

CRITICAL SPOT: Heperais

Two members of the Mutant corps have broken their loyalty to Perry Rhodan and now he must risk detection by going in person to the trouble area of Heperais.

Before his mission is through, there is excitement unlimited in this, the first adventure of the interstellar colonists.

And the Robot Regent of Arkon learns to its dismay that the long-thought-dead Administrator of an Earth destroyed... still lives!

And by a chance of cosmic proportions, Talamon the Moulder is shocked when he has an insight that leads him to realise that—

## THE DEAD LIVE

### 1/ "NOTHING'S GOING TO HAPPEN TO THORA!"

SMACK!

The balled fist that struck the top of the heavy oakite table belonged to Reginald Bell, second-in-command to Perry Rhodan and Perry's lifelong friend.

The nearby windows shook with the vibration.

From the windows there was a good view overlooking Terrania, seat of Earth's world government in the 21st century.

"Death's too good for them!" was the opinion chirped by the comic-looking being crouched on the middle of the table: the mousebeaver from the planet Vagabond-Pucky.

Then the Peacelord spoke. "Force won't solve our problem," Perry Rhodan said. His gaze wandered over the powerful panorama of massive buildings, the teeming city surrounded by a fertile area that had once been anything but fertile in the previous century when the area had been known as the Gobi desert. But his eyes were turned inward in introspection as he continued: "We would only make more enemies. If

these people find they cannot agree with our policies and goals, they will simply have to find a new home. It was a joke during World War 2 when Hitler gave the world '24 hours to get out' and it was a gag long ago to say 'Earth—love it or leave it!' But now that solution is not only possible but necessary. There is no longer any room on Earth for rebels against our harmonious life because the Earth belongs to a united mankind and has no time for misguided malcontents."

"Maybe they should settle on the Moon?" suggested Bell, throwing his good friend Pucky an encouraging glance. "In my opinion, even Venus isn't far enough away for them."

"Let's ship them off to the next galaxy!" Pucky suggested. "They can't do any harm there."

Rhodan shook his head again. "No use going from one extreme to the other. We have to find the golden mean—the compromise that will satisfy everyone—and then our problem will be solved. These so-called Free Settlers aren't trying to overthrow us, they just simply refuse to be Terrans in our sense of the word. They won't recognize the world government—but for that should we declare war on them? Should we send tens of thousands of people to death because a few fanatics can't think logically? No, we must do the opposite—we must help them!"

"Alright," said Pucky resignedly. "So we have to help our poor ungrateful enemies."

Bell leaned forward toward Rhodan, who sat just across the table from him. "So what do you have in mind?" Pucky had already moved his yard-long mouse form to one side and out of the way, having telepathically sensed Bell's intention.

"They'll be settled elsewhere," said Rhodan. "I'll put one of the larger spacespheres at their disposal, along with a 200-man crew, and send them off. They can leave the Earth and look for a new world. When they find one, they'll be able to do whatever they please and we won't have to bother with them anymore. Don't you think that's the best and simplest solution?"

Bell agreed and, Pucky added: "I just hope they don't run into any Springers and betray the Earth's position to them."

"The rebels won't even know it anymore," Rhodan promised, realising that both his friends had agreed with his decision at least in principle. Burly, red-haired Bell had been, easier to persuade than Pucky, who was both an extraordinarily intelligent mousebeaver and one of the most capable mutants of all time. Rhodan continued: "I'll have our proposal submitted to the spokesman for the free settlers."

"Why do you call them 'free settlers'?" Bell asked, cupping his chin in his hands. "Are all the other colonists from Earth not free then, just because they owe their allegiance to the world government? Is this a paradox of some kind or..."

"They call themselves that," Rhodan explained. "In our official documents and records they are called 'Anti-social Free Settlers'—the AFS."

"That makes sense," grinned Bell and looked over to Pucky. "What do you think of that, you old carrot chomper?"

The mousebeaver revealed his single incisor tooth—his version of a smile—and thus showed he was not averse to a bit of humour such as Bell's jocular reference to his taste in vegetables.

"Not bad, Reggie," Pucky answered, "Not bad at all. But if there's anyone who's antisocial around here,

it's someone who makes fun of people's dinner—"

Bell grabbed for the mousebeaver but Pucky was quicker. He 'teleported to safety at the other end of the table. Easy to read in his shining mouse-eyes was the intention of making use of his 3rd ability, telekinesis, if Bell did not behave himself.

However, Bell had no desire to float weightless against the ceiling. He gestured lazily with his hand. "Come on, Pucky, let's be friends again and not argue over trifles. —Well, Perry, what do you plan to do now?"

As Pucky returned, calmed, to his old place, Rhodan laid out his plans. "We're getting the crew together now."

In a few weeks the ship can take off and then we'll be rid of our trouble with the rebels—I hope. Anyone unhappy with the way things are on Earth can go along."

"I hope there won't be *too* many," muttered Bell, "Or we'll have to send out a whole fleet."

"I don't think it will come to that," Rhodan said. "Say—what is it, Pucky?"

The mousebeaver held his head lowered and cocked to one side, seeming to listen to something coming from inside himself. He was clearly receiving a telepathic message or perhaps he had by chance mentally overheard something which interested him. Rhodan himself had become a telepath over the years, although he had to admit that the mousebeaver was far superior to him in that respect. While Rhodan could perceive generally only concentrated thought-impulses 'aimed' at him, and those only under especially favourable circumstances, Pucky could receive and understand any impulse, emanating from a living brain, even when it was not intended for him.

"Just a moment," chirped Pucky. He waited, then looked up. "The information centre will call for you in a second, Rhodan. There's an important message from space, though I don't have any idea what it's about."

Rhodan glanced at the blank TV screen that took up the whole of a narrow sidewall. It connected him directly with Terrania's communications station. If someone there wanted him, the screen would—

Yes! There it was!

The screen suddenly lit up and formed an animated image. A man sat behind a desk, looking into the room as though the walls did not exist. Hidden cameras and microphones switched on automatically and the 2-way connection was made.

"Sir," said the man behind the desk, "We just received an important message from the *Lotus*. Commanding officer Jim Markus has sent an emergency signal and the *Lotus* is returning immediately to Earth. The ship can possibly arrive as soon as later today. Since the communication broke off at that point, I could learn no more."

Rhodan's expression became earnest. "No other indication as to what's wrong, Miller?"

"None, sir. The transmission was no more than a short impulse and lasted only a 10th of a second. I had no time to get a fix on its point of origin."

"Thank you," said Rhodan. "Remain on the alert and let me know immediately if you hear anything more from the *Lotus* ."

The screen went dark again.

"Well?" said Bell anxiously, "What does all that mean?"

"That means," answered Rhodan, looking past him, "that 4300 light-years from here, in the Heperais System to be exact, something has gone wrong. What that is, we'll soon find out, perhaps even yet today."

"And the settlers?" twittered Pucky.

"They can wait. They aren't so important now. At the moment, in fact, it seems to me that only Capt. Markus is at all important."

Bell stood up. "I'm going to the spaceport. Markus surely won't be long in coming across a measly 4000 light-years. That's just a stone's throw across the cosmos, a cat's jump through Hyperspace."

Pucky shivered and teleported down to the floor. "Why must Reggie be so tactless and talk about cats when I'm around? There must be some way to break him of that habit..."

Rhodan watched them go but his face lacked the smile it usually bore when the 2 friends fell to plaguing one another with affectionate insults and banter... which they were now doing, although out in the corridor and no longer in his office.

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Capt. James Markus landed only after 20 hours had passed.

He explained that his delay had been due to waiting as long as possible for further messages from the cosmic agent Fellmer Lloyd, who was missing somewhere on the mysterious planet Volat. But no word was forthcoming from Lloyd and Markus had at length decided to return to Earth and report to Rhodan.

Along with Bell and Pucky, the mutant André Noir, an excellent hypno and of late a telepath as well, was also present at the meeting.

"And then you landed our agent Lloyd according to plan?" asked Rhodan for the sake of confirmation once Markus had begun his recital. "Then what happened?"

"I don't know all that much myself," the Captain apologized. "Lloyd impersonated a Preboner and attempted to get in touch with our man Sikeron, who was killed. While he was trying to find Sikeron, Lloyd met Kuri Oneré, the daughter of a Galactic Trader who had settled on Volat.

"Now the indigenous inhabitants of Volat are giant insects. Not much is known about them except that their leader is a female, the one they call the 'Omniscient Mother'. With her help, Lloyd was able to recruit members of various intelligent races into a band to oppose 2 mystery men. The latter, men with

supernatural abilities, turned out to be members of your Mutant Corps, sir: 2 rebels."

Although it did not show on his face, Rhodan's interest had clearly increased. "Tell me more!"

"The rebels are Nomo Yatuhin, a weak telepath, and Gregor Tropnow, a hypno. They both felt themselves short-changed because they had not been given the life-prolonging cell-renewal treatment on the planet Wanderer. On Volat, they founded a resistance movement against the Earth. Together with Springers and other subjects of the Arkonide Imperium, they planned to betray and attack Terra whenever the opportunity arose."

"My own men..." murmured Rhodan, still shocked. He appeared as though he did not want to believe it. Bell remained grimly silent.

"There will always be traitors," said Markus philosophically. "They discovered Sikeron and killed him before he could pass what he knew on to the Earth. Now it looks like they got Fellmer Lloyd too. In any case, I couldn't find any sign of life from him. The last message he sent went something like this: *3 alarm alert! Yatuhin and Tropnow are traitors. Attack on the Earth planned! 3 alarm alert!*

"So what became of him?" Rhodan asked.

"No one knows. He disappeared along with the girl Kuri. The natives didn't kill them, that much is certain. The natives had been helping them all along, you know."

Rhodan remained silent for several minutes. The others were quiet, too, in order not to disturb him. Being telepathic, Noir and Pucky could follow the deliberations in his mind as he was making no effort to shield them.

Finally he spoke. "Is the *Lotus* ready for takeoff, Capt. Markus? Good. Noir, Pucky and I are flying with you and we're leaving today."

The ensuing silence lasted only a second before Bell indignantly exclaimed: "What about me? You're certainly not going without me, are you."

"I'm afraid so," Rhodan told him calmly. "Who would look after things here for me if not you?"

"And to think you spent all day yesterday telling me what a wonderful and important job you have, Reggie!" said Pucky, grinning maliciously with his incisor tooth. "So what good's your high rank if all it does is stick you behind a desk whenever there's some excitement? Well, at least you'll be safe sitting here. The Chief and Noir and I can take care of this little business out in space by ourselves."

"I won't have to listen to speeches by the hired help while you're gone, that's some consolation," muttered Bell. Just to be safe, he held on tightly to the table's edge but the mousebeaver did not attempt to use his telekinetic power against him.

Pucky suddenly sprang into Rhodan's lap and looked soulfully into his eyes, chirping: "I'm going away now, Chief. I have to get something before we take off for Volat. See you later..."

Before Rhodan could say anything, Pucky had disappeared. No one knew what he went to find.

"Cute little fellow," Markus commented—to which Bell responded with a nearly hysterical laugh.

Rhodan turned to Noir, who sat across from him. "Make sure that Anne Sloane receives a comprehensive report of the current situation. She's in Venusport right now and will have to be informed of the Mutants' whereabouts. We'll meet in an hour on the *Lotus* at the spaceport. Markus, you come with me."

Bell watched as the others left the room. Then he slowly stood up, walked around the table and sat down in the massive seat that was Rhodan's customary place.

The temporary transfer of governmental authority in Terrania had taken place without fanfare. In that moment Bell had become the man who pulled the strings—all the strings that held Rhodan's Solar Imperium together.

The shock came a few minutes taken off.

To start with, the light cruiser had stood on its 3 telescoping legs. The shining metal sphere was 300 feet in diameter, nothing in comparison with the spacespheres measuring 2400 or even 4500 feet in diameter. By any standard, the *Lotus* was a small ship but she could defend herself in an emergency. And, like on any other ship in the Imperium fleet, a hypercom and a structural compensator were to be found installed aboard. The compensator disguised jumps through hyperspace so that they could not be detected by others. Rhodan's ships could speed through space, 'silently' in a sense, without being spotted by the omnipresent tracking stations manned by Arkonides and other intelligent races.

The crew members assumed their posts for liftoff. Meanwhile, the passengers had assembled in the Control Central. Rhodan sat in the copilot's seat next to Markus while Pucky lolled—as usual—in a reclining position on one of the couches, appearing to miss Bell greatly. André Noir, the hypno, had taken his place in the reserve seat.

The vidscreens glowed while nearby, in the navigation room, the positronic brain spewed out the data for the imminent jump through hyperspace.

Markus laid his hand on the control lever.

And then the spaceport, the city of Terrania, the Asiatic continent and finally the planet Earth shrank behind them into the emptiness of space.

The acceleration was such that the *Lotus* would reach the speed of light in 20 minutes. Even before reaching the outer limits of the solar system, it was possible for a ship to go into transition.

More on the basis of a hunch than anything else, Rhodan suddenly said: "Turn on the radio!"

Markus was surprised. "Why, sir? Inside the System you'll get only the normal radio traffic. Besides, we'll soon be moving so fast the waves won't reach us anymore."

Yet, Rhodan felt more strongly than ever that his hunch was more than a mere whim. He pressed his point. "You're right, normal waves won't reach us—but the hypercoms allowed for emergencies."

"You're expecting an emergency? What kind?"

"You can never tell—I just think it's a good idea to stay in touch with the Earth until the last minute."

