

The Terra and Centurion and 10 mutants defend the Earth against the might of the Springer and Mounder Clans.

The Centurion is captured, Tiff and McClears head out in a Gazelle but they are also captured.

*is this the end for the Earth & Perry Rhodan
all will be revealed in—*

The Red Eye of Betelgeuse

1/ BLASTOFF FOR BETELGEUSE

TWO ALIEN ENTITIES in the entire Universe—one semihuman, the other completely inhuman—believed *they* knew the location of the planet Earth, besides the Arkonides Khrest and Thora and the mouse-beaver from the world called Vagabond.

Khrest, Thora and Pucky, of course, really knew; the other two— Well, one was a Galactic Trader of the Mounder clan. Green of skin and measuring a good 6 feet in height and almost the same in width, he was the undisputed lord and master of a considerable spaceship fleet. Tophor.

The second entity travelled aboard Tophor's flagship, the same space vessel with which he had attempted to attack Earth when it had been accidentally discovered many months previously. However, neither Tophor nor 'the other' knew that Perry Rhodan's mutants had long since altered the position coördinates data in the memory banks. 'The other' was the positronic brain aboard the Mounder's ship.

Occupying the supposed position of the Earth now was the third planet of the giant star Betelgeuse, 272-light-years distant from the terrestrial solar system. This fact was to lead to a world-shattering mistake—a carefully engineered error for 2 great stellar races, although their greatest adversary, a certain Terranian named Perry Rhodan was, as a result, to disappear forever from the scene along with his home planet.

Exactly as plotted by Rhodan.

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Humanity had finally come of age. Man had made of his planet a near Utopia only dreamed of a few generations earlier by visionaries like Wells, Bellamy, Gernsback, Ernst von Loig.

World government had long since ceased to be a social fantasy, the impossible dream of science fiction prophets and global-minded statesmen. Border lines and customs barriers had fallen. Homer G. Adams, the Finance Minister of Terra, had introduced a common unit of currency: the Solar. The former great powers and the small nations had their representative seats in the Great Council of the World Government, which met at regular intervals in *Terrania*, the world capital.

The danger of war was now as dead as the dinosaur. Money which had previously been squandered insanely and incessantly on the senseless competition for national military 'security' now served to construct a gigantic spacefleet for the protection of mankind as a planetary unit.

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Located in the heart of the Gobi Desert, *Terrania* was the scene of great activity. As the central core of United Earth, the city of a million inhabitants awaited the report of its first citizen, finally home from space after an absence of half a year. No one knew what had transpired during those 6 months but everyone suspected that only events of critical importance could have kept Perry Rhodan so long away from Earth.

Chief Engineer Kowalski and electronic technician Harper had their evening free and were seated expectantly before the TV screen in the common living quarters which they shared with 2 other colleagues who were on the night shift. The station identification picture showed interstellar space with the Milky Way in the background; in the foreground, the shadow outline of a torpedo-shaped ship. Only the single word *Terrania* identified the source of transmission.

Every Earthman, Earthwoman and Earthchild was aware that an event of major importance was impending. Virtually no one would miss this broadcast for World Government was to speak to the population of the entire planet.

Perhaps the most important man on Earth or off it—the Administrator himself—would address the united natives of his home world personally.

"He just got back today," said Kowalski and Harper knew who he meant. They had both seen the mighty spherical spaceship land, such a ship as the Earth had never before beheld. The giant vessel had an approximate diameter of one mile. The name *Titan* stood out on its hull of Arkonide steel. "I'm anxious to hear the news he's going to give us."

He referred to Perry Rhodan, the man who had united the Earth and brought it to the status of a great galactic power. Perhaps he was the only living human who had no enemies, at least not on the Earth or among humankind. Beyond, in the far reaches of interstellar space, however...

"We'll soon find out," Harper rejoined, as he lounged in his chair. "At least one thing hasn't changed: the delays for station identification are still a part of television!—Ah! Now it begins!"

The glittering Milky Way faded from the screen to be replaced by the face of a man who was known to

everyone. This was Col. Albrecht Klein, Rhodan's second-in-command. During the absence of the Administrator he acted in the interest of the New Power and conducted the affairs of the World Government, energetically supported by Allan D. Mercant.

"Friends! Terranians!" Col. Klein made an effective pause and looked into the camera with a friendly smile—thereby looking into the eyes of more than 2 billion humans. "Perry Rhodan has returned from his expedition into outer space and will briefly inform you concerning the more important events that were involved. A fuller report will be forthcoming in the next few days. And so I ask your indulgence if the Administrator is brief. I now turn you over to Perry Rhodan." Col. Klein smiled and moved to one side, disappearing momentarily from the TV screen's field of vision.

"Well, so far, that was fairly short and painless," observed Harper, looking on with interest as the receding camera picked up Klein again and then revealed the assembly hall in which the delegates of the World Government Council were seated around a horseshoe-shaped table. "There—that's him!"

Kowalski nodded. He had known Rhodan for a long time. The smartly tailored uniform of the spacefleet accentuated his lean figure as he arose with a slight smile and walked to the speaker's podium. He shook hands with Col. Klein, then stood before the camera, which brought his image to all parts of the world, even into smallest villages of the farthest continents. Simultaneously, his words were translated by interpreters into the language of each country in which the sound and image were being received. By this means, each person could understand his words, even though he spoke in English.

"Terranians!" Although he continued to smile, Rhodan's voice sounded slightly strained. In his grey eyes gleamed the timelessness of infinite space, which had become his second home. However, this quality did not radiate from him as before, but seemed rather to be suppressed by an overriding expression of anxiety. "During the past 6 months, very much has come to pass, both here on Earth and in the far reaches of space. You will all recall that we launched an expedition in search of the Arkonide Empire, which exists at a distance of 34,000 light-years in the star cluster M-13. Well, we found Arkon, the chief stellar system, but we experienced a sharp disappointment: 6 years prior to our arrival, the Arkonides had been superseded by an inconceivably tremendous positronic brain, which now rules a stellar empire larger than anything that has ever existed in the known part of the galaxy." Rhodan made a slight pause to let the effect of his words sink in. The camera swung away from him slightly and revealed a close-up of the two Arkonides, Khrest and Thora.

Harper let out a low whistle. "That Thora is really way out. She's thin and she's tall and her white hair and red eyes don't send me very much. You know, she isn't actually beautiful—but there's a certain fascination about her that's hard to resist..."

Rhodan appeared on the screen again. "We succeeded in appropriating from the Empire its largest battleship, the *Titan*. Owing to attacks by outside enemies, the robot brain perceived that it was being menaced and so it allied itself with us. We gave assistance to the Regent of the Arkonide Empire and won its trust—insofar as the word may be used with reference to a machine. In the course of our operations, the fact became increasingly clear that Earth and the Empire possessed a very considerable enemy—namely, the Springers. You have already heard of this humanoid race which is an offshoot of the Arkonides. They are also known as the Galactic Traders. They were the ones who at one time attacked the Earth and were repulsed. The Mounder, Topthor, still knows the position of Earth—at least, he believes he knows it, he and the positronic brain on board his ship.

"But there is still someone else who wishes very much to know where the Earth may be found: the gigantic robot brain of Arkon. Fellow Terranians, our world knows no more dangerous enemy than this robot brain, which will permit no other major power to exist in its vicinity. And Terra is in the process of

becoming a major galactic power!"

Rhodan was interrupted by applause from the delegates. He thanked them with a nod of his head and continued. "The robot brain of Arkon consists mainly of ice-cold logic and a complete lack of compromise. It sees in us only a welcome assistance which it may employ at will in order to be of service to its own interests. However, the Earth is not interested in being a colony of Arkon."

There was a new burst of applause. Harper and Kowalski also clapped enthusiastically. Khrest and Thora again became visible on the viewing screen. They sat motionlessly in their places, apparently suppressing any outward expression of emotion. In Khrest's eyes there was a momentary gleam but no one would have ventured to say whether this were a sign of vexation or not. Thora did not take her eyes from Rhodan for a single second. Her gaze was fixed on his lips as though expecting a revelation from them.

Rhodan waited until the applause subsided. "I emphasize the ice-cold logic of the robot brain. If it were to learn of our intention not to continue as its servants, it would strike without pity and destroy us—if it knew where the Earth is located. But it does not know where in the infinity of space our solar system is located. It still does not know that."

"And Tophor can't give it away because we have changed the registers of his small positronic computer on board his ship and given it a false memory. If today Tophor were to ask his robot navigator for the position of the Earth, he would receive the answer that Earth is the third planet of the giant sun Betelgeuse in Orion, 272 light-years distant from here.

"It is my plan that the Galactic Traders—perhaps even the robot brain of Arkon—should annihilate this third planet and thus believe firmly that they have destroyed the Earth. According to the Arkonide catalogues, this third planet is uninhabited. But we will arrange that it appears otherwise. In this manner, Earth will officially cease to exist. Only then will we have time to build our space fleet uninterruptedly, so we may one day contact Arkon and place before it our conditions—and certainly not as mere subsidiary allies but at the very least as partners with equal rights."

There was more applause, even from the two Arkonides, who were also not in favour of a robot as the ruler of their Empire.

Harper mumbled, "Rhodan has his plans, alright—and are they ever wild! But I can understand that there isn't any other possibility. We just disappear from the scene until we've become stronger."

"Well, it sounds simple enough," replied Kowalski and looked at his watch. "He made it short and painless and confronted us practically with established facts. I'm anxious to see that full report they said would be coming through later. That will be a real adventure to read. Half a year in outer space is a long time."

He didn't suspect how close he had come to the truth. Harper was about to answer but Rhodan continued speaking.

"Terranians! I have confided my plan to you so that you may understand our activities later. Even this week, two of our heavy cruisers will take off in the direction of Orion in order to give an uninhabited planet the appearance of being inhabited. It is a fair certainty that the Mounder, Tophor, will then not wait long in destroying the hated 'Earth'. He shall have his wish!" Rhodan raised his hand in greeting and signalled to the camera. The picture faded and the *Terrania* symbol returned.

Kowalski got up and turned off the television. He looked at Harper. "Well, what do you think about it? Don't you think he's been pretty thorough in the way he's figured this thing out?"

"I don't know if it's been as thorough as all that," muttered Harper doubtfully. "No matter how sophisticated or infallible a calculation may be, there can always be one small error—and then you've had it!"

"Nonsense!" Kowalski was actually indignant. "Perry Rhodan doesn't make mistakes!"

It was a rash overstatement, since no infallible an had yet been born. Rhodan had already made errors in the past. Of course, he had always been able to either repair the damage or to turn them somehow to his advantage.

Harper nodded and rose to his feet. "It's possible, Kowalski, but this time I just happen to have a feeling that he's making one. Maybe I'm wrong, and I certainly hope so, but I'll tell you this, old friend! If there's a mistake in the calculations this time, then God help us!"

Kowalski didn't answer. He watched his friend silently as he disappeared into the next room.

The chief engineer from Poland shrugged his shoulders. What could go wrong if these Traders came with their fleet and destroyed an uninhabited world that they took for the Earth and which was almost 300 light-years away? Yes, what possibly could go wrong...?

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"This injustice cries out to high Heaven and I'm putting in a complaint!"

The voice was very high-pitched and shrill, its tone not only peevish but also full of reproach and anger. But it appeared to make very little impression on Rhodan, who smiled softly and appeasingly stroked the reddish brown fur at the nape of the speaker's neck.

"But Pucky—why so furious? Haven't you honestly earned a leave of absence? I'm going to stay here too."

But Pucky chose to be vehement. He sat beside Rhodan on one of the chairs, drawn up to his full height, which only amounted, however, to about 3 feet. The large ears gave evidence of a sensitive hearing, the sharp snout an outstanding sense of smell and the broad hind portions with their spoon-shaped thick tail advertised very little enthusiasm for long walks. But walking wasn't very necessary for Pucky, because he was a teleporter, and he could transport himself at any time to any chosen location. In addition, he possessed the gift of thought-reading and was accordingly a telepath. With his mental powers, he could move matter without touching it, a faculty which was known as telekinesis. Pucky was so universally gifted that upon first meeting him no one could believe it.

"Alright!" he pouted, and grinned indignantly with his single incisor tooth, which he would rather have occupied with raw carrots. "But 10 mutants are going along. I'm the only one left out."

"My decision is final," said Rhodan. He thus swept every one of Pucky's objections away and turned to

the assembled crewmen, who had watched the by-play with varying degrees of enthusiasm. "Maj. Deringhouse will take over command of the *Centurion* ; Maj. McClears, the *Terra* . Both cruisers have a standard crew complement of 400 men and are equipped with hyper-compensators. This will prevent anyone from tracking your hytrans jumps. In addition, 10 members of the Mutant Corps are taking part in the expedition. John Marshall is the chief mutant. He has received from me an unlimited operational authority and is only subordinate to Deringhouse."

Next to Rhodan stood a stocky, square-built man with a red brush of hair and a broad fare. As he shook his head almost imperceptibly, Rhodan noticed an unexpressed question in his water-blue eyes.

"What is it, Bell? Any more objections?"

Reginald Bell was Rhodan's best friend and closest confidant, having also been the former Defence Minister of the New Power. He seemed surprised at such a direct question but quickly overcame his embarrassment. "No, everything's quite clear—I'd just like to back up what Pucky was saying..."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I don't think it's fair that just we two have been singled out to remain behind. What are we doing here if the existence or non-existence of the human race is to be decided almost 300 light-years from here? Pucky is the best parapsychic sensitive and I—I—"

"Yes?" queried Rhodan and grinned his amusement. "And you...?"

"Well, after all, I'm Pucky's friend," was all that Bell was able to claim by way of justification.

In his seat, the mouse-beaver pricked up his ears. In his bright eyes was a gleam of pleasure. "Well, old battle buddy, thanks very much!" he chirped happily. "Ill file that away for future reference. But I think we're beating our heads against the wall. The battle plan is set in cement. We're just not going to be needed."

Rhodan smiled at him. "You've grasped the situation quite well, Pucky. Both ships are ready for takeoff and they will start their flight to Betelgeuse tonight. Col. Deringhouse, you know the plan. Together with McClears you will make a pretense of defending the third planet. Then, after the Galactic Traders have attacked it several times, you are to retreat and disappear, just as soon as the enemy has completely destroyed the third planet and not left a trace of it behind them. We're forced to make a sacrifice of this world but it does not have any intelligent life. The Traders won't hesitate to consider the destruction of the mysterious planet Terra as an accomplished fact. And even the robot brain on Arkon will be grateful to them—considered from a purely logical point of view. Actually, it's too bad, because I'm quite fond of that old 'dome head'." There was a note of deliberate irony in this latter remark.

The two battle cruisers were spherical ships having diameters in excess of 600 feet. Their range of action was practically unlimited. By means of transitions through hyperspace, they could cover inconceivable distances in a matter of seconds. A considerable amount of time was taken up by the positronic calculations of the pertinent coördinates but this was not to be compared with the short duration of the trip itself. The armament consisted of pulse-stream projectors and other engines of annihilation, which were of Arkonide origin. Powerful energy screens protected the spherical vessels from any attack. Antigravity fields neutralized all inertial impacts, from deceleration manoeuvres, or during landing and takeoff.

Khrest cleared his throat. "And then what happens?" he asked quietly.

Rhodan looked at him. "You mean after we've succeeded in faking the destruction of the Earth? Then we will prepare ourselves, Khrest. It may take years to attain our goal, perhaps centuries. In any case, we will not again make a thrust toward Arkon until we are able to announce the position of the Earth without the slightest apprehension—an Earth that will suddenly begin to exist again. And it will be an Earth that can dictate its conditions to the robot brain of Arkon. I think this is also in your own interests, Khrest, Thora..."

The two Arkonides nodded in a rare gesture of mutual agreement.

Suddenly Bell began to grin. He patted Pucky on the back, winked at Rhodan and shouted fervently, "Our resurrection is sure going to be a surprise for certain people...!"

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Rhodan, Bell, the two Arkonides and Allan D. Mercant stood at the edge of the broad spaceport area as the two mighty spaceships prepared to take off.

Searchlights blazed, bathing the area in a brilliant illumination. Up at the other end of the field the dark night of the desert began. The heavens arched like a cosmic bell above the two heavy cruisers, before which lay one of the most remarkable missions that an Earthly spaceship had ever been assigned to. In the course of human history, many a war stratagem had been demonstrated and historians were always pleased to record them. However, never before had a planet been represented as the Earth and destroyed in its stead.

Mercant was inclined to look younger than he was but Rhodan was able to detect that the former Defence Chief of the Western world had aged somewhat in the past months. The heavy responsibility that now rested on his shoulders consumed a lot of his energy. The crown of blond hair encircling his bald head was showing its first silvery threads. "There they go!" he announced. "And hopefully, to return again soon." While speaking, he took care not to step on a crawling night beetle. In spite of his notorious harshness in the performance of his duties, Mercant was a friend of animals and lower creatures of nature's domain. Or indeed, this predilection may have been owing precisely to his outer severity. "Fortunately this time I'm not remaining behind all by myself."

Rhodan didn't remove his gaze from the two glistening spacespheres. "The *Titan* remains on constant standby, Mercant," he reminded him. "At the moment I receive any report of emergency from Deringhouse, I'll be under way."

Mercant made a wry face. "What could go wrong?"

"You seem to forget that we are not familiar with the system of Betelgeuse. In that regard, we are relying on the Arkonide catalogues. It's all well and good that the third planet is uninhabited, a mere jungle world that probably wouldn't have developed life for millions of years, but what about the first and second planets? What about the fourth one?"

"Betelgeuse is a red giant. Its diameter is 400 times greater than that of our own sun. I'm surprised that the third planet even has any vegetation—or that it is supposed to have any."

"You are a politician, my dear Mercant, not a scientist. The dimensions of a sun are not important, or even the intensity of its heat radiation, if the planets are sufficiently removed from it. The life zone of a planetary system depends on the proper relationship between distances and the relative amount of warmth radiated and received. We will soon know what surprises the second Earth may have in store for us." He looked at his watch. "In 2 minutes take off."

