

The Springers are gathering a force of 800 ships under Cekztel commanded by Topthor to destroy the Earth.

The Topides reinforce Betelgeuse with 400 ships under Al-Khor and move off to the 3rd planet to mislead the Springers.

The Titan and the two heavy cruisers make multiple appearances to reinforce the deception that Betelgeuse is SOL.

Perry realizes that this is not enough and stages the destruction of the Titan and himself.

*And so in this final Adventure
of the First Cycle read how-*

THE EARTH DIES

1/ FORCE UNKNOWN

"THE GREAT PUZZLE-SOLVING MARATHON now begins, Reggie. The Galactic Traders will consider us to be Terranians and they'll be right. But, if all works according to plan, the Topides will mistake us for Galactic Traders."

"We'll give them a helping hand in that direction," promised Reginald Bell.

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Beyond the space-time continuum defined by Einstein, in hyperspace, all ordinary laws of nature cease to have validity. The concept of time vanishes; vast distances shrink to zero.

In the 'natural' universe, a fraction of a second passed as Perry Rhodan leapt 10,000 light-years into the Milky Way in the mighty spherical spaceship *Titan*. Leapt far beyond his actual goal.

In the blinking of an eyelid our sun Sol diminished to the tiniest of stars, traceable in the kaleidoscope of bright and faint celestial bodies only by the most supersensitive of electron-telescopes. Even Betelgeuse, the red giant, seemed at the point of extinction now, 9728 light-years from the Titan in the direction of Terra.

Ahead of the *Titan* stretched the boundless reaches of the universe with its inhabited and uninhabited systems and their corresponding dangers.

Perry Rhodan sat before the panoramic viewscreen gallery, which afforded him an awesome view into the depths of infinity. Next to him sat Reginald Bell, his best friend and companion of many a space-time campaign in the interests of Earth, who presently rubbed the aches of transition from the back of his neck, brushed back his unruly stubble of red hair and narrowed his eyes in order to see more clearly. The *Titan* moved silently through the endless panoply of stars, now only 'creeping' along at nine-tenths speed. At this rate it could take *years* to reach the next star!

"Let's hope our rematerialisation sent out a space-warp shock strong enough to register with everybody concerned," said Rhodan casually. He nodded toward the door of Com Central. "Well, we'll soon find out. With hypersensor stations spotted all over the galaxy, they're able to track all hyperspace transitions and, since we didn't use our compensator on this jump, they should've picked us up.

"The great puzzle-solving marathon now begins!"

Bell stretched his thickset body, which made him appear a bit plump and sluggish but he was anything but, from either a physical or mental standpoint. "Those Topide lizards must take us for Springers by now and with the Springers it's the other way around—they come from the depths of the Milky Way and presume Earth's in the Betelgeuse system where the Topides are trying to establish themselves! The Springers want to destroy Earth so they'll mistakenly attack Betelgeuse 3 and bump into the Topides. That'll touch off a battle royal and we have only to stand by and watch in order to accomplish our objective. A pretty slick arrangement, Perry!

"The main spectators are going to be Deringhouse and McClears. We're going to have to get in touch with them again.—I wonder where their cruisers are hiding?"

Bell considered the question a form of request and got up, saying, "Okay, I'll take a looksee. Do you want the radio traffic coded?"

"Yes, absolutely." Rhodan continued to search the viewscreens. "Ask for their positions and let me have a report on their situation. And tell Deringhouse to stand by when you get him—I want to talk to him myself. We don't want any video setup because we don't want to give any of the pessimists a hint to the contrary. The more we can do to make the Earth disappear from the scene for awhile, the better off we are."

"That's right," Bell grinned. "A lot is hanging on that one, alright." He crossed the dome-shaped Control Central and entered the adjacent radio room. "Hi, Martin. Good morning."

Cadet Martin acknowledged the greeting without turning around. He sat in front of his equipment and observed a rash of numbers as they spun across his coloured megacycle dials. An oval viewscreen

revealed a flicker of colour lines which raced meaninglessly across the convex surface. Nothing of a recognizable nature seemed to want to form there. A crackle of static emerged from the loudspeaker.

"The hyperjump went off okay, sir. There've been no radio receptions since then—at least none that pertain to us.

"I want you to send a hyperspace message to Deringhouse in the direction of Betelgeuse. Code it according to system HB-33. Positronic. Maj. Deringhouse is to give us his position and stand by for reporting. The Chief wants to talk to him personally. Let me know as soon as you have the connection."

"Very well, sir, it shall be done!"

Bell looked on for a few moments while the chief duty officer of Communications activated his hyperspace transmission equipment and put the dispatch into the scrambler, removed the coded tape and connected it to the transmitter. The call would continue to repeat until an answer was received on the same frequency. It could go on for hours, or perhaps only minutes.

"We're running the search call," Bell told Rhodan as he sat down again in the First Officer's seat. "I hope we don't get tracked down by any Springers."

"We won't," smiled Rhodan. "It's true that under certain circumstances hyperspace transmissions can be traced out as to their direction but not their distance. So they could do a lot of fancy long-range triangulations before they'd find us. That make you feel better, Reg?"

His thickset companion grumbled something unintelligible and then devoted himself resignedly to a contemplation of the universe, as though he had never seen a star in all his life.

In his time, however, he had seen more stars than most have seen pretty girls...

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The heavy cruiser *Centurion*, a spherical vessel with a 600-foot diameter, hovered with no apparent motion in space and waited. Close by, about one mile distant floated the sister ship *Terra*, whose commander was Maj. McClears.

On board the *Centurion* were 10 mutants in addition to the telepath John Marshall—not to mention Pucky the mouse-beaver. Pucky's temporary separation from his bosom pal, Bell, was in a way an improvement: At least he was not adding any new colourful language to his vocabulary and had to content himself with what he had already picked up—which was considerable.

Deringhouse had slept a few hours and had just returned to the Control Central in order to relieve his second-in-command, Capt. Lamanche. "What's new, Captain?"

The Francoterranian shook his head. "Nothing, sir. Our distance from Betelgeuse is still 30 light-years. The hypersensor has picked up a heavy rash of transitions in the vicinity of the system. The Topides are evidently getting their promised reinforcements already."

Deringhouse nodded wearily. "Good, Lamanche. You can relieve me again in 5 hours."

5 hours...

Deringhouse didn't sit down at once but wandered back and forth for awhile in the spacious Control Central of the *Centurion*. Many things had happened in the past number of days...

Rhodan's plan to trick the powerful enemies of the Earth was taking shape with increasing effectiveness. Through Tophor the Springers had a strong card in their hand. The Mounder, Tophor, knew where the Earth was to be found. At least, he believed that. What he did not know was that Rhodan's mutants had long since altered the position of Terra in the Nav positronicon of the *Top 2*. If one were to retrieve data from his computer now, concerning the location of the Earth, the answer would be that it was the 3rd planet of the giant sun Betelgeuse.

The end result that Rhodan was aiming for was that the Springers would attack the 3rd planet in the belief that it was the Earth itself that lay before them. By this ruse he would gain time to build up and strengthen the home solar system against the day of a second confrontation with the robot brain of Arkon. He wanted all alien intelligences to assume that the Earth and the Terranian, Perry Rhodan, had ceased to exist.

Deringhouse smiled softly. It was a shrewd and daring plan which, if it succeeded, would solve a great number of problems.

The 3rd planet of Betelgeuse was an uninhabited jungle world that would have to be sacrificed. On the other hand, the 4th planet, the water world of Akvo, had turned out to be a surprise. On the single continent that sat in the great ocean like an island, the Topides had established a military base. These reptilian intelligences who were old enemies of Rhodan were under the control of a dictator who ruled a stellar empire that was 815-light-years distant from the Earth. And now here they had appeared in much closer proximity to the Earth. In a quickly conceived plan of strategy, Deringhouse and his people had represented themselves as Springers and revealed to the startled and suddenly very attentive Topides that the fighting forces of the Mounders, who were a special police force of the Springers, were now on their way with the intention of destroying the Topides' stronghold. It was also represented that fighting units of the other Springers and the Aras were taking part in the operation.

The reaction to this was as they had expected it to be. The reptiles put in a request for reinforcements in order to defend themselves against the attack. Deringhouse had pulled out of the area and was now located 30 light-years away, in order to await the results of his deception.

A sharp buzzing sound smote his ears. It came from the adjacent Communications Central. Lt. Fisher was standing watch.

This particular buzzer signified that a hyperspace communication was being received.

Rhodan...?

With a leap, Deringhouse crossed the control room and pushed open the door of the Com Central.

Fisher was adjusting the volume controls and searching for the code key. Then he activated the unscrambler and threw in the decoding equipment.

In the same moment, the incomprehensible sounds emerging from the loudspeaker became

understandable.

"...turion. Repeat. *Titan to Centurion* . Give your position, Maj. Deringhouse. The Chief is waiting for a detailed report. I repeat the entire message. *Titan* here. Position 10,000 light-years from Terra in the direction of Arkon. *Titan to Centurion* ..."

"Answer them, Fisher," ordered Deringhouse. "Who knows how long they've been signalling? Or did you just pick them up?"

"I've no idea, sir, when the beamed transmission reached us."

There was a 2-minute wait till Rhodan's voice was heard in the loudspeaker. His words did not require the thousandth fraction of a second to bridge over the unimaginably great distance between them.

"Rhodan here. I'm 9,728 light-years from you, Deringhouse. Many transitions are giving us an indication here that the expected assembly of the Springer fleet is taking place. The total number of units is unknown so far. What's happening there?"

"We were able to decode the latest hyperspace dispatches of the Topides. Their dictator has committed strong fleet contingencies which are being rushed to the aid of the threatened base on Akvo. I would estimate that 500 ships are under way."

"I think the Springers will also bring about that number of ships into the action, so there are going to be some rather dramatic accompanying circumstances surrounding our planned demise of the mock planet Earth. If the Topides and the Springers clash, there won't be very much of them left. We have to make sure they don't get a chance to clear up their own confusion. The Springers have to mistake the Topides for the Terranians or their allies and the Topides must consider the Springers to be their bitterest enemies. Then if we make a few appearances at the right time and allow ourselves to be seen briefly here and there, it would seem to be enough to complete the deception. Do you have anything else, Deringhouse, or is everything clear?"

"No, just one question, sir."

"What is it, Deringhouse?"

"Are you going to remain there or are you going to come here to support us? And one more thing: when should we return to Betelgeuse?"

Rhodan did not delay in giving an answer. "We will work together. You will receive your attack orders at the moment that the Titan makes its jump to Betelgeuse. That will occur in the same moment that the Springers and the Topides have their first encounter."

"Do you think 3 ships are enough to deceive both sides?"

"I think so, if we don't always show up in the same place. So until then, Deringhouse..."

The Major nodded at the viewscreen, which would have revealed Rhodan's face under normal circumstances. Then he returned to the main Control Centre, sat down in the Commander's seat and brooded to himself.

Hopefully, Rhodan's calculations would work out correctly.

Otherwise...

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The 2nd player at the galactic chessboard was Al-Khor, Commander of the Topides in the Betelgeuse system. Since he had eliminated his opponent, Wor-Loek, and made his own contact with the home planet, a few changes had been made. The relatively weak military base on the 4th planet had been dismantled hastily in order to remove it from danger in case of an attack from outer space. Al-Khor had become a useful part of Rhodan's plans without in the least being suspicious of the fact. Moreover, his strenuous preparations had only served to strengthen the impression of the Springers that the jungle world of the 3rd planet was in fact the Earth.

For Al-Khor had transferred the fighting forces of the Topides to the 3rd planet.

Hour after hour, new reinforcements were arriving from the Topides' home system, which was more or less 500 light-years distant. It was easy for Deringhouse to register the hypertransitions and up to this time he had counted about 400 units.

On the upper plateaus of the primeval forests, energy beams carved out tremendous caves in the rocky cliffs. The previously uninhabited planet was transformed into a fortress bristling with weapons. Patrol ships of the reptiles circled Betelgeuse 3 in precisely calculated orbits, providing a guarantee against any surprise approach of the Springers. Other units were concealed in the shallow oceans and waited there for the signal to attack.

The Topides were well armed and prepared to give the greedy Springers a proper reception, whose motives this time they had completely misunderstood. If they had actually known why the Galactic Traders were attacking Betelgeuse and that they considered the 3rd planet to be the Earth, their actions would have been considerably altered.

But they did not know this...

And so it came about that, without any further help from Rhodan, the uninhabited world whose galactic position had been represented as that of the Earth in the memory banks of Tophthor's positronic Nav computer had become an interplanetary fortress practically over night—a fortress that was considered in certain circles to be the Earth.

Al-Khor had no idea that he had become a pawn in the game.

He was on board one of the last ships to leave Akvo, the water planet. As the bluish world shrank away behind him, he nodded with satisfaction to the commander of the cruiser. "The Springers will never get the idea that we're as interested in the 4th planet as we are in the 3rd and they will also have no opportunity to correct their mistake. The Dictator has just advised me that a further fleet of 200 heavy class warships will join us in the attack when we are in full engagement with the enemy. Perhaps not a single Trader ship will escape destruction."

"A very shrewd move," praised the commander of the cruiser. "Your name, Al-Khor, will go down in

the history of the Topides."

Al-Khor nodded calmly. He already saw himself participating in the victory parade before the Dictator, who would decorate him as a hero of the stellar empire.

The cruiser arrived at the 3rd planet and brought Al-Khor to the new headquarters of the reptiles, a hollowed-out mountain near the equator. The hypercom equipment was already in operation. In less than 2 minutes, Al-Khor established a connection with his home planet. The Commander-in-Chief of the fighting forces there answered him and requested a full report. Then he promised: "Al-Khor, you can depend on the fact that the Springers are going to suffer the greatest defeat in their long history. The Dictator is very pleased with your tactical preparations. Send us the agreed-on signal as soon as the Springers attack and make sure that we are continuously advised concerning the progress of the battle."

"We will be victorious," said Al-Khor loftily.

There was a moment of silence, followed by the answer: "You *must* be victorious, Al-Khor!"

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The 3rd player at the galactic chess game was called Cekztel, an ancient patriarch of the Mounders who had received the Supreme Command over the collective fighting forces of the Springers. His massive figure—he weighed more than 13 hundred pounds—was supported by a special seat in front of the controls of his ship, from which vantage point he intended to lead the mission.

It was a mission that would signify the end of a planet called Earth.

In effect, Cekztel was now officiating merely as the executive functionary of the operation. The actual initiator, however, was called Tophthor, and so we will concern ourselves principally with him, because it was he who at one time discovered the Earth and managed to secure its galactic position in the memory banks of his positronic Nav computer. As Perry Rhodan continued to become an increasingly dangerous factor the worth of this piece of information increased correspondingly. But finally Tophthor had been forced to surrender it to his own race because his own safety depended upon it. The Springers had unanimously decided to eliminate Rhodan once and for all. His home planet was to be destroyed. Tophthor provided the key.

This key, however, was not actually effective any longer, because Rhodan's mutants had long since altered the computer data. Now the so-called Earth circled the star Betelgeuse.

So far, so good.

Tophthor's mighty physique was also supported by a wide seat. The Mounders had lived for a long time on a planet of very heavy gravitation but in spite of their tremendous bodies they were astonishingly nimble and agile.

The fleet hovered 12,000 light-years from Betelgeuse in readiness to make the final hypertransition and make a surprise raid on the Earth, whose defence forces could not have any advance knowledge of the imminent attack. Tophthor lifted a communication lever on his command console.

"Hey, Regol! Are you asleep on your post?"

The answer did not sound in the least sleepy. "The communications central is on open reception standby, Topthor. We have not been able to make contact yet with Talamon."

"Don't we have any secret frequency?"

"No answer on the special frequencies, either. Talamon simply is not acknowledging our signals."

Topthor hit another control lever and interrupted the communication with the radio central. For 2 minutes he cursed to himself before he reconnected the intercom.

"Send Gatzek up here at once!"

Gatzek was the second officer of the *TOP 2* and a close confidant of Topthor. The 2 Mounders had experienced many a campaign and fought many battles together for solid cash paid for by wealthy Galactic Traders. However, this time the action did not concern itself with money or profits; this time, the action was necessary in order to eliminate an enemy who had become too powerful.

Why didn't Talamon answer?

Gatzek was comparatively lean and only weighed about a thousand pounds. "What's happening, Top? Attack?"

"Not yet," growled Topthor peevishly. "Cekztel is taking too much time. In the meantime we're detecting a large number of hypertransits in the direction of Terra. I'm worried about that. It looks like Rhodan has been warned."

For a moment or two Gatzek appeared to be frightened but then an incredulous grin spread across his broad face. "Who could have given him any warning?"

Topthor did not elaborate on the subject. "I have not yet been able to make any contact with Talamon. Where could our friend be hiding?"

Talamon...

He was the only Springer who had established a friendly relationship with Rhodan, because the latter had once spared his life when 200 Mounder ships had been trapped in an inescapable situation. Moreover, Talamon had Rhodan alone to thank for the best business deal he had ever put over in his life.

Naturally, no one was aware of the fact but Topthor entertained his own misgivings and had special reasons for reading strange conclusions into certain facts known to him alone. His last conversation with Talamon had made him very pensive.

"Is he going to take part in the attack on Terra?" asked Gatzek.

"Who among the Mounders is not going to take part in it, even if he has one ship?" retorted Topthor with a counter question. "Our attack fleet has grown to more than 800 vessels but Talamon hasn't shown up with even a lifeboat. Do you have any reasonable explanation for that?"

Gatzek shrugged his massive shoulders. "Do you think maybe he's afraid?"

Tophthor actually became incensed by this inference and dismissed the possibility with an impatient wave of his hand. "Fear? Talamon and fear? I'm afraid he has other reasons. He has a streak of loyalty for Rhodan."

"With a Terranian who is as good as dead?" marvelled Gatzek. Then he roared with laughter. "Why do we concern ourselves about Talamon? If he doesn't want to, then he can stay out of it. We can handle this Rhodan all by ourselves. He certainly won't be able to accomplish anything against 800 ships."

He was basically correct in his statement but fortunately he did not suspect just how correct he was.

"Talamon is my friend," Tophthor explained. "I don't like to see my friend go down the wrong road and end up paying dire consequences for it. We have to warn him."

"And how are you going to do that if he doesn't reply to your signals?"

Tophthor didn't know the answer himself and he didn't have any further opportunity to ponder the matter because at this moment the loudspeaker of the intercom crackled and Regol's dispassionate voice said, "The transition co-ordinates and the schedule are coming through now. The attack against the Earth will begin in exactly 30 minutes." Immediately Tophthor appeared to have forgotten about Talamon. Nodding to his subordinate, Gatzek, he returned a question: "Mere will we come out after the transition?"

