As a proof of our good will we are contributing our entire stock of g/Z 45 completely free of charge. Also, about a half hour ago a

formal inquiry came through from the robot brain on Arkon!"

Gegul knew what a pound of g/Z 45 cost; it was one of the most precious pharmaceuticals produced on Aralon. The '3-hour convulsion sickness' that he himself had brought to Exsar was the most highly contagious of all infections. The Council had shipped off 6300 medical men to Exsar—which meant 6300 candidates for death! Hardly 10% of them would have a chance of ever seeing Aralon again and after the landing on the plagued planet the hospital ship faced a 50-year quarantine!

"Ye Cosmic Gods!" stammered Gegul, close to collapse.

"Gegul!" called the security robot guarding the entrance of the chamber where the Council regularly met. Its voice was hard. "I request you for the last time to appear before the Council of Physicians!"

Gegul knew that he walked his last steps as a free Ara. Death waited for him. He had failed! He had added to Aralon a greater catastrophe than Perry Rhodan!

* * * *

In the receiver of his small hypersender, Tiffloor heard the incessant broadcast of the same repeated data. Again and again he heard mention of Gegul's name, as well as Aras and Aralon, and somewhere in between he picked up something that sounded like '3-hour convulsion sickness'. The Galactic Traders and their families were dying like flies—by the hundreds of thousands!

No one had taken notice of the Gazelle. Those who looked upon the spectre of Death were not very interested in company or who might be paying them a visit. Gliding just 1500 feet above Exsar, Lt. Tiffloor flew in his Arkon spacesuit at a 70-mile an hour clip. Without interruption of signals, he was tracking the local hyper-transmission station and his speaker volume kept getting louder. Tiff did not need to worry about being discovered. The tiny deflector field around his suit made him invisible.

Now his antigrav field lifted him. Like a leaf drifting on the wind, he glided in a gentle curve above the mountain chain and down again toward its base, where he discovered the small settlement. Here the tiny transmitter was sending out an uninterrupted stream of alarms to the Arkon Empire.

No one challenged him as he entered the low, flat building which displayed on its roof the typical antenna array for hyper-transmission broadcasting. He kept his deflector shield operating. The Springer at the hypertransceiver must not recognize him as an alien, otherwise the presence of Rhodan in the proximity of Star Cluster M-13 would not be a secret any longer.

The door was open. Curiously, Tiff entered the house. For the first time he saw how Galactic Traders lived who did not spend their lives on spaceships. The unaccustomed dwelling culture surprised him. The house, located in a village-like settlement, radiated an atmosphere of cozy comfort, and for the first time Tiffloor felt a twinge of sympathy for a Springer.

When he shoved open the door of the room where the hyper-transceiver was operating, he saw the Trader whirl around. For safety, Tiff kept his psycho-beam raygun trained on him. By means of the antigrav field he floated over to the transmitter, where he cut off the microphone. It was not necessary to broadcast their conversation to the whole Galaxy.

Then he made himself known as an Arkonide. As the Trader, a stubby-framed, fortyish man, gazed toward him uncomprehendingly, he repeated his statement in Intercosmo.

"An Arkonide?" came the counter-question. The man slowly lowered his right hand.

Tiff gave him a warning.

"Why do you hide behind the deflector shield?" asked the Springer suspiciously.

Then Tiff came to the point. He didn't give the other a chance to talk until he had spoken his piece. "So with your suspicions would you like to let every last Springer on Exsar become a victim of the plague? Don't you have enough dead people lying around in the streets by now? Tell me what you have been able to observe and I will do my best to provide that at least a few million people survive this sickness. So you see, my friend, it all depends on you!"

Two hours later Tiff found himself in the capital city of the continent. Here most signs of life had almost been extinguished. Over the metropolis hovered the breath of pestilence. Horrifying spectacles lay before him as he swept on over the houses. His goal was the main hypertransmission station.

It was still operating but the great building that housed it was filled with either the dead or the dying. There was no one who might have been helpful to Tiff. One hour later he succeeded in connecting the alien tape player to the transmitter. It was a continuous tape. Endlessly the hyper-transmitter sent out its accusing broadcast. Accusations against Aralon and the Aras! And personal accusations against Chief Inspector Gegul of Aralon!

Julian Tiff. . . was convinced that the mammoth Brain on Arkon would have to had picked up this continuous hypertransmission. Just how precisely and logically that automatic positronicon operated, he well knew from his experience as an assistant to Perry Rhodan. On Aralon they would receive official inquiries from Arkon, which meant that the Aras of Aralon would have no other recourse than to do everything possible to bring the deadly '3-hour convulsion sickness' under control.

* * * *

Perry Rhodan was paged by his communications centre. "Sir," inquired Communications Officer Jobson "may I tap you in on a tape broadcast we're picking up from a hyper-transmitter station on Exsar?"

"Channel it in here," Rhodan decided. Then he began to smile when he immediately recognized Tiff's voice—but suddenly his face became rigid. Bell, who had lain on the couch staring at the ceiling, suddenly sprang up and growled through his teeth. "If I could get my hands on Gegul, he'd learn a thing or two! They pass themselves off for doctors when they are actually monsters! Perry, why haven't you turned this hell of a world of Aralon into a sun ball?"

"Because I am neither avenger nor judge, Bell. We do not have the right to sit in judgment and I am content *not* to bear such a responsibility!"

4/ "EARTH—AND RHODAN—MUST BE DESTROYED!"

The *Gazelle* was hardly inside its hangar again before the stupendous sphere of the *Titan* got under way. With the help of the hyper-compensator it left the planet Exsar's solar system quite undetected and also arrived out of hyperspace unnoticed in the proximity of the planet Honur in the middle of Star Cluster M-13.

From the Arkonide star catalogue it was open knowledge that Honur was a 'forbidden world'. Aside from this single notice, however, there was no indication as to the reason for the restriction against landing there. Some time ago Perry Rhodan had not allowed the restriction to deter him from going there and the price tag for disobeying the official ban had been the near fatal illness of his entire crew. That the little funny bears of Honur, miniatures not much over a foot in length, secreted a nerve poison from their pelts and infected anyone who inadvertently touched them was in itself a catastrophic situation—but that these innocent creatures with their poisonous secretions represented a deliberate product of Aras' breeding laboratories was a criminal offence!

The Aras of Aralon had not atoned for their crime in a form that was commensurate with its gravity. In spite of being criminals they were also the top medical geniuses of the Galaxy and the Arkon Empire could not yet dispense with their help.

The *Titan* made a vertical landing at Honur's graveyard of ships—a ghastly memorial consisting of miles of derelict space vessels which had also disobeyed the ban and whose crews had long since fallen prey to the fatal hyper-euphoria induced by nerve poison. But for Perry Rhodan and his men, Honur was no longer a 'forbidden planet'. In the meantime he had obtained the antidote. The Aras of Aralon were forced to surrender it and until the day of its final demise this race would now never forget its first encounter with the beings from Earth.

Perry Rhodan looked pensively at his friend. "Bell, have you ever come to realize that—for many intelligences in the Milky Way—my name carries the same connotation that the word Devil does on Earth?"

Bell looked up in surprise. "So what?" he asked, at first casually—but then he sobered. "That is and will remain the other side of the coin. You'll never be able to change it. It's something you'll have to come to terms with. By not thinking about some things, the worst can be overcome."

Even Perry Rhodan was only human, after all. In this moment of reflection he felt the weight of responsibility resting on his shoulders like an insupportable burden. He had somehow been chosen as the one who must protect Earth in relationship to the universe. He had already achieved the first giant step beyond the solar system and—outward to the stars. Now he feared the next giant step because he could sense the uncertain footing of his power.

The Earth had come to be threatened by the Galactic Traders. The Aras, who were descendants of the Springers, were using the power of their medical monopoly to force the others into attacking the Earth. That the attack would occur, Perry Rhodan was convinced. For this reason he had sent Col. Freyt back to Terra in the *Ganymede*, in order to expedite all preparations necessary for a global defence—and the *Ganymede* was the only ship other than the *Titan* that was equipped with a tele-transmitter. There were only these two and neither vessel was reproducible. What were a pair of tele-transmitters against 2 or 3

thousand Springer space battleships?

With an instinctive clarity, Perry Rhodan recognized the limits of his power; he knew that the Earth was lost unless he could find a way of thwarting the planned attack. For the moment he saw no possibility of averting the disaster.

Bell studied him closely as Perry spoke aloud, seemingly to himself. "I hope we're not depending too much on Talamon's help. For days now I haven't been able to shake off a disastrous feeling that we're running wide-eyed into a situation that can blow up in our faces!"

Com Control switched a dispatch through to Rhodan's cabin: "Patriarch Talamon has taken off with his entire fleet to the Gonom System. The rendezvous of the Springers and Mounders will take place in 3 Arkon days on Laros, the 18th moon of the single planet Gom. End of coded message... The astronomical data for the Gonom System read as follows..."

Rhodan cut it off. With a lithe movement he got to his feet. His more rugged and squarely built friend followed more heavily.

In this great gathering of the clans which would take place in 3 Arkon days on the Gonom System's moon of Laros, the peril to Earth would enter its most acute phase. Perry Rhodan was not disposed to permit the rendezvous to run its course undisturbed...

* * * *

After announcing that the death sentence for Chief Inspector Gegul had been executed, Santek, the present chairman of the Council of Physicians of Aralon, carried on with the routine business of the day. Not a word was even mentioned concerning the '3-hour convulsion sickness'. To him and all others present the fate of millions of Galactic Traders was a matter of insignificance.

"We will not send an observer to the rendezvous. Yesterday this was decided by vote. The result of the voting is known to each of you. With his graphic presentation, Chief Biologist Keklos has convinced us that he will be able to work more unobtrusively from his laboratories than we can with the most neutral-appearing observer. Three of the Springer ships will be seeded with 3 types of disease whose symptoms are unknown and this will produce the consternation that is necessary for the pursuance of our objectives.

"Thereafter, Keklos will proceed immediately with whatever else is necessary. A demonstration of our medical technology and skills will be staged in a manner that will exclude any suspicion that material gain is attached to it but it will serve to convince the Springers and the Mounders that our common existence can only be assured when Perry Rhodan and his Earth have ceased to exist!"

"I am now in a position to inform the Council of Physicians that the location of the planet Terra no longer remains a secret. Its coördinates are firmly registered in the core memory banks of the positronic computer on board Topthor's flagship!"

Santek's announcement had explosive impact.

They all recognized the incalculable value of this one piece of information. But of course in its wake came suspicion. Nakket inquired why the Mounder, Topthor, had held back his knowledge for such a long time.

The question had hardly been registered in Santek's ears before the large viewscreen flared to life. With 5 times normal magnification, the huge, squarish figure and green-skinned face of Topthor appeared. Santek let him talk. He was relying heavily on the rough, uncultured words of the old chieftain.

As he reported his last battle with Perry Rhodan, the Mounder's voice began to thunder. He spoke realistically without overdoing it and with sound analysis. Among other things he said: "At first it appeared certain that my fleet outmatched Rhodan by far. I was already seeing him as a plucked bird but in the next minute I was thanking the gods and a few spare devils on the side that I was able to get out of there with my ship at all! My other battle spacers were destroyed. From one moment to the next they mysteriously disappeared without a trace. Maybe Rhodan is 10 times smarter than I am but I'm telling you right now that the disappearance of my big ships had nothing to do with his wits—the fact is, Rhodan has weapons that are not to be found anywhere else in the Universe! His powers are a threat to us. His destruction, and with him the complete annihilation of his home planet, means security for us and for Arkon's empire..."

Topthor's voice resounded even after the screen blanked out. The cynical, cold-blooded Aras grinned at each other. The old man was a perfect mouthpiece for them. He was the representative for their interests.

Calmly, Santek continued. "We shall conclude an agreement with the Galactic Traders and Mounders whereby we, the Aras, pledge ourselves to provide immediate help in case of dangerous illnesses—and all medications specifically furnished in such cases will be at a 50% rebate."

"Even medications in series 08-KL-56?" asked Mulxc testily.

Santek returned a cynical smile. "Will we be to blame, after the destruction of Rhodan and his Earth, if new types of plagues and epidemics appear everywhere—especially if we swiftly, but *nottoo* swiftly, develop the cures for them, thanks to our genius? Officially the series 08KL-56 preparations will only be developed in the laboratory by the end of the year. By that time, nobody will be talking any more about Perry Rhodan and his ridiculous Earth. At that time, the Springers and the Mounders will only have the *one* problem of not being infected by any of the diseases.

"In the final analysis, you know, we're going to have to work as swiftly and inconspicuously as possible to counteract the losses that Gegul has cost us...!"