Bell was remarkably quiet. He stood there motionlessly in the night and gazed across at the *Centurion* and the *Terra*. Rhodan surmised what was bothering him. Bell would love to be part of the action when it came to playing tricks on the Galactic Traders but he had to remain behind on Earth.

One minute to takeoff.

Khrest broke the silence. "If the plan succeeds, then Terra will have won more than just a battle."

"That's the purpose of the whole undertaking," said Rhodan.

The seconds ticked away. Nothing could now interrupt the course of events, nor did anyone wish to.

"Now!" murmured Khrest.

The two giant metal spheres rose silently and soared slowly away into the dark sky. The searchlights followed them for awhile, until their glistening hulls passed beyond their range and disappeared into the vast emptiness.

Rhodan sighed. "Well, that's it. Now there's nothing else we can do but wait it out. Let's hope that our calculations work out smoothly—because the tiniest displacement of a decimal could be disastrous."

Khrest, Thora and Mercant nodded.

Only Bell growled discontentedly. "Mathematics are my weak point—maybe I should have gone along with them after all."

Rhodan smiled at him reproachfully. "And spoil everything? No, it's probably best for you to stay here and make your mistakes."

Which didn't help to improve Bell's mood, especially since he wanted to take out his anger on Pucky and was not able to find him.

2/ INVISIBLE SPIDER'S WEB

As the *Centurion* rematerialised, Maj. Deringhouse saw something that made him forget his painful reactions to the hypertransition. He was stationed in the observation cupola which was located in the equatorial area of the spherical spaceship. The transparent dome made all videoscreens unnecessary. Anyone looking outward from this position received the impression that he hung suspended in space itself.

On his port side, he could see the sister ship *Terra* rematerialise. But that was not what had made the major impact on Deringhouse, who was already familiar with a great part of the galaxy; it was the star that greeted the two ships as they sped toward it with the speed of light

Betelgeuse!

The great sun floated there in the midst of the infinite universe like the yellowish-red eye of a giant, larger and mightier than all the stars that Deringhouse had ever observed. The others paled before the massive dull gleam of the giant as though they were ashamed of their own modest brightness.

So this was Betelgeuse, actually a red giantess. If one were to put her in the place of Earth's Sun, her fiery rim would reach beyond the orbit of Mars. She was cooler than Sol but this factor was compensated for by her incredible dimensions. Designated as an abnormally variable star, her surface temperature was in the neighbourhood of 4,500° Fahrenheit. Fourteen planets were supposed to be circling Betelgeuse, of which the third world was to take over the role of the Earth. Because even if Tophor had forgotten many things, there is one thing that he certainly would not have forgotten: that the Earth was the third planet of a solar system. Naturally he would soon recognize his mistake, because how could a Galactic Trader mistake Betelgeuse for the sun? But—as Rhodan had smilingly assured everyone—then it would be too late for him to correct the mistake.

A feeling of anxiety crept over Deringhouse as he stared into the red eye of the giant. Previously he had not given much weight to such things as presentiment or foreboding but this time things appeared to be different somehow. Perhaps it was due to the unique nature of the plan. Or perhaps due to many unknown factors in the equation. At any rate, Deringhouse had to employ all of his determination in order not to fall prey to his doubts.

Anyhow, what good was fear or trepidation at this point?

He shook himself and got up. Drawn to his full height, he went out of the observatory and permitted himself to be transported by the personnel carrier belt to the Control Central, where his first officer, Capt. Lamanche, was already waiting for him.

"The last transition has been completed," announced the older officer, superfluously. "Our goal lies within two light-days of the *Centurion*."

"Thank you," acknowledged Deringhouse as he observed the panoramic gallery of videoscreens. With a lifelike clarity they reproduced the ship's surrounding environment, unless one were using the special magnification feature. Such was not the case now.

"Did everything go alright?"

"Yes, sir. Also with the *Terra*. McClears is waiting for your instructions."

Deringhouse nodded his satisfaction. The uncertainties of a few moments before disappeared. "Set up the intership communication," he ordered calmly.

While he waited for the telecom videoscreen to warm up, he tried to remember everything he knew about the solar system that lay before him. It wasn't very much. One thing for certain: the 3rd planet was uninhabited. Only on the 4th planet was there supposed to be some sort of primitive life, according to the indications in the star catalogue. Other catalogue information included the fact that the surface was for the

most part covered with water, which was a hindrance to the development of actually intelligent races. Well, those were statements which could be factual—but by the same token they could also be outdated by now. No one had any idea of when the Arkonides had once visited the system of Betelgeuse and catalogued it. That could have been many thousands of years ago.

Maj. McClears appeared on the screen. "Well, here we are!" He confirmed the fact as though he had discovered a new universe. "That's a pretty tremendous sun out there, don't you think?"

"It's a pretty big brute," replied Maj. Deringhouse curtly. Involuntarily his gaze wandered to the adjacent viewscreen, where the reddish eye seemed to be watching him with a glimmering intent. "Its gravitational field must be unimaginable."

"Nothing to worry about if we observe the prescribed distance limitations, Deringhouse. The 3rd planet is a couple of billion miles distant from that flaming surface."

"What do you think about our going over to take a look at the 4th planet first?"

"Why?"

"Because it has life on it; primitive, we'll have to admit, but life nevertheless."

McCclears glanced briefly at his data sheets. "The 3rd planet is directly ahead of us while the 4th is on the other side of the sun. It'd be quite a detour. And besides that, it's the 3rd planet that we..."

"Alright, McCclears, let's make a compromise. We'll take a quick look at the 3rd planet and then fly ahead to the 4th. I'd like to know who's living in our neighbourhood if the 3rd planet is going to be attacked by the Springers."

"I'll buy that, Deringhouse. Do we remain under light velocity?"

"Yes. I don't want to use any hyper-transits here because I'd like to look this system over more leisurely. The Springers think they'll find the Earth here. Maybe they've already been here ahead of us and have sent their ships here. We have to be careful. Maybe we should separate."

Deringhouse knew that the Springers were their greatest enemy on the rocky road to peace in the universe. Properly considered, the Springers could not be judged exactly as a warring race. They were traders, nothing more. But certainly they were traders with a very self-willed perspective of things, possessing a hard determination to tolerate no competition. They were prepared to deal and trade with all comers but only on their conditions. Whoever threatened their monopoly would be unceremoniously eliminated. For this reason, there were also the Mounders, who were their special police force.

And now Rhodan was in the process of turning the tables. He looked upon peaceful and fair commercial practices as a guarantee of a successful coexistence of the various races. But because of this attitude, he automatically became the most dangerous opponent of the Springers, who did not possess any specific planet of their own and were actually at home everywhere in the galaxy. Such a struggle was capable of lasting for centuries. However, by means of Rhodan's present strategy, it could also end abruptly and then...

"Separate?" asked McCclears, interrupting Deringhouse's train of thought. "Why that? It isn't necessary."

Deringhouse gave in. "Alright, skip it. So we'll stay together," he said. "We'll drift around in the vicinity

of the 3rd planet in order to make a brief observation. Then we'll go nonstop to the 4th planet. Instead of going around Betelgeuse, I would suggest two short hypertransitions. I'll give you the exact coördinates. So carry on, McClears. We'll maintain communications."

The telecom screen went blank but both communications control centres remained in contact.

Deringhouse turned to Capt. Lamanche. "Maintain the present course. I'm going back to the observation chamber. Tell Marshall I'd like to talk to him."

Lamanche nodded and depressed an intercom button.

Deringhouse left the Control Central and 5 minutes later entered the transparent-walled cupola again. Although no light had been turned on, the room radiated a reddish illumination. The outer planets of the system had long since been put behind the *Centurion* in the depths of space. They were giant ice worlds plodding along their lonely orbits in an eternal twilight, naked of any form of life.

The 5th planet stood far off on the starboard side, a red-gleaming giant twice the size of Jupiter. The spectro-analyses had shown that it was outside the life zone of Betelgeuse. Deringhouse seated himself, deeply impressed. He stared ahead into the vast emptiness of the giant system. Even at the speed of light, it would require weeks if one were to traverse its diameter.

Betelgeuse had become larger but it was still light days away. If Deringhouse wanted to face it, he had to admit that this closer view had not altered original impressions. He had imagined the giant star to be like this whenever he had looked at it previously in the home skies of Earth, in the constellation of Orion. Even as seen from the Earth, that red eye had shown angrily and threateningly through the vast reaches of infinity. Across the light-centuries of space, it had worked its effect upon the beholder. And inasmuch as Betelgeuse varied considerably in its brightness, it always appeared to the careful observer as though the red eye were blinking at him across the abyss—although no one had ventured to say whether this was supposed to be a friendly wink, as was customary among friends, or a terrible threat, a warning: *Watch out, Earthworm!*

Take it easy, Betelgeuse

—he thought bitterly. *We don't want anything from you, only one of your children...*

Was that not an answering blink from Betelgeuse...?

Behind him, the door slid into the bulkhead wall and then closed again.

"You wanted to speak to me, Major?" John Marshall had entered the cupola. Naturally his question was completely superfluous because Marshall was a telepath and already knew what the commander was thinking. But he took care, always, to underplay his unusual faculties.

Deringhouse nodded without turning around. "Sit down, Marshall. Over here, please. What do you think of Betelgeuse?"

Marshall sat down and looked into the empty space between the planets for long moments in silence. Finally his gaze remained fixed upon the red-gleaming giant sun. "Betelgeuse is going to become a turning point in human history," he murmured, lost in thought. "Rhodan could not have found a more appropriate star."

Deringhouse did not answer. He stared silently into the sun whose rays were filtered through the

multi-laminar glasslike material and were rendered harmless. The red sun radiated hotly but not with sufficient brightness to blind the eyes.

"Don't you feel that way?" asked the telepath in an attempt to confirm his own feelings, although he already knew the answer. "Quite," agreed the Major. "I think as you do but Betelgeuse doesn't look very peaceful. Her aspect reminds me of Mars—and Mankind made Mars its god of war."

"Well, that's true, Major, but you know yourself that later that was born out to be erroneous. Mars is a friendly world—nothing to be compared to the flaming Hell in front of us. Perhaps its appearance is also deceiving."

"Let's hope so," grumbled Deringhouse but he didn't sound too confident about it. Then, making a visible effort to pull himself together, he said, "Why do we concern ourselves with Betelgeuse at all? We don't want anything from the big old red giantess—we're only interested in the third planet."

Marshall smiled softly at the manner in which his direct supervisor attempted to put aside his own premonitions. "And the fourth," he reminded him.

"Yes, of course, that one especially. The catalogue lists primitive life there. The surface is supposed to consist of 90% water. We'll take a look at the single continent and cross over the island chains, then come back to the third planet to wait for the Springers. I'll bet you Topthor is thinking the time is about ripe for attacking the Earth. But he's going to wonder..."

"I'd rather hope that he won't have any time for wondering," remarked Marshall sceptically. "If he sees too quickly that he has the wrong solar system in front of him, Rhodan's plan is going to go up in smoke."

Deringhouse shook his head grimly. "We'll just take care that he doesn't have time to think."

* * * *

It was a world similar to Venus. Slowly and at low altitude, the two cruisers swept along over the surface of the third planet. Three great continents lay in a gigantic, primitive sea, covered by thick, primeval forests, which were only broken by broad, wide plateaus. The peaks of rugged mountains towered into the drifting clouds. Between lay broad valleys.

It seemed improbable that there would be no form of sensible life here but no matter how hard they searched for it, they did not find the slightest trace. Naturally this could not be completely determined up here from this height but one thing was certain: intelligent life did not dwell upon the third planet of Betelgeuse.

McCleary's face appeared on the screen of the telecom. "So here you have Terra 2," he said, only partially satisfied. "Actually, it's too bad, don't you think? It could be put to good use."

"I gather you're referring to colonization," replied Deringhouse. He nodded slowly. "You're probably right about that but what Rhodan has in mind is more important—even more important than the existence of this planet."

"Before we take up guard duty here, you—ah—wanted to look over the fourth planet," suggested McClears. "Do you think it's necessary that I come along? Or do you think maybe it'll be better for me to stay here with the *Terra*?"

Deringhouse considered this for a moment and then nodded. "Maybe it's not a bad idea if we separate just now," he admitted. "I'll be back in 20 hours. I don't think it'll be necessary to spend any more time looking at that water world. As soon as any Springer ship appears in this system, we'll meet at Terra 2 and carry on according to plan. Our Com stations will remain in contact with each other."

McCclears breathed an obvious sigh of relief. "In the meanwhile, I can take more time to look over Terra 2." It seemed almost as though he were consoling Deringhouse. "As soon as you return, you'll receive a detailed report. Do you think it's necessary to set up a base?"

"On Terra 2?" Deringhouse shook his head. "No, that will not be necessary. If the Springers attack, they must not catch us on the surface of the planet. That would be too dangerous." He pondered the question a moment. "If you want to, you can launch a Gazelle class scoutship. It'll be better for you to remain, however, out in space with the *Terra*. Do you go along with my thinking?"

McCclears indicated his agreement. After an exchange of further instructions, information and good advice, Deringhouse made his departure and put the *Centurion* on a new course. He broke through the thick cloud cover of the third planet and hurtled outward into space.

The first short hypertransition brought the ship into a position from which both planets in question could be laterally on either side of the giant sun. On the right, the brightly gleaming cloud cover of Terra 2 could be seen, while to the left the 4th planet shimmered in an almost unnatural blue-rose light. The planet hovered in the vastness of the void like a drop of sea-water.

While the nav-computer calculated the coördinates for a second hypertransition, Deringhouse regarded this giant 'water drop'. Beside him sat John Marshall while Capt. Lamanche busied himself with the controls.

"It has a pleasant appearance," remarked Marshall, who was reflecting the Major's thoughts.

Deringhouse nodded. "It's like a blue diamond, irradiated by a reddish light—a magnificent sight. A name like Betelgeuse 4 sounds a little too prosaic for such a wonder of the universe. How about calling it Akvomondo?"

"The Water World? Why not? The name certainly fits."

"So, Akvo it is!" said Deringhouse. "I'm anxious to see what we will find there."

"Probably water," peeped a thin little voice, somewhat timorously, out of a corner of the control room.

Deringhouse turned slowly toward the source of this voice, trying to accustom his eyes to the semi-darkness there, but John Marshall had whirled around as though bitten by a snake. Pucky crouched in the corner and manufactured an embarrassed grin with his single incisor tooth, the while his soft brown eyes seemed to smile imploringly, as though asking for forgiveness.

"You!" gasped Deringhouse and almost fell out of his seat.

"Yes, I," confirmed Pucky, and turned his attention to John Marshall, who was still sitting motionless,

staring at this unexpected apparition. "Don't forget to take in some air, Johnny. The human body can't hold out much longer than 3 minutes without oxygen—and it would be a pity to cause you to—"

"How did you get here?"

Pucky leaned back and supported himself against the bulkhead, visibly relieved. "You may not be ready for this but I came here on board the *Centurion* ."

"Now don't talk nonsense, Pucky. I brought 9 people with me from the Corps. You were not among them."

"Actually, you brought 10 with you but you didn't know it," the mouse-beaver lamely explained. "Naturally, Rhodan doesn't know anything about it, either. He's going to be thunderstruck when he finds out."

Marshall got up slowly and walked over to Pucky. "I'm afraid you're going to be struck with more than thunder, my disobedient little friend. Do you always have to go against regulations? So you sneaked on board.—When did you do it?"

"Sneaked is not the correct expression—I naturally teleported on board while you were still in *Terrania* . This is the first time I've had the nerve to show myself. You aren't really mad at me, are you, John?"

Marshall stared at the miscreant, who pleaded with his brown, hound-dog eyes. His rusty brown pelt lay flat against him, which demonstrated his peaceful attitude. The incisor tooth had long since disappeared behind the lips of his sharp snout. Pucky was not grinning any more, which could mean almost anything.

It was difficult for Marshall to keep a straight face. "You'll have to settle this with Rhodan, Pucky. He's the one who will have to punish you for your insubordination. I can't even put you in irons, because how can you imprison a teleporter?"

"Yes—ah—I've already asked myself that," Pucky murmured softly.

Marshall swallowed almost convulsively. Deringhouse let out a really weird groan and then turned again to the viewing screen, as if he would have nothing more to do with the entire affair. The mouse-beaver belonged to the Mutant Corps, which was led by Marshall. Therefore, Pucky was Marshall's concern.

"Very well," sighed the telepath. "We will hold this situation in abeyance until Rhodan decides what is to be done. I'm afraid you're going to have to be taught a lesson."

"If I can make myself useful here, maybe it won't go so badly," said Pucky, hopefully, with a return of his usual self-confidence. He hopped forward a few steps and looked past Deringhouse at the viewscreen. "So that's the 4th planet. What's the matter with it?"

"Nothing is wrong with it!" Deringhouse turned and looked angrily at Pucky. "What's supposed to be wrong with it?"

Startled, the mouse-beaver drew back. "I only thought..." he chirped, "because you were staring at it so—" Pucky had an ingenuous habit of butting into all things and all places without regard to rank or age. He may have justified the habit on the basis of the fact that everyone treated him that way—because after all it seldom occurred to anyone to say "excuse me" to a mouse-beaver, or "sir" or "if you please..."

"I happen to be pondering over it," said Deringhouse, reprimandingly. "And I'm waiting for the go ahead for our next hypertransit. I do presume that it is still permissible to reflect, ponder and deliberate, or—?"

Pucky stood his ground. He glanced briefly at Marshall. "Oh, it's permissible, alright, Major, although it has been the cause of a great deal of folly and nonsense, as is certainly borne out by human history, which I had the more or less dubious pleasure of studying while I was on the Earth, in order to—"

"Knock it off!" shouted Deringhouse. "Who's been teaching you that soapbox elocution? I don't think you ever intended to end that sentence."