"Right in the middle of the Terra system. A reconnaissance ship has verified the calculations. We will emerge from hyperspace within less than 2 light-minutes from Terra."

"Those characters are certainly in for a big surprise," growled Tophthor. He was the only Mounder who had ever seen the Earth but at that time Rhodan had thrown a monkey wrench into his calculations. In spite of it all, Rhodan had spared his life but Tophthor was not the type to acknowledge such favours. "This time he's not going to be so lucky!"

"That is to be hoped," remarked Gatzek. And suddenly he didn't sound overly confident.

On the other hand, Tophthor had another motive for his own uneasy feelings: Talamon. He knew that his friend was an exceptionally shrewd man, one who would never make such a decision without very vital reasons, because this decision could destroy his entire career. If Talamon was not joining in this attack, he must have had doubts from the start as to the success of the action. Why? Did he really know Rhodan so well that he was able to evaluate the chances or was he holding back because of gratitude. Did he feel that he was not justified in attacking Rhodan because the latter had at one time made him a present of his own life?

A Springer and a Mounder—a sentimentalist?

Tophthor gave a forced laugh and stamped into the communications central. "Well, Regol, what's with Talamon?"

"Our call signals remain unanswered, Tophthor. Your friend has refused to announce himself. No one knows where he is located."

Tophthor remained silent for some time, then turned suddenly and went back into the control room. He sat down heavily in his seat, which complained audibly under the heavy load.

Gatzek waited patiently. He saw by the mood Tophthor was in that it was better to remain silent.

For Tophthor's countenance revealed not only an agony of curiosity but also a sudden expression of doubt.

* * * *

And finally there was still Talamon, for whom Tophthor had searched so desperately. Of course, he played a relatively unimportant role in this galactic game of chess, because he was not putting in an appearance at all. But that was precisely what filled Tophthor with both anger and uncertainty.

In spite of it all, he operated on his own cognizance in not responding to the summons of his patriarch, Cekztel, and when he did not place a single ship at their disposal for the planned attack on the Earth. Why should he add injury to Rhodan? Had it not been Rhodan, himself, who had made him a millionaire, who had spared his life, who had proved to him that a code of ethics could exist between alien races?

No. Talamon saw no cause to betray Rhodan. Somewhere in the Milky Way, he stood by with his fleet of 200 ships. He sent out reconnaissance scoutships and remained silent but with his communications equipment in a constant reception mode.

He was firmly resolved to come to Rhodan's assistance should it prove to be necessary. His attempts to warn the Terranian remained without result. At least he had not received an answer. He continued meanwhile to monitor all transmissions of the assembling Springer fleet and was completely current on the status of the operation. He also picked up Tophthor's radio call but did not answer it.

And so it came to be that a considerable force lurked in the background and waited for the moment when it should enter into the developing events. It was a force of which no one was aware.

Not even Perry Rhodan...

2/ RED SOL? WRONG GOAL!

On board the *Titan*, everything was under control. Chief Communications Officer Martin had just recuperated from a good sleep and had returned to his post when a strange pulse-coded signal began to be received with unusual strength. The transmission contained only one word that was not coded: "*Rhodan!*"

All the rest was gibberish.

Martin was experienced enough to record the transmission several times on tape before advising the Chief. Rhodan came at once. He appeared to be fresh and rested.

"Yes, what is it, Martin?"

The Communications officer played the tape. Rhodan listened silently for awhile. Then he smiled and pointed to the positronic computer console.

"Turn on decoder program XX-13 and run the tape through. Re-record the decoded message and put it through to the Control Central. I'm going to relieve Bell."

Martin turned to his task while Rhodan opened the door of the Control Central and left the Com section. In the control room, Bell sat slumped in the command seat and turned around wearily. A weak grin swept over his wide features as he recognized Rhodan.

"It's about time somebody came to spell me off. I can hardly stand on my legs."

"If my knowledge of anatomy doesn't fail me, you are sitting on your legs, but extremely high up."

"Good grief! Does everybody have to take me so literally?" Bell complained peevishly. "I just wanted to say that I've had it; I'm tired!"

"Then go get yourself some sack time, you sack of potatoes," Rhodan advised and he pulled his friend out of the seat. "Things may be breaking loose around here and we don't want to have any old tired-out soldiers standing in our way."

This observation revived Bell with amazing swiftness. "It's breaking loose? What's breaking loose? You don't mean to stand there and tell me we're finally going to tap the old button!?"

Rhodan nodded in the direction of the Com. Central. "We just picked up a dispatch. If I'm not too mistaken, I think it's coming from Talamon."

"From the Mounder? What does he want from us, anyway?"

"That we'll soon know. At any rate, he's following our agreement and sending the signal with just my name decoded."

Martin ducked his head into the room. "I have decoded the message. Do you want me to...?"

"Spin it off—relay it in here!" ordered Rhodan and switched on his intercom equipment. Seconds later the tape was running in the Com room and the message could be heard in its decoded form.

"Yep," confirmed Rhodan happily. "There's no doubt that that's the bellowing voice of our friend Talamon. He must have been plenty worried about us to take the chance of sending us a call."

Bell did not answer. He listened tensely to what was now ringing through the loudspeaker.

"Rhodan, this is Talamon! The Earth is in grave danger. In exactly 20 minutes the Earth is going to be attacked by a fleet under top command of Cekztel and with Topthor as chief pilot. Your position is now known. I am waiting for your instructions. I am not joining the attack. I repeat: Rhodan, this is Talamon! The Earth is in grave danger. In less than 20 minutes..."

Bell nodded approvingly. "Well, will you get that—the old walrus! He's actually levelling with us and

wants to warn us. I wouldn't have thought him capable of it."

"When this is over with," promised Rhodan, "we won't forget him for it. He turned off the speaker equipment. Then he leaned back comfortably in the upholstered chair. "Well, what about that shuteye you were going to take? I mean, you were so tired..."

"Tired...?!" drawled Bell. His red hair was bristling. "I'm supposed to hit the sack when the war is going to start in 20 minutes?"

"You shouldn't forget," advised Rhodan calmly, "that Martin received that dispatch 10 minutes ago. The decoding alone took 6 minutes."

"10 minutes!" Bell's eyes opened wide and round. "That means that in exactly 10 minutes the Springers... Holy jumping Jehosephat! What are we still doing here?"

"10 minutes..." Rhodan consulted his watch and corrected himself. "9 minutes are enough time if we know how to use them." He pressed a button. "Martin, set up a connection with Deringhouse. I will join you." He cut off the intercom and got up. "The whole show is on the air—even if we don't move a finger. Now we have to roll along with it and do everything we can to influence it in our favour. And naturally, that's what we're going to do. Do you intend to stay awake?"

"The devil with sleep!" growled Bell and stumbled along after Rhodan, who went into the Com room again where the hypercom transmitter was already in operation.

Deringhouse responded at once.

"This is the latest information," said Rhodan and glanced again at his watch. "In 7 minutes and 30 seconds the Springers will materialize in the Betelgeuse system. We must be there ahead of them because I don't know how Topthor is going to react when he realizes his mistake. We have to see to it that he doesn't have any time to clear up his confusion or explain to anybody what is going on. The Springers have to regard Betelgeuse as Earth's sun. Other than Khrest, Thora and Pucky, Topthor is the only non-human who has ever seen the true Earthly sun and committed its position to memory. So the Springers have to be engaged as soon as they put in an appearance."

"That's what the Topides are waiting for," observed Deringhouse.

"That's fine but we ought to give them a hand. We'll hytrans to Betelgeuse in exactly 7 minutes. Deringhouse, I want you to attack the first Springer ship that you can track. But don't hang in there and try to slug it out. I don't want you to stay more than one minute in any particular place. Transit jumps are more important than fighting. The Springers have to believe that they're dealing with a whole fleet of heavy cruisers. Give the same set of instructions to McClears. Is that understood?"

"Understood, sir. What are you going to do?"

"Well, the *Titan* 's going to join you and since we're the only 3 spherical ships around it's doubtful we'll make the mistake of shooting each other."

Deringhouse's next question came in an urgent tone. "Why don't we simply destroy Topthor's ship and clear all complications out of the way? If he and his Nav computer are destroyed, nobody can correct the error any more."

Rhodan smiled coldly. "We're dealing with hundreds of cylindrically shaped vessels that are almost identical. Do you think that you'll be able to locate Topthor at first glance?"

There was a short pause, then Deringhouse asked, "And what if I should just happen to succeed in identifying him?"

Now it was Rhodan's turn to pause. Swiftly he considered the question although he knew that there was only one answer he could give. Naturally Deringhouse had the best chance of identifying Topthor because there were 11 mutants on board the *Centurion* and if Topthor was dead...

"If you locate Topthor, destroy his ship."

"Thank you, sir. I'll give it a try. Is there anything else?"

Rhodan looked at his watch, which was an activity he would be repeating quite often in the next few minutes. "The hypertransition of the Springers will be in... 3 minutes 50 seconds. Good luck, Deringhouse!"

Rhodan turned around and almost collided with Bell, who had taken up a position behind him. Without comment, he went past him and picked up the coordinate data from the Nav computer for the forthcoming hypertransition.

"Have a seat, big boy. In 5 minutes, you'll be able to marvel at the giant star Betelgeuse—if you have any time for sightseeing."

* * * *

"I'll bet you," said Pucky, "that I'll be the first one to locate Topthor's ship. Okay?"

Deringhouse raised his hands in a horrified gesture of defence against the mouse-beaver. "Look, I'll bet the devil any time, but I'll never take a bet with you again under any circumstances. My fingers are still sore from scratching your back and I still have to pay for 200 carrots!"

"Well, anyway, I'm going to find Topthor," Pucky persisted and ignored the Commander's protests. "And then I'll jump on him and I'll twist his neck for him."

Deringhouse grinned while activating the controls that automatically committed the ship to the hypertransition to the Betelgeuse system. "That I would like to see. I'll admit you're a telepath, a teleporter and a telekinetic expert but I didn't know that you were also a wrestler. But have fun..."

"You don't believe me?" asked Pucky in a strangely ominous tone. As he leaned back in the upholstered couch, there was an unholy expression on his crafty little rodent face. "I've already handled robots and..."

"Well, Topthor isn't the only one to consider," Deringhouse reminded him as he moved a lever into a countdown start position. "His whole ship has to be destroyed. You forget that the actual coordinate data for the Earth are still contained in the positronic registers because they can't be erased. Naturally Topthor

is important; the Mounder is no idiot. He's going to realize at once that he's landed in the wrong solar system and he'll start getting suspicious."

John Marshall, the leader of the Mutant Corps, entered the Control Central of the *Centurion*. He nodded to the mouse-beaver and then turned to Deringhouse. Since he was a telepath, he naturally knew already what Pucky had been discussing.

"It will be the task of the Mutant Corps to trace down this fellow Topthor, Major, so why don't we let Pucky take on the mission, since he's so sure of himself?"

"I don't have any objections," answered Deringhouse cautiously. I only objected to making a bet with him. I certainly have a right to steer clear of him on that score if I don't want to return to the Earth a pauper and half crippled."

Marshall grinned and had to agree with him. Pucky was satisfied. Deringhouse felt relieved and thought of the task that lay before him.

Then the *Centurion* transited into hyperspace.

It made the jump simultaneously with the *Terra*, its sister ship. The 2 gigantic, spherical vessels, 600 feet each in diameter, reentered the normal continuum of space 5 light-minutes distant from Betelgeuse 3.

All weapon stations were fully manned. The defence screens began to function automatically. In the Communications Central, meanwhile, Capt. Lamanche strove to pick up all reliable information he could from the intercepted radio traffic in order to determine the next course of action. Excitement ran high on board the *Centurion*.

At first, however, the space surrounding the ship remained empty. The 3rd planet was a bright star off the bow.

The small hypersensor equipment was activated and began to register the first enemy transitions. The arrivals were spaced out but in a few moments it was obvious that they had all originated from the same starting point.

The fleet of the Springers. It had arrived a few moments off schedule.

* * * *

The Topides waited in their subterranean fortresses.

These extensive installations had been set up with a feverish haste in order to divert the enemy from the more valuable 4th planet. If a world was going to be attacked, it would be better to offer up the 3rd planet as a target, for there was nothing there worth defending, outside of endless primeval forests and stony, high plateaus. No intelligent form of life existed in this jungle world.

Nothing, naturally, other than the Topides.

Al-Khor maintained a permanent network of communications with all command posts. He was continuously updated in regard to all defence preparations and other relevant events. A permanent hypercom channel was set up between himself and the dictator of the Topide system, 543-light-years distant.

"Reconnaissance cruiser *MV-13* has an important message."

Al-Khor nodded to the speaker on the viewscreen. "Send it through," he ordered. The scaly, serrated crest on the back of his neck hung limply to one side, demonstrating the state of his fatigue. His scaly body was partially covered with a uniform. In his wide belt, the handle of a portable raygun was to be seen.

The face disappeared from the screen. For a moment the silhouette of an elongated vessel was visible and then the hard features of a Topide appeared. "Cruiser *MV-13* . Commander Ber-Ka. Important message: 2 light-minutes from here we have detected the first transition space warpages. The Springers are beginning their attack."

"Try to establish a count," ordered Al-Khor. "Report all further transitions at once and give their positions. I will dispatch a number of fighting units in your direction immediately. Attack, Ber-Ka! Only individual in-fighting can confuse the enemy!"

"I will attack!" confirmed Ber-Ka. His face disappeared swiftly from the screen, which immediately brightened again and revealed another Topide.

From here on, there was no rest for Al-Khor.

The attack against the Betelgeuse system began.

But patrol cruiser *MV-13* had just received its instructions. Ber-Ka did not hesitate to carry them out.

Ber-Ka was still young and ambitious. Only a few years ago he had held the commanding position on a larger warship, a cylindrically shaped vessel 600 feet long. Its excellent armament had given him a sense of security and also it had given him the courage to attack stronger opponents than himself. He drew his slender figure to his full height and ordered his officers to him.

"My friends," he said firmly, "Al-Khor has given us complete freedom of action. We are to attack the Springers wherever we find them. You know as well as I that there can be no better opportunity than this to distinguish ourselves. Long live the Dictator!"

"Long live the Dictator!" murmured the officers, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. To many of them, their own life was somewhat more valuable than a posthumous decoration but disobedience to the Commander meant instant death. So the chance of living through a battle was considerably greater.

On the viewscreens of the *MV-13* , wandering blips of light represented the attacking Springers. Here and there, these points of light simply appeared out of nothingness and indicated that more hypertransitions were still occurring. After a careful study of these patterns it became clear to Ber-Ka that the Springers were interested in no side engagements but had instead singled out the 3rd planet as their main goal.

This was of course astonishing because after all it had originally been the 4th planet that had served the Topides as a base of operations and presumably it should have been that planet that would be attacked.

Why was it then that the Springers did not concern themselves with the water planet but instead were making such a concentrated rush toward the 3rd planet?

For Al-Khor, also, this was the burning question of the moment, which no one seemed to be able to answer.

In outward appearance the Springer ships were almost identical in appearance to those of the Topides but they were considerably faster, more manoeuvrable and more heavily armed. Also, the Mounders were the proven battle elite of the Galactic Traders and had always lived by war. To attempt living by peace had not yet occurred to them.

Ber-Ka searched until he found a lone, wandering point of light far enough away from the others not to represent a trap for himself. Then he gave his instructions to the pilot while he hurried to the battle command post in order to lead the attack personally.

The selected target was a comparatively small ship of some insignificant Springer clan. Its commander had of course heard of Perry Rhodan and his home planet Terra. However, he considered all reports concerning them to be greatly exaggerated. And because of this, his present attitude was to be the cause of the destruction of himself and his crew.

Ber-Ka continued to stalk his prey. The unsuspecting Springer held steadily to a course that would bring him to the 3rd planet. The reptile's well-trained hands were poised over the firing keys of the rayguns. Deep within the cruiser the necessary power was building up and being stored for the moment when it would be released in one lightning blow.

"They're still one lisek away," murmured one of the officers uneasily. He wasn't especially enthusiastic at this moment although he had already served on many a punitive expedition against defenceless subjects. However, this was another matter: they were going against an enemy who was at least equal to themselves.

At least!

"Distance, ½ lisek!"

The distance continued to decrease and then became constant as the Springer discovered his attacker and flew in a sharp, evasive curve.

"Pursue—and fire!" shouted Ber-Ka and he felt the deck tremble under his feet as the salvo raced away from the bow.

It was not difficult for the racing fingers of energy, travelling at the speed of light, to overtake the slowly moving Springer, even before a single move could be made in his own defence. Colourful flashes of lightning surrounded the small ship, whose defence screen collapsed instantly and offered no further protection against the pursuing heat rays. Its generators detonated with a blinding flash. The hull bulged outward and melted away. The resultant debris spewed forth with a seeming indolence in all directions of space. Here and there, massive figures in pressure suits could be seen, whose own propulsion mechanisms instantly fired and attempted to take the survivors away to safety.

One of the Topide officers stared with narrow eyes after the fleeing Springers. "Should we finish them?" he asked.

"No, I'm a soldier, not a murderer."

"But they have attacked us, Ber-Ka!"

"Considering the overall situation, you may be right but we are the ones who attacked this one. Let's give them their chance and not bother ourselves about them." He turned back to the Control Central.

He was the Commander. His order was law. The Springers in their lifesuits moved away in all directions and swiftly became lost in the emptiness between the planets.

Ber-Ka turned his attention once more to the viewscreen. The blips wandering across his field of vision had increased in number but at this great distance it was difficult to determine whether Topide ships were among them or not. Of course Ber-Ka knew that the main striking force lurked below in the cliffs of Betelgeuse 3, or, as it was called in the Topide catalogues, Lyrad 3.

MV-13 had wandered far from the 3rd planet and was approaching the orbit of Akvo. Under no circumstances must the attackers be permitted to concern themselves too closely with the water world on which perhaps the abandoned defence bases might attract unwanted attention.

The wandering points of light finally disappeared. There was only a single blip to be seen. It appeared to be a vessel that had no desire to be destroyed in the first assault wave... After bringing it under magnification and probing it with a coded ship call, Ber-Ka's suspicions were confirmed that he was dealing with a Springer. And this Springer was heading straight for the planet Akvo.

"New course—operations sector CO-17-dk," he called to the navigation's officer, while ordering the weapon stations to stand by to open fire. It was necessary to intercept the Springer before he could get suspicious. "Increase velocity."

He pursued the wandering light-point with a tense expectancy and was soon forced to the conclusion that this was a battleship of the Mounders and there wasn't any doubt that the patrol cruiser was outmatched by it.

In Ber-Ka, ambition struggled with the instinct of self-preservation.

