

The lives of the crew of the New Power hang in the balance. Artificially induced illness has ravaged Perry Rhodan's allies, and there seems to be no cure—unless his young lieutenant can accomplish a perilous interstellar mission.

First, Rhodan's agent, Tifflor, must feign betrayal of the Peacelord of the Universe. And then he too falls victim to the ruthless schemes of the murderous Medical Masters...

This is the stirring story of—

EPIDEMIC CENTRE: ARALON

1/ AN EXCITING PLAN

A ghastly and uninviting world at best, Mooff 6 was a giant planet orbiting the yellowish sun designated as Mooff in the Arkonide Star Catalogues, situated in the centre of Star Cluster M-13, about 34,000 light-years from Earth.

When Perry Rhodan first landed on Mooff 6 he was strongly reminded of Jupiter, although Mooff 6 harboured intelligent life, unlike the great gas giant of our own solar system.

And what a strange life form! The Mooffs were wide, flabby and taller than a man, resembling overgrown jellyfish. Harmless and peaceable, they communicated with each other telepathically. They simply had not elected to build up any notable form of civilization and were content merely to be left alone.

So Perry Rhodan gave them their wish—but first he was forced to determine whether they had anything to do with the terrible plague that had struck down his men. He took 50 Mooffs: aboard his ship and adapted living quarters for them containing their native methane atmosphere. By this means he hoped to make use of their mildly hypnotic powers of suggestion in case he needed them to help replace the afflicted mutants of his special corps—at least for the time being.

Before takeoff from Mooff 6, Rhodan gathered a few of his remaining healthy crewmembers in the Control Central. Khrest, the tall, white-haired Arkonide scientist, sat down in one of the chairs. Very little confidence shone in his reddish eyes for he realized what a harsh blow the Peacelord had been dealt; what an impossible position he had been put in. The situation seemed virtually hopeless.

Although considerably younger than Rhodan, Lt. Tifflor bore a striking resemblance to him. He sat at present before the nav-computer and waited for his chief's decision. The Japanese 'seer', Wuriu Sengu, stood nearby, silent and unassuming according to his nature.

Pucky, however, was another matter. As the most highly endowed paranormal sensitive, the mouse-beaver lay sprawled casually on the couch. Looking like a king-sized Mickey Mouse with a broad supporting tail, he possessed a soft, rusty pelt and the good-natured limpid brown eyes of a loyal hound dog. His long ears and tapered snout lent him a comical aspect that camouflaged his true nature from those who did not know him. Telepath, telekineticist, teleporter, all in one, he was fluent in the common usage of Intercosmo, Arkonide and English.

Pucky's voice rang out high-pitched and almost chirpingly in the great Control Centre of the Titan, a super spaceship almost one mile in diameter. "Looks like we're ready for liftoff, Rhodan. So—it's back to Arkon again?"

"I don't see any other alternative. We know the Aras are the originators of the hyper-euphoria sickness afflicting 700 of the crew, including the Mutant Corps and Thora—not to mention Bell. If anybody can provide a cure, it's the Aras alone we have to look to. So we're just going to have to try to find out about them on Arkon. Nobody else seems to know where the central world of the Ara clans is..."

"The robot brain on Arkon knows," Khrest offered with a positive nod of his head. Suddenly, the ancient savant showed new interest. "The Brain will help us!"

"In its own interests," Rhodan concurred. "Ever since the great positronic brain took over rulership from the Arkonides, the Empire has improved. And why? Because the Brain shows initiative. I'm certain that it's aware of the danger the Aras represent and that it will help us further. Any more questions? Otherwise, we'll take off."

Lt. Tifflor raised his hand like an obedient pupil. "Don't we have prisoners on board?" he asked. "They are Aras! Can't they reveal the position of their home world?"

"No doubt," Rhodan agreed. "But we need confirmation from Arkon, so that we don't fall into a trap. Only the robot brain can know if the statements of the prisoners are valid. We have no choice but to beat a path to Arkon."

"Then what are we waiting for?" shrilled Pucky, but with exceptional gravity. "Let's lift off. Arkon is only a cat's jump away."

"Probably more of a mouse-beaver jump," said Tifflor, alluding to Pucky's teleporting capability. "Just a few lideks (light-decades) away, if I'm not mistaken."

"We'll have to do it with a half-depleted crew," said Rhodan, not without confidence. "Very well, then—let's get ready for takeoff. The Ganymede has the same coördinates as we do. We'll fly together to Arkon."

Arkon was the centre point of a stellar empire that embraced the entire Star Cluster M-13, more than 200 light-years in diameter. There on the third principal planet was the positronic brain, whose partner Perry Rhodan had become.

His ship, the *Titan*, had once belonged to the Arkonides. He had actually stolen it but the Brain had generously relinquished the vessel to him—under one condition: Rhodan must promise to use it only for the benefit of the Empire.

The fight against the Aras was for the well being of the Empire.

The *Titan* was a spherical ship whose diameter was just under a mile. Its crew complement had been set by the Arkonide Fleet Command at 1500 men. With an acceleration of 375 miles/sec², it could reach the velocity of light in exactly 10 minutes. It could also make a transition into hyperspace. With a single hyperjump through the 5th dimension, it could leap across tens of thousands of light-years of distance.

The *Ganymede* was Rhodan's original flagship, in which he had flown from the Earth to Arkon. The *Ganymede* could also conquer interstellar immensities with the help of the hyperspace transition. But in addition, it had two pieces of special equipment on board which were a secret even to the all-knowing robot brain on Arkon. The tele-transmitter could dematerialise any object whatsoever and then rematerialise it anywhere—for example, on board another ship. With this, Rhodan possessed an unimaginably dangerous weapon. The second acquisition, taken over from the Springers, was the hyper-compensator. When this was in operation, alien tracking stations could not determine the directional coördinates of a hypertransition jump. For several weeks now, the *Titan* had also become equipped with a special hyper-compensator.

On the viewscreens a primitive landscape was to be seen. Mountain peaks both bare and snow-covered rose loftily into the hazy sky. Ammoniac seas shimmered in the dim sunlight. No life stirred. After good-byes had been said, the Mooffs had withdrawn. The severe danger that had threatened them had been removed. It was not they but the Aras who had to be regarded as the culprits. It was the Aras who had sought to take over the Arkon Empire, by secret and very insidious means. In the course of that struggle, 700 of Rhodan's people had become infected by a disease called hyper-euphoria. Those afflicted by it felt light-hearted and carefree and sang and danced—but they ceased to eat any food. They starved without being aware of it. In their blissful and euphoric state, they forgot everything, including the natural function of nourishment.

In order to keep them alive, Rhodan had been forced to subject the victims to a prolonged deep sleep and feed them intravenously. But this was only a temporary expedient, since they would soon die unless an actual cure were discovered and applied. And only the Aras could help, because they had also been the ones who had invented the infectious substance that caused the illness.

"Liftoff in 10 minutes!" came Perry Rhodan's final decision. "The coördinates are known, Tiff. Keep in video contact with Col. Freyt." Freyt was commander of the *Ganymede*.

Pucky slid off the couch and waddled to the door. "I prefer my cabin during a transition hop," he said. "In here it gets rough!"

Everybody smiled as he exited. Only Khrest remained grave. "Id like to be with you, Perry, when you talk to the robot brain."

"We'll all take part in that conversation," Rhodan assured him. "But I have just one request: I don't want anybody to mention a word about the 700 sick patients we have on board. I'm only going to report Thora and a few others as being ill. The Brain thinks logically. If it comes to realize that we're not fully in battle readiness, it could deny us any assistance. And, unfortunately, we still need that help."

The clock hands moved onward.

Liftoff...!

The two space giants rose upwards almost weightlessly, thanks to their antigravity fields. The *Ganymede* was a cylindrical vessel 2500 feet in length and about 600 feet in diameter. The repulsion fields began to

operate. The giant world of the Mooffs receded under them into the depths of the void. By the time it had become a star point of light, both ships had arrived at speol.

Then they simply disappeared from normal space. They flickered slightly, blurred a little—and ceased to be there. They had been swallowed up into the 5th dimension, where time and space have no meaning.

Somewhere in another place, they materialized again now, in the same second. And with them materialized everything that had been on board at the point in time of the transition. . .

* * * *

Arkon lay almost in the centre of the great star cluster.

The two spaceships emerged out of hyperspace within a third of a light-year of the flaming star. Relatively motionless, they hovered here while preparing themselves for their next venture.

In the sickbay and other emergency hospital stations of the *Titan*, the patients lay in their beds. They rested in trance-like sleep and knew naught of their surroundings. Meanwhile, the recently arrived reinforcement crew from the Earth had more or less familiarized themselves with the ship's equipment and had taken over the posts of the disabled crewmen. For Rhodan this had been an uncomfortable rearrangement. He had actually needed weeks in which to properly train the new men, yet he had to accomplish it in only a few days.

Physicians and scientists concerned themselves with the patients but even though they were keeping the unfortunate victims alive they had not been able to discover the specific pathogenic agent nor had they developed any antidote.

Rhodan called Khrest, Tiff, Sengu and Pucky into the Communications Centre where the hypercom equipment had already been turned on. Nearby in the control room: two medics waited with Thora, who was in a half-drugged state of sleep. Upon a signal from Rhodan, they were to bring her in to the Communications room.

The coded transmissions of the Brain flickered on the picture screen. Patterns of colour endlessly changed form in an incomprehensible jumble. Only a correctly installed deciphering unit would be able to straighten out the visible abstractions. Synchronously with these optical impressions, unidentifiable sounds rang forth from the loudspeaker, vaguely similar to electronic music.

Rhodan nodded to his companions and threw in the transmitter key. "*Titan* reporting. Commander Thora of the House of Zoltral. Second Commander Perry Rhodan. Confirmation of contact is requested."

His words were transmitted instantly from the antenna into hyperspace and without the slightest loss of time were transferred back into normal space at a distance of a third of a light-year. In the same second in which Rhodan spoke, he could be heard at a distance of light-months or tens of light-millennia. The hypercom transceiver equipment on board the *Titan* possessed an almost inconceivable range.

The colourful pattern on the screen congealed into an abstract picture but then altered itself again immediately. Gradually the familiar Titanic hall emerged into visibility, together with the gleaming metal

dome resting on its sectional floor plates. Here was the robot brain of Arkon, ruler of a stellar empire of unimaginable dimensions.

A cold, mechanical, strictly impersonal voice came from the loudspeaker: "Your I.D. is recognized. Closed channel activated. Speak!"

Thus the Brain had provided that no one would overhear their conversation. Rhodan stared at the armourplated cupola, under which rested the greatest positronic brain in the universe. In relation to that robotic mind he experienced something akin to sympathy, although that was not quite the expression for it. At any rate, they had become partners—this almost infallible machine and he.

"The *Titan* is reporting back from its mission. Unfortunately, without success. Of course we prevented the destruction of the planet Mooff 6 by the Arkonide fighter fleet but we have only approached our main goal by a single additional step. We know now that the Mooffs bear no guilt in the revolution on Zalit, nor can they be held responsible for the hyper-euphoria sickness. They have no more to do with it than the indigenous inhabitants of Honur do. The only ones who are guilty, are the Aras. They are behind everything that has happened.

"The Aras are a tribal or clan offshoot of the Springers, otherwise known as the Galactic Traders. However, there are no friendly relationships between them. The Aras are in all practicality the medics and biologists of the Empire.

"But they are descended from the Traders!" said Rhodan, with a peculiar emphasis. "They support themselves not alone through their science but also by commerce. This heritage of their race they still adhere to. Unfortunately, they trade not only in medicines, they are also merchants of death!"

"The proof!"

Rhodan sighed. "We found plenty of proof on Honur and Mooff 6. We learned that the Aras infect entire planets deliberately and then later supply the necessary antidote at exorbitant prices. Do you consider such a practice to be fair play, Regent?"

The robot brain required one second in which to formulate an answer. "It is a criminal offence against the laws of the Empire. But we have need of the Aras; otherwise I would initiate an immediate destruction of all their worlds."

Rhodan nodded. "I am in accord with you. But there must be a way of forcing them to observe the Law without depriving ourselves of their medical knowledge. I am urgently in need of a cure for the hyper-euphoria. Thora of Zoltral has fallen ill."

Rhodan thought he detected a trace of excitement in the impersonal voice but it could just as well have been an illusion.

"Thora, ill...? Infected by the Aras? Ah yes, I'm aware of that. You reported it to me already. So no cure has been forthcoming?"

"Only the Aras can furnish it."

"They don't have any specific home base but they maintain many planetary strongholds."

Rhodan tossed in the bait: "For example, perhaps such a planet as Aralon?"

It worked. . . . The robot brain let 5 seconds go by before it answered: "Aralon is considered to be the central world of the Aras. How do you know this, Perry Rhodan of Terra?"

"Ara captives revealed it to me but I couldn't be sure that they were telling the truth. So it is a fact, then? Aralon is the principal world of the galactic Medical Masters?"

"Yes. Aralon is the 4th of 7 planets orbiting the small, yellow sun of Kesnar, whose position I will furnish you. Other important data are: Aralon is an unarmed world and does not possess an actual spacefleet. It has not been necessary for the Aras to defend themselves. As I now understand it, they have managed over millennia of time to keep their infectious bacterial and viral strains from dying out. The entire galaxy needs the Aras and their medicinal arts, so it maintains good relations with them. From this point of view, the Aras are the most powerful people in the Empire—that's why they have no weapons or battleships of any kind. They can't be forced against their wills to produce a specific medicine and deliver it."

Rhodan recognized that the Regent spoke a truth that was founded on logic. If he, Rhodan, were to attack the world of Aralon, there was a danger that he could annihilate the very scientists who had developed both the causative agent and the cure for the hyper-euphoric sickness.

"But there is a way of putting a stop to their activities. For the good of the entire Empire and all intelligent races of the galaxy, it must be employed."

"What way is that?" asked the Brain.

"Strategy!"

"Explain more precisely what you mean," demanded the Regent calmly.

"First I'd like to show you what can happen to the Arkonides if it occurs to the Aras to bring the epidemic to Arkon," said Rhodan and he signalled to Khrest.

The white-haired scientist withdrew and reappeared moments later with Thora in her portable bed. Her eyes were open and she smiled radiantly. Her face reflected complete unconcern but her features were thin and hollow-cheeked. Even the intravenous feeding could not prevent the patients from starving gradually while still alive. "That is Thora, of Zoltral, the commander of this ship. She does not know that she is sick, Regent, but death is already reaching for her. She will continue to smile even as she dies. The Aras infected her—and only they can heal her again."

The robot brain remained silent for almost a minute. Then, when it answered, there was just a hint of emotion in the mechanical voice. "Explain to me your strategy, Rhodan. If you can convince me that an attack against Aralon will not endanger the Empire, I will place all of my resources at your disposal."

Rhodan breathed a sigh of relief. He saw to it that Thora was taken back to her hospital station. Then he pointed to Lt. Tifflor, who stood in the rear of the Com Central next to the Japanese, Sengu. "The name of my strategy is Lt. Tifflor, Regent. He has already saved an inhabited world from the clutches of the Galactic Traders, by posing as a 'cosmic decoy'."

"A—cosmic decoy?"

"A tiny transmitter has been installed in his body, which radiates pulses continuously. The important feature of this is the fact that these impulses are propagated without any time loss and are perceptible at a

distance of 2 light-years. Also they are telepathic in nature rather than from any kind of radio apparatus. So Lt. Tiffloor is a sort of synthetic telepath, who can transmit his thoughts over 2 light-years—and, as mentioned, without any time loss."

"That is a technology that is unfamiliar to me. You have things at your command, Rhodan, which could be very useful to the Empire."

"This is why we became partners," Rhodan reminded the robot brain, and continued objectively: "I will infiltrate Tiffloor onto the planet Aralon. One man alone will be inconspicuous. He can hardly be suspected of being the advance agent of a galactic force of arms. We can thus be constantly informed of everything that happens thereafter on Aralon. And then we can move in."

"That's a very risky undertaking," cautioned the Brain.

"Thora must be cured! So it's necessary that we take some degree of risk. But when we also consider that it's not only Thora who's involved here but that all of Arkon could be afflicted with this sickness, then you see the risk is comparatively small. The Aras have to be convinced that they can offer a better service to the Empire if they merely operate properly. Their swindling and deception in regard to the health of the Empire comes under the heading of high treason."

"Let me have time to evaluate this new information," requested the Regent.

"The crackling of the loudspeaker indicated that the acoustical part of the connection had been interrupted. The picture portion remained on the screen. Rhodan cut off the transmitter and turned to Tiffloor. "Well, Tiff, you can see you've got a job ahead of you. My plan isn't clear yet but I more or less know how we can trick the Aras. I want you to take Wuriu Sengu and Thora to Aralon."

Khrest took an involuntary step forward. He stared in shocked amazement at his friend. "Perry, surely you don't want to expose Thora to this danger?"

Rhodan smiled softly. "On the contrary, Khrest, Thora will be the first to receive the serum that will heal her—and mind you, at the hands of the physicians of Aralon. That's the way we will have the proof that they are also the originators of the epidemic and at the same time we'll know that the cure is possible."

"And how do you expect to bring the Aras to do this?"

"I'm not down to the fine details yet but it'll all come to me before we are orbiting over Aralon... with military power at our back in such force that we can show our fist to any possible attacker."

"But I heard that Aralon is supposed to be without weapons and is fully demobilized..."

"...which in no way means that Aralon is defenceless, Khrest. I believe the Aras have powerful friends, if it comes to that."