Markus shrugged and reached for the intercom. "Com Centre! Keep the hyper-receivers open until we

go into transition. That's right, orders from the Chief!"

Rhodan sank back into the padding, listening with half an ear to the incoming signals as they arrived over the hypercom and were broadcast into the Control Central. His gaze rested on the row of vidscreens in front of him which depicted the space surrounding the ship.

There was the Earth, shrinking even as one watched. It was a familiar picture, well-known to all space travellers, but the man had not yet been born who ever grew tired of looking at that beautiful blue-green world. Near the glaring disc of the Sun stood Venus, a brilliantly reflecting sickle. To one side, Mars was slipping past ever faster towards the ship's stern—if one could speak of a spherical ship as having a stern.

The amount of interference coming from the loudspeaker was increasing, although the *Lotus* was moving away from the sun. Normal signals were being reflected off the billions of chunks of matter in the asteroid belt and picked up by the ship's antennae.

Then a loud, clear voice broke through the confusion of signals and interference. "Calling Perry Rhodan! Come in please! This is Col. Derringer, Mars Security! Calling Perry Rhodan! Come in—"

Rhodan gave a start but his surprise lasted only for a fraction of a second. Even before Capt. Markus could make a move, Rhodan was already out of his seat and speeding to the communications centre. Pucky watched him go with considerable astonishment but remained where he was.

As Rhodan entered the small instrument-crowded room, the communications officer on duty was on hand to make the connection with Mars. He looked up at Rhodan inquiringly. "That call was made by hypercom, sir. Do you want to reply?"

"Yes," Rhodan said. "Make the contact with Derringer. I want to talk to him."

Col. Derringer continued to broadcast without pause and with the same urgency. However, since he expected a reply, his receiver would have to be in operation too.

"Contact made," said the officer, handing the microphone to Rhodan.

Rhodan waited until Col. Derringer stopped speaking, then said: "Rhodan here, aboard the *Lotus*. What is it, Colonel?"

There was no reply forthcoming for a few seconds. This was not because of any time lapse required for the waves to cross the 50 or 60 million miles to Mars and return, for hypercom transmissions were instantaneous. Rather, Derringer was astounded to have received an answer so quickly. Finally he spoke, tersely and precisely: "I'm greatly relieved, sir! What is your position?"

"Just outside the Asteroids."

"Good! Turn around and land on Mars."

"Why?"

"Did you order the mutant Gregor Tropnow to pick up Thora here?"

Rhodan went pale and tried to hold himself steady by gripping the table with his free hand. His lips

compressed into a thin line and, when he at length opened his mouth, he found he could speak only reluctantly and with difficulty. "No, Colonel. My wife was to have remained on Mars until her vacation was over. What happened?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but there's strong reason to believe that your wife has been abducted. Mr. Bell was of that opinion, too, when I contacted him. Some hours ago the mutant Tropnow landed here, claiming he had been given orders to pick up Thora. He said an unexpected situation had arisen in Terrania, requiring her presence there Thora left Mars exactly 2 hours ago."

Rhodan appeared to be in perfect control of himself now. His voice betrayed no excitement but he was still pale. "Why did you wait so long before investigating?"

Col. Derringer hesitated for a moment. "Who could have suspected that Thora was being kidnapped? Members of the Mutant Corps have always been above suspicion."

That was true. It suddenly became clear to Rhodan that no man could be absolutely trustworthy—somewhere, hidden in the most remote corner of every heart, was at least the germ of betrayal. Or was he deceiving himself—after all, wasn't he the one who had planted the seeds of treason in Tropnow when he denied him the cell-renewal on the planet Wanderer?

"Listen to me, Derringer," Rhodan said. "I'm not coming to Mars. I know where they're taking Thora. Make further inquiries on Mars and let me know when you find out what ship they used."

"They used a Gazelle-type scout, sir," Derringer answered quickly. "That we know already."

"Good—that's something to go on, at least!" Rhodan commented. "Stay in touch with Reginald Bell: he has a direct connection with me and will keep me posted. And one other thing, Colonel—I hold you entirely blameless in this affair."

Relief was clearly audible from the other end. "Thank you, sir. I only did my duty..."

"Even that can be a mistake sometimes. Carry on Colonel."

The connection was broken off.

His hands trembling, the communications officer switched off the hypercom and looked at Rhodan uncertainly. His lips moved as though he wanted to say something but evidently his courage had failed him.

Rhodan, who knew the man's thoughts better than if he had read them, rested his hand on the officer's shoulders. "Thanks, friend," he said, "but the dirty trick these characters pulled won't do them any good. It will only increase their punishment when they're caught. Nothing's going to happen to Thora."

*Nothing's going to happen to Thora!*

While he walked back to the control central, memories and emotions shot through his mind like electronic flashes. He loved Thora now as much as he did the day he met her—even if, on that long-ago day, he had not realised it was love which drew him to the strange woman whose home was not the Earth. He, the relative immortal—104 years old and still looking 40—he loved the Arkonide woman to whom immortality had been denied. True, the life-prolonging elixir purloined from the Aras continued to hold off the effects of aging but for how much longer...?



And now the traitors wanted to take Thora away from him!

Correction:

They*had* taken her away from him!

As he stepped into the control central a second later, Noir came towards him. The telepath was already aware of what had happened, thanks both to his ability in reading minds and to the fact the intercom had broadcast the conversation into the control room.

"The lousy traitors!" Noir exclaimed. "We'll show them—"

"Let it go, Noir!" Rhodan said. "Nobody's going to escape what they deserve. Up to now I've always been able to respect my opponents because they usually fought with honest and honourable weapons. But to abduct a woman in order to extort what they want out of her husband—I can't think of anything lower than that. Only a degenerate could have come up with such a scheme."

"Degenerate or not, I'd like to wring his neck!" chimed in Pucky, who had not stirred from his couch. "He won't get away from us!"

Rhodan turned to Markus. "When will the transition take place?"

"Barring any change in plans, it's set to go in exactly 2 minutes and 40 seconds." Markus hesitated briefly, then asked: "Will we maintain the same course and coördinates, sir?"

"Our destination is still Volat," said Rhodan. "Tropnow was the kidnapper and Fellmer Lloyd spotted him on Volat. So if we want to get there before it's too late, we don't have any time to lose."

"As for me, the sooner I can get my paws on Tropnow, the better I'll like it!" growled Pucky from his corner.

Rhodan did not respond. He sat silently in his seat once more and, lips tightly pressed together, stared at the videoscreens.

He was in that pose when the stars disappeared and the terrifying emptiness of Hyperspace took their place. Hyperspace—that realm in which neither time nor space exist...

## **2/ A PAL FOR PUCKY**

Of the 6 planets that orbited the star Heperais, only the 2nd one, Volat, was inhabited. More than 4000 light-years from Earth, the planet belonged to the Arkonide Imperium and was ranked as one of the most important trade outposts for spacefaring intelligences in that sector.

The Arkonide empire was ruled by a robot: a mammoth positronic Brain. Its interests were looked after on Volat by the Arkonide administrator residing in Kuklon, the capital city and site of the planet's largest

spaceport,

Volat was about the size of the planet Mars and had a gravitation somewhat weaker than Earth's. Because of its hot, tropical climate, the world was covered for the most part by forest and jungle.

When the *Lotus* came out of transition, she was coming into the Heperais system at the speed of light. The structural compensator aboard had assured that no one had registered the ship's rematerialisation. Being spotted now was unlikely but even if the ship were noticed it would be assumed to be one of the many commercial vessels approaching or leaving Volat

The communications station aboard the *Lotus* stood ready to receive but nothing came in to indicate that Fellmer Lloyd was in his small, Gazelle-like craft, attempting to contact them. The mutant would certainly assume that Capt. Markus and the *Lotus* were circling the Heperais system, standing by to serve as a relay station.

But nothing was heard from Fellmer Lloyd.

Rhodan seethed with restlessness, "Get the Gazelle 5 ready to go," he told Markus, signalling Noir and Pucky to come along. "It's time to move out."

"I don't think I could have stood that couch much longer," said the mousebeaver, slipping to the floor and hopping towards the door. "It's as hard as an ironing board."

Noir had other things on his mind. "What if the Gazelle is seen landing?"

Rhodan answered him before turning to Markus. "We're not going to land in the middle of downtown Kuklon, you know, but in an uninhabited area on the main continent. We don't know where Lloyd is now but we're all telepaths: one of us will find him."

And then to Markus, Rhodan said: "You'll maintain a stable orbit, Captain. Two light-years from Volat should be enough. Broadcast a tracking signal once every 22 hours, lasting a minute. We don't know what the situation will be when we return to the ship, so I think this cautionary measure is a good idea."

"Very well, sir," said Markus. "What should I do if your Gazelle is attacked?"

Rhodan smiled. "Do nothing, Captain. Nothing at all. Understand?"

Markus understood but his astonishment at the order was obvious. Rhodan felt obligated to give an explanation: "If we're attacked and our opponent is superior, we'll surrender. That, too, often leads to accomplishing a goal."

Then Rhodan followed Noir, who was already on way to the hangar. Pucky had decided to save wear and tear on his short legs and stood waiting for them by the Gazelle's open hatch.

This excellent scout-craft was shaped like a discus more than 100 feet in diameter. Its engines were normally capable of leaps through hyperspace covering as many as 500 light-years and the weaponry on board was enough to inflict serious damage on even a cruiser the size of the *Lotus*. Last but hardly least, the Gazelle's special equipment included generators producing artificial gravity fields which compensated for the effects of rapid acceleration and deceleration.

"What are we waiting for?" demanded the mouse-beaver, teleporting himself up into the Gazelle's

airlock. "Every second is precious if we want to get hold of those criminals!"

Pucky's anger towards the 2 betrayers seemed to be boundless. Ever since they had abducted Thora, he had not taken the trouble to consider their motives any more closely. In his mind the single act of kidnapping Thora had already convicted them.

Rhodan gave the officers of the *Lotus* some further instructions, boarded the *Gazelle* just after Noir and Pucky. The hatch closed automatically behind them with a muffled, hollow clang.

10 seconds later the disc-shaped craft left the spherical cruiser and raced towards the distant planet at a constant speed. The *Lotus* left its previous course and headed toward the position in space Rhodan had directed. From there it would enter into the prescribed orbit.

Rhodan sat at the *Gazelle*'s controls; Noir, sitting next to him, was waiting, his hands resting on the switches that could activate the ship's defences within seconds. Pucky remained idle; he sat in front of the communications system but it had not been turned on.

Volat drew ever closer and finally it was time to brake the *Gazelle*'s speed-of-light approach.

Beneath them the planet revolved sluggishly in the glare of its sun. Soon Kuklon itself came into view, on the vidscreen a clearly defined welter of tall buildings and elevated transport-skyways. Nearby lay the broad expanse of the spaceport, studded with the spacecraft of all manner of intelligent races. Concentrated here in the city and spaceport was virtually all of the planet's civilized life, unaffected and influenced by the indigenous natives who lived in the vast forests and on the high plateaus.

The natives hunted and, to some extent, farmed. What did they care for the Arkonides, Springers and other races who had made their planet into an outpost of the legendary Imperium? Nothing—as long as the invaders only left them alone!

Rhodan allowed the *Gazelle 5* to wheel about and came in towards Volat's night side. The *Gazelle* approached closer and closer until Rhodan was flying it along just above the treetops. The forests were almost endless, broken only by the great seas. Broad river valleys indicated a plentiful supply of water below and Rhodan noticed on the infra-red screen that the slopes showed signs of cultivation.

"It will be dark in an hour in Kuklon," Noir said. "We'll have to wait until then before we can land."

"We'll land even before that," Rhodan answered, letting the ship drop even farther. "Fellmer Lloyd must be down there somewhere, not far from the capital city." He turned to Lucky. "Have you picked up any impulses from him yet?"

The mousebeaver shook his head wordlessly.

They glided now over a broad rocky plateau but even the infra-red screen showed no further details. Either the plateau was uninhabited or the Volatians had camouflaged their dwellings well.

Then Rhodan made his fateful mistake: he switched off the protective energy-field which was designed to deflect meteors in deep space. The field also warded off the shots and energy beams from enemy ships.

The attack that followed was so sudden and so surprising that no counteraction could be taken before the *Gazelle* had already suffered too much damage to stay aloft.

A greenish-blue tentacle of energy shot out of nowhere and struck the Gazelle's flattened nose. The shock nearly threw Rhodan out of his seat, knocked Noir to the floor and sent lucky sliding across the cabin.

The ship began to drop.

A 2nd burst went past them and blasted a burning hole in the forest expanse below.

"Hold on!" Rhodan shouted and grabbed the controls.

The Gazelle was gliding a bit to the side, heading for the trees not far beneath it. The ship no longer responded to the steering controls but it could be braked somewhat so the imminent crash would not be as disastrous as otherwise.

"Those were Springers!" Pucky murmured angrily, eavesdropping telepathically on the crew of the enemy ship. "Our old friends, the Galactic Traders! But they have no idea who we are—they're just acting on orders from someone else!"

"Try to pick up more of their thoughts!" Rhodan called back. "We'll hit the ground in 10 second—as soon as we touch down, make for the hatch and get out of the ship!"

The next 10 seconds were almost an eternity.

Then the splintering of branches and the bursting crash of the ship's impact itself resounded over the loudspeakers, picked up by the exterior microphones. A jolt slammed through the Gazelle's crippled body, sweeping all loose objects from their places.