He could always veer off of the course as though he had not noticed the enemy. The majority of his crew would have maintained silence on the matter, out of personal interest for their own preservation. But if there were just one among them who happened to have it in for him and wanted to deal him a blow or seek a promotion, he would be finished. Cowardice in the face of the enemy was punishable by death.

Actually, therefore, it was more a fear of betrayal that motivated Ber-Ka to carry the attack forward. He was by no means happy about the situation but he did not have any other choice.

The light-point came closer and gradually resolved itself into a long shadow on the viewscreen that obliterated a number of distant stars. There was no indication that the Springer had noticed its pursuer. It held unconcernedly to its course. At its present low velocity it would require 2 hours yet before it penetrated the atmosphere of Akvo.

Ber-Ka suddenly had a new idea. "Radio Central!" he called. "Try to set up a communication with the alien."

"With the Springer?" asked the operator in astonishment.

"Yes, with the Springer. The call frequency is in our catalogue. What's so amazing about it? Haven't we been in contact with Springers before?"

"Yes—but under other circumstances."

"That's just the point," said Ber-Ka, and he smiled briefly. "I am curious. It is precisely the circumstances that interest me."

He re-channelled his monitor equipment. Now he had a closed circuit connection with his own Com Central. Without having to leave his station, he could now observe the operations of the radio operator.

The ship call went out.

On another screen the lengthy shadow had grown larger. The *MV-13* approached its course at a lateral angle. At a specific point ahead they would undoubtedly meet if both ships' courses and velocities were maintained as at present.

The loudspeaker and the viewscreen were respectively silent and dark. The Springer did not answer the ship call or else he hadn't heard it, which did not seem probable in view of the circumstances.

However, Ber-Ka did not give up so easily. "Continue the call," he ordered to the radio officer. "And you can add that we're asking for a parley."

This was against all regulations. Setting up conferences with the enemy by far outstripped the level of competence and responsibility of a small cruiser commander. Ber-Ka knew this but it made no difference to him. He harboured a vague suspicion and he wanted to know whether his instinct was valid. It was worth the risk. He did not know that he was about to make history, no more than he knew who the commander of the alien vessel was...

* * * *

When the first ships of the Springers penetrated the upper layers of the atmosphere of Betelgeuse 3, Al-Khor ordered the counterattack.

Everywhere heavy armourplate hatches opened up and the muzzles of impulse cannons glided out of the ground and pointed skyward. Subterranean hangars disgorged the waiting battle fleet, which at a single command rose vertically to meet the attacker.

A deadly battle ensued, imposing heavy losses on both sides. The first atom bombs began to fall and destroyed a portion of the fortress installations. The robot-guided defence rackets of the Topides pursued the Springer ships until they reached them and destroyed them. The ships selected as rocket targets could only escape the threat of destruction by making a blind transition into hyperspace.

Al-Khor sat deep underneath the rocky surface and listened to the reports. He winced bitterly whenever he heard of losses caused by the attacker but his countenance brightened whenever he was informed of the destruction of an enemy ship.

In spite of this, he could not escape the realization that it was only a matter of time until the Springers would be able to destroy the 3rd planet in a single blow with the help of an Arkon bomb or perhaps even a gravitation bomb.

He began to wonder with amazement why it hadn't already happened. "Connect me with the home planet!" he shouted in the dimly lighted room, just as a heavy detonation was felt nearby and the main lights went out. "The Dictator, quickly—before its too late!"

There was nothing for a few moments and then he heard the voice of the chief radio officer. "The main power has failed. We'll try the emergency equipment!"

"I'm waiting!" Al-Khor shouted back. Then he supported his weary head in his almost human hands and thought of the certain death that waited him at home if the Springers should be victorious.

But—was it his fault, after all, if he didn't have enough ships at his disposal? Had he not warned the Dictator and begged him not to underestimate the Springers?

And now, since he was justified, was he to die after all?

Al-Khor straightened up. His eyes began to gleam dangerously. He dispelled such thoughts from his mind.

He would sooner surrender to the enemy and become a traitor—and then perhaps remain alive.

Well, there was still a little time for such a decision...

"We have your connection," called the communications officer. "Turn on your set, Al-Khor!"

A chill came over Al-Khor. For a short moment he wavered over what he had to do but then he got hold of himself. "Al-Khor here. Lyrad 3. The Springer attack has begun, Dictator. The enemy forces are superior to ours. Without help, from home base, we are lost!"

"Then fight!" said the Dictator coldly. The face of the Dictator was rigid and aloof on the screen. The cold eyes bored into Al-Khor as though they could read his most secret thoughts. "I will send you another 200 ships but not a single vessel more. Fight and conquer, Al-Khor, or—it would be better for you never to return home!"

"But..."

Al-Khor became silent. The Dictator had already cut the connection.

The Commander of the reptile forces leaned back and breathed a deep sigh. "Fight and conquer... How easy that is to say! Outside, a world is falling to pieces and we're supposed to fight. What else is there to do? Our ships are putting up a defence against a superior force but they don't waver. Before giving in, they permit themselves to be destroyed. And the Dictator? Does he have a word of approval or recognition to spare for us?"

A sound behind him jerked him to alertness with the suddenness of a whiplash. Footsteps approached. Then an icy voice spoke to him without the slightest tremor of emotion. "How can we win victory if our Commander is already beginning to lose his resolve? What's the matter with you, Al-Khor? Are you

tired—perhaps tired of living?"

Al-Khor controlled himself sufficiently to turn about slowly. His scaly, claw-like hand rested on the butt of the raygun in his belt. "You, Ra-Gor! I could have suspected as much! Why aren't you at your weapons command post and seeing to it that the enemy ships are being decimated? If you want the actual truth of the matter: what you are doing is high treason!"

The young officer standing behind the Commander also had his hand on the butt of his weapon. He smiled coldly. In his eyes was a storm of ambition mixed with hate, of fear mixed with reckless courage. "And what have you done, Al-Khor? You have doubted the wisdom of our Dictator. You demand recognition from him for merely doing our duty. That is mutiny!"

Al-Khor slowly turned back to the control console and observed the darkened viewscreen before him. He could plainly see the reflection of the young officer behind him in the smooth glass. "I have only been thinking out loud, Ra-Gor, nothing else. And I might add that I have kept my thoughts to myself and shared them with no one."

"Except me!"

Al-Khor nodded. "Without intending to, my young friend. By your own choice you seem to have burdened yourself with a knowledge that may be a little too heavy for your young shoulders to bear. So I will help you to carry the load."

"That won't be necessary, Al-Khor. I can handle it myself. The Dictator will be thankful to me when I explain to him what kind of a coward his Commander-in-Chief was..."

"*What?*"

"Yes, because you are not going to return home alive. The courageously fighting officers will be spared your disgrace. Or would you prefer to be publicly executed?"

Al-Khor realized that he had no choice in the matter before him. He had always been a true subject of the Dictator, even if he didn't always sanction his methods. But now to be denounced a block-headed young opportunist like this? No! That was going too far!

He drew his weapon unobtrusively and released the safety catch. In the reflection on the viewscreen glass he could see that Ra-Gor was still hesitating to carry out his intent. Had he suddenly gotten cold feet? When now it was too late and Al-Khor did not experience the slightest twinge of sorrow or compassion as he swung around with lightning swiftness and aimed his gun at the surprised officer.

"Mutiny is punishable by death, Ra-Gor. As Commander I have such powers under my jurisdiction, so I hereby sentence you to death. That sentence is to be carried out immediately. I will even permit you to keep your own weapons and to..."

But the victim did not have a chance to take advantage of the slim margin of opportunity offered. He died even before his raygun moved from his belt,

In disgust and revulsion, Al-Khor stared for a few seconds at the mortal remains of the young, zealous officer who had wanted to use his head as a stepping stone. Then he turned around once more and busied himself at the control console.

The battle reports coming in from the fighting forces were uncensored and apparently without order or supervision. It did not take many minutes for Al-Khor to realize that the battle was virtually lost. The superior power of the enemy was too great.

What remained was a very slight possibility, a meteoroid in the void, so to speak. With an impatient sweep of his hand, he silenced the incoming confusion of voices. Automatically all stations were changed to a mode of reception. Now they would all be able to hear his voice at once.

"All officers, attention! This is Al-Khor, your Commander." He paused slightly, took a deep breath. "We will abandon Lyrad 3 and engage the Springers in outer space. Either we will be victorious—or we will die! That is all!"

That is all...! The words echoed in Al-Khor's mind as he got up and took care of issuing his final instructions.

* * * *

When the *Top 2* materialized and the giant, blood red star Betelgeuse appeared on the viewscreens, it was to Tophthor as though someone had struck him in the face. Speechless and uncomprehending, he stared at the unbelievable spectacle presented to his eyes. This the sun of the planet Terra?

Impossible!

This giant red eye before him was a completely unknown sun, so basically different from the yellow star he had known before that a blind man would have known the difference.

And Tophthor was anything but blind.

His first thought was to get into immediate radio contact with Cekztel and to reveal the error to him. But then he remained seated and continued to stare silently at the incredible scene. He tried to find some explanation for it but did not succeed. Under no condition would it have been possible for the positronic brain in the Nav section to have made an error. That was completely out of the question. At the time, the location data had been registered right on the spot and stored in the memory bank, so there could be no error from that source.

Tophthor was an objective thinker and therefore he soon gave up trying to find an explanation for the impossible; there was time for that later. At the moment it was important to face the facts as they were and to consider the possible results or alternatives.

Alternative 1: to communicate with Cekztel and admit to him that he had led the fleet to a false destination. What would be the consequences? Tophthor quickly became ill when he thought of them. Even though he was not aware of any blame on his part, the reproaches would fall on him like hail. And who would care? No one. Maybe he would even be ostracized and in the future would have to live the lonely life of an outcast, shunned by everyone and without a friend.

No. Tophthor had no intention of enlightening Cekztel.

Alternative 2: he would try on his own to solve the problem and find out how the error had occurred. This involved remaining silent for the time being and allowing his companions to believe that this was in fact the system of Terra and the Earthly sun. Certainly it wouldn't take long for them to realize that they had been led astray, because Rhodan's home system would not be lying here without protection. However, in this place no resistance was to be expected. It was a discrepancy that would soon demonstrate itself—a discrepancy that Tophthor was satisfied with for the moment.

The 2nd alternative seemed to be more acceptable to the Mounder.

But he thought further. He knew that on board were a number of the crew who had been with him that time and had seen the Earth themselves. Would they remain silent if he should reveal the facts to them? Certainly they were old friends and comrades of his, especially Regol and Gatzek.

And lastly there was still the positronic brain, which was capable of error.

Tophthor got up suddenly and paid the Navigation room a visit. He dismissed the officer on watch and set about checking out the data personally. After a few minutes the computer spewed out the results. Tophthor checked it through and shook his head.

The statements checked out. The co-ordinates checked out. The red, giant sun checked out!

Silently and without explanation he nodded to the officer who had in the meantime returned and he went back into the Control Central. He sat down heavily in the upholstered seat and looked at the viewscreen. He also plugged in to the running stream of radio traffic and listened. The attack on the 3rd planet had already begun.

He smiled faintly to himself but suddenly his face became tense and rigid.

The Terranians were putting up a desperate defence!

Tophthor felt as though he had received an electric shock.

This was the second surprise within a period of 10 minutes.

Were there actually Terranians in this alien system? Then he was saved; and for the time being nobody would catch on to this involuntary betrayal. The 3rd planet appeared to be inhabited and was being defended.

He listened to the inflowing reports very attentively and breathed a sigh of relief. Although they soon put him in a complete state of confusion. He couldn't understand it. Perhaps the Terranians had set up a military base here which they intended to defend. If, then, according to plan, the attacking fleet destroyed the 3rd planet, the Terranians would have lost only one military base, not Rhodan's home planet.

Tophthor decided also to keep this secret to himself for the time being and to continue his investigations on his own responsibility. So it came about that he finally turned away from the general course of the fleet and headed for the 4th planet, where he intended to assemble data about this system without interruption and put them through the positronic brain, in order to make every comparison possible. Somewhere the error was buried and he was going to dig it out.

The position of the actual planet Earth must not be lost!

* * * *

The Springer did not reply.

Ber-Ka did not hesitate and opened fire from all weapons positions.

To his amazement the entire salvo of energy beam was swallowed up and absorbed effortlessly by the enemy's defence screen. Meanwhile the relative distance between the ships had been closed to such an extent that any retreat was out of the question. But even that decision was denied Ber-Ka.

The Springer ship altered its course slightly and turned broadside to the *MV-13* . Ber-Ka knew what that meant but it was too late to change his own position. With a lightning move he switched all energies into the defence screen in order to take the shock of the expected answering attack.

But the Springer did not fire energy beams; instead, a silvery shining torpedo came toward them, surrounded by a strangely shimmering light. Automatically altering its course, the missile glided unconcernedly toward the *MV-13* . It followed their evasive manoeuvres easily and then detonated with a blinding flash close to the stem quarters.

Ber-Ka felt the hard jolt that ran through the ship. In spite of his arm rests he was thrown out of his seat and rolled straight across the Control Central without stopping until he hit the bulkhead. Cries rang out. Someone shouted an order. Then came a second detonation and a new jolt. The lights went out. The gravitational fields ceased to function and Ber-Ka became weightless as the ship hurtled in freefall toward the planet Akvo without engines and without guidance.

The stern must have been destroyed.

Filled with desperation, Ber-Ka floated weightlessly against the ceiling in a futile struggle to direct his course.

At any moment the enemy could strike the deathblow to him and to the cruiser.

But Ber-Ka waited in vain.

Without support, the *MV-13* , plunged toward the surface of the 4th planet...

* * * *

Topthor observed the unequal battle from his Control Central.

At the very first appearance of the other ship, a suspicion had emerged in him that was so absurd and crazy that he came near to shaking his head in amazement at his own thoughts. But he finally perceived that the whole battle action was going very strangely. Perhaps he might be able to lift the veil from this

mystery if he were to interrogate these "Terranians." It was clear that they were quite helpless. They would have to realize that they were in his power; otherwise they would never tell the truth.

But were they Terranians?

Topthor observed the long, rod-like ship with its balloon-shaped centre bulge that glided alongside in battle readiness. Where had he seen this particular shape of hull before? The Topides? Did they perhaps have their empire in the region of Terra?

Or had they become in some manner allied with the Terranians?

The attack was fended off and then the stem and engine rooms of the unknown vessel were destroyed with a grav-torpedo. The ship dropped toward the planet.

Topthor trailed it casually. He neither made preparations to rescue the shipwrecked crew nor to blow the cruiser to atoms. Relatively motionless, he hovered close behind the *MV-13* and waited.

2 hours passed while Ber-Ka went through hell and felt that his ghuz (A flying fish prized for its fine flavour) was more than well cooked. The planet had grown in size and already the single continent glimmered through the gaps in the cloud covering. The first whistling sounds of the upper layers of the atmosphere became audible.

Then Topthor decided to take action. The *Top 2* moved closer to the plunging ship. Gleaming magnetic clamps emerged from the hull and gripped the derelict firmly.

The force of gravity returned as both ships swept through a shallow curve. They circled once around Akvo and finally landed on a high plateau near the coast.

Meanwhile, Topthor had not been idle. He stood in the open airlock and waited for the survivors of the captured ship with an impulse beamer ready in his hand. But he had not counted on the suicidal fanaticism of the Topides. He became suspicious only when a round porthole opened on the bow of the derelict. He saved himself with a quick jump back into the lock chamber and let the hatch fall shut. Then he raced to the Control Central where Gatzek had already noted the incident. With a quick manoeuvre of the controls, the defence screens were turned on.

But a tenth of a second too late...

The blinding finger of energy shot out from the *MV-13* and struck the *Top 2* amidships! A detonation followed as one of the reactors discharged itself. The mighty ship split asunder in the middle and only then did the energy screen start operating. Within a matter of seconds 2 derelicts instead of one lay next to each other on the plateau of the 4th planet and in each of them the deadly enemy of the other lay in wait, watching for any weak spot of his opponent.

Topthor cursed his carelessness. But then suddenly he became quite calm. He looked into Gatzek's wide, staring eyes. "Investigate our power situation and check out the communication and navigation centrals for their operational status. Give me the results immediately. Determine repairs necessary for manoeuvrability of the *Top 2*."

Gatzek hesitated. "What's with this derelict that has crippled us? Shouldn't I give the order to have it destroyed?"

"Keep your place, Gatzek. I'm going to take this fellow in hand myself. And I think we're in for a couple of surprises."

"I'm up to my neck in surprises now," protested the officer and he left the Control Central.

Topthor smiled wryly as he watched him go. Then he got up and went into the Com Central. Regol hunched over the control console and ran through a panel checkout. An incomprehensible jumble of sounds came through the loudspeaker—at least that was functioning!

"Are you in contact with Cekztel?" asked Topthor.

Regol shook his head without turning around. "Not yet. They haven't had time for it. The Terranians have closed the battle with us and they're about to lose it. Rhodan's super battleship has been seen several times."

Topthor was speechless for several seconds. Then he echoed: "Rhodan's super battleship?"

Regol nodded in equal astonishment. "Yes, it's his *Titan*, or whatever he's named that big ball of his, and also at least 10 heavy Arkonide cruisers seem to be taking part in the defensive fighting."

"And they are *losing*?" asked Topthor incredulously. This didn't sound logical! "Is it certain?"

The reports are unmistakable, Topthor. There can be no doubt that we have strongly overestimated the fighting power of the Terranians. And incidentally, this whole time I've been wanting to ask: have you noticed a change in the sun here? If my memory doesn't fail me, Terra had a small, yellow sun and now..."

"I know," Topthor interrupted impatiently. "We'll talk about that later. Just now there isn't any time—there are more important things to take care of. Get me a radio connection with that derelict!"

Regol laughed. "I've been trying to do that for some time. They don't answer. Apparently their radio had been destroyed."

Topthor sighed. "So that's out. It looks as if I'm going to have to show myself in the lock again—with a neutrality flag in my hand in order to convince them of our peaceable intentions."

"Do you think the Terranians on board will honour it?" asked Regol doubtfully.

Topthor was already at the door. He turned around. "Who says that Terranians are over there on board that wreck?"

Regol's mouth gaped open as he stared after his commander.

3/ THE SEARCH FOR SYNTHETIC ISLAND

There was no respite for the positronic Nav computer on board the *Centurion*. The heavy cruiser

would appear among the Topide ships and fire more or less effectively against the attacking Mounders for a moment or two. Then it would disappear again into hyperspace. Almost instantaneously it would reappear in another place. Maj. Deringhouse sweated in his eagerness. Capt. Lamanche, his first officer and second-in-command, roared out a continuous stream of orders to ensure that the transitions would continue in rapid succession. Inasmuch as Rhodan with the *Titan* and McClears with the *Terra* were carrying out the same manoeuvres, the Mounders were receiving the impression that they were confronted with at least 3 or 4 battleships of the Empire class and 10 heavy cruisers.