5/ SECRET OF THE BLUE ROOM

The *Titan* came soundlessly out of hyperspace. The transition shock—a pulling pain at the back of the neck, plus a partial unconsciousness—soon faded out for everyone. From the panoramic gallery screens, the solar system of Gonom shone in upon the Control Central.

The final checkouts and all clears following the hypertransit jump came from all departments of the

mile-thick spherical spacer. The most important checkout was determining whether or not the hyper-compensator had concealed the transition into and out of hyperspace. It was relayed up to the Control Central with a short "Everything okay, sir!"

Once more the *Titan* had rematerialised within Star Cluster M-13, this time 20 light-hours from the red dwarf sun Gonom. This star was 68 light-years distant from Arkon. The ugly red dwarf only possessed one planet, which according to Arkon Star Catalogue was known as Gom.

Bell's dissatisfied features betrayed what he thought about this world. And he had every reason for expressing it. Almost the size of Saturn, with a diameter of over 40,000 miles, Gom's gravity readout was 1.9G. That 50 pounds would weigh almost 100 pounds on its surface was not so startling but its rotation was identical to that of its orbital period around the dwarf sun Gonom. Converted to Earth time, the value of this orbital period given in the Arkon star catalogue represented 2.4 years. This meant that a day on giant Gom was 1.2 Earth years long, as well as the night!

"Go-o-o-*dnight* !" quipped Bell instantly when Khrest the Arkonide brought it to his attention.

"The best part is yet to come, Bell," said Khrest, and he smiled so mysteriously that Bell watched him suspiciously. "Aside from such little items as Gom's temperature extremes, which produce the most terrible and unimaginable hurricanes in creation because of heat and cold ratios between the superheated day side and the night side—with raging wind velocities reaching over 600 miles per hour—Gom also occupies a very unusual position among planets, owing to a rumour or legend thousands of years old to the effect that it is supposed to harbour a frightful form of life!"

Even Perry Rhodan perked up to listen. Ever since he had averted shipwreck on Honur by a hair's breadth, he categorized every negative rumour concerning an unknown planet as 'extraordinarily important information'.

Reginald Bell didn't think it was amusing. "I've heard enough about this planet," he said defensively. "Just the fact that it's decked itself out with 18 moons makes it look to me like a monster—and a glutton, at that!"

Gonom glowed dully in the panob screen, casting a reddish pall over the saturnine planet with its multiple moons.

The hypersensor registered and tracked a mass arrival out of hyperspace of both Springer ships and spacers of the Mounders. All set a course for Laros, the 18th moon. Laros was in opposition. Rhodan waited for an encoded message from Talamon.

* * * *

Chief Biologist Keklos was conspicuous not only for his short stature or his gleaming white plastic smock with its softly glowing insignia of rank but principally for the manner in which he greeted or dismissed each person who conversed with him. He could not tolerate being closer than 10 feet from anyone in a discussion. If the other party came closer than that, either through ignorance or forgetfulness, then he was not supposed to be surprised that even the most interesting conversation could terminate instantly. So far, Keklos had just turned his back on them and walked away.

But this Keklos, a sick man himself, was the greatest biological genius, and also the least known. Outside of those who performed their duties on Laros, there were not more than a dozen Ara doctors who knew who Keklos was, what he did and what he knew. This was of no concern to Keklos. Nothing concerned him, not even the mass extinction of other intelligences.

Often his tremendous research series involved the simultaneous deaths of many intelligent beings. He was not to be deterred by Arkonides or anyone else—Aras, Springers or Mounders. Whether or not intelligent life forms were destroyed in the process of his experiments did not interest him in the slightest. The only thing that ever interested him was reaching his particular objective.

Until the present time, he had always succeeded.

With evident satisfaction he examined the 3 'bio-men' who stood before him, separated from him by an invisible radiation screen. They represented the most advanced test-tube product: 10 feet tall, of humanoid stature but furnished with 4 arms. As a departure from traditional shape, instead of long, their heads were round—more or less spherical in structure.

Still quite fascinated, the biologist kept observing them. Sentimental or spiritual motives were alien to him. His hand slowly reached for his neutron gun. With the other hand he threw a switch that cut off the radiation screen that stood between him and the humanoids.

The barrel of the weapon pointed at the middle homunculus, who was aware of what was being aimed at him. An unarticulated cry came from his circular mouth, which opened like the shutter of a diaphragm, but the ray of force whipped from the hand weapon and struck him. Each hit from a weapon of this kind, which worked on the principle of extreme short-wave frequencies, had until now caused the destruction of any organic life. But the bio-man did not die; he only shuddered a trifle till Keklos cut off the terrible beam of destructive force.

With an inconspicuous movement he had reestablished the defence screen and at the same time summoned his coworkers. Behind him the door opened and 3 Aras entered. They remained carefully at their 10-foot distance and awaited their chief's instructions.

"Carry out the intelligence tests. Also check out to what extent the bio-men are immune to hypno- and psycho-rays. You don't have to research their fireproof qualities any further: we've had those results already. Check out speech and memory capacities as well. By tomorrow evening I will have final results of the tensile strength of tendons and sinew. Check also all fatigue level indications—" In the presence of the 3 humanoids he brought his most gruesome instructions to an end.

One bio-man began to stammer. Keklos flared up impatiently and said in ice-cold tones, "Away with him! Tell Moders I want him!"

Moders arrived almost before the assistant medics and the bio-men had disappeared. This giant figure of a man with notably coarse facial features remained at a distance of 10 feet from the Chief Biologist.

"Moders," began the scientist, while pacing back and forth, "the instructions which I have given concerning the bio-men you will find recorded in the computer banks. From here on I want you to take charge of this for me. I'm going to have to be involved with the Springers and the Mounders who are having their meetings here. If you have to over-tax everybody and all equipment, I want you to force-drive the daily output of bio-man production up to 5000 units—that is, if tomorrow's test results are favourable. It's settled: the bio-men will not be supported by a bony framework... it's the only thing

holding us up now, and we've had the least trouble with the Sargon fibre tissue."

"Take care that the continuous replacement of 'basic material' is supplied from Gom without interruption or breakdowns. I don't believe I have to refer especially to the career of Chief Inspector Gegul, who ended up in a converter! That is all, Moders. You may go!"

Keklos himself was a biological monster—an Ara who had forgotten the law known to everyone in the Milky Way: 'Physician, heal, but don't ever endanger the patient!'

He waited until the visibly shaken Moders had turned around and exited. Then he also left the room, but through a door that only opened after it had registered his brain-wave pattern. A conveyor took him swiftly into the depths. Now and then, light shot out from the natural rock for a distance of perhaps 5 or 6 feet. No one would have suspected that in these isolated light sources a very sophisticated control system was contained, which worked on the principle of brainwave patterns and was not to be deceived. In each light-source well, a conglomeration of deadly ray weapons was concealed, in readiness to annihilate the intruder foolhardy enough to be conveyed without authorization into the most secret laboratories of the Aras.

A great armourplated door, which also opened only in response to Keklos' brain-wave pattern, gave him access to lab 3 and 101 areas. When the Chief Biologist took the next step, a softly shimmering scrim of light disappeared in front of him. A deadly field of radiation was automatically shut off. He opened the next door by hand and passed through a lock in which he was disinfected. Then he entered the first room of the great laboratory Complex 3.

He did not pay attention to the Aras who were at work here. He hurried along a broad middle aisle, past retort systems, incubator installations and the most complicated medical equipment, toward the room that mounted a huge Ara Restricted Area symbol on its door. Before this, Keklos had to pause. His palms pressed flatly against the door. Suddenly, it slid into the wall. He stepped quickly through and remained waiting until it finally closed again.

In a blue plastic-tiled room which was flooded with a diffuse bluish light of strange intensity, he was forced to close his eyes for a short time. In contrast to the other rooms of the lab 3 complex, here it was strikingly cool, almost cold.

And the biologist Keklos was alone here.

Even Moders, his closest assistant, had no idea of what secret was in this room.

Here the prolongation of organic life *had* become fact!

Almost with racing steps, Keklos hurried to the place where a chair stood in front of a primitive-looking apparatus. As he sat down on the seat, each movement expressed tension and expectation. From his right, Keklos pulled the on-microscope alongside. When the small black metal ball on the end of the microscope was lined up on the gelatinous mass, the diffuse blue light in the room suddenly went out, to be replaced by impenetrable darkness.

Keklos waited motionlessly. A greyish something appeared, became brighter, acquired contours and was finally recognizable as a viewscreen. He did not activate any controls. There were no adjustments on the on-microscope. It regulated itself by means of its small positronicon. All around Keklos, energy fields and concentrated radiation hummed and crackled—it was one mad multiplication of sorcery made up out of medicine and Ara engineering technique. Chief Biologist Keklos was the man who ingeniously mixed it

all together in order to reach his goal.

Now he suppressed his breathing. Once again the on-microscope unveiled the mysterious aging process of the cells, but here—? Keklos was a fanatic. He forgot time and place. His eyes did not tire of staring at the screen of the on-microscope and observing the miracle of youth-preservation in the cells, which according to biological laws should be manifesting now in the atrophy and decline.

Keklos remained silent. Not a word, no sudden outcry gave expression to his triumph. Before his eyes the path was indicated which would make it possible for him, even tomorrow, to promise the Aras a 30% prolongation of life!

And in a hundred years, thought Keklos, I will still be the Chief Biologist—and in a hundred years I will have found the secret of eternal life! It's a shame I couldn't obtain this Thora for experimental purposes. Her cell condition would have interested me, and the fact that this woman, in contrast to most of the Arkonides, still possesses initiative. Without Arkonides from the highest social strata, I won't be able to complete my latest test series. First thing tomorrow I'll order 10 of them from Aralon. They have enough eligible material lying around in their hospitals...

He leaned back and rubbed his tired eyes. A 178-year research project had reached the end of its first phase today. Chief Biologist Keklos already saw the Aras as the successors to the Arkonides, taking over rulership of the Empire in Star Cluster M-13.

For him, Perry Rhodan ceased to be a factor to consider.

* * * *

On board Topthor's flagship, the hypercom receiver sounded. By chance, the old Mounder happened to be in the Control Central. He turned around, recognized that the message was coming in on Talamon's frequency and let out a bellow when Talamon's laughing old face came into focus on the screen.

"By all the gods, Talamon, where in the devil have you and your ships been hiding? Half the Milky Way is looking for you! I've been searching for you, and Headquarters, too!"

Talamon's laughter lingered, then changed to a crafty grin. "Topthor, I'm cutting in the scramble coder, using password 'Obsian'."

At the same moment, Topthor's intuition came into play. He took a look around the Control Centre. "Get out of here!" he ordered his clan followers.

The last of these had hardly left the Control Central of the battleship before he turned to an ancillary console of the hypercom and adjusted certain controls to accommodate the password Obsian. Now Talamon's report came through clearly. Topthor listened with interest to what his best friend had to tell him. He did not take offence that Talamon, in spite of using a scramble-coded hypercom transmission, was nevertheless cautious and even left certain innuendoes dangling in the air.

"Isn't there some way I can get a piece of this business, Talamon?" Topthor bored carefully toward the fountain of gold that Talamon had alluded to in his paraphrased report.

"That's why I'm calling you now, Old Man," and Talamon grinned at him from the viewscreen. "All you're going to have to come up with is a hundred million in cash in order to make 5 times that much in a month!"

Suddenly old Tophor wasn't smiling. "A hundred million! Where do you think I'm going to get *that* kind of money?"

Tophor the Mounder was known everywhere as a miser and a hoarder. Together with his clan he counted among the Nabobs of Star Cluster M-13—those who had made it rich in far ventures and come home to keep it all. He could have shaken a hundred million out of his left sleeve but the shrewd, cunning oldster was merely gracious at all times, without any expenditure of money.

Talamon did not hard sell him. "I'll be landing in 18 hours. Until then you can think over whether you want to come in with me in this business or not. Otherwise, old friend, I'll make the deal with somebody else."

Talamon guarded himself from letting out one word about the Arkon T-steel on Honor. Now he fell back on his concocted cover-up: "Tophor, it wasn't laziness that kept me from answering all the calls that reached me. All we need is for somebody to intercept our conversation, even now—and if I had answered your search call just once, everybody else would have known in a few hours where I had hidden out with my fleet! Tophor, I have in my hands *the* business deal of my life. Old boy, think it over. You have 18 hours. Over and out—!"

Talamon's image faded from the screen. Tophor stared pensively before him.

To risk 100 million and receive in return 500 million without firing a shot, without putting a single fighter ship onto the game board and for once without having to pull the Springers' hot chestnuts out of their stellar fires...