Rhodan threw himself to the floor a moment before the crash and landed on all fours. He slid slowly across the control room and came to a stop, directly behind the pilots' seats. His numbness did not last long. He stood up with a groan and said hoarsely: "Quick! Before they come back and finish us off!"

That brought Noir back to himself. He had been thrown sideways out of his seat and had struck his head hard against a metal cowling. A thin trickle of blood ran down his forehead but he seemed to have no serious wounds.

Pucky had come out of the wreck in the best shape: he was no longer even in the control central. He had teleported himself outside just before the Gazelle had crashed. Having had no time to take Noir and Rhodan along, he stood alone some 50 yards away as the spaceship smashed through the trees and into the ground. Hardly had the ship stopped moving when Pucky sprang to the outer hatch, opened it and went on to open the inner airlock door.

"Anything broken?" Rhodan asked Noir in the control central. Outside in the corridor was a noise: that would be Pucky. "Does it hurt?"

"Only in my head," Noir moaned, clutching his forehead. "I think I broke some of the instruments when I hit them."

"That isn't important anymore," said Rhodan consolingly. Then he saw the mousebeaver by the open hatchway. "We're going to have to make a run for it—we've got to get out of here as fast as we can!"

The 2 men stumbled through the narrow corridor and reached the outside hatch 10 seconds later they

were running with Pucky into the dense jungle, not even pausing to look behind them.

The approach of the destroyer was audible enough and carried more meaning than any words could express.

Then the brilliant flash of an explosion blinded the fugitives, and the ensuing shockwave threw them to the ground. Rhodan took time to turn his head. A shadow blocked out the stars. The alien ship could not be made out clearly but it had to be larger than the Gazelle. The unknown enemies aboard it had no trouble spotting Rhodan's craft with their tracking equipment. Now spotlights leaped through the darkness and caught the wreck in their glare.

Rhodan, Noir and lucky slipped deeper into the shadows.

And then the attackers did something very stupid: they destroyed the wreck with an impulse beam that left it a molten mass of metal within seconds.

Rhodan breathed easier. "We've been lucky. I was afraid they'd search our ship from top to bottom. They possibly would have found clues aboard that would have stunned an intelligent enemy. Well, Yatuhin and Tropnow won't have played their trump card yet—and no one will know that the Earth still exists. At least that's what I'm hoping."

"And nobody knows Rhodan has landed on Volat," murmured Noir without any false pathos. "And, of course, nobody knows that Pucky, the fierce warrior, is here, too," he added, with a quick glance at the mousebeaver.

Rhodan did not reply. He looked at the glowing wreck and saw its reddish reflection of the dully shining underbelly of the unknown ship. He tried to make out the crew's thought-impulses and thereby learn something of their further intentions but he was not successful. Perhaps Pucky had had more luck.

But the mousebeaver shook his head "Springers, like I said. They were recruited by an unknown person and sent out after us from their headquarters—wherever that might be. Their warning system must have picked us up while we were still in space."

"They're well organised," Rhodan observed. "Do you think the 2 rebel mutants are behind this?"

"Who else could it be?"

Rhodan looked up again into the starry night. Here the sky looked much different than it did on Earth, which was located on the edge of the galaxy. Volat was closer to the centre and the number of stars in its heavens was unimaginably greater. A solid white band of stars ran clear across the sky, throwing passing clouds into bold relief.

The alien ship had disappeared—vanished as though it had never existed. It had carried out its mission and now it was returning to its unknown base of operations.

Rhodan nodded grimly. "They'll pay for destroying the Gazelle—scouts like that don't come cheap!"

Noir stood up. "Now what? The city must still be hundreds of miles away. And this jungle..."

"We still have Pucky," said Rhodan quietly, also getting up. There was nothing around them but the stillness of night and the rustling of branches in the wind. "Pucky can bring us one by one into the city,

should that seem necessary. However, I don't think it would be a good idea to pop up again very soon. Our enemies should think we're all dead."

"But the jungle!" Noir pointed out. "I don't find it at all inviting. Who knows what dangers are waiting for us in there?"

"The information we have on Volat states that there aren't many beasts of prey in the forests," said Rhodan "There's only one real enemy for us here: the band of rebels. They'll be coming after us once they find out we're still alive."

Noir looked up. "I just can't understand how any of our own men could come up with a plan to kill you. It's beyond all belief."

Pucky hissed angrily in agreement and Rhodan explained: "Envy breeds hate, André. And hate in its turn makes the unthinkable thinkable. Hate often provides the motivation for seemingly irrational actions, whether the hate is justified or not. Now my hate for Troponow—*that's* justified! But morally speaking, is there a difference?"

Noir did not answer. Instead he stood rigid and mute in the night, looking into the impenetrable darkness of the jungle. He faced into the west, in precisely the direction of Kuklon.

"What is it?" Rhodan asked, concerned.

The hypno pointed into the darkness. "I don't know how far away they are but there are living beings out there. They're conversing but I can't understand what they're talking about."

"Natives?"

"I can't tell but they probably are. What kind of creature is a Volatian, sir?"

Rhodan brought to mind the short study he had made in Terrania. Now what was it the Arkonidean star catalogue said about Volat, 2nd planet in the Heperais system? "Ah, yes... The Volatians evolved from insects into a humanoid form. They walk erect and are about 6 feet tall. They have thin limbs and large heads with prominent multifaceted eyes and feelers. They have a brownish-black skin which is partially hardened into a shell. The Volatians are an intelligent and harmless race but they observe strange customs. They are ruled by a matriarchy, probably a carry-over from their insect stage of development. They live according to the laws laid down by the 'Omniscient Mother', their ruler, who possesses unlimited power over them. Their language is not perceptible by human ears because it lies well up in the super-sonic range. Telepaths, however, have no difficulty communicating if they supplement their ability with the use of sign language. You, Noir, ought to get along well with them, since you're a hypno as well and can 'suggest' to them."

"They sound like funny-looking creatures to me," murmured Pucky in some surprise and waddled off in a westerly direction. His sharp eyes had discovered a path. "I'm curious to find out what they'd have to say to me."

Rhodan gave a fleeting laugh. He was curious about it himself. "Let's follow Pucky," he said to Noir. "He has the best instinct for woodsmanship."

Noir took the rear. Then he whispered: "There are some more in the east, right behind us!"

"I can sense their thought-impulses myself," said Rhodan in a low voice, "but I can't interpret them. Are they Springers or Arkonides?"

"They're strange impulses," said Noir, "and very peculiar thoughts, and... they're limited somehow. No, they aren't human beings."

"They aren't? Are they Volatians?"

Noir shook his head, although Rhodan was unable to see him. "Not at all. Those are Volatians *in front of* us. No, the thoughts behind us are like those that would originate *inconditioned* brains. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

"I think so," said Rhodan. "You're trying to say that they are only able to think of one specific thing and nothing else, right?"

"That's it, sir. Their minds have room only for their mission and nothing but."

"Their mission?"

"Yes," said Noir evenly, "and their mission is to capture us."

\* \* \* \*

The high plateau reared above the jungle, which stretched even to the city limits of Kuklon. No roads lead to the city, only hidden paths and secret trails. Under certain circumstances the latter could be used by motorised vehicles, although if it had been raining for more than 2 days, even the widest caterpillar tracks bogged down in the mud.

No Arkonide or Springer would have known where the plateau was located. Here resided the mysterious ruler of the Volatians: at once a queen and a goddess and the object of strange and incomprehensible rituals.

Hidden beneath the sheltering tree branches stood the native huts, beehive-shaped structures constructed from a wide range of materials. Some huts had been built of wood, others of a sort of bark. Even hard mud mixed with straw had been used. The entrances resembled those on Earthly beehives; the only difference, in fact, was one of size.

This rocky plateau, hidden and for all practical purposes inaccessible to outsiders, was the true 'capital city' of the planet Volat.

In one of the primitive-seeming huts, Fellmer Lloyd lay on a low bed and held the hand of the girl Kuri. She sat on the edge of the bed, looking down at him. Kuri could not be called beautiful for she was somewhat too stocky but her large dark eyes, almost Oriental in effect, made up for it. Her skin was reddish and her hair was like copper. She was the daughter of a Galactic Trader.

Fellmer Lloyd could read her feelings like an open book. He was a seer and could pick up and analyse brain-waves. His ability as a telepath also allowed him to perceive the feelings and moods of other living

beings. In any event, he was aware that Kuri cared a great deal for him.

"We're safe, Fellmer," Kuri said, giving her voice a confident tone. "Nobody will find us here."

He nodded. Under the light sheet of bark that served as a cover, his broad, muscular body seemed thin and helpless. "That's good to hear, Kuri. If I could only find out if my friend Markus received our call for help and passed it on..."

"You've got to get well first," she told him.

He shook his head. "I'm not sick, Kuri. The beam of a shockgun hit me, that's all. Another day or two and I'll be back on my feet. And then we'll have to do something."

Kuri looked up. There was a movement at the hut entrance and then someone came in.

It was a Volatian. Kuri gave the strange-looking creature a friendly smile, knowing she would never have anything to fear from it or the rest of its breed. The feelers above its staring eyes moved but she could hear nothing. Her glance went questioningly to Fellmer, who suddenly listened and then sat up.

"The enemies have lost the trail and have returned to the city," said the Volatian. Only Fellmer could hear its voice and understand.

He smiled weakly. "Thank you, my friend. You have rendered us a great service."

"The Great and All-Wise Mother has said that you may remain among us for as long as it pleases you," the Volatian continued.

"I'll be able to stand up today," said Fellmer. "As much as I'd like to stay, I'll have to turn down her kind offer. I'm waiting for my friends and they'll never be able to find me here."

The Volatian stepped closer and sat down on a stool. "Do your friends look like you?" it asked. "Are they men like those who rule our world?"

"Well," Fellmer hesitated, "they *look* the same."

"And do they also come from the Great Void?"

The 'Great Void' was outer space, Fellmer knew. The Volatians were not a spacefaring race. "Yes," Fellmer answered. "They'd come from there if they were to come for me."

A logical deduction seemed to have been made in the Volatian's mind. "Then it was them."

"Who?" Fellmer asked.

"Last night a small round ship came to our planet from the Great Void but it was attacked and it crashed. We received word of this only a short time ago."

"A round ship?"

"Yes, a flat, round ship."



Fellmer felt fear. That could only have been a Gazelle, a ship like his own.

Rhodan...

"What happened to the men aboard the ship?" Fellmer asked.

"We do not know. Perhaps they are dead."

Fellmer swung his feet off the bed and onto the floor but as he tried to stand up he felt so unsteady that he nearly fell over. The effects of the shock-blast had not yet been overcome. He sank back resignedly to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Kuri supported him.

"I'm still too weak," he admitted, "but I've got to find out what happened to the men aboard that wrecked ship."

"We will soon know," said the Volatian. "The Omniscient Mother has instructed some of us to go into the great forest and search for signs of them. If the men still live, we will find them."

Fellmer lay back on the bed. "You *must* find them!" he moaned and closed his eyes.

The Volatian left the hut without a sound and only Kuri remained with Fellmer. She gazed tenderly at the Terran's pale face.

On Earth, life in all its millions of forms had evolved from a single primal cell. The logical conclusion, then, would seem to be that evolution on various worlds would follow wildly different paths.

But that had not been the case. True, Terrans discovered astounding creatures and entirely new twists of the evolutionary process but life everywhere always seemed to conform to the same principles of reproducing, eating and dying.

The Katanians were no exception. They lived on a warm jungle world close to the centre of the galaxy, enjoyed a modest intelligence and in all respects could be cited as a happy race. At least happy until they were discovered by the truly intelligent races and from then on their happiness was over.

The Galactic Traders in particular recognized the Katanians' worth. Though they were large and powerful cats, the Katanians were extremely susceptible to hypnotic control. Once given an order via hypnosis, the cats would carry it out no matter what. It was impossible to turn them away from their goal. Since the Katanians possessed powerful teeth and sharp claws, they served especially well for guarding prisoners and tracking down escapees.

5 such Katanians had been set loose to catch the crash-landed space-travellers in the event they were still alive and, if necessary, to kill them. The great cats glided silently through the dark Volat jungle, guided by their unerring instinct which did not let them miss the slightest spoor. Their supple bodies, up to 6 feet long, adroitly slipped around every obstacle and their eyes, well-suited for beasts of prey, penetrated the gloom of night almost as if it were daylight. Originally peaceful and friendly creatures, they had been transformed through hypnosis into mindless engines of destruction.

When the refugees stopped to take a rest, Pucky became once more aware of the unknown pursuers' increasingly stronger thought-impulses. "I don't like it," he whispered to André Noir, who had sat down next to him. "Something in the thoughts of those behind us is bothering me no end. Subconsciously I want to avoid any confrontation with whoever's after us. But real fear isn't what I feel at all."

Rhodan had listened attentively. "You've never been afraid of anything in your whole life, Pucky," he said thoughtfully. He motioned to Noir. "What are you picking up? Are you afraid too?"

"No—er, not exactly. I'd just rather avoid our pursuers, that's all. They strike me as uncanny. They're concentrating so intensively on capturing us that it's as if it's their only purpose in living. Their minds are operating only to accomplish that goal and everything else has been shut out."

Pucky moved restlessly, then stood lip. "Let's get going again. I don't want to—"

Rhodan remained where he was. "What is it you don't want?" he inquired. His voice was still friendly but it carried the tone of a light reproach. "Pucky, I don't think I know you anymore."