And yet the 'Terranians' were losing!

This was primarily due to the clumsy and far too slow-moving Topide ships, which were simply no match for the Springer assault. If the *Titan* had thrown its true power into the battle, it might have gone differently; but for understandable reasons Rhodan was not interested in that. The Springers had to win and be convinced that they had destroyed the Earth and, naturally, the spacefleet of the Terranians.

Deringhouse took his eyes from the controls to look up at John Marshall, who had just entered the Control Central. "Well?" he asked, excitedly. "Any success?"

"This time you could have made your bet with Pucky," replied the telepath. "We haven't yet picked up the faintest trace of Topthor. I'm beginning to doubt that he's taking part in the attack."

"Impossible!" Deringhouse shook his head. "We intercepted a radio message that indicated definitely that he's taking part in it. Is Pucky the only one you put to work on it?"

"Naturally not. All available telepaths are attempting to pick up the Mounder's thought impulses. Ras Tschubai has already teleported to a number of Mounder ships but he didn't find Topthor on board any of them. Each time that black phantom appeared out of nothing, the crews were almost seared to death."

"All the better," grinned the Major. "Such teleportation phenomena will be the best proof to our attackers that they are fighting against Rhodan's people."

"Pucky has made a lot of jumps himself. Each time he could have taken along an atom bomb and destroyed the enemy ship but that wouldn't have quite served our purposes. Frankly, I'm not exactly enthralled with the idea of losing a battle with such a crass lack of concern, when it could be won so easily."

"The whole Milky Way is supposed to believe that we've been wiped out but that's just why Topthor has to be found. If he loses his nerve and reveals to his friends that they have destroyed the wrong planet, our whole strategy will go up in smoke. Up to now it's been going along quite smoothly."

"We'll continue our search," promised Marshall and he nodded to Deringhouse reassuringly. "We'll catch him once and for all. He can't hide away forever."

"Let's hope he can't!" growled Deringhouse and ordered the next transition jump, which brought him right smack in the centre of a duel between 2 cruisers of the lizards and a giant cylindrical ship of the Mounders.

* * * *

Topthor waited in the open airlock and stared alertly at the unidentified smaller ship. What would he see?

Terranians?

He was almost certain of the fact that there wasn't a single Terranian on board that wreck over there. A quick perusal of the catalogue had confirmed his hunch. The Topides built ships of this design.

Was it true, then, that the Topides had made some kind of alliance with the Terranians? How could one make any sense out of that? Didn't Rhodan represent any danger for their empire?

He had to know these things and for this reason he was now risking his life. Maybe his other question could also be answered, as to how the Nav computer on board the *Top 2* could make this kind of mistake.

Beyond the flat plateau, the tropical forest began. It fell away below into distant flat country. It was only on the far horizon that another chain of mountains showed itself but it was partially lost to view in the haze of distance. Somewhere to the right glistened the ocean, which seemed to be the main surface feature of the planet. It wasn't an unpleasant world at all, really; it was too bad there were no intelligent natives around with whom one might do a little trading.

Or were there such intelligences? What were the reptiles doing here?

Topthor's eyes caught a movement on the derelict. A lock port opened slowly and ponderously as though moved by hand. Apparently all equipment on board the other ship had been put out of commission. Then a hand became visible.

Although Topthor had expected as much, it startled him.

It was the scaly hand of a reptile—of a Topide.

So it was true after all!

If Rhodan's spherical ships had not been seen in this battle, one might consider a fantastic possibility here. Topthor smiled grimly as he thought about it, even though he did not suspect how close he had come to the truth.

A Topide appeared in the now open airlock and raised both hands, which were empty. He stretched them out to show them to the Mounder. Topthor showed him his own empty hands and shouted to him in the customary parley language of the Arkonide Empire: "It's better that we don't fight each other any more or we're all going to be lost. Nobody is going to come to our aid. If we compare notes together, we may be able to find a way out."

Ber-Ka continued to be suspicious. "Why didn't you destroy us in space when you had a chance? You could have done it before we fired a shot."

Topthor grinned pleasantly. "I have my good reasons for that, Topide. Why don't we have a quiet little talk? I believe it may uncover some surprises for both of us."

"I had that idea in mind even before I attacked you."

Topthor perked up. The contact was showing promise. "Is your radio equipment still functioning?"

"No. It was destroyed."

"Mine is still working—at least the receiver. We haven't checked out the transmitter yet because for the time being we aren't interested in revealing our position. Come on, Topide, let's meet together over by that big, bare rock. I'm carrying no weapons but my people are standing on guard. You are free to take the same security measures.

Without waiting for a reply, Topthor climbed down the few steps of the extended ladder and then his mighty figure stood on the plateau. His belt was empty but in the spacious pockets of his cloak was a small needle pistol—just in case.

Ber-Ka hesitated but he must have finally perceived that there was absolutely no alternative for him other than to accept the suggestion of the Mounder. Perhaps this Springer was really being honest with him. He raised his scaly arm as though in a signal and called a few instructions into the interior of his ship. Then he, too, stepped down upon the surface of the water planet and came slowly over to the place that Topthor had designated.

They met at the large rock.

Topthor observed the creature opposite him more closely. According to his knowledge of the Topides, this was a still young specimen of the curious reptile race with whom contact had been made here and there in the past. They could not be designated as enemies because after all they shared the same hatred with the Springers against the Arkonides. This was all the more reason the present war was so astonishing a situation.

"My name is Topthor. I am the patriarch of my clan and also the commander of this once very fine ship." He turned around partially and pointed toward the middle of the broken wreck. "I take it that you are the officer and commander of the other unlucky ship."

Ber-Ka nodded. His accent was noticeable but he spoke a fair Intercosmo. "I am Ber-Ka, commander of the patrol cruiser *MV-13*, which you have made inoperable and forced to a landing here. Now what has been accomplished by it?"

"What has been accomplished at all by this whole accursed war?" asked Topthor ingratiatingly. "I'm certainly the last one who wanted it."

"Who did want it, then? Did we do the attacking or was it the Springers who came here with the intention of destroying the entire system?"

Topthor sharpened his ears. "Where did you get this information? How could you know that we actually came here with that intention?"

Ber-Ka searched the vast countenance before him and found only a frank curiosity. He actually did not know the answer to the question he was asking. "Some days ago we captured several Springers—they were not Mounders—and we interrogated them thoroughly. They admitted that an attack on this system had been planned."

Topthor was bewildered. "Springers?—ordinary, normal Springers? This we do not know about. Nobody else knew about this undertaking, which was prepared in secret. Who could the traitor have been? Was there any description of them, Ber-Ka?"

"Why are you interested in them?"

"Because there can be no traitors—and finding answers to the impossible is one of my favourite pastimes."

Ber-Ka studied the Mounder for some time but could not read anything but a very tense curiosity in his eyes. "Some days ago, Springers landed on this planet. They did not land of their own accord but were forced down by our tractor beams. Their commander surrendered to us. We also captured another considerably smaller ship of theirs. You must know by now that we maintained an operations base in this system."

"I've gradually come to that realization," admitted Topthor. "But continue. Who were these Springers?"

"That I do not know but perhaps Al-Khor could enlighten you. He interviewed the prisoners who later were able to escape."

"They have escaped?" Topthor's amazement grew. "I can't quite grasp all of this. How is that possible?"

"The native inhabitants of the sea helped them get away. They must have been in some sort of alliance with them."

"Native inhabitants? Do you mean to tell me that there are intelligences on this world of water?"

"They are harmless creatures with but a trace of understanding," said Ber-Ka disparagingly. "They are not of any importance at all."

"And yet you people have found it justifiable to set up a base here, haven't you? Well, however that may be, what I want to find out is who these Springers were who were captured and then got away. Did their ships have any clan insignia?"

"They bore names on their hulls but I am not informed about it. At any rate, one of them had a spherical shape, while the smaller ship was more like a disc.

"Spherical...?" drawled Topthor in surprise. "The spherical shape of Arkonide or Terranian vessels?"

"Terranians?"

Topthor bypassed the question. "There are no Springers who possess vessels of a spherical shape, outside of a few extravagant millionaires who can afford to keep Arkonide ships taken as war booty. They haven't anything to do with our mission here."

"Nevertheless they were Springers because they told us so themselves. Now certainly I should be able to ask some questions after answering yours so willingly."

"By all means, but there's just one more piece of information: On which planet do you have your military base?—the 4th or on the 3rd

"I don't think it will do any harm for you to know that also. We are based on the 4th planet. We only set up defences on the 3rd planet in order to draw you away from the more valuable water world."

Tophthor became lost in meditation. "State your questions," he murmured absently.

Ber-Ka took advantage of the opportunity. "Why do you attack our system? How did you know of our military base?"

Several minutes went by before Tophthor answered. He had been so busy with his thoughts that the Topide had to repeat both of his questions.

"Why are we attacking you...? My dear Ber-Ka, this isn't easily explained. To put it briefly: we didn't know that a Topide base existed here. I know it's hard to believe but we were under the impression that this was the home system of the Terranians, of whom you may have heard. Or does the name Perry Rhodan mean anything to you?"

"Perry Rhodan...?" The Topide considered this for a moment. "Yes, I believe I've heard of him before. One of our expedition fleets clashed with him in a system that must have been in close proximity to Terra. To be frank with you, we thought it was Terra. Unfortunately, the fortunes of war were not with us at the time and we had to withdraw."

"These Springers that you captured here—what did they look like?"

"Well, the way Springers usually look. Humanoid, slender... they spoke pure Intercosmo..."

"Well, the Terranians do also," interjected Tophthor. "...Why should they want to disguise their identity?"

"That is also my question, Ber-Ka. Do you know something? I'm slowly beginning to suspect that we've been victimized by a carefully contrived hoax. Do you know who your prisoners were? No? Then I'll put you wise to something: they were Terranians and more than that they were Terranians working for Rhodan, who came here and informed you that we Springers were planning an attack on the Topides. I'd just like to know how they found out about our plans and how they knew that the co-ordinates would be false."

"What co-ordinates?"

"The co-ordinates of Terra, which are registered in my navigation computer."

Ber-Ka gave a visible start of astonishment. "You know the position of Rhodan's home planet?"

"Yes, at one time I believed I did. You probably won't go along with me on this but I assure you that the co-ordinates I now have pertain to this giant red sun, which has about as much to do with Terra's mother star as I have to do with you. My positronicon has made a mistake and it's given me false co-ordinates. Rhodan must have known that beforehand."

"But that's..." Ber-Ka stuttered and then fell silent.

Tophthor nodded in bitter agreement. "Yes, I know, it seems impossible and yet it's the only answer. There's no other explanation for this riddle. And while we sit here and try to unravel it, out there in space your fleet and mine are trying to destroy each other. We have to get busy and do something."

"My radio equipment is destroyed," complained the Topide.

"I'm still not sure whether our transmitter is working. But Ber-Ka, I'll tell you one thing for sure: those Springers who were so willing to be captured in order to plant their information with you were agents of Rhodan—Terranians! And you let them get away! For that your commander ought to be drawn and quartered because he alone is responsible for the present blood bath we're suffering."

"Why single him out?" asked Ber-Ka, puzzled. "If you had not attacked us, nothing at all would have happened."

Topthor did not reply. He looked across toward the airlock of the *Top 2* and discovered Regol's face peeking cautiously around the corner.

"Hey, Regol! What's with the transmitter equipment?"

"Not much, Top. We sent out a call to a ship that was in the area but we didn't get any answer. I'm afraid..."

Topthor sighed and turned to Ber-Ka. "I'm afraid, too, Topide. What I mean is that for the time being we're going to have to take a forced leave of absence on this water world until the outcome of the war has been decided. But whatever the results of this battle may be, the real and only victor is Rhodan. It's really a shame that this man isn't a Springer. What a genius chess player he is! That mind of his can think too many moves ahead. It's magnificent the way he works in his plots and schemes and then lets other people do the work for him. Truly, I would give my left arm if I could make Rhodan an ally of mine." He paused, startled by a sudden thought. Then he cocked his head to one side and smiled bitterly. "It just occurs to me that maybe I won't have to give my left arm at all. I happen to know a Mounder who has made millions by working together with Rhodan. My friend Talamon has been smarter about this than I gave him credit for. Now I also understand why he didn't take part in this campaign. Okay, just wait, old friend, there are a few words I'd like to have with you when I get back!"

Get back...?

Topthor suddenly realized that his return was not so certain.

Rhodan knew that there was only one Springer who could cast light on the error to which the whole Mounder fleet had fallen prey and he would take pains to see that this single witness did not talk.

For now Topthor suddenly knew Rhodan's intention.

He turned to Ber-Ka. "I think that we will make peace, Topide. You probably still don't know why we have become allies, your race and mine. We have an enemy who is more devious and dangerous than you can imagine, an enemy who goes so far as to even make a lie out of his own destruction in order to prepare a terrible revenge in the darkness of forgetfulness. One day Rhodan will strike anew and every race in the galaxy that hasn't become his friend in the meantime will be his target."

"I do not quite fully understand

"Nor is it necessary for you to understand, Ber-Ka. For the moment you don't have any choice but to accept my offer. Try to repair your transmitter. We will feed you the necessary power. Our main generator is still working." He nodded to the reptile and turned back to his own airlock.

Ber-Ka hesitated a few seconds and then he turned to walk slowly back to his ship.

In his head swirled a thousand unanswered questions...

* * * *

"I've been through practically all of the ships but I can't scare up Topthor Pucky squatted in exhaustion on the couch in the Control Central and looked despairingly at Deringhouse. He seemed to be less disturbed over not having found Topthor than he was by the thought that he had lost a bet—that is, *if* Deringhouse had closed the wager.

"Maybe Topthor was killed at the beginning of the battle and his ship is destroyed. Then that would take care of the problem."

"Rhodan wants facts," retorted Marshall. "Betty Toufry claims that she has just detected some thought impulses for a moment which might have come from Topthor."

"What makes her think so?" asked the mouse-beaver doubtfully. But his big ears were standing on end. The muscles of his hind legs tensed as though he was ready to make a jump. "And in what direction was she listening?"

"Always in a direction away from Betelgeuse," advised Marshall. "In the direction of interstellar space."

"That's nonsense!" chirped Pucky. "You mean in the direction of the water planet, Akvo. It happens to be exactly where she's probing!"

Marshall's first impulse was to jump up angrily but then his eyes narrowed suddenly. He looked searchingly at Deringhouse for a moment, then turned to Pucky. "Hm-m-m... Maybe that's not such a stupid idea, my little friend. I think I'll take Betty to task on that."

"I'll join you," the mouse-beaver volunteered and he slipped off the couch. "And if you're game, I'm always willing to make that bet."

"This time you won't have any victims, I'll guarantee you that," parried Marshall and disappeared into the corridor.

Pucky waddled after him, confident of victory.

Deringhouse stared after the 2 mutants but was interrupted by the buzzer on his radio call equipment. He pressed a button. The viewscreen remained dark but a voice emerged from the loudspeaker that was very familiar even though slightly distorted by the decoder:

"The Topides are just about wiped out. I think we can depend on the Springers to want to destroy the last ship before they turn to the task of obliterating the supposed planet Earth. They'll no doubt turn the jungle world into a small sun. Well, our water friends on Akvo shouldn't have any objections to having their average temperature come up a notch or two. According to reports, 200 more Topide ships have appeared but that's only going to delay the demise of the lizards by a few hours. What's going on with

you? Have you found Tophthor?"

"Not yet, sir," replied Deringhouse, depressed. "But maybe we've found a trace. Marshall is checking up on it now."

"Tophthor must be silenced," ordered Rhodan. "He isn't going to keep his mouth shut of his own accord—that's for sure. This is the second time that Mounder has set out to destroy the Earth. If he won't allow himself to be taken prisoner, he will have to die. Otherwise we will never have peace."

"If we find him, sir, we will take care of him."

Rhodan's voice sounded brittle when he said: "Maybe he's already been killed fighting and that would spare me a few twinges of conscience. In any case we need the proof that he's dead, otherwise our whole action here will have been for nothing. If nobody is aware of our deception, Tophthor is the only one who can enlighten the Springers. That we will have to prevent. Where's Pucky?"

"He's with Marshall and Miss Toufry."

"Get him for me, Deringhouse. I want to make him a proposition."

Not 10 seconds later the mouse-beaver materialized in the Control Central and regarded the dark viewscreen. "You called for me, Chief?" he twittered contentedly. There was no sip now of his previous state of fatigue. "I believe we've found a trace of Tophthor."

"Then he's still alive?" Rhodan sought to ascertain.

"If the trail is still warm—yes. Why?"

"Pucky, find Tophthor! It's important. This whole battle between the Mounders and the Topides is unimportant. Even the alleged destruction of the Earth is uninteresting to us if Tophthor remains alive to clear up the mystery. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Chief. Anything else?"

Rhodan's voice remained serious although the faintest hint of a softer tone was noticeable. "Listen closely, little fellow. If you succeed in getting me the facts concerning Tophthor's fate, I'll make you a present of a whole silo of carrots."

For a second there was a devout silence. Then Pucky squeaked his joy and danced on one leg through the Control Central, almost falling over the commander's feet when he didn't get out of the way.

"That would be wonderful—I wouldn't have to make any more bets for almost 2 years—and there's nothing I hate worse than betting. You've got a deal, Chief! I'll have Tophthor for you in one hour and that includes the silo of carrots!"

Rhodan laughed restrainedly. "Good luck—not only for you but for all of us!"

The loudspeaker became silent.

Pucky remained seated for awhile, then slowly sat back on his broad hindquarters. His faithful hound-dog eyes searched Deringhouse's face. His single incisor tooth revealed itself as a sign of the

wonderful mood he was in. "Well?" said Pucky.

Deringhouse strove to remain serious. "Do you want to bet that you don't find Topthor? How about 5 pounds..."

The mouse-beaver waddled away without deigning to honour Deringhouse with even a glance. Before he disappeared, he chirped: "Five pounds! That's ridiculous! When I'm more or less a millionaire already? Ha—five pounds! Did you ever hear of such a thing! How do you figure that? How dare this fellow I"

The rest of his protest was lost.

In the midst of his thoughts, Pucky had teleported himself to a new location. Fortunately, not outside into empty space.

* * * *

Meanwhile, Topthor and Ber-Ka had arrived at an agreement. Between them there would be a truce and they would attempt to contact either the Springers or the Topides in order to inform them of the terrible mistake.

It was not possible to repair the transmitter of the *Top 2*. It was bad enough for Topthor to only be able to intercept reports of the battle under these conditions but for the unfortunate Ber-Ka it must have been even more unpleasant.