Tophor got to his feet sullenly. "Why didn't Talamon give me even 5 minutes to decide? Of course I would have bought in on the deal. A curse on this clan gathering here—I don't think I like the idea any more! 500 million in one month without having to risk my life? My dear Aras, in your last visit, you were a *bittoo* friendly! I'm going to disappoint you badly. I am not your Council's whip. You'll have to fight your own battles to win over the old hollow heads! I have more important things to do—such as picking up a little sum of 500 million! Forbidden planets and shrinking suns! Why with this I could even forget Perry Rhodan! If I only knew what this colossal deal of Talamon's consisted of—!"

* * * *

Perry Rhodan had intercepted Talamon's hypercom transmission. At the same time it was a prearranged signal for him, to the effect that Talamon's smallest spaceship would arrive in an hour to take on board a Gazelle-class scoutship along with the mutants.

Bell left his co-pilot seat. "I'll get ready," he said contentedly. "The mutants have also been briefed already..."

6/ HYPERCOMFUSION!

Laros, the 18th moon of the planet Gom, was an oxygen world and in its diameter and gravity it was similar to the Earth.

Two great oceans separated the flat continents from one another. There, were only 8 large cities on Laros, which by Arkonide standards were of no significance. With their hospital tracts they served as cloaks of camouflage which the Aras used to conceal their subterranean places of research. Much more intensively than on Aralon, Laros had been developed into one big system of caverns and beneath the moon's harmless-appearing surface 3,000,000 Ara medical men carried on experiments that the Galaxy must not know about under any circumstances.

The Master Council, the highest court that the individual physicians received their instructions from, had ordered for Laros and its secret laboratories that each Ara, once he entered the cave system below, would have to make his dwelling there until his death! Only Chief Biologist Keklos and 5 of his closest assistants were exempt from this law.

The physicians and medical men working above in the hospital areas had no idea that beneath their feet more than 3,000,000 colleagues worked in life-long slavery, conducting experiments all aimed at but one objective: to one day convert the domain of the Arkonides into an Empire of the Aras!

Chief Biologist Keklos was officially head of all hospital installations on Laros, where only sicknesses related to disturbances of the inorganic metabolism were handled exclusively. He received in his office a biochemist named Tragh, a young man with prematurely wasted features.

Tragh's gaze wavered. Four weeks ago he had been transferred to Laros as a punishment, having in fact just barely escaped a death penalty. But he still had more to fear from the courts. Three other crimes had as yet remained undiscovered. But he thought about them when he received the order to come to the Chief Biologist, Keklos.

And now he stood before this powerful, tremendously influential man, who was the uncrowned Lord of Laros. Keklos did not leave him in any doubt as to why he had been summoned. He presented to Tragh the details concerning the very 3 crimes that he had thought were undiscovered.

"Stop shaking, you wretch!" Keklos thundered at him. "I could turn you over to the tender mercies of a converter but I'm going to give you one more chance, Tragh! Now listen..."

"The ships of the Springers and the Mounders are arriving on Laros in a constant stream. All crews realize that a landing here automatically puts them under quarantine until one of our medical commissioners has been on board and determined that the crew is healthy and the ship is not a germ carrier. We have been forced to impose this restriction because of the Exsar incident. Surprisingly, the 3-hour convulsion sickness broke out on that planet and, as you know, for some incomprehensible reason the Aras have been given the blame.

"I want you to take part immediately in the inspection of the landed ships, as a biochemist. But your principal assignment is not connected with giving support to the commission in the course of their work.

Instead, in 3 of the ships I want you to place one of these capsules you see on my desk—into the air-conditioning intake system."

"If you take care of this task to my satisfaction, then I am in a position afterward to obtain clemency for you from the Master Council. As soon as I have left this room, come to my desk and take the 3 capsules; then go to my light-board and commit to memory every detail you see noted there!"

Keklos concluded his commands with an inhuman threat: "If you should make the slightest mistake, Tragh, you will have the adventure of landing as an experimental subject in one of our plague-research departments!"

In shocked dismay, Tragh stared after the horrible little man. He did not believe one word the Chief said. He suspected that he was now a candidate for death. But this served to fill him with the desperation of a madman compelled to clutch at the final straw. He ran to the desk and snatched up the 3 capsules greedily. He concealed them surreptitiously and studied what was written on the light-board. Only then was he able to see through the terrible plan of the Chief Biologist!

* * * *

Bell put in an emergency call. He was already with the mutants on Talamon's smallest ship, which had come to fly them to the *TAL 6*.

"What's up?" asked Perry calmly over the radio connection.

"Oh nothing much," began Bell, and whenever he started that way the rest of it was sure to be heavy, "but were you aware that Laros is a main stronghold of the poison mixers, Perry? That place is under complete jurisdiction of Aras! I just happen to be reading here an edict of quarantine..."

"Just a second, Bell."

On Bell's screen, Perry was seen to turn around and Bell caught his question: "Khrest, didn't you know that?"

Khrest, a top scientist in the Arkon Empire, shook his head. "300 years ago Laros was only an insignificant Arkon base, Rhodan..."

Bell heard his friend gasp. Perry Rhodan turned again to the screen. His face expressed deepest concentration under a suppressed tension. With his unfailing instinct he appeared to sense trouble. Bell also. Behind this quarantine notice, something was decidedly fishy! Bell let loose then with his angry suspicions. His voice became sharp when he mentioned the planet Exsar and then read the high-sounding phrases of the Aras.

"Bell, when did you get this quarantine notice?"

Reginald Bell understood why Perry asked the question. Rhodan was beginning to distrust Talamon. And for this reason he was quick to answer: "This instruction isn't 15 minutes old. It just came fluttering in from Laros over the hypercom."

"Okay." Perry nodded in response. "Then you already know how you and the mutants will have to conduct yourselves after the landing, Bell."

"Very nicely put, Perry," grinned back the heavyset one. "I'm not the least worried about *us* but what are Talamon's clansmen going to tell the Ara commission when they're standing in front of the *Gazelle*?"

"Well, friend, is it absolutely necessary for them to see the *Gazelle*?" asked Perry softly, and cut off the connection.

Bell's strong rebuttal didn't get through...

* * * *

Laros possessed an astonishingly large spaceport of first-class construction. Almost 4000 square miles in extent, it offered room for a medium-sized fleet and the landing surface was so solid that even ships of the Arkonide Universe class could land here without using their antigrav fields.

Bell stood beside Talamon the patriarch in front of the large viewscreen and examined the tremendous spaceport in amazement. The whole layout filled him with certain misgivings but in contrast to his normal habit he did not express himself. Whoever understood Bell knew that his silent moods were the same as a threat.

The hypercom speaker blared. A call from Laros. It was an order not to land. *Contagion danger on Laros!*

"Why are you laughing, Bell?" asked Talamon, who was usually the first to be suspicious about anything.

Bell sneered scornfully. "Because they must have pulled that gag out of the mothballs! It's no wonder that these poison peddlers can't think of anything better to do; these Aras are just busy from morning to night spreading their germs around. I hope I get a chance down here to wipe out Gegul!" He couldn't forget the crime that Gegul had perpetrated on the planet Exsar. In the computer archives of the *Titan* he had familiarized himself with all the gory details concerning the '3-hour convulsion sickness'.

Bell was a good-natured person. People who knew his soft spots could wrap him around their fingers but let the slightest infraction of the code of ethics occur and the fun was over. Gegul's unprecedented action had been one of the most unethical of crimes and it was an expression of Bell's nature that he wanted to get his hands on this man.

* * * *

As the Ara fighter robots lined up, in front of the 3 great locks of the Springer spaceship *XUL 2*, every Galactic Trader and Mounder fled the vicinity of the vessel. An Ara ambulance ship raced to the scene

and hovered over the cylindrical hull of the Springer craft. Uninterruptedly it broadcast the "contagion" alarm, which was everywhere feared as the most dreaded signal in the entire Star Cluster M-13. The alarm was emitted acoustically, optically and vibrationally.

The small ambulance ship had hardly traversed half of the great spaceport before 5 large vessels appeared. They came to a stop above the *XUL 2* and generated a defence screen around the long ship. Shortly thereafter a gigantic, major-class Ara ship appeared. It took a stationary position exactly above the *XUL 2*. Slowly an opening appeared along the keel, almost 1000 feet long and 200 feet wide. It seemed like the gaping maw of a monster, ready to devour the infected *XUL 2*.

Hardly had the last section of the hole gaped open than the 5 other craft isolating the *XUL 2* with the defence screen disappeared. Slowly the vast ship with its yawning aperture lowered vertically. When it was within 150 feet of the Springer ship, the latter detached itself from the surface, lifted up by mighty tractor beams, and was pulled through the opening in the Ara ship.

Soundlessly the great maw in the belly of the monster closed again. Like shutters, section after section came back into place. It was a ghastly scene. On board hundreds of spacers lying around the periphery of the vast port, the rescue action of the Aras had been followed on television screens—an Ara-broadcast of the scene. The commentator carefully avoided any intimation of self-praise. There was a dissolve transition into one of the laboratories.

Glistening apparatuses, unfamiliar to Springer and Mounder alike, sparkled from the screen.

The ascetic face of an Ara appeared. His gaze hypnotized. He spoke slowly, sometimes hesitantly. He described the disease that had been discovered on board the *XUL 2*: "The contagion is known to us and we have the preparations at our disposal with which to combat it successfully." His tone of voice remained even throughout. What he said sounded unassuming and modest. The speech made a tremendous impression on all who sat before their screens and watched. "I am sorry to announce that the *XUL 2* was the third case we discovered today and we were thus forced to isolate the vessel. But we are happy to assure you that the 3 sick patriarchs will be returned to a state of health in time to take part in the meetings. May I then bid you good day and wish you a very happy sojourn on Laros!"

With this the broadcast came to an end.

For biochemist Tragh, his career and his life came to a close.

He was about to leave the *XUL 2* with the Commission in order to accompany them on board the Ara ship that was demarcating the isolation area around the allegedly contaminated cylindrical vessel. Suddenly, he was blocked from entering the exit lock by two Aras. In that moment he was aware of his danger. He looked around for help but the broad passage of the *XUL 2* was empty. No one heard the hissing of the two rayguns. The murderers concealed their instruments of death in their pockets and, with peaceful smiles, departed from the Springer ship. They were not members of the Commission; they were officials from the Security Department.

When they entered the Ara ship's control office, the larger of the two men indifferently handed in a plastic foil sheet. "The assignment has been taken care of," he said curtly.

The man who received the sheet commented: "That's the second case this year now an Ara has sold medications to Arkonides before they were officially released for distribution. This Targh was a 4-time offender. Well, this certainly seems to balance the accounts!"

* * * *

Talamon had landed on Laros with his flagship *TAL 6*. Topthor had arranged for his friend to bring his ship down next to his own spacer. The Ara Commission was just leaving.

Bell and the mutants finally came out of their hiding place with angry faces. They had only had to stay there for a half-hour. What had been taken for a major emergency prior to their landing on Laros had in actuality turned out to be a farce.

"It was a swindle!" Bell grumbled to Talamon. "The Aras are not a bit interested in the state of your health. These poison-pot mixers are only trying to set up a 'good weather' front and they're trying to brush their big mistake on Exsar under the carpet. Well, Talamon, can you say the Commissioners have given any of you an honest examination?"

Talamon could only stare at Bell in amazement. The pace that this being from the mysterious Earth set for him was a bit too fast. He was finally coming to understand how Perry Rhodan had managed with a handful of men to steal away the *Titan* from Arkon. But he still didn't know what his guests planned to do here on Laros. Neither Perry Rhodan nor this Reginald Bell had briefed him and the mutants who sat silently behind him did not seem to react to questioning.

Talamon comprehended least of all what this little girl was doing among the grownup Earth beings. He glanced at Betty Toufry repeatedly and Talamon, who was himself the father of a good dozen daughters and sons, could not suppress a certain fatherly kindness toward her.

By contrast, the two-headed Ivan Goratschin almost scared him and the black Ras Tschubai, never ceased to startle him.

"So your big gathering is taking place day after tomorrow, Talamon? About what time?" Bell wanted to know. He happened to be standing by an apparatus that was unfamiliar to him. "By the way, what is this?" he asked, pointing to it.

Since Bell's stocky figure concealed the equipment, Talamon moved his 13 hundred pounds to come over and take a look.

"That's—" Talamon suddenly gasped. He made a frantic movement with his hand and pushed switches. His green complexion darkened when he shouted, "Who turned on the hypercom?"

A stark chill ran through Bell.