"Well, that's the way Bell always talks when he wants to express himself properly," replied the mouse-beaver defensively. "Naturally, he has also imparted other things to me, but—"

"Yes, I've heard about them," mumbled Deringhouse, and concentrated once more on the viewscreen. "Bell isn't the highest man of letters and he's about as subtle as a bull."

For a moment, Pucky appeared to be somewhat perplexed. Then his incisor tooth gleamed briefly as he hopped back into the corner of the room, avoiding Marshall by a wide margin.

The telepath looked at him in mock sympathy. "I wouldn't want to be in your skin, Pucky, if Rhodan shows up here. This time he would hardly be as lenient with you as he was on Aralon."

"He'll practice a little leniency, alright," growled Pucky with an unusually deep tone of voice, "if I save all of you from certain destruction." He balled himself together on the deck as if ready to go to sleep. "The way I see it, it won't be hard for us to fall into some dangerous trap, and then you may find me to be very useful." Having spoken his piece, he closed his eyes.

Marshall stared down at him for a few seconds, then sighed and returned to his seat next to the controls. Lamanche, meanwhile, had been wise enough to stay out of the situation, choosing not to add to the demoralization of either side.

"Well, Deringhouse, what do you say? Do you think we'd better notify Rhodan about this? Maybe they've noticed Pucky is missing back home and they'll be worried about him."

A heartfelt sigh emerged from the corner.

Deringhouse winked at Marshall. "Worried? Who could possibly worry about such a disobedient mousebeaver? I'll bet you no one has even missed him. It won't even occur to anybody that he isn't around any more."

"Huh?" The question emerged from the corner, slightly restrained but nevertheless audible.

"That's right" retorted Deringhouse, who was playing his ace card now. "No one is going to miss you."

Pucky waddled forward out of the corner, his incisor tooth gleaming in an expression of new challenge and enterprise. Before Deringhouse, the mouse-beaver drew himself up to his full height. "So, you say nobody will miss me? And would you like to make a bet on it? Good! Let's make a wager! Let's say—for 200 carrots and 3 hours of back-scratching... "

"For... 3 hours—what?" Deringhouse appeared to be completely at a loss.

"Quite simple: scratching my back, preferably at the nape of my neck," explained the mouse-beaver pleasantly. "I submit myself to it sometimes as much as a half hour at a time. I remember once that Bell was stuck for 5 hours—"

"Yes, I also heard about that," the Major interrupted him, while running a hand through his sparse hair, "but I'm not taken in by your tricks so easily. You bet with anybody you please but not with me!" He turned to Lamanche. "Well, what do you say? Are we ready?"

"The coördinates have been established," said the Frenchman. "We can transit."

Pucky hopped back into his corner. When the opportunity presented itself, he would remind Deringhouse of the wager...

* * * *

As they emerged from hyperspace and returned to the more trustworthy space-time-continuum, the planet Akvo was hardly two light-minutes distant from them. The instantly-activated deceleration strongly reduced the flight velocity of the *Centurion*. Deringhouse cut in his manual override in order to have the ship completely in his control.

The blue planet continued to grow in size. Its appearance was strangely unique. It did, in very fact, appear to be one giant drop of water, floating weightlessly in the universe and illuminated by a giant rose-coloured lamp. By now, Betelgeuse had acquired the apparent diameter of Earth's own sun but it was billions of miles removed. It's light required many hours to traverse the intervening distance.

Deringhouse switched on the intercom and established a connection with the ship's laboratory. "Meier! This is Control Central. During our approach flight to this planetary body ahead of us, I want you to set up a complete instrumental probe. I need the constitution of the atmosphere, the rotation data as well as the orbital data and the annual and seasonal data that's related to it. Shoot me the results up here as fast as you can."

"Wilco, Commander!" came the answer.

Deringhouse cut off and turned to Marshall. "I'm anxious to see those results."

The telepath waved his hand in a questioning gesture. "Major, I don't quite understand your interest in this planet. You're the commander and I shouldn't mix into your affairs but if you permit me the question—why are you so interested in this fourth planet when our assignment is supposed to be concerned with decoying the Springers into a destruction of the third one?"

"It may be nothing but curiosity," admitted Deringhouse. "But I'm also thinking of our own security. The first observations ever made of the Betelgeuse system only bring up the possibility of two planets having intelligent life—the third and the fourth. If the third is doomed to destruction, I'd like to know at least if the fourth one might be suitable for later operations. I think you can understand that, Marshall. It adds up to this: our overall safety and security demands that we become as completely informed as possible concerning conditions in this system. I believe I can accept the responsibility for the slight delay involved. We won't miss the main action. If the Springers show up, we'll be informed immediately by McClears."

The telepath was able to observe that Deringhouse spoke exactly what was in his mind. He nodded slowly. "I'm in accord with you, Major. Do you also intend to land on Akvo?"

"That depends on the circumstances. If we pick up any signs of intelligent life, I will naturally attempt to establish a communication." A buzzer sounded. "Excuse me—that's the lab. We'll know in a few moments now what the conditions are on Akvo." He pressed a switch and announced: "Control Central."

"Meier here, laboratory. Results as far as we've gone are as follows: the 4th planet has a 48-hour day, the orbital revolution around Betelgeuse requires 270 Earth-years, change of seasons is consequently almost unnoticeably slow, and is insignificant, anyway, because hardly any ecliptic angle is measurable. The atmosphere is breathable. It's a little light on oxygen, and steamy. One landmass about the size of Europe is the only continent and then there are a number of smaller islands. Otherwise, the surface consists entirely of water. The ocean is not particularly deep. That's about all of it at the moment.

"Thank you, Meier."

Deringhouse remained silent for awhile and stared at the videoscreen. The bluish planet had become larger and now almost filled the entire field of vision. In the reddish sunshine the outlines of the single land surface stood out plainly and seemed to lie in lonely isolation on the great watery waste of the planet. If there were intelligences there, they would have to live principally from the sea and its products. Ship navigation would be extremely limited because why cross the sea if there was no shore to reach? A completely unknown type of civilization must have developed itself here. Deringhouse was extremely curious about it.

He finally made a decision. "We'll look for a good landing place on the continent. They could hardly know anything about space travel here."

"Who do you mean—*they*?" asked Marshall, pointedly.

He did not receive an answer...

The *Centurion* circumnavigated the water planet one time. Flying very low, it swept along over the endless blue wastes and then once more approached the coastline of the continent. Isolated advanced archipelagos failed to show the slightest trace of civilization. Overgrown with dense forests, they were reminiscent of the paradise islands of Earthly southern seas. Wide-sweeping sandy inlets and bays invited one to tarry awhile but Deringhouse was not in the least inclined at the moment to take a holiday. What he was searching for was alien intelligences. Akvo could not be without life.

The first evidence that appeared to support Deringhouse's contention was a low-profile dome-like structure located in the immediate vicinity of the coast, not more than a mile from the beach. The water must have been very calm at this location because the sea bottom could be seen quite clearly. The upper portion of the cupola structure rose out of the water, revealing a platform and balustrade. Porthole-like windows encircled the building, the bottom half of which lay under the water and certainly reached the ocean floor.

The *Centurion* slowed its flight.

Deringhouse stared at the phenomenon. "Well, now!" was all he could think of to say at the moment.

John Marshall joined him in observing the dome-shaped structure. As usual, Lamanche remained

unmoved by the event. He tended the controls and made sure that the heavy cruiser remained on its course.

"A noteworthy development!" observed the telepath. "What I can't figure out is why they built that thing in the water when they have plenty of room there on the land."

Deringhouse looked ahead at the nearby coast. "You've got a point there. There's nothing like this that I can recognize on land. At the least I would have expected a city at a location like this but I only see primeval forest and a coastline made up partly of sand and partly of rocky headlands—but otherwise, nothing. It's peculiar, really—very peculiar..."

The domed structure fell behind them as they arrived at the coast and followed it a few miles. Beneath them lay nothing but untouched land, which did not reveal any sign of artificial or synthetic development. The terrain ascended gently, showing low mountain chains, broad river valleys, giant prairies and savannas and endless forests. But no signs of a civilization could be discovered.

"That's very strange," said Deringhouse, expressing his thoughts aloud as though to himself. "There's only one continent on this planet and you'd think the inhabitants would have used up every square foot of land by now. You'd expect to see throngs of people down there, like in our capital cities. And what do we find? Nothing! Absolutely nothing! Where are these characters hiding themselves?"

"If we hadn't seen that cupola back there, I'd swear the place was uninhabited," remarked Marshall.

"The cupola, however, does exist," said Deringhouse pointedly. "There's life on Akvo, that's certain. And we're going to find it."

Having expressed himself, he leaned back as though lost in his own reflections, and this suited Marshall. He gave Lamanche a friendly nod as he left the Control Central. Behind him waddled Pucky, who had read his thoughts. Marshall took the shortest route into that part of the ship where the other 9 mutants were quartered.

The door of the Control Central had hardly closed when Deringhouse stirred out of his mental preoccupation. Without removing his gaze from the videoscreen, he leaned forward abruptly and said to his first officer, "What is your assessment, Lamanche?"

The Frenchman absently swept his hand across several controls on the console before him. He shrugged his shoulders and then expressed himself somewhat guardedly. "We don't know yet what that cupola is. For all we know, it could be a wrecked spaceship—we haven't yet taken a good look at that thing. It would support my own theory that there isn't any intelligent life here."

This explanation did not seem to satisfy Deringhouse at all. He snorted disdainfully. "A wrecked spaceship—hah! The cupola is a building. That's for certain. The only remaining question is, why—" He became silent suddenly. Lamanche looked up and followed the gaze of his commander.

On the videoscreen, the surface below was clearly visible. In natural colour, it drifted slowly over the convex surface of the screen. Then Lamanche also saw the low dome-shaped elevations on the edge of the broad plateau that lifted toward them out of the plain below. The small structures glistened with a reddish reflection of the sun, as though made of metal. Their obvious fabrication was evidenced not only by their individual shapes but also by their overall arrangement.

The *Centurion* started to land...

* * * *

A great hullabaloo of shouts and greetings went up as Marshall and Pucky entered the wardroom of the Mutant Corps.

"Wow, what a surprise!" came a happy cry from Ras Tschubai, the Afroterranian teleporter. "So maybe you're the secret weapon in this operation?"

"He's a secret, alright," grumbled Marshall with ominous undertones. "The little scamp sneaked on board and simply came along—against explicit orders from Rhodan."

The smile of the Africa-born mutant faded in sudden shocked concern. "Oh oh! In that case, I wouldn't want to be in your skin, Pucky!"

"I don't know about that!" giggled young Betty Toufry. "He seems to have a pretty thick pelt on him!" She bent down to stroke Pucky, who submitted to it with visible signs of comfort. He was very fond of the little telepath, who was very much on rapport with him in the sense of paranormal faculties because Betty was also a telekineticist. "Rhodan will forgive you, Pucky!"

"He will if you put in a good word for me, I'm sure," Pucky nodded with renewed confidence.

The Japanese 'listener', Doitsu Ataka, shook his head. "You're talking about discipline. Let him do whatever he wants. I'm inclined to agree with him. At least things aren't going to be dull around here any more. Pucky is always a lot of fun."

Marshall glanced disapprovingly at the Japanese. The fellow mentioned discipline in one breath and violated it in the next.

But Pucky knew how to turn the situation to his advantage. "Right you are, Ataka!" he called out happily. "Who knows how much time we have yet to live—why shouldn't we make merry? Anyway, Rhodan would just have us all die—naturally, in a figurative sense—so let's die figuratively—but at least let's do it merrily. What I suggest is an endurance scratching contest and I'll be pleased to place myself at your disposal..."

Marshall deemed it expedient to change the subject. "Everybody listen closely!" he called out, putting a stop to the general laughter. "On this planet, which the Commander has baptized with the name Akvo, we've just discovered the first signs of intelligent life. We are going to land. No one knows what we will find but one thing is certain: it has nothing to do with our actual assignment."

Unfortunately it was an illogical closing phrase but Marshall realized it only sometime later—as did everyone else. Now, for the moment, there was no time left to think.

The emergency alarm shrilled through the ship.

Marshall stood for a moment as though paralysed. He seemed to be listening inside himself and then a shock ran through his body. "Deringhouse!" he groaned. "What happened? Your thoughts! They're

muddled and confused..."

A buzzer sounded. The viewscreen lit up on the intercom, which connected to all departments of the ship. The commander's face appeared, perplexed and troubled.

"Attention, all hands!" he shouted in hard, almost brittle tones. "This is a top alert! Man all weapon stations at once! Somebody has taken over the controls of the *Centurion* ! We're landing!" He paused briefly as though considering. "Marshall! Keep your mutants on standby. We may need their help!"

"What's the matter with the ship?" cried Marshall. "Have you already tried—"

"It's useless. We've been trapped in a powerful tractor beam. It knocks out all our controls. Frankly, Marshall, I'm not intending to strike back at the aliens. I want first to wait and see what they want from us."

"Don't you think it's amazing that a race would be here with the technical development and means to take over a ship like the *Centurion* when we didn't see the least sign of their activity on the surface of Akvo?"

Deringhouse attempted a weak smile. "That's exactly what I want to find out. What we are experiencing is paradoxical and impossible. No, I wouldn't be too much surprised if an advanced civilization existed here on this world. But..."

Marshall felt the deck tremble under his feet. Then came a harder shock which almost toppled him over. And finally—silence...

On the viewing screen, Deringhouse was seen to glance off to one side before he turned back once more to his audience. "Yes," he said tonelessly, "we have landed. We are in the middle of a rocky plateau. Shining metal dome structures surround us but I can't make out any weapons. Also, neither humans nor any other kind of life forms are discernible. We have to wait it out until the unknown people are ready to establish contact with us. I want everyone to remember this: we are not defenceless, gentlemen. At the first or least indication of hostile action on the part of the opposition, we will strike without compunction but we will not be the ones to start the war. You will not open fire without my orders."

Marshall listened as the various weapons positions reported their readiness and went on alert standby. He gave a few instructions to his mutants and then left the wardroom in order to proceed to the control room, where a better overall view of the situation could be obtained. And if necessary he could also direct any required mutant action from that point.

Deringhouse stood erect and ready before the panorama view gallery and observed the *Centurion*'s surroundings. He gave Marshall only a quick glance and did not permit his presence to interrupt his thoughts. Lamanche hunched a little to one side over the controls of the energy screens, which were not yet activated.

Deringhouse murmured aloud to himself, uncertainly: "There's just no chance that they'd know where we came from, even if they turn out to possess hypersensors. The *Centurion* and the *Terra* are equipped with the necessary hyper-compensators. Nobody can track our transition jumps. At least that's a consolation."

"In spite of all that, they still dragged us down out of the sky," warned the telepath.

"So what if they did? We submitted to it, Marshall. All right, I'll admit that for the moment we were powerless and had to go along with it. I would say right now that we've got the stuff to destroy their installation. On the other hand, why should we? I want to know what they look like and who they are." He looked again at the viewscreen and Marshall followed his gaze.

The heavy cruiser rested on a broad plateau. The first of the metal dome structures stood at a distance of 300 yards, obscuring the edge of the forest behind it. On the horizon shimmered the tops of distant mountains in the heat of noonday. The second dome lay farther to the right—then the third, the fourth and so on. They formed a circle in the middle of which the *Centurion* was located.

Lamanche awoke from his lethargy. "It's a veritable trap—an invisible spider's web," he declared sullenly. "We're sitting right in the cross-hairs of the captive beam that's holding us down. I wouldn't have thought these islanders could come up with something like this. Why don't they show themselves?"

"They probably have their reasons," replied the Commander. He stared intently at a specific point on the edge of the forest. "But I believe our curiosity is about to be satisfied. There comes a ground vehicle."

Now the two other men saw it. A grey-coloured object separated itself from the shadow of the strangely formed giant trees and rolled out slowly onto the plain. Deringhouse activated the magnification of the viewing screen and now they saw it more clearly. It was a type of armoured vehicle, even though it was without a gun turret. In the place of the latter was a curved cupola composed of transparent material. This type of transport equipment often used to explore unknown worlds, especially where the atmosphere was considered either unsuitable or dangerous. Behind the transparency of the cupola, the hazy outlines of several figures could be seen. The distance was still too great to be able to pick out details.

Deringhouse turned around and looked at Marshall. "Well, what do you say? Still no thought impulses?"

"Some, but they are insignificant. They are screening themselves, so it appears they have already had contact with telepaths. They may be telepaths, themselves, and understand the necessary security measures they have to take, to restrict the radiation of their own brain waves."

Deringhouse fingered the vernier adjustment knob on the magnifier and said nothing. There was a sudden new gleam in his eye as he observed the approaching vehicle. For a moment it seemed that he wanted to express something but then he thought better of it and remained silent.

Marshall noted that the Commander's hands trembled slightly. He sent out a telepathic command: *Pucky! Teleport immediately to the Control Central!*

The mental command was hardly finished before the air shimmered in the middle of the room—and the mousebeaver suddenly appeared out of nowhere. He had heard Marshall and had come immediately.

"What's, up?" he twittered, as ready for action as ever.

"We are just now making contact with the alien people, Pucky. Unfortunately, their thoughts are being screened off. We have to know with whom we are dealing. Could you perhaps—?"

"Could I *perhaps*, he says!" piped Pucky enthusiastically. But he added with an impudent grin, "But how about you putting in a good word with the Chief, if I—"

"That's blatant blackmail!" put in Deringhouse without turning around. "But you're on! Even I will protect you if you can succeed in telling me, within the next 10 seconds, who it is that's coming at us in that ground vehicle. I may be mistaken but somehow there's something familiar in those blurry figures..."

Marshall started visibly. "Familiar—you say? I had the same impression from those weak thought impulses. Could it be coincidence?"

"Why argue about it?" asked Pucky. "I only have 5 seconds more. Until then..." The air shimmered once more. The spot in which he had just been standing was empty.