The Topides were beaten; that much was certain. The pitiful remains of their fleet had definitely been surrounded and ordered to surrender. On the other hand, there were some ships that had retreated into the caves of the jungle planet without realizing that this planet had been specifically singled out for complete destruction.

The Topide reinforcements arrived and entered the battle. The fresh forces still possessed good morale and added some painful losses to the Springers but soon the usual superiority of the Mounders demonstrated itself.

The Topides fled.

The pursuing Springers had passed the point of showing any mercy. They struck remorselessly and destroyed one ship after the other. The only ones they could not wipe out were the spherical ships of Rhodan which continued to appear here and there.

Topthor and Ber-Ka listened to the reports. The Topide had given up all hope and resigned himself to his fate. Not so the Springer.

"There must be some possibility of setting up communications with both sides, Ber-Ka. You say you had some bases here. Have they all been completely abandoned or did some crew still remain?"

"I don't know," lamented the Topide. "The security measures of the Supreme Commander are never a

matter of general knowledge. There may still be manned radio stations here but how can we make contact with them when we don't know where to find them?" The reptile paused abruptly, then eagerly nodded his head. "It would be logical to search first at the main headquarters. If anyone remained behind, it would be there!"

"And where is this former headquarters?"

Ber-Ka pointed toward the ocean. "Somewhere on the coast, on a man-made island in the sea. I don't know the exact location because I don't have any idea of where we've landed. We just have to try."

Topthor wrinkled his brow. "The reactor explosion has destroyed my holds and storage rooms and that includes the small power glider I had and the ground vehicle. We'd have to go on foot and I'd call that a senseless thing to do."

"We have a ground vehicle," said Ber-Ka with a trace of hope. "Unfortunately, our hydroplane was a victim of your attack, so we will just have to try to force a way to the ocean. There the beach is broad and solid enough to serve as a road. Theoretically we only have to drive around the entire continent in order to be certain of coming across the metal island."

"Quite a pleasant outing, I'm sure," observed Topthor bitterly but he was forced to realize that he didn't have any other choice if he didn't want to remain sitting on this spot. "How large is your ground vehicle?"

"If we take along enough provisions and water, I'd recommend only a two-man crew—and naturally the appropriate weapons. We don't know how long we will be under way."

The Mounder thought for a few moments, then finally he nodded. "Alright, Ber-Ka." He looked up at the sky. The sun was almost at the zenith and it was very warm. "We should start out today because every hour counts—although I don't have too much hope that we will be in time. But it is vital to let everybody know about the terrible mistake that could victimize the whole Milky Way before it's finished."

Preparations were made swiftly. In the Topide ship a port opened laterally, a ramp extended outward and then a plump-looking ground vehicle rolled down and out onto the stony plateau. It possessed wheels and caterpillar tank treads so that it would be able to adapt itself to the present environment very well. A small energy cannon with a 360° action radius offered protection against attack. The small reactor on board possessed enough power to keep the vehicle operating without interruption for hundreds of years.

Boxes of provisions were swiftly loaded on board and the water tank was filled. Ber-Ka gave his people some final instructions and then motioned to Topthor. "We can get started now. I think we may be able to reach the coast in 3 or 4 hours. Then it will go easier."

"What about the marine inhabitants?"

Ber-Ka made a gesture of dismissal. "We don't have to concern ourselves about them. They are peaceful and do not possess any weapons. They probably won't pay any attention to us. We only have to watch out for either your ships or mine, so that we're not discovered and fired upon. That is the main danger that we have to protect ourselves against. Our private truce between us is of no consequence to any of the others."

Topthor double-checked his heavy hand-beamer. "We will force them to make peace," he growled, and clambered into the cabin of the ground car, which could only hold 4 Topides. As Ber-Ka followed him,

he found the space inside to be almost filled up.

"By all the space spirits!" groaned the Topide. "'Mounders' is a descriptive name for your people but I believe 'Super Heavies' would be better!"

Topthor grinned back. "That we are and not only in a physical sense, my friend," he assured him. He started the machine.

Those remaining behind, watched the vehicle as it dove under the foliage of the jungle and then they returned to their ships.

They did not know how long they would have to wait.

Ber-Ka soon took over the driving task and was able to find clearings or a stretch of jungle where there was only a slight undergrowth, which made it simple for the heavy caterpillar treads to roll over. And if thick trees got in the way and could not be driven around, the ray cannon came into play. More than once in the first hour, smoking ashes marked the path that Topthor and Ber-Ka took through the primeval forest.

The afternoon passed into evening. At the edge of a small clearing they stopped and prepared themselves for the night. They would have been able to continue but they feared their bright searchlight might attract some unwelcome attention.

The heating system spread a pleasant warmth through the cabin. The 2 dissimilar aliens had supper and then lay down to rest.

Outside everything remained calm and quiet. There wasn't any moon to illuminate the dark shadows of the unknown forest, in which invisible enemies could be lying in wait. Nothing moved. Somewhere the breakers of high waves would be falling on the coast and swirling around the steel pilings of a synthetic island.

That could be a matter of only 6 or 7 miles.

Or yet a thousand.

This night, Topthor slept very restlessly. Every once in awhile he would wake up and listen to the regular breathing of his involuntary ally, whom he gradually came to envy. When he would roll his massive weight to the other side, the whole vehicle shook but this was not sufficient to disturb the Topide.

Finally day dawned and in the East the sky took on all the variations of colour of a rainbow. The red sun moved with massive slowness above the treetops.

Topthor awakened Ber-Ka. "It's time we got under way. We've wasted enough time already. Probably the battle has already ended but nobody knows what has really happened. You going to fix some breakfast?"

While the Topide prepared a frugal meal, Topthor clambered down out of the narrow cabin and made a brief tour of inspection. He was sure that during the night he had heard certain indefinable sounds. Well, if anybody had been moving around in their vicinity, there would certainly be some tracks to be seen.

Inwardly the Mounder was quite certain that he was mistaken about it all but he just wanted to make

sure.

The clearing seemed to be unchanged. There were no openings in the thick underbrush at the end of the forest to indicate a secret penetration. Ber-Ka had assured him that there were no animals here—at least, no large ones.

Topthor's foot stopped suddenly, poised in midair. His eyes stared incredulously at a mysterious track. It was a wide, sliding mark that emerged into the clearing from the forest, went one time around the ground vehicle and then disappeared in the underbrush on the other side. Not a single twig had been broken, as though the one who had made the track had been crawling rather than walking.

Topthor turned around slowly and returned to the ground car.

Ber-Ka knew immediately what was involved. "Relax, Topthor. Those are the amphibians. They often come on land but soon have to return to their element. If one of their tracks is outside, the ocean can't be very far away. So far, so good! And now, come and have breakfast so that we can get started as soon as possible."

Topthor looked back at the curious track, then shrugged his broad shoulders and forced himself through the far too inadequate entrance.

In spite of the prospect of soon reaching the sea, the breakfast prepared by the Topides did not make much of an impression on him but it didn't have anything to do with the food itself. Perhaps it was the gnawing uncertainty that spoiled his appetite...

4/ PUCKY THE POWERFUL

It was at about this time that Al-Khor's last ship was destroyed. The fleet of the Topides existed no more.

The last radio report left the Betelgeuse system and proclaimed to the Dictator of the Topides' stellar empire that his troops had fulfilled their duty and had offered resistance to the attacking enemy with their last drop of blood.

No answer was returned from the home planet.

* * * *

Rhodan looked up as a man entered the Control Central of the *Titan*. It was Dr. Certch, the robot psychologist. Owing to an increasingly independent trend of thinking among positronic and electronic brains, it had become necessary to develop a new scientific specialty. In this regard, it was Certch's assignment to monitor the complicated thought trains of the robots and predict how their brains might

react to one situation or another.

"Well, Doc, what are, you doing here? Surely you wouldn't be concerned about so mundane a thing as a space battle."

"That is not my purpose here," smiled Certch, obligingly. But in his voice was a serious note that brought Rhodan to attention. "There are, however, events which one should not lose sight of..."

"Such as?" Rhodan shoved aside a stack of radio dispatches that had been intercepted during the past hour. They merely confirmed what was already known; the Mounders had won victory and now prepared themselves for the last blow against the "Earth." Cekztel had ordered the Arkon bomb to be prepared.

"You know that I have constructed a small positronic brain that I call 'Max.' Max is a calculating sort, if I may put it that way. A mechanical psychologist who can predict and calculate all of the logic gatings and thought chains of his larger brothers. I have been in a conversation with Max for some time."

"And what does he say?" Rhodan wanted to know. He knew of the scientist's hobby and took it seriously. More than once, now, Dr. Certch had proven how well he understood the logical thought processes of mechanical brains. "Hopefully, something in our favour..."

"Max is worried about the positronic brain on board Topthor's ship, sir. In view of what has occurred, we must assume that Topthor himself will have an interest in covering up the mistake. According to Max, there's room here for a qualified hypothesis to the effect that the brain thinks otherwise and is attempting to clarify the error. And Max is also of the opinion that sooner or later it will discover the handiwork of the mutants and notice the alteration of data. In other words, the Springers will find out that it is not the Earth they have destroyed but a harmless planet."

"Provided that Topthor and his ship did not fall prey to a ray beam."

Certch nodded. "Well, naturally that's true, but we don't know if he or his ship is a casualty. And even so there is still the possibility that his ship was only reduced to a derelict and one of these days will be located. Until then the robot would have enough time to solve the riddle. If you want to be quite certain that you've been the winner of this chess game, you must make sure that Topthor's ship has been completely destroyed."

"I'm naturally in agreement with you, Doctor, but first we have to find Topthor and his ship. According to my calculations, the Springers will be busy for awhile yet in the task of saving their survivors and bringing their lightly damaged vessels to places of safety. Only then will they destroy the 3rd planet. If they withdraw from this system, it will be too late for us. So we have very little time at our disposal for eliminating the danger of Topthor. John Marshall and his mutants have been trying for hours to find a trace of him but until now their efforts have been without results."

"I hope they'll succeed soon."

"Everything depends on it "I replied Rhodan and he nodded to Dr. Certch as the latter exited from the Control Central.

But Certch practically pushed the door handle into John Marshall's hand, as he came from the mess hall with Betty Toufry to see Rhodan. Curious, Certch followed them back in, so that his absence from the control room was of an extremely short duration.

"Betty has definitely picked up thought impulses from Topthor," reported Marshall excitedly. "But she has not been able to determine an exact location. So Pucky is working on it with her. The important thing is, we can now say with certainty that Topthor's ship is not in the main group of the Springer fleet at all."

"Where, then?"

"If we knew that we would be better off," admitted Marshall. "Chief, I guess you know that distances can't be determined with the help of telepathic impulses alone. That's why Pucky remained on board the *Centurion* while Betty and I have come over to the *Titan*. You know that the calculation of a distance, with the help of two given sides of a triangle and one angle, is not a problem any more today—actually it wasn't a problem as long as 4000 years ago. The only new thing about it now is determining both sides by means of telepathy. In short, Betty and Pucky have attempted to get a bearing on Topthor by means of telepathic triangulation. Betty has come up with her co-ordinates but until now we haven't heard anything from Pucky."

"Are you in radio contact with the *Centurion*?"

"Yes, of course. Capt. Lamanche is the acting C.O. there right now. Deringhouse is flying toward Akvo."

"The water planet? Why there?"

"Because Topthor's thought impulses come to us more or less from that direction."

Rhodan narrowed his eyes and looked at Marshall searchingly. "And now you say that only Pucky's bearing co-ordinates are lacking...?"

"Yes. With those we would know exactly where Topthor is located. Where Betty's and Pucky's co-ordinates cross you will find the Mounder."

The intercom buzzed. The face of Cadet Martin appeared on the small panel screen.

"Is Marshall with you, sir?"

Rhodan nodded toward the telepath. "Yes, he's with me. Do you have news from Lamanche?"

"Pucky has just submitted some data for Marshall. Shall I read them off?"

Marshall nodded eagerly. In his hand he held a pencil and writing pad. Betty looked curiously over his shoulder. Dr. Certch shifted from one foot to the other. To him the top priority was to know that Topthor's ship was destroyed—and along with it the dangerous navigation robot brain.

"Read it off!" ordered Rhodan.

Marshall wrote down the co-ordinates and then began to draw a diagram. He stepped quickly to Rhodan's side. "This is a map of the system, Chief. I believe Pucky's supposition has worked out."

Rhodan handed him back the map. "What supposition?"

"That Topthor has landed on Akvo. Apparently he became suspicious and wanted to take a look at

'Mars' first, so it's high time we take some action..."

"There's a call coming in from the *Centurion*, sir," announced Martin and disappeared from the viewscreen. Silence reigned in the Control Central for half a minute. Everybody waited to see what had happened now. Finally the intercom screen brightened again. Martin appeared to be somewhat confused as he said: "It was Deringhouse. He just announced that Pucky has disappeared without a trace."

Rhodan gasped. "What do you mean, disappeared? Where is the *Centurion* now?"

"Circling Akvo, sir. According to Lamanche, the mouse-beaver said he had to take care of something—and then he disappeared. A small atomic demolition bomb is missing from the arsenal."

Marshall expelled the air from his lungs with a whistle. "Will you get that little scamp?! He knows now that our quarry has landed on the 4th planet and he's acting on his own. Isn't that pretty rash comportment, Chief?"

Rhodan tipped his head to one side and smiled thinly. "One of us would have had to take care of the matter, anyway—why not Pucky? I promised him a silo full of carrots if he could find Topthor."

Marshall sank down into the adjacent seat. "I give up!" he groaned and closed his eyes helplessly..."

* * * *

A strong southern breeze drove the waves unceasingly against the flat, sandy beach, which stretched from west to east as straight as an arrow, only to be interrupted at infrequent intervals by small, idyllic bays. The tropical forest began about 150 feet from the shore but this 150-foot width was as flat as a roadway.

Topthor was driving the ground car and as he watched the ocean he stopped involuntarily. In a veritable spell of enchantment he observed the blue stretch of water that reached to the distant horizon. Suspended above it was the gleaming orange-red sun. It was warm, so that the breeze offered a welcome relief. The transparent cupola of the vehicle was open. Topthor took in the smell of salt on the damp, warm air.

"It would be best for us to turn eastward," said Ber-Ka, who was accustomed to the ocean view. "The steel island lies on the south coast, I'm sure of that—more or less on the southeast tip of the continent."

Topthor tore his gaze from the pleasing aspect before him and set the car in motion once more. He turned to his companion. "I'm beginning to understand why you set up a base here. This is a world you can make something out of."

The Topide did not reply. He continued to look down at the beach as though he expected to see someone there but his eyes searched in vain for the silvery arrows on the rough surface of the sea which would announce the presence of the swimming fish creatures. The inhabitants of the planet Akvo, as Deringhouse had named this world, lived almost exclusively in the water. They could not stay on land more than 2 or 3 hours. Under water they propelled themselves like jet aircraft. They sucked the water into their large mouths, compressed it in the middle of their bodies with a special organ and then ejected it through a jet in the rear portion of their bodies. The success of this arrangement demonstrated itself in the

astonishing speed of their propulsion.

They did not show themselves and Ber-Ka seemed disappointed.

Topthor's initial enjoyment of this pagan landscape soon wore off and his worries returned to him. Moreover, there was always the uncertainty of what had happened in the meantime. The weak transmitter on board the ground vehicle was not powerful enough to call to the fleet. The *Top 2* couldn't give any answer so it was useless to transmit to them.

It was a messed up situation but sooner or later they'd find him and then Rhodan's deception would be exposed and it was possible that the Nav computer of the *Top 2* might correct its own error. And then the Springers would repeat their attack on the Earth.

Only then it would be the actual Earth!

After 3 hours of steady driving, Topthor started as Ber-Ka suddenly let out a cry and excitedly pointed ahead.

"The island...! We've made it!"

Topthor looked at the low, dome-like structure. It stood just above the breakers about a mile off the coast, supported by slender pilings anchored in the ocean bottom. The railing, which encircled the platform, was designed to protect its inhabitants from accidental falls into the sea.

But nothing moved on the platform. The synthetic island appeared lifeless.

Topthor said nothing. He drove along silently for about 10 minutes and then stopped at a place on the beach that was directly opposite the island. In an improvised harbour, several ownerless boats lay waiting.

Ber-Ka pointed toward them. "We can get to the island with those. Let's go! What are we still waiting for?"

Topthor hesitated. "And what if they've seen us and are ready to destroy us?"

Ber-Ka dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. "After all, they'll see that I'm an officer and they're not going to shoot at you without further investigation when they see that you're in my company. Who knows what's happened in the meantime? Come on, Topthor! Each minute is valuable!"

Topthor climbed out of the protective groundcar unwillingly because until now it had offered shelter. The aspect of the silent and mysterious island resting there in the water did not please him very much, even though it offered him the possibility of making contact with his people.

However, it offered Ber-Ka the same chance.

If he wanted to really be truthful with himself, he had to admit that he didn't trust the Topide out of his sight. Yes, they had made a truce agreement but it had been an expediency only and was in no way the result of mutual sympathy. He was convinced that neither one of them would honour the agreement any longer than the circumstances required. If Ber-Ka became established with his people, he would not need Topthor any more. In the other hand, Topthor would have no further interest in the reptilian alien if he could make contact with Cekztel.

Therefore...

Ber-Ka already stood by one of the small boats, which practically invited a trip to the island. "Come on, Tophthor, we don't have any time to lose!"

The Mounder moved slowly, his raygun swinging heavily in his belt. His feet sank deep into the loose sand. He didn't let Ber-Ka out of his sight because he wasn't fond of the idea of being shot in the back. The point of decision was nearing swiftly and inexorably.

The boat swayed dangerously but with its softly humming motor it brought both of its passengers safely to the island's boat landing, which was a small platform lying close above the surface of the water. At this location the smooth wall of the island was broken by a door. A locking wheel took the place of the usual handle or doorknob.

Ber-Ka secured the boat and disembarked. With nimble hands he opened the door, while Tophthor also got out of the boat and stepped onto the island, whose walls towered another 60 feet above them. Under the boat landing, the pilings supporting the structure were not visible. Here the cupola itself continued beneath the water. Tophthor could not see the bottom of the ocean and had no idea how deep the water might be.

Meanwhile, the Topide had entered and now he turned around. "Come on, Tophthor. Of course I don't know whether we'll find an intact radio station or a crew but we have to see what we can discover. This was our headquarters but as I see the lower portion of it has been flooded. Do you see the steps under the water? Only those leading upward are usable. I don't have any idea where the radio station is located."