For an hour he had been conversing openly with the patriarch. Perry Rhodan's name had been mentioned a hundred times or more. They had discussed how many aliens the Mounder kept hidden on board the *TAL 6*, how fast the *Gazelle* in the secret hangar was and what its Right radius was.

Bell shot a desperate glance at John Marshall. After a concentrated mental effort, the latter could only shake his head negatively. Tako Kakuta, the child-faced Japanese teleporter, had inconspicuously disappeared.

"None of us touched the hypercom switches!" swore Kitai Ishibashi, breaking his silence. With lightning swiftness, he had scanned the minds of all his colleagues without finding any guilty consciences.

With astonishing swiftness, the Mounder rediscovered his capacity to react. With a speed no one had thought him capable of, he went to the ship's P.A. system control. "Close all locks! Don't let anybody out!"

Bell only nodded his agreement. Not only their own lives were at stake but now also the lives of all the clansmen were thrown into the gamble.

Talamon had hardly shut off the hypercom when a notice came through from ship's security: "Patriarch Topthor wishes to see you."

"I'm not on board!" the oldster roared back, breathing hard.

"Sir, I have mentioned to the patriarch that you were here and—"

With a Mounder's special curse, Talamon cut the com switch off. Then he cried out in loud alarm when the air in front of him began to shimmer. Out of the emptiness emerged a being! Tako Kakuta had rematerialised close in front of the Mounder.

With every indication of horror, the old one retreated slowly, step by step, until he was obstructed by the cabin bulkhead. He stared at the small, delicately framed little man while the latter reported to Bell. Where was he supposed to have been? In the control centre of hyper-communications for Laros?

When? But he had just seen him a few minutes before, sitting beside the black mutant.

"Ye Cosmic Gods! And the hypercom—"

Bell shouted over Talamon's moans of despair. "This time your Cosmic Gods didn't have their thumbs in the pie!"

Talamon had always been a civil and courteous person but he had often either failed to understand or at least only barely comprehended Bell's flowery and colourful speech, which was usually slanted toward Earthly meanings and comparisons. Now in his excitement he understood absolutely nothing. Talamon, the discreet and cautious, the reliable Mounder who always kept his wits about him—Talamon exploded and bellowed at Bell with such a desperation that it almost spun him around.

His tirade was about the Gods and that they didn't have any thumbs and how could one blaspheme the Gods, anyway, in a situation like this? All the while Talamon failed to remember that he had not been especially pious in his day and that often in the process of turning a profit he had forgotten his Gods too easily.

He swore loudly and earnestly that he would nevermore stray from the path of virtue nor deviate from the laws of the Great Godhead.

If the cabin bulkhead he was leaning against hadn't deterred him, he would have flown from Bell's laughter. But this Earthman stood in front of him and even went so far as to put his hands on his shoulders.

"Talamon!" he said. "Man, get a grip on yourself!"

But Talamon saw the small, yellowish little human with the slanting eyes still standing next to Bell. Tako Kakuta meant well. He only wanted to show the patriarch that his faculty for dissolving and disappearing into thin air was nothing extraordinary. But he accomplished the opposite effect. The flickering and shimmering of the air almost robbed Talamon of reason. He sought to support himself against Bell.

"Talamon!" Bell shouted at him. "The Com Control on the *Titan* must have scrambled our hypercom transmission or jammed it! There's no other explanation! For an hour now the Aras have been going crazy up in their hypercom central transmitter station—because no signals are getting out and no understandable messages are being received! Man, have you got rocks in your head?"

Old Talamon pleaded piteously: "Bell, if only for just this once you could speak in a language that I can understand too! What is that supposed to mean—rocks in my head...?"

* * * *

"Has Reg lost his marbles?" shouted Perry Rhodan and in the same moment became once again the expedition's 'safety switch'.

He took action while his 3 dozen colleagues sat as though in a state of shock.

Bell's voice was coming in over the hypercom—and what he was *saying* ! But it didn't get very far.

Without taking the safety of the *Titan* into consideration, from his seat he activated the ship's hypercom transmitter as a frequency jammer. First he jammed Talamon's frequency only but then he brought in the signal techs, demanding the impossible from them. A minute later he jumped into the problem personally and wrung boundless admiration out of his chief communications engineer.

"I don't want any hypercom transmissions to leave Laros or arrive there. I want the Aras to think—who cares what they think! Bradger, why don't you switch the carrier frequency oscillator to 1604 megacycles? Come on, let's go! You can show me your disbelief later!"

So it went for a 10-minute period. Rhodan egged his team on at such a pace that all of them were outmatched one by one.

When the *Titan* was finally jamming all frequencies, Rhodan wiped sweat off his brow and then relaxed into his uncanny state of calm. "Now all I want to know is how long Bell thinks he's going to keep this show on the air!" His voice sounded as cool and collected as ever. His eyes remained calm. No feature of his face was disturbed. By his actions he forced his own composure upon others, as when he had demonstrated to the communications technicians how to put knowledge into practice.

The Chief went back to the pilot seat and eased himself into it. There was only this one noise in the entire huge Control Central of the *Titan* . The others breathed without a sound and didn't dare move.

Only Pucky the mouse-beaver seemed to be without awe. He teleported himself into Perry's lap. Perry was not in the mood for this kind of a visitation and was about to command him to get down when Pucky squeaked: "Hey, Chief, don't you think the termites in the memory banks of the Laros hypercom station

have just about chewed their way out by now?"

This was genuine Reginald Bell phraseology and Rhodan didn't grasp a word of it. Although he didn't show it, he was inwardly really burned up. What Bell had cost him with this open hypercom transmission of his was almost too much to bear!

"Pucky, don't make me angry!"

The mouse-beaver, an exceptional telepath, read Perry's thoughts as though they were an open book. He lisped softly: "But Perry, the Aras have the first 10 seconds of Reggie's speech in the memory registers! When they throw out the garbage they'll find our Laros operation in the bucket!" Thus Pucky pointed out the Achilles' heel of the situation. "Boss, let me take a jump! I'll show those Aras a thing or two! Okay, May I, Perry?"

This little ragamuffin of a Pucky could beg like a little child but anyone defining his character on that basis alone would find himself disgraced forever. This being in animal form and yet who was not quite an animal—intelligent as a human and adept at teleportation, telekinesis and the art of mind-reading and whatever else that was slumbering in him—he could be cold-blooded, shrewd and a daredevil, a master of any situation.

And now here was a situation that *only* Pucky could save and that he would have to solve if everything that Perry Rhodan had thus far built up was not to be cast into oblivion.

Perry's permission for the desperate teleport jump was very brief: "Come back in one piece, Pucky."

The mouse-beaver disappeared from his lap without a trace.

Laros was 20 light-hours distant from the *Titan* !

* * * *

Chief Biologist Keklos learned to his satisfaction that the great space freighter had taken off from Gom, loaded with replacement supplies.

Then, this shipload will arrive just in time for the great gathering of the Springer patriarchs he thought contentedly, and dispatched his directives.

* * * *

Bell was startled by the impact of a heavy object on his shoulder. Before he had a chance to see what it was, he heard Pucky's squeaky voice: "Tubby, you know you just gave me the rough end of the deal! The Aras were just about to review data in their hypercom memory registers and they were about one hair away from hearing the dulcet tones of your voice! So I had a little fun with those pill-pushers. When I

had their consternation at the right pitch, instead of hearing you on the retrieval tape they heard the 'Dance of the Howling Dervish. But the Chief is still chewing his nails, wondering who else in starsville may have recognized your voice. —See you!" Nobody laughed at the mouse-beaver's playful caper. Terror was still in their bones.

Pucky rematerialised a second time in Perry Rhodan's lap and Perry sighed out his relief. Pucky pretended not to notice but he inscribed it deep within and was proud that Rhodan had worried about him to this extent.

"Chief," he piped, "for the moment our fat friend is fairly free of trouble and so are the others. I read John Marshall's thoughts and he's still searching like mad for whoever pulled the trick with the hypercom!"

Perry Rhodan's only reply was: "Not a very auspicious beginning..."

* * * *

Tophthor and Talamon sat face to face. Tophthor scrutinized his friend carefully.

Talamon looked ill. He had greeted Tophthor almost listlessly. But this wasn't a social call—they were here to discuss the colossal business venture.

As a good businessman he sought to thaw Talamon out a little. "Cekztel himself is coming today, friend," he revealed.

Cekztel was the top chief of all the Mounder clans.

Talamon could only think of the hypercom transmission that had been made from his ship. "So?" he said just to be polite.

Tophthor tried to take another tack. "This time Rhodan and his Earth will be taken care of!"

"You think so?" Talamon asked by way of reply.

Finally Tophthor blurted out, "Is that business deal all you can think about?"

"That what—?"

Tophthor had never been an especially humorous type but now he was *completely* humourless. He brought his fist thundering down on the table. "Once and for all, old man, let's have it out! What's wrong with you? You aren't thinking about your big deal at all! Cekztel arriving doesn't mean a thing! And you're not at all interested in us not having Rhodan and his Earth to worry about any more!—Talamon, are we two still friends?"

Talamon sidestepped with a counter-question: "Would I have cut you in as a partner in my business otherwise?"

"That's no answer, old boy," the sly fox bellowed at him. "You have troubles? Yes? So have I! The Aras are giving me a headache!"

Finally Talamon began to show interest. He leaned forward and, although they were alone, whispered: "Tophthor, there is a dirty traitor on my ship! One of my clansmen is trying to sell me short—and if he succeeds there won't be any *TAL 6* any more!"

"Does this have something to do with your big business deal?" asked Tophthor testily.

"Partly, Tophthor, maybe so—and that's why I don't know yet if it's such a good idea for you to get mixed up as a partner

The Mounder emitted a full-throated laugh. "It's more than a good idea, Talamon! After all, I'm the only Mounder, in fact the *only* one at all, who knows where to look for the Earth! Oh yes, Talamon, the coordinate data are tucked away very nicely in my ship's positronicon and..." Now his voice also lowered to a whisper "Look, I've secured the core-memory section with such sophisticated stuff that the most persistent Ara alive can never get that data without my permission!"

Now Talamon's eyes lighted up. He knew that Tophthor was not double-dealing with him. "Then you don't like them any more than I do, Tophthor! I'd prefer Perry Rhodan a thousand times over, compared to them..."

The other snapped at the bait immediately but in a way that strained Talamon to the utmost in order not to betray himself when his friend bellowed at him: "Me too! Yes sir, I almost orbited when I heard about the crime they pulled on Exsar and when I finally heard that Aralon had launched *acost-free* rescue expedition and gambled over 6000 medicos in the bargain, I tell you the blinders came off my eyes!—I could have told them to forget about this meeting on Laros!"

"Was it you, then, who dropped the bomb on Goszul's Planet?" asked Talamon sarcastically and he felt that his mood was improving.

"Small talk!" growled Tophthor. "Let's get down to cases about going after Rhodan and no kidding around! Tell me, have you taken a fancy to Rhodan? You're not complaining about him, I notice, and that's not like you..."

"Tophthor, do you badmouth a being who has had the right and the power to kill you and yet has not used that right and that power? Because of him the Talamon Clan is alive, Tophthor!"

Abruptly Tophthor got up. He looked at his friend long and thoughtfully. The other met his gaze firmly. Two individuals, both of them over 1200 pounds; old, shrewd and crafty; hardened by many a bloody space battle. They nodded at each other.

Soberly, Tophthor said, "If I'm not mistaken, then I, too, am still alive for the same reason—because Rhodan held off in the fight I had with him. He refrained from turning me and my ship into a gas cloud. But no, Talamon, I'll have to sleep on this a bit... Now this Rhodan of yours is starting to give me concern from a direction I had never suspected! Until tomorrow, Talamon, until tomorrow...!"

John Marshall's strange, fixed expression faded from his face. He passed a hand across his forehead in a gesture of exhaustion, then ran his fingers through his dark hair and sat up. Now he was the old John Marshall again, one of Perry Rhodan's oldest colleagues and one of his best telepaths. He gave Bell an eloquent look.

"Well?"

John Marshall remained seated; he smiled thinly. "Topthor is the only survivor who knows the position of our solar system and of the Earth."

Bell and his mutant commando were still in Talamon's private cabin. They both knew that the crafty fox Topthor was visiting the ship at this moment. Marshall had not let the opportunity escape him and with his telepathic faculty had been able to 'listen in' on the conversation between Talamon and Topthor. He had been able to tap into their thoughts and thus he had discovered Topthor's most precious secret.

Bell stated stubbornly at John Marshall. In the meantime the weird affair of the hypercom had almost been forgotten, yet Marshall couldn't help thinking about it because through 'monitoring' he had become aware of Talamon's worries and questions as to *who* had turned on the equipment.