"The Aras, and friends? To whom do you refer?"

"Don't forget that they belong to the race of the Springers," Rhodan reminded him. But then he made a hasty motion for silence. The loudspeaker had come to life. He quickly threw in the transmitter key again.

Seconds later, the cold voice of the Regent resounded: "The star Kesnar is 38 of your light-years distant from Arkon. All other data is in agreement with what your prisoners have told you. You have from me

full and unlimited authority and may operate on the basis of your own judgment. In addition, I will place at your disposal a robot-controlled battlefleet, which until further notice will be programmed to obey your commands. Identification will follow on the same frequency on which I am speaking to you now. You are the commander of this fleet. The units will be at your disposal within 10 minutes. You will instruct me concerning the measures you are taking at the moment of their introduction. I wish to caution and warn you: do not attack Aralon without sufficient reason. We still urgently need the Aras. There are still diseases and sicknesses on the worlds of the Empire."

"Yes, that is true, Regent, and it will continue to be so just as long as the Aras are allowed to continue working without restriction.

"You have received my instructions," replied the Regent unemotionally. "You will adhere to them if we are to be partners. For the rest I wish you good luck and success, Perry Rhodan. If you need further help, call me. End of message."

Rhodan waited until the picture on the screen became dark. Then he cut off the transmitter and the receiver. With a great sigh of relief, he sat down in the nearest chair. For long moments he sat there as though in near collapse, his head supported in his hands. No one ventured to disturb him and even Pucky remained quiet.

Khrest waited patiently.

Finally, Rhodan looked up. He smiled slightly and said, "I'm gradually getting the message that the robot brain is making me into some kind of policeman. Keep the peace—keep order and you will be paid! Well, as long as his interests and mine coincide, that kind of thing can continue. But woe be unto something!—if our interests happen to clash! What will happen then is not yet clear to me."

"Men we'll simply depose the Regent and take over the Government," twittered Pucky confidently and slipped off the couch. He drew himself up and thrust out his bright, furry chest, deliberately putting on airs like the old-fashioned dictators of Earth. "I feel I'm especially qualified for the post of Foreign Minister."

Tiff grinned. "I think you'd make a better Minister of Entertainment," he suggested. And then he became serious again. "You want to set me down on Aralon, Mr. Rhodan? And what am I supposed to do there? I don't know Aralon."

"Nobody knows this world where the Aras have their medical and biochemical laboratories. I'll wager, however, that we'll know a lot more about it after you've been there for a few clays."

"And Thora is coming with me?"

Rhodan nodded. "She has to come with you! Without her the operation wouldn't have any purpose. Yes, what is it, Lt. Fox?"

During Rhodan's conference with the robot brain the older officer had been assigned the task of watching the picture screens of the Control Central in order to be able to report any possible changes of circumstance there. Rhodan did not choose to rely exclusively on his instruments at all times. Normally Fox performed his duties as watch officer of the Communications Central.

"A fleet is emerging out of transition. Already we're completely surrounded by them. They are Arkonide ships."

"Those will be the new reinforcements we've been promised," said Rhodan calmly and he got up. Together with the others, he went across into the Control Central and looked at the panoramic video gallery screens, which revealed all the surrounding space in natural colour.

It was a truly frightening spectacle.

The massive battleships of the *Stardust* class—giant spheres 2500 feet in diameter—hovered more or less in the background. Entire echelons of cruisers and destroyers stood before them as a defence screen, with the muzzles of their dangerous rayguns pointed in the direction of flight. Agile interceptors had taken over the peripheral escort positions.

Rhodan knew that there was not a single human being on board these spaceships. The individual commanders were positronic robots whose programmed knowledge was greater than the best of Earthly scientists. All controls on board the ships were moved automatically and were positronically controlled. What was lining up out there in space was the mightiest military force that Rhodan had ever beheld. And it had been placed at his disposal.

It filled him not only with pride but also with a feeling of deep satisfaction. The man from Earth had achieved this. He had proven that he was worthy of the Arkon tradition. The robot brain had acknowledged equal rights for Terranians, yes, even in preference to the Arkonides, who were the original founders of the Empire.

Man had given proof that he comprehended the nature of an animate universe!

As though awakening from a trance, Rhodan turned soberly to his task. "Fox, use the Arkon frequency channel and set up a direct connection for me with the flagship of the Arkonide fleet and transfer it into the Control Central. I want to speak with the commander of the battlefleet."

Lt. Fox disappeared into the Com Central.

Khrest asked, "What do you want of him, Perry? He will have received the Regent's orders by now."

"Only the order to obey my commands," Rhodan countered.

One minute later the rigid face of an Arkonide robot gazed from the communications screen into the Control Central of the *Titan*. In the crystal lenses of its eyes flickered the light of a computerized control.

"Rhodan of Terra, I and my fleet are at your disposal," it said, by way of opening the conversation. "What is the nature of your instructions?"

Rhodan suppressed his gratification. "We will fly to the Kesnar solar system. The hyper-transit manoeuvre will bring us out at one-quarter of a light-year from Kesnar. Your fleet will remain stationary in that position while my two ships continue onward at relative light velocity. From this moment on, we will remain in permanent radio and video connection. Further instructions will follow as required."

"Message understood! We have gravitation bombs and at any time we are able to..."

"I do not wish the bombs to be employed. What is your designation?"

"My name is OR-775, Rhodan of Terra."

"Good, OR-775! Then follow my instructions and wait for the exact transition coordinates that my Communications Officer will send you. The hypertransition will take place in one hour."

"Message understood! I am standing by!"

The videoscreen image faded out.

Khrest, who stood very close to Rhodan, let out a tremendous sigh.

Rhodan turned to him in mild astonishment. "What's the matter, Khrest—do you have a problem? Isn't everything going much better now than you had ever dared hope for?"

The Arkonide nodded. "Actually almost too well," he admitted cautiously. "Have you any idea what it means to have become the commander of an entire Arkonide battlefleet? As of 13 years ago, no one had even entrusted me the command over a single ship, although I belonged to a ruling house. You, Perry, are practically an alien member of a primitive race. At least, That's what you were only about 15 years ago. Today, you are already operating with the authority of the mightiest empire that has ever existed in the universe! Perry, you have now practically come into your own!"

Rhodan slowly shook his head. "Don't be too hasty, Khrest. I have no personal claim to all this. The universe belongs to everyone. But I will admit to a certain degree of pride that I happen to be flying under the colours of the robot brain and in charge of the most tremendous fleet I have ever seen. Of course you realize you can rest assured that all this power lies in good hands."

Lt. Fox popped his head into the Control Central. "The coordinates have been checked out, sir, Do you want me to pass them on to the fleet commander?"

"Yes, do that, Fox. The hyper-transit will take place in exactly 50 minutes. Until then we will maintain light velocity. And now the time has come to go into a huddle over our battle plan. Tiff, I need you in this briefing most urgently. Also Sengu. Khrest, I'd be glad to have you join us."

"What about me?" The reproachful question came from the corner, where Pucky had rolled himself together on the couch and was listening to the conversation. His ears had come up and the large brown eyes gazed with an innocent loyalty into the metallic world of the spaceship. "I'm starting to get the feeling that this time around there's not going to be much for me to do."

"You're about as wrong as you can be, Pucky," Rhodan informed him. "In a passive sense of the word, I believe you have to play the principal role. Tiffs thought transmissions can only be picked up by you and you alone. We do not have any other telepaths on board who are in a condition to spell you off in that capacity. It's true that you can't go directly to Aralon but in the final analysis, you know, the actual adventure part of an undertaking is not always the most important one. In any case, I can't possibly do without you. Now—are you satisfied...?"

Pucky whistled shrilly and off key. "What choice have I got? Okay, so sound off with your war plan, you've got me stretched out on the rock."

"What's with you, Prometheus? Is that some more of Bell's influence? I'm afraid you've got your figures of speech mixed up again." Rhodan favoured him with a fleeting smile and then became serious again. "Alright, then, now everybody listen... I'm going to explain this plan to you as briefly as possible. We're making our transit-jump in 45 minutes and we will rematerialise at a distance of a quarter of a light-year from Kesnar. Then what we'll do..."

Rhodan spoke for half an hour and was not interrupted a single time by any of his tensely listening companions.

The plan that he developed was, in itself, as exciting as any romantic adventure novel...

2/ INHOSPITABLE HOSPITAL PLANET

The sun Kesnar was a small, yellow star in the navigation target screens of the *Titan*. The quarter light-year distance could have dwarfed even a giant celestial orb—and Kesnar was anything but a giant.

The great Arkonide fleet remained motionlessly at its point of emergence into normal space. Rhodan had ordered final coördinates to be furnished to OR-775. Now when the battlefleet went into its next transition, it would materialize within only a few liseks (light-seconds) from Aralon.

The *Titan* and the *Ganymede* continued to fly toward the system at the relative velocity of light. At this rate of speed it would take them 3 months to reach Aralon.

Tiff's finest hour had come again.

Thora was placed once more in a state of deep sleep. The Arkonide woman lay motionlessly in her portable bed with buckled leather straps across her to prevent her falling out in case of unexpected movements.

Wuriu Sengu, the 'seer' who could see through solid matter by the force of his will and who was the only parapsychically endowed mutant outside of Pucky who had not fallen victim of the sickness, was wearing his slick uniform, which designated him as a mutant in Rhodan's New Power. Tiff also wore this uniform. There was not the slightest intention to conceal their identity.

In the small hangar of the *Titan* where the *Gazelle* was housed, the last details were discussed. The *Gazelle* was a long-range scout ship in the form of a disc. Its diameter was approximately 100 feet, while its central thickness was about 60 feet. This small spaceship was capable of covering 3 light-years in a single hypertransition jump and it had an average operational range of about 500 light-years.

Rhodan took Tiff to one side. "Tiff, do you know exactly now what role you are going to have to play?"

"It's going to be very difficult, sir, for me to be a traitor to you."

"That is a part of your assignment and don't you ever forget it! Now I want you to think along with all conversations, so that Pucky will always be informed as to "What's going on; especially when the Aras speak, review their words in your mind. That's the only way that it will be possible for Pucky to follow the conversations."

"If only nothing happens to Thora..."

"Relax, Tiff! The Aras always know how valuable a hostage can be when they think they've got one in

their clutches. And on the other hand, they're going to do everything in their power to prove to you how terrific their medical capabilities are. You'll see. It'll all go along smoothly—just as we have thought it out. Okay—it's time. I wish you a lot of luck, Tiff. So long!"

"Yeah, so long—but not too long, I hope!" responded Tiff as he straightened up his lean frame. His grey eyes gleamed with new decision. He bent over to stroke Pucky's soft fur. "Do a good job, old friend. When I come back, you can come to me and I'll scratch your neck for half an hour."

"Huh! Bell has done that for as much as 5 hours at a stretch," said the mouse-beaver depreciatingly, "but I suppose a half hour is better than nothing."

Khrest clapped Tiff on the shoulder. "Lots of luck Lieutenant. Take good care of Thora!"

"I'll guard her like my own sister, Khrest," promised Tiff as he climbed up through the lock hatch.

Sengu was there already, waiting for him. Then, after last goodbyes, the lock closed.

The Gazelle lay in the hangar ready for takeoff. Rhodan Khrest and Pucky left it and returned to the Control Central. From here they followed the ensuing events on the viewscreens. Nothing happened for about a half minute. Then suddenly the Gazelle shot laterally into their field of vision. It hurtled with incredible acceleration toward the distant sun and in another second dematerialised. It would presumably in the same second emerge again from hyperspace three quarters of a light-year distant from the *Titan*—and it would land on Aralon.

All else was pure speculation.

And sheer luck, should everything go according to plan...

* * * *

Tiff was not at ease in any sense of the word.

Nobody knew how the Aras would react if an alien ship landed on their central world. Granted, they were known as a relatively peaceful people but that did not exclude the possibility that they would know how to defend themselves if anything went contrary to their interests. At any rate, it was a matter of record that they had attempted to bring the planet Zalit under their control, with the help of the hypnotic Mooffs, in order to destroy the robot brain on Arkon and to seize the rulership, of the Empire. Therefore the Aras were not quite as harmless and lacking in ambition, as they might appear to be.

As the Gazelle materialized, it was 20 light-minutes, away from Aralon and racing toward the planet at near light speed but steadily decelerating.

Tiff had sufficient time to make a visual survey. Aralon lay directly in his flight path, a brightly gleaming orb that grew brighter and larger with every second.

Sengu got up from his bunk and approached Tiff, joining him in observing the screen. "When do you think they'll spot us?" he asked with deep concern.

Tiff shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't the slightest idea. It all depends on how good their warning system is. Maybe they've already had us for awhile on their tracking screens."

"Should I turn on the radio receiver?"

"That wouldn't be a bad idea. You might even be able to make a connection but don't give any answer back. Leave that to me!"

The Japanese nodded and busied himself with the radio transceiver equipment. The minutes passed and became half an hour.

Their velocity had long since diminished considerably. The Gazelle now moved along at about 600 miles per second. Aralon was a shining, bright green planet with continents and oceans. It reminded him of the far distant Earth.

In the receiving section for normal reception bands there was an incomprehensible confusion of hundreds of voices. Sengu could hardly understand a single word. For the most part they spoke Interkosmo, which was the colloquial common language of the Arkonide Empire. All communications were in code.

As Tiff continued to observe the starboard viewscreens, he saw two cylindrical spaceships moving swiftly toward the Gazelle. Before he could speculate on what he should do, they were already past him. They made a course change to the left and flew more or less in the same direction toward Aralon, without paying any further attention to him. Tiff had never experienced anything quite like this.

Here they were approaching an unknown world that was highly civilized and nobody troubled themselves about them!

He didn't have any further time to mentally review this phenomenon of which Pucky by now must already be informed... that is, if he wasn't asleep. Unfortunately there was no possibility to also receive communications with the body transmitter: the equipment worked only in one direction.

Three other ships, also cylindrical, approached from the port side. They overtook the Gazelle and then spurred with a wild new velocity toward Aralon. In the magnifying viewscreen, Tiff was able to observe that they flew toward the main continent and prepared for a landing approach there.

"There's a bit of traffic around here," he remarked dryly to Sengu, who had stared in open-mouthed amazement at the alien ships flying past them. "If all that wasn't a camouflage, I guess nobody is going to notice us."

He didn't realize how close he had come to the truth with his assumption.

A short circumnavigation was enough to be able to locate the spaceport. It was an open area with a smooth, synthetic surface, almost circular and having a diameter of some 180 miles.

With the exception of Arkon, Tiff had never seen anything like this.

The landed ships stood in long rows on the field, giant spherical bodies in the Arkonide style, cylinder-shaped giants and towering torpedo shapes. There were hundreds of different types, all told more than 10,000 ships.

The incessant coming and going created such a confusion of traffic that Tiff thought he was dreaming. Writers of science fiction in the past had attempted to describe the life and activity of a spaceport of the future, somewhat along these lines, and they had been ridiculed. Now—he himself was experiencing a greater fantasy than those authors in their wildest dreams had tried to describe.

The lower he came toward the ground, the more tremendous was the impression. The rows of ships formed regular avenues in which ground vehicles swiftly travelled back and forth, thus establishing a connection with the flat-looking buildings that bordered the great field in a ring formation.

Tiff descended lower and finally saw a free space large enough for the relatively small Gazelle. He had the impression of being a dwarf among giants as he set the ship down gently and cut off the engines.

But none of the giants appeared to have noticed his arrival. Nobody troubled themselves at all about him. It was just as if he had merely parked his car in a space on Earth among thousands of other vehicles.

His neighbour was a cylindrical vessel a thousand feet high. Tiff noticed how some of the crewmembers descended to the ground in an elevator and got into a waiting ground vehicle, whereupon they simply drove away. They did not offer the scoutship so much as a backward glance.

In this forest of metal monsters, he had become disoriented. With the help of the ship's instruments he was able to make a rough estimate where the long buildings with the large display of flags were located, which he had noticed shortly before his landing. He assumed that the flags were some sort of signal system that indicated the port authority.

Sengu continued to stare with increased amazement at the countless number of spaceships. By his own reckoning he figured that an average of 50 ships landed and took off every minute. There was no evidence at all of any kind of security system at the spaceport. Perhaps it might have seemed to the Aras as ridiculous as on Earth to control massive auto parking by radar signals.

"It beats me!" grunted Tiff and he gave it up. "So this is the way they operate on a really civilized world. And to think that only 20 years ago a single rocket takeoff on Earth would create a greater sensation."

"Well, times change," concluded Sengu, "and they change awfully fast. Anyway, here comes the ground vehicle already that's probably going to pick us up." He was simply seeing through the walls of the Gazelle, "So it looks like the place isn't completely without organization."

"Ground vehicle?"

"Yes, and in fact it doesn't have a driver. It's remote-controlled."

Tiff shook his head but got hold of himself again. "Well leave Thora in her cabin. The entrance lock is secured enough so that no one can get in. But I don't think that anybody around here is inclined to steal a ship, even though it looks like they could get away with it, with nobody noticing a thing. We won't take any weapons since we're dealing here with a peaceable race of people."

He said this with a touch of cynicism as he blocked off his controls. Thora's cabin was locked. The Arkonide had just been given an intravenous feeding injection and she was sleeping. Then they left the Gazelle, secured the airlock and jumped down onto the hard, smooth ground.

The ground vehicle stood about 10 feet away and waited with an open door. In the place of a driver, an automatic instrument panel took up the forward section. Behind it there was sufficient room for 6

passengers.