"If there is one—or if it still exists—we will find it," said Tophthor with new optimism. "Perhaps in the upper levels. Let's take a look at this water castle. I find this a fairly interesting layout you have here, even though I don't understand why it wasn't constructed on land... You say there aren't any natural enemies around."

"It was built here for the purpose of contacting the native inhabitants," explained Ber-Ka brusquely. He began to go up the stairs.

Tophthor followed him after casting a glance at the flooded corridors which led into the depths. Apparently the Topides had only taken the most essential things with them, because the general installation, equipment and furnishings still remained. There was every evidence of their intention to return here after their battle with the Springers. In drawers, cupboards and lockers were stored even the documents and record cylinders—the containers with the microfilm and stacks of photographic reports of the 4th planet of the system, which they called Lyrad. Tophthor looked rather covetously at these valuable documents. He preferred to take them all with him at once but then he reminded himself that the reptile-men in all probability wouldn't be coming back here.

It was just about 100% certain that Ber-Ka was the last living Topide to enter this former headquarters and it appeared to be just as certain that he would leave it as a dead man—if he left it at all.

Tophthor's hand lay casually on the butt of his raygun as Ber-Ka turned suddenly and pointed ahead where an open door stood at the end of the passage. Behind it was a brightly lit room.

"The radio central, Tophthor! We've done it!"

The Mounder started as though he had been caught in an illegal act. He forced a grin at the lizard. "Excellent, Ber-Ka! Then I think Rhodan's time has run out..."

The wide room was empty and unoccupied by any crewmembers. The equipment, receiver, generators and transmitter stood untouched in their proper places. Broad windows permitted the daylight to stream in upon them. The seats for the personnel stood exactly as they had been left. It seemed to Topthor that the reptiles could be returning at any moment, as if they had only left the place for a few minutes. But then he scolded himself for a fool. The reptile fleet was as good as destroyed. No one would be able to return here. Ber-Ka was and remained the last Topide who had the opportunity to look over the former headquarters.

"Do you understand how to work any of this equipment?" asked Topthor.

"Enough for our purposes," the young officer assured him and he pointed to the control console. "At the beginning of my career I was a radio operator. Just wait and in a few minutes we'll have Al-Khor there on the viewscreen."

Topthor wrinkled his brow. "Why not Cekztel, my superior officer? Who knows whether or not this Al-Khor is still alive after his fleet was destroyed ...?"

"Is this a Springer station or a Topide station?" asked Ber-Ka. "As soon as I have spoken to Al-Khor, the installation will be at your disposal. You can't ask for more than that."

The Mounder nodded hesitantly. His hand was once more resting uneasily on his belt. "That may be so, Ber-Ka, but without my generosity you would hardly be here on this island. Therefore I have a claim to the first communication. Besides, it would hardly be of any use to your fleet if Al-Khor learned about the great hoax we've been exposed to. It's important that the battlefleet of the Springers be warned. Don't you see that?"

But Ber-Ka had fixed upon an idea of his own. He wanted revenge. And he wanted to perform a hero's deed. If he killed this Springer and at the same time managed to bring the fighting operations to a halt, he would receive the Dictator's medal of bravery; of that there could be no doubt. But this Topthor was a quick and dangerous opponent who shouldn't be underestimated.

"Perhaps you are right," he said warily. "Please... you help yourself to the equipment first. You probably know how to operate it."

"I was also a radio operator," muttered Topthor and he stepped past Ber-Ka to the empty chair. Unobtrusively he drew his weapon. He reacted swiftly as he recognized the reflected figure of the Topide in the convex glass of the viewscreen and observed that he drew his weapon from his belt and aimed it at his back. He acted as if he were about to sit down but instead whirled around and threw himself to the floor, firing simultaneously.

Ber-Ka was taken completely by surprise. Without a sound the Topide died, the weapon in his claw-like hand still pointed at Topthor. The beam of energy died after a short flash. Topthor gave a sigh of relief and shoved his gun back in his belt. Now no further danger threatened him from the treacherous lizard whom he had to kill in self defence. The corpse was proof enough of the intent of Ber-Ka to shoot him in the back. He would leave it lying just as it was.

Topthor sat down before the controls and studied the layout of the equipment. It wasn't any different in

principle from the radio installations of the Springers except for small differences in the actual controls with which he was not familiar. He was convinced, however, that it would take only a short while before he would have the station in operation.

For exactly 10 minutes Topthor hulked motionlessly over the equipment. Then he hesitantly reached out his right hand and pulled back a lever. At the same time, with his left hand, he activated several switches and buttons. He adjusted the frequency of the transmitter, keeping all decoder equipment disconnected, and finally took the microphone after the viewscreen brightened.

"This is Topthor, speaking from the 4th planet of the system. This is Topthor speaking from the headquarters of the Topides! I am calling Cekztel, Commander-in-Chief of the Mounders! Answer, Cekztel! I have important news for you! Come in please—over!"

He repeated the message 3 times and then switched over to the receiver.

He did not have long to wait before the somewhat distorted features of the old patriarch appeared on the screen. The crafty eyes above the broad nose and full, greying beard searched as though they did not see Topthor.

"Hello, Topthor? Cekztel here. Why don't you cut in your camera? Where's your video? My screen is dark."

"This is a communications setup of the reptiles and I'm not too familiar with it. But that's not important. Listen, Cekztel, make peace at once with the commander of the Topides!"

"You've lost your mind, Topthor! The Topides have allied themselves with the Terranians and now I'm supposed to make peace with them? Besides, I wouldn't know where I could still find a reptile commander. Rhodan's giant ship has appeared several times along with some smaller units but none of the cylindrical ships have been sighted since the end of the battle."

"Come and get me, Cekztel!" begged Topthor. "You can find me easily on the 4th planet..."

"What are you doing there? I didn't see your ship during the battle."

"I'll tell you all about it later, Cekztel. In any case you're going to be amazed when I tell you how neatly we've crawled into Rhodan's trap!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Topthor! We've won this battle and we're making final preparations to destroy the Earth. Only one more hour now and

"That's a mistake!" interrupted Topthor with a grin which of course the patriarch wasn't able to see. "A gigantic mistake! You can save your bomb and..."

Topthor gave an involuntary start when he saw the viewscreen suddenly go dark. Cekztel's face disappeared. Simultaneously the soft humming of the equipment became silent. The control lights went out.

The entire installation had turned itself off automatically. Before Topthor could comprehend what was happening, a chirping voice behind him said: "Turn around but keep your hands off your weapon."

Topthor slowly turned around.

* * * *

Deringhouse was not entirely innocent in the matter of Pucky's disappearance.

"What would we do on Akvo, Pucky?" he asked warily while hesitating to make the next hypertransit. "There's nothing going on there."

"Maybe there is," twittered the mouse-beaver and he examined an almost perfect isosceles triangle he had made out of a piece of paper. "There may even be a lot of thing's going on over there."

"I don't understand, Pucky."

"Then I'll explain it to you, Boss. Our good friend Topthor seems to be taking a special leave of absence on Akvo. I'd sort of like to cut his vacation short before he gets into some kind of mischief."

"Topthor?" asked Deringhouse in astonishment. A shock ran through him. Topthor!

"Precisely," nodded Pucky cheerfully but then he began to plead with that heart-rending puppy dog look of his. "You know, the Chief has promised me something if I find Topthor. What do you think he'll give me if I clip Topthor's wings and destroy his ship?"

"All alone?" Deringhouse was amazed but was already looking at his star charts. "You know, I don't mind picking up a few points with Rhodan myself..."

The mouse-beaver snorted disdainfully. "What would you do with a couple of hundred pounds of carrots? Anyway, what's the big deal? All I'm asking is that we make a fly-by over the planet—within a couple thousand miles."

"I have to advise Rhodan..."

"Later, Major. Can you be sure that Topthor won't be spouting off to Cekztel in the meantime?"

Deringhouse nodded, convinced, and turned to the hypertrans programmer.

3 minutes later, the *Centurion* popped out of hyperspace in the vicinity of Akvo and curved into a shallow, parabolic orbit that brought the ship close to the edge of the atmosphere.

"Well, Pucky?" asked Deringhouse, turning around. "Are you satisf..." He interrupted himself and looked about in silent wonderment.

Pucky was no longer in the Control Central. He had disappeared without a trace.

Deringhouse did not delay further in making contact with Rhodan.

* * * *

As the aqueous planet Akvo appeared on the viewscreen, Pucky concentrated—and made his jump.

As soon as he could see again and sensed solid ground under his feet, he breathed a sigh of relief. There was a certain risk to simply teleporting into nothingness but he had lucked in. He stood on the top of a bare mountain which rose high above the tropical forest and offered a splendid view in all directions. Of course this didn't quite solve all his problems but it made the search considerably easier in view of the fact that Akvo had only one continent, which was not very large.

Pucky looked up almost vertically at the sun in the noon sky. He sat down on a flat rock and closed his eyes. That which he could not see he would have to 'hear.' Otherwise he would never locate his prey.

And his prey was named Tophthor!

He listened inwardly in order to trace the Moulder's thought impulses but this was somewhat more difficult here than in empty space. To his amazement he immediately traced something in the first few seconds—scattered shreds of thought which undoubtedly originated from Springers and Topides.

Springers and Topides!

From the same direction! Pucky turned his head. Hm-m-m... From this distance it was not possible to determine the direction of origin exactly.

He sighed. "Springers and lizards on friendly terms—that's a surprise. And it's something we'll have to look into. Perhaps Tophthor is in the vicinity."

He took a few bearings in the assumed direction toward the next mountain and teleported himself across. After 3 additional jumps he saw below him a rocky plateau on which 2 ships lay beside each other. Or more precisely: 2 derelicts.

Pucky let out a shrill whistle. "The *Top 2*, if I'm not mistaken. That's real grundle!" (Future slang equivalent of "That's just ducky" originated by columnist of the 1970s, Fisher Trentworth.)

He reached behind him for a small leather bag that he had hooked to his belt. It contained a metal object the size of a duck egg. It was an atomic bomb!

He took out the dangerous instrument and adjusted its fuse. Then he pressed in a button and made certain that it remained in a depressed position. If it were to be released, the detonation would follow in exactly 5 seconds. It was an ancient principle but capable of a most ultra-modern effect...

Pucky teleported and materialized in the Control Central in the middle of the broken ship that belonged to Tophthor. The officer of the watch sprang wide-eyed off the couch and leapt to his feet in sudden fright, to stare at this incomprehensible apparition before him. In his belt was the regulation hand weapon issued to all crewmembers but at the moment he had no intention of using it. In a state of shock he looked at the mouse-beaver who had appeared so suddenly out of nowhere and who held in his hand a glittering object as though he were ready to throw it.

"Now if you're a real good boy, I'll give you a present," chirped Pucky in purest Intercosmo, a

circumstance which left the Mounder practically breathless with surprise.

He could only gasp, "What kind of a present..."

"Your life!" said Pucky triumphantly and showed him the bomb. "This thing is really loaded. If I let loose of it, it will explode—and that'll make a real pretty hole in this part of the planet. So let's not have any tricks. I want you to go outside in the open and call the others together."

"The others...?" asked the Mounder, swallowing hard. It was evident that he couldn't comprehend what was happening. "Who are you?"

"I am Pucky!" answered the mouse-beaver from the planet Vagabond. "You've never heard of me? My best friend is called Perry Rhodan."

"Rhodan...?" groaned the great mountain of flesh before him. "Rhodan is here?"

"In the area. Just in the area, you might say," said Pucky calmly. "And now, call the others together outside. I'd like to address a few appropriate words to them. That includes the reptiles. Are you playing footsie-clawsie with them?"

"Topthor ordered it. He said that this war is a mistake"

"War is always a mistake," agreed Pucky, "but there are also some mistakes that can avoid war."

The Mounder stared at him without grasping his meaning. Pucky grinned and showed his incisor tooth. "Get going. We haven't got much time. In 2 minutes I want to see both crews together outside. And tell them, while you're at it, that I'm holding an atomic egg in my hand that will crack its shell 5 seconds after I'm dead—in case anybody gets any bright ideas."

It only took about a minute. Pucky waited in the lock until the Topides and the Springers were assembled together outside on the plateau. Then he stepped into the open airlock and held the atom bomb high over his head as he shouted to them in a shrill voice. "To make it short, Rhodan has sent me. The assignment: to destroy Topthor's ship. Now!" He showed the bomb to them a second time. "Make yourselves scarce, otherwise you'll go up with it. You have 10 minutes. K'pu?—is that understood?"

They understood instantly. Members of both races scattered out in all directions. Only an unusually small Mounder held back for a moment. He hardly weighed 900 pounds. Before he disappeared into the underbrush, he called back, "Without the ship we don't have any shelter. Are we supposed to die here or is somebody going to pick us up?"

Pucky shrugged. "You can try building bomb shelters for yourselves," he advised patronizingly. "By the way, where is Topthor?"

The Mounder hesitated for a few seconds, then turned and disappeared.

Pucky watched him go while whistling softly to himself, way off key, as he waited exactly 10 minutes. Then he turned back into the ship and searched for the room in which the navigation computer was located. Having found it, he grinned with his incisor tooth and bowed before the positronic monster. He showed the machine the atom bomb and twittered: "Now, you forgetful old think tank, I've brought you something very special to eat. Do you know why? No? Well now, by all the carrots of the universe, there are many who have died in ignorance—so why not you?"

Carefully Pucky placed the atom bomb on the control console in front of the robot. He held onto it for a few more seconds—and then took a sudden step backwards.

The bomb lay where he had left it. The red button had sprung outward.

Pucky dematerialised and within another second stood on a mountain about 3 miles distant from the 2 wrecked ships.

"3 seconds more," he murmured and eased himself down on his broad hindquarters. "Now!"

Behind the leafy roof of the forest rose the glare of the explosion, expanding swiftly to the sky and practically causing the red sun to fade momentarily from view. A mushroom cloud rose somewhat more slowly and then everything was over.

"That bolt-bucket of a computer has spilled its guts for the last time," growled the mouse-beaver and turned in another direction. "And Tophthor's thoughts are a little too noisy. He must be over there." On the horizon, the broad surface of the ocean stretched to meet some low lying clouds to the right on a spit of land. "He's talking with Ber-Ka. Who is Ber-Ka?" Pucky resumed his listening and then came suddenly to life. He sprang to his feet, then remained with his head cocked to one side as though this would permit him to 'hear' better. "Now he's also a murderer? That makes my task a little easier. Alright, let's move, old fellow!"

By "old fellow," Pucky meant himself.

The first jump brought him to the coast not far from the place where the shore boats were anchored. Out in the ocean lay the steel island. Pucky sharpened his bearings and knew that Tophthor was to be found out there.

The second jump brought him to the main platform on top of the island.

From this point on the mouse-beaver did not use teleportation. He concentrated on Tophthor's thoughts and determined the proper direction. The Springer must be directly beneath the platform in the Topides' communication central. Ber-Ka was already dead and Cekztel was just now answering Tophthor's call.

There wasn't a second to spare.

Pucky waddled down a staircase and reached a corridor. 10 short steps brought him to a door which stood ajar and he pushed it open cautiously.

He looked at Tophthor from behind and noted that his attention was fastened upon a viewscreen before him.

Directly in front of him lay the mortal remains of a Topide.

"That's a mistake!" Tophthor was saying. "A great big mistake! You can save your bomb and..."

Pucky sent out his telekinetic force currents and gripped with invisible fingers the electronic maze of the radio installation. The picture on the screen went blank. Fuses blew. The power failed. And so did the entire installation.

"Turn around," said Pucky, "but keep your hands off your weapon."

He watched carefully to see that Topthor complied with his command...

5/ A WORLD CONDEMNED

Al-Khor recognized the fact that the Topides had lost all their ships but he still felt duty-bound to continue to distract the Springers from the 4th planet until the bitter end.

And so it happened that Cekztel experienced an unpleasant surprise when he approached the alleged Earth in a small fleet of search vessels. Out of the hastily built fortresses of the reptiles arose such a powerful counter-fire that the defence screens of a number of battleships collapsed, offering no further protection against the deadly energy beams that rose to meet them.

Cekztel looked on horrified as almost half of his search fleet was destroyed in the course of a few seconds. He considered himself foolish in so grossly underestimating the strength of the Terranians.

Added to this was the fact that precisely in this delicate moment Rhodan's spherical cruisers appeared and caused further confusion, resulting in the loss of 3 more Springer vessels.

The 3rd planet had turned into a fire-spouting inferno.

The way it appeared—at least these were the thought processes of the Springer patriarch—the Terranians had evidently developed their home world into a subterranean fortress. This might at last be the answer to a puzzle that had caused Cekztel such a headache. He had always been of the opinion that any civilized planet had its own particular facade or card of identity and that was the appearance of its surface. The surface of Terra consisted of a wild, primeval landscape that did not demonstrate the slightest sign of any civilizing process. Did the Terranians live inside their world? Any previous doubts he may have had that he was not dealing with an actual Terra were swept aside by the demonstration of this powerful counterattack.

His commands hammered into the control centres of the remaining vessels: "Retreat! Retreat! Rendezvous at BK-59hf. Just get out of this place!"

With an incredible velocity the cylindrical ships of the Springers hurtled out into space and left behind on the jungle planet a group of surviving Topides who breathed a deep sigh of relief.

* * * *

Cekztel stared at the empty viewscreen and waited for Topthor to come on again but the receiver remained silent. The Moulder failed to reestablish contact.

The patriarch's ancient brow was furrowed in puzzlement. In a new mood of uncertainty he turned to one of his officers. "What is Topthor trying to tell us?" he said wonderingly. "That Rhodan has pulled the wool over our eyes, that he has played a trick on us? Let somebody explain that to me! Aren't we just about at the point of mopping up this Rhodan once and for all? Haven't we destroyed his fleet and the fleet of his allies? Admittedly Terra is putting up a bitter defence and has no intention of surrendering but where does that get it? The Arkon bomb is going to add another sun to this system! And even if that doesn't serve to wipe out Rhodan, what can he do without a home planet? He can't just live forever in his ship. And if he tries to land on one of our worlds, we'll still eliminate him."

The officer nodded slowly. "I'd feel better if I knew that Rhodan was dead."

"That makes 2 of us!" blustered Cekztel, who was angered by these new doubts that plagued his mind. "Believe me, I share the same sentiments with you! But I'll be satisfied first when Terra is destroyed. Terra is the seedbed and breeding ground of this upstart who refuses to recognize our trade cartels and our hard-won commercial monopolies. Look at how the Topides have become our enemies. They were at least halfway neutral until Rhodan succeeded in bringing them over to his side. After we destroy Terra we're going to have a very serious word or 2 with the dictator of those lizards!"

"Maybe he was forced to take this step?"