Now Marshall revealed another part of Topthor's secret. "The Earth's astronomical data are resting in the core-memory section of his positronic nav-computer."

With one hasty addition, John Marshall caused Bell's satisfied grin to disappear. "And he has the whole thing under lock and key."

Reginald Bell, who with Perry Rhodan, was the only one who had completed the highest phase of Arkonide hypno-school methodology, permitted John Marshall to make a complete exposition of what he had discovered. He listened expressionlessly, now cold and uninfluenced by any feeling, logical to the last degree. He thought the problem through as to *how* his mutants could reach Topthor's ship nav-computer, how they could get around the security circuits and how they could finally arrive at the core-memory section.

Tersely, objective in phraseology, unambiguously, he shot supplementary questions at Marshall. The telepath concentrated to his utmost capacity.

When Topthor revealed his secret to his friend and spoke of being in possession of complete details of the Earth's position, he had simultaneously thought smugly of a certain part of the electronic security setup which he had hit upon as a means of protecting the registered data against any unauthorized retrieval.

"There's still something missing, Marshall," said Bell, still prodding the Australian telepath to a top level of alertness. "This last safety item, the thing about the ultra-barrier, is contradictory if there isn't also some auxiliary equipment of some kind that can change the polarity of the protection system when the data is to be gotten out. Topthor *couldn't* have thought of the one without the other. Go over your findings, Marshall!"

Bell did not hurry him. His mutants comported themselves as though they were not present in the room. Kitai Ishibashi, the Japanese physician and psychologist, with the tremendously powerful suggestive

power, was only hypothetically there. By means of his special faculties he found himself with Topthor, who meanwhile had left the *TAL 6* and was going to his flagship at the moment, carrying on cogitations in his mind concerning Perry Rhodan.

John Marshall suddenly started as though he been dealt a heavy blow. The same thing happened to Kitai Ishibashi.

Bell only observed the phenomenon without having sensed it, which didn't surprise him. He was not equipped with the faculties of his mutants.

Thoroughly shaken, John Marshall groaned, "My God, what was that?!"

Bell had very seldom seen him like this and when he had it was always when they had been in the gravest danger.

Kitai Ishibashi didn't appear to be any better off than Marshall. The tall, lanky Japanese had drops of perspiration on his forehead. "Something tried to take hold of me," he said, explaining his sensation, "but just as it started to take hold of me it missed!"

Marshall nodded agreement.

"Suggestion... hypnosis... telepathy...?"

"None of those," retorted Marshall sharply. "It was something new, something I have never before experienced. I believe it is something that is *after* us..."

Bell had made a lot of momentous decisions in his time and had always come to the right conclusions but what command could he give if his two mutants couldn't classify the threatening danger any closer than that? He rapidly reviewed everything and a logical conclusion was evident in his question: "Marshall, have you been able to grasp which peripheral device Topthor may have altered in order to switch polarity in the ultra-barrier of the core memory?"

This problem took precedence over all others. Their own safety was insignificant. They had to get to Topthor's ship positronicon in order to remove its astronomical data pertaining to the Earth!

The warning system in Bell's brain sounded a faint alarm. In all of his deliberations he had committed an error somewhere.

Positronic technology had eliminated the possibility of a destruct mode—stored data could not be destroyed. Magnetic erasure of formula constants did not exist. Only corrections of data were possible but they had to be actual pertinent corrections, otherwise the computer wouldn't accept the new information and would simply leave the old values in memory!

"I've got it!" exclaimed Marshall, jolting Bell out of his meditations.

"What?" asked Bell and thereby differentiated himself from the 'safety switch' that Perry Rhodan represented.

"I know now what ancillary equipment for the ultra-barrier that Topthor was thinking about..."

In spite of Marshall's explanations, Bell couldn't quite grasp it all. He glanced at the 'seer', Wuriu

Sengu. This average-looking Japanese possessed the astounding faculty, using high mental concentration, of being able to increase the optical resolving power of his eyes to such an unbelievable extent that he could see between molecules and atoms of solid material and then still be able to see the target-object as 'normal'.

Wuriu Sengu understood Reginald Bell's unspoken request.

He took a pad and pencil and concentrated, whereupon he saw the schematic arrangement of that part of Tophthor's positronicon which Bell in his own mental gyrations had not been able to visualize clearly enough. The weird optical sojourn lasted just 10 minutes; then the 'seer', Sengu, was normal again. He handed Bell the circuit diagrams of the ultra-barrier and the auxiliary device.

Bell had to smile at his own obtuseness. Now only a glance at the schematics sufficed to clarify the anti-tampering hookup in his mind.

"Okay," he said in English. "We're moving our headquarters back to the Gazelle again. I'll follow you; first I have to talk to the *Titan*. Marshall, how does the *Betelgeuse* look?"

The Australian laughed softly. He had been able to read Bell's thoughts. His answer was: "I believe the Chief would say she's in quite good shape!"

* * * *

Three patriarchs saw Chief Biologist Keklos leave the room. Two Springers and one Mounder then stared at each other angrily. One after the other shook his head in rebellious disapproval.

After collecting himself together, Mounder top chief Cekztel grumbled: "If I ever get sick again, I'd rather drop dead than be nursed back to health here under this Chief Biologist! I've seen a few planets in my time that our bombs have turned into suns but it didn't particularly fill me with joy to see them destroyed. Now I'll admit I never was much for compassion but in the final analysis those were our deadly enemies that we annihilated. I've never tortured anybody to death but I will lay you odds that Keklos does!"

Siptar, the ancient patriarch, nodded prudently. Old Vontran did not conceal his antipathy.

"Tomorrow is the assembly." Siptar's cryptic words implied much and he looked across at Cekztel with a certain sage expectancy.

The latter's grim wrinkled features became fierce as his gaze swung from one to the other of the Springer patriarchs. "*Without* you Traders, the Mounders will not attack the Earth! If you fly with us—every one of you with well-armed ships—then you can count on us. Otherwise..."

If ever a voice carried tones of authority, it was Cekztel's. He was the lord of patriarchs of all the Mounder clans. Nobody knew how many space battleships he commanded. Perhaps Cekztel himself didn't know but a space battleship of the Mounders, when measured by its heavy calibre weapons, was as powerful as 50 well-armed Springer ships.

Siptar's dark eyes had not been dimmed by age and he was famed for his sagacity and self-control. Now he asked coolly: "Is this to be taken as a threat, Cekztel?"

Cekztel laughed aloud. Banging a fist on the table, he thundered: "As extortion, Siptar! Do you Springers think we are fools? When somebody like Perry Rhodan can manage to steal the Empire's greatest battleship and in spite of that end up working *with* the robot brain on Arkon, in my eyes that one is not a meren*othing* ! And because nobody knows what kind of a giant fleet Rhodan may have at his disposal in the Terra sector, that's why we Mounders are only going to attack when and if the fleets of the Galactic Traders accompany us! Now—is that condition still a piece of blackmail or merely applied logic...?"

"How will you vote tomorrow, Cekztel?" asked the ancient Siptar craftily.

Cekztel's eyes flared up. "Whether or not I speak tomorrow for an attack on Terra is of no consequence! It depends on *your* decision! And when you are ready to also take a gamble, then you will not have called upon us for help in vain!"

Votran thought to hear in this a financial proposition from the Mounder and he sought to nail Cekztel down with a short question.

But the latter leaned back comfortably and chuckled slyly. "Do you really believe that we'd take on a mission like this for*nothing* ? Have you Traders ever sold something, without receiving a payment for it? Were any of you ever in any negotiation with the Aras where you didn't have to settle a bill? Friends, you're being facetious! Our assistance will cost several hundred millions—and come to think of it, Topthor is the only one who knows Earth's position and Topthor is a Mounder—so I'd say you ought to pay double that amount!"

"Cekztel!" snarled Siptar. "You can't be serious!"

The other replied coldly: "When it comes to money, I don't make jokes. You want to bargain? You want a cut-rate price? All right, then *you* go twist Perry Rhodan's neck! I'll tell Topthor to let you have the navigation data. Go ahead—fly off to Earth! Tackle Rhodan there—and have fun, you tightfisted peddlers!"

* * * *

Chief Biologist Keklos listened to Moders' report. The latter took care not to overstep the 10-foot restriction.

"The production of bio-men has begun. I have ordered the first of the retort-autoclaves to be heated. This evening at change of shift we will be able to observe whether or not the mass production is operating perfectly. Then I will apply all batteries of the retort-autoclaves—?"

Keklos interrupted his speech sharply. "You're going to wait until the Springer meeting is over with, Moders!" He ignored his co-worker's astonishment. "Has the space freighter from Gom been unloaded yet?"

"No."

"Then give immediate orders that the unloading is to be postponed until later. I want that put through at once. But before you do, bring me a bio-man!"

Moders was dismissed. He left the Chief's office, mentally confused. He didn't understand Keklos' instructions. All of a sudden had the mass production of bio-men lost its top priority? And why should the basic material from Gom remain in the spaceship?

Moders was not nimble-witted enough to connect these new instructions together with the bio-man, to whom he gave the order to go to Chief Biologist Keklos.

The colourless, greyish 10-foot tall creature was a synthetic life form out of a chemical retort. It entered the Chief's room and stood there waiting with one pair of arms folded across its chest and another pair behind its back. Keklos had just established a communication with the space freighter that had landed the raw material from Gom.

On board the freighter his orders were causing a stir and a general shaking of heads. When the bio-man was included by Keklos, the officers in the Control Central of the freighter gave up trying to find a key to these mysterious changes in their orders.

But Keklos knew quite precisely what he wanted!

* * * *

A quarter of a million miles above Laros, Talamon's large fleet hovered in a waiting position. His smallest fighter ship had been called down to Laros by the ponderous patriarch in order to undergo inspection by the Ara physicians but as of an hour ago it had flown off again.

For Talamon, the shock of the hypercom episode still sat in his bones. What was still more distressing to him was the fact that he must look at each of his clansmen as a possible traitor. At this moment he found himself en route to Bell's 'headquarters', now set up in the scoutship which stood in Talamon's secret hangar and was held in standby readiness for instant use.

Even Bell hadn't been able to reassure him. Talamon continued to be convinced that a deception was afoot among his followers. He refused to buy the theory that capricious chance alone had turned on the hypercom transmitter. Bell didn't buy that one, either, although the telepath, John Marshall, maintained that it had to be. He had taken upon himself the gigantic task of 'monitoring' each crewmember and the results had been zero.

However, the landing of the smallest Talamon vessel on Laros and its successful return flight an hour ago had not been for nothing. This flying back and forth was a camouflage action in order to establish the heavy radio traffic of the *TAL 6*. Inasmuch as it was all on Talamon's frequency, Perry Rhodan automatically received it also, and he must of course have been startled by the uncoded text.

The Moulder entered the Gazelle and gave a sly chuckle as he handed Bell the foil-printed message that the small space fighter had again joined the fleet hovering over Laros. Bell was not interested in the clear text. He knew that this dispatch was Perry's work and that it carried hidden information. The Gazelle's

positronicon received the foil text; Bell depressed the decipher key and the computer calculator transformed the ordinary message into astronomical data. According to this, the Earth was a planet in the Orion sector—a satellite of the giant sun Betelgeuse, the third planet of the stellar Colossus, and thereby actually displaced 272 light-years from its true position. As viewed from Star Cluster M-13, the coordinates now positioned the Earth 272 light-years closer to M-13!

Bell grinned to himself. "I'd hate to have to walk that far!" He failed to notice that Talamon had already left him.

John Marshall appeared from the background of the small control room. "Sir," he announced, "Talamon will neither warn us that Topthor knows Earth's position nor will he betray us to Topthor. And if he sticks to his latest idea he's also not liable to enter into the big venture with us with the Arkon scrap metal on Honor. On the one hand he feels duty-bound to Topthor and on the other hand to us. And to all that if you add the hypercom situation—"

Bell hastily motioned him to silence. "Marshall, spare me all that. Just brief the mutants that nobody must let anything slip in front of the Mounder that has the slightest hint of what we know. Can you imagine what would happen otherwise?"

"Yes, sir! Then Talamon would come to us and tell us that he was on his way to Topthor to advise him of the fact that we were in possession of his secret—"

"Which would no doubt warm the cockles of his big, fat heart!" interrupted Bell with a cynical laugh. "Send Tako Kakuta and Ras Tschubai up here—they are going to make a soap bubble out of Topthor's great secret!"