They had no sooner seated themselves than the door silently closed upon them. The vehicle set itself in motion and raced along the avenues formed by the towering spaceships. It turned once toward the left and then increased its speed.

From here to the edge of the landing field it was perhaps 12 miles if one were to travel in a straight line. Tiff was completely occupied in transferring his mental impressions to Pucky, whose face he would have given a lot to see right now.

It was impossible for Tiff to describe the different details of the types of ships he saw during their hurtling passage among them. He satisfied himself with giving an overall picture of the place and finally developed a system of pointing out at least the rough particulars. Sengu grew tired of the monotonous view; he leaned back in the upholstery and closed his eyes.

The journey lasted almost 10 minutes and then the spaces between the ships opened up until finally the rest of the field widened out before the eyes of the Terranians. The car drove directly to the long building that was decked out with all the flags that Tiff had already seen from the air.

They crossed an entrance control area. A long row of cars stood next to each other as though on a parking lot. They found an opening and the vehicle they were in turned into it as though guided by an invisible hand.

The doors opened.

Tiff nodded to Sengu and they got out. No one asked for any parking fee and Tiff wasn't too certain that the credit charge plate against Arkonide currency values would have been acceptable but Khrest had taken the precaution of providing him with it anyway.

"Well, what now?" asked Sengu helplessly. The distant forest of ships was somewhat obscured from their view by the mass of parked vehicles. "Where do we go from here?"

Tiff straightened out his uniform. He affected a weak smile and pointed to the nearby building. "There!"

There was a lively traffic of pedestrians in front of the building. Humanoids went in and came out again. Among them Tiff noticed more than once figures that were not human but because of the distance he could not quite identify them. A Mooff inside its pressure chamber was rolled by and it too disappeared into the official-looking building. Wide and brightly coloured steps led up to a main entrance, behind which booth-like counters were seen.

Tiff returned the nod of a tall man who hurried past them. Who was he? Perhaps a Springer? Or the member of another race that was related to the Arkonides?

Slowly and with a growing feeling of relative insecurity, the two Terranians climbed the steps to the building. There it would be decided whether or not Rhodan's theory had practical application.

A sturdy little man, only about 3 feet tall, came by wearing a hermetically sealed spacesuit and cast a searching glance in their direction. Tiff thought that he perceived behind the faceplate a frog-like countenance that was veiled by a greenish misty atmosphere.

"Looks like every race in the galaxy has a rendezvous here," he whispered to Sengu, whose slanted eyes

narrowed suspiciously as he took in his surroundings. "I could never have imagined there was anything like this anywhere."

The Japanese nodded in agreement. "There's sure more going on here than on Arkon. It looks more to me like the capital world of an empire."

This was an acute observation and the justification for it was not to be denied. Tiff admitted it secretly to himself—and then he finally saw his first Aras.

Me the Springers and the Galactic Traders, they were descendants of the Arkonide settlers. Their tall 6 or 7-foot figures were albino in nature. The colourless skin, the white hair and the reddish eyes were sufficient to support such a classification. They were incredibly thin and seemed to consist of mere skin and bones.

The Aras, 3 in number, cast curious glances at the 2 Terranians but then ceased to concern themselves further about them. They wore white cloaks which bore shining gold insignias at the chest level. Their movements were grave and stately in manner and gave evidence of self-assurance and discretion.

"They don't seem to be overly conceited," Sengu muttered when the 3 men were out of earshot. "What are those white cloaks supposed to represent?"

"Perhaps they are physicians," Tiff suggested thoughtfully. "That wouldn't be too surprising at a spaceport, you know."

They arrived at the main entrance and went inside with several other humanoids. Somebody here somewhere would finally have to take notice of them. They saw nothing but counter booths spreading out right and left. Behind the counters sat female Aras who seemed to be answering questions. At least they were carrying on conversation with the people who were standing in front of the booths and they were shoving various printed forms here and there and filling out papers.

The 3 Aras in the white cloaks walked through the crowd and searched about in all directions. It was as though they were looking for something. Then they finally disappeared through a rear door.

Tiff gave Sengu a light nudge in the ribs and moved toward the nearest counter booth.

A quite pretty Ara looked up at them with interest.

Tiff cleared his throat but before he could open his mouth to ask a question the girl spoke to him in colloquial Intercosmo, "Here is your form. Please fill it out."

Tiff took the folded sheet and for a second or so he stared dumbfounded at the familiar characters. He had learned the language of the Arkonides in the hypno-school. It would not be difficult for him to answer the questions that appeared on the form. It was only a matter of whether or not he felt like answering everything that was there.

He nodded to the girl and went with Sengu. to one of the numerous writing desks that stood in the wide hall. A magnetically secured writing instrument was available for all visitors at each desk. Tiff noted with some amusement that the experience here was the same as one might expect on the Earth in a similar situation. He placed the form on the writing panel, took up the marking rod and stared with considerable wonderment at the first question that appeared under the normal request for name and home planet:

What is the nature of the sickness that brings you to Aralon? (Give colloquial designation or describe symptoms.)

Sengu looked over Tiff's shoulder and wrinkled up his face quizzically. "Maybe they think every space traveller is sick or something?"

Tiff didn't answer. He kept on reading:

2). Do you wish a direct treatment and immediate discharge or is a longer convalescence planned?

3). Indicate the desired class of treatment.

4). Do you have hospitalization insurance under the Arakos Plan or do you have another type of insurance? (Please give exact details.)

Tiff looked up and met Sengu's gaze. He muttered uncertainly, "Maybe I picked out the wrong booth. Maybe they've got a special department here for sick space travellers."

"Well," suggested the Japanese, "why don't we just go try another place?"

Tiff shoved the folded form into his pocket and went calmly over to another booth that had just become free. Without even looking up at him, the pretty but painfully thin Ara girl shoved a form over to him. Tiff took it, although he already knew that it was no different from the one he had just discarded.

The truth was gradually dawning on him.

They both went back to the writing desk. Tiff took up the writing rod and began to fill out the form.

Name: Thora, of the House of Zoltral; Arkon System.

Form of sickness: Hyper-Euphoria.

Place of occurrence: the planet Honur, Thatrel System.

Desired type of treatment: First Class.

Insurance: private patient.

Form of treatment: direct and for immediate discharge.

Sengu shook his head several times and looked cautiously all around. The situation was gradually beginning to be a little weird for him. Nobody paid any attention to them. The hall was filled with a big push and press of people as in any market place. Quite frequently he noticed Aras in white smocks who moved slowly and with self-assurance among the throng examining new arrivals. They spoke to some of them, conversed awhile and then continued onward.

"Tiff, I don't understand all this! Where are we? What's going on here? Have we gone crazy?"

Tiff signed his name with a flourish at the bottom of the filled out form and winked confidentially at Sengu. "My dear friend, we have not lost our minds and as for what is happening here, it's quite simple: we have landed on Aralon, the central world of the Aras, which is a race made up entirely of medics and their assistants. So what could be more natural than to make the whole planet into one big hospital? That's right, Sengu: we're standing in the reception hall of one big hospital. Whoever comes to Aralon is a sick person. He wants to be cured. He can only find a cure in this place, which is the source of all sicknesses. The Aras have to make a living, you know—so they live on the sicknesses of other people."

A great light began to dawn for Sengu. The Aras in their white cloaks and smocks—they were doctors who idly sauntered about and looked over the new patients. The many application booths were places where the new admittances were registered and classified according to the type of sickness and the method and means of payment.

"One planet—a single hospital? I—I can't grasp it!"

"Why not? I find it quite logical. We should have known it before we even landed. So now I've filled out Thora's application form. All we have to do is turn it in and see what happens."

"And what about us? Don't we have to announce ourselves some way?"

"Well, apparently for the healthy ones there's no requirement for any kind of signing in. Apparently, healthy people don't stick around on Aralon any longer than is necessary. They bring their sick friends or members of their families here and then take off again. Later, they pick up the cured patients again. It's a very simple system—and certainly very profitable. The whole planet lives off of this trade."

He smiled briefly and very coldly, then took the completed form and marched over to the nearest booth. Sengu followed him with a very strange feeling in the pit of his stomach.

The Ara woman took the form and glanced through it swiftly, then looked up at Tiff with a courteous smile. "This... Thora... from the clan of Zoltral... is she related to you?"

It sounded a little suspicious. Naturally anyone could see at first glance that Tiff and Sengu were not Arkonides by any stretch of the imagination. There were so many different races of people in the Arkon Empire that the Ara woman certainly didn't have any idea to which of them the two visitors belonged.

"No, naturally not. We're bringing her here merely by order of her clan."

The girl nodded and made a small notation on the form before she laid it down. However she didn't seem to be completely satisfied. With a renewed smile she leaned forward slightly and looked into Tiff's eyes as though she were searching there for an answer. "It's not really my business but what system do you come from? Not from Heroinka?"

Tiff shook his head so emphatically that one might have assumed he considered Heroinka to be hell. "My home planet is Terra, In the Sol System," he said casually. "Are you familiar with it?"

She shook her head just as emphatically as Tiff had before. "Never heard of it! We've never had any patients from that planet. Where is it located?"

Tiff shrugged his shoulders. "A long way from here—many thousands of light-years."

Her eyes opened wide and she stared incredulously at Tiff. Then she laughed quite melodiously. It made her look particularly pretty and cute. "You're joking! No system can be more than 115 light-years from here. At least, not if it's still a part of the Empire."

"Terra," said Tiff, slowly and deliberately, "does not belong to the Empire."

The Ara girl suddenly stopped laughing. She made a few more notations on the form and tossed it into a metal container. There was a short, swift suction sound and the form disappeared.

She took a round metal disc from a compartment and gave it to Tiff. "Use this to pay the ambulance for bringing Thora out of your ship. The vehicle will bring her automatically to the correct station. You consign the patient and then return to your ship. I wish you a long life..." And she turned to the next visitor, who was a formless something in a pressure suit and breathing mask.

Tiff pulled Sengu away with him. He had shoved the metal coin out of sight into his pocket. When they were finally standing outside, they gave an involuntary sigh of relief. The air was good and mildly warm, reminding them of an Earthly spring day.

Tiff was gravely troubled. "They're making it pretty darn hard for us to attract any attention here. It's just like in a regular hospital on Earth. There, anybody can go inside without being questioned as to who he is and what he wants—assuming, of course, you're talking about a very large hospital. On the other hand, if you walk into an ordinary tenement house, everybody would be craning their necks and wanting to know who you were and whom you'd come to see. Well, this entire planet is one big hospital. It's no wonder it makes no difference to them who we are. If we're just bringing in a patient and we have money..."

"So what do we do now? We can't just simply consign Thora to them and then leave her behind."

"That's not my intention. That girl has already made notations on the form I turned in. Back in the offices somewhere, where they shuffle all that information around, somebody's going to sit up and take notice—especially when they read about Terra."

"Do you believe they've heard about Terra?"

Tiff nodded confidently. "In any case, it'll come as a surprise to them. At least if nobody has heard of us, that fact alone will be disturbing enough. So I think they'll be very interested in making our acquaintance. I'll bet you they're already waiting for us at the station where the ambulance is supposed to bring us and Thora."

Next to the fleet of cars that they were already familiar with, they found another group of vehicles. Here were machines and vehicles of various kinds, which seemed to be designed for different sorts of patients. One of them even had the semblance of a large aquarium and was filled with water. Tiff's imagination was challenged to envision the patient that might be carried in this one.

He took the metal coin out of his pocket and studied it more closely. A specific configuration was engraved on it. The configuration marked on the side walls of the portable aquarium was not identical with it.

They didn't have to search very far before they found the designated vehicle. It looked very much like a normal ambulance. Instead of a door handle, there was a slot, under which was etched the same configuration as that on the coin.

"Pretty sneaky!" mumbled Tiff. "They're trying to make this place idiot proof!" Patiently, he shoved the coin into the slot.

As though moved by phantom hands, the door opened soundlessly. They got inside. The door closed and the car set itself in motion. It drove out onto the field and took a direction toward the avenues that led between the spaceships.

"How is the robot guide going to know where we left our ship?" asked Sengu with a trace of triumph in his voice. "There's no marker or sign of any kind where the Gazelle is parked. Do you have a logical explanation for it?"

"I think so," replied Tiff and watched the giant ships come toward them at a very rapid pace. There was still no vibration to be felt in the machine. "After all, you know we were picked up by a car. The route to our ship is precisely registered in its positronic brain. They only need to request data from it and the small robot brain of the auto will send out the information, which can then be programmed into the ambulance. You see, Sengu, it's all very simple."

The Japanese gave up. Wordlessly, he merely waited for whatever was to happen and as the vehicle pulled to a gentle stop directly under the boarding lock of the Gazelle, he merely permitted a slight grunt of recognition to pass his lips.

Thora was awake. She smiled at the two men, unable to comprehend what was happening on her behalf. In view of the fact that she was tied down to the bed with the leather straps, Tiff decided not to put her under with another injection. With the help of a small, portable antigravity device, they towed the bed out of the cabin, through the narrow gangway and finally to the waiting car. The ship's entrance was again locked. Then, as the two of them also entered the ambulance, the doors of the vehicle closed and it set itself once more in motion.

This time, it took another route...

* * * *

After 15 minutes they left the landing field behind and reached a broad avenue that led downward into a tunnel and disappeared beneath the surface of Aralon.

Sengu observed the change with mixed feelings. "Do you think it's a trap, Tiff? What's a hospital doing underground?"

Tiff had begun to narrow his eyes a bit as he looked around. "I'm not quite sure but I could guess that

the Aras are not particularly fond of sunlight. Don't forget that they're albinos. According to the kind of patient, they may have hospital departments above and below the ground. I think our first stop is going to be an assignment and disbursement point."

No vehicles overtook them but many cars were coming from the other direction. For a distance of about a mile, narrower streets could be seen branching off to the left and the right. At even intervals, round inset ceiling lamps produced a dim illumination.

Suddenly they slowed their pace and the car took a turn to the right, after which it picked up speed once more.

"Well, it shouldn't take very long now," surmised Tiff, "until we know where we are and what this is all about. It'll be a big relief when the uncertainty is over with."

"I think you can say that again," Sengu murmured but there was not much conviction in his voice.

Farther ahead it became bright and then their vehicle glided out of the tunnel into a wide area, drove up a narrow ramp and stopped in front of a gate. Several seconds passed and then the gate opened as though moved by ghostly hands. The car drove in and finally came to a stop in a brightly-lighted hall into which many passages opened. Everything gleamed with neatness and cleanliness. Aras in white smocks hurried here and there, conversed with each other rapidly, cast hurried glances at the ambulance—and then disappeared again.

Five Aras appeared from another direction and stopped at the car. To Tiff, their grave expressions seemed to be a forewarning of what was to come. On the other hand, this might be only an impression. One of them inserted a coin in the automatic registration box and the doors of the ambulance opened.

"You are bringing the patient, Thora of Arkon?" asked one of the Aras and looked searchingly at Tiff.

Tiff nodded. "That's right," he said and climbed stiffly out of his seat in order to stretch his legs. "Is this the department for hyper-euphoria?"

The others did not show any reaction. "Who are you?"

"Lt. Tiffior of the planet Terra, Sol System—in case that means anything to you."

"And this one?" He pointed to the Japanese, who had also gotten out of the car.

"Wuriu Sengu, also of Terra," replied Tiff.

The Ara nodded, as though learning something that he had known all along. "So it's Terra," he murmured with satisfaction. "We suspected this."

Tiff could not hold back his curiosity any longer. "You have already heard of Terra? On what occasion, might I ask?"

"You will be provided with ample opportunity to converse with us on this subject. You will now follow us."

Tiff indicated the ambulance. "What about Thora? She is sick and she needs immediate treatment."

"We will take care of her—don't worry about it. The Nonues Plague is a relatively simple infectious disease. Tomorrow the patient will not even know that she has ever been ill. So please come along. We have to speak with you."

Tiff still hesitated. He didn't like the thought of leaving Thora alone. But they gave him no further time to apply delaying tactics. At a gesture from the Aras, four powerfully built men appeared swiftly. In comparison to the other indigenous people of Aralon, these were veritable giants. Two of them grasped Tiff and Sengu. They felt their arms twisted roughly behind them and they were shoved ahead toward a door. The Japanese prepared to defend himself but Tiff warned him not to.

"Don't, Sengu! First we have to find out what they want from us, so don't give any resistance."

A door was jerked open in front of them. The 4 powerful men shoved their victims into the room beyond but still did not let go of them. Three of the 5 Ara physicians followed. Behind a wide table sat 3 other Aras, wearing the customary white smocks. They observed Tiff and Sengu with unusual interest.

Tiff asked them sharply, "May we be informed as to what this is all about? We bring you a patient and you treat us like prisoners!"

The oldest Ara nodded slowly and cast a glance at a dossier file that lay before him on the table. Then he looked up at Tiff again with his reddish eyes but without expression. "That is just the point—you bring us only one patient... According to the information we have on hand, there must be hundreds of patients involved. What happened to them?"

Tiff was unprepared for this. He needed a few seconds before he could answer. "Perhaps I have a personal interest only in a cure for Thora."

The older one leaned forward. "So?" He leafed through the documents. "You are from Terra, a planet that is 30,000 light-years distant, and which has previously had no contact with the Empire. Your commander is Perry Rhodan, who has already had several clashes with the Galactic Traders. Why should we be particularly desirous of administering medical aid to the enemies of our friends?"