The mousebeaver looked up into the dark canopy of tree branches. "We'd be safe up there and I can teleport you all up. This running through the forest is pointless, anyway."

"Perhaps you're right," Rhodan admitted. "But you know that in order not to raise any suspicion we have to forego any use of your supernormal capabilities. They must think we're ordinary people, not magicians. Of course, later we can."

He stopped. An audible rustle could be heard in the forest not far away.

Pucky stood with his back against a tree. The hair on his neck stood on end. His concentration showed he was ready at any second to teleport himself to safety. Noir listened tensely into the night and Rhodan remained calm.

"They're already rather close," Rhodan said. "Perhaps we ought to go on. I'd prefer not to meet them in the dark. Everything looks different in daylight, anyway. If we work it so they catch up with us only after daybreak, we'll be able to deal with them better."

"That's right!" Pucky agreed quickly and immediately took up the march again. Noir followed cautiously and this time Rhodan was in the rear, watching continuously behind him. In the meantime the noises had died away. It was evident that the pursuers—whoever they were—were not gifted with telepathic or other parapsychological abilities.

The remaining hours of night passed in nearly unbearable tension. Never before had Rhodan seen the mousebeaver so agitated and ever-ready to flee. His instinct must indeed have been warning him of an unspeakable danger which Rhodan and Noir could not sense.

The eastern sky grew lighter and then the shadows of night rapidly dissolved into daylight. Now it was beginning to warm up rather quickly.

The three had crossed a broad clearing and now paused under the protection of the first trees.

"If we want to lie in wait for our mysterious followers, we'd best do it here," said Rhodan, surveying the surroundings. "The bushes are thick enough to offer us excellent cover and the grass in the clearing is too low to hide our pursuers. So we'll see them before they see us. What do you think, Pucky?"

The mousebeaver fell to the ground and panted in exhaustion. "It's inexcusable," he complained, "for you to make me run like this when I could teleport myself to the other side of the planet. My short legs—"

Rhodan smiled indulgently. "I know it's asking a lot of your short little legs but I can't change things. How far away are our followers now?"

Pucky pointed in the direction from which the trio had come. "Not far at all, anymore. Luckily they aren't moving very fast but they haven't lost our trail yet, either. Must have good noses."

Rhodan was surprised. "Good noses? You mean they follow our trail like hunting dogs?"

"Yes—or like hunting cats."

"Ah ha!" exclaimed Noir, regarding the little mousebeaver with a suddenly very thoughtful air. "Like cats, eh?"

Rhodan's smile grew broader. "I think I'm beginning to know why you have such an instinctive fear of our pursuers, Pucky. Maybe they *are* cats—and it's well-known that cats are down a ways on your list of favourite animals."

"*Bigcats areway* down," Pucky clarified. "Cats have something against me."

Noir looked out into the clearing. "So they've sent animals after us? Why didn't they come after us themselves? Wouldn't that have been simpler?"

"Not at all," said Rhodan, his own gaze following Noir's. As yet, nothing moved in the tall grass. "They aren't familiar with the forest and furthermore don't know who they're up against. Didn't you tell me that the minds of our pursuers thought only of their mission and seemed to be conditioned? Well, there you have it. The cats—if that's what they are—have been trained for this sort of thing. Anyway, we'll soon see for ourselves."

Pucky suddenly sat up. Then he teleported himself up to the thick lower limb of the tree behind him. He looked out over the clearing from a height of 12 feet. His fur still stood on end. He called out shrilly: "They're coming! And they *are* cats! Monster-sized cats. At least 6 feet long!"

Rhodan and Noir were not high enough to see more than the movement of the grass. Not hesitating very long to consider, they also climbed up the tree. The branch was large enough to support them all and they could sit down next to Pucky.

The pursuers were indeed giant cats: 5 of them sweeping across the clearing. Even now they were less than 200 yards away. Rhodan realized with a start that his small group had no weapons and yet it did not seem advisable to simply have Pucky teleport him and Noir off to safety. The cats would be intelligent enough to be able to report the inexplicable disappearance of their prey to their masters and that was precisely what Rhodan wished to avoid.

"They'll be under the tree in 3 minutes!" Pucky whispered frantically. "we've got to do something!"

"Maybe they can't climb trees," suggested Noir reassuringly.

"*Thesecats* can!" Pucky retorted angrily. "I'm telling you, the second they start up this tree I'm getting out of here! You two can do what you like with the brutes—I'm not going to stick around just to get torn apart!"

Pucky had never before been heard to talk like this—not the courageous Pucky who feared nothing.

What, Rhodan wondered, had gotten into Pucky, affecting only him and no one else? Was it really the instinctive fear his species had of cats?

"Who said we wouldn't defend ourselves, Pucky?" asked Rhodan, not letting the 5 cats out of his sight. "You have my permission to do what you like with the cats—but please, nothing suspicious."

The fur on Pucky's neck laid flat, as if on command. His incisor tooth made a timid attempt to reach daylight but without success.

Then Rhodan and Noir suddenly noticed a loose boulder, which had been lying not 20 yards away, weightlessly raise itself into the air and climb straight upwards. The rock went so high, in fact, that they could barely see it. Then it moved a little to one side and began to plummet back down.

The boulder fell out of the clear sky like a plunging meteor and Pucky's aim was exact. Before two of the big cats knew what was happening, they had been smashed by the rock deep into the soft ground. One thing was certain: they would never hunt again.

The sudden appearance of a falling boulder frightened the 3 remaining cats into momentary confusion but they regained their self-control astonishingly fast. The incident was classified in their minds as inexplicable and they did not bother just now to seek an explanation. The important thing was that the falling rock had no connection with the prey they sought. And though 2 of their fellows were dead, 3 Katanians would be enough to track down the strangers and render them harmless.

And so they resumed the hunt

"That wasn't necessary," Rhodan whispered to the mousebeaver. "Why kill them just like that?"

Pucky's excuse was not long in coming. "They really would have been suspicious if the rock had fallen slowly. This way they'll think it was a meteor."

"Well, you've made worse jokes," Rhodan conceded, turning his attention to the surviving cats gliding resolutely towards the jungle's edge. "But I must admit that I'd be afraid of them too if I were a mouse."

"But I'm not your average mouse," Pucky said in his own defence, preparing to elaborate on that matter in greater detail. However he was interrupted by Noir. "They've caught our scent," the telepath announced. "They know we're up here in this tree."

The 3 Katanians had at last found their quarry. With their green-shining eyes, they looked up at the 3 refugees sitting on the lowest branch. The prey was within easy reach and, moreover, paralysed with fear.

And hypnotized Katanians know no pity.

One of the cats sprang—and slammed into Pucky's timely telekinetic force-barrier. The cat fell back to the ground, hissing angrily. It had seemed to strike an invisible wall in the middle of thin air.

Before the cat could gather itself for another spring, something odd happened—something for which there was no explanation: from the forest came a muted 'phoot!' and the cat lurched on the verge of springing, then sank slowly to the ground. Its 4 legs jerked briefly, then it lay still.

The cat was apparently dead.

Rhodan forgot the other 2 cats and tried to peer into the thickets to the east. He could not hear anything but then he sensed faint thought-impulses.

Volatians!

One of the remaining 2 cats raced in leaping bounds towards the bushes—and fell, hissing shrilly, victim to the invisible shots. This cat, too, was dead.

Terrified, the last cat turned to flee.

Rhodan put the Volatians out of his mind and called to Pucky. "Don't let that one escape—but don't kill it, either! We have to find out who its masters are. Can you hold it down while I see to our unexpected allies?"

"Right, Chief—much as I don't like it," Pucky agreed, concentrating his full attention on the cat bounding out of the clearing. "I'll hold it, alright."

Rhodan and Noir climbed down out of the tree and raised their hands towards the interior of the forest. They knew that their allies could see them and would not misunderstand their gestures.

The foliage before them rustled and then 3 Volatians carrying blowguns came out into the open. Their weapons were not, Rhodan and Noir quickly noted, trained on them.

"We are friends," said the Volatians in their inaudible language. The message formed itself clearly word by word in the Terrans' minds. "The Omniscient Mother sends her greetings."

Rhodan decided not to make a reply himself and motioned for Noir to transmit the reply.

"We thank you," said Noir. "The cats had caused us much difficulty."

"The cats are called Katanians," said the foremost Volatian. "They serve the rulers of our world and have torn many of us limb from limb. They are beasts."

"The last Katanian will not escape its due punishment," Noir promised, "but we have not killed it because we require information from it. Do you know a man who is a friend of ours? He must be on your world. His name is Fellmer Lloyd." It was a rather direct question but Noir did not wish to waste any more time.

The answer was just as direct. "He is at our village and waits for you."

Rhodan gave a sigh of relief. He stepped forward and extended his hand to the 3 strange beings. They took it and thus was the friendship between 2 quite different races finally sealed.

In the meantime Pucky had come down out of the tree too. He waddled gravely through the long grass out to where the last remaining Katanian motionlessly awaited its fate. Pucky's telekinetic power continued to hold it fast

The cat's green eyes shone with malevolence but deep within it felt fear of the powerful opponent it and its late fellows had so woefully underestimated.

For his part, Pucky had overcome his fear. It was enough for him to strut before his deadly enemy and

gloat. He, the great mouse, held a huge cat in his power. It was too bad that his fellow mousebeavers on the planet Vagabond could not see him now, although they in all probability would not have known what a cat was.

Then Rhodan, Noir and the 3 Volatians came along. The natives held their blowguns ready to shoot but Noir calmed them by saying that the beast was now fully harmless and could cause no more damage. Then they stared timidly but admiringly at the mousebeaver, who quite clearly enjoyed the attention.

"Noir," said Rhodan, "try to get some information out of the Katanian. Master, origin and anything else that might interest us. You'll probably first have to remove the hypnotic block that's been placed on the animal's mind."

It turned out to be easier than they had anticipated.

Once freed from the hypnotic block, the Katanian proved to be the most peace-loving creature imaginable. Not much information could be gleaned from it but the Terrans were able to learn a few things: 2 mysterious individuals adept in 'magic' were the leaders' of a group of Springers and Arkonides. One man could read minds and the other could bring any living being under the force of his will.

Just as Rhodan had suspected. Added to this, Capt. Markus' report led to but one conclusion: the 2 traitors and former members of the Mutant Corps, Yatuhin and Tropnow.

"Noir," said Rhodan, "ask the Katanian if it knows anything about Thora."

It was not difficult for the hypno to project mental questions into the cat's brain. Being understood was quite simple.

Then Noir shook his head. "He doesn't know about any prisoners but if there was one, he thinks she would be confined in the gang's headquarters."

"Where's that?"

Again the silent thought-exchange. "In a large building close to the spaceport," said Noir at length. "He'll show us if we promise not to kill him."

Rhodan looked surprised. "We don't have any intention of killing someone who shows us he's grateful. Tell him that."

What followed then was indeed astonishing.

Freed from Pucky's telekinetic field, the giant cat crawled up to Rhodan and licked his boots. It purred loudly and stretched its stiff limbs. The purring sounded like a motor.

Pucky took an involuntary step back in surprise when his former natural enemy came to him, too, and licked him. The rough tongue so tickled the mousebeaver that he displayed his incisor tooth with a giggle and lay down invitingly on his back. The Katanian took the hint and licked him on the belly.

Watching, Noir could only shake his head in wonder. "Just like an overgrown kitty-cat."

Hearing that, Pucky immediately leaped to his feet and the Katanian, startled, moved to one side.

"That's it!" exclaimed the mousebeaver. "We'll call him Kittikat! Can we keep him, huh, Perry?"

"Keep him?"

"Yeah! Forever! He's my friend and—"

"Peculiar," said Rhodan. He, too, could only shake his head. "Sometimes I can't understand how someone can change his opinion so rapidly." Thoughtfully, he watched the giant cat, who seemed as harmless as a newborn calf. 'Kittikat' was now rubbing up against Pucky as if to thank him for the trust he had shown in him. "But then again," Rhodan went on, "considering the facts of the matter here, maybe I can understand it. Alright, Kittikat can stay with us for the time being. But if things go on like this, I may have to start a zoo."

Pucky bent over the Katanian who was now reclining on the ground. The understanding between the two had grown up as suddenly as if there had never been any problems in the history of cat & mouse relationships. Was the mousebeaver also a hypno?

"Your name is Kittikat and you're staying with us!" Pucky telepathed and Kittikat understood him.

The Volatians had watched the events without seeming to understand them but they now appeared to be satisfied that the cat offered no more threat to them. These human beings were strange creature—that the Volatians knew from history many times over. Why worry about yet another proof of it?

"And now," said Rhodan without any segue, "take us to your village. We want to talk to our friend Fellmer Lloyd."

Without a word the Volatians began to walk and Rhodan and Noir followed.

Kittikat was at the end of the parade and on his back rode Pucky in knightly splendour!

Somewhere behind them, in the clearing in the middle of the forest, lay 4 dead Katanians. They had died as bloodthirsty beasts before they could be changed back into their normal, peaceful states.

It was just as well. Otherwise Rhodan would have had to make an extremely difficult decision!

### **3/ TRICKING THE ROBOT REGENT**

Rhodan pushed Fellmer Lloyd back in bed.

"You stay put for now," he said, "and recover from the effects of the shock. If there's anything to do here, I'll take care of it myself. Now tell me in detail what happened. All I know is what Markus told me and since he wasn't completely informed himself, that isn't a great deal."