8/ ATTACKED BY AN UNKNOWN FORCE

Keklos did not forget the warning of Chief Inspector Gegul, who had since been sentenced to die in a converter, and now there was just this one night separating him from the patriarchal meeting. At that time Gegul had said to him: "Chief Biologist Keklos, the danger begins with the grand assembly. That's the way it happened on Goszul's Planet and that's the way it will be again on Laros. However, I shall foil any further repetition and those who are on Perry Rhodan's payroll are going to get snared in my net. Can you guess what kind of a net I am going to throw out to them, Biology Chief?"

He had guessed it even as Gegul had stated the question and he told him so. Independently from Gegul he had conducted his experiments along similar lines and he was all the more impressed by Gegul's near clairvoyance because that which he had perceived as a weapon, based on his senses rather than on knowledge, was indeed a weapon—*afrightful* weapon!

Well, Gegul had now ceased to exist. To Keklos this fact was not even worth a shrug of the shoulder but Gegul's plan lived on. It had become reality.

"I want Moders in here at once!" Keklos snapped into the intercom.

Moders did not appear.

Keklos sounded an alarm. He often sounded alarms; afterwards somebody would usually disappear, sometimes several Aras at a time. No one knew where they were. No one dared make official inquiries concerning them.

Still Moders did not appear!

Within the gigantic system of caverns of the moon Laros, a condition One alarm was instituted. It was an alert that encircled the entire moon, emerging at many places from the inner world to the surface and spreading its branches from there.

Moders could not be found!

In the brain of Chief Biologist Keklos hammered Gegul's warning prophecy: "*The danger begins with the grand assembly.*"

Many patients died that night. Surgeons set aside their instruments in the middle of operations, leaving their responsibilities to the nurses and crippling entire hospital tracts. They went searching for Moders, Chief Biologist Keklos' closest assistant.

Moders was not found...

* * * *

Furiously, Talamon sat down in the chair. Raging mad, he glared at his friend Topthor. "What is with these fighter robots?"

He had been stopped in front of Topthor's ship by robots and examined; he had been stopped in front of the lock and been examined; and again on the main deck of the vessel and finally in front of the bulkhead door of the Control Central. Each time they had taken his brainwave pattern and beamed it off somewhere for examination. It was understandable that he should be, in a bad mood.

But Topthor's disposition didn't appear to be any better. "Did you happen to take a good look at the robots?" He stressed the word 'good'.

Then something began to dawn on Talamon. "You mean—they're not yours...?"

"Aras!"

Talamon shouted and got to his feet. "And you stand for that?"

"Sit down again, my friend. With my approval, the Ara robots are standing watch! Two hours ago aliens were seen in my ship! Probably Springers!"

Topthor noticed how his friend seemed to slowly collapse back into the massive seat and he heard him groan in disbelief, "*A-l-i-e-n-s...*?"

What Tophthor could not guess were the thoughts that blanketed Talamon's brain. He thought he knew who the aliens were!

"Yes, aliens, Talamon—aliens in the power rooms."

At that moment an invisible load was lifted from Talamon. He had assumed that the aliens had been seen here in the Control Central, where the Earth's position was registered in the computer core-memory bank. What could they be looking for in the power section? On that basis he could remove Rhodan's people from his suspicions with a clear conscience—it must actually have been Springers.

In genuine astonishment he asked, "What's there so special to look for in our power rooms?"

"I reported this to Cekztel and he passed it on to Chief Biologist Keklos. Ever since then the Ara robots have been blocking everybody and getting in the way but I still feel better because of it. The only thing that gripes me is tomorrow's big meeting... Talamon, can I actually pull 500,000,000 out of that business deal?"

"At the least!" replied Talamon gravely. He regarded the other penetratingly. "Whatever happens, Tophthor, you may and you *must* trust me. And keep your mouth shut! Don't ask me questions even when things start to happen. I don't want to have to lie to you! I can even pull this deal without you. On my own accord I've marked off a piece of it for you because if anything goes wrong, Tophthor, I want at least *one* person to keep faith with me!"

"For that you wouldn't have had to make me a present of 400,000,000 in profit, Talamon, and I—" In that instant he thought he heard a strange noise behind him. "What was that?" he cried out and looked hastily around...

* * * *

At this same moment, Wuriu Sengu sat next to Bell with his eyes closed and said: "Tophthor must have heard something. He's whirling around to stare at the nav-computer. Now he's getting up—no, he's sitting down again, but he's uneasy about something. Talamon is asking him something. He doesn't answer him but instead he's switching on the P.A. system and is giving out instructions. Just now I can't see a sign of Tako Kakuta."

Reginald Bell lifted his head to study Ras Tschubai reflectively. He was his second teleporter and according to plan should have hidden himself in Tophthor's Control Central long since in order to help Tako Kakuta alter the memory register of Earth's position data. But Tako had not remained entirely unnoticed upon his arrival in Tophthor's Control Central. Bell was just about to ask the 'seer', Sengu, a question, when all 3 of them—Tschubai, Sengu and himself—were startled by a loud noise.

The sound came with the rematerialisation of the small, slender teleporter. Under a forward jutting forehead, the child's face was troubled. Tako Kakuta was jolted in the midst of materialization!

"There was something..." he said in great distress. "Exactly the same thing intercepted me when I arrived near Tophthor in the Control Central, sir!" He raised himself slowly from the floor and shook his head. But *what* it was, Kakuta could not explain.

Bell directed his question to the suggestor. "Ishibashi, did you notice anything?"

"Yes, sir, but I can't explain it, either. It grazed me only just lightly. I have a sense of something 'concentrated'—a concentrated force of some kind."

"Wuriu Sengu, was your vision clear during the whole time?" Bell waited tensely for the 'seer's' answer.

"Very clear, sir!" replied Sengu positively.

"Then I'd better turn this over to Marshall," Bell decided, and got up. "Gentlemen, Project Memory Section Topthor is temporarily suspended!"

Whereupon he went to look for John Marshall, who normally was the leader of this Corps during mutant missions.

* * * *

The call signal sounded on Keklos' communicator with the highest priority classification. The Chief Biologist glanced up from his documents, switched on and heard an excited voice announcing that Moders had been found.

Keklos cut through the long-winded introduction. "State your report concisely and at once!"

With increasing interest, he listened. On the screen he could see Moders' condition. He had not connected the reverse transmission of his own image. The group of physicians surrounding the unconscious Moders could not have suspected how satisfied Keklos appeared to be. He made no specific disposition of the report submitted. "Do whatever is necessary, gentlemen!" he said and disconnected.

Shortly thereafter he summoned the bio-man that Moders had been assigned to send in to him a few hours before. As the synthetic creature entered for the second time this night, it was startled by Keklos' reaction. The bio-man was not aware of the Chief Biologist's fanatic animosity toward any approaches to his person within the 10-foot limitation. The artificial life form created out of biological substances was confused by Keklos' sharp reproaches. It took a few hasty steps and stood close in front of its creator.

The bio-man heard Keklos' panicked outcry. It saw the Chief Biologist's hand grasp the weapon. It understood Keklos' wild shout of "Back! Back!"—too late. As the thermo-weapon in the Ara's hand spewed forth its terrible energy beam, it destroyed a synthetic life that had barely been 'born'.

Keklos glared down at the remains with blazing eyes. Furiously, he hissed, "Now I have to provide myself with another 'intermediate transmitter', so I'll start all over again... And when Moders wakes up he won't be happy to find he is research material for the aromatic infections department. I would have thought him capable of mote intelligence. Up to the time he passed out, he still must not have grasped what plan I am following, and my instructions should have given it away."

Keklos forgot no detail. Before he summoned the next bio-man, he informed the experimental section of

the aromatic infections department that Moders was at their disposal as research material.

10 minutes later another humanoid stood in his room. The Chief Biologist made him into an 'intermediate transmitter'. Through the ersatz being he communicated with the Basic Substance which a space freighter had flown in fresh from the planet Gom and which per Keklos' instructions had not yet been unloaded.

Moders had been found unconscious in front of this space freighter and Keklos knew why!

* * * *

Wuriu Sengu had given Tako Kakuta and Ras Tschubai the agreed signal. Using his special powers, he surveyed Topthor's Control Central.

It was empty.

At two locations behind Sengu the air shimmered and into these shimmering points the two teleporters disappeared. Almost in the same instant, however, Sengu saw these two conceal themselves in the commander's station of the old Mounder, behind heavy cabinets of the communications installation.

The two teleporters oriented themselves quickly. Now their close study of Talamon's *STAL 6* and the Control Central came to advantage. From the time they had become familiar with Topthor's secret, thanks to Marshall's telepathic faculties, they had examined the nav-computer with extraordinary thoroughness. The positronicon, which occupied almost the entire wall on the other side of the commander's station, was the mirror-image duplicate of Talamon's own installation.

In spite of this, it was no cinch to program a specific area of the core-memory section. Both men even possessed the knowledge of an Arkon specialist, through the Arkonide hypno-schooling, but in order to master a positronicon in both theory and practice one needed the intelligence quotient of a Perry Rhodan or a Reginald Bell.

For Perry's corpulent comrade everything had always been child's play. Here he would have been the right man at the right place but Bell was no teleporter and without this fantastic faculty he would have long since lost his life under fire from the Ara fighting robots who were watching Topthor's great battle spacer on 4 levels of security.

But Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta were not entirely alone. Bell, who had often taken many risks, had proceeded this time with the foresight of a tight-minded tactician and refused to leave the smallest detail to chance.

Wuriu Sengu saw what was transpiring in Topthor's Control Central and maintained a quick running commentary about it. John Marshall and Kitai Ishibashi sat in front of him. Marshall was Rhodan's best telepath. Ishibashi, a suggestive hypnotist, had often demonstrated that he could exert his will over hundreds of people so powerfully that his subjects were convinced they were acting on their own volition.

As the ultimate safety factor, Bell had the telekin, Tama Yokida, in reserve. The distance between the Gazelle and Topthor's Control Central had been measured off to the last inch. Yokida had a sketch on his lap, which showed the relative distances between various equipment in the command station and how

far each important individual gear was from the other.

Tama Yokida had to take part in the mission whenever robots threatened. Using his telekinetic powers, he would float them like balloons in such a way that they would smash against obstacles and be converted to so much scrap metal.

Suddenly Wuriu Sengu became mildly excited. "Sir, the entrance door is opening in the Control Central. Tophthor is coming in with two of his clan followers."

Even as Sengu spoke, Marshall and Ishibashi were already at work.

Bell sat back to one side and observed them calmly. Nor did he fret inwardly. He merely surveyed his men with a confident alertness. Each one of them who was directly engaged in the operation worked with assuredness and concentration.

Kitai Ishibashi had reached out toward Tophthor's will. With a lightning swiftness he pressed into his thoughts and instantly discovered the point of attack from which he could most easily influence the Mounder. Ishibashi called this his 'laminar method'. He did not inundate the will of the other like a flash flood but instead forced his will upon him layer by layer.

John Marshall was not able to give direct support to Ishibashi's endeavours but as a telepath he could monitor the 'victim's' thoughts and give the suggestor valuable clues as to how to apply his gift.

* * * *

Tophthor waited until the bulkhead door had closed behind him. His old, greenish face reflected an angry uneasiness. "Sit down," he said harshly to his clansmen. The two young Mounders, equally as squarish in structure as the old man, eased themselves down into their seats, watching him expectantly. Tophthor's dark mood advertised that they were not in for a picnic.

"This Keklos character, this Ara chief on Laros—I think he's crazy! You two have to stand watch here until I send you a guard replacement. The highest-ranking biologist is seeing ghosts. He thinks those aliens that were seen yesterday afternoon on this ship, and unfortunately got away, are some kind of phantoms working for Perry Rhodan! What you and I may think of the matter is our own affair. Keklos has half-pressured me into a decision: either I set up a security guard over the Control Central with my own people—in which case we'll be maintaining a constant video connection with Keklos or else he will order a half dozen Ara fighter robots in here!... So, that's it! Now let me see your weapons."

One of the clansmen cursed angrily but he responded to Tophthor's order by exhibiting his hand weapons, as did the other man. They both glared at the old man in wide-eyed challenge.

Tophthor, the eternally growling and grumbling patriarch, burst into a laugh. He even went so far as to give them a cheerful wink. "Make yourselves at home here," he said, giving them carte blanche. "If you need to take a nap, go to it. As for the video hookup to Keklos—I'll have a talk with him from my cabin once more. If he still insists on it, I'll let you know."

"That's fair enough, sir," chuckled the larger of the two youths and he nudged his companion in the ribs.

He was suddenly in the best of moods and stowed all his weapons deep inside his pockets. "By the stars, Sir, I'm as tired as if I'd been carousing 3 days and nights!"