Two seconds later he was back. His face reflected unbounded amazement. With his ears held rigidly high and the nape of his neck bristling, he sank down on his broad hind parts and utilized his wide beaver tail as a support. "Wow! Who would believe it?!" he groaned, then let out a shrill whistle. "Who would have thought that the world was so small? What am I saying—the world? The *universe* is small!"

"What's the matter with you?" scolded Deringhouse. He tore his gaze momentarily from the viewscreen. "Stop driving us up the wall! What do they look like?"

"Speak up, Pucky!" urged Marshall also. He could no longer suppress a very strange presentiment. He began to suspect that they were in for an unpleasant surprise. "Did you see them?"

The mouse-beaver nodded slowly. "I materialized right between them in the ground car. Out of precaution I held my breath, because you never can be sure whether the atmosphere in a strange place like that is good for the lungs. But my fears were groundless. They breathe the same air as we do and they sure looked amazed when they saw me..."

"For God's sake!" roared Deringhouse, suddenly reddening with impatience. "I want to know what they look like! Are they water people or not?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Pucky rejoined with irritating calmness. "Do you believe that intelligent fish could have set up a defence base here on the land? That's quite a nonsense!"

"*Pucky!*!" Deringhouse stretched out the name with a note of dire warning. "Perhaps you don't realize how important it is but I beseech you once more to answer my question—once and for all! *What do the aliens look like?* And what do you mean by your remark that the universe is small?"

The mouse-beaver did not change his manner; he only shoved out his incisor tooth slightly to show that he was still cool and collected. "I don't know if you're going to be ready for this—but they look like the Topides. And if I may express myself more clearly, without disillusioning you too much: I'd like to swear that they are Topides!"

—*Topides...*!

To Deringhouse and Marshall, it was as though an icy hand had grasped their shoulders. It was true that almost 10 years had passed since they had encountered these highly developed and extremely intelligent reptiles in the system of Vega but the skirmish with them was still fresh in the memory of both men. The human-sized Topides possessed two legs and two arms, which they knew well how to use. Their hands were equipped with 6 agile fingers. The body was covered with a scaly, brownish-black skin. The head remained that of a giant reptile. Dark, protruding, chameleon-like eyes appeared to see everything within an angle of 180°.

"Topides!"

What were Topides doing here in the Betelgeuse System?

Deringhouse took a deep breath. "That's just about all we needed! Do these crocodiles have to stick their snouts in everywhere?"

"They have their own little stellar empire," reflected Marshall tensely. "If I'm not mistaken, somewhere in the constellation of Orion. And so, even in this region..."

"Yes, more than 800 light-years distant from Earth. That's still a considerable distance from here."

"What difference does that make?" retorted Marshall. "In any case, it's in the same direction. I wouldn't be surprised if they had a defence base here."

"On an uninhabited world? Why?"

Pucky had listened to the conversation with bowed head but now he shook his head wonderingly and piped up with a shrill voice, "Why cudgel your brains about it? Ask them yourselves what they're doing here!—Here they come!"

Deringhouse swung around and looked at the viewscreen. The domed vehicle had come to a stop less than 100 feet from the *Centurion*. Undoubtedly the reptiles had already concluded that this was an Arkonide battleship. Perhaps the circumstance might be put to some advantage.

The cupola of the ground vehicle opened and 3 reptilian creatures stepped down from it. They wore a kind of uniform which only partially obscured the scaly bodies. Not one of them was without his raygun, fastened in holsters on their belts. Their manner of approach reflected a certain arrogance. Apparently all sides in this encounter were depending heavily on their own superiority but Marshall knew only too well that the Topides, by their nature, did not know fear, and even in the most hopeless situations were accustomed to fight to the last drop of blood. The driving fear of their own dictator was greater than the fear of death itself.

"They certainly have nerve!" marvelled Deringhouse, who had come to know the Topides when he was commander of a detachment of more manoeuvrable space interceptors. "They simply take up a stand right under our gun muzzles and wait to see what we're going to do. We could convert them to atoms..."

"...which wouldn't be much use to anybody," Lamanche permitted himself to observe.

"Do you want me to send those lizards running?" volunteered Pucky, eagerly.

"Are you out of your mind?" inquired Deringhouse. "I want to know what they're up to on this planet and what they want from us. Marshall, you will accompany me. Let's take a look at these characters. Hopefully, there's no one among them who will recognize us."

"That's improbable. We look as much like each other in our own race as they do to us in theirs. I wouldn't be able to differentiate between them. But what will we tell them if they ask us who we are?"

Deringhouse slowly nodded an acknowledgement of the problem and then issued a few instructions to Lamanche, while he walked to the door with Marshall. "Under no circumstance must they find out that we are *Terranians*. We will explain to them that we belong to one of the Springer clans. Hopefully, they

will believe that, even though the Springers normally don't use spherical spaceships. Besides, I think it might be favourable to us, because they aren't on good speaking terms with the Arkonides and they know that the Springers don't particularly qualify as particular friends of the Empire either."

Pucky hopped along behind the two men and was heard to remark, "I suspect that the plot is beginning to thicken. Now, the way I see it..."

Lamanche watched them go and said to himself, "Gene, my boy, if this thing works, I'll eat 3 fighter robots for lunch—without mustard!"

Whereupon Pucky, who had just reached the door, turned around and warned him: "Without mustard? Okay, we'll hold you to that...!"

3/ LORDS OF AKVO

As the main exit lock of the *Centurion* opened, more than 150 feet above the ground, John Marshall felt an unpleasant tingling up and down his spine. He knew, of course, that at this moment more than 200 pairs of eyes were fixed on the Topides and more than two dozen hands were at the controls of the heavy-calibre pulse-beam projector cannons.

But he also knew, with an equal certainty that this could be of little use to him if he were dead.

The silvery glistening escalator ladder emerged from the lock and extended downward. Deringhouse placed his right hand testingly on the butt of his weapon, as if to convince himself that it was loose and ready. Then, with a slight nod of his head, he stepped on the first rung of the ladder, which began to glide downward automatically.

Marshall followed him.

The 3 reptilian creatures stood motionlessly before the giant ship and waited self-confidently for the two men whom they apparently considered to be their prisoners. Their black, round eyes gleamed with an insidious expectation. The physical appearance of the men hardly seemed to surprise them.

Marshall recalled what happened that time in the Vega System. There the *Terranians* had their first encounter with the reptilian race. Rhodan had taken the great Arkonide battleship from them, the *Stardust 2*, which was a half-mile in diameter, and gradually they had succeeded in driving off the Topides. From then on there had been peace.

And now here they were faced with them again, although in another role. At least that's the way Deringhouse planned it.

The talon-like hands of the Topides also lay upon their weapons. Marshall probed their thoughts and read only a mixture of curiosity and keen alertness. They appeared to feel very sure of themselves.

As Deringhouse sprang lightly from the descending ladder rang and walked toward the waiting reptiles, an invisible wall of rising tension seemed to erect itself between humans and Topides. The Major came to

a stop within 10 yards of the Topides. His right hand still rested on the butt of his portable pulse-beamer. A thin smile played about his lips. He was sufficiently acquainted with the mentality of the reptilian creatures not to have to fear an attack at this time.

Marshall remained several yards behind Deringhouse and attempted to scan the thoughts of their opponents in order to determine their intent. But the results were negligible.

Before the two *Terranians* could speak the first word, the middle Topide said to them in purest Intercosmo, "You happen to be in our sovereign territory and you are hereby requested to submit to our regulations and instructions. Nothing will happen to you if you offer no resistance. *Tono?* Who are you?"

Deringhouse did not show any surprise. "We did not intend to land in your sovereign territory. We were forced to do so. I am a Springer and we belong to the clan of Gatzel."

The Topide nodded. "That's what we thought, stranger. However, your ship is of Arkonide construction. We are very familiar with that type."

"That's right," replied Deringhouse, calmly. "It's the heavy cruiser class. We took it from the Arkonides, when they were giving us a bad time. Do you have any objections to that?"

Now the Topide smiled but it was not particularly cheerful. "No, we have absolutely no objection to that. The Arkonides can hardly be called our friends. What do you want in this system? There's nothing of commerce here and, if there were, we could take care of it ourselves."

Deringhouse shrugged his shoulders. "We were on a routine flight when we discovered this planet. We thought perhaps it might bear some kind of life on it and we started to explore it. We didn't find anything except these unusual cupolas."

"They belong to our defence system," explained the Topide. "This water planet was discovered by us years ago and we took possession of it. It serves as a support base."

"As long as nobody shows any resistance to it, that seems perfectly reasonable," Deringhouse admitted cautiously. "And inasmuch as it doesn't appear as though there are any native inhabitants..."

The Topide continued to smile. "There are natives," he said, testily. "They are reconciled to our ascendancy over them." He paused briefly and then added, "Besides, what alternative did they have?"

Deringhouse could no longer suppress his amazement. "Native inhabitants—on this world? We did not see a trace of them during our flight."

"You apparently don't have any equipment that would enable you to observe the life that is under the surface of the water—or do you?"

A shock of realization came to Deringhouse and Marshall. Naturally, on a world like this, any intelligences—if they existed at all—would have had to develop in the water, and when the Topides saw fit to establish a base here, beings were involved who had to be considered in some manner. Marshall thought about the large, dome-shaped structure that somebody had built on the coast. It's design was contradictory to the habits of the Topides and so it had in all probability been constructed in the water so that the inhabitants of the sea could make contact with their overlords.

The overall picture began to form slowly in Marshall's brain.

"I am called Al-Khor," said the middle Topide. "I am commander over the base on this part of the continent. May I ask you now to turn over your weapons? I should not wish to have us come into conflict with the Springers due to an indiscreet action. As soon as I release your ship, you will have your weapons returned to you."

Deringhouse hesitated. A profusion of thoughts raced through his mind and he sought in vain to put them in order. He cast a searching side-glance at Marshall and the telepath nodded his approval. He had long since known that the Topides actually attached a great deal of importance to the maintenance of peaceful relationships between themselves and the Springers.

"Alright," replied Deringhouse and drew his weapon from his belt. "We will abide by your requirements."

One of the reptiles took the weapon from him in his sharp talons and observed it with interest. Marshall also surrendered his raygun.

"In return," suggested Deringhouse, "please give us the assurance that you will not hold us against our will but that we will be free at any time to ask for the return of our weapons and to depart from this planet."

Al-Khor smiled again, "We are happy to give you such assurance. No one will stand in your way if you wish to forego the benefits of our hospitality and if you place no value on it. But first, I think we should have a little talk. Certainly you have a few things to tell us, and believe me—on such a lonely base as this water world, life is very tedious and boring. Come along, please."

Deringhouse hesitated. "What about my crew? I wouldn't like to have any indiscreet action on their part..."

"We have no objection to your instructing your people," interrupted Al-Khor. "Give them the good advice to remain in the ship and not to attempt anything."

Deringhouse nodded and turned on the tiny transmitter on his armband. "Lamanche," he said in English. "We are pretending to go along with the conditions of the Topides. Get hold of McClears and tell him to get over here and stand by for further orders. For the time being, there is no acute danger. That is all."

"Wilco," was the brief reply.

Al-Khor blinked his chameleon eyes suspiciously. "Why don't you speak in Intercosmo?"

"My second-in-command is still very young, Al-Khor. He only understands the dialect of my clan. I told him that he should keep himself calm and wait for our return."

The Topide appeared to be satisfied. With an inviting gesture, he indicated the open door of the domed vehicle, thus allowing his involuntary guests to go first.

Even as the ground vehicle set itself in motion, Marshall established silent contact with Pucky and familiarized him with Deringhouse's plan, which he had read in the latter's thoughts.

* * * *

Maj. McClears always operated in a completely logical manner and therefore he normally acted as Deringhouse would in his place—except that he differed from his commander in regard to personal safety.

When he received the alarming report from Lamanche, he uttered a mighty oath at first and then proceeded to reflect upon the general situation. What would have happened if Deringhouse had not made a flight to the fourth planet?

The answer to that seemed quite simple: they would have waited here at their leisure on the 3rd planet until the Springers made an appearance; they would have attacked, retreated and carried on as if the Earth were being defended. The continuous exchange of individual battles would have created the impression that a whole fleet of heavy cruisers was involved, which could not be destroyed under any circumstances. In time, it would have occurred to the Springers to drop a gravitation bomb on the home world of the *Terranians* and thus wipe out the planet forever. So far, good! But—on the 4th planet were the Topides!"

That was the salient point of the argument!

So now the thoughts and speculations of Maj. McClears were slipping inadvertently into the same channels as those of his friend Deringhouse. Therefore, he had to take a course of action that endangered his own security. Later, when Rhodan recalled this event, he would have to admit that any sensible man would not have been able to act in any other manner, provided that he subordinated his own safety to that of the Earth.

And so it turned out that McClears' deceptive manoeuvre served to initiate the most ingenious of all the unpremeditated moves in the game of Empire that Perry Rhodan had ever undertaken. He did precisely what was necessary to give the semblance of truth to the lie that Deringhouse had told the Topides. His thoughts were racing while he ordered the communications officer to call Lt. Tiffloor back to the ship.

Tiff was the most capable among the new generation of officers being groomed to take the place of the old top cadre in Rhodan's organization. At this particular moment he was occupied with the *Gazelle* in observing surface details. The flying disc—100 feet in diameter and approximately 60 feet thick—was the ideal scoutship for this type of operation. He received the transmitted message just as he had landed upon a plain and was about to disembark. He decided with reluctance to respond to the order and return to the *Terra* and he wasn't in too cheerful a mood when he entered the Control Central and faced McClears.

"It's a wonderful planet down there but unfortunately there isn't any animal life. It's inexplicable to me because I can't think of any hypothesis to cover the situation. Okay—so you called me back. I presume you had some, thing on your mind."

"The understatement of the year!" grumbled McClears. He had not yet brought his complicated train of thoughts to a definite conclusion but in a sense his plan was set. "Deringhouse has landed on the fourth planet. He calls it Akvo."

"That's not surprising—or is it?"

McClears kept his voice level. "Unfortunately, he wasn't the first one to take a liking to that water world, Lt. Tiffloor. There were others who preceded him; namely, the Topides..."

"Topides?" Tiff tried to recall the name. He had been too young at the time and only knew Rhodan then by hearsay but dimly he recalled the original film that he had seen concerning the invasion of the reptiles in the Vega System. "You don't mean those crocodile creatures who wanted to destroy the Earth and clashed with the Ferrons by mistake?"

"That's exactly who I mean," nodded McClears, patiently.

"What are they doing in these parts?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. All I've got is a short announcement from Deringhouse that the Topides have forced the *Centurion* to a landing and have taken the commander prisoner. We've received instructions to fly to Akvo and there to await further orders."

"How is Deringhouse going to give out new orders when he's been taken prisoner?" Tiff wanted to know. "Or is this capture some kind of a cover-up?"

"It could be exactly that. At any rate, were going to take a closer look at Akvo. I'm not very happy about having the Topides in the immediate vicinity. But if they are there already, then we have to try to tam their presence to our advantage somehow. I'm assuming that Deringhouse is thinking along those lines, himself, because he'd have to have a dam good reason to permit himself to be taken prisoner so easily."

"Do you have any ideas?"

"Yes, I do. I'll admit they're a little vague right now but hear me out..."

And McClears laid out his plan to Tiff. After only the first sentence, the lieutenant caught on. A fleeting smile touched his lips but he did not interrupt the older officer. The latter continued his explanation and meanwhile had the *Terra* take off. After the second transition, when Akvo gleamed in the viewscreens, he ended his briefing with the words: "And so I believe that we can kill two birds with one stone. If I only knew how I could transmit my plan, so that Deringhouse would be aware of it, I'm convinced that he would give his approval immediately and request further orders from Rhodan. But without his approval, I cannot set up radio communications with the Earth."

"What about the mutants?" suggested Tiff.

"It's a possibility," conceded McClears. "Unfortunately, we don't have any telepaths on board the *Terra*, so I don't see any other alternative than to operate independently of Deringhouse. We'll keep the *Terra* orbiting at a considerable distance from Akvo and only the *Gazelle* will go down to the surface."

"That's quite a risk."

"It's one we'll have to take," said the major, resignedly. "Deringhouse is going to have to play dumb in case he finds out that we have been overpowered in a brief but heavy encounter. I just hope that he won't take it seriously and really worry about us."

"And I hope," added Tiff, sceptically, "that if he does have such worries, they really will be groundless."

"Join the crowd," said McClears.

* * * *

Surrounded by the other mutants, Pucky crouched on the divan in the wardroom and permitted himself to be pampered. In return, he informed them, from time to time, concerning the events which Marshall transmitted to him telepathically. Also, Lamanche, who had taken over the command of the *Centurion*, was in audio contact with the conversation by means of the intercom. The setup worked better than any other electronic arrangement that might have been devised.

"They are getting along fairly well with Deringhouse and Marshall," said Pucky and he indicated to Betty Toufry a place on his back that he wanted scratched. "Apparently the Topides are pretty serious about starting good relationships with the Springers. Up till now the two races haven't had much to do with each other. As Marshall has been able to read in the thoughts of our Commander, he doesn't intend to butter up the relationship too heavily. Can any of you follow that?"

"Not I." Ras Tschubai shook his head and looked beseechingly at Ataka. "The better they can make the relationship between them, it would seem that our chances would be so much the better to blast out of here all in one piece."

"So?" said Pucky with irony. "What would we accomplish by disappearing from the scene?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, what I mean is, where does it get us if the Topides make a honeymoon with the Springers and allow us to leave? Does that have any positive influence or effect on the actual assignment that Rhodan has given us? Don't forget that the Springers want to destroy the third planet of this system because they think it's the Earth. And here on the fourth planet sit the Topides. Now then—does that start to turn on a light bulb for anybody?"

No particular light came on for Ras Tschubai but perhaps for Lamanche, who sat in the Control Centre, not taking his eyes from the viewing screens and at the same time listening to the conversation in the wardroom of the mutants.

He cleared his throat audibly, pondered the situation intently for a few moments and then stood up and opened the door to the Communications Central. "Still no report from McClears?" he inquired.