"That may be but we're not sure of it," retorted Cekztel. He narrowed his eyes as he looked once more at the dark viewscreen. "We should take care of Topthor. See that one of our ships picks him up. In the meantime I'll make all necessary preparations for the destruction of Terra."

The officer acknowledged the order and went into the communications central. There he made contact with a certain Berndta, a somewhat more slender type of Springer patriarch who led a clan known as the 'Seed Merchants.'

As the trader's crafty face appeared on the viewscreen, the officer announced: "You have an order from Cekztel, Berndta. He wants you to take a trip to the 4th planet to pick up Topthor and his crew. He has made a forced landing there. Apparently his radio gear is knocked out but you'll be able to find him. The planet is entirely uninhabited."

"Topthor of all people!" groaned Berndta with a pained expression. "He's the one who ruined my business once, when I..."

"That is of no interest either to Cekztel or myself," interrupted the officer. "You have received the assignment to fetch Topthor. It's important because Topthor has information for us. I hope that you place the welfare of our people above your personal differences, Berndta..."

"Don't worry about it," answered the thin one. "I know what I have to do. When am I supposed to start?"

"Immediately! And don't let it startle you if in the meantime you see the 3rd planet turn into a sun."

"Terra?"

"Yes, Terra!" replied the officer and he disappeared from Berndta's viewscreen.

The seed merchant stared a few moments at the empty screen. Then he sighed and shouted his orders. The crew hurried to their stations and prepared for the assigned rescue mission.

The *BERNI* was a comparatively small ship, having a torpedo-shaped hull about 250 feet in length. It was not heavily armed but was extremely manoeuvrable. Cekztel could not have selected a better ship than Bernda's for this task. Owing to its business of collecting seeds, herbs and animal-product sources of vitamins, its speciality was to scour the surfaces of unknown planets for signs of vegetation and animal life. This professional activity forced Bernda to use a small, manoeuvrable ship.

"Accelerate to approximate light speed!"

After coming about, the *BERNI* hurtled outward into space and quickly left the Springer fleet behind it. Once they encountered the drifting wreckage of a destroyed ship but no one paid it any attention.

After the proper manoeuvres and a hypertransition, the 4th planet finally showed up so large on the forward viewscreen that it filled the raster. Bernda had no intention whatsoever of allowing his duty to get in the way of his professional interests.

When he noted the presence of so much water, he was disappointed. The major portion of the planet was covered with it, which was not very promising. But perhaps on the continent itself he might discover some new life forms that would give a boost to his business. Of course if he were to stumble upon Topthor right off, he'd have to forget about any profitable sojourn here. But Topthor had time. His absence would neither delay nor accelerate the course of things.

The *BERNI* more or less pancaked down through the atmosphere and then swept along over the ocean within a few feet of the surface. Isolated islands heralded the nearness of the continent, which soon appeared above the horizon.

Bernda extended the observation cupola and forced himself into the narrow seat, which would hardly have accommodated Pucky's broad beam. From here he had an unobstructed view in all directions, particularly below him. The auxiliary helm here enabled him to control all movements of the ship from the cupola. A direct connection with the radio room also assured him of continuous contact with the crew, or if need be with any possible escort ships.

Bernda dedicated himself entirely to his own purposes. With specialized expertise he observed the tall trees of the primeval forests and estimated their value. Trees were always in demand on verdureless worlds and commanded relatively good prices. Especially when it came to such good shade producers as these. Under no circumstances would he miss the opportunity to collect some sprigs and seeds here.

But still, maybe it would be better to look first for Topthor...

He chided himself for the thought—but then, considering that he was to be paid some actual cash for this campaign, he was supposed to attend to a modicum of duties. If only he was to rescue somebody other than Topthor...!

Inadvertently he elevated his gaze and was arrested by a hovering cloud formation that struck him as having a strangely familiar shape. A gentle wind had altered the mushroom formation somewhat, which in the meantime had gained a considerable altitude, but its typical umbrella and the vertical pillar beneath it left no doubt as to its nature.

Up ahead there somewhere on the continent, an atomic explosion had occurred, and not too long ago.

Bernda's curiosity was aroused.

He increased his velocity and arrived above the razed plateau in less than 5 minutes. A large, cone-shaped cavity in the earth gave testimony to the magnitude of the catastrophe that had taken place. The edges of the broad, circular hole reflected a hot, glassy shimmer. Here and there he could see the flicker of small fires in the thick, tropical forest, but they were hindered from spreading due to the smothering effect of the underbrush.

Bernda had no intention of landing. Why should he expose himself to unnecessary danger? If Tophor had been here, he was now most certainly a dead man.

But who had set off the explosion—and why?

Naturally the answer to such questions wasn't immediately forthcoming but perhaps time would tell.

Bernda turned the ship and glided slowly toward the nearby ocean. For the moment he had dropped the subject of seeds and sprigs and was now racking his brain to try to figure what it was that the atom bomb was supposed to have destroyed.

He found the answer sooner than he expected.

He detected a movement below on a rocky plateau. He lowered his altitude immediately and was able to make out a tall, erect figure—green and glistening, with a long, scaly tail.

A Topide!

What was one of the reptiles doing here? Bernda dropped closer and was about to order the raygun crews to destroy this enemy when he was suddenly shocked by a new development.

He saw a second figure. A Mounder. He emerged from behind a boulder and remained standing close to the Topide. Both of them stared upward and signalled to him.

As though they'd been waiting for this, other Mounders and Topides now made an appearance. They carried on as though a state of war had never existed between them. It was all beyond Bernda's comprehension but he was smart enough not to follow through with his command to the gun positions.

He landed within less than 600 feet from the weird group and made ready to set foot on the alien world. Understandably he didn't trust this peaceful arrangement out there and he shoved 2 hand-beamers into the belt of his uniform. He also ordered 2 of his officers to accompany him. They, too, were heavily armed.

The 3 Springers came to a halt at about 20 yards from the airlock of the *BERNI* and awaited the approach of the strangers.

"What do you make of it?" whispered Bernda. The officer on his right shook his head doubtfully.

"Maybe they've crashed here and have postponed the fighting." He did not realize how close his supposition came to the truth. "Why should they stand around and kill each other when they're all together like that? Well, we'll soon know."

The other officer grumbled nervously. "Nevertheless, they're violating battle orders." His hand was on his gun. "The Topides have been recognized as Rhodan's allies and should be treated accordingly."

"Let's see it out," warned Berndt softly. He gazed silently at the 2 Mounders who approached, accompanied by 2 Topides. He noted that they were unarmed. The remaining Springers and reptiles remained behind by the large rock.

The delegation came to a stop within 10 yards of Berndt and his 2 men. One of the Mounders forced a smile.

"That's what I call fast rescue work," he said for openers and he reached out as though to shake hands across the intervening distance. "We were starting to figure we'd have to spend the rest of our lives here. Did you find Topthor and Ber-Ka?"

"Ber-Ka? Who is he?"

The Mounder pointed to his reptilian companions. "The Topide commander of the ship we shot down. Unfortunately, the *Top 2* was damaged enough in the action to be unable to take off again. We and the reptiles made a truce because further fighting was pointless."

"I'm sure that Cekztel will be most pleased by this arbitrary conduct of Topthor's," insinuated Berndt somewhat gloatingly. "Where is Topthor, actually?"

"He and Ber-Ka went off to try to locate the radio station. It's supposed to be somewhere on the coast. On a synthetic island."

"A synthetic island?"

The Mounders shook his head stubbornly. "It's useless to explain it to you without giving you a complete story. Give us food and water and then you'll find out everything you need to know."

But Berndt was far too curious now to accept this proposal. "Answer another question first. Several miles from here we found an atom bomb crater. What happened there and what was destroyed and by whom?"

"It was Rhodan," the Mounder informed him. "At least we recognized one of his closest aides, a strange creature with brown fur and a short, wide tail. It appeared out of the air, then threw a small atom bomb and disappeared again."

"And you came out of that alive?"

"We were given a warning and had 10 minutes to get to safety."

"And nobody made any attempt to stop this remarkable creature from destroying the ship? I must say that our fleet has something other than heroes in it. And the Topides have nothing to their credit either."

"What do you mean, stop him?! Are you crazy? This animal, or whatever it was, held a high-powered atom bomb in its hand!"

"And so you just ran off like so many Gorkan racing bugs, didn't you? Well, Cekztel will have to make his decision on this. I only have the responsibility to find Topthor because he apparently has some important information to give us."

"Important information?" asked the Mounder testily. He seemed to be trying to remember something. "That could well be. Topthor and Ber-Ka were acting very secretive and claimed that the whole war was senseless. They figured that Rhodan has set a trap for us that we've all fallen into without realizing it. That's all I know about it."

"Who are you?"

"I am Gatzek, Topthor's second officer."

Bernda nodded slowly. "Alright, then tell your men—and for all I care, the reptiles too—that I will permit rations to be distributed among you. But within half an hour I'll expect your full report. There's something that smells about this and I'm going to get to the bottom of it."

He watched with mixed feelings as Topides and Springers walked peacefully past him and sat down next to each other on the ground to wait quietly for their portion of the food allotment.

* * * *

The Arkon bomb was one of the ancient Arkonides' most terrible instruments of destruction. Once activated, it was capable of unleashing an irreversible, world-annihilating process of combustion.

Unfortunately, it was not the Arkonides alone who possessed the secret of this bomb. This frightful weapon was also at the disposal of the Mounders but fortunately it had not been put to use very often.

Cekztel had selected the Arkon bomb as the means of destroying Terra.

The Springer fleet had retired to a location in space that was sufficiently removed from Terra to be relatively clear of danger. Unmanned rockets were still rising up from the jungle world and automatically seeking out targets. It often happened that they achieved their purpose whenever some isolated Springer ship failed to be on guard enough to jump to safety by means of a short hypertransition.

What Cekztel was not aware of was the fact that only a handful of Topides was manning the planet's defences. Most of the installations were operated automatically under robot control. However, this small group of reptiles was now self-committed to death, while Cekztel was firmly convinced that in destroying the 3rd planet he would be eliminating an entire race of people who had dared to thwart the plans of the Galactic Traders.

He left the Control Central and joined his ordnance technicians. They were occupied with setting the timing mechanism on the bomb that Cekztel's ship was to drop.

"How far along are we?"

One of the specialist officers turned to him. "The fuse timer will run for an hour and then the bomb will detonate," he reported. "That should be long enough to let us get to a safe position."

"An hour...?" Cekztel mulled it over. "Under normal circumstances, that should be enough. By then we can be billions of miles away. But if the slightest thing should go wrong..." He left this possibility dangling

but nobody ventured for a second to take his suggestion seriously.

"The fuse mechanism is activated upon impact," continued the officer. "All we have to do is to drop it."

Cekztel's gaze rested on the bomb itself.

It was not very large but it concealed within a devilish mechanism that advanced scientists had developed over a period of thousands of years and which until now had never been improved upon. The only destructive weapon that might compete with it was the gravitation bomb.

"We will start the bomb run in 10 minutes," said Cekztel and turned to go. Without wasting another word, he returned to the Control Central and turned on the hypercom. He waited several minutes until he could be sure that everyone on board his own ship and all fleet commanders would be able to see him and hear his voice.

"The hour of decision has arrived. If everything goes according to plan, the destruction of Terra will begin in 70 minutes. Rhodan has escaped us but his allies, the Topides, and the members of his own race on the planet will soon be dead. Within 10 minutes I will plant the bomb, The timer span is for one hour. We will observe the effects of the mission from this position. As soon as this system has 2 suns—a giant red star and a small white one—our task will have been completed. The planet Terra will then continue to live in memory only." He made a slight pause and then continued. "I will contact you again at the time of departure. The starting order for leaving this solar system will be issued shortly after ignition of the Arkon bomb. Until then, all units will continue emergency alert standby. If Rhodan's ship appears, you are instructed to pursue him unconditionally, to attack and destroy him."

Without waiting for an answer, he cut off the communication. He hunched motionlessly over his controls for more than 5 minutes but then he suddenly became active again.

With the touch of a few levers he increased velocity and caused the ship to peel away from the fleet formation. Like a plunging hawk, the great ship dropped toward the tiny star of a planet, which swiftly grew larger and finally filled the viewscreens.

Everywhere on the rugged and craggy surface, firing shafts which had been hidden until now opened up, mighty impulse cannons shoved their spiral barrels out of the ground and spewed forth energy and destruction against this audacious invader. Cekztel diverted all available power into his defence screens and approached the atmosphere without any diminution of velocity and soon the shrieking of air friction penetrated the ship.

His speed was still too great. Were the bomb to be dropped now, it would still act like a short-lived satellite. The velocity dropped quickly.

Heedless of all dangers, Cekztel's ship sank lower and passed over a giant mountain range. The surface fire diminished. Apparently the Terranians had not anticipated that any attacker would pick out a mountain range as its target.

And that was just fine for Cekztel.

He turned on the intercom. "Weapons Central! In 20 seconds, bomb away! You will lob it into the crest of the range ahead of us!"

He decelerated slightly and considered speed and altitude, calculating approximately where the point of

impact would be. A towering, flat mesa-like formation presented itself to his view. Now he glided along above it. Simultaneously he received confirmation from the bombardier.

"Bomb away! It's going to hit that mesa!"

Cekztel turned and reached for altitude. He saw the bomb fall and strike the rocky surface. A small cloud of dust—that was all. The silvery glistening device lay in a small, shallow trench.

And waited...

In 59 minutes, the end would come.

Cekztel took one last look at the condemned world below him and then he gripped the controls with confidence. The ship turned up almost vertically, showed its stem to the planet and hurtled with swiftly increasing velocity into the blue sky—followed by a long-range Topide missile. A 5-lisek hyperjump was sufficient to bring the ship to a safe distance because the tracking range of the rocket's automatic navigation equipment was limited to about 60,000 miles. The far-travelling rocket would no doubt continue its course until, in a thousand years or so, it would detect some solid object, overtake it and destroy it.

Perhaps it would only be a meteor but perhaps also an unsuspecting commercial vessel. Who could guess? At any rate, it didn't concern Cekztel. His work was done. Within the hour, he would already be under way to Star Cluster M13...

6/ DERINGHOUSE SIGHTS HIS—"MAN"

Deringhouse saw Rhodan's face on the viewscreen although the 2 ships were separated from each other by more than a billion miles. Also the carrier and audio frequencies of the radio transmission did not require the fraction of a second to cover the distance because they were channelled through the accelerator of the hypercom equipment.

"Well, it's happened, Deringhouse," said Rhodan. "Cekztel has planted the bomb. In the remaining 50 minutes I'm going to try to rescue the Topides who are still down there."

"Is that enough time for you?"

"I monitored the patriarch's speech to his fleet," replied Rhodan reassuringly. "Don't worry, I'll set the *Titan* down there in time. Actually, it's too bad about the planet—it's such an idyllic sort of primeval world—but its loss has to be our gain, for the sake of our goal. I was worried, or course, that the Springers would smell a rat at the last moment. Generally speaking, a civilized world usually presents a different appearance than this one. It's lucky for us that the Topides were so helpful, by converting the uninhabited planet into a bristling fortress. That's what supported the impression that this was the Earth itself."

"Sir, shall I remain in the Akvo area?"

"Yes, try to pick up Pucky. By this time he should have completed his mission. To be certain, I think you'd better land there and search for him. You're fresh out of telepaths so you can't make a contact with him."

"Pucky took a special mini-transmitter with him but unfortunately it doesn't have a receiver. Anyway, he can send out a tracking signal and that should help us find him in the shortest possible time. But of course until now he's been silent."

Rhodan terminated the conversation. "Fly to Akvo and wait there till you see that this system has acquired an extra sun. Find Pucky and then keep your receiver open. You'll hear from me in due course."

Deringhouse cut the connection. Rhodan's face disappeared from the convex screen, which immediately darkened. Capt. Lamanche, who sat at the pilot controls, looked up.

"Course for Akvo, Major?"

"Yes. First, fly over the continent, Lamanche. If we don't find anything there we'll try the coastline. Somewhere we have to find a clue to Pucky's and Topthor's whereabouts."

The *Centurion* approached the marine world and soon sank downward into the atmosphere. At a low altitude the spherical ship flew in increasingly widening circles over the continent. Which brought the *Centurion* ever closer to the coast.

While Lamanche did the piloting, Deringhouse took over the optical equipment for a visual search, backed up by the radio central, where the ship's receiver was tuned to Pucky's tracking-signal frequency. The mouse-beaver still did not seem to find it necessary to reveal his location.

Was it that he hadn't found the opportunity to do so?

A shock of anxiety came over Deringhouse. Until now the thought had not occurred to him, even for a moment, that something could have happened to Pucky. A mutant with 3 parapsychic faculties was practically invulnerable and it seemed impossible that he hadn't taken care of Topthor by now. Then why didn't he contact them so that he could be picked up? Or was he fooling around with those fishmen of Akvo and taking a submarine ride, as he had done once before?

By the time Deringhouse discovered the crater on the plateau he had become filled with alarm. But then the rising anxiety in him was immediately replaced by surprise and wonderment.

The crater could only have been caused by the small atom bomb that Pucky had carried with him. Obviously he had found Topthor's ship and destroyed it. But what about Pucky and the Mounder?

Deringhouse's thoughts went in circles, and arrived at nothing.

The conical blast hole in the ground fell behind. They crossed over a plateau and then a wide stretch of tropical forest that seemed to reach toward the distant coastline. But Deringhouse soon realized that the coast was not as far away as he had thought. To the left of their flight path he saw the blue shimmer of the broad sea.

Below, everything was still and peaceful. Deringhouse wondered futilely if there were any survivors of the bomb explosion. It was not like Pucky to kill defenceless enemies, however evil their intent might be.

Lamanche had turned on the forward viewscreen and based his action on the theory that 4 eyes were better than 2. And events were to prove that he wasn't wrong.

Of course Deringhouse saw the ship in the same moment but even before he could draw the pilot's attention to it the latter had acted and turned on the defence screen. Only then did the 2 men bring their discovery under closer scrutiny.

The long, slender hull of the Springer ship lay on the edge of a plateau. A number of dark dots moved about on the bare surface of the area and suddenly halted, then took off in all directions. Some of them disappeared into the ship and some into the forest.

Deringhouse said: "Go down lower, Lamanche. Let's have a look at those characters. It seems there are other Springers here besides Tophthor."

"Topides too," added the captain while he lowered the *Centurion*. "I had a good look at them in the screen's magnifier."

"And at peace with each other, would you believe it!" Deringhouse was entertaining private thoughts which were to lead to a fatally mistaken conclusion. "Since when did they stop fighting each other?"

Unknowingly Lamanche added more to the error in judgment that was to come. "Maybe Tophthor has told them about the mistake they've fallen prey to—at least that's one answer to your question, sir!"