"It's no better with me, either," replied the patriarch and he yawned heartily. "It's time I got to bed!" Whereupon, he exited.

* * * *

Hidden behind the massive communications equipment of Topthor's battleship, Tako Kakuta and Ras Tschubai winked at each other in relief. From the moment when Topthor wanted to inspect his men's weapons, he had almost instantly become another person. Having always been strong for discipline on board his ship, he himself had suggested that the assignment here could be taken lightly. Both of the teleporters knew who was at work here, influencing the wills of the 3 Mounders.

Then Topthor's ponderous steps faded away and the heavy bulkhead door closed hermetically behind him.

Ducked down behind the communications cabinets, the two mutants exchanged glances once more. They listened acutely. Both of them waited for the two Mounders to start snoring. Finally the two mutants emerged from behind the communications equipment, moving as soundlessly as shadows...

* * * *

Less than two miles away in the small Control Central of the Gazelle, Bell gave the telekinetic mutant, Tama Yokida, a special assignment. "Fix it for me so that in the next 15 minutes nobody can get through the main bulkhead door of Topthor's Control Central—not by any means whatsoever!"

Tama Yokida merely nodded his assent and opened up with his telekinetic powers, hurling them across to Topthor's battleship, where he then unleashed unimaginable energies. These energies probed inward to the locking mechanism of the door, shorted itself across Arkon relays, caused strong magnetic fields to collapse and worked between hatch and slide-bars like an unbreakable welding seam.

* * * *

Topthor's positronicon was operating! The two guards sprawled in their seats and snored. Neither Kakuta nor Ras Tschubai turned even once to watch them. They trusted Ishibashi's ability without reservation.

Memory registers! Tako Kakuta had switched them on but he was now uncertain as to which

adjustment to make.

In the control room of the Gazelle, Marshall told Bell, "Kakuta doesn't dare feed the t-impulse into the memory core section. He's still hesitating and—"

Bell was prepared for such unforeseen events with a complete set of counter-measures. Kitai Ishibashi would have to forego his 'suggestivity processing' of Topthor momentarily. "Take over Kakuta! Here—" he pointed to his checklist of switching sequences. "This is where he's hung up! Make it fast, Ishibashi!"

As Kakuta now unhesitatingly fed the t-impulse to the memory section of the nav-computer, he had no idea that Ishibashi had given him the command to do so from a distance of almost two miles.

"All set?" the African asked him. Ras Tschubai had taken care of his part of the assignment.

"Just a sec—"

A voice bellowed out behind him: "What's going on there?"

One of the guards had awakened!

Ras Tschubai had disappeared before Kakuta's eyes. The big, slender African had dared to teleport at the moment of the challenge. Kakuta did not take the risk but if Tama Yokida in the Gazelle failed him now, he was lost.

Tama Yokida had not had time to inform Bell. He released the bulkhead door-lock of the Control Centre from his telekinetic forces and began instead to work on the Mounder.

The latter, just awakened from hypnotic sleep, was nevertheless still under control of an alien will and didn't find it at all surprising to rise suddenly out of his seat and be stuck to the ceiling of the Control Central. During his ascent, Tama Yokida had turned him so that his chest pressed against the ceiling and he couldn't observe what was going on below.

Wuriu Sengu the 'seer' continued calmly with his commentary on what he saw, in spite of this latest incident which could have dire consequences.

"Kitai!" snapped Bell but he realized by the hypnotist's hand signal that he was already on top of the situation.

Then Sengu announced: "The bulkhead door is opening! Topthor is—"

Suddenly, an invisible wave of force struck through the control room of the Gazelle. Bell and his mutants were swept into a corner. Sengu groaned aloud. He had been struck on the head. Marshall held his own head tightly with both hands. Beside Bell, Ishibashi was back in action at once. They exchanged glances.

"Marshall!" Bell called to him sharply. "Marshall and Sengu!"

Both of them were working from the floor, including also Tama Yokida. Now for the first time Bell himself was aware of this monstrous unknown force. What had hurled them all against the wall? What powerful thing had discovered them and attacked?

"Sengu, what's old Topthor doing?" asked Bell quickly.

"I can't see him!" came the surprising and unbelievable answer of the 'seer'.

Bell stared at him uncomprehendingly but in the next moment he shot a question at Ishibashi: "Do you have Topthor under your control again?"

He could only shrug his shoulders but it told Bell enough. Then he let out an oath as Ras Tschubai, the African teleporter, rematerialised.

"That old fox of a Topthor is lying on C-Deck and he's sleeping on top of Arkon bombs!" said Tschubai.

Bell didn't have to go into this piece of information. Instead he asked: "Tschubai, in the last few moments were you attacked by some unknown force?"

"Attacked?" asked the African.

Sengu shouted, "Kakuta has completed the Earth-position corrections. Now he's standing over the Mounder, who has fallen from the ceiling. He seems to be injured."

"That's all I need!" growled Bell. "Ishibashi, plant a suggestion in Kakuta to teleport the fellow into the ship's sickbay, if he can do it without any risk!"

Ishibashi concentrated. It gave Bell a few seconds of respite in order to think clearly.

Only they who were holed up in the control room of the *Gazelle* had been thrown to the floor. Almost two miles away, Ras Tschubai had not noticed a thing. Suddenly Bell recalled that during their stay in Talamon's private cabin they had experienced 3 inexplicable phenomena one after the other.

"Marshall—" He didn't get any farther.

Talamon stormed into the small control room with every sign of the highest agitation. His news was not good.

Since a few minutes ago, more than 100 Ara fighter robots had started stamping through the rooms of the *TAL 6* accompanied by almost 200 silent Aras, all armed to the teeth. They were making a systematic, room-by-room inspection.

Bell looked at the patriarch reflectively. The longer he knew Talamon, the better he liked him. The old boy wasn't afraid of anything—except that just now he gave out a shriek.

Tako Kakuta had rematerialised exactly in front of him and had opened his mouth to give his official report but he recognized the Mounder in time. He controlled himself quickly but then launched a question that made everybody present shudder: "Did you know that 3 battleships are floating in fixed position over the *TAL 6*?"

Chief Biologist Keklos was inflamed with suspicion. Two reports lay in front of him: one was from the main hyper-communications station; the other pertained to the previous night's search through the *TAL 6*.

Keklos thought neither of the one nor the other. He pondered instead over his own experience and asked himself the same question over and over again: "Why did Topthor call me last night and what could have been the purpose of his insignificant blabbering?"

Last night he had visited Topthor's flagship personally because he had suddenly come to distrust the video transmission he was picking up from the Control Centre. But everything in the Mounder's battleship had been in order and the oldster had triumphantly shown him a part of the security circuits he had added to the core memory of the nav-computer.

"Chief Biologist Keklos," Topthor had said, "from this you can see that I had already done everything on my part, before you resorted to your defence measures!"

Last night, that demonstration had looked good and sounded good, but at that time he had not yet received the two reports which now lay before him.

The statement from the hypercom station was disturbing:

4 technicians had suddenly picked up a strange hypercom broadcast, which in a few seconds was blanketed by electronic jamming. Before the source of the jamming signal could be determined, the interference had spread across all frequencies. This unprecedented situation had deterred the technicians from concerning themselves at once with the initial clear portion of the transmission. While they were still trying to investigate the interference, the power station went out for a few seconds. Shortly thereafter, for reasons completely unexplainable, the M-wave grid collapsed and, almost at the same time, the hyper-converter tube exploded. When all of these damages were finally taken care of and they returned to an examination of the clear-text portion of the hypercom broadcast, the memory playback section they had heard originally now had something different on it: a chirping voice that announced a "Dance of the Howling Dervish"—and then a hellish music broke out, unbearable to Ara ears.

Keklos had stumbled at once over the strange word 'dervish'. He had researched clear back to Aralon but there was no philologist there who was capable of giving him the meaning of it.

"It must be star devils!" he exclaimed, shoving both reports aside. The investigation of the *TAL 6* had also uncovered nothing. Or—?

He suddenly sat bolt upright and reached almost greedily for the *TAL 6* report. It only took a glance for him to read that the inspection of the mighty battleship had lasted only slightly more than an hour. This did not sound right, inasmuch as that was a ridiculously short time period for such a large task.

He stared at the figures pertaining to the time. What had happened last night on the *TAL 6*? Again the thought hammered into his deliberations: "*The danger begins with the grand assembly.*"

The gathering of the patriarchs was just about in its closing stage. It had been resolved that Perry Rhodan and his home planet should be destroyed. The meeting had gone into the final phase of bargaining over the price that the Mounders demanded from the Springers for their part in the mission.

Half an hour before this, Keklos had turned off his video receiver in anger and disgust. Which was a bad

decision, because just then Cekztel, supreme chief of all Mounder patriarchs, had jumped to his feet with a loud curse and declared: "The Mounders will *flyno* attack against Rhodan and his Earth! To me, this haggling over 80 millions is an insult!"

Neither Cekztel nor Siptar, nor Vontran and all the others could know that Perry Rhodan's mutants were delivering their ultimate effort in order to turn the grand assembly into an exploding bomb of disunion and dissension. The two teleporters, Tako Kakuta and Ras Tschubai, had played 'tugboat' in the early dawn. In first-class teleport jumps they had brought Bell, Tama Yokida, John Marshall and several other mutants to the assembly hall and accommodated them in secure hiding places.

They could not influence the outcome of the voting any further. Against all expectations the decision had been arrived at immediately upon opening the assembly and the 30 patriarchs who went *against* the plan to destroy Rhodan and the Earth were defeated in the minority. However, when Cekztel made his financial demand, matters appeared to change somewhat.

Ishibashi had shouldered the heaviest part of the work. Almost one by one, he planted a suggestion in the Galactic Traders to refuse Cekztel's demands. Against a weak majority in favour of paying the Mounders the stipulated price, more and more voices were raised, shouting "Pirates!—Profiteers!"—finally casting doubt upon the voting results.

This very last part of Bell's plan included Betty Toufry, who supported John Marshall and Kitai Ishibashi. As these 3 stood up shortly before the debacle, Cekztel got up suddenly and prepared to leave the assembly. Bell was watching him gleefully from his hiding place, when something grazed him with such force that he came within an inch of losing his balance. He saw John Marshall hunch over as though suddenly cringing, then Kitai Ishibashi's startled face as he groaned, "There it is again!"

In that moment, Reginald Bell knew that they were still far from winning the battle. Something indescribable was reaching for them out of the Unknown!

It was then that the Ara fighter robots suddenly appeared in the wide centre aisle and blocked the path of the Mounder's supreme chieftain.

Tama Yokida announced almost breathlessly, "Sir, the robots know exactly where we're hiding. More than 3 dozen of them are coming up here toward us!"

The sudden silence of the grave fell upon the hall, broken only by the metallic rumble of the marching fighter machines...

* * * *

The greyish, hideous, synthetic creature stood before Keklos.

"So? Speak, then!" Keklos shouted at the bio-man. He had just learned that this creature had wanted to speak to him as early as last night, at the time he was inspecting Topthor's flagship. This bio-man was his 'intermediate transmitter'.

In a disconcertingly human-sounding voice, the bio-man said simply: "They have been found..."

"Where?" Keklos shouted, this time louder, since in his mind he was already sentencing the 3 Ara assistants to death for having neglected to tell him that this artificial being had asked for him even last night.

"Sir, where many are met together, and also where there are many..."

Only the second part of the answer wasn't clear to Keklos but he set up an alert for the assembly hall of the patriarchs.

"...and also where there are many..."

The Chief Biologist considered this part briefly. The second half of the answer could only signify one place: Talamon's flagship, *TAL 6* ! He had already ordered a second inspection but after questioning the bio-man further and getting a slightly clearer answer, he had no further doubts.

Defence alert for the *TAL 6* !

And he shouted again at the synthetic creature: "Tell him to attack them! Destroy—do you understand? Will you tell him at once?"

"Yes sir... destroy!" replied the test-tube being.

Keklos watched the thing's departure with feverishly gleaming eyes. For a very brief moment he seemed to drift off into space in a trance. Into this hiatus flashed the sudden cognition of how he could place himself in communication with the Basic Material from Gom without using an 'intermediate transmitter'.

And he admitted to himself, "Gegul landed in the converter a couple of weeks too soon!"

* * * *

"40 units!" said Tama Yokida in low tones, his voice unwavering.

40 Ara fighter machines stomped up the ramp that rose toward them in a free-floating double curve. Over 100 robots were distributed among the patriarchs. They had occupied all exits with lightning swiftness, now standing motionlessly with their lenticular eyes fixed on the surprised Springers.