Tiff was on the verge of answering: because you're the ones that made them sick. But he controlled himself. "Who has told you that Thora is a friend of Rhodan?" he asked. "What other information do you have?"

"Oh, a number of items," murmured the elder. "You will recall that Rhodan indulged in germ warfare on a world known to the Springers as Goszul's Planet, in an attempt to gain possession of it—or have you forgotten that already? This is a very shameful method of conquest, you must admit. The afflicted Springers came to Aralon to receive our assistance. It was by this means that we learned of the affair. Fortunately, the infectious illness was a self-healing type. Nevertheless, Perry Rhodan has earned himself a very bad reputation through this affair. And now we know the Terranians."

Tiff was not able to remain silent any longer. "So? You know us, do you?" he growled and jerked himself loose from the grip of his two captors. "Listen, shrimps, I don't need any muscle men! So just get your hands off me!" Then he turned to the old Ara behind the table and continued. "Rhodan merely used a method that's the basis for the entire existence of the Aras—isn't that right? So all of a sudden that makes you real indignant. Or do you want to deny that you spread the worst plague viruses in the whole galaxy in order to profit from healing the victims of the diseases? Without the Aras, there wouldn't be any diseases any more—but then you might have to do an honest day's work to earn a living! If you functioned normally, there would be plenty to occupy an intelligent race like yours—such as research.

Synthetic life, eternal life, the elimination of physical death—the list is endless! But what do you do? You promote diseases so that your hospitals will never be empty! So what do you say to that, old boy?"

The albino behind the table had listened attentively without showing the slightest sign of agitation. He conferred in low tones with his colleagues. Then he looked questioningly at Tiff. "What is it you are trying to convince me of? Is there something you are attempting to find out? Does Rhodan seek to know something that he is uninformed about?"

"Rhodan!" sneered Tiff in such a scornful tone that it shocked even himself. "What's Rhodan to me? It's true—he's the one who wants Thora for himself. I think her sickness was an opportunity for him, because you know the symptoms of hyper-euphoria, which we call the eternal love curse. No, I want to speak frankly with you..."

"My name is Themos, the chief of this department and the head of research over the corresponding laboratories. Please tell us more."

"I intend to, Themos. I have come here against the will of Perry Rhodan. Do you really believe that Rhodan would have sent only Thora to you? You must have considered that question already, haven't you?"

"And why have you brought Thora to us against the will of Perry Rhodan?"

"I—well, I'd like to do her a service, Themos. There are a number of reasons for it. Thora is very powerful and can do me a lot of good if she is placed in a position to be obligated to me. In addition, this is the way that I can prove to her that her life is worth more to me than it is to Perry Rhodan."

Themos leaned forward and regarded Tiff searchingly. "You wish to betray Rhodan? How can I know whether or not this is all a brazen lie?"

"Either you believe me or you don't. Unfortunately, I'll have to leave that decision to you. Heal Thora of her sickness, if you can, and I will demonstrate my gratitude to you."

The elder studied Tiff for awhile, then looked at Sengu, who very curiously was demonstrating a great interest in the floor he was standing on. Then the old one began to converse with his colleagues and all 6 Aras went into a huddled conference.

Tiff had time then to send Pucky a telepathic report.

The inaudible discussion behind the table lasted almost 10 minutes. Then Themos said, "We will cure Thora but in the meantime we cannot allow you to return to your ship. Consider yourselves as our guests. You will be given a room, which you may not leave without special authorization. Aside from that, you will probably have no objections if we search you for weapons or communicating devices?"

Of course Tiff was inwardly angered by this request but on the other hand there was no better way of convincing the Aras of his and Sengu's harmlessness. Actually, they didn't possess any visible weapons or transmitting equipment. If the Aras could prove this to themselves, they would no doubt relax their vigilance.

"Naturally we don't object to that," agreed Tiff calmly, "if it will relieve your minds. The only thing I don't like is to be locked into a room. I have to know what's happening with Thora and whether or not you can actually cure her."

"I will guarantee you that on the strength of my scientific reputation," assured Themos confidently. "You see what's involved here is the Nonues Plague, which is a virus disease developed by me, and naturally I also found the antidote for it. Thora will be a healthy woman as early as tomorrow." He looked sharply at Tiff. "Incidentally, does she know where and why she was infected?"

"How could she? Only when she's well again—she'll either understand or remember. Arkon isn't going to be very happy to know your methods of generating sickness."

Themos smiled coldly. "We will take care that Arkon is not informed of this. And inasmuch as you profess to be against Rhodan, you will not betray this to Thora or the Arkonides, either—isn't that so?"

Tiff did not answer.

Suddenly Sengu asked: "Your laboratories are located deep under the surface—much deeper than this section of the hospital?"

Themos nodded in some astonishment. "Yes, how do you know that? Our main installations are under the ground because in the long run we have found that the rays of the sun have deleterious after-effects."

"At least for albinos," interjected Tiff laconically.

But Themos appeared not to be offended. "Yes, you're quite right," he confirmed evenly. "That's why we spend as little time as possible on the surface. So it isn't such a bad prospect for you to have to stay underground in the meantime, until we have arrived at a decision. The great medical Council of Aralon will have to consider all of this carefully in the coming weeks."

Tiff leaned forward. "Weeks, you say? Do you think I've got that much time?"

"Don't you have time?" asked Themos testily. "Who then might be waiting for you, if you are not returning to Rhodan?"

Tiff felt like biting his tongue. "I—ah—want to go with Thora and my friend to a little out of the way system where there is a sort of paradise planet. Thora and I will be married there..."

"Oh?" Themos appeared to be surprised. "A certain Eztat has reported to me that there is between Rhodan and Thora a certain—shall we say, friendly relationship? What will he have to say about this?"

"Is that any worry of ours?" replied Tiff casually. He wished he could see Rhodan's face at this moment while Pucky was relating the conversation to him. Such a blatant development as this had not been planned. "We won't ever be seeing Rhodan again."

"I take that actually to be a certainty, whether you betray him or not," Themos maintained coldly as he rose to his feet. "But enough of this talk; I'd rather get down to business. You will be brought to your room and there you will be searched. If you don't give us resistance, you will not have any difficulties. Tomorrow there will be a medical examination, which is purely a matter of routine—nothing to be concerned about. Then you may greet a healthy Thora and we will see what she says about your wedding plans. For your sake, I—ah—hope she will be very happy..."

Tiff was aware of the threat behind these words but he didn't have further opportunity to guard against a definitely growing suspicion in this regard. Four powerful aims grasped him from behind and he was

taken from the room. The same thing happened to Sengu.

"We're going to take a trip deep inside the planet," he called to Tiff and grimaced: "In fact, very deep, I'm afraid."

"Be quiet!" shouted one of the guards.

"That's the least of my worries," responded Tiff without paying any attention to the Aras. "It can't compare with my big worry over what Thora's going to say when she finds out that she's my fiancée...!"

3/ TWO SENTENCES OF DEATH

The *Titan* and the *Ganymede* passed through a short hypertransition, which brought them closer to the Kesnar system. Flying at light velocity from that point, they were still one light-day away from Aralon.

The rest period had remained without event. Tiff had reported the transfer of himself and Sengu to a very comfortably appointed room beneath the ground and emphasized that he was going to catch a few hours sleep since on the surface of Aralon night had arrived. Also, beneath the surface of the planet a kind of work hiatus was in effect.

Pucky awakened and made it his first duty to listen to the short impulses of Tiff's body transmitter. The signals came in an even cadence but did not carry any information, so it could be assumed that Tiff was still asleep.

The mouse-beaver stretched, slipped out of bed and proceeded into the adjacent shower room. With an inner dread, he waddled under the cold stream of water and kept on convincing himself that the procedure was not only cleansing for his pelt but was healthy in general. Then he dried himself under the hot air stream and set out on his way to the officers' mess.

There, in addition to Khrest and a few acquaintances, he found Rhodan, who wanted to know immediately if anything new had occurred in the meantime. Pucky was able to reassure him in that respect and then proceeded to dedicate himself with fervour to the breakfast. To his joy, he found on his plate a special ration of precious carrots, which had been sent over from the *Ganymede*. They were his only vice, from which even Bell had not been able to dissuade him.

"If the Aras keep their word, today Thora should be cured," said Rhodan, and took a swallow of hot coffee, which he preferred to other instant or concentrated beverages. "And then we'll know that they have the antidote. So there won't be an excuse for waiting any longer."

"What do you mean?" Pucky mumbled while chewing, which was a difficult task in view of his solitary incisor tooth. "Are you going to attack?"

"What else?"

Khrest lowered his cup slowly. In his eyes was a spark of alarm. "Perry, as we now know, Aralon is the galactic hospital. We will automatically be making an error if we attack Aralon."

"Yes, it's an old history that is very familiar—an armed camp under the sign of the red cross. Here it's the same deal. At least we have the proof at hand from Tiff that the Aras are misusing their ability and their knowledge."

"Tiff is in their hands!" Khrest reminded him.

Rhodan nodded. "But not for long, Khrest. Pucky knows where Tiff is at every moment and when we're close enough for Pucky to locate him, they won't be able to hide him from us very easily. I don't intend to handle the Aras with velvet gloves. They are more dangerous and unscrupulous than any enemy of the Empire."

Khrest remained sceptical. "Nevertheless, in the eyes of other races of people you will be perpetrating an injustice if you attack the defenceless doctors and physicians. You have to consider that many come to Aralon in order to seek help against sickness and death. You would then be the one to hinder the healers from performing their work of salvation. And if on top of that you also kill them..."

"By neither word nor deed have I so much as hinted that I would kill a single Ara," said Rhodan calmly.

Khrest breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, then that's fine! Although I'm at a loss to figure out how you can force them to give in by mere threats."

"We'll see," said Rhodan. "Frankly speaking, I'm not quite sure of the next step myself."

Pucky looked up suddenly. The rest of the carrot fell from his paw and landed on the dish. There was a sparkle of excitement in his eyes.

He whispered softly: "Tiff has been awakened. They are coming to start questioning him again."

* * * *

The door was shoved open from the outside and two powerful Aras entered. Tiff and Sengu woke up instantly. Their normal thought processes began operating again. Twenty-four light-hours away Pucky was picking up the impulses.

"Alright—on your feed Themos wants to talk to you!"

Tiff slid sideways out of the bed and began to take his time. Also, Sengu washed himself thoroughly before he slipped on his uniform. Both of the Aras shifted impatiently from one foot to the other but they must have received strict orders not to torment the prisoners unnecessarily.

Finally, the morning preparations were completed.

"When is breakfast served?" asked Tiff. "Or isn't this a regular hospital?"

"Themos is going to give you particulars concerning your questions, said one of the guards and opened the door. "Will you come willingly?"

Neither Tiff nor Sengu considered it necessary to answer.

Wearing his white smock, Themis again sat behind the familiar table with its broad crescent synthetic surface. Other Aras were with him. They glared ominously at the two as they entered. Their eyes promised nothing good.

Tiff forgot the breakfast. He guessed what had happened. And his fears were confirmed by the first sentence uttered by Themis. "We have cured Thora, Terranian! She can't seem to recollect that she ever gave you any hopes concerning a marriage. Now, as before, her total sympathies lie with Perry Rhodan. So—what do you say to that, Lt. Tiff, or whatever your name may be...?"

Tiff took his time to answer. He reviewed word for word the short speech of the Ara in his mind so that Pucky would be informed. Only then did he shrug his shoulders and make a rueful suggestion: "How unfortunate! The sickness must have erased a portion of her memory. She doesn't even recollect the last tender hours that we spent alone together! May I see her?"

"What do you still want with her? Thora is an Arkonide. She will enter into no relations with either you or Rhodan and we will see to that. She has decided to remain forever on Aralon to apply her energies to the work here and to stand at the side of the sick and the needy. Don't you believe that is a more beautiful proposition?—a more noble objective, at any rate, than to marry a Terranian!"

Tiff began to boil. He thought intently and concentrated entirely on Pucky: *Tell Rhodan it's time to move in! Attack! I will transmit uninterruptedly so that you can locate my position. They want Thora—*

"Why don't you answer?" Themis interrupted him. He wasn't the friendly old gentleman of yesterday any more.

Tiff looked into his reddish eyes. "Because I'm wondering, Themis. Didn't I bring Thora to you because I wanted to get her away from Rhodan? Haven't I betrayed Rhodan? And what thanks do I get? Do you wish to deceive me?"

"You brought Thora to Aralon in order to have her cured—because we are the ones who can do it. Only we possess the serum to fight the Nonues Plague and we will never give it to anyone. If your Rhodan still has sick crewmen on board his ship, he will have to come to us if he wants them to be well again. And perhaps we will then turn two traitors over to him."

Tiff gave no answer. He had expected something of this nature. For the Aras, everything depended now on Thora. They must be considering the Arkonide woman as a powerful ace up their sleeves—no wonder, if she had indeed revealed her true sentiments regarding Rhodan!

Themis motioned to the guards. "Take them down below into the experiment station for extra-imperial races. We must find out how Terranians are organically constructed. Perhaps we may even be able to determine whether they are descendants from earlier Arkonide emigrants or are a unique species."

Tiff and Sengu could probably have resisted but it would have been a pointless struggle against superior odds. Why take an unnecessary risk? Rhodan had received the distress call already and would not hesitate to attack Aralon. The issue here was not only Tiff and Sengu but, above all, to set Thora free.

And to acquire the hyper-euphoria serum...

They were shoved into an elevator that dropped with increasing velocity into the depths of the planet. The two guards did not take part in the hurtling descent.

It was a small square chamber which couldn't have been more than 200 cubic feet in volume. The walls resounded with an ever-increasing shriek of rushing wind. Tiff noticed that the weight of his body had been reduced by half. Aralon possessed the same gravity as the Earth so it appeared that they were now falling at about half of the natural speed of falling bodies on the planet.

"Can you see anything?"

As the Japanese looked about him on all sides, his eyes made him appear as though he were in a trance. We're dropping with increasing speed past countless stations hospital stations. The whole planet must be undermined. Beneath us I can see an endless shaft. There is nothing else I can make out."

"How have they managed to bore so deeply into their world?"

"They have been a highly advanced race for thousands of years but in spite of all their medical knowledge they can't tolerate the sun. Mat else could they do but go inside the planet and live there? According to my estimates, we must be a mile under the surface already."

The seconds became minutes. Then Tiff sensed that he was becoming heavier—double his normal weight. The deceleration had set in at a rate of more than 30 feet per second squared.

Then the elevator came to a jolting halt.

It was almost 3 minutes before the narrow door opened. A glaring light came into the small cubicle. Tiff's eyes accustomed themselves quickly to the difference in light intensity. He looked into the determined faces of at least a dozen Aras who were waiting for them.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" asked one of the alien albinos gruffly.

Tiff nodded to Sengu and they got out of the elevator. The Aras fell back slightly as though they feared a contagious disease. They were not concerned about the possibility that the prisoners could escape. Here below, more than 6 miles under the surface, there was little likelihood of that.

The walls of the great hall were no different than those higher above and closer to the surface. Here was the same clinical cleanliness, the same degree of bright illumination, the same hopelessness for those who dwelled here not of their own free will.

"Follow us!" the two Terranians were commanded. The Aras went ahead. They seemed to have no question but that Tiff and Sengu would follow.

Tiff urgently sent Pucky information and described their situation. According to his calculations, they must be a little over 6 miles directly beneath the edge of the landing field and across from the administration building that was decorated with all the flags.

They walked the length of a corridor and arrived in a wide chamber in which white-smocked Ara scientists worked at tables and unfamiliar equipment. This must be one of the laboratories of which Themos had spoken and whose presence anyone on Aralon would suspect. With a faltering heartbeat, Tiff suddenly recognized motionless life forms floating in some preservative fluid in large containers. The

labels on the containers established that these were samples of different races whose origin was exterior to the Empire.

"A Terranian in alcohol," thought Tiff with loathing. And he could already see himself floating in a glass vessel so that coming generations of Ara scientists could lift him out and examine him. And once again his distress cry went out to Pucky: *Hurry up, for Gods sake! They have something horrible planned for us!*

Tiff and Sengu failed to notice that the doors behind them always closed in complete silence. They were in the most complete trap that ever was. Only the way ahead remained free but in that direction lay anything but temptation.

The Aras came to a halt. One of them opened a door at one side and invited them in. "Your room, Terranians. You will receive something to eat immediately. Do not be troubled by your surroundings. Nothing is going to happen to you—at least for the time being."

Tiff passed him silently and entered when he saw that in fact it was a room and not a torture chamber. There were two beds, sanitation facilities and a table with 4 chairs, which made the place even almost livable, if one could forget the proximity of the lab.

Sengu followed him. The door closed with a muffled click.

It seemed to Tiff that it signified that the last possibility of a retreat had been cut off. He sighed and sat down on the bed, looking at Sengu. "Six miles under the surface! Can you give me any idea how we're going to come out of here again?"

Sengu looked at the floor. He shook his head. "No, naturally not. But it will certainly interest you to know that another laboratory of some kind is beneath us. Actually it looks more like a packing and shipping department. Next to it there's a warehouse with thousands of cases and boxes and containers. Do you think maybe that's where the medicines are packed and stored?"

"How far is it underneath us?"

"Not more than about 18 or 20 feet." Wuriu's gaze moved sideways to the wall and then rose to the ceiling as though he was following a creeping fly. "I see Thora!" She is being taken back up above in an elevator." Tiff had to suppress the uncanny feeling that always came over him when he saw how easily Sengu could see through solid walls. "What is she doing down here?"