The seer allowed himself to relax and glance quickly at Kuri. The almond-shaped eyes of the Trader's daughter were filled with admiration for Rhodan, from whom she could not take them away. It was not that Fellmer felt jealous but it was then that he knew how much he cared for Kuri and how little he

wanted to lose her.

"I hid my Gazelle in the jungle near Kuklon," Fellmer said, "and proceeded to the city. There I learned that Sikeron had been murdered because he had been on the track of Yatuhin and Tropnow. Kuri helped me put together a group that we hoped could defeat the mutineers but unfortunately we underestimated our enemies. We were beaten. That's about it, I think."

"It's not very much," said Rhodan, trying to conceal his disappointment and not unnecessarily excite the injured man. "What do you know about our enemies?"

"They hold out in a tall building close to the space-port—their operation is disguised as a legitimate business concern. A Springer clan has allied itself with the 2 rebels, although the Traders don't seem to know everything. They were promised eternal life, that's all. Yatuhin and Tropnow are careful not to mention anything of Terra or Rhodan. They don't do it out of consideration for us but for more selfish reasons. Once they have enough weapons and allies, they plan to usurp your power, sir."

"My power?" smiled Rhodan, amused. "If only those two had some idea what a heavy burden my power is... they would be glad to have no part of it."

"Well, the hunger for your power is the reason for their treason," said Fellmer, looking at Kuri. "But that wouldn't bother me so much if it weren't for the risk they might someday accidentally say too much and reveal the Earth's and your existence to the Springers."

"Sooner or later that won't be a secret anymore, anyway," said Rhodan. "The ruling robot Brain on Arkon will eventually learn that it has been deceived. You can see that's less worry for me than the fact that something like a revolution is possible in our own ranks."

"Even mutants are human," said Fellmer in defence of his own enemies. "They felt themselves discriminated against because they didn't get the cell-renewal. Maybe that was a mistake on your part."

"No one is infallible," said Rhodan evasively. He was silent for a moment, then asked: "Who is Arkon's representative on this world?"

"The administrator's name is Mansrin. I don't know him personally but it's said he's an efficient sort once you get past the usual overpowering arrogance. Why?"

"Just curious," said Rhodan, who as yet had no definite plan. "It's always best to have some idea of who you may be dealing with."

"If they survived the attack," said Fellmer, "some of my old allies must still be on the planet. I had no time to find out, though."

"Noir is doing that right now," Rhodan assured him. "From what he's told me, there were indeed survivors. Right now, you try to get used to Pucky and Kittikat."

"Kittikat?! I've never heard of him. Is he a new member of our Mutant Corps?"

Rhodan smiled. "Unfortunately, Kit is no mutant. He is a Katanian though, and since yesterday—"

"What's a Katanian?"



"A race of cats from somewhere in the centre of the galaxy. Although originally harmless, they can easily be hypnotically influenced and turned into raging beasts. The Springers and other intelligences have put that quirk to use. We 'disarmed' Kittikat and let him join the group. He gets along especially well with Pucky."

"Cat & mouse?" said Lloyd in disbelief. "And to think that Pucky, who always had the cold shivers whenever a cat would walk by, would take up with a... Well, I recall a visit to the zoo in Terrania; the mousebeaver actually trembled in fear when we went by the tigers. Pure instinct, he told us. And now this? How big is this Kittikat?"

"He would probably win a fair fight with a Bengal tiger."

Lloyd could not believe it. "And something like that has made friends with Pucky? Incredible!"

Rhodan laughed and changed the subject. "I still need some information so I can make preparations. Perhaps you can help me."

"Just ask me, sir. I wasn't asleep before that shock-ray hit me."

And Rhodan began to systematically ply Lloyd with questions.

\* \* \* \*

"You should put on a disguise!" Noir exclaimed, regarding Pucky sceptically from top to bottom. "Otherwise they'll recognize you right off."

The mousebeaver drew himself up to his full height, stroking flat the brown fur that Kittikat's licking had disarrayed. "A disguise?" he demanded in surprise. "What should I disguise myself as, then? A man? Even the stupidest fool there would see through that."

"You should at least wear a cloak," Noir persisted. "Anything so that everybody doesn't spot your fur first thing. Maybe they would think you're a dwarf."

Pucky sighed. "Personalities who stand out never have it easy," he decided, seeming to think of that fact as a consolation. "If I looked like a perfectly normal human being, it would be a lot simpler for me. But..."

Rhodan finished the drawing he had been putting on a piece of paper. "Unfortunately, Lloyd isn't any more familiar with the details than what I've drawn here but at least he found out where the traitors' headquarters is located in the building. You'll spring right into the middle of it, Pucky, and find out where everything is. We'll need to know when the excitement starts."

"Excitement? What excitement?"

"You'll find out soon enough," Rhodan promised. "Now, under no circumstances do you dare get caught. Disappear the instant anyone shows up and come back here as fast as you can. Understand?"

"I'll be like Greek lightning," the mousebeaver pledged.

"Greased lightning," Rhodan corrected.

Pucky chortled at his mistake. Then he looked distrustfully at Noir, who was approaching with a colourful blanket. "What's with that funny looking crazy-quilt? You don't think for one minute I'm going to wear that dust-rag... do you?"

"Why not?" asked Rhodan, who understood what Noir had in mind. "If anybody sees you wearing this, he'll certainly never guess where you're from. Come on, let's go, Pucky, put it on! Don't be so proud."

"But...!" squeaked Pucky miserably, looking as though he had to bear all the burdens of the universe.

"No buts!" said Rhodan unrelentingly. "Do you think you're going to a beauty contest?"

Pucky resigned himself to his fate.

He looked like the sort of dressed-up monkey that Terran circus performers once took with them to arouse the attention of children. Pucky's reproachful eyes embodied all the pain of the world. In the background, Kittikat whined plaintively—as plaintively as if Pucky were being taken away to his execution.

"Your vanity is in vain," Rhodan lectured, trying to bite back his grin. "It's springtime and I'm not referring to the season."

"Your words are wise," Pucky murmured, his voice deliberately lowered to deliver the desired effect, "but they are unable to mend my broken heart. Auf widdershins!"

And before anyone had time to correct him, he was gone.

The Katanian still whimpered and he paced the floor restlessly.

He?

Or was it possibly a she?

As yet, no one had taken the trouble to find out.

\* \* \* \*

Kuklon, capital city of Volat, was really the only place on the entire planet evincing interstellar characteristics. Here was concentrated all civilized life and from here the rest of the colonial world was governed. The true natives, the Volatians, were little enough concerned by the government and lived their own lives but they knew that the beings who had become their rulers inhabited that collection of ugly stone structures.

Volat was more of an outpost than an actual colonial world. Valuable ore was mined in some of the

mountains but, in the main, Volat served as an exchange centre for goods from other solar systems.

The palace of the Arkonide administrator with its huge hypercom antenna stood in the centre of the city Kuklon. Contact could be made at any time between here and the mighty positronic Brain that ruled the interstellar empire of the Arkonides.

Right in the neighbourhood of the spaceport stood another building. Towering high in the sky of Volat, it served as a Springer trading centre. A large number of the upper floors had been rented out and hundreds of different firms had their offices there. Since no one could possibly know everyone else in the vast complex, Pucky was not especially noticed in the first few minutes. And the *Galaxyis* rich with bizarre creatures.

The mousebeaver materialized in a large room on the 20th floor. Luckily, no one was in the room at the time and his appearance out of nowhere went unobserved. With a reluctant motion Pucky rearranged the multicoloured cloak around his neck, let out a deep sigh and strode to the nearest door.

It opened out onto a wide corridor. On the left were windows giving an open view over the nearby spaceport. The field was crowded with ships and between them vehicles loaded with freight and passengers glided to & fro. Transporters flashed, along on glistening rails while a spaceship was taking off or landing every 2 or 3 minutes.

"Busy place," Pucky marvelled. He was trying to keep from stepping on the edge of his 'robe'. Even walking erect without any hindrance was troublesome enough but with the cloak around him he could no longer see his feet—and that caused even more problems. Had anyone seen him waddling past, he certainly would have been amazed by the sight of a weird dwarf who was having trouble with the gravity.

On the right were doors bearing signs displaying the names of business firms. The building undoubtedly encompassed more than 2000 separate rooms, if not more. How could Pucky hope to find the right one? Only pure luck could help him now. Kittikat had revealed, however, that the strange magicians were to be found—only on the lower floors.

An elevator opened up directly in front of Pucky. Several Springers came out, hurrying along in a business-like manner. Only one of them gave the colourful dwarf a surprised second glance but even he did not bother himself any further about the apparition. Business was more important.

Relieved, Pucky entered the elevator. 20 seconds later he stood in the corridor running along the 3rd floor. The only difference between this level and the 20th was the absence of company names on the doors, which instead bore Arkonidean numbers. And Pucky could read Arkonide.

The mousebeaver walked slowly past the doors, sampling the thought-impulses behind each one. Many of the rooms, he determined, were empty. In others sat harmless individuals carrying out their daily duties and thinking of nothing suspicious. Most of them knew nothing outside their own limited fields. They concentrated only on their small tasks and were not at all aware of the overall picture.

Perhaps on the 2nd or 1st floors?

Before the elevator returned, a door in front of Pucky opened and a man stepped out into the corridor. He was stunned to see Pucky—who immediately realized the danger he was in. This was no ordinary office worker.

The man addressed the mousebeaver imperiously. "What do you want here? Who are you?"

That alone was enough to anger Pucky, who did not care to be spoken to in such a tone, but he did not let himself be carried away into doing anything rash. Instead, he introduced himself with a ceremonial bow, drawing the cloak around him in an attempt to make the gesture seem as courtly as possible. "I am Brabul, King of Voodoo, noble Springer. I seek Mansrin, the Administrator."

The Springer's expression grew annoyed. "The Administrator lives in the palace. Who sent you to us here?"

"They told me at the spaceport that..."

"Where is this Voodoo? What are its coordinates?"

Pucky quickly lost his patience. "I wanted to speak to the Administrator and I have no interest in giving you the coordinates of Voodoo. They're none of your business."

The Springer did not care to be addressed in such tones himself and his hand flashed out to grasp Pucky's cloak. "Listen, little man, you're getting a little too fresh for your size, so I think I'll have to run you in. Start walking—we're going to find out what the boss thinks of you. And don't do anything stupid on the way."

Pucky overcame his justifiable desire to let the Springer float up to the ceiling or out the window. Instead, he submitted meekly and did not defend himself. He seemed a most wretched figure as he waddled off in mock terror. Only the thought that he would settle the score with this bully of a Springer gave him the strength for self-control.

The Springer stopped before a door on the first floor. One hand held Pucky's cloak and the other pressed against the body-heat activated door-lock. The door opened silently, giving access to Room 18.

Pucky was pushed into the room rather forcefully. He nearly stumbled when his cloak's long decorative fringes tangled with his feet. Fortunately no one noticed him use his telekinetic ability to hold himself upright.

Then he forgot the Springer for a second because in front of him, sitting behind a broad desk, was a man he knew.

Gregor Troponow, the traitor.

Although in reality 88 years old, the mutant looked considerably younger thanks to biological cell-preservation techniques—which were still no substitute for the immortality that had been denied him. His face showed strong concentration as he looked up and saw the two come in. He did not evidence any recognition at all, which was not surprising since Pucky had never been in close quarters with him before.

"What is it?" Troponow demanded.

The Springer had lost all his over-bearing dominance and was almost humble as he reported: "He was sniffing around upstairs in the administration area and I thought it would be best if you took care of him. He claims he wants to speak to Mansrin."

Troponow nodded. "Fine. Wait outside until I call you." He did not move until the Springer had left the

room, then he leaned forward and stared at Pucky.

"Brabul of Voodoo," said Pucky gravely. "I wanted to deliver some gifts from my people to the Administrator but unfortunately I seem to have lost my way in your building."

"So it seems," said Tropnow, beginning to put into action his hypnotic powers. His silent order to Pucky demanded that he tell the truth.

Of course the beam of mental energy only struck the mousebeaver's defence screen and had no effect but Pucky allowed nothing of it to show.

"It concerns trained monkeys," said Pucky importantly.

Tropnow gave a start. "What?" he groaned, not comprehending. "Monkeys?"

"Yes," Pucky went on earnestly. "We've succeeded in training this rare breed. We wanted to make a gift of them to Arkon and since Volat was closer to us, I thought it would be best to..."

Pucky perceived only relief in Tropnow's mind, relief that swallowed up all his former slight suspicions. He had to be convinced now that the colourfully clad dwarf had spoken the truth, since there could be no resistance to the suggestive power of a hypno's command. Then a thought that electrified Pucky shot through the traitor's mind: *This can't be any trick of Rhodan's to find out where we've got Thora—I'm sure of that now!*

"We have nothing to do with the Administration," said Tropnow aloud with an indulgent smile. "You can find any number of taxis that will take you to Mansrin right outside on the street. Goodbye, eh... What was your name?"

"Brabul, sir," said Pucky, trying to learn more about Thora's hiding place—but Tropnow had already forgotten about Thora. "Brabul of Voodoo."

The mutant pushed a button and the Springer came in.

"Show Brabul the way out. He can go."

Pucky waddled out of the room and down the corridor toward the elevator. To his chagrin, the Springer followed to accompany him. As Pucky had no intention of leaving the lion's den just yet, this was somewhat irritating. He stopped suddenly and threw the bewildered Springer a contemptuous look, growling bitterly: "Begone, son of a senile worm! Did you not hear that I am free to go where I please? And I take no pleasure in your company!"