The officer on duty shook his head. "Not during the past half hour, sir. The *Terra* went into a wide orbit and is quiet. Our receiver continues on open standby."

"Keep me informed of any activity."

"Yes, sir."

Lamanche acknowledged with a nod and returned to his own position, where he began again to ponder intensively over the entire situation. In some strange manner, his speculations began to move in the same direction as those of Deringhouse and McClears, which was proof of the theory that logically thinking brains always arrive at the same conclusions.

* * * *

The Gazelle departed from the mothership, *Terra*, and hurtled downward in a vertical drop. Lt. Tifflo levelled the spaceship off only when within about a mile of the surface of Akvo and then went into a glide pattern. The atmosphere whistled with the passage of the disc-shaped vehicle but offered little resistance.

McClears and Tiff sat in the small control room with all viewscreens turned on. Once they thought they saw a shimmering, dome-shaped structure in the water next to the coast of the large, single continent but they ignored it. The Gazelle moved more slowly as it continued to lose altitude and acted like the advance guard of an expedition, such as one that might have been assigned to the task of investigating an unexplored planet. The 2 men waited tensely for the first reaction of the Topides and they didn't have long to wait. Near the summit of a mountain there was a sudden flare. The viewscreen picked up a sleek projectile that increased its velocity in a vertical climb and was apparently precisely calculated to cross the path of the Gazelle at the proper moment.

Without doubt, a ground-to-air missile.

Tiff activated the defence screen and a few seconds later a flaming detonation and barely perceptible jar announced that the attack of the Topides had been scattered to the winds in the true sense of the word.

A second projectile suffered the same result.

"What now?" asked Tiff.

"Quite simple, Lieutenant. Now we'll look the situation over more closely, as though we were curious Springers." He adjusted the course and turned the helm over to Tiff. "Circle that mountain and get down a little lower. Keep the screen activated and in the meantime I'll drop a few harmless high-explosive bombs on them, so that they will know that we've got something on board that is dangerous—but naturally *nottoo* dangerous."

Tiff nodded and grinned. The reptiles would undoubtedly fall for the booby trap and try to take these relatively harmless enemies alive. And that was the plan that McClears had developed.

10 seconds later, below in the primitive forest near the foot of the mountain, several bombs detonated. The shrapnel tore holes in the thick vegetation but hardly caused any other damage.

And within another 10 seconds the controls of the Gazelle refused to respond. Tiff struggled in some bewilderment to bring the small spaceship under his control again but he did not succeed. Slowly and steadily, the scoutship lowered and finally landed with a sharp jolt in a broad clearing that was hardly a mile from the coast. From what Tiff could determine, they had landed exactly in the middle of a circle that was formed by small, glistening metal domes.

McClears rubbed his hands. "Everything is working out as smooth as pie. The lizards will be happy to have made such a good catch. We'll leave our 8 crewmen on board while we pretend to surrender to the enemy."

"Let's hope they don't kill us on the spot."

"Don't worry about that. It goes against their type of mentality. I told you the Topides are extremely curious. They'll want to know absolutely with whom they are dealing and why we came. So we'll let them find out. And then they'll be astonished at the activity they're going to develop around here."

"Take it easy," advised Tiff sceptically. He was perturbed when he thought of what Deringhouse's reaction would be to their arbitrary action here.

And Rhodan, above all...!

A ground vehicle approached the Gazelle and came to a stop. Two Topides got out and observed their war booty. Out of one of the metal domes the dark muzzle of an energy cannon emerged threateningly, aimed itself at the Gazelle and waited.

"Okay, let's go," said McClears and nodded to a young captain to whom he had delegated the command of the Gazelle. "Come on, Tiff. The plot thickens. And just remember: we are the advance guard of the Springers. The main force is on its way!"

The two Topides watched the two men calmly as they emerged fearlessly from the hatch and sprang down to the surface. Behind them, the exit closed hermetically. And seconds later the high-energy defence screen was activated again. Admittedly, the Topides could hold the space vehicle captive and hinder its takeoff but it was now impossible for them to destroy the ship or to force an entry into it. The 8-man crew was fully secured from the clutches of the reptile race.

When the Topides requested them to surrender their weapons, McClears did not give his up so easily. They had to be taken from him by force and he didn't miss a chance to strike one of the flat, crocodile skulls powerfully with his fist, which caused him more pain than it did the reptile. And for that reason, it didn't have much of an effect.

The action was adequate and the reaction was what was to be expected. However, whereas Deringhouse had been considered as a possible ally, McClears and Tiff were immediately declared to be prisoners. But McClears didn't allow himself to be intimidated by that. While he and the young lieutenant were shoved into the narrow confines of the ground vehicle and were bumped along over a bad road near the coast, he spouted dire threats against the Topides and promised bloody revenge. His comportment, in view of the not-so-rosy situation, was a bit impractical and so finally the dull-seeming reptile creatures ceased to pay any attention to his ravings. McClears finally gave it up and hoped that he'd soon meet with a more intelligent example of this unpleasant race.

It was a wish that was soon fulfilled but not in a way to bring him any personal advantage.

The road ended on the coast under some high trees and camouflaged by the thick canopy of foliage there was a low-rambling building constructed of gleaming metal. Topides appeared to know of no other building material. The two prisoners were brought into a room, locked in and left to their own resources for the time being.

A brief investigation by McClears convinced him that there would not be any way out of the room without some outside help. Therefore he squatted down on the floor in a corner and began to meditate on the situation.

On the other hand, Tiff thought of his micro body-transmitter. The coin-sized 'thing'—it could be called nothing else since no human scientist actually understood its true nature—had been planted in his

right renal membrane.

Any telepath whose level of para-sensitivity was 'resonant' to Tiff's body-transmitter was capable of tracking the 'telepathic bearing transmitter', Julian Tiff, over a distance of two light-years and thus they were able to determine his location. Through this means, it was naturally possible to also pick up Tiff's thought impulses, if the distance were not too great. So Tiff could be relatively certain that anything he thought of with sufficient intensity would reach the telepath, John Marshall. In addition, he was also equipped with a micro-transmitter in his larynx.

The only thing Tiff could not do was receive...

* * * *

Al-Khor was fairly agitated as he entered the cell in which the two prisoners were being held. A deadly hate gleamed in his bulging round eyes. Only a last spark of circumspection prevented him from executing the two alleged Springers on the spot.

"Repeat once more what you said to my subordinate officers," he challenged McClears harshly and stationed himself in the doorway so that the two guards accompanying him would be free to fire their weapons. "I promise you that you will not be punished if you speak the truth but I must know what happened."

The major shrugged his shoulders. "Don't take your second officers too seriously. They must have misunderstood. What do you mean, anyway?"

"You know very well what I mean, Springer. Moreover, you should know that you are not the only prisoners that we've taken. We've captured a heavy cruiser and we have in our power a certain Maj. Deringhouse."

According to the plan, McClears put on an act of being horrified by this announcement and even became pale, which Tiff observed in secret admiration. He sprang to his feet and came a few steps toward the Topides. The guards raised their weapons threateningly. Al-Khor remained fearlessly where he was and did not move one inch.

"If your testimony is valid, your lives will be spared!"

McClears cast a quick glance at Tiff, who nodded affirmation. He could rely on the fact that Marshall was receiving the tracer impulses. "What are your questions?" he challenged Al-Khor.

"What is the meaning of your threat that others would follow to wreak revenge. Also, you told my people something about an impending invasion by your clan."

McClears gnashed his teeth dramatically. A small drop of blood appeared on his lower lip. "In my anger... Well, what's the use of holding anything back? I don't see any reason to remain silent about something that you're going to find out about anyway. The Springers suspected the existence of a stronghold in this system that belongs to their deadliest enemy. You aren't familiar with them, so their name isn't relevant to this discussion. Anyway, the Mounders were alerted. You probably know that the

Mounders are the special police force of the Springers. The combined forces of the Mounders are going to attack and destroy the third and fourth planets of this system without any prior parlay or negotiation. So I can only give you the good advice to get out of here as fast as you can."

"Hah!" snorted Al-Khor uncertainly. "This is a trick!"

McCleers began to roar with laughter. He laughed until tears appeared in his eyes. Then, in a gesture of vast amusement, he clapped the Topide on both of his scaly shoulders.

"A trick? My dear friend, I swear to you by all my ancestors that I speak the truth! The Springers are preparing to depopulate this entire system without leaving a trace. Nothing can hinder them from their purpose—that I promise you!"

"Nothing?" roared Al-Khor in sudden rage. There was an insidious gleam in his eyes. "You mean nothing can hold up the Springers? I think that perhaps there is something. If they find out that we consider the fourth planet as our own property, no one would dare..."

"Why not?"

"Because..." Al-Khor hesitated. "Well, because the Galactic Traders have no reason to open hostilities against us. They don't have a good relationship with the Empire and we don't either. Why shouldn't we cooperate with one another?"

"For a very simple reason, my dear friend," McCleers explained with apparent delight. "Because of course we have to assume that you are allied with our enemy, who has a military base in this system—in fact, has practically populated it."

Now it was Al-Khor's turn to laugh. "The water creatures—your deadly enemies? That's ridiculous! It's not only absurd but also even..."

"Water creatures?" inquired McCleers, cautiously. "I don't understand what you mean."

"On this planet there is a comparatively intelligent race that appears very infrequently on the land and also makes no claim to it. That's why we could set up our stations without hindrance. They only exist in the water and it's on the bottom of the ocean that they have to build their cities. But other than that there is nothing in this system that would represent a threat of any kind. If you don't refer to these water creatures then your Springers are the victims of a gross error."

"Our information is quite reliable," insisted McCleers, while shaking his head in denial. "I have been instructed quite thoroughly and specifically concerning the plans of our patriarchs. In these briefings it has been asserted that the Topides have a weak military base on the fourth planet, the presence of which need not be taken into consideration. You can see that even negotiations will not help you any further. Our leaders consider you to be allies of our deadly enemies."

"In the name of the galactic gods!" cried the Topide. "Now once and for all, tell me who this mysterious deadly enemy is!"

McCleers declined. "I'm not authorized to reveal it," he said.

"In that case we can force you to tell us!"

"You haven't got time," advised the major calmly. "Our fighting units can strike at any moment—and then it would be too late for you."

Al-Khor let out a hiss of rage. He signalled to his guards and turned around and left the cell. With a dull thud, the door slid into its slot.

McCleary looked at Tiff, who had quietly repeated the entire conversation and thus had transmitted it all to Marshall and Pucky. "Well?" he asked, triumphantly.

Tiff shrugged his shoulders. "Let's hope," he said sceptically, "that they will react to all this precisely as we would expect rational but militarily efficient beings to react."

McCleary grinned. "That they will do—you can depend on it!"

Unfortunately there was no possibility of confirming this because only 10 minutes later they were picked up for transporting elsewhere. They were taken in a small vehicle directly to the coast, loaded on board a flat boat and brought to one of the steel, dome-shaped islands. This was the same cupola that they had seen before from the air. Deringhouse had probably also noticed its presence here. Using a ladder fastened to the wall, they climbed up the low superstructure, which was encircled by a railing. An elevator brought them finally into the depths of the structure. A Topide whom they hadn't seen before led the way. He was heavily armed and of a fierce disposition.

McCleary was not thinking of escape any more than Tiff. They were both dominated by a single thought: would their ruse not fail to work its effect?

The room was equipped with glass walls which faced the sea on all sides. Here one could enjoy an unobstructed view of a world that lay 5 to 6 fathoms under the surface of the water. Built-in air locks indicated that one could penetrate the open sea from here without letting water penetrate the below-sea level chamber. Or also the opposite: one could enter the cupola from the sea and this seemed to be the only reasonable purpose for the entire installation.

The Topide stopped in front of a door. He opened it and stepped back. "Here's your new prison," he hissed. "You remain here until everything is over with."

"What do you mean—over with?" McCleary asked. But he didn't get an answer. Shrugging his shoulders, he entered the chamber, followed by Tiff, who quickly spoke into his laryngeal transmitter. The door glided shut and they were alone.

Alone—where?

Only the door seemed to be made of opaque material. Otherwise they seemed to be floating in emptiness—in the middle of the ocean, the nearby bottom of which dully reflected the light of day. But the truth dawned on them quickly: they had been placed in a cell that was under the dome structure or on its lower edge. This transparent cell floated in the ocean. Except for the side where the door was, they were surrounded on all sides by water.

McCleary sat down in a corner on the transparent floor and to him it seemed as though he crouched on the water itself. Curiously he looked around. "Well now, that's very interesting," he remarked, sarcastically. "We're supposed to study oceanography until they drown us!"

Tiff shuddered slightly. "You mean—they're going to kill us?"

"Don't be silly! I don't mean that literally but you did hear them say that intelligent fish or something of the sort are supposed to exist here. I guess we're supposed to look at them—but don't ask me why. On the other hand, it could be these fish are supposed to look us over and learn what Springers look like. It's a crazy situation."

"If I only knew whether or not Marshall has had a chance to pass on my information to Deringhouse. Deringhouse is, after all, no telepath but at least Pucky must know where we are."

The water was bright blue, mixed with a rosy glow from the light of Betelgeuse. At this place the ocean was not more than 10 fathoms deep. Now, after their eyes had accustomed themselves to the strange twilight of their surroundings, they could easily see the ocean bottom, which was perhaps another 4 fathoms underneath the transparent floor of their unusual prison cell.

Strange water plants swayed there in rhythm with an invisible current. Colourful fish shot through the scene in decorative swarms, as if pursued by an unseen enemy. In between hovered a few frail, transparent creatures, which moved with a slow dignity, reminiscent of Earthly jellyfish. Farther ahead the bottom dropped suddenly away and the water became dark blue and endless.

Then it was that Tiff emitted a cry of astonishment. Staring with widened eyes, he pointed into the deep blue of the sea.

McCleary followed his startled gaze and for the first time human eyes beheld the rightful lords of the water planet...

4/ EIGHT LIVES AT STAKE

In the meantime other affairs came to a head. Deringhouse could hardly recognize Al-Khor as the latter ordered them brought before him.

"Why have you told me nothing about the imminent attack of your clan?" asked the Topide in sinister tones. His reptilian eyes gleamed ominously. "You should have considered it an obligation to do so."

"Obligation?" replied Deringhouse in amazement. "Is it perhaps then your obligation to keep me here against my will?"

"You are not being forced into the status of prisoners."

"But nevertheless, we are, aren't we? Will you perhaps deny that our ship..."

"That's the other matter I wanted to question you about." Al-Khor watched Deringhouse suspiciously. "What were you telling me—whom did you take it from? The Arkonides?"

Marshall swiftly read the thoughts of the Topide and knew why the question was being asked. Hopefully Deringhouse would catch on quickly enough. Otherwise he'd have to warn him.

"That's right. From the Arkonides," admitted the major cautiously, "but I naturally don't know whether the Arkonides captured it from somebody else before that. Why do you ask?"

Al-Khor nodded, apparently reassured. "That is probable, because the name that's painted in black letters on the hull is not in the Arkonide language. Anyway, let's drop that. We have placed the commander of the other ship under tight security. I'm seriously considering what I should do with you."

"Let us go," suggested Deringhouse. "What do you get out of keeping us here?"

"Hostages," retorted Al-Khor short and to the point. "You will be here with your people when the Springers come to destroy this world and perhaps—under my surveillance—you will place yourselves in contact with the attackers before then in order to warn them."

"That wouldn't be of much use," conjectured Deringhouse, truthfully enough. "They wouldn't listen to me."

"Then you will die along with us!"

"Fine!" The major forced a smile. "Then at least in that respect we would be more or less allied with each other, wouldn't you say?"

Al-Khor did not answer. Without a word he left the prison cell that now served the *Terranians* as a temporary home.

Marshall frowned. "I don't like it," he announced, "and my mutants have been unhappy for some time now. Pucky has been raving to get into the action. I can hardly hold him back any more."

"He won't have to wait long," said Deringhouse consolingly and stared at the blank wall of the undecorated room. "What's with McClears?"

"He's sitting with Tiff in a glass prison cell under the ocean."

Deringhouse smiled. "Well, that way at least they're not being bored to death," he observed. "Okay—let's get with it. Give the mouse-beaver our position. Let him zero in and join us. Let's shake up these crocodiles with a real scare. They've certainly earned it."

Two minutes later, Pucky materialized with a happy grin and made the narrow cell more crowded. He brought two freshly loaded rayguns and several atomic hand grenades which, although not much larger than the average walnut, were capable of a devastating effect. He himself wore an impulse beamer in his belt, the weight of which was giving him quite a problem.

"So here we are!" he twittered. "Let's give them a show!"

"Hold on a moment!" warned Deringhouse. He turned to Marshall, who was in the process of signalling him while listening inwardly, telepathically. In the same second, Pucky's mouse-like physiognomy took on an almost devout expression. He seemed to have forgotten his spirit of enterprise.

Deringhouse waited patiently. He knew that both of the telepaths were receiving an important piece of news from Tiff.

* * * *

McCleairs emitted a hoarse cry of amazement and alarm.

A squadron of underwater torpedoes raced toward the, glass cell in arrowhead formation, as if about to blast the entire domed structure into the air. The slender bodies were perhaps 5 feet long and glistened like silver in the reddish light coming down from the surface 10 fathoms above them. From the stem portions of the weird missiles streamed white jets of compressed water, which quickly dissipated and faded away.

Only upon a second examination was McCleairs aware of his error.

These were no synthetically created torpedoes but living creatures, seal-like, with wide-open mouths, small eyes and low-lying oval-shaped ears. Now the speed of the small detachment diminished. Out of pouches in their skins emerged slender arms with finely jointed hands. The compressed water jets at their tails faded out. The animals—were they animals?—came to a stop.

They swam curiously around the glass cage and observed the two occupants with intelligent eyes. One of them came close and pressed its face against the transparent wall. McCleairs gazed directly into the questioning eyes.

And then he also sensed the vibrations.