"Perhaps," surmised Tiff, "they're showing her the supplies of the healing serum for the hyper-euphoria. Rhodan is naturally interested in that. They're going to use her as a decoy—or else "they're going to use her against Rhodan for blackmail. Good Lord, I'm afraid we've been thinking too much like human beings again! These Aras aren't doctors, as we know on Terra: They're devils!"

Sengu kept looking at the ceiling. "Bell once told me that we can even cope with the Devil. I take him at his word, Tiff. Only a few feet underneath us is the material that we need. I can see it but of course that doesn't help us now. And yet I know that as early as tomorrow we will have it. Quite definitely, I know that we will!"

"Wuriu, you're a 'seer'," retorted Tiff calmly. "You're not a prophet..."

* * * *

Some hours before this, in the middle of the previous night, Thora had come to her senses. She opened her eyes as though awakening from a dream and stared, blinked, into the bright lamps that were flush with the ceiling above her bed. She did not know what had happened to her. As her eyes accustomed themselves to the bright illumination, she made out the face of an elderly man who stood near her bed and observed her searchingly. In his eyes—the red eyes of an albino—she perceived an unspoken question and a frigid interest.

Her memory came back to her.

An Ara!

Where was she? What had happened to Rhodan?

"Who are you?" She raised up high but sank back onto her pillow immediately. She felt terribly ill. "Where am I?"

"You are safe and you are well," answered the stranger. His voice sounded reassuring but it emanated a certain chilling objectivity even as the sanitary room was cold and impersonal. "Do you know a Lt. Tiffloor from the Sol System—home planet, Terra?"

Thora nodded confusedly. "Yes—I recall.

"Do you recall also that you were going to marry him?"

"Are you crazy? What is it you want from me? Where am I? And how did I get here? What happened to Perry Rho—" She stopped suddenly.

The Ara smiled knowingly. "Please continue speaking. You wish to know where Perry Rhodan is? You will learn that when you reveal to me why you don't wish to marry Tiffloor."

"Whatever gave you that insane idea? Tiffloor is a good friend but I don't love him. If there is any man that I love, it is—" Again she interrupted herself.

"Perhaps Rhodan?" asked the Ara,

She gave no answer but the truth could be read in her face. The Ara nodded his satisfaction and bent down close to her.

"So then, it is Rhodan. I am happy to learn that. And Rhodan returns the inclination of your heart. That is excellent. Then he will certainly be interested in seeing you alive again."

Thora struggled upward. Hate flamed in her golden eyes. "Whoever you may be, the punishment of the Empire will fall on you, you horrible creature!"

"Now is that the thanks we get for bringing you back to health? You were sick, Thora of Zoltral—very, very ill. You are on the planet Aralon in the galactic hospital of the Aras and you will be free just as soon

as Rhodan is our prisoner. Don't try to delude yourself as to the gravity of the situation. And one thing more: you have just passed a sentence of death on a certain Tiffloor. He has become worthless to us.

What is your name?" asked the Arkonide woman with a very self-controlled voice.

"My name is Themos. Why do you want to know?"

Without the flicker of an eyelash Thora replied, "Because in this moment *a second* sentence of death has just been passed—on an Ara by the name of Themos. You may rest assured that within 24 hours the sentence will be carried out!"

Themos became even paler than he was normally. He stared silently into the pitiless face of the Arkonide and suddenly realized how beautiful this woman was...and how dangerous...

4/ PERRY & PUCKY PLUNGE TO DOOM

The Control Central of the *Titan* was large but in comparison to the mile-thick spacesphere it could be designated as a mere trifle. But even in spite of this it would have been easy for anyone to overlook Pucky there, unless they took a very good look around.

The mouse-beaver lay in his favourite place on a couch near the navigation computer, which Bell had usually serviced. Today that post was occupied by a younger officer, Lt. Bristol. He was fresh from the Space Academy of Terra. Colonel Freyt had included him in the reinforcements that he had brought from Earth.

Rhodan sat tensely behind the main control console from which the giant battleship was directed. The door to the communications room was open. Khrest stood close beside it and waited with concern for the outcome of the pending decisions. It did not please him to think that no other means had been found than force in order to free Thora and her two companions and to obtain the serum against the sickness that had afflicted the 700-crew members.

Rhodan turned to Pucky. "Well, what have you got? No news about Thora...?"

"She must be well again. Otherwise this Themos character couldn't have uncovered the trick. Tiff's death is a foregone conclusion."

"But it hasn't been carried out yet," observed Rhodan grimly. "What does Tiff say?"

"They're still in the room by the laboratory. He believes they're getting ready to dissect him."

"Can you get any fix on his location?"

"Yes," twittered Pucky confidently. "Tiff has described the appearance of the surface area. I believe that I will be able to find it. But of course it's still 6 miles underground. How will you manage that with the *Titan*? Why don't you let me take a jump down there?"

"Well, what do you think we have the Arkonide fighter robots for?" Rhodan reminded him. "They'll soon be able to clear the way down there from the surface. And the first minute I have that Themis in my hands, he'll be very happy not to have carried out his intentions!"

Pucky did not answer. He had sat up on the couch and now he crouched there with his back against the wall. He seemed to listen keenly inside himself with his eyes closed. No one disturbed him. In the Control Central reigned absolute silence.

The waiting lasted almost 3 minutes.

"This is it!" whispered the mouse-beaver, finally. "They're taking Tiff first. He's struggling desperately but the odds are too great. He's describing a brightly-lighted chamber filled with weird equipment and gleaming instruments. Tiff thinks they're going to operate on him—although he says he's fit as a fiddle!"

"In a situation like that—he still has time for humour!" Rhodan was astounded. "Quick, Pucky, I need the final location data!"

"No change!" Pucky responded. "Let's get going!"

Rhodan nodded. Everything was prepared. The navigation computer had already calculated the exact data for the planned short hypertransition. The *Titan* would come so close to Aralon that it was to rematerialise in the planet's atmosphere. Minutes later, the *Ganymede* was to follow and take over the defence position to cover their back in the direction of outer space.

It was a daring undertaking, even though the journey was almost at an end. Only half of the crew was able-bodied now, although they were well trained. But it was going to take more than raw know-how and ability to decide whether Rhodan's plan was to succeed or not. Especially it would require a generous portion of luck.

The zero moment arrived.

The mighty ship disappeared from normal space and instantly reappeared just two miles over the landing field of Aralon.

As the giant sphere appeared above the accumulation of spaceships, many of the galactic visitors caught their breaths. They recognized it at once for what it was. But what did an Arkonide battleship of this major class have to do on this planet of healing and gentle mercy?

Rhodan, however, was not concerned with the thoughts of these races of people who were strangers to him and he was through with deference and consideration. He simply pancaked the *Titan* to the ground and landed it on the edge of the field. Not 3 seconds later the lower loading locks opened, ramps extended outward and then the robots began to march. They were steel giants, almost 8 feet tall and with 4 arms. The 2 lower arms were nothing more than portable impulse rayguns, with which any resistance could be nipped in the bud. The energy of these weapons, when concentrated could vaporize any material substance and cause it to disappear. With heavy, rhythmic steps, the metal legs of the fighting machines came down the ramps and touched the surface of Aralon—then they marched onward. The robots formed themselves into columns, the head of which was directed toward the building under which lay the laboratories.

Rhodan gave a final command over the radio.

The robot army set itself in motion.

A number of Aras standing at the entrance of the Administration Centre had watched the spectacle in frozen astonishment. Their minds seemed unable to grasp what their eyes were observing. But then, as the glittering phalanx of robots marched in their direction, they lost their temporary paralysis. With cloaks and smocks fluttering they hurried inside the building and slammed the doors behind them.

Entirely unarmed, Rhodan disembarked from the *Titan* with Khrest and Pucky. The two men strode along behind the robots in a manner that was deliberately calm and dignified, while they did not so much as favour the nearby ships and their crews with the slightest glance. Pucky, whose normal walking method was difficult, and whose waddling gait would be anything but dignified, fell back on his paranormal capabilities. Telekinetically, he raised himself about 6 inches off the ground and floated over the smooth synthetic surface along with the others. His appearance was thus not only impressive but in a certain degree uncanny.

About 10 robots marched silently ahead and arrived at the main entrance of the administration building where several ambulances were standing in the forecourt. Rhodan saw the lightning of several energy beams and then the entrance doors ceased to exist. Without having been interrupted in their pace, the robots pressed into the building and, according to instructions, occupied all exits and elevators that led underground. The express command not to kill anyone remained in effect.

Rhodan tamed on the small transmitter on his armband. "Lt. Bristol, is everything in order?"

The answer came immediately: "All clear! No one dares to bother us. There are no further changes on other ships. Our guns are manned and ready for action. We await your further instructions."

"For the time being—none!" said Rhodan grimly and cut off.

At a distance of about 2 miles, a 2500-foot-long cylindrical ship lowered slowly toward the field, which was clear in that area, and finally came to rest. The *Ganymede* had also landed and would, according to plan, disgorge 200 robots, which would form a cordon around the ship. This measure had been conceived by Rhodan as being slightly more than merely impressive show. It was necessary to demonstrate the presence of power and whether or not that power was to be used depended entirely upon the Aras.

Khrest whispered: "Over there—a Springer ship. I presume they have brought sick patients also. The Aras don't exempt their own relations!"

Rhodan looked closer. It was one of the torpedo-shaped ships that were very familiar to him, almost a thousand feet long and standing vertically on its telescopic landing struts. His eye caught a movement above near the bow. A circular hatch turned and revealed an open gun emplacement. Out of this he now saw the spiral muzzle of an energy cannon emerge and take aim on the marching mechmen.

Rhodan took lightning swift action: "Lt. Bristol! You have an alert for a Springer ship—200 yards east. A ray cannon on the bow. Neutralize it immediately—but only destroy the bow!"

Before the Springers could fire a shot, there was a lightning flash from the *Titan*. Rhodan observed that the bow of the impertinent torpedo ship began to glow and then melt down. The dangerous cannon disappeared. There was nothing left of the bow portion of the vessel. "That's enough, Bristol. Adjust your telecom equipment to the normal frequency channel for Aralon. Plug in the amplifiers. I want to put through a short announcement to the commanders who are gathered here."

A few moments later this arrangement was confirmed.

Without stopping, and while continuing to follow the robots, Rhodan spoke into his transmitter: "Attention! To all ships stationed on Aralon. This is Perry Rhodan of Terra, speaking to you by order of the Regent of Arkon! This is a firm warning to all visitors to Aralon not to interfere with the ensuing action here. From this moment on there will be no exceptions and no consideration will be given. Anyone either attacking us or giving assistance to the Aras will be destroyed. This is a police action by order of Arkon. I repeat: whoever interferes will suffer the consequences!"

Rhodan knew that everyone heard the message because no ship was in the habit of leaving its radio communication station unmanned. So everyone knew with whom they were dealing and they were going to start cogitating over who this Rhodan of Terra might be. It was a name that no one had ever heard before.

Pucky cried out suddenly in greatest alarm: "They're strapping Tiff down on the table! His cries for help are more and more urgent! He doesn't even know where we are or if we are even hearing his calls!"

"The poor devil!" muttered Rhodan and quickened his pace. "If they do anything to him, we show them no mercy."

Perhaps this threat was not intended to be so severe but it caused Khrest to pale. The good reputation of Arkon was of prime importance.

"Lt. Bristol! Have the left robot column take over guard duty up to the edge of the landing field. The right column I want at my disposal and I'd like to talk to its commander."

The command was passed on over the *Titan*'s radio immediately to the robots. The left wing turned and took up a formation in front of the long building. Their weapons were trained on the forest of spaceships. The right column, on the other hand, came to a halt.

One of the ponderous mechmen came back and stood in front of Rhodan. "Your orders?" he asked with an impersonal ring to his voice which was a little reminiscent of the robot brain of Arkon.

"I want 3 robots to accompany me. The others will see to it that our thrust into the subterranean laboratories will have protection at our rear. Khrest and Pucky will go with me." He turned to the mouse-beaver. "Directions, Pucky? Be as accurate as you can."

Pucky pointed diagonally toward the ground ahead of them "There, at a little over 6 miles deep—or more exactly, 30,582 feet down under." He looked up again and turned his gaze to the buildings over at one side—especially the one with the ramp and the entrance doors. "And there are the elevators that they use to go down underground with."

As the 3 robots reported to him, Rhodan didn't lose any more time. Their serial numbers were printed on metal shields attached to their glistening chests. These were a form of address code.

"RK-935, you go in front of us and get rid of any physical obstacles. Do not kill any living beings but you may paralyse them. RK-940 and RK-999 take over the rear guard. March!"

The forecourt seemed to be deserted. A few vehicles stood around, empty and deserted. The open entranceway seemed to yawn like the maw of a hungry giant.

Pucky suddenly piped shrilly: "There ahead! They are waiting for us—also unarmed! They want to talk to us! One of them is Themos. I was able to identify his thoughts. He wants to make you a proposition, Rhodan, and I think it may be a sneaky one. It has to do with some kind of a business deal."

"Springers are always Springers," Khrest murmured and hurried to keep pace with Rhodan. Pucky had glided on ahead and waited for them next to the entrance.

Behind lay a brightly-lighted passage. RK-935 marched heavily onward with both his weapon arms at the ready. His forcefield was not yet activated inasmuch as no armed resistance was expected.

They came into a white hall that appeared to be the one Tiff had described. Two ambulances stood to one side in a parking indentation along the wall. Corridors and doors led off in all possible directions.

A group of Aras in white smocks came toward Rhodan and stopped a small distance away. One of them, an older albino, raised his arms and spoke in tones of dignified reproachfulness. "What is an armed invasion doing on a hospital planet? As I can see, this monstrous atrocity is being perpetrated with the knowledge of Arkon. May I request an explanation for this and ask a question..."

"If there's going to be any questioning around here, I'll do it," interrupted Rhodan coldly. "If I'm not mistaken, you are Themos."

The old one was startled and confused. How did this stranger know his name? Was this Rhodan's deputy? He couldn't imagine that this might be Rhodan himself, especially coming unarmed, even though accompanied by several robots.

"Yes, I am Themos—chief of the research section for extra-imperial sectors. What do you want? Who are you?"

"Before I tell you that I'll give you some good advice—and that is to set my people free. You can experiment on whomever you wish but not on Lt. Tiff and Sengu."

A fleeting smile touched the lips of the Ara. "What interest could you have in people who betray you? It should be a matter of indifference as to who punishes them."

"Do what I tell you or suffer the consequences."

Themos hesitated. He cast a glance at RK-935 and realized that in the presence of force there was very little opportunity for making deals. "Do you place no value on Thora?" he asked calmly. "We have cured her. You can tell Rhodan, in that regard, that..."

"I am Rhodan."

Themos had guessed this by now. He controlled his reactions but his companions seemed to shrink an inch or two. Pucky waddled a few steps ahead of Rhodan and observed Themos appraisingly—then he displayed his telekinetic capability.

Suddenly the old Ara lost his footing and began to rise toward the ceiling while flailing frantically about. There was a muffled thud as his head struck against the ceiling lamp. His appearance was not particularly encouraging to the other Aras, who had watched the event with wide-eyed expressions of incredulity. Themos himself had lost his voice and looked below him fearfully.

Rhodan asked, "Which elevator goes down to the medical warehouse?" As Themos did not give an answer, he said to Pucky, "Drop him—but not too fast."

Themos suddenly got back his normal weight and fell almost the whole 15 feet without support. The mouse-beaver braked his fall only at the last moment but not sufficiently to avoid a hard impact. Themos let out a cry and then lay crumpled on the floor.

"So which elevator?" repeated Rhodan.

One of the Aras finally stepped forward. "That door over there," he said. He seemed to realize that there could be no manipulating in the presence of robots and supernatural forces. "But I wish to caution you that it is forbidden..."

Rhodan cut him short. "The theft of humans is also forbidden. Go ahead of us there and show us the way. RK940, you stay here and make sure that these Aras don't move from the spot." He touched Pucky on the back. "What's with Tiff?"

"They're taking Sengu first. There's no direct danger for the moment. But I was able to pick up Thora's thoughts. She is safe but under guard. They've locked her in a room that's about 300 feet underneath us. I find her there every time I search."

The Ara that was to show them the way stopped in front of a door. He pressed a button. The door slid to one side. Behind it was revealed a small cubicle.

Rhodan shook his head. "There must be freight elevators. This is too small."

The Ara shrugged his shoulders and walked over to a wider door behind which a square chamber was revealed that was 4 times as large as the previous one.

"You come along with us," Rhodan commanded and shoved the Ara in ahead of him. "And now, no more delaying tactics, my friend. You know where our two people are located. So hurry. If we arrive too late, none of you will ever see your next birthday."

"I am ready to help you," mumbled the Ara, reproachful that they did not recognize his good will. "Do not believe that all of us are in agreement with the actions of Themos."

Rhodan looked at Pucky. The mouse-beaver searched the Ara's subconscious mind and then shook his head. In a shrill voice, he revealed the results of his telepathic sounding. "He lies because he can do nothing else. The Aras live by these activities and consider them to be lawful—that is, lawful in their eyes. No one goes against the will of Themos. Besides that, this fellow is planning to lead us astray, so watch out!"

With unconcealed horror the Ara saw his most secret thoughts laid bare. Who was this uncanny little creature that could read his thoughts? Was there nothing that could prevent this Rhodan from destroying the very basis for existence on Aralon?