The Springer was muscular and almost 6 feet tall. A red beard fringed his chin and boldness and a desire for action merged in his eyes. Surprise had overpowered him only for a second and now his true character had broken through, winning the upper hand.

This ridiculous dwarf... what was this pathetic little creature trying to do—insult him? No true Springer would take that from a dwarf!

He leaped forward and grabbed Pucky with both hands. "I'll kill you, you mangy midget!" he threatened in rage, pulling Pucky closer. The immediate contact was alright with the mousebeaver—who concentrated and teleported.

The Springer was still holding him tightly as he materialized in that same split-second on the plateau in the jungle. The close bodily contact had allowed the Springer to make the long journey in a disembodied state. Naturally he was not aware of just what had happened to him and his surprise at instantly finding himself in a totally different place must have been complete.

"What am I?" choked Pucky angrily, pushing the astonished Springer away. "A mangy midget? You're one to talk, you flea-brained gorilla! You'll find out who I am, just wait!"

Pucky let loose a shrill whistle and Rhodan emerged from one of the beehives, followed closely by Noir. A grey shadow streaked across the open area and congealed into the form of Kittikat, who greeted Pucky with a joyful whine and the Springer with a growl.

"Don't just stand there gawking," said Pucky, pushing his prisoner forward, "*move!* My boss would like to talk with you—and I'd advise you to tell him the truth."

The Springer stared in fright at the still-growling Katanian but started walking nonetheless. Pucky remained a little behind, stroking Kittikat.

Rhodan watched with interest as the involuntary visitor stumbled towards him and stopped in front of him. He read nothing in his thoughts but total confusion. The Springer still could not understand how he had come here. It did not follow the natural order of things.

Before the Springer could open his mouth to ask the obvious question, the tall man with the stern yet open and honest face stepped forward. And the question that man directed to him was so blunt and surprising that he had to answer it before he could even think of a lie.

"Where is Thora, the woman Tropnow abducted?"

"In the cellar room..."

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan took Noir by the hand. Between them stood Pucky with his arms wrapped around each of the men. The contact would be enough to enable all 3 to dematerialise.

"Now!" said Rhodan.

Pucky concentrated on the Administrator's palace and sprang.

They were in luck. As they stood on the roof of the giant building, high above the city and near the huge hypercom transmission antenna, no one else was to be seen. A stairway led below.

They let go of one another.

"You make sure no one disturbs me," said Rhodan. "Stay in the immediate vicinity of the communications room and be ready to intervene if necessary. We'll remain in telepathic contact."

They had received all the information they needed from the captured Springer and thus had an exact idea of the layout of Mansrin's palace.

Rhodan hesitated by the door of the com-room. He had no weapons. If he were to meet resistance, what should he do? The use of force was repugnant to him, so he would have to depend on the suggestive look in his eyes and his persuasive words. Steeling himself, he threw the door open.

Hypno-training had acquainted him with the arrangement of a hypercom transmitter and he could operate one without difficulty. Almost all of the connections were made automatically and the only real problem was in setting up the proper sending coördinates and knowing the call signal for the party one was trying to reach.

Only a single man was on duty, sitting idly in a chair and reading. He looked up as Rhodan came in and his eyes narrowed. From an external standpoint and ignoring certain small differences, Rhodan did not differ much from either an Arkonide or a Springer.

"What do you want?" asked the com-operator uncertainly. "Who sent you?"

Rhodan looked at him directly. "Orders from the Administrator: set up a direct contact with the Robot Regent on Arkon. It's urgent!"

Rhodan hoped the operator would set up the connection for him and save him the trouble but the man remained suspicious for no discernible reason.

"Do you have a written order?" he demanded.

Rhodan shook his head and increased the suggestive power of his eyes. "We have an emergency, so it's not necessary. Now do what I said or I'll report you to the Administrator."

Rhodan's suggestive gaze had its effect. The operator went to the massive control board and switched on the power. With a few pulling of switches and pressing of buttons he had activated the transmitter and the receiver. Vidscreens glowed into life. Rhodan stepped a bit to one side, just out of range of a hidden camera. It was not necessary for the Robot Regent to see and recognize him. Let the positronic Regent worry why the calling party did not choose to show himself.

"Station Volat, System Heperais here. Administrator Mansrin calling the Regent. Over."

In the meantime, Rhodan telepathically called Pucky to come in. The mousebeaver entered through the doorway and nodded. He understood. He walked up behind the unsuspecting hypercom operator, laid an arm on his body—and the two of them vanished without a trace. 10 seconds later the mousebeaver rematerialised. Without the operator.

"I locked him up in the basement," he twittered happily. "It'll be at least 2 hours before anyone finds him there and even then he's going to be hard-pressed to come up with any reasonable excuse to explain how he got there. Nobody's going to believe ghosts kidnapped him from his post."

Rhodan gestured. "Go back outside. You and Noir make sure no one comes into this room during the next few minutes. The Robot Brain must not be made suspicious!"

Pucky disappeared.

Then came the reply to the transmitted signals.

The vidscreen glowed and Rhodan once more saw the familiar 'face' of the Regent: an enormous dome of pure steel, the largest positronicon in the universe. It stood in its great hall nearly 30,000 light-years away and ruled the interstellar empire. The com-waves raced through hyperspace and transmitted its image in less than a thousandth of a second.

Along with its mechanical voice.

"Regent of Arkon here. What is it, Volat?"

Rhodan, out of range of the camera, said: "Alarm, Regent! A group of rebels has revolted against the Imperium! Administrator Mansrin requests the support of a small battlefleet!"

Short pause. Then the question: "Your image is not being received. Who is speaking?"

"The Communications Duty Officer, Regent. The equipment is defective and the image-transmitter no longer functions properly. Volat needs help urgently!"

Again a short pause. Then the answer: "The fleet will be sent once it completes some other important tasks. Arrival in 24 hours. Incidentally, the image of your communications-room is being transmitted here perfectly. I can determine no defect."

Rhodan went cold. He had not reckoned with the Brain's strict logic and his excuse had not been very well thought out. He decided to stake everything on one last trick. With one hand he gripped the main current switch from the side and said: "I'm speaking over an auxiliary unit. The rebels... help...!"

Then he yanked the switch down. The equipment shut off automatically and the videoscreen image dissolved. The loudspeaker went dead.

That would give the Robot Brain something to think about.

Rhodan smiled coldly as he went to the door. He opened it and looked out into the hall.

Noir and Pucky stood around, unoccupied. No one had come to bother Rhodan. "Let's go!" he said, a smile still on his face. "We've exactly 24 hours to take over the rebels' headquarters. The Regent of Arkon won't stand for any revolts against the Imperium, so when this is all over, everyone will believe that Arkon stepped in to keep order. No one will suspect we were pulling the strings." He took Pucky and Noir by paw and hand respectively for the contact needed for teleportation. "Why shouldn't we let Arkon do some work for us? Haven't we already done enough work for Arkon?"

Pucky whistled in agreement and showed his incisor tooth.

That was the last thing Rhodan saw before he once more stood on the rocky plateau in the jungle—and, in materializing, nearly stepped on Kittikat's tail.



The final briefing session took place that same evening.

"It would be a lot simpler if I'd just spring right into the middle of that traitors' nest and bring Thora out by myself," Pucky declared for the 10th time. He was sitting on the ground with his back against Kittikat's soft belly. The cat had stretched out comfortably and was purring gently, sounding indeed like a small motor.

"There's more involved than just that" Rhodan repeated, also for the 10th time. "My first concern is rendering the 2 traitors harmless and making it look like the work of the Robot Regent."

Rhodan paused. Pucky's expression was deadly serious, which was unusual for the light-hearted mousebeaver. Rhodan continued.

"When the Arkonidean battlefleet arrives to put down the rebels, it must be quite obvious that there are such rebels on Volat. And as of today, no one knows it yet. Now if a small war has broken out in the trade centre complex, the Arkonidean officers will react quickly. Hopefully, Mansrin will join them. Therefore it must seem as if Tropnow and Yatuhin are rebelling against the Imperium."

"And Arkon's troops will proceed to take care of them," said Noir in agreement. He sat next to Lloyd, who had recovered nicely and was chafing at the bit to pay back all he had suffered. "We're killing 2 birds with one stone," Noir went on, "We'll be rid of our enemies without anyone learning whose enemies they were."

"If they keep their mouths shut...!" muttered Pucky. Rhodan's voice was earnest. "They won't have the slightest opportunity to spill their secret. You'll see to that, Pucky."

Pucky's expression was pained. "It's always me! And I'm the pacifist! I can't kill anybody..."

"Who said anything about killing?" Rhodan demanded. "You'll deliver the mutants to us. Noir will slap a hypnoblock on them to make them forget everything and the rest we'll see to once we're back home on Terra."

Pucky was mollified and Noir appeared satisfied.

Rhodan picked up from where he had left off. "Tomorrow, towards noon, we'll force our way into the building with the help of Lloyd's Volatians. At about the same time, the Arkonide fleet will be landing. I'll alarm Mansrin then, who will react quickly and send the Arkonidean troops to us. And, in the general confusion, we'll grab the mutants and free Thora. So that's my plan, more or less. Any further suggestions?"

"I've got a question," said Lloyd. "Will we be coming back here to the plateau?"

"Yes, of course," said Rhodan. "Anything we do will be done from here."

"My Gazelle is hidden near the city. If it's found in the meantime—what then?"

"Don't worry," Rhodan told him. "Capt. Markus and I have agreed on a distress signal. Anyway, there's not much chance of the ship being discovered."

Lloyd hesitated, then realized perhaps his thoughts had already been read. He glanced quickly at Kuri Oneré, who sat somewhat off to the side, and whispered: "But what will become of Kuri? If it hadn't been for her..."

Rhodan smiled, understanding completely. "Kuri will go with us back to Earth. Thora will be happy to have a new and loyal friend. Any more questions?"

Fellmer Lloyd breathed more easily.

He had no more questions.

\* \* \* \*

A new day had broken over Kuklon. As usual, it was a warm and sunny day, no different from any other day of that summer. Yet something would happen that day to make it a memorable one.

At least for those who survived it.

Administrator Mansrin knew nothing of the events in preparation on the planet he ruled. As he did every day, he arose none too early from his bed, took a lukewarm shower and ate breakfast.

He heard the usual requests from a group of supplicating natives and—as usual—turned them down. What did he care about those primitive, half-intelligent creatures. They should be grateful that they were left alone and not disturbed.

Then he listened to reports from the communications room. That interested him much more. All sorts of things were going on throughout the Imperium...

In the Berilla System, a revolt of snake-like creatures had been put down. Some 20,000 light-years farther, towards the centre of the galaxy, a robot fleet had fallen victim to a cosmic electro-storm. Only one ship had escaped the catastrophe and the captain gave his account of the experience. Mansrin listened with a comfortable shudder. This was much more entertaining than watching the colour patterns on diversion vidscreens, as so many of his race were wont. There had also been a war among the planets of a giant star system and more than 50 worlds had been involved. But the Robot Regent had quickly acted and...

Suddenly, Mansrin realized what did not seem right about the reports. Something had been bothering him all along and he had been unable to figure out what it was. Now he knew. A gap broke the continuous sequence of the received reports. A rather considerable gap, at that. The com-station had apparently been unoccupied for a space of 3 hours—or else the operator had been asleep.

Mansrin looked up the operator's name as well as that of the man who had relieved him.

Though an Arkonide, Mansrin was not one of the degenerated zombies of his race who depended entirely on the technology their ancestors had created. Mansrin could still think and act.

And he did.

"Send in Operator Bredag!" he ordered once he had contacted the head of Personnel. "He is to report to me immediately and bring his electronic service control card with him."

The Administrator leaned back in his seat and waited. He tolerated no carelessness—certainly not in his own palace. If the operator could not show that no messages had come in during those 3 hours, he had been asleep. Or had not been in the com-station at all.

The door opened but it was not Bredag who came in, it was a younger Arkonide instead. His face looked troubled and bore signs of a guilty conscience. "My apologies, Administrator," he said. "I took over Bredag's post in the com-station after his shift was over. He was not there when I came into the room last night. I assumed he had left before I arrived but when the commanding officer asked him, I looked around and found Bredag's control card in its place. That means Bredag can't have left the com-centre yet."

Mansrin's eyes narrowed. "Come, come, it's too early in the morning for riddles. Explain this phenomenon to me."

"The phenomenon *can't* be explained, sir. The control card was mounted in the electric eye next to the centre's only door. It unmistakably registered Bredag coming in to begin duty but it did not register him leaving. Bredag therefore *must* still be in the com-centre. But he isn't."

"Impossible!" Mansrin exclaimed, sitting up straight. "Don't give me any fairy tales—where *is* Bredag? I want to know!"

"We've searched the whole room but there's not a sign of him. We did not want to disturb you so we weren't going to report this until we had an explanation. Unfortunately, we still don't have one."

"But a man can't fool the electronic control system!" Mansrin cried. "He's *got* to be in there, then!"

"But he isn't," said the operator, standing firm. "There is only one logical explanation: he dissolved into thin air and disappeared."

"You call that logical?" Mansrin demanded angrily. "I've never heard such nonsense. Hmm, maybe something's wrong in the control system. But Bredag has to be somewhere."

"Maybe so, sir, but he isn't in the com-station anymore. Or in his quarters, for that matter."

Mansrin thought. "Those 3 hours of messages that just aren't there... they're starting to worry me. You should have said something when you went to relieve Bredag and found he wasn't there."