Tiff finally reported to Marshall and Pucky.

"So that's what they look like—the little fishmen," mumbled McCleairs, mostly to himself. "They came at us like rockets—their locomotion isn't by regular swimming movements. Instead they have their own system. Probably some kind of recoil or reaction. They swallow water, compress it inside themselves and then jet it out behind them. Good heavens!—they're living underwater rockets!" He pressed his right hand flat against the separating glass wall. "They generate waves of vibration," he added, thoughtfully. "Maybe some kind of means of communication. If we could only understand..."

Tiff heard him and transmitted the description onward. Marshall received it and reported, in turn, to Deringhouse.

"Ataka!" said Pucky.

Deringhouse nodded. "Maybe you're right, Pucky. The Japanese 'earman' can pick up sound waves that no normal human ears can discern. Also ultra-sound. If these fishmen aren't telepaths, and it doesn't seem to be the case, maybe they do communicate by means of vibrations or sounds in the ultra-range. Ataka can detect them. Besides, his perceptive faculties are combined with a sort of unconscious telepathy, so that it's probable that he might be able to understand the alien sounds. Pucky, bring Ataka here."

The mouse-beaver straightened up. "This is a pretty narrow pad, isn't it, Major?"

"You won't be here very long. We will break out and free McCleairs. The masquerade is over. We don't have to impose on our lizard friends any longer."

"Thanks to the eternal gods!" squealed Pucky.

"Why is that? What's on your mind?" inquired Deringhouse apprehensively.

The mouse-beaver revelled for a moment in memory of his telekinetic feats of the past. "Well, I've tossed around a few robots and saurians in my time," he said, "but a crocodile—that's kind of new to my trade!"

A second later, he disappeared.

"It's true that the Topides are going to be surprised to find us suddenly carrying weapons but we shouldn't underestimate them. If it's necessary, they can die without the flicker of an eyelash. There's only one point where they're sensitive: they're superstitious."

"Then Pucky is certainly in the right place, Major."

"You can say that again," Deringhouse agreed. "The rascal is only too well aware of it. You know, after all, according to the book, I should have locked him in the brig."

"There's no prison cell that can hold him," said Marshall, repeating a well-known fact. "In many respects, Pucky is a true prodigy."

The air flickered about them and then the mouse-beaver and Ataka formed before their eyes. The Japanese made himself as thin as possible but they could hardly move because of the narrow restrictions of their quarters and the ventilation also left something to be desired.

"It's as bad as a phone booth!" carped Pucky disdainfully.

"Not for long," said Deringhouse emphatically. "Can you open the lock on the door?"

The mouse-beaver hopped over to the metal door panel and examined the inserted bolt mechanism, which it was not possible to manipulate directly—at least not manually. But the mouse-beaver had an invisible set of fingers at his disposal, in the form of telekinetic currents of force.

The invisible tendrils of energy emanating from his small but incredibly capable brain penetrated behind the smooth metal and explored the intricacies of the mechanism. Then, with a soft click, the bolt sprang open. Deringhouse stepped forward and pushed the door outward.

"Well done, Pucky!" he complimented him and drew his raygun. "And now to stir up a little panic among the lizards! Anyway, they'll have their hands full activating their defences against the imminent attack of the Springers. I grant them that they won't have very long to wait."

"But at least long enough until we're back to safety and can join the action," Marshall warned, guarding against over-optimism. "Pucky, are you picking it up? There are Topides nearby."

"Yes, there's a whole crowd of them—up there behind that door."

They stood in a long, slightly curving passageway that obviously led along the outer rim of a dome-shaped structure. A row of doors led away into the distance. On the other side of the passage were windows. Beyond lay a primeval, tropical landscape with mountains and forests. On the horizon

shimmered the broad surface of the ocean. The sinking sun was close to the dividing line between water and sky.

Deringhouse stopped near the door that Pucky had indicated. "Here?" he asked, wishing to be sure.

Marshall and Pucky nodded in rare agreement. Deringhouse lifted his weapon, stepped slightly to one side and activated the firing button. The fine beam of pure energy struck the frame of the door, melted the metal and moved downward in a welding action. Immediately the swiftly moving mass created a thick welding seam. It would certainly take hours for anyone to open the door. It was only to be hoped that in the room behind it there was not an exit.

"They're sitting neatly in the trap," praised Ataka with shining eyes.

"I'd rather have put them through a couple of flying loops," put in Pucky. "Flying reptiles would make quite a circus!"

"Wait your turn," advised Deringhouse and led the way.

The others followed. Pucky brought up the rear, because when he was not teleporting, his short legs always upset his calculations, as far as locomotion was concerned. In order to suppress his vexation, he whistled loudly and shrilly to himself as though not a Topide existed.

The passage ended at a door which was standing ajar. Behind it was no chamber at all but freedom. However, what kind of freedom was it? Under these circumstances, was there anything that could be done with it? They were still in the camp of the reptiles.

Deringhouse took a firm grip on his weapon and pushed the door open. Inasmuch as he did it rather violently, the Topide sentry outside was almost catapulted belly first onto the ground but he caught himself and turned around with a grunting sound. In his eyes was the equivalent of a reproach.

The reproachfulness transformed itself into alarm as he saw Deringhouse, Marshall and Ataka. Then shock became amazement when he saw Pucky. Pucky took offence at the other's amazement, which only Marshall was able to grasp, because he was also a telepath and was able to comprehend the first mental reaction of the guard, the same as Pucky.

"What—?" sizzled the mouse-beaver in his rage and he almost choked. "You call me—vermin? Then you're a kite...!"

And the Topide flew like a kite.

Telekinetic force currents lifted him from the ground and sent him vertically upward into the air. He let out several shrill cries of alarm that no one heard. Pucky's flare of anger soon burned itself out and he lowered the unfortunate Topide, who had lost his weapons as a result of his involuntary jump. Thus divested of everything but fear, he was deposited on the flat roof of the dome-shaped building. There the reptile hunched close to the edge of the roof and stared down, uncomprehendingly, at the 3 men in whose midst was a small, furry creature that seemed very similar to the giant rats in the canals back home.

"Vermin—of all things!" snorted Pucky again and strutted right out into the open as if he had never heard of the word "danger".

In a shed at one side of the main structure, Deringhouse recognized a couple of the ground vehicles, whose operation he had providentially observed, so it would not be difficult to put such a vehicle to use in making their escape. Of course, Pucky could have transported them one at a time to the *Centurion* but then possibly this would give the Topides a little too much to think about. Everything had to look so normal that no one would get suspicious.

"Over there—the ground cars!" Deringhouse called after Pucky. "Let's take one of them! But first, let's take care of some general confusion."

The rest was not too difficult, because the leaders of the Topides were locked in and appeared for the moment to have no other immediate worry than to break out of the welded door. Marshall threw two of the small bombs into the building and raced after Deringhouse and Ataka, who were busy getting to the cars.

With a flaming detonation, the dome-shaped building shattered into many pieces which, having become molten, simply melted down. Out of a nearby entrance a few of the unwounded Topides came storming and began to shoot wildly about with their hand weapons. That was a welcome signal for Pucky to give them his best attention.

While the 3 men were attempting to get one of the larger ground vehicles into operation, the mouse-beaver started to 'play', as he called it when he had the opportunity to apply his telekinetic gifts at will.

The reptiles did not know what was happening to them. They suddenly lost their footing and began to float in the air. No one suspected the little furry animal to be the cause of this miracle, except Al-Khor who was making a few connections in his mind. The leader of the Base Command sailed weightlessly along above the tops of several trees without any visible means of propulsion, while he recognized in the mouse-beaver the curious apparition that had popped up in the ground car for several seconds earlier that morning.

What was happening was not natural! But Al-Khor did not know personal fear. This wonder creature was made of flesh and blood and therefore had to be vulnerable. He still possessed a raygun. In spite of this more than ridiculous situation, he aimed at the tiny creature in the middle of the rubble-strewn forecourt and pressed the trigger button.

The result was something other than what Al-Khor had expected.

Since he was the same as weightless, the recoil of the energy beam accelerated him sharply into the sky. Noting the astounding action of the Topide, Pucky gave impetus to Al-Khor's flight. After putting him through a few somersaults, he finally set him, down on the top of a tree that was over 150 feet high and whose lowest branches came only within 60 feet of the ground. The Topide would have to figure how he was going to get down.

To their horror, the other reptiles collided in the middle of the air and made a hopeless tangle. No one dared to shoot for fear of endangering the other.

In the meantime, Deringhouse rolled the ground vehicle out of the shed. A further hand grenade got rid of the remaining ground cars in one blinding flash of destruction. The Topides would have to walk. That was precisely what they despised doing the most.

"Let them down!" shouted Marshall and motioned to Pucky, who crouched happily in the sparse grass

and formed the reptiles into a circle a hundred feet above the ruins of the dome. "They've had enough!"

"But I haven't yet!" shrieked Pucky, letting the Topides fall 30 feet before bringing them to an abrupt halt in midair.

"So I notice!" Marshall scolded and gave Deringhouse several instructions. The ground vehicle rolled alongside Pucky and stopped. "I'll have to do something about that!" He leaned down from a side door and gripped Pucky by the nape of the neck. He lifted the mousebeaver up and, with a firm grip, brought him into the dome-shaped cabin. "And now do what I told you to!"

For a brief moment Pucky wavered, then grunted angrily and looked up at the terrified Topides, who waited motionlessly, and for the most part without weapons, to see what the uncanny power would do with them now. Then he sighed resignedly and gave his brain a corresponding command.

The Topides went into a squadron-like flight formation and then hurtled away with a reckless acceleration to disappear on the other side of the treetops. Pucky gazed for a few more seconds after them, then sighed once more and turned to Marshall. "So?"

"What's the matter with you? You aren't supposed to let them fall!"

"They haven't fallen, Master. They're sitting somewhere in the trees and building nests for their young ones, in case they don't prefer to climb down. But of course that's also possible." The mouse-beaver's bad mood was obvious. "So what do you want me to do now?"

Marshall took a deep breath. The worst was over. "We rescue McClears. He's in a worse situation than we are. He only has Tiff with him."

Pucky listened within his mind. "The distance is exactly 22.6 miles southeast. Should I make a jump over there?"

"Not yet. And when you do, you have to take Ataka with you; he's going to try to make contact with the Akvons."

"Akvons?"

"Yes, that's what we call the fishmen. Deringhouse had the idea. In the coming fight, I don't want any innocent forms of life to suffer. Nobody wants that."

"What's happening to the *Centurion* ?"

Deringhouse had steered the ground vehicle onto a narrow road that led in the direction of the coast. He adjusted his small armband transmitter, which the Topides had not taken from him because there had been no time to do so.

"Capt. Lamanche will have to show us what he can do," said the major. "We will drive to the coast and start an action to rescue McClears while the *Centurion* deactivates that tractor beam and also comes to the coast. We'll join each other then. In any case, I want to avoid anything that will make us look supernatural to the Topides. They know only too well that the Springers fight with traditional weapons and equipment. We must not arouse unusual suspicion—and that goes especially for you, Pucky!"

"Am I a supernatural being?" asked the mouse-beaver anxiously.

Deringhouse didn't go into that one. He established communication with Lamanche. "Captain, my instructions are for you to give a brief warning and then bring your guns into play and destroy the metal domes that are now surrounding the *Centurion*. It's my thought that they are probably the generators for the traction beam. And then clear out. Track us if we are on the coast. I'll then give you further instructions."

"Roger!" came Lamanche's voice, cool and impersonal as ever. "Anyhow, it's a miserable thing to sit around without any action like a mother hen on her eggs. The mutants are burning up, wanting to show those lizards a thing or two."

"The mutants, above all, will remain in the background. The Topides know that Rhodan has a Mutant Corps but the Topides must believe that they are dealing with normal Springers. Is that clear?"

"Roger again, sir," returned Lamanche, somewhat offended. "We will meet on the coast."

Deringhouse stared for a few seconds at the suddenly silent receiver. Then he grinned briefly and put the vehicle in motion.

The route he followed could hardly be called a road but at least it indicated a direction. The dome-shaped vehicle was well equipped with shock-absorbers and springs but the abnormal shape of the seats, which were not built for human anatomy, forced a cramped position during the trip.

The terrain sloped downward and after a half-hour the coast came into sight. To the right and the left there was hardly an opening in the primitive forest, in whose undergrowth no hand, either human or inhuman, had yet penetrated. The road curved slightly to the left and headed toward a point which could not be far from the place from which one could reach the metal island, a mile or so across the water, where McClears and Tiff were held prisoners. But the road reached the seacoast even sooner. Here the primeval forest could not find sufficient nourishment in the sandy soil, so that a broader, more wide-open strip was created. The road led along this directly toward the east.

Deringhouse drove the car under the protective branches of a giant tree and cut off the engine. The humming ceased and for a moment the 3 men heard nothing other than the roar of the surf and the movement of the wind in the leaves of the trees. The primitive landscape stretched calmly and peacefully before them. The sea stretched away into endless distance—it would be necessary to circumnavigate the globe to reach land again. The billows rolled toward the coast and broke far off shore to then come hurtling toward the sandy beach in a foaming flood. Then leisurely the water washed back into its own element.

"Here I'd like to put up some tents," murmured Ataka dreamily, "like on an uninhabited south sea island..."

"Appearances are deceiving," retorted Deringhouse and he pointed at an angle into the sky. They followed his gaze. A small, glistening aircraft object raced across the crystal clear dome of the sky and moments later was lost to view. "That's a patrol flight. They probably don't know yet what has happened. If we're lucky, the communications equipment at their base has been destroyed."

Marshall turned to the Japanese. "Do you think you could make contact with the Akvon's from this point? Otherwise you'd have to be teleported with Pucky into McClears' prison. It would be better if the action to set them free were started from here, in order not to raise any suspicions. The Topides have to believe that we are Springers, without any supernatural faculties."

Ataka nodded and came forward out of the shadows of the trees. "If Tiff described it correctly, they communicate by means of sound waves. I'll try to pick up a contact—in the water. So—what I'm going to do is take a bath!" He dropped his uniform jacket onto the beach, got rid of his trousers and sauntered to the roaring surf like a soldier on furlough.

Pucky watched him enviously. "He has all the luck!" he chirped. "I wouldn't mind a cool bath right now myself."

"Maybe you'll get to bathe much sooner than you'd like to!" said Deringhouse. "Or above all—*more* than you'd like to!"

"He can't hear you with the noise of the surf," replied the mouse-beaver evasively. He watched as Ataka leapt over the first combers. But he had to work his way out almost 50 yards before the water reached to his chest. The waves lifted him now with an even cadence and he waved happily back toward the shore.

"Where does he think he is, on leave or something?" cried Pucky jealously.

Suddenly, Ataka disappeared.

In one moment his head was clearly visible and in the next moment it was gone. He remained out of sight for almost a minute before his laughing face bobbed up again. He waved both of his arms excitedly.

"He can hear the Akvons." Marshall passed along the message of the Japanese. "But he understands nothing. He may be receiving an overwhelming confusion of information. At any rate, we know now that they have a means of communication."

"Just barely!" was Deringhouse's evaluation. "What now?"

"Maybe the Akvons are telepaths," said Pucky hopefully.

"Not very probable," put in Marshall, "but we'll soon find out."

Ataka signalled again. Now he dove under once more. When he reappeared, Marshall became excited.

He's reporting stronger impulses. He has been detected. And now..."

They saw it themselves.

Out there, 200 yards from the beach, the surface of the water was cut by 4 or 5 V-shaped ripples, which converged upon Ataka, who had become motionless. The waves reached to his neck but sometimes only came to his navel.

The 5 silvery trails circled him and then their foamy wakes subsided. A sleek, seal-like body emerged from the water in front of Ataka and began to gesticulate with its very movable arms. Its oval mouth was clearly discernible.

"Akvons!" said Marshall. "Just as Tiff described them. Now the question is, whether or not Ataka understands them." He hesitated a second, then nodded. "Contact has been made, but... Pucky, jump over to the *Centurion* and fetch André Noir!"

"Noir?" queried Deringhouse. "What do we need with a hypnotist? Do we want to force the Akvons to our will?"

"No, but with his help we can make ourselves understood to them. The fishmen are not telepaths and nobody understands their language. Noir can implant a suggestion of our intentions."

"Good!" Deringhouse agreed. "But be careful, Pucky. Keep in mind that Lamanche is already..." He cut off abruptly.

The mouse-beaver had disappeared already. Only his tracks in the sand, which ended abruptly, signified that he had even existed here.

Deringhouse cursed. "He doesn't even wait until I finish giving a command!"

"But he did!" Marshall grinned. "After all, you know, he reads thoughts. And we have little time to waste."

Meanwhile, Ataka had continued to communicate with the fishmen but apparently without results. He continued to point toward the land and began gradually and slowly to approach the shore. The Akvons followed him hesitantly.

Deringhouse and Marshall watched intently. When the Japanese reached the beach and turned around, the Akvons were still there and appeared to be standing up. The water reached only to the lower portion of their bodies, the scaly skin of which glistened silvery in the light of the lowering sun. Deringhouse would have given much to know if they possessed feet as well.

Ataka beckoned to his new friends. In a slow and ungainly manner, they came in closer. And then it was seen that the Akvons did not have legs but instead a strong, flat swimming tail with which they guided their underwater travel.

Marshall sharpened his telepathic ears and concentrated. "Their thought impulses are strong enough. I can receive their mental currents. Just barely but perceivable. If only Noir were here! I'd like to know what's taking Pucky so long!"

Ataka pointed up onto the beach where Deringhouse and Marshall were standing. The Akvons, raised their shining eyes to the two men, who must have looked as strange to them as did they to the humans.

"They can endure 2 or 3 hours of exposure out of water," muttered Marshall. "One of them was just thinking of this. They are peaceable but have no idea of how we came to their world. Hm-m-m. They don't think very much of the Topides. They believe that we are their allies. It's time that we straightened them out on that."

At this very moment Pucky materialized with André Noir.