Deringhouse nodded ominously. "That's most likely the answer, Captain. All right, move in on them but keep your defence screen up. We'll look these fellows over and interrogate them..."

"Interrogate...?" Lamanche expressed bewilderment but then stopped talking.

From below, a poisonous green ray of energy shot upward and reached toward the *Centurion*. It struck the invisible envelope of high-tension energy and was absorbed. But the unknown marksman persisted relentlessly in the same line of fire, attempting to make the defence screen collapse.

Deringhouse shouted to battle stations: "A Springer ship is below us. I am directly over the target. Drop an atom bomb!"

It was self-defence, even though they could have responded with a considerably less powerful weapon. But Deringhouse was now fully convinced that Tophthor had revealed the Great Secret to these Springers and Topides.

And therein lay the tragically mistaken conclusion.

Tragic, that is, for the surviving Topides and Springers, over whom the mantle of death fell with the swiftness of thought...

* * * *

Except for Bernda and Gatzek.

The 2 Springers were on their way to the coast to search for Topthor. They had learned from the Topides that the Mounder and Ber-Ka must have reached the island. Proof of this had been obtained from a partially intercepted message between Topthor and Cekztel.

Naturally, Bernda could have used the ship to get to the island but he preferred to go in the tractor scout car in order to take advantage of an opportunity for a small private excursion. Whenever he was on an alien world he didn't like to forget his business interests. The exceptionally wide spread of these tree branches interested him especially. Their seeds would bring a good profit.

Gatzek knew nothing of the commercial objectives of the slender Trader, whose physiology reminded him of the hated Terranians.

They reached the coast and followed the tracks of the ground car which Topthor and Ber-Ka had used the previous day while undertaking the arduous journey. When they finally observed the low-lying structure of the artificial island, they figured they had it made. With a sigh of relief, Gatzek recognized the other ground car parked near the shore. It was empty.

Bernda pulled to a stop. A bit stiff in his legs, he climbed down from his seat and jumped to the sandy ground. More slowly and ponderously, the Mounder followed; his feet sank deeply into the soft ground.

"How did they get out to the island?" he asked and he looked doubtfully at the row of small boats that lay beside the small dock. "Certainly not in those flimsy kreenut shells..."

"They can carry more than you might, think," answered Bernda "Let's give it a try."

Gatzek went over to the first boat and tested his foot on the small deck. It sank somewhat but its gunwales remained sufficiently above water. "I guess they'll do, Bernda Let's hope nobody steals our scout car in the meantime."

"That's silly! Topthor's car is still there untouched. Anyway, who's around here to take them?"

Before Gatzek could answer, something happened that caused him to jump back to the shore.

Afar off, a brilliant flash was seen above the forest. It was not especially blinding but there followed a shockwave that swept mightily over the treetops and blasted seaward, causing a swirl of ripples across the water. It was only the intervening protection of the forest that saved the 2 Springers from being thrown to the ground.

"What was that!" cried Bernda suddenly turning pale. "Isn't that in the direction we came from? The ship...!?"

Gatzek could not suppress a trembling that crept through his body. "The ship... yes, that could be. What's happened?"

10 seconds later the answer came in the form of a giant spherical vessel that appeared above the forest and moved toward them at a slow but threatening pace.

One of Rhodan's ships!

Bernda emitted a warning shout and started to run. He paid no further attention to his companion, concentrating exclusively on his own safety. Before the spacesphere reached the beach and descended, the lean Trader arrived at the edge of the forest and pushed his way into the thick underbrush. He shoved, pushed and ran as fast as he could until he was out of breath. Fully drained and exhausted, he sank to the ground, quite certain that nobody would be able to find him here in the wilderness. All around him the mighty boles of the wide-branching trees rose up vertically and were lost in a maze of green foliage above. There was nothing that could be seen of the sky.

For some minutes he lay there stretched out on the moist forest floor and listened for any chance sound of pursuit. But all remained quiet. Perhaps they hadn't located his tracks. The overhead canopy of leaves was too thick to make any attempted search from the air successful.

He wondered if Gatzek had made it to safety.

Bernda was finally able to concentrate on his surroundings and he breathed a little easier. His glance fell upon an elongated, nut-like object—at least it was orange and looked like a nut. He was aware of a trace of hunger as he straightened up and took the thing in his hands. He saw at first glance that the shell was hard. He found a rock, braced the nut against a tree root and broke the shell.

He could hardly suppress a cry of pleasure because the nut contained tree-sized seed kernels, from which mighty, wide-branched trees could be developed. At least 200 of the seed kernels were stored in the shell.

And as Bernda searched about him more carefully he discovered a great number of the seed nuts. His mood brightened quickly and he began to gather them together into such a pile that he didn't know how he'd be able to carry them all.

Poor Bernda!

He still didn't understand that there wasn't a single being on this world who would have the slightest interest in these nuts—not even the fish folk. As for other entities, he would never see any potential customers for the remainder of his life unless somebody picked him up from Betelgeuse 4.

And the prospects for that became increasingly remote...

* * * *

15 minutes were still left to go before count 'zero' for the Arkon bomb...

Deringhouse landed on the wide strip of sand on the seashore, quite close to the two tractor-treaded ground vehicles and the figure of Gatzek, who was incapacitated by fear. The great landing struts sank deeply into the soft ground, causing sea-water to well up around the pods.

"Lamanche, you take over the battle stations in case we get any back-talk. I'm going outside."

The Francoterranian turned to the control console governing the ship's smaller calibre fire units. "Take some crewmen with you!" he urged. "The fat one out there doesn't look too feisty just now but

appearances can be deceiving."

"I'm going with Ras Tschubai so that I can disappear at any moment. That's what we've got a teleporter for."

He nodded to Lamanche and hurried as swiftly as he could to the wardroom of the mutants.

"Ras! We're going to jump to the shore and scare the pants off a Mounder!"

The powerfully built Afroterranian, one of the best teleporters of the Mutant Corps, looked at the exterior observation screen and nodded his assent. "Hold tight, Major!"

Deringhouse gripped Ras firmly—and in the same second was standing outside on the soft, sandy ground, not 10 yards from Gatzek. He drew his raygun from his belt and aimed it at the Mounder, who was wide-eyed in fright.

"Don't move, Lardbird!"

It was an effort for Gatzek to hold his half ton figure in a standing position. He had heard of the mysterious forces Rhodan made use of but this was beyond his understanding.

"I am unarmed!" he pleaded.

"Lucky for you," Deringhouse assured him. He replaced his weapon. "Where is Topthor?"

Gatzek indicated the island. "Maybe there. I'm looking for him myself."

"Why?" asked Deringhouse pointedly. "Have you allied yourselves with the Topides?"

"Why?" Gatzek seemed to search his own thoughts for an answer. "We were shipwrecked like they were. So why should we just keep on killing each other? There wasn't any reason for it any more."

Deringhouse saw the logic of it. He said: "If you just take it easy, nothing will happen to you. I'm going with my friend here, over to the island, and I'm going to look for Topthor. Don't try anything stupid."

"May I go back to the ship that's waiting for me over in the mountains?"

"The Springer ship? We destroyed it because it attacked us. I'm afraid it would be useless for you to go back there."

Deringhouse gripped Ras again and pointed to the island.

The Afroterranian made his jump.

They materialized on the upper platform and quickly found the corridor that led to the radio room. The corpse of a Topide lay in front of the giant control console. Deringhouse shuddered.

Then he caught sight of Topthor.

7/ RHODAN DIES

Precisely as planned, the Arkon bomb detonated at the mathematically predicted second. Rhodan was already back out in space and saw the brilliant flash that would initiate the chain reaction. It would require several hours for the planet to be converted into a sun.

The Springer fleet lay at a distance of one light-hour. Maj. McClears on board the heavy cruiser *Terra* was keeping them under observation and kept the video in continuous relay to the *Titan* so that Rhodan could maintain a full orientation to the situation. Cekztel's radio messages revealed that the transition co-ordinates for a return to M-13 had already been calculated. The mission was completed: the Earth had been destroyed.

But everybody knew that Rhodan was still alive.

This was the point that still troubled Rhodan. He ordered Marshall to come to him in the Control Central after Bell had made some more or less practical suggestions on the basis of which the actual plan was finally crystallized.

"In the eyes of the Springers, the *Titan* has to be destroyed," Rhodan began and he smiled faintly as he saw the shock of horror in the telepath's features. "Same way the Earth was destroyed. Only then can we be sure that our little chess game has been won without any hitches. Also, the robot brain on Arkon has to be convinced that we've been eliminated. We've cooked up a very special and quite effective stunt, Marshall, but to pull it off we need a teleporter, either Ras Tschubai or Pucky."

"Both of them are on the *Centurion*, sir. We'd have to get hold of Deringhouse and instruct him..."

"Deringhouse will be here in 10 minutes with his cruiser. In about a half hour the Springers are going to pull out of here and the whole thing has to happen in the meantime."

"What has to happen?"

Rhodan continued to smile as he said, "The magnificent demise of the *Titan*, which will be ripped to atoms in the very midst of the Springers..."

Marshall did not turn pale because meanwhile he had read Rhodan's thoughts.

Then he, too, began to smile...

* * * *

Gloomily, Deringhouse returned to the vicinity of the *Centurion*. When he and Ras Tschubai materialized on the beach they noted that the Mounder, Gatzek, had disappeared. He, too, had elected to seek the protection of the forest. He must have figured it was better than being taken prisoner.

Deringhouse didn't make the effort to chase after the fugitives. Akvo offered them everything they needed to sustain life, Or almost everything. They'd have to look out for themselves. Just now he had other worries.

Where was Pucky?

Topthor was no longer among the living. Deringhouse had found Topthor sitting in a strangely distorted posture in a chair directly in front of the radio control console, his head lying against the panel counter.

Or whatever it was that still remained of his head. For Topthor had killed himself with his hand weapon. Clutched in his hand, the raygun's muzzle was aimed at his head.

Topthor was dead and with him the secret that had threatened his life was also dead.

Deringhouse took the Afroterranian's hand. "Let's go into the ship," he said wearily. "If I only knew how we could find Pucky..."

They materialized in the Control Central. Lamanche was still seated at the controls but there was nothing left for him to monitor. Contentedly purring in his lap, Pucky was getting his neck scratched. As Deringhouse finally gave voice to a suppressed cussword, the mouse-beaver shook his head reproachfully.

"Chief Deringhouse," he chirped, "during the last hypertransition it seems you've lost your good upbringing."

"How long have you been here?"

"Long enough," sighed Pucky, "to get grey hairs waiting around for you. Did you find Topthor?"

"Why did he commit suicide, Pucky? Do you know anything about that?"

"He was tired of living, Major. He wanted to kill me first and then himself. It's only that he got the sequence of things turned around."

"And...?" pursued Deringhouse but he looked up as the radio man on duty came into the room.

"Message from Rhodan, sir. You are to go to the prearranged co-ordinates. The calculations are..."

"Alright!" Deringhouse waved him off. "I'll come in and see to it personally." He cast another glance at Pucky and said: "That thing about the reversed sequence of events... I'll want you to explain it to me when Rhodan is present..."

Pucky made no reply.

* * * *

"It's comparatively simple but it all has to happen at the exact second," concluded Rhodan and he looked questioningly at Pucky. "If you'd prefer, you know Ras could handle it, instead."

The mouse-beaver shook his head so vehemently that his ears flapped. "Ras should spare himself, Chief. Besides, he's with Deringhouse on the *Centurion* but I am here..."

Rhodan nodded. "For the time being, I'd just as soon pigeonhole your weak explanation concerning Topthor's death. But what really happened?" He looked at his watch. "You'll have to make it snappy, we only have a couple of minutes left."

Pucky shifted back and forth nervously. He looked pleadingly at Bell. "Actually, I took him by surprise and called to him. He turned around and wanted to shoot me. What was I supposed to do? What would become of you, Chief, if you didn't have me any more? And above all, poor Bell...! No, I just didn't have the heart to allow myself to be killed..."

"And...?" urged Rhodan impatiently, again checking his watch.

"No and! Topthor held the raygun to his head and pulled the trigger. That's all."

Bell snorted knowingly: "Not mentioning the fact that you're a psychokinetic little clown and able to move solid objects without touching them. Which is what you're going to have to do now with the atom bomb."

Pucky gave him a sad look. "Just as you say, Belt Buster."

Rhodan looked at his watch for the last time "In any case, you'll get those carrots, Pucky. But now shake a leg, we don't have any time to lose. The Springers will be out of here in 5 minutes. Pucky, get to the weapons central! Set the timer on the bomb at exactly 5 seconds and then wait for my command. Is that clear?"

"It's still too long a time-setting," twittered Pucky and he disappeared. Bell stared, nonplussed, at the suddenly empty spot where he had been.

The hypercom was turned on.

The first message was coded and went to McClears and Deringhouse: "Activate your hyper-compensators and make 10 random transits before you return to Earth and land in Terrania. There you can expect to see me shortly. Everything in order?"

"Roger—over and out!" returned their double reply. 20 seconds later the *Centurion* and the *Terra* were no longer present in the system of the red sun Betelgeuse. Only the *Titan* remained behind.

Rhodan had calculated his co-ordinates precisely. But before he made his hyperjump, he allowed the hyper-transmitter to warm up a bit more. He tied it in to the frequency of the robot brain. Now with a single flick of a switch, Rhodan could be in contact with the Regent of the Arkonide Empire, more than 30,000 light-years distant.

Pucky appeared on the viewscreen. In his arms he held an elongated object: the bomb!

"Ready, Pucky?"

"Ready!"

"Hold on, everybody. Here we go!"

The *Titan* dematerialised and then reappeared in the same second only a mile and a half distant from Cekztel's ship. Close by hovered more than 200 fighting units, all of them getting ready for their long-distance hypertransition. Owing to this very circumstance, there was a considerable pause before they opened fire on the spherical spaceship.

Prior to this, however, a number of things happened simultaneously.

Pucky teleported with the atom bomb and materialized outside the Titan. He wore a spacesuit and was not discernible against the silvery shining hull. With one hand he depressed the timer button. When he released it, 5 seconds would elapse before the detonation. His telepathic tendrils groped toward Rhodan's mind and he waited for the command.

Meanwhile, Rhodan had depressed the transmitter button. The contact with Arkon was established. But the robot brain wouldn't be the only one to bear the message. Anybody else could hear it also because he had intentionally cut off the encoder.

In contrast to the *Centurion* and the *Terra*, his hyper-compensator was turned off. It was intended that every hypersensor in the Milky Way should be able to detect the transit jump of the *Titan*.

The invisible defence screen encircled the ship, especially to offer Pucky protection against the ray beams of the Springers.

Cekztel's ship fired off the first shot. It was a signal for the rest of them—and for Rhodan.

In a loud and desperate tone of voice, he shouted into the microphone of the hyper transmitter: "This is Perry Rhodan, System of Sol! The Springers have destroyed our planet Terra!" He utilized the brief pause to concentrate mentally: Pucky, now! Then he continued—and he had exactly 5 seconds to finish: "My hyperfield generator is damaged and I'm trying to escape toward..."

He released the transmission control to "off" position. With his other hand he threw in the program commit lever of the hypertrans equipment.

The *Titan* dematerialised.

The bomb remained behind but the time differential to the point of detonation was so slight that Cekztel became the understandable victim of a misconception.

He believed that he saw with his own eyes how the *Titan* was decimated by a terrific explosion right in the midst of dematerialising. Simultaneously, Rhodan's appeal for help to the robot brain roared in his ears and it was abruptly cut off by the explosion. The hypersensor on Cekztel's ship—and with it also thousands of other hypersensors in every region of the Milky Way—was able to register the beginning of the *Titan*'s hypertransition.

But no one was able to detect his reemergence into normal space. Rhodan had remained in hyperspace.

He was disengaged from the existing plane of time.

Cekztel was triumphant. His uncoded hypertransmission raced a million times faster than light throughout the galaxy and was received by all concerned aliens:

We have eliminated the greatest danger in the Universe: RHODAN IS DEAD! The planet Terra has been transformed into a sun! The Empire is no longer threatened! Long live Topthor, architect of our triumph!

But Topthor was beyond enjoying praise: eulogies are never appreciated by the dead.

When Rhodan slipped back into normal space under the warp-absorbing protection of the hyper-compensator, he was just in time to hear Cekztel's epitaph speech and a mocking smile came to his lips.

Once more the co-ordinates were set up. The next hyperjump, still utilizing the invaluable hyper-compensator, would return the *Titan* fully intact to Earth. To an Earth submerged in an ocean of oblivion for years and perhaps decades to come. At least as long as Rhodan deemed it necessary. Most definitely until such time as Earth was strong enough to repel any attack from outer space.

Pucky sighed blissfully and moved Bell's massaging hand to another place on his furry back. "You know something, my king-size comforter? Life is beautiful—but I never thought it'd be even more wonderful to be dead!"

"Dead right," agreed Bell, too much at peace for once to take issue with Pucky, even oblivious to the fact that his choice of words was faintly ironic.

Rhodan observed the 2 mismatched friends momentarily, then placed his hand on the master switch of the hypertransystem.

Slowly, deliberately, he activated the switch.

Once more the *Titan* materialized in another spatima matrix without leaving the slightest trace of its passage. As the ship glided smoothly into this new space, a familiar old yellow-white sun appeared, father of 10 planets, of which the 3rd from the solar hearth attracted the affectionate attention of all aboard.

To eyes of humans born and bred on Sol 3, it was the most comforting, the most welcome, the most beautiful sight in this or any other universe:

The blue globe cherished by all native to it. The world the Peacelord had 'destroyed' in order to protect it.

Mother Earth.

CONTENTS

1/ FORCE UNKNOWN

2/ RED SOL? WRONG GOAL!

3/ THE SEARCH FOR SYNTHETIC ISLAND

4/ PUCKY THE POWERFUL

5/ A WORLD CONDEMNED

6/ DERINGHOUSE SIGHTS HIS—"MAN"

7/ RHODAN DIES

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

The Earth Dies

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

RHODAN'S INCREDIBLY daring plan—with some help from Pucky—has succeeded: all intelligences in the galaxy have come to believe that the Earth has been destroyed. Thus Mankind has won the extra time vital to the undisturbed unfoldment of its destiny, its progressive development toward the establishment of a Solar Empire—an Imperium.

The dramatic events of the next volume take place well into the 21st century as we leap ahead into a new epoch in humanity's history which you will witness at first hand through the eyes of a hibernator from the past, a man of many personalities, possessor of a powerful 'monoblock' & an invisibility device.

The Hermit of Time.

Atlan!

Antagonist of Rhodan!

A clash of giants ensues 12,000 light-years distant from Earth on Hellgate when the Peacelord encounters—

TIME'S LONELY ONE

by

K. H. Scheer