"It often happens, sir, that someone will leave the com-station a few minutes before his relief comes. Incoming messages are received automatically and recorded. That wasn't the case last night, however. The equipment was shut down."

"Shut down?"

"Yes, sir. It had been shut down for 3 hours."

The Administrator leaned back once more into his seat. His gaze rested thoughtfully on the young

Arkonide. With instinctive certainty he realized that the man spoke the truth. But that did not solve the mystery. Quite the opposite.

Disquiet began to make itself felt in Mansrin's mind. Logical as it was and governed by technology, there was no place in his mind for inexplicable phenomena. Everything had explanations, even apparent mysteries.

"Keep looking for Bredag and if you find him, I want to talk to him. And keep me posted on your progress in the search. You may go now."

When he was alone once more, Mansrin shut his eyes for a long moment.

He had the unmistakable feeling that this matter was not the only unpleasant surprise the day would bring.

A feeling that would prove justified.

\* \* \* \*

About 2 hours later, several persons entered the giant building near the spaceport. They came from different directions and seemed to have nothing to do with one another.

Appearances are, of course, deceiving.

Fellmer Lloyd crossed the first floor corridor and entered the well-furnished reading room. He nodded to some Volatians sitting in the comfortable chairs and poring over some of the journals lying on the tables. Then he sat down himself and selected a book describing the organization of the Arkonidean spacefleet.

Not 50 yards away, Rhodan and Noir stopped in front of a door. A sign labelled it as the entrance to Room 18.

*Pucky, where are you?* thought Rhodan intensively and mentally listened for a reply.

The answer came surprisingly fast. *In the basement! This room is empty but it's been fitted out for holding prisoners. Give me a tip as to where I should look, Chief!*

*I'll give you a tip as soon as I find one,* Rhodan thought back. *Meanwhile, keep on looking.*

Then he nodded to Noir and knocked forcefully on the door.

Some time elapsed before a light humming sounded but now the door could be opened. Rhodan was surprised that it could be so simple. He had expected to run into difficulty but Troponow evidently felt extremely confident.

He entered the room along with Noir and closed the door behind him.

The traitor sat behind a desk and watched them come in. His mind seemed to refuse to believe that the man he thought 43,000 light-years away suddenly stood in front of him. Almost 10 seconds went by before his complexion began to change. Then it went white; not a drop of blood remained in his cheeks. Troponow came a little out of his seat, only to sink back down again immediately. His mouth opened to emit a stammer but no rational sound crossed his lips.

"Good day," said Rhodan. His voice was friendly on the surface but carried a steel undertone that boded nothing very friendly for the traitor. "I'm happy to see you looking so well. I just hope for your sake that my wife is equally healthy."

"Rho... dan!" Troponow finally gasped. "You..."

*There's a weapons arsenal in the next room down here,* Pucky telepathed at that point. *What should I do?*

*Take an impulse-beamer and weld the door shut from the inside,* Rhodan directed, not moving a muscle. Then he turned his attention back to the trembling Troponow. "Where is Thora? Tell me or Noir will scour your brain to find out. You know what a man looks like afterwards."

The betrayer was a hypno himself. No one had to tell him what effect such a massive assault on the consciousness had on one's ability to think afterwards. He stretched his hands defensively to the 2 men.

"I'll tell you everything," he promised. "Just ask me."

"Didn't I just ask you a question?"

Droplets of sweat appeared on Troponow's forehead, shining like pearls. "Thora is... well, she's safe. Promise me my freedom and I'll tell you where she is, alright?"

As a hypno, Troponow could shield his thoughts and Rhodan had not been able to learn where Thora had been hidden. With considerable effort he kept his self-control and did not show his anger but his voice was ice-cold and dangerous as he spoke: "I'm warning you, Troponow! You have no conditions to make! Isn't it enough that I've found you, even though there were thousands of light-years between us? At this moment an Arkonidean battlefleet is landing on Volat to re-establish order. You have no more possibility of getting your revenge on me. Give up, Troponow!"

"Does Thora mean so little to you?" asked Troponow.

Noir balled his fist but a warning glance from Rhodan restrained him from anything rash, "Troponow!" said the Peacelord with a rising voice. "I've never in my life strangled a man but I may do it yet today—right now, in this room! I'm warning you! You have 10 seconds!"

Troponow could guess how serious Rhodan was. He tried to calculate his chances as he attempted to reach the alarm button with his hand. Just a few more inches...

...3...4...5..."

Troponow glanced quickly at the 2 men as his hand reached the button and pressed it. In that instant alarms would sound in the ready-rooms, calling to their weapons the men training there. No matter what happened from this second on, he was no longer alone. The thought gave Troponow his self-assurance back.

...10!" said Rhodan just then. He did not show that he had noticed the betrayer's hand movement. Tropnow's alarm coincided exactly with his own plans. The time was just before noon: the Arkonidean fleet must have already landed. "Alright, where's Thora?"

Tropnow smiled scornfully. "You wanted to kill me, eh, Rhodan? Try it and you'll never know where your lovely wife is stashed away!"

Again came a silent message from Pucky: *I've found Thora. She's alright. Now what?*

*Wait there*, Rhodan replied and looked directly at Tropnow. Aloud, he said: "I ought to take you up on that. As for Thora, set your mind at ease: we know where she is. Or don't you believe me?"

Tropnow grinned twistedly. "Of course I don't believe you." He had to stall for time; his men could be coming in at any moment.

"Too bad for you, Tropnow, Rhodan answered. "Thora is downstairs in the basement and Pucky's with her."

"Pucky? That mousebeaver?"

"Oh, you know him?"

Footsteps could be heard from the corridor outside, then somebody pounded on the door. Tropnow started to move but a warning look from Rhodan stopped him dead.

"Wait!" snapped the Peacelord. "You don't seem to be very fond of living."

"You don't have any weapons," Tropnow pointed out.

"That's true," Rhodan admitted, "but don't get excited. We'll have some in a minute." He thought intently: *Hey, Pucky! Leave Thora where she is and bring some hand-beamers up from the arsenal to us in Room 18. And hurry!* "Even though you quit the Mutant Corps," Rhodan added aloud to Tropnow, "we still have some capable members left. You'll see in a moment."

Tropnow, whose face had regained a little of its colour, went pale again.

There was another pounding at the door, this time stronger and more urgent. After a short pause the intercom device on Tropnow's desk crackled and a voice asked: "What's going on in there, Gregor? This is Nomo—why haven't you called? What's the alarm for?"

Noir leaped to Tropnow's side before he could reply to his fellow betrayer. Rhodan placed his index finger warningly to his mouth, switched on the intercom-mike and said: "Nomo, come quick to Room 18—and hurry!" Then, with no further explanation, Rhodan turned it off.

Something hissed suspiciously at the door and a glowing white seam appeared in its surface. So, they were trying to heat-ray their way in. The situation was becoming critical.

Then, in the middle of the room, the air shimmered and Pucky materialized. With him came 5 hand-beamers, clattering to the floor. The beamers were of the type whose slightest intensity could paralyse a man for hours. Pucky was about to disappear again but then he remembered the outrage he

had endured the day before. He quickly strode over to the desk by Rhodan and Tropnow—and gave the traitor a ringing box on the ear.

Extremely pleased, he twittered: "That one's from all the trained monkeys in the galaxy!" he boxed Tropnow's ear a 2nd time and added: "And that one's from Thora!"

Suddenly, Pucky was gone and only Tropnow's burning cheeks and the 5 hand-beamers indicated that the mousebeaver had been at work.

Rhodan stooped and picked up the beamers. 2 he shoved into his belt, 2 he gave to Noir and the 5th he held in his hand.

"Okay," he said, "We shouldn't keep the boys outside waiting any longer. Tropnow, open the door before they burn the building down. Come on, man, hurry it up!"

As though moved by a ghostly hand, the glowing door suddenly opened. Rhodan now turned his full attention to developments out in the corridor, knowing that Fellmer and his band of natives would show up at any time. The rebel band would find itself caught in a pincer movement.

3 men stormed through the doorway and stopped dead the instant they saw the beamers aimed at them. They held up their hands, seeing that the faces behind the beamers looked deadly earnest.

Behind his desk, Tropnow made a lightning movement. Out in the corridor yells could be heard, then the hissing of impulse-beamers. Hope lit up in the eyes of the 3 men who had come in.

Before Rhodan could turn around, he saw out the corner of his eye that Tropnow had pulled a weapon out of his desk drawer.

It was aimed precisely at Rhodan's back.

\* \* \* \*

Hypercom operator Bredag had been vainly hammering away at the thick walls of his prison for hours. He did not have the slightest idea where he was. He had even less idea of how he had gotten there. One second he had been sitting at the hypercom control panel and the next he found himself in this dark room. The air was stale and choking, as though the air conditioner had not functioned in months.

He had already paced off the dimensions of his unknown prison, estimating it to be about 15 feet long and just over 10 feet wide. It was completely empty and sealed off from the outer world by an iron door.

Once he had heard steps outside and had beaten desperately against the door but no one had heard him. The footsteps grew fainter and finally died away in the distance. Then all was utterly still.

Bredag did not know how long he had been there.

Hours, probably. Or even a whole day? It might even night outside by now.

He sat down in a corner and thought. If only he knew *how* he had come here! There were no such things as ghosts. A stranger had forced his way into the com-station, he remembered, and had demanded a connection with Arkon. Did this have anything to do with what happened after that?

A connection with Arkon? Right. And then it happened.

Suddenly he gave a start. Weren't those footsteps again outside the metal door? He stood up and pressed his ear against the cold metal. His first impression was of his ear freezing, then...

Yes, those were footfalls. He began to pound on the door with every ounce of his strength. But maybe that would not be loud enough. He bent over swiftly and pulled his shoes off, then banged them against the door.

The footsteps stopped. Then they quickly approached.

Bredag heard a return knocking. He pounded back.

The electronic lock hummed and the door rose, allowing light to flood into the dungeon. Someone called out Bredag's name in surprise as the unfortunate operator staggered out into the hall. He fell directly into the arms of his astonished liberators.

They took him straight to Mansrin the Administrator, who listened to his story in disbelief. Yet, Mansrin did not levy any punishment. Instead, the Administrator let him go and stared pensively for some minutes at the door Bredag had closed behind him.

Who had been the stranger requesting contact with Arkon? He, Mansrin, had not authorized it. And who had removed Bredag from the com-station without the operator's brainwave pattern being registered by the electronic control system?

Questions on top of questions—and not a single answer. The communicator on his desk hummed. He flicked it on absentmindedly but his sleepy demeanour vanished in a flash when a cool voice reported:

"Peculiar events in progress at the Galactic Traders' trading centre, Administrator. A shootout is currently underway. 2 opposing groups appear to be fighting each other. One of our men accidentally stumbled into it and only narrowly escaped."

"A shootout?"

"Yes, sir. A veritable war is being fought on the lower floors."

Mansrin shook his head. "How is it possible? Have the police been called in?"

"No, sir. What should we do?"

"Alert the police. They are to occupy the trade centre and arrest those participating in the violence. No parleys. We won't stand for any disorder here on Volat. We're going to act at once. I'll be right out there at the scene myself."

As it happened, Mansrin did not arrive quite as soon as he had expected.

Hardly had he shut off the communicator when a large vidscreen on the wall glowed into life. It was the



direct connection to the hypercom in the com-station.

*Now what?*

The figure of a man appeared on the screen. "Administrator! Fleet Commander Arona wishes to speak to you!"

"Arona?" queried Mansrin. "I don't know him."

Before the com-operator could answer, his image was swept away by another. A slight flickering indicated it was coming over a great sound quality was loud and clear and without interference.

"You are Mansrin, Administrator of Volat?" asked the new image.

Mansrin nodded mechanically. He knew that the other man could see him. "Yes, I am. Who are you and what do you want?"

"I am Commander Arona, 7th Strike Force, Arkon. We were informed that a revolt has broken out on your planet. Give me the details so that I can order the appropriate action. Our distance from your planet is 5 light-hours. Following a short transition, we will arrive in half an hour. You are advised to issue orders preventing any vessels from leaving Volat for the duration."

"There isn't any revolt here!" Mansrin exclaimed in confusion. "I didn't give any alarm to Arkon!"

"I am acting on orders from the Robot Regent," Arona said, cutting off further explanation. "My duty is to carry them out."

The stranger, Mansrin thought. Who was this stranger who had forced his way into the palace and had used the hypercom transmitter to send an alarm to Arkon? "But Volat is a peaceful world...!"

"That's enough for now!" Arona interrupted. "We will be landing in exactly 28 minutes. Make sure that there aren't any untoward incidents. Once on Volat I will release a robot army immediately find issue a battle order. Over & out!"

The image dissolved and the screen went dark.

Mansrin was suddenly alone.

More alone than he had ever been in his whole life.

\* \* \* \*

Noir acted quickly and without thinking.

He had no time to adjust the intensity of his beamer and so Tropnow caught the full energy blast before he could shoot Rhodan.

Tropnow was dead.

Rhodan spoke coldly. "Drop your weapons, men! And watch it—I'm just as fast with a beamer as my friend... yes, that's fine. Now go to the wall and turn your backs to us. Stay that way and don't move."

With his foot he shoved the 3 dropped beamers to the other side of the room. If the 3 rebels wanted to get to them, they would have to go past him. There was little chance of that now.

Fellmer Lloyd looked through the open doorway for a moment. "They're fleeing downstairs," he announced. "We'll follow them and, if possible, look them up somewhere."