"Just got out of there before Lamanche took off. He sure gave the Topides a hot foot—their whole tractor-beam installation is down the sink!"

Deringhouse sighed. "If I'm not mistaken, that's more of the speech contamination you've picked up from Bell. All right, Noir, now's your chance to show us what you've learned. Marshall will serve as your receiver, so you two get to work and establish communication with the Akvons."

And the communication occurred!

Marshall picked up the thought impulses and translated them vocally. Then André Noir caused answers to appear in the brains of the fishermen, in the form of thought-pictures which were clearly understood. Admittedly it was an intricate method but nevertheless it produced practical results.

"You are strangers on our world?"

"Yes, we have come from the stars, where we too have a home."

"And why have you come here?"

Deringhouse, who directed the interview, permitted the reply: "In order to warn you and to help you. But permit us to ask a question: are the 4-limbed reptiles your friends? Did you give them your permission to live on the land that belongs to you?"

The answer returned immediately: "No, they didn't ask us. Many days and nights ago they came here and built their houses. How could they ask us anything? We don't understand them and they don't understand us."

"And you would prefer it if they were to go back where they came from?"

"Yes, that would be better. But how can we drive them away? We have no weapons."

"Do you want us to help you?"

A slight pause followed this question. Then the Akvon's reply proved that they were smart indeed—and distrustful.

"And what do you wish in return for that?"

Deringhouse smiled: "Only one thing: your friendship. We will carry on trade with you, we will exchange goods and we will build a small defence base on the land so that the reptile people cannot return here."

"The reptiles have never traded with us. Very well, we are in agreement. We shall report to our leaders."

Deringhouse got back to the main item. "There is one thing more: the reptiles have taken two of our friends prisoner. We wish to set them free but it will be difficult without your help. Will you help us?"

"We know about the captives. They are in the water castle of the reptiles. Can you live under water?"

"No, we need air to breathe. Under water we would die."

"Air?" came the thought-impulse; and then: "Very well, we shall keep that in mind. Wait for us in this place until early tomorrow morning. Perhaps we may find a solution."

"If our great ship comes here," replied Deringhouse, "we will also have a solution. But very well: we will meet tomorrow in this place when the sun has risen. We shall wait for you."

"We'll be here!" promised the Akvons. They waved once more to the men, observed the mouse-beaver

curiously for several seconds and then disappeared into their natural element.

For a little while the silvery streaks of their bodies could be seen and then they were lost from sight as the fish-beings dove down and hurried away into the depths of the sea.

Pucky watched them go. He licked dry lips with his tongue. "They've got it pretty good down there," he chirped. "Do you think maybe they never get thirsty...?"

Deringhouse looked at the horizon. Huge and red, Betelgeuse was getting ready to sink behind the vast tides of the ocean. The sky took on a mixed colouration of rose, green and violet. Like a curtain of fire, the heavens seemed to reveal a truly unearthly drama.

"Tomorrow," said Deringhouse. "Tomorrow we will know more."

"Do we stay here?" Marshall wanted to know.

"Yes, we'll sleep in the ground car."

The telepath shook his head. "Not necessary. "I'll go with Pucky now and fetch McClears' Gazelle. We have the whole night to accomplish it."

Deringhouse nodded slowly. "Okay with me. Then Ataka and I can take a swim at our leisure, until you get back. You too, Noir?"

Pucky cast a desperate glance at Marshall but when the latter shook his head sternly he went over to the telepath, put his little arms around him, whistled way off key—and disappeared with him.

The fives of 8 men were at stake.

5/ FATE OF THE METAL ISLAND

Before it had become actually dark, the Gazelle landed next to the camouflaged ground car with Marshall and Pucky on board. The manoeuvre had been made just in the nick of time because the Topides had broadcast a major alert as a result of the destruction of the first stronghold and the terrifying action of the *Centurion*, which converted the entire plateau into a mass of glowing lava before it disappeared. Their fighter craft came from all parts of the water world and assembled on a point of the continent that wasn't more than 30 miles distant from the metal island.

An attack had just been made on the Gazelle, which the crew had been able to repulse. Before the second and stronger attack was begun, Pucky and Marshall had appeared. The small ship then took off and disappeared into the twilight. By flying fast and low, it soon escaped the pursuers' tracking beams.

Deringhouse had the scoutship tucked away into a covered clearing in the forest so that it could not be easily detected from above. A short radio contact with the *Terra* sufficed to let them know their position. It had finally become dark when Deringhouse communicated with the *Centurion*.

"Ahoy, Lamanche! Where are you?"

"In orbit, sir. We're standing by for the next attack order."

"That may be awhile yet. You stay upstairs and keep in contact with the *Terra*. Defend yourselves against all Topide attacks. But stay where you are. Here below we have a few things to take care of."

"Message understood, sir. In case you need any help..."

"Relax, Lamanche. Or should I say—never fear, Pucky is here! Over and out!"

He shut down the transmitter equipment and exited the ship, jumping down to the soft sand below. In the process, he almost stepped on Pucky's tail.

Squatting there in a well-behaved and docile posture, the mouse-beaver observed the darkened sky and the first gleaming stars which formed curiously shaped and unknown constellations such as had never been observed from the Earth.

"Hey now, what are you doing here? I thought you wanted to take a swim..."

The mouse-beaver's incisor tooth gleamed in the starlight. "And that I shall—now. Maybe I can at least leave you guys for half an hour."

"What do you mean by that? Do you think that without you we'd never make it?"

Pucky waddled away and left a very remarkable track in the fine sand. He crouched down 30 feet away and looked around. "Yeah-h!" he drawled out in his twittering voice. "If you didn't have Pucky along...!!?? I think maybe I'll collect those 200 carrots, after all, don't you think?"

Having delivered this, he disappeared with a daring dive into the oncoming rollers.

But Deringhouse shook his head reproachfully. He had suspected that he'd been bugged by Pucky's telepathic tendrils...

* * * *

The sun rose blood red above the primeval forest and prepared a gloriously colourful reception for the day.

Marshall, who had the last watch, stood close to the wash of the waves and looked out toward the horizon of the sea. He was looking for the already familiar silvery streaks that would announce the arrival of dawn.

The night had passed quietly. Nothing new had been reported by the constantly manned communications station of the *Gazelle*, where they had all slept. Of course a lively radio traffic was going on between the various ground stations and ships of the *Topides* but most of the dispatches were coded. After some time, the small positronic computer on board had succeeded in breaking the code but very little was

gained by it. The Topides were taking up new positions, that was all.

Marshall was aware of the first faint thought-impulses of the fishmen before he could see any sign of them. However, he soon made out their silvery streaks on the horizon. They were still far out but they approached with unbelievable swiftness. They were evidently swimming in organized echelons because the formation was in the shape of a giant wedge which pointed directly at the shore.

As far as he could figure it, about 50 Akvons were approaching.

The V-shaped silvery ripples faded within 20 yards of the sandy beach. The leader appeared and awkwardly made his way to Marshall. The others remained in the deeper water. Only their sleek heads bobbed on the surface. Curious eyes observed the men searchingly.

"We have come as promised," came the Akvon's thought. "But we didn't find any way to make it possible for you to live under water."

For at least 20 seconds now, Marshall had been calling Pucky mentally. He breathed a sigh of relief when he finally received an answer.

"I'm still asleep," the mouse-beaver signalled back. "What the heck's the matter now?"

"Send me André Noir, on the double! The Akvons are here!"

There was no answer but a few moments later Pucky materialized right next to Marshall, who jumped involuntarily. At the same time, Noir appeared half-dressed in the Gazelle's open hatch. He climbed down and came forward at a run.

Communication with the water people was established:

"It is unnecessary to trouble yourselves about it because we have a means of remaining under water for long periods of time," said Marshall. "We have special suits that enable us to live in the outer void of the universe and airless space is more hostile to us than the ocean."

"Then can you come with us?"

"If you are strong enough to tow us, because we don't swim very well."

"When?"

"Have patience for just a short while. We have to make some preparations."

Half an hour later, in the shallow sea on the coast of the single continent of Betelgeuse 4, the fishmen witnessed and took part in such a unique and utterly strange spectacle that they would never in their lives forget it.

Wearing hermetically-sealed spacesuits, Marshall and Noir were stretched out flat, each on the scaly back of an Akvon, and let themselves be carried through the greenish twilight of the underwater world. A third figure, somewhat smaller, reclined on the back of a third Akvon: Pucky! A vanguard of 20 fishmen swam ahead of them and the rest followed in order to cover the rear of the flotilla.

Undoubtedly the one who was enjoying this the most was Pucky. His custom-made special spacesuit

fitted him as though it had been poured onto him. The large view window of the helmet enabled him to see clearly on all sides and, inasmuch as the water here was not deep, for the first time known to anyone the mouse-beaver beheld the mysterious world that lay beneath the surface of the ocean.

Low, sandy dunes stretched out below, presenting a veritable flower garden with their growth of colourful seaweed. In between them shot small iridescent fish, which seemed to be seeking refuge from the roaring convoy passing over them. Vision was limited to the right and left. Above glimmered something like an orange-red lantern: the sun.

The swiftness of their travel was astonishing. Now both of the men realized also that the Akvons were, in fact, living recoil rockets. With their mouths they sucked in a constant stream of water, then placed it under pressure in the middle of their bodies by means of a special organ and jetted it out at high velocity from a stem tube under the guiding tail fins.

The thrust must have been enormous because Marshall was convinced that the Akvons were only swimming at about half their capability out of consideration for their new allies

High above the stratosphere, the 2 heavy cruisers followed their orbits in freefall. Their radio communication centres were on open standby for the reception of any messages. They waited.

Deringhouse also waited, with the Gazelle. The scoutship still lay undetected under the heavy roof of foliage provided by the tropical forest. If necessary, it was ready at any moment to take off and go into battle. Marshall only had to press the red button of his tiny transmitter; the bearing signal would ensure that he and his companions could be located.

And last but not least, McCleers and Tiff still waited. They sat in their transparent prison cell without knowing whether or not anyone had picked up their signals at all...

* * * *

After several fruitless attempts, Al-Khor succeeded in placing firm ground once more under his feet. He had slid down the smooth trunk of the tree, bruised, scraped and lacerated his skin, and had fallen the last 15 feet or so. In so doing, he sprained his heavy, scaly tail, which was extremely painful.

Limping on one leg and cursing to himself, he steered a course for some distance through the thick underbrush. After a search, he found his raygun and finally stood on the edge of the clearing, in which the station had once existed. Now it was no longer a question of a station but of ruins.

The 'Springers' hand grenades had worked their full effect. The cupola lay in a heap of rubble, the ground cars were destroyed and the troops were either dead, wounded or carried off.

Carried off through the air!

Naturally, Al-Khor reflected upon that phenomenon and he arrived at the local conclusion that the Springers must have developed some sort of device that nullified gravity at any desired moment and which then enabled them to move, any objects around in the field of weightlessness as they pleased. For the incident he had experienced, there was no other explanation. At least no natural explanation; and

Al-Khor defended himself against considering any other kind.

He searched through the rains and rubble and finally located a ground car that was partially intact. He was pleased to find that its radio set still functioned. He called the troop garrison headquarters and received an immediate recognition signal.

"This is Al-Khor speaking, Section Commander of South Coast. The Springer captives were able to break free and destroy our station. I request immediate assistance. Send me a ship."

The answer was not very encouraging. "We are in top red alert, Al-Khor, and we can't spare any of the few ships we have. Try to make it through to Headquarters on your own. There is danger that the Springers are getting reinforcements and will attack us."

"Whom do you think you are telling all this to?" shouted Al-Khor furiously. "In the final analysis it is I who brought this entire situation to your attention and..."

"We shall expect you at Headquarters."

The receiver clicked. Al-Khor cursed indignantly and smashed the transceiver equipment with a single blow of his scale-armoured right fist... They could just figure out for themselves how they were going to take care of the Springers. He had time.

Then he dug into the supplies of food provisions on board the domed vehicle and treated himself to a leisurely supper. As he prepared his camp and decided to spend the night here, it was dark already.

As the grey dawn approached, he woke up half-frozen. Somewhat later, he was grateful for the warmth of the rising sun, which rendered his limbs tractable again. After an ample breakfast, he started the engine and rolled across the strewn rubble to the narrow road, which led in the direction of the coast and to Headquarters.

A twinge of conscience compelled him...

Without knowing it, he rumbled along sometime later past the hiding place of the Gazelle. He struck a course to the East and finally approached the steel island off the coast in which the Topide officer staff was quartered and in which their councils of war were held.

A boat brought Al-Khor to his colleagues, who were amazed to see him but nevertheless received him with reserve. It appeared as if they held the escape of the prisoners against him and held him responsible for the planned action of the Springers, purely because he had discovered them in the first place.

Without paying him any more heed, they continued their council of war.

Wor-Loek, Supreme Commander and Al-Khor's superior officer, was speaking. "So we appear to be in agreement that we will attempt to fight off the imminent attack of the Springers, alone and without assistance."

"That is sheer nonsense!" declared Al-Khor quite loudly before he had even sat down. "We could hardly make a greater mistake!"

Wor-Loek started visibly and acquired an ominous expression. Must he be contradicted specifically by the one who had so miserably failed? If the Dictator back home found out about what happened,

Al-Khor would be finished anyway. A shadow of disgrace certainly fell upon himself, as well, the Supreme Commander of the water world.

"So?" questioned Wor-Loek, testily. "You say I am making a mistake? Perhaps you will be good enough to comment a bit further on that point and to explain your justifications?"

Al-Khor drew a deep breath. "Isn't it enough for you, that only two of these Springers blasted our station out of existence, after escaping from a securely locked cell? There was no possible defence against them because they possess a device with which they control the force of gravity. Also I am harbouring a suspicion that they are going to attack the water world with an overwhelming striking force that will wipe us out completely after a very short engagement, if we are too proud to request reinforcements from the home planet."

There was a stir of reaction among the Topides. Now Al-Khor's words were not being taken quite so lightly. But Wor-Loek refused to be swayed.

"Who is telling you that such an attack will be brought against us?"

"You know it as well as I do, Wor-Loek. It's your own pride that lets you countenance our destruction rather than call for help. You'd love to be a hero. I, however—and most of my colleagues—would much rather remain alive."

A murmur of agreement emerged from the assembly. Wor-Loek searched about him among the others but he encountered only threatening looks.

"Then I take it you are in favour of admitting our weakness to the Dictator?"

"Yes, since we are blameless in the matter. And I even think we'll be doing our empire a favour..."

Of course they were not doing that in any sense of the word but how was Al-Khor to know? No one could tell. Not even Rhodan.

"Favour, you say?" Wor-Loek drew himself up and glanced across toward the door where two guards stood motionlessly with safety catches open on their hand beamers. "I am of another opinion and I believe you have failed us. Now you want to make excuses for it. That is mutiny and I will make you answerable for it. Guards! Al-Khor is under arrest! Take him to the prison under the water. Al-Khor you will surrender your weapons."

Al-Khor stood there several seconds as if paralysed but then his body became animated. In a lightning swift move, he drew his weapon and aimed it at the Supreme Commander. "I am under arrest? And I am to surrender my weapons? That is against all reason. Take back that insane order. We are close to a time when we have to stand together if we do not wish to go to our destruction."

Wor-Loek relied on his authority, which included decision over life and death. "My decision stands. Guards, take Al-Khor into custody and I hereby strip him of all military honours."

Now Al-Khor did not hesitate. With a single, well-aimed shot, he cut down his opponent, who fell to the floor as if struck by lightning. Then he turned to the guards and ordered them to return to their places. Within, he trembled in a turmoil of emotion, but outwardly he was amazingly calm.

"Topides, we are now without a leader, but the main point is to make our decisions quickly. I stand by

my proposal, to place ourselves immediately in communication with our home planet and make clear to the Dictator what has happened—and what is still going to happen if reinforcements are not sent as quickly as possible. An invasion by the Springers is imminent. They suspect the existence of an enemy stronghold in this system and are determined to destroy the third and fourth planets. However, we wish to colonize the water world and later the jungle world also, since we hold rights of prior possession. We have not seen any signs of an enemy in this system—other than the Springers, themselves. I am asking for your concurrence so that I can make contact with our home planet at once."

The heavy raygun still rested in his hand but the muzzle pointed to the floor. Perhaps it was the sight of the dangerous weapon and the awareness of Al-Khor's uncompromising nature, which he had only now demonstrated, that moved all officers present to come to a unanimous agreement

One of them stood up and said: "We are without a supreme commander. Therefore I move that Al-Khor take over Wor-Loek's position from this moment on."

Again there was no objection.

Al-Khor was thus the new commander of the water world and he took charge immediately. He turned to one of the officers. "Have the hyper-transmitter operator make contact at once with home base. I will be in the Communications Central in a few moments and will speak personally with the Dictator. However, the rest of you..." He again looked at all of them. "Proceed at once to your respective stations and ships and wait for further orders. The water planet is in a state of war..."

Someone in the background asked: "What happens to the prisoners who are down below in a water cell?"

Al-Khor nodded. "I'm glad you reminded me of that. They have to be rendered harmless before they also escape."

"Perhaps they could give us useful information concerning the forthcoming invasion..."

"No, we've run out of time... Besides, they've said everything that we want to know. They are too dangerous to be permitted to live. Arrange for the swiftest possible execution."

The Topide in the back row gave a curt confirmation but he remained seated in order to wait for the conference to end.

Which was precisely the wrong thing to do...

* * * *

Tiff thought constantly of the things he wanted to be sure to transmit to John Marshall. In spite of the best of intentions and the greatest dedication to the task, it was the best he could do, since he was not an actual telepath. But he nursed the hope that Marshall was reading his thoughts—that the body-transmitter would serve as an excellent tracking device...

McClears squatted in the comer on the transparent floor and stared reflectively at the sea bottom below,

which he could now make out plainly in the full light of day. The weird fish creatures had disappeared again and so swiftly that it seemed they had been called away. The major's faint hope vanished. It turned out he could expect no help from them. But in any case, to what avail? Deringhouse and the mutants must surely be on their way by now to rescue him and Tiff.