The Ara made a heroic resolution. If all else failed, he would have to sacrifice himself for his people. If he were to die and Rhodan died with him, then no one would ever learn the source of inexhaustible wealth from which the race of the Aras subsisted.

It was fortunate for him that Pucky was occupied at that moment in receiving new calls for help from Tiff. Sengu had been escorted past him but now this was an enthusiastically hopeful Sengu, because at long last he had seen the arrival of Rhodan above him in the Administration Building. He looked through more than 6 miles of solid matter and knew that the rescue could not be far away. It was none too soon, however. "They are already in the elevator," he whispered to Tiff, who lay buckled down tightly to the white table. Glaring light forced him to close his eyes tightly. Only a few minutes more...

Pucky was receiving Tiff's thoughts and was about to report them to Rhodan when the Ara made a sudden furtive move with his hand. He grasped the operating lever of the elevator, jerked it sharply beyond the safety, stop and with all his strength broke the lever off.

At the same time, everyone in the cubical became weightless.

RK-999 had stepped forward in order to prevent the Ara from moving the lever, since Rhodan had not given any instruction for such an action. Now his legs rose up from the floor of the cubicle and, since there was no resistance to stop his forward motion, he floated weightlessly toward the Ara, who could only stare at him in horror. Even Pucky was not able to slow the involuntary flight of the ponderous robot, which now slowly but with full force crashed against the helpless Ara and broke every bone in the weak and brittle body of this descendant of the Arkonides and Springers.

The traitor had received a quick and painless death.

However, the elevator hurtled now with increasing velocity into the depths and toward the centre of the planet.

* * * *

"Only a few minutes more..." Sengu interrupted himself. No one hindered him from speaking but in spite of this he became silent and shuddered. He had seen how the Ara had sabotaged the elevator before he died.

"What is it?" asked Tiff as he strained at the leather straps that tied him to the table. "Why don't you keep on talking?"

Sengu continued to stare at the ceiling. He did not resist when he was also strapped down. Aras hurried busily here and there, arranging glistening instruments and talking quietly among themselves.

"What is it?" Tiff yelled, repeating his question.

One of the scientists cast a glance at him but did not trouble himself any further concerning the two Terranians, who in his eyes might as well be dead already.

"The elevator!" groaned Sengu, frightened. "It's dropping into the depths. The Ara broke off the control lever. Nobody can stop the falling cage."

To Tiff it was as though someone had just cut off his wind. As long as he had known Rhodan to be on his way, he had kept up his confidence, but when the rescuer himself was caught in the trap, it seemed

that there wasn't any way out any more. The Aras could carry out their devilish plans without hindrance and then one day unknown plagues and epidemics would break out on the Earth, whose only cure would be the impossibly high-priced medicines of the Aras. The circle would then have been closed.

Gathering all his reserves of strength, he strained upward and tore loose the straps that held down his left arm on the table. Several Aras sprang immediately toward him and pressed him back but even with one arm Tiff was a dangerous opponent. His searching hand discovered a hard object. He gripped the shear-like instrument and shoved it into the body of the nearest Ara. With a cry of pain, the wounded medic staggered and sank down, groping for support, and finally collapsed on the floor.

Before Tiff could look around for a new attacker, he suddenly felt a sharp pain at the back of his neck. He whirled about, but the hand holding the injection needle drew away swiftly.

The paralysis came immediately and raced from his brain to his arms and his legs. The instrument fell from his hand. He did not resist any more as they refastened his arm to the table.

Sengu did not seem to pay much attention to this occurrence. Wide-eyed in fright he gazed diagonally toward the ceiling. His gaze wandered to the wall then and moved downward until finally he was staring at the floor.

Then he closed his eyes.

It was as though he did not want to see any more of what was happening.

He remained completely apathetic when an Ara approached him and gave him also a paralyzing injection...

5/ 'NON-KILL' NULLIFIED

10 valuable seconds went by.

However, in these 10 seconds the cubicle plunged almost a mile deep and the rate of fall increased with the square of time. The air resistance braked their fall slightly but beneath them there must have been an auxiliary shaft or they would have been cushioned by now.

Rhodan floated in the middle of the chamber. His face reflected alarm and momentary indecision but then his accustomed presence of mind returned. "Pucky! Stop us! Hurry!"

The mouse-beaver could move purposefully and without hindrance, even in free fall. In spite of the more than grave situation, however, he did not forget the main purpose of his presence here. "Tiff's transmitter has gone out—I mean, at least the telepathic impulses. I only hear the normal carrier signal. He must either be asleep or unconscious. I don't pick up anything about Sengu anymore."

"Anaesthesia!" shouted Rhodan in new anguish. "Hurry, Pucky! We only need one minute for a 6-mile drop. We've covered half of it now!"

The mouse-beaver nodded calmly and shoved RK-999 to one side; the robot floated like a balloon into the other corner. The dead Ara followed him

35 seconds... Over 3½ miles deep. And now Pucky demonstrated what telekinesis could do.

He turned his gaze toward the control panel where the end of the broken lever gleamed metallically. He concentrated his telepathic streams of power on the control rod that he could not reach with his fingers.

"40 seconds!" said Rhodan tonelessly. "Almost 5 miles!"

Pucky heard nothing. His eyes stared strangely.

The axis of the broken lever moved by fractions of an inch back toward the zero position. It did not stop in its slow movement. It continued to turn.

Rhodan sank to the floor of the cubicle and the two robots followed him. Then he sensed that his normal weight had returned—and now gradually doubled itself. The pressure increased. Rhodan dropped to his knees and then did the most sensible thing, which was to lie flat on his back with his arms and legs stretched out. Khrest followed his example.

One minute. They must have overshot the 6-mile mark by some distance and yet the shaft had not come to an end. No one knew how deeply it penetrated into the bowels of the planet.

Pucky appeared to be listening. He no longer looked at the control lever but angularly toward the ceiling. "We're already deeper than Tiff and Sengu but the elevator is starting to rise again. We're making it!"

"Bring it to a stop when we're on the same level as Tiff!" advised Rhodan, while struggling for his breath.

Pucky concentrated again. The remnants of the lever tamed slowly in the opposite direction. Their weight became normal and then the elevator stopped. "We're there!" chirped Pucky, who seemed quite satisfied with the success of his activity. "Tiff can't be far. In any case, he's on the same level as we are."

Rhodan searched for some means of opening the door to the elevator but didn't find anything. Pucky read his thoughts and gave a shrill whistle, which—as usual—was off key. With his neck fur bristling, he solved the problem in his own unique way before Rhodan could make any objection.

"Watch out, RK-999—but don't be alarmed!"

Before the heavy fighter robot knew what was happening to him, he felt himself raised into the air. He floated back against the rear wall of the cubicle and then picked up speed in the opposite direction like an arrow shot from a powerful bow. With a splintering crash, he broke through the locked door and stood in a well-lit hall. Without ceremony, Rhodan sprang after him, followed by Khrest, then RK-935, and finally Pucky, who beamed like a conqueror and looked all about him as though he expected applause from an invisible audience.

But the Aras who chanced to be in the hall at the moment were not thinking of applause. Stark fear gripped their slender limbs and they stood motionlessly staring at the incomprehensible. Two metal monsters, two men—one of whom was evidently an Arkonide—and one very strange little creature, had come through the wall.

"Rhodan!" Pucky's sudden cry was shrill with alarm. "Tiff's impulses are receding. They aren't any

weaker—I mean, "they're going away!"

"The Aras have been warned," surmised Khrest. "They are securing their hostages."

"Pucky, follow those impulses—quickly!" ordered Rhodan. "We'll be right on your heels! We don't have to bother about these Aras here!"

Pucky raced ahead. The doors in front of him opened, again as though moved by invisible hands. Aras looked up from their work and their eyes widened in sudden fright as they saw this uncanny group storm past them. As one of them in the second laboratory made an imprudent move, the concentrated paralysis beam of a robot hit him instantly. With a brief outcry, he collapsed unconscious.

After they had gone about 160 feet or more and passed through several laboratories, Pucky suddenly came to a halt. Rhodan stared at the two tables with the attached leather straps. Only one Ara stood in the background and was just switching off his videophone. He turned around calmly and looked fearlessly at the intruders. There was a cold gleam in his eye.

"You have come too late, Rhodan. Your friends are in security!"

Rhodan asked Pucky. "Where's Tiff?"

"They are bringing him below, but not far—at the most, maybe 30 feet. Now the elevator has stopped. Yes, Tiff is directly underneath us. There is no further change of location."

The Ara had listened to them incredulously. Perhaps at this moment he began to believe in magic and to regard Rhodan as some kind of superman. At any rate, the rash precaution that headquarters had ordered had been in vain. How these strangers knew where the prisoners had been brought remained a puzzle. In any case, it was necessary to thwart the escape of the hostages.

Before anyone was aware of it, he pushed down a small lever on the v'phone. "Order from Themis: kill the prisoners at once!" he cried loudly, then ran for the open door. He dashed directly into the paralyzing energy stream emitted by RK-999 and suddenly dropped to the floor as if struck by lightning.

Rhodan was about to rush to look for the elevator but then he thought of a better solution. "Pucky, 30 feet isn't too far away. You say Tiff is directly beneath us? Good! Then go get him and Sengu! We've only seconds, so hurry!"

The mouse-beaver didn't even take time to confirm the order with a nod. The air began to shimmer. His figure blurred as though surrounded by water—and then Pucky was gone.

* * * *

The effects of the anaesthetic only lasted a few minutes.

As Tiff opened his eyes, Sengu was also just coming to. They lay on top of a large, wide packing case in a dimly lit room. Here the dazzling cleanliness of the laboratories was missing. The walls were dark and exuded an icy coldness. Crates and entire stacks of packages ready for shipment filled the room. A

conveyor belt moved slowly along the aisle and ended in a shaft that led vertically upward.

A warehouse! A warehouse filled with medical supplies!

Tiff had no idea how this change of location had taken place. He knew he had just been on the white operation table and had received a paralysing shot. And now he was in a storage room. Three Aras in white smocks were running excitedly back and forth. They were piling boxes in front of a door that led out of the room, as if they wanted to block any entrance into it. Workers came by and assisted them.

Then suddenly a bell rang shrilly. At the same time, a loud and excited voice was heard. Tiff understood every word.

"Order from Themos: kill the prisoners at once!"

The 3 doctors ceased their barricading activities and looked at each other in amazement. One of them wearily wiped sweat from his forehead. He glanced briefly at Tiff and Sengu, then said to his colleagues: "What good are they to us if they're dead? How can we study their organism? "It's getting to where I don't understand Themos' orders anymore. First we bring the prisoners into the storage room and now we're supposed to kill them..."

"Themos knows what he's doing!" another one interrupted him. He grasped a crowbar that was leaning against one of the cases. "I'll do it so that it won't damage the bodies!"

"I am a scientist," interjected the first Ara. "I am not a murderer and I'll have nothing to do with this...!" Without paying further attention to his colleagues, he tamed in a dignified manner and marched off into the darkness of the warehouse.

The Ara with the crowbar watched him go and then laughed apathetically. His cold gaze rested on the two prisoners. "Well, of course I would have preferred to have you alive, but..."

It was as far as he got.

Directly between him and the two Terranians, the air began to flicker. A small figure materialized. Pucky hunched on his hind quarters and supported himself on his broad beaver tail, which looked like a large magnified spoon. He grasped the situation at a glance and recognized the only dangerous opponent present.

The Ara overcame his surprise. He did not waste time trying to find an explanation for the unexplainable. Instead, he lifted the metal bar.

But Pucky was not in favour of having his skull bashed in. "I am the bogeyman!" he twittered sweetly and stretched his arms out toward the Ara, who suddenly stopped his movements. He had not reckoned with a talking ghost who looked like an animal. But then all reason left him. The heavy bar came up and remained hanging over him as though someone were holding it tightly. Surely not he.

It raised up by itself and whirled out of his hands like a propeller. It completed a loop and circled once around, the storage room. Then, as though gripped by incomprehensible forces, it bent itself into the shape of a letter 'R'. This ironwork letter R floated like a sword of Damocles over the head of the terrified and paralysed Ara—and then it fell. Tiff saw the heavy iron fall on the Ara, who collapsed under its weight.

"Pucky!" he yelled. "That was cutting it mighty close!"

"Well, you know me—I'm a stickler for punctuality!" nodded the mouse-beaver calmly. He looked around for something with which to cut their bonds. When he failed to find anything, he went over to Tiff and said to Sengu, who lay next to the Lieutenant, "Just take it easy, Wuriu. I'll bring Tiff upstairs and be back in a second. These moles down here won't dare lay a hand on you or I'll drop the ceiling on their heads. See you!"

He put his arms around Tiff and a second later disappeared with him.

Sengu remained behind, alone.

It took longer than the promised second. He looked across at the door with mixed feelings. The last of the scientists was still standing there as though welded to the floor. The workmen had watched the proceedings uncomprehendingly; apparently they grasped nothing of the situation and appeared to be accustomed to not having anything explained to them anyway.

Then Pucky returned. "Well," he chirped expectantly. "Anybody looking for another lesson?"

"They were well-behaved," commended the Japanese with a gasp of relief. "And now let's get out of here—I'm sick of looking at packing crates!"

Pucky grinned and teleported him one story above, where Tiff was already rubbing his wrists and getting his blood circulation back in order. But the mouse-beaver did not seem to be quite satisfied. "You wanted to make a call to Themos on the videophone?" he inquired of Rhodan. Once more he had probed the thoughts of his chief. Rhodan nodded. "Good! In the meantime, I want to have another look around down below. I—ah—forgot something."

"Forgot something?" asked Khrest, astonished.

"Yeah, it just skipped my mind, sort of," Pucky confirmed—and he could not be deterred, for the reason that he had already disappeared.

Rhodan shrugged his shoulders and went over to the pictophone. He didn't find it difficult to operate: A short depression of a call button and the connection was made with headquarters at the surface. On the small screen appeared the face of the old Ara, which immediately twisted with fear and surprise. On his forehead was a colourful bruise but otherwise he seemed to have withstood the fall from the ceiling very well.

"You...!?" he stammered, incredulously.

"In the flesh, Themos," returned Rhodan. "Lt. Tiffior and Sengu were freed, after all. The sacrifice of your expensive elevator operator was a wasted effort. But now what you're going to do for me is to release Thora—otherwise you're going to be in trouble. Because if anything happens to her, I will transform this entire planet into a living hell!"

"That you would not dare, Rhodan! You would have the entire galaxy against you!"

"Hardly, if the galaxy were to learn the truth. You know what I'm getting at, Themos. There is only one single reason why I am sparing you. Your race is intelligent and has an extraordinary experience and background in the field of medicine. The Aras could render invaluable service to the Empire without

having to resort to deception. But if you persist in being stubborn and if you continue to refuse to take such advice, then only one alternative will remain: Aralon—the breeding spot of all diseases, the epidemic centre of the universe—will have to be destroyed. Have I made myself clear?"

Themos stared at Rhodan hatefully. "Who are you, anyway?"

Rhodan returned a cold smile. "I am Perry Rhodan Of Terra, authorized deputy and plenipotentiary of the Robot Brain of Arkon. The range of my authority is unlimited, Themis. It extends to the full destruction of Aralon, if required. And now I want you to decide; otherwise, I'll have to set Thora free myself. And that I will succeed is something that you had better start believing."

Then something very remarkable occurred. The expression on Themis' face changed suddenly. He smiled, and it was a triumphant, satisfied smile that caused Rhodan to become extremely wary. "Very well, Rhodan of Terra, I will set Thora free—unconditionally. My orders will be given at the end of this conversation. Where do you wish her to be delivered?"

"Up there in the hall my robot RK-940 is waiting. I want to see him on the videophone."

No more than 20 seconds passed before Rhodan was looking into the glistening crystal eyes of the fighter robot.

"RK-940! This is Perry Rhodan speaking. Within 5 minutes you will be looking at Thora and you will take her into security immediately on board the *Titan*. If you do not have Thora before you within 5 minutes, you will kill Themis and you will destroy all communications equipment in the control centre there."

"Understood!" rasped the voice of RK-940. In his complicated innards, a ticking began. The countdown had started...

The face of the Ara appeared again on the vidi-grid.

"Hurry up!" ordered Rhodan. "Each second is precious. And don't believe that the robot will give you one small second of grace!"

Rhodan cut off the connection abruptly and left Themis to his confusion. RK-940 would hold to his instructions with the precision of an infallible machine.

"If I only knew about Pucky..." fretted Tiff. "Sure like to know what he's looking for down in the cellar."

"Cellar is putting it mildly!" Rhodan reminded him that they were 6 miles under the surface. "I think I can guess what he's doing down there. You say one of the medics is still on two feet?"

"Yes, sir. Do you mean—?"

"What else, Tiff? If we were not mistaken, Pucky's going to show up pretty soon with a very valuable package. It is *the* package for which we started this whole undertaking—aside from the fact that we wanted to unmask the Aras—and their methods to all the races of the Empire. Or did you perhaps think that I would have carried through such an extensive and apparently unnecessarily complicated operation without any particular reason?"

Behind him, something crashed to the floor. They turned around and saw Pucky materializing. The

elongated crate had fallen a few feet but was not damaged.

Pucky straightened up and announced with the pride of a conquering field general: "The serum for the laughing sickness!"

But the merciless illness of hyper-euphoria was anything but something to laugh about.

"Well done!" praised Rhodan. "But—are you certain you didn't grab the wrong medicine?"