"Retreat!" ordered Bell. Ordinarily the daredevil, he now perceived that an inconspicuous change of position would be better than the most impressive victory.

John Marshall addressed him. "Sir, without—"

Then the invisible force clutched at them again. Bell felt himself seized and hoisted up into the air. Beside him, Betty Toufry shot higher. Marshall and Yokida lay in a corner; Ras Tschubai had been forced to his knees; and only Tako Kakuta had been able to hold his position.

Bell caught Betty almost before his feet hit the ground. The duration of the Unknown's attack was as

brief as its grip had been powerful.

"Clear out! Beat it!" It was hard for Bell to say it but any resistance here was senseless.

"Too late!" Tama Yokida cried through clenched teeth. "First a couple dozen robots will have to fly from the ramp!"

A quick glance told Bell that the telekineticist was forced to resist. He gave the teleporters their order: "You're tugboats again!" It was a gross understatement of the real situation. No one took it as a joke.

Tako Kakuta was about to transport Bell in a flash 'jump' to the Gazelle but Bell glared him off. Kakuta whirled around, took hold of big lanky Kitai Ishibashi, concentrated, set the air around them to shimmering and then disappeared with the hypnotist.

The telekinetic mutant Yokida unleashed his power over the oncoming fighter machines like a primeval storm. The first 5 mechmen lifted from the ramp, describing curves in the air, then flew against the metal legs of the following 5. The thundering collision of 10 fighter machines was heard throughout the assembly hall but from their position the patriarchs could not see the scene of the action.

10 out of 40 robots were out of commission for the moment but the remaining 30-positronically controlled apparatuses which knew neither fear nor compassion but only obeyed their programming-stamped onward over the jumbled chaos and moved into the final curve of the high-vaulting ramp.

"I'll push them over the edge—"

Bell and Tama Yokida were gripped by brutal, titanic forces; they were whirled around at a crazy speed and then suddenly were released. The thunderous sound of their bouncing against the surface of the ramp was drowned under the stamping of the fighter machines. Bell was bleeding at the nose from the centrifugal force he had encountered. For long seconds, Tama Yokida could see nothing. When he regained his vision and peered through his observation slit, he was met with the glitter and gleam of robots.

Service in the New Power had imparted to each an ability for lightning swift reaction. Yokida jerked Bell to the floor. A thermo-blast hissed narrowly above them and struck the wall, which vaporized under the high-energy impact.

Then Bell discovered the shimmering in the air. He did something that he never was able to duplicate later: he reached into the midst of Ras Tschubai's materialization and jerked him to the floor. A fraction of a second later, Tako Kakuta was down with them. He had foreseen the danger and made his 'jump' for a belly landing.

"Grab on!" roared big, lanky, pitch-black Ras Tschubai. He felt Bell's arms around his rib cage and dematerialised with him in a 'jump' to the Gazelle.

But in the last moment a monstrous Something grasped at him. Tako Kakuta must have felt the same thing because he gave a howl. Bell felt that his arms would be torn from his body. Then suddenly it passed and they landed in the Gazelle.

"Whew! That's what I call a last minute—!" Bell started to say but in the next moment he and all the others were hurled into a corner.

He tried to resist the invisible force but did not succeed. Then he was aware of Betty Toufry's sobbing. The girl was in danger! Rage unleashed a giant's strength in him and suddenly the invisible strangling-grip desisted.

Bell stood up. "Yokida—Toufry! Rip off Talamon's hangar hatch! We're taking off!"

With one leap he was into the pilot seat of the scoutship, which had been in standby readiness in this secret hangar ever since the landing of the *TAL 6*. The Gazelle was a trans-light-speed craft in disc form. It had a diameter of 100 feet and an axial measurement of 60. Its formidability lay not so much in its 500 light-year range but in its abnormally heavy armaments.

Now Bell was keen for a full-power takeoff. For him, this 18th moon, Laros, had suddenly become Hell. A danger lurked here which they were helpless to fight.

On board the Gazelle, everything began to get into high gear for the liftoff but the two telekineticists had not yet announced that they had been able to break open the hangar hatch with their special powers. Finally, however, daylight burst over the viewscreen into the Control Central. Tama Yokida and Betty Toufry had managed to force open the outer hatch.

"Finally something worked!" shouted Bell triumphantly and he popped the 'ON' button of the automatic takeoff sequencer. With a whistling shriek, the Gazelle shot out of her hiding place and hurtled starward!

* * * *

Talamon faced the Chief Biologist and his staff with a gaze that was cold and fierce. 10 of the oldest Mounders stood behind their patriarch. There was menace in their looming, squarish bulks and belligerent eyes.

"Prove it, Keklos!" Talamon challenged in undismayed and imperious tones. "Go ahead and prove to me that I have provided a hiding place for the scout spacer on board my ship! But before you try, I recommend that you take a look at the lock hatch."

The hatch doors had to be repaired. Forces, which were beyond Talamon to imagine, had broken them open and now they couldn't be closed.

"I'll subject you to brainwashing!" snarled Keklos. The Chief Biologist had an idea that Topthor's presence here might give support to his confrontation of Talamon.

Topthor heard the expression 'brainwashing' and shuddered. Something had happened on board his own ship the previous night which he could not comprehend. He had taken a nap on top of Arkon bombs—he, of all people, who ordinarily went 8 days without sleep—and Grugk, his grandson, lay with a broken arm in the ship's sickbay. No Mounder knew *when* or *where* Grugk had broken his arm, least of all Grugk himself. During the night he had been discovered in the hospital section.

All this shot through Topthor's head. A brainwashing process made mental cripples out of its victims. Did he not also run a danger of undergoing this treatment? And what had his friend Talamon said to him?

"If anything goes wrong, I want at least one person to keep faith with me."

Then, too, the big business deal still hung in the air!

Keklos whirled around as Topthor laughed aloud, standing behind him beyond the 10-foot distance limit. They glared at one another.

Topthor shook his massive head emphatically and bellowed: "Keklos, you're not giving *any* Mounder a brain washing! Before that happens, Laros will be a blazing hot sun! Besides, you have to prove all your accusations!"

Keklos was too shrewd to merely buck his head against the wall. He didn't have any really incriminating evidence against Talamon, except that the one proof he did possess was tied to one of the Aras' greatest secrets: the Basic Material from Gom! This closed his mouth; this tempered his whole approach.

Wordlessly he and the Commission and the fighter robots all left the *TAL 6*.

Topthor and Talamon watched their departure without expression. Slowly the other clansmen also filed out. When they were alone, Topthor placed a massive hand on the other's shoulder and winked at him. "Old friend, now we've got to get into this little business matter of ours!"

Talamon simply nodded.

Topthor nodded in return. "It's true I shouldn't ask any questions, my friend. And I will ask you none, Talamon. But I can ask *myself* a question and it goes like this: Doesn't your great big business deal smell pretty strongly of *Perry Rhodan* ?!"

* * * *

"What the devil—*now* what's going wrong!" roared Bell from the Gazelle's pilot seat as he glared at his control panel.

The Gazelle slowed down, then peeled off from its course, which normally would have required an acceleration of ½ *speol*. Bell shouted over the intercom to the power station, where the double-headed mutant, Goratschin, and Wuriu Sengu were on duty. All he was able to get out of the power room was a voiceless choking and throat-rattling gasps. In the same moment it hit him too; again the invisible Something grasped him, seemingly bent on crushing him into the pilot seat.

Somewhere in the Gazelle, equipment shrieked and grated which had never made a sound before. Behind Bell, John Marshall groaned. Tako Kakuta sat crumpled beside him in the co-pilot's seat. Bell felt his senses fading away, just as sudden release came and the terrifying phantom fled.

"Paramechanics!" gasped Marshall.

Bell only partially understood. His usually ruddy face looked grey and old. "Telekinesis from *this* distance?" he blurted out incredulously.

The Gazelle, which persisted increasingly along a course it was being forced into by an unknown power, hurtled toward the giant planet Gom.

"We have to send an emergency call to the *Titan* and..." Bell got no further. From two sides he felt himself grasped, crushed and tortured. *This is the end!* was the terrifying thought that ran through his mind. Desperately summoning his final strength, he rasped to John Marshall: "Communicate with... with... Pucky!" Unconsciousness overtook him.

Marshall forgot his own fate. He rose above himself and, concentrating in spite of his fear of imminent death, made contact with Pucky aboard the *Titan*. From that mysterious cranial location from which telepathic waves emanate, he managed to transmit a fragmented mental message: *Data... Terra... Tophthor's Tron... reprogrammed to... Betelgeuse.*

The positronicon of Tophthor, reprogrammed. To Betelgeuse! Pucky gasped, waited for further revelations. But none were forthcoming. The esper-waves died out.

All life aboard the Gazelle subsided into an unconscious state. The scoutship hurtled unimpeded toward Gom, caught in the grip of monstrous forces. It began to dip into the tenuous stratosphere of the infernal planet...

This was Perry Rhodan's darkest hour!

He had to stand immobile and watch helplessly while he lost Reginald Bell, his best friend; while his closest colleagues crashed on Gom in the Gazelle. He could not insert himself into the action. All space throughout the Gonom System was a radar-net of shifting skeins, sweeping nets. The spacers had buzzed up from Laros Eke a swarm of hornets to pursue the small ship that had been cached in the *TAL 6*.

The *Titan* resounded with alarm signals; seconds passed and then the mighty sphere was battle-ready. Perry Rhodan remained oblivious to his surroundings. He was concentrated deep within himself, struggling for enlightenment. He had only to speak a Word and the crash of the Gazelle would be averted, the lives of his friends saved.

But he did not have the right! More was at stake than his friends, his personal feelings: the destiny of Mankind on Earth lay in his hands alone!

With an emotionless voice he gave the command. "Pull out."

The vast ship was concealed behind a tremendously powerful anti-detection screen, still the possibility of their being accidentally tracked down could not be discounted in the face of this veritable explosion of battleships in this sector of space.

Those two fateful words—*pull out*—signed the death warrant of redheaded hot-tempered roisterous Reggie and other of Perry's best friends but Rhodan's order was dictated neither by courage nor cowardice. It was based on pure merciless logic: the security of the Earth demanded it of him!

A faint grim smile touched his lips as he thought. Of the altered memory data in Tophthor's positronicon.

Pucky squatted down beside his dejected leader. "Reg will come back, won't he, Perry?" he chirped. "He has to come back. Else I won't have anybody I can really bug!" Perry, on the other hand, thought of how much he would miss being bugged by his bumptious buddy.

* * * *

On Earth, Col. Mein was Perry Rhodan's second-in-command. He reported to Col. Freyt, Perry's first officer in his absence: "The day after tomorrow the new hyper-compensator will be installed on board the *Solar System* . Then the ship can take off for Honor with the special team."

"I'd rather keep the big cruiser here," replied Freyt, "and above all I'd like to see the Chief again! When I came back from M-13 in the *Ganymede* , the Gobi was overcast. I have a feeling that storm clouds are building up all over the solar system! I'm not superstitious but I can't shake loose a bad case of the downies. Somewhere in the Arkon System, I sense that something has gone wrong.

"When will the shockwave hitus ?

CONTENTS

[1/ THE ROBOT REGENT DECIDES](#)

[2/ RHODAN'S RUSE](#)

[3/ "THEY ARE MONSTERS!"](#)

[4/ "EARTH—AND RHODAN—MUST BE DESTROYED!"](#)

[5/ SECRET OF THE BLUE ROOM](#)

[6/ HYPERCOMFUSION!](#)

7/ TOPTHOR'S GREAT SECRET

8/ ATTACKED BY AN UNKNOWN FORCE

9/ PERRY RHODAN'S DARKEST HOUR

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

PROJECT: EARTHSAVE

Copyright © Ace Books 1974

All Rights Reserved.

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

MYSTERIOUS FORCES that make a mere plaything out of the Gazelle—what is their origin? What is their intent?

And what is to become of Perry Rhodan's right hand—Reginald Bell? Not to overlook 8 highly important multi-talented paranormals who are the heart of the Peacelord's mutant corps? Forced to hastily depart after their dangerous mission at the conference of the Aras and Springers, have they only fled one hot spot for one even hotter?

Only a single ship's positronicon contains the data revealing the location of Earth in the interstellar atlas of the great galaxy so Rhodan's agents have found it a comparatively

simple task to substitute misleading information designed to keep Earth's whereabouts unknown to other races of the sevagram—alien intelligences more powerful than Terra, which is but a fledgling in the development of solar system colonization.

Many puzzling questions are asked in the next volume of PERRY RHODAN, not the least of which is the reason for—

THE SILENCE OF GOM

by

Kurt Mahr