The main thing was that the Topides were convinced of an imminent attack by the Springers and they were initiating the appropriate defence preparations.

So it had been worth the sacrifice. But McClears confessed to himself quite frankly that he was not going to sacrifice his life. He was a man of honour and a friend of Rhodan but he was no suicide. Only insane people were suicidal or self-sacrificing heroes!

"There's nothing to see, Tiff. Since last evening, no more of them have shown themselves. Do you think maybe they've lost interest in us?"

"Major, we don't know what their relationship is to the Topides. Perhaps they've received instructions not to allow themselves to be seen here anymore in the vicinity."

"So why do they lock us in a glass prison under the ocean? So that maybe the fish people can observe us after all."

"Do we know that for sure?" asked Tiff doubtfully. "Let's wait and see what happens."

That was easier said than done. Since the day before they had squatted here below, idly waiting. No further examination or inquiry had ensued and they had also been given nothing to eat or to drink. Fortunately, McClears found a few tablets left in his pocket which were capable of helping against the strongest pangs of hunger and which minimized thirst.

Suddenly they heard footsteps approaching. They sensed the vibration of them clearly and they stood up. They felt that it would be better to face the reptiles on their feet. It may have been also a subconscious warning that moved them to do so.

When the two Topides opened the door and stepped into the room, the two Earthmen knew immediately what was intended for them. This was clearly evidenced by the others' grimly narrowed eyes and the rayguns pointed at them.

"They're going to execute us!" whispered Tiff and he quickly thought further: *Help us, Marshall, Pucky! We don't have much time left. Our position is: the metal island off the coast, 10 fathoms below water level. They are demanding that we leave our cell. Quick, hurry it up!*

It was bright outside in the corridor. The brilliant illumination emitted by the ceiling and walls blinded them. The two Topides thrust their gun barrels into the backs of the prisoners and urged them forward. With grimly set expressions, McClears and Tiff moved onward to an unknown destination.

The passageway made a sharp turn and ended in front of a grey metal door. The hand-wheel for turning the bolt mechanism indicated that this must be the door to an airlock.

Or to a water-lock...

One of the guards turned the wheel. Slowly the door swung back and revealed the chamber beyond.

"*Trex!*" said the Topide in Arkonide. "Go! And have fun!"

McCleairs remained where he was. Tiff moved forward while sending out his constant mental distress signals. He described their situation and hoped that their friends would not keep them waiting long. In fact, it was now high time.

"You, too!"

McCleairs didn't budge. Each second won was priceless.

"What's going to happen to us?" he asked.

The lizard's mouth drew itself into the semblance of a grin. "Al-Khor, the new Commander, has sentenced you to death. You will not suffer long. Drowning is fast."

"Why should we die? Haven't we told you everything that was important to you?"

"We didn't like the verdict," explained the Topide. "But I know that it was just. You've caused enough damage. A ground station has gone up in smoke, the other prisoners have gotten away, a number of Topides have been killed. You have earned a death sentence, so now get going!"

McCleairs did not give up. "Are we responsible for the operation of the other Springers? We didn't order the invasion..."

"That's enough conversation, Springer. Go!"

He aimed the raygun at the major. McCleairs was finally sure that not another second of time could be gained. He turned and stepped into the narrow room where Tiff was waiting for him.

"When they let the water in," he whispered, even while the heavy door was closing, "they'll have to let the outer lock door open. Then we can swim out!"

"I'm afraid," retorted Tiff despairingly, "that they'll take enough time about it to let us drown first. They're shrewd enough to take that into their calculations. We can only hold our breaths, nothing more. And of course—hope!"

McCleairs didn't answer.

On the seaward side of the room, a narrow slit appeared next to the floor, which admitted water into the lock. The opening widened swiftly and the water rose correspondingly higher. It soon came to their chests.

"The opening!" cried Tiff excitedly. "If it only comes up a little bit more, we can get through..."

But the vertically sliding lock door remained where it was. The water level continued to rise without interruption, reaching now to their throats.

"Breathe in!" shouted McCleairs. "Hold your breath, dive and try to get under it. Maybe there's some spot wider than another. Lots of luck, Tiff! We might just make it!"

In a sudden burst, the water broke into the lock.

Within a single second it rose to the ceiling and filled up the entire chamber. McClears and Tiff held their breaths and sank to the floor. They felt the water pressure; their ears started to ring and the lack of oxygen cramped their movements.

McClears' groping fingers reached the upper edge of the door crevice. He pulled himself down and then touched something that was alive and moving.

Were it not for the water, what came out of him would have been a yell, but instead his overstrained lungs surrendered their stored up air in a soundless gurgle.

In a few seconds more, he would be finished...

* * * *

The advanced guard of the Akvons slowed their pace and regrouped.

What's wrong? asked André Noir by means of a hypnotic thought picture.

Marshall and Pucky promptly received an answer: "The water fortress of the aliens. We have arrived. They have special doors that lead into them from out here."

In the same moment the first distress call from Tiff was received. Pucky traced it and thought to Marshall: *Not 30 feet in front of us. Should I make a jump?*

No, wait! Perhaps we can help without the Topides noticing it!

Before them in the eternal twilight of the sea, the walls of the synthetic island shimmered. They stood on rounded support pilings and ended a good 10 fathoms below the surface of the water. The airlocks were evidenced by a row of narrow hatch slots. From here on, the Akvons were in the realm of the Topides, if circumstances so required it.

Now we will fetch them out!

Marshall nodded inside his helmet. It was a strange sensation to sit on the slender body of one of these mermen as though on a horse.

Get their bearings, Pucky!

The mouse-beaver, who under different circumstances would be having a whale of a time on this submarine excursion, guided his mount closer along the grey wall of the metal island. He pulled to a stop in front of one of the indented airlock doors.

Here it is! They are being brought in. Tiff is already in the chamber. McClears is still outside talking.

Marshall was already aware of this... and more...

Above on the platform are guards with energy weapons. In case McClears and Tiff make it to the surface...

As a suggestive hypnotist, Noir was of course not much of a telepath but he could understand the thought-impulses of Pucky and Marshall and by this means he was given instructions. Immediately he translated these into directions for the Akvons to follow. The little fishmen who were without riders suddenly exploded away as though on a commando charge. They swam up to the surface and began to romp and play there, according to their custom. They shot with lightning speed here and there like so many arrows; they roiled up the water, they hurtled yards high into the bright sunlight and then fell splashing back into their element.

The half dozen Topides lowered their weapons. This was a sight to which they were accustomed.

Pucky thought:*Tiff is signalling that the water is being let in. After a few seconds:The opening slot is too narrow to let McClears and Tiff pass through.*

Marshall answered:*Open it, Pucky!*

The mouse-beaver swam ahead still closer to the steel prison chamber and concentrated on the restrained sliding door of the lock. Slowly its lower edge began to move upward. Admittedly, this allowed the water to move faster into the lock but the opening became large enough to admit a man. Hopefully the two victims of the death sentence would realize this in time.

They were aware of it.

Pucky guided his Akvon slightly downward and reached into the open crevice. He was able to grab hold of a groping arm and to tug McClears through the aperture. The major's eyes were half opened but seemed not to perceive very much around him. A large air bubble emerged from his mouth and rose swiftly toward the surface.

Quick, Marshall. He can only last 10 seconds. Bring him far enough away from here and then up to the surface. You can always dive under again.

Marshall took charge of McClears, who did not resist and listlessly permitted anything to be done with him. Noir relayed the order to the Akvon. It was only with difficulty that Marshall was able to hang on with McClears, so tremendous was the acceleration with which they now shot away through a wall of water that seemed to become viscous in its resistance to their swift passage.

Pucky waited not another second. He pressed through the narrow opening in the airlock chamber and immediately saw Tiff, who had given up his attempts to escape and floated up to the ceiling where not a single cubic inch of air remained.

Pucky shoved up from the floor and was able to grab Tiff's feet. The weight of the spacesuit allowed him to sink down again. As fast as he could, he pushed Tiff, who was already half-unconscious, out into the sea. The waiting Akvon, who was Pucky's little 'seahorse', quickly took over. The fishman grasped the unconscious body, pulled it close to him and raced away without bothering about the mouse-beaver. The latter hesitated a moment, then turned around and swam back into the airlock.

The two Topides who had imprisoned Tiff and McClears still stood before the door of the lock and conversed with one another. At the end of 10 minutes the outer lock gate was to be closed and the water

was to be pumped out of the chamber. It was not yet time.

They did not notice that the locking wheel on the door was being turned as though by an invisible hand. Then the door burst open. And with it surged a watery deluge that flooded over the completely surprised reptiles and swept them away with it.

Pucky had opened the outer door completely so that the entire portion of the station below water level was inundated. Reptiles in this area either drowned or were able to save themselves in the last moment and bring the alarming news to the upper story, where the officers were still assembled and in their council of war.

The water rose up to the platform and the metal island was thus rendered useless as a base of operations.

Pucky slipped once more through the outer opening into the ocean and began to put some distance between himself and this area. The close proximity of the island was now fairly dangerous.

He picked up the mental impulses from Marshall, who had come to the surface with McClears, several hundred yards away. The Topides on the platform were far too occupied to concern themselves with what was going on in the ocean. The island was, of course, unsinkable, but it was three-quarters inundated.

Pucky could have teleported himself but swimming under water was too much fun to be deprived of so soon. McClears and Tiff were safe now, which was clearly indicated by Marshall's thought-waves. The Akvons had reassembled and were taking care of removing the rescued personnel from the danger zone as swiftly as possible.

The mouse-beaver went deeper and swept along over the gorgeously coloured sea bottom. Once he encountered a larger fish but it took one look at this astonishing creature and darted for safety as fast as it could. Pucky grinned happily, watching it go.

And so it was that he arrived on the beach by the Gazelle two hours later than the others.

He had taken his long awaited bath—but of course without getting wet...

6/ TOPIDES & TERRANS—ALLIES?

Perry Rhodan was in the midst of a conference with Khrest and Thora concerning possibilities of Interstellar colonization when he was interrupted by a sharp buzzing sound. He started for a second, then pressed a button on his wrist communicator. "Rhodan here. What is it?"

"Hyper-communication from Betelgeuse, sir. Do you want me to take it?"

"Advise Reginald Bell and hold it. I'll be there myself."

Khrest and Thora saw him hurry from the room before they could ask a question. They got up and

followed at a more leisurely pace. They, too, were interested in knowing what had happened out there 272 light-years from Earth.

In a few minutes the elevator brought Rhodan to the Com Central hyperspace communications section. Communications Officer Eilman stood stiffly at attention and announced: "Maj. Deringhouse, *Centurion*, Betelgeuse System, requests top priority transmission for an important message. Distance, 272 light-years, Betelgeuse..."

Rhodan waved him off defensively. "My dear Eilman, I'll admit you're the chief brass-pounder around here but why you have to warm over old hash is beyond me. If you can't give me news, it's better to invent some. Now what's with Deringhouse?"

"He will be on in exactly 30 seconds."

Rhodan nodded and seated himself at the receiver console. At the same moment, Bell entered, glanced briefly at Eilman and sat down next to Rhodan. "Now I'm really anxious," he said.

"That's two of us!" returned Rhodan. "Where else could he be?"

"I'll sure straighten that one's furry hide for him!" promised Bell and thus revealed that they were referring to Pucky—whom they had worried about to an extreme ever since the takeoff of the two heavy cruisers.

"Let's wait and see," ordered Rhodan calmly. Before him, a green signal lamp flashed on. Then a distance-distorted voice emerged from the loudspeaker.

"Deringhouse here. Calling *Terrania* ..."

"On the other end," said Rhodan. "It's good to hear your voice again, Deringhouse. Before you begin, there's a question: have you seen Pucky anywhere?"

There was a short pause. Then Deringhouse answered, "Pucky is with us, sir."

"Good. Now give us your report. Have the Springers shown up?"

"It all depends on how you look at it, sir. We are the Springers. At least for the Topides. Besides, the real Springers..."

"Come again, Deringhouse! Did you say Topides...?"

Deringhouse gave his report. Rhodan and Bell listened with grave expressions. They didn't interrupt the major even once and he finally finished and gave a summarization:

"So that was our plan and we each arrived at it completely independent of the other. I trust you will be in accord with our concept of the situation. Naturally, it would have been easy to destroy the ground stations and ships of the Topides with the help of the *Centurion* and the *Terra* but that wouldn't have gotten us anywhere. But this way we have a chance to kill two birds with one stone. Of considerable importance is the fact, in regard to all this, that the Topide commander, a certain Al-Khor, has sent out an emergency call to his home planet a few hours ago. He is requesting of the Dictator and ruler of the Topide stellar empire that help be sent in order to rescue the Betelgeuse System from the clutches of the Springers. The Dictator is deathly concerned about the Springers' planned raid. He's promised Al-Khor

that he's going to dispatch a strong war fleet at once. That's what we're waiting for now..."

Rhodan looked at Bell, who stared uncomprehendingly at the loudspeaker as though he were expecting a revelation. Then he said: "That's excellent, Deringhouse. If your plan works out—and I'd like to bet that it will—we will achieve our original objective without lifting a finger. The attacking Springers will mistake the bitterly defensive ships of the Topides for those of the Earth or for its allies. On the other hand, the Topides will be perfectly correct in recognizing the Springers for what they are: the actual Springers. Their only error will be in mistaking their motive as an attack directed at themselves. We only have to take care that the two sides don't get a chance to clear up the mistake. Unfortunately, I have received no communication from Talamon, the one Mounder chief who is favourably disposed toward us. So I don't really know if he's going to take part in the attack. If he's smart, he'll stay out of it."

Deringhouse's voice broke into the ensuing slight pause: "Your orders for us, sir?"

Rhodan smiled suddenly. "Wait it out, Deringhouse. The best thing is for you to retreat to the third planet and act as though it's the Earth. Maybe you can succeed in attracting some of the Topides in that direction also. That way, the third planet will be more convincing in its role of *Terra*."

"Understood, sir! Further reports as fast as new developments occur."

"I'll be there soon," promised Rhodan, "so that we can prepare a warm reception for our friends. This time the Topides will be our allies—it's just unfortunate they won't know it!—Before you sign off, Deringhouse: have you placed our insubordinate, Pucky, in solitary confinement?"

Deringhouse hemmed and hawed, then reluctantly confessed: "I'm sorry, sir, but we urgently needed the little—er, the lieutenant—on this mission. Frankly, we wouldn't have made it without Pucky. Am I permitted to make an observation, sir?"

"Observe away!" Rhodan's smile broadened and Bell nodded eagerly.

Deringhouse sighed audibly. "Pucky shouldn't be judged too harshly, sir. It was pure patriotic zeal that motivated him and not any insubordination for selfish reasons. Naturally I more or less raked him over the coals for what he did but then, under fire, he came through with flying colours. He even saved the lives of McClears and Tiff. Nobody else could have done that. So you see, in spite of..."

"Alright, Deringhouse, you've made your point. Tell Pucky his misbehaviour will be condoned this time but also inform him he's not to see a single carrot for the next 6 months."

"Mm-m-m..."

"You wanted to say something else, major?"

"Sir... I don't think Pucky's going to be very happy about that."

"I'm sure he isn't! Bugs Bunny was a carrot-hater compared to Pucky. It's my hope hell miss them enough to learn a lesson."

"I doubt it, sir. I have a confession to make... You see, there was this bet and I lost it..."

Bell exploded with laughter. He knew the kind of bets his *bête noir* snared people into. Plucky, the carrot-freak-nick! Several sadder but wiser betters had already paid off a small fortune in the crunchy

vegetable—not to mention finger paralysis from back scratching.

"Very well," said Perry, laughing now himself. "Maybe he'll finally get his fill of his favourite food and relaxation. Just take care that he doesn't bust his belly—we still need him in the fight to come against the Springers and Topides. Signing off, Deringhouse. Our best to the crew—and Pucky! Over and out."

After the static in the loudspeaker died, Rhodan and Bell stared at each other for some time. The overall situation was one of deadly seriousness but neither man could repress a wry smile.

Only Chief Communications Officer Eilman maintained a grave expression. He could not empathize with this kind of humour. Also, he did not possess sufficient imagination to visualize the picture which floated before the minds' eyes of Rhodan and Bell:

Robots dragging sacks and crates full of carrots out of the storerooms of the *Centurion* and into Pucky's cabin, where the smug mouse-beaver lay on the divan as majestically as a pasha of old and permitted Maj. Deringhouse to work off his first hour of back-scratching.

One must avoid betting with Pucky—ever—unless one were a masochist psychologically seeking self-punishment, unless one nursed a neurotic need to lose 100% of the time.

Anyone with a sense of humour would have agreed that it was regrettable that Perry and Reg were not also aware of the luncheon that loser Lamanche had volunteered to consume as an acknowledgment of Pucky's acumen: a meal fit only for a man with a cast iron stomach: 3 fighter robots.

Without mustard.

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

RED EYE OF BETELGEUSE

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

The Topides. Lizard-men. Former enemies of mankind.

Now, to the great surprise of Perry Rhodan, the Topides are discovered to be maintaining military bases in the Betelgeuse system... and Perry is quick to take advantage of this fact, incorporate it as part and parcel of his gigantic diversionary manoeuvre.

But—will the Topides, actually play their proper role when the enemy spacefleets of the Springers and Aras appear?

And Tophthor—the patriarch of the Mounders who has actually seen Earth's sun with his own greedy eyes: will he not realize immediately that the positronicon aboard his ship has steered him in the wrong direction, guided him to a false destination, the moment that he sees Betelgeuse? For no intelligent being could ever mistake the giant star for Sol of Earth's solar system.

What then, when Tophthor sees through the deception?

Topthor is the key figure in the ensuing conflict, so dramatically recorded in the diary of Perry Rhodan in the next episode of the series known as

THE EARTH DIES

by

Clark Darlton