"Relax!" said the mouse-beaver reassuringly. And he exposed his incisor tooth, which was a sure sign of happiness and good cheer. "The Ara with the white smock was very happy to be able just to talk. And in his thoughts I read the truth. The serum in the case here is for a thousand people. We only need to inject it. It works its effect within one hour."

Tiff sighed with relief and looked in the direction of the door leading to the other laboratories. Behind it a suspicious silence reigned. "Then lees get to the *Titan* ! The only question is, how do we get up to the surface? The elevator needs repairs, if I'm not mistaken."

"They'll need a long time to put it in order again," Pucky observed absentmindedly. He was listening. Perhaps he was receiving telepathic impulses. The conjecture of the others was soon verified. "RK-940 has just received delivery of Thora. She is fresh and active but she is very worried—extremely worried!"

"Worried?" said Rhodan wonderingly. "But why?"

"Why, I couldn't say. But as to whom she's worried about, I do know..."

"So?" queried Rhodan.

"About you!" exclaimed Pucky and again revealed his incisor tooth. "There's no question about that...!"

Khrest took the time to nod to Rhodan with a knowing smile but he was again interrupted by Pucky, who perceived the opportunity for a somewhat snide observation. "Then I guess Tiff will have to shop around for a new bride."

Tiff blushed like a schoolboy. "I—ah—I didn't have a better idea at the time," he stammered, embarrassed. "Unfortunately, Thora didn't know about our plan, and she naturally was furious—I mean, to wake up like that and find out that I planned to live with her on some paradise planet somewhere..."

Now Rhodan also smiled. "A fascinating idea, to say the least," he admitted, but then became serious again. "I believe it's time that we put this medication in a safe place. I still don't trust these Aras as far as I could throw them!"

Precisely at this moment there was a humming sound in the room. Rhodan lifted up his arm and pressed a button on the tiny transceiver of his armband.

The excited voice of Lt. Bristol was heard repeating: "Perry Rhodan—come in, please! Perry Rhodan, answer! Urgent! Perry Rhodan, come in...!"

Rhodan pressed a second button. "Rhodan here!" What's the trouble?"

There was a moment of silence; then Bristol's shouting voice burst upon them: "Alert Condition One!

We're being attacked by a fleet. More than a hundred Springer battleships have surrounded Aralon. We await your instructions!"

Rhodan had turned pale. He cast a hasty glance at Khrest before he said, "Activate defence screens around the *Titan* and the *Ganymede*. Avoid battle engagement as long as you can. We will be there in 10 minutes. Hold out!"

Bristal confirmed. The receiver went silent.

Slowly, Rhodan turned around and looked at the two robots. His voice was grave and unusually cold as he said: "RK-999! The order for non-kill is lifted. Go ahead and clear the way to the lifts. Overcome any resistance you meet!" He turned to the other robot. "RK-935! For you also the non-kill order is lifted. Keep us clear in the rear. Destroy any attacker." Then he turned to Khrest, Tiff and Sengu. "You take turns carrying the medical case. Pucky, teleport up above and make sure that Thora is brought to safety. If the attack of the enemy fleet has already begun, wait with her and the robots in the central building. Better yet, in the hall because the elevator shafts terminate there." He added broadly: "Alright, let's go! We've no time to lose!"

While RK-999 recklessly broke through the door panel, Pucky dematerialised

6 miles below the surface of Aralon, Rhodan's thrust for freedom began...

6/ 'THRESHOLD OF A NEW EPOCH'

When Themos was carried into his office—Rhodan's robots did not hinder his people from doing this—he had only one thought in mind: *revenge* ...!

But then he began to receive the impact of setback after setback as everything went wrong. Hundreds of freshly arrived patients preferred to go back to their ships and look for help elsewhere. Conditions on Aralon appeared to be too unsafe.

Then came the ill-fated attempt of his assistant to sabotage the elevator carrying Rhodan.

And finally, the two prisoners were freed.

Then Themos hesitated no longer. He established a direct contact with the administration building on the other side of the spaceport and put himself in contact with the chief doctor of the entire sector. In as few words as possible he depicted the gravity of the situation and emphasized that Rhodan was in possession of secrets that endangered the existence of Aralon.

"Allegedly he's operating under order of the Empire but that seems to be doubtful. The Robot Brain hardly places any confidence in us, so why would it trust a complete alien who was never even a bloodline relation of the Empire? Send in a Springer battlefleet. Ask for support from the Mounders!"

It was a lot to ask for.

The Mounders were the police force of the Galactic Traders. They lived by war. Often they provided a protective escort for important commercial transports but just as often they waged war against worlds that dared resist the rigorous methods of the Springers. Having differentiated themselves early from their main race, the Mounders lived at one time on a planet of unimaginable gravitational force. As a consequence, they were about 7 feet tall and on the average about 5½ feet wide and their warring capacity was as tremendous as their physical appearance. Their fleets were on battle standby throughout the extent of the Empire.

The chief physician hesitated. "You know that the Mounders are very expensive. Their fee is no small matter to consider. I'm not sure that your concern is justified. Perhaps you could—ah—fool this Rhodan..."

"Impossible!" Themos hissed through his teeth in his rage, as he was loathe to admit his defeat in this area. "If you wait another half hour, we are finished. We can close the hospital. The patients do not feel safe any longer on our world."

The decision came with surprising swiftness. "Very well, Themos. I will call the Control Central of the Mounders on the hyper-transmitter and request that they immediately send us a strong contingent. But you will have to bear the responsibility for it, Themos. I can't release you from that."

"Do it, then—we don't have a minute to lose!"

Themos shut off the videophone but was startled out of his wits as the buzzer sounded again. When he answered, Rhodan's face appeared on the grid.

"You...!?" he stammered, almost in shock.

"In person, Themos," returned Rhodan and then proceeded to make his demand that Thora, the last ace up their sleeves, should he set free.

Not without secret satisfaction, Themos agreed.

* * * *

The Mounder Talamon hunched his 1300 pounds of weight behind the controls of his ship the *Tal 6*. He was stationed in the Dragolan Sector, about 47 light-years distant from Arkon, when the hypercom installation received a transmission that was addressed to him.

It came from Mounder Headquarters.

Talamon nodded his satisfaction. "Maybe this monotonous waiting is over with! It's about time something happened around here again—otherwise I'll be taken out of circulation before my time!" This was an expression of his own rough brand of humour.

The communications officer announced that the communication had been established. Seconds later he heard from Headquarters, which was not exactly on a planet but was stationed rather in a giant cylindrical ship.

"Talamon! The Aras are requesting armed assistance! Planet Aralon, System Kesnar, coördinates are known. Two ships, one of Arkonide origin, are to be destroyed. The commander is a certain Perry Rhodan of Terra. Unknown. How many units do you have?"

"108."

"Good enough. Go at once into transition."

Even before Talamon could confirm the order, Headquarters cut off.

Talamon gave instructions to the commanders of the other ships and immediately set things in motion. While the fleet was building up speed toward the transition, he kept thinking of the name, Perry Rhodan.

Unknown...?

No. The name wasn't that unknown to him. Somewhere he had heard it before.

Perhaps from Topthor...?

Of course—Topthor! Somewhere, more than 30,000 light-years from here, Topthor had knocked heads with this Rhodan and come out on the short end. That was not going to happen to Talamon. If this Rhodan wanted to try to take on a hundred heavily armed ships, then he'd have to be either from Terra or out of Gardraxtol (equivalent of Hell in the Mounder mythology) itself!

10 minutes after Themos' cry for help, Talamon's fleet materialized in the Kesnar system, not 3 light-seconds from Aralon. They separated and swung around into position. 50 heavy class battle units blocked off the port. At slightly more than one mile of altitude, they formed an impenetrable net over the giant landing field, on the edge of which lay the stupendous *Titan*.

Talamon experienced a sudden tightening of his stomach muscles as he discovered the giant sphere. He had never before seen such a tremendous ship. It must be the latest product of Arkon's shipbuilding technology. Well, maybe the big brute wasn't as dangerous as it looked...

That could be determined.

He switched on the telecom. "Regul, take 10 of your ships and start an attack on the big ball down there. Use a broadside of all available guns simultaneously to see if you can break through the defence screen. If you can, destroy the ship. Attack in one minute. That is all!"

Regul confirmed and formed his units in readiness for the assault.

Talamon sat behind the controls of the *Tal 6* and waited...

* * * *

Pucky materialized.

3 or 4 Aras jumped up in frightened confusion as they saw the mouse-beaver suddenly come into being. One of them ran toward a door with flying smock but he got only a few steps before he felt himself lifted into the air. Then he sailed in a broad curve through the hall like a winged torpedo and landed with a long, sliding skid against the wall. Benumbed but otherwise unscathed, he lay there.

"Where's Themos?" asked Pucky in his high reedy voice. He addressed himself to the two Aras who would have preferred a quiet and unobtrusive exit. "Take me to him—and snap it up or I'll put you into a hypertransition! You look like you're half-gone anyway."

The two hesitated but when their smocks became independently animated and pulled so violently to get free that they tore themselves into sheer rags and then made a few tired loops before fluttering to the floor, they gave up. They turned obediently, and marched willingly into a corridor, at the end of which was a frosted-glass door. The lettered caption announced that behind this the top chief officiated.

With a movement of his hand, Pucky put the two Aras to flight. Then he touched the door with telekinesis. It opened as though by a phantom hand. Sitting hunched behind his desk, Themos was completely exhausted from his strategic activities. The bruise on his forehead had not gotten any smaller.

Pucky closed the door behind him. Visually, it seemed to close by itself. Themos saw it with new apprehension and wondered if his mind were slipping. He could not know that this was but the beginning of even more 'incredible events.

"You sorry excuse for an Ara—did you call the Springer fleet for help? Speak, or I'll send you nose diving to the centre of Aralon!"

"I—I—"

"Thank you," nodded Pucky. "That will be sufficient. You see, I'm a telepath and I can read your sneaky mind. So you've sicced the dogs on us, have you? And the Mounders to boot! You have just made an unforgivable mistake. We knew you were the rabid type but that you're so stupid you can't even see out of your own eyes—that's too much! Come on, love! I want you to come with me..."

"The Mounders are going to—"

"They'll be happy if we don't skin their fat hides!" interrupted Pucky, who could hardly control himself. "You will come with me. I want to show you something. Come on—snap it up!"

Themos rose hesitantly. He was darkly apprehensive and not overly curious about what this little monster had in mind to show him. Certainly it would be nothing to fill his heart with joy.

Suddenly Pucky began to receive Thora's thoughts. They were full of panic and fear. Outside on the landing field, a violent defensive battle had flared up. He could make that much out of the mental hubbub and confusion. The *Titan* had been attacked. In a wild flight, Thora had been able to save herself by running to the building after she had already covered half the distance to the waiting ship.

Pucky's anger mounted.

Recklessly he forced Themos under his telekinetic control and caused him to float about 6 feet off the ground in front of him. He arrived in the hall in time to see Thora burst through the entranceway and throw herself into a chair in a state of exhaustion. She appeared to have really had it. A few seconds

later, RK-940 followed her with his weapon arms still glowing from battle.

Themos made a rough landing at Thora's feet.

The Arkonide woman looked up. She glanced first at Pucky and then at the Ara. Her face twisted with hate. Themos received a kick in his side that reawakened the almost forgotten pain that his fall from the ceiling had caused. He wailed piteously to himself. The robot raised its right weapon arm and aimed it at the traitor.

"Halt!" cried Pucky. "Rhodan has ordered you not to kill anybody who is not attacking us!"

"Themos deserves death!" Thora cried in support of the robot. Her scorn and rage were greater than Pucky's, which was saying something. "Why should he be spared?"

"Rhodan has to decide that, Thora," chirped the mouse-beaver placatingly. "This fellow won't get away from us."

"Where is Perry, anyway?" asked Thora. She seemed to be pulling herself together at last. "Does he know what is happening?"

Pucky looked at the elevator entrances. "As a matter of fact, he should be showing up any moment now. He's coming up with Khrest, Tiff and Sengu. The two robots are to follow. They're using the small personnel elevator because the other one has had it."

Thora got up slowly and walked toward the elevators. There were two doors, a narrow one and a wide one, which barred the entrances to the shafts.

"That's the wrong one!" yelled Pucky as she pressed a button and caused the wide door to roll back. There wasn't any elevator cage to be seen—only a great, dark hole: the shaft that led more than 6 miles into the depths. "I told you it was the small one."

Thora left the wide door open and turned to the personnel elevator. Here also the shaft was visible but from it came a steady humming noise. The cubicle was coming up.

It took two more minutes and then it arrived. Rhodan stepped into the hall, followed by his 3 companions.

Thora's face beamed in joyous relief as she hurried to the leader and grasped both of his hands. "Perry, I—I'm so happy, I—!"

Rhodan returned the pressure of her hands. "Thank you, Thora. That means more to me than you think. You've made me very happy. I thank you again, Thora, but now is not the time for personal things. Sengu, bring the medical box and give it to RK-940."

Pucky straightened up before Rhodan and was about to say something when Thora emitted a cry. She had turned around to go back to her chair, when she remembered Themos. The Ara had observed with horror how his deadly enemy had emerged from the elevator intact, followed by the prisoners and the Arkonide. Gathering his last reserves of strength together, he sprang up and raced past Thora. He saw that the only possibility of escaping Rhodan's revenge would be a flight to the subterranean labyrinths. But in his excitement he confused the two open doors. He saw his error a second too late. With a bloodcurdling cry, he plunged down into the black abyss of the shaft.

Rhodan hurried to the wide-open doorway of the shaft and stared down into the bottomless depths, as though he might still be able to help the traitor. "Pucky!" he cried out sharply. "Bring him back—quickly!"

The mouse-beaver glanced swiftly at Thora. From the momentary strain of surprise, her face now became calm and expressionless.

"Pucky!" called Rhodan urgently. "Did you hear me?"

The mouse-beaver waddled to Thora and looked at her watch. "Themos has already been falling for 30 seconds," he observed calmly. "That's just about 3 miles. Nobody can assume that he fell exactly in a vertical line. He's already dead."

"Pucky!" Rhodan's voice was sharp as a knife. "You do at once what I told you!"

"40 seconds," replied the mouse-beaver, unshaken. "That's almost 5 miles. Rhodan I have to reject that order. Themos is a no good traitor who is being punished by fate itself. Nobody has the right to interfere with the workings of destiny. 50 seconds. Themos is dead, for sure."

Rhodan's face was almost white. In his eyes burned vexation and anger. "Pucky, that was refusal to carry out a command! I'll speak with you later!" He started at a sound behind him but it was only the cage of the smaller lift that was gliding into the depths to pick up the robots. Then he appeared to forget the occurrence. With a touch of a button he established contact with the *Titan*: "Lt. Bristol? Quickly—a status report!"

"10 enemy ships are attacking. Our defence screens are holding. What are your orders?"

"Wait. I'll be with you in 10 seconds. Activate the hyper-transmitter." Turning to Pucky, he continued: "Bring us to the Control Central of the *Titan*. Thora and Khrest, you will be picked up immediately. Tiff and Sengu, also. See you!"

Pucky embraced Rhodan with his short little arms and disappeared with him within the second. Those remaining were still able to detect a gleam of triumph in the mouse-beaver's eyes...

* * * *

Talamon had risen higher in his ship in order to get a better overview of the situation. As he observed the fruitless attack of his 10 ships, it was characteristic of him not to be filled with unbridled rage and senseless hate. On the contrary, he was confronted by a certain admiration for this Rhodan. The fellow really must be somebody and it might be hard to imagine just what might happen if one chanced to be his friend.

But then he recalled his assignment. Rhodan was to be destroyed. "Regul!" he roared into the telecom. "Pull back! It's senseless to attack that thing with just 10 ships. Did you receive any defensive fire?"

"Not a shot!" came the answer, a trifle incredulously. "All they've done is throw in their defence screens. And we can't get through them."

"We will attack with all 50 ships," Talamon decided. "No energy screen, even as powerful as that one, can withstand the combined fire power of 50 battle cruisers. We will begin our action in exactly 2 minutes!"

In the Control Central of the *Titan*, Rhodan could hardly suppress his amazement as he saw the sudden withdrawal of the 10 attacking ships. Pucky had just materialized with Sengu, who was the last to be teleported. He sat down on the medicine case in exhaustion and mumbled, "So what now?"

"Three things," answered Rhodan curtly. "Sengu, you and Khrest go to the sickbay and take the case of medicine with you. Dr. Haggard will receive the first injection. And then I want all the rest of the patients to be inoculated. Secondly, Pucky will go immediately to the main administration building on the other side of the spaceport and will try to get hold of the responsible chief and bring him here. It has to be the one who spoke to Themos and sent out the alarm to the Springers. The third task is mine alone. Bristol? Is the hyper-transmitter ready for operation?"

Pucky sighed and dematerialised where he sat.

Sengu took the medicine case under his arm and, with Khrest, left the Control Central. Tiff took over the *Titan* command station with Bristol. Rhodan and Thora, went together into the communications section.

The giant picture screen of the hypercom revealed the majestic spectacle of the robot fleet of the Empire standing ready for action in the far depths of space. A slight switching action caused the entire picture to be replaced by the face of a robot. Rhodan recognized it by the metal tag on its chest.

"OR-775! This is Rhodan of Terra speaking. You will go at once with the entire fleet into transition and blockade the Kesnar System completely. Deploy some of the units to guard over the landing field and destroy anyone trying to take off. Do not attack. Use only defensive action. Confirm!"

"Transition in 10 seconds! Only defensive. No attack."