"It'd be better if you didn't," Rhodan told him. "I'm counting on the Arkonidean fleet to arrive at any second. If my alarm is to have any credibility, they should find at least some rebels battling it out when they get here. So only hold the enemy back and let him have a chance to get his weapons back when we pull out. Take these 3 fellows with you, by the way."

"Right, Chief," said Fellmer Lloyd and left, taking the prisoners with him.

Rhodan breathed easier. *Pucky!* he thought. *Bring Thora up here to us!*

Noir went to the door and stood guard so that no one came into the room. Rhodan went back to the desk and waited. He felt a sudden disquiet—he simply could not wait until he held Thora in his arms once more. She, the once so cool and distant Arkonide, had become his wife and life-time companion. He loved her, far more than he had loved any other woman. And his love had only grown over the 6 decades in which he had not aged.

However, Thora grew older.

It was still hardly noticeable, for the methods used of biological cell preservation were most effective, although they did not bestow relative immortality. The life-elixir of the Aras from the planet Tolimon had well demonstrated its powers. For the time being, the aging process in Thora's body had stopped.

But for how long?

Rhodan did not know. But there was new hope for Thora and Khrest, hope embodied in a single name: *Atlan!*

The air in the room shimmered as though it had grown warm. And together with Pucky materialized the slim figure of a woman. She wore the loose uniform of the Terran spacefleet and the light green of the decorated jacket contrasted well with her Arkonide-white hair. Her gold-red eyes sought Rhodan—and found him.

"Perry..."

She hurried to him and he wrapped her in his protective arms.

Pucky made a wry face and turned away. "Always this kissing stuff!" he twittered in comic exasperation. He wiped his mouth with the back of his paw. "I'd get sick if anyone licked me on the mouth like that."

"Don't worry," said Noir from the door, "no one would ever think of it."

Shrugging his shoulders, Pucky waddled across the room, past Rhodan and Thora, and stretched to look out the window.

The commotion in the corridor had died away.

Suddenly, without turning around, Rhodan said: "Pucky, why don't you go see about Yatuhi? I called him in here but I'm afraid he got held up. We can't let him disappear on us."

"Let him disappear? I should say not!" growled Pucky, not moving.

And then he was gone.

The Oriental Nomo Yatuhi turned off the communicator on his desk. Why had Tropnow's voice sounded so strange? Was it the excitement? And why had the alarm been given?

For him, the revolt against Rhodan had long lost its appeal but he knew there was no going back now. Eternal life—what was it really? Perhaps an illusion. Why wasn't he content with the biological treatment that every mutant in Rhodan's service received? Didn't he still look young and fresh in spite of his 89 years?

And now? if things went wrong?

The thought of the alarm occurred to him again. What did it mean? Those Volatians again? Or had Rhodan himself tracked the rebels down to their hide-out?

He brightened at the thought of Rhodan. Tropnow was in danger or he would not have called for help.

Nomo leaped up and rushed out to the corridor. Even at this distance he could hear the tumult. Shots hissed through the hall. Fingers of energy sliced into the walls and melted the surfaces in great molten drops. Men shouted and ran past Nomo. They were Springers, Arkonides and members of other, related races. Even some non-humanoid creatures were among them. All of them had forgotten the hopes and promises Tropnow had offered them for their service.

Only Tropnow?

The Oriental shrugged and hurried on.

Then he stopped. He had no weapons. If he were attacked, how could he defend himself? He put on a defiant expression and went on.

2 or 3 men ran by him. "They've got Tropnow!" they shouted.

"Who?" yelled Nomo back but received no answer.

*Who?*

Sirens screamed outside. Nomo stepped to the window and looked out. At least 10 police vehicles were stopping and letting out armed soldiers attached to the Administration's peace-keeping force. They ran towards the building, their ray-weapons held fire-ready.

Where did *they* fit into all this?

Nomo was soon no longer able to understand anything. His plans had kept a possible attack by Rhodan's men always in mind but he had never even considered a raid by the Administration police.

That could be disastrous and ruin all his plans. Under no circumstances could things be allowed to come to an all out battle between his men and the official might of Arkon. Then it would be the end of his plan for a peaceful buildup of a legion destined to fight one day against Terra.

But then again.

What if Arkon were to learn that the planet Terra had not been destroyed by the Springers but still existed? If the Robot Brain knew that Rhodan was alive—how would it react? Up to now, Tropnow had not wanted to depend on the decisions of a positronic brain. But if there were no other way out...?

Nomo never had a chance to make that decision.

As he was carefully trying to make his way to Tropnow, someone tapped him on the back. A small voice chirruped: "You were wondering what the Positronicon would have said to that, eh, Nomo? And you didn't notice me arriving, did you? You always were a lousy telepath. But I'm a good one."

The Oriental whirled about but he already knew who was standing behind him. Unlike Tropnow, he knew Pucky well and had often been around him. He knew that he had no chance against the mousebeaver and so attempted no ruses. He stood stiffly.

"What will you do with me?" he asked. His only hope was that the police would come. Perhaps Pucky feared being discovered, since no one was to learn of the existence of the Earth. If only he could stall Pucky long enough.

"You don't have any better ideas than that?" scoffed the mousebeaver. "How long do you think it will take me to teleport us out of here? And don't try to break loose from me when I teleport—you know there isn't anything to eat in the 5th dimension. If I lose you there, you'll starve to death."

He grabbed Nomo and sprang.

For the Oriental, it was as if the world around him collapsed. Now he saw the corridor in front of him and heard the rumbling footsteps of the police running towards them—and a second later he stood with the cursed mousebeaver in the middle of a jungle—surrounded meadow. The blue sky shone radiantly above them.

"So," Pucky twittered in satisfaction, "now what do you have to say?"

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Nomo without showing any sign of fear. "If you want to kill me, do it now and get it over with."

"I didn't say anything about killing you. Rhodan wants to find out some things from you."

"The Earth is a long way away..."

"But Rhodan isn't, my friend," said Pucky. "Tropnow had to die because he wanted to kill Rhodan, but if you talk, perhaps Rhodan will be more merciful to you."

"Rhodan? Here on Volat?"

Pucky reached for Nomo again. "We're talking too much. I'll take you to a safe place now."

Pucky got the bearings for a very prominent rocky peak in the area of the main plateau and teleported again.

Nomo opened his eyes as soon as he felt solid ground beneath his feet but Pucky had already vanished, leaving him alone. Didn't the mousebeaver care that he might be able to escape?

Then the Oriental saw that from here there was no escape.

Pucky had left him on the tip of a rocky spire rearing out of the jungle. The stone formation was like a needle, more than 100 yards high and 20 yards broad at the base. The peak was no more than a small flat area a yard square.

In all the universe there was no better prison.

Nomo had with him only what was in his pockets—nothing of any use now. Even if his shirt and jacket could provide enough material to fashion a crude rope, to what could he tie it? In the less than 10 square feet on that rocky pinnacle, there were no trees nor even crevices in the rock. No, there was no hope of escape.

Nomo sat down and tried to overcome the feeling of dizziness he had when he looked down into the looming depths. Some of the trees were rather high but they were too far away for him to reach. When he looked up into the sky, it was as if he were alone in the world. Around him was nothing but emptiness and the gentle wind from below.

A square yard for life...

Would they let him live? Tropnow was already dead. Rhodan showed traitors no mercy because not only did they endanger his own plans but also the existence of all mankind. And that, Nomo knew well, was the decisive factor. Rhodan valued the existence of humanity more highly than his own life.

He would be punished, Nomo realized, and for treason there was only one punishment: *death!*

Nomo Yatuin was Japanese. His ancestors had the blood of the Samurai in their veins. When they were captured by their enemies, they chose to die by their own hands. It was shameful to be killed by an enemy.

Nomo looked around again. How was he to kill himself? He had no weapons or anything else.

The depths?

Leaping into the terrible void?

He shuddered but then he realized that if he wanted to carry out his intention there was no alternative. It would be a matter of only a few seconds before he struck the ground at the foot of the rock pillar. Perhaps he might even land in the tree branches—and have a slight chance of coming away alive.

But in the end it was not that small hope that impelled him to go through with it.

He bowed to the East and pronounced a short prayer. Then he took a step. And another.

Like a stone, he fell into the depths.

## 5/ REGENT TO RHODAN

5 light cruisers landed without mishap on the field at the Kuklon spaceport. Hardly had they touched the ground when large hatches on their sides opened up and broad ramps were extended—and down marched the warrior robots.

Vaguely humanoid in appearance, the robots were more than 6 feet tall and had 4 arms. The 2 lower arms were heavy impulse-beamers.

The robot army fell into formation with a thundering step and waited for orders. Specially-marked officers—also robots—took the lead of the weird battle company. Their com-antennae were ready to receive. They stood facing the flagship, where Commander Arona was sliding a tiny transmitter into its case. It was only a small, flat box but with it he could control the entire steel army.

Arona was an Arkonide but in no way did he resemble certain degenerate examples of his race. His proud face radiated initiative, which was no longer typical in the Realm of the Thousand Suns. His tall figure, marked by the white hair on his head, demanded respect. Stiffly erect, he left his ship and a few minutes later stood out on the landing field. He carried the control transmitter for the robot army under his arm.

Only a single officer, also an Arkonide, accompanied him.

Arona issued his first order and the army of 500 robots began to march.

The landing field was as if swept clean. The usual vehicles had vanished. Even the edge of the field, where otherwise a brisk traffic would be constantly in motion, seemed deserted. The police alarm had caused enough confusion but the landing of the 5 cruisers had been the ultimate. No one knew what was going on but everyone had decided to take shelter in the most secure building available. Only a few harmless Volatians did not concern themselves with events they did not understand and went about their usual business without allowing themselves to be disturbed.

Even they disappeared from the street, however, when the Arkonide Arona marched to the city limits at the head of his metal battle-squad.

A tall and expansive building blocked the view of the city itself. The main street ran past the complex.

Arona turned to his officer. "Lt. Ro, why hasn't this Administrator Mansrin come out to meet us? What is with this revolt?"

Ro pointed to the small communicator that kept him in touch with the ship. "We don't know, Commander. Mansrin denies that he made the call to the Regent. He claims that there isn't any revolt."

against the Imperium on Arkon."

"Very mysterious!" said Arona mockingly, looking at the tail building. He seemed to notice something. "No revolt, eh? Then why, I'd like to know, are they shooting over there?"

"Where, sir?"

Arona pointed ahead. "Not 500 yards from here. Don't you see the typical flashes of impulse-beamers? People are fighting over there—and rather bitterly, at that. Strange that Mansrin didn't want to tell us about it, isn't it?" He held up the case containing the communicator and spoke into the barely visible microphone. "New direction of march: 369! Weapons ready!"

The robot army wheeled easily around and followed Arona and Ro.

The robots had raised their lower arms to a horizontal level. The mouths of powerful energy-beamers, placed where hands should have been, were trained on the distant building.

A vehicle emerged from a side-street, crossed the avenue and came to a jolting halt on the other side. An Arkonide sprang out and hurried up to Arona, his white hair flowing in the wind behind him.

"Arona! I'm Administrator Mansrin and I must apologize for my failing to meet you in the customary fashion. Certain events have taken place that..."

"The rebels, am I correct?" said Arona.

"No, but—well, yes!" stammered Mansrin. "I mean to say that this is just what I can't understand. I didn't send any message to Arkon calling for the fleet because there wasn't any reason to. On Volat we have known only peace and order... until today. At the moment you announced your coming, a gun-battle broke out in the Springers' trade centre and we don't know who is fighting whom. In any case, they're fighting it out in there. I've already sent my police in, however."

Arona looked at Mansrin critically. "Then you don't believe it could be part of a large, planned revolution? Perhaps the Springers have..."

"Never, Commander! I know these people here..."

"You can never tell, Mansrin," Arona interrupted. "Whatever's going on, my robots will re-establish the peace. They we'll find out who had his little joke of alarming Arkon over a trifle. You weren't the one?"

"It was a stranger, Commander," Mansrin said. "This much I know already: someone slipped into our com-station and made the operator put through a connection with the Robot Regent. You can't explain it with pure logic."

Arona, who kept his arms folded, gestured. "Come with me, Mansrin. We'll solve the riddle of this false alarm together. You're right—I don't see any logic in it myself. Who would willingly put himself in danger by calling for the most powerful strike-force in the galaxy?"

He burst out with a laugh. "Only someone insane would do that!"

Almost with a shudder, Lt. Ro added: "Or someone more powerful, sir."

They looked at him with wide and astonished eyes but found nothing to say in reply.

The robots marched.

\* \* \* \*

It was on the steps leading down to the basement that Fellmer Lloyd and his group met the rebels, who fought doggedly on for goals they did not comprehend. Their 2 leaders were dead or captured but they were not aware of it. They simply followed their orders and opened fire on the Volatians following them.

As a seer and a telepath, Fellmer recognised their plan before it could be carried out. He shouted his orders. The Volatians had been well-trained. They threw themselves to the side for cover, took out the grenades that had been supplied to them from Lloyd's Gazelle and tossed them down the stairway.

Then Fellmer Lloyd calmly ordered a retreat.

Hardly had the first energy beams hissed from below and melted the stair-railings when several detonations sounded. Yells and orders followed, then the rebels stormed up the stairs. The hideous stench of the enormous stink-bombs was more terrible than the fear of meeting a hall of bullets from the waiting Volatians.

And that was just Lloyd's plan.

The rebels were half-blind, trying to rub the penetrating smoke out of their eyes. They could no longer recognize Lloyd and