Rhodan nodded. The picture changed. Again the entire fleet appeared on the entire screen. The scene was being transmitted by a special communications ship. Then, finally, the picture on the screen changed from one second to the next, to reveal the countless, impersonal, coldly gleaming suns of Star Cluster M-13.

It was this same second of time that signified for Talamon the end of all hope for a profitable victory. Alarm bells and klaxons sounded throughout his ship. All units hovering in formation over the landing field, waiting for his command, now automatically activated their defence screens. His communications system went wild, shooting messages everywhere and reaching even the ships on the other side of the planet and on the edge of the system.

The first sighting was confirmed. A powerful battlefleet of the Arkonides had appeared—so powerful that in a matter of mere minutes it could reduce the Springer contingent to a chaotic mass of molten, plummeting derelicts. Talamon recognized this fact with astounding clarity and took lightning action. This admirable capability for fast reaction had saved his life many times in the past—and certainly would now.

"Hold fire!" he bellowed into the microphone of his communicator. "Remain passive. No attack. Wait it out! I'll deal with them!"

Somebody shouted from the communications room. "We're being hailed! Somebody named Rhodan

of—"

"Transfer it in here!" Talamon yelled back in grave surprise. "Hurry it up!"

It took a few seconds for the screen in front of him to come to life. A face appeared and the Mounder looked into the cold, grey eyes of a being who was formed like an Arkonide but certainly could not have been of that race.

"*Keshtan Maunzer—jott?*" asked the man, in faultless Intercosmo, "You are the commander of the Mounders? Answer me!"

"I am he," replied Talamon and smiled wryly. "You misunderstand my intentions—"

"If you mean *I could* misunderstand, you must be more specific," retorted Rhodan. "Do you know who I am?"

"Perry Rhodan of Terra," said the Mounder, not particularly enthused. "Your encounter with Topthor has not escaped notice."

"That makes it the more astonishing that you should try to attack me. Who contacted you?"

"The Aras. They were in distress and so it was our duty to respond to their call."

"The first duty of all members of the Empire is to serve the Empire, Talamon. You should know that."

"The Aras serve the Empire, Rhodan. That is a known fact. When they request help, it's also in the name of the Empire."

"What was the name of the Ara who called you?"

"The chief physician, Borat. He heads the spaceport sector and—"

"Borat, is it?" Talamon noticed that Rhodan turned to the side and spoke to someone. "You are Borat? Good! We will converse later..." And again, looking at Talamon, he continued: "What do you know about the Aras and their methods, Talamon?"

The Mounder's expression was not overly responsive. Apparently he didn't know how to handle the question. He shrugged his massive shoulders. "What everybody knows. They heal the sick and develop the best kinds of medicine. They don't have any armaments and are considered to be peaceable inhabitants of the galaxy. That's why it was hard for me to understand why you—"

"You mean to say that's all you know? Pucky, is he speaking the truth?"

To his great astonishment, Talamon saw a small, curious, furry creature push Rhodan to one side and come into the field of vision. He looked into a pair of brown, good-natured eyes which regarded him searchingly. Then the creature nodded and disappeared again.

Rhodan's face returned. "You are fortunate, Talamon. You do in fact know nothing about the actual activity of the Aras. That excuses you. But I will explain it to you so that you may be able to instruct the races of the Empire as to what is happening on Aralon."

The next 10 minutes were for Talamon the most surprising of his life. He listened silently to what Rhodan was reporting. The latent humour and good nature in his face disappeared, to be replaced by grim anger.

When Rhodan finished, Talamon was silent for some time. Then he asked: "Why don't you destroy Aralon?"

Rhodan's brief smile was not exactly pleasant. "Did I destroy your fleet when you attacked me? No, because destruction and death are not always the best answers to a problem. The galaxy will learn how the race of the Aras came by their wealth. From today forward, their secret is no more. If they wish to continue to exist, they will have to make an about-face and apply their knowledge for the general benefit of all. If, however, an epidemic or sickness of some kind occurs somewhere in the Empire, and if it is found out that the source of the pestilence is Aralon, then by all means—this planet will cease to exist."

Talamon nodded slowly. "The Aras are offshoots of the Springers. Trading is in their blood, as it is with us Mounders. I'll admit we live by fighting but we don't live by meanness. You can count on me any time, Perry Rhodan wherever justice is too weak to defend itself."

Rhodan's face lighted with a new warmth. "Thank you, Talamon. I won't forget it. And now, gather your fleet together, and I hope that in the future you will think about what you promised me. You know, even the Springers aren't always on the side of what's right. I'm afraid "they're soon going to be faced with certain problems that may be a strain on their conscience."

"You have my word, Rhodan. I am wealthy enough to turn down a few propositions that come to my command post, in case I don't particularly like them. May I give you my hypercom frequency, on which I may be reached at any time?"

"I'll be glad to take you up on your offer, in case it's ever necessary to use it."

"And one more question," added Talamon. And in his eyes was a curious coyness that was not compatible with his mountain of flesh. "How is it that the Arkonides have become so active again? An official battlefleet of the Empire hasn't been seen for thousands of years."

"The times are beginning to change," smiled Rhodan knowingly. "The Empire stands at the threshold of a new epoch in its development. Become a part of this development, Talamon, and you will have ample opportunity to use your martial capabilities—but for the proper cause!"

Talamon nodded. "Count on me, Rhodan. And if you ever feel that your home planet of Terra is in danger, call on me. Luck be with you, Rhodan."

He switched off without waiting for an answer. There was a pensive gleam in his eyes.

Then with a ponderous movement he pushed the lever of the telecom into transmitting position. "Fleet standby for transition!" he said. His voice trembled with a mixture of relief and new decision. "Coordinates as before..." And after a few seconds, he added: "Mission accomplished."

10 seconds later, Talamon's fleet disappeared from the skies...

Rhodan stared another half minute at the empty videoscreen before he turned to look at Pucky. "Well, shorty, what was on his mind?"

The mouse-beaver grinned. His incisor tooth slipped forward another little notch and gave his face a cunning appearance. The fur at the nape of his neck was smooth once more. "He is very much impressed. At first it was just his all-out amazement at the robot fleet. He had never counted on that. In his eyes, the Arkonides are asleep at the switch and aren't capable of fast reaction. But then when he learned the truth about the Aras, his attitude changed amazingly fast. I saw that this change was honourable and convincing. We have found in Talamon a true friend. He was also impressed by the fact that we did not use our superior strength to chastise him. He did not lose a single ship. Rhodan, he admires you!"

"Thank you, Pucky," replied Rhodan, who really seemed to be touched by this. But only of a moment and then his gaze hardened again. Coldly he turned to the Ara who stood trembling between Tiff and Sengu. Apparently he had not yet recovered from the remarkable manner of his lightning-swift transportation. "You heard what I said to the Mounder, Borat. That was no idle warning. Aralon will have to reduce its production by half. In the future, no viruses or implanting of epidemics and pestilence will be exported, only medicines. You will take care of any races that have been afflicted by you and it will be free of charge. For the purpose of monitoring and controlling you, I am leaving 200 fighter robots behind on Aralon. They will be so programmed that they will immediately annihilate the first offender.

Do not believe that a robot with a positronic brain can be tricked. Even should you find the means to harm a robot, this would be of no avail. They would then combine their energies in order to transmit a hyper-communication to the robot brain on Arkon. The result would be a punitive expedition, which—after evacuating the sick patients on Aralon—would mean the destruction of the planet. Have I expressed myself clearly enough?"

Chief physician Borat nodded frantically. His eyes were filled with raw terror and he appeared willing now to do everything that was asked of him. Nevertheless, he said: "I am not able to decide alone. The Council of Physicians must give their consent and..."

"Do you know of anybody who would consent to the destruction of Aralon?"

"No! Naturally not, but—!"

"No 'buts', Borat. There is no other alternative! No compromises will be allowed. You know, your first mistake was not being satisfied with what you had accomplished. Your second mistake was to attack me. It's a good thing that you are able to leave this ship under your own power and return to your office. I shall expect a decision from the Council within 3 hours. That's enough time. Goodbye—and stay in good health, Borat. Tiff, take him to the lock."

With a cold smile, he watched the Ara's departure until he had disappeared. Then he turned to Pucky. "And now to you, my friend. You have refused to carry out an order. Do you have any excuse for your behaviour?"

The mouse-beaver seemed to shrink a few inches in size. He actually seemed to curl up inside himself. His imploring gaze went to Thora, who looked at Rhodan with embarrassment. A slight blush coloured her cheeks. "It was my fault, Perry. I asked him to kill Themis."

Rhodan looked past her. "You have a human life on your conscience, Thora."

"He was a traitor, Perry! He deserved death!"

"Can men decide this? Borat also deserved death, if that's the way we're going to judge things—and thousands along with him. But you see that he can be of more use to us alive. Even Themis in the future would have been able to compensate for his crimes."

"Are we the ones who killed him?" Thora defended herself. "He jumped into the shaft, the very one that he had hoped would be a death trap for you! He alone brought on his own death. If Pucky did not help him, it may have been negligence, but it was not murder."

"So it's mitigating circumstances is it?" asked Rhodan sarcastically. He shook his head. "Please, Thora, in the future, try not to alter my decisions like that. On the other hand, I can understand your anger and score, so let's not talk about that." He bent down to Pucky. "Let it be a lesson to you, little friend. Now of course Thora has the patience to scratch your hide for you in leisure hours and to scrounge a couple of carrots for you once in awhile in the ship's kitchen—but that does not mean by any stretch of the imagination that my orders may be ignored. Do you understand me?"

Pucky's faithful eyes looked up even more faithfully. His incisor tooth dared to make its first thrust in the form of a grin. He nodded his head vigorously. "Understood, Chief!" He was listening in the direction of the door. Now his incisor tooth took no further heed of the scolding just administered. He grinned, filled with expectation, as he waddled straight across the Control Central and made the door slide open.

Somewhat dazed by the unexpected ceremony, Bell stumbled over the threshold and looked down at Pucky, who was his bosom friend. Bell's red stubble of hair lay peacefully on his rounded pate. The broad face beamed with joy and satisfaction. In his blue eyes was a glimmer of suppressed sorrow, which was a sharp contrast to his outward contentment. It was as though he found himself in a severe spiritual schism at the moment. "Hello!" he said and waved generally at everyone. "So here I am again. Anything happen while I was gone?"

Pucky snorted disdainfully. "While we were out saving the whole Milky Way, you were lying in bed asleep with a silly grin on your face. One thing we can be thankful to the Aras for is that for awhile we didn't have to look at you all the time. And it would have to be me that took care of fetching the medicine that woke you up again. But I'll make another trip and get hold of some of the original virus, I think."

Then something totally unexpected occurred. Bell appeared to be terribly frightened. He squatted down and looked deeply into the mouse-beaver's faithful eyes, in which there was a spark of devilment. "But Puckykins, my best friend and battle companion! You wouldn't do that to me, would you? I'm all slept out now, believe me. I'm rested and ready for action. And I also have time, according to Uncle Dr. Haggard. Two weeks of convalescence. Just think—two weeks! That'd leave me enough time to even be nice to you and—"

"You mean, back-rubbing and scratching sessions?!" asked Pucky in surprise. And he began to beam with pleasure. "You mean you're going to be a real good guy and scratch me and rub my fur? Then it's settled! Two hours of scratching every day—"

Bell made a face as if someone had just given him 3 death sentences simultaneously. But one glance into the beaming face of the mouse-beaver warmed his heart and almost caused it to melt. Resignedly, he nodded. "It's settled, Pucky."

He rose up slowly and staggered over to the nearest chair. With a loud groan he sank into it and closed his eyes. For him the world around him ceased to exist.

The fur stood up on the nape of Pucky's neck. He set his arms akimbo and shook his head disconcertedly. "What he said was real nice—but what he's thinking now—it's so characterless and mean that it can't even be repeated. Well, the main thing is what he will do. And he *will* keep his promise!" He straightened up to his full height and waddled over to Thora, who placed her hand on his head and smiled at him. "He just has this terrible fear of me, that's all."

From Bell's chair emerged a heart-rending groan. Then it seemed as if this impudently challenged victim had fallen asleep—which was perhaps the most merciful solution.

Rhodan grinned and motioned Lt. Bristal over to him. "We are waiting for a communication from Borat and then we will take off. See to it that the robot fleet return to Arkon and remains there on standby until further notice. We've made ourselves deadly enemies of the Aras and I don't know yet how all this is going to work out. Perhaps the Regent may have an answer for it. At any rate, we are the first who have given resistance to two powerful races—against the Springers and now against these Medical Masters of Aralon, who wanted to make a business of healing healthy people."

Khrest and Thora exchanged glances. As Lt. Bristal went out of the Control Central, the Arkonide said: "Rhodan, your behaviour and restraint in this affair are going to bear results. That's as clear to me as the spring waters of Terra. People are going to start searching their minds and consciences and they're going to start asking themselves questions: Who is Perry Rhodan of Terra? You are a new factor in the calculations and evaluations of all members of the Arkonide race. People are going to have to learn how to take you into account. Inasmuch as you are acting in the name of the Regent, in the future people are also going to have to take the Arkonides into account. Therefore, Perry, I have you to thank. You are in the act of performing a great deed, whereby the old reputation for action and decision will be given back to my people—a reputation that they lost many thousands of years ago..."

Thora nodded her agreement. "If we continue to work together in the common cause, and for the time being recognize the robot brain as Regent, the Empire of Arkon will flower to a new prime of life. I, too, have you to thank, Perry—for everything..."

But Perry Rhodan was not a man to forget his origin any more than he could lose sight of how he had come thus far, as a result of that strange destiny that he had met on Earth's moon when he landed there in a fragile liquid fuel rocket and discovered the shipwrecked Arkonides. What would he have been today without these Arkonides? Where would the Earth be? Would it have known at all that, in addition to Earthmen, there were intelligent beings in the universe? In fact, without this strange stroke of fate, would not humankind have long since destroyed itself in an atomic war?

He shook his head and reached out his hands to Khrest and Thora. "No, my friends, you do not have me to thank. What I am today, and what I am able to accomplish, is due entirely to your own merits. You are the ones who will save the Empire because what would I be without the help you first gave me? An Earthly space pioneer who, maybe by now, barring an atomic war, might have landed on Mars or Venus."

"No, Thora and Khrest, we—together—are what counts. Without me, you would have died on the Moon, but without you I would be a member of a primitive race that would just be taking its initial steps toward the stars—and maybe botching the job, at that. But together we're a team that counts—friends banded together with a common purpose, dedicated to the preservation and strengthening of the

Arkonide Empire."

He met the gaze of she who was the epitome of Arkonide womanhood and sensed an exciting quickening of his pulse. For in Thora's eyes there was not only admiration and friendship, emotions which multitudes felt for Perry, but—love! Genuine love: pure, open, unabashed. In this moment an inner peace came to the Peacelord as he realized that all of his secret hopes had not been in vain.

Lt. Bristol entered and wrenched Rhodan from his reverie. "A communication from Borat, sir! The Aralon Council of Physicians has accepted the terms of your ultimatum. We disembarked 200 robots. The Titan and Ganymede are ready for liftoff. —Your orders, sir?"

Rhodan looked at him as one awakening from a beautiful dream. "My orders? Oh—transition to Arkon, what else. Tiff will take over the command—I have other things to do."

Bristol disappeared. Seconds later, Tiff came in and sat in the pilot seat. His orders snapped out smoothly and authoritatively. Countdown began. In two minutes, both ships would hurtle into the heavens and leave behind 10,000 disquieted and reflective forms of life who had their homes on all the worlds of the Empire. Intelligences who had become accustomed to thinking of Arkon as a world drowned in the waters of Lethe, slumbering in a dream of ages. Now they had seen with their own eyes how a dynamic figure from the planet Earth had rescued a world from a false sense of security which had only served as an open inducement to all the enemies of the Arkonides to develop plans of conquest against them.

They would all begin to ask themselves, "Who is this Perry Rhodan? Where is this world of Terra that menaces our ambitions?"

"One more minute to takeoff," announced Tiff matter-of-factly.

Rhodan's eyes returned to Thora's luminous face...

Then Pucky rose noisily from the couch where he had been sitting hunched in an unusual bog of silence. He slipped to the floor and waddled brusquely to the door, which opened automatically before him and slid to one side. "Hmph! I see I'm excess baggage around here," he twittered, accompanying his twit with a shrill whistle indicative of his displeasure. "I'd like to know who's going to rub my back when Bell's leave is over with." Having spoken his piece he gave Thora a reproachful look, hobbled into the passageway—and disappeared.

"Takeoff in 10 seconds!" said Tiff, too involved with his duty to spare any emotion for the small drama which had just taken place.

Rhodan nodded to Khrest and Thora. "Let's go. I think we should start thinking about what our report to the Robot should sound like."

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

EPIDEMIC CENTRE: ARALON

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

On Honor, world of the Honos, the skeletal hulks of long-abandoned spaceships suddenly assume unexpected value when it is realized that they consist of 3 to 400 tons of invaluable Arkon T-steel!

Too good a deal for the Galactic Traders—or is it Raiders?—to pass up.

But if the Springers sense a commercial killing, can the Mounders be far behind? Not if Talamon the Mounder has anything to do with it—and he does! Talamon moves swiftly despite his 1300 pounds of corpulence.

And into the picture come the Aras as well, those medical machinators who would not even stop at the destruction of Earth itself to further their insidious interests!

Steel yourself for an adventure that's fast as speol (speed of light) in—

PROJECT: EARTHSAVE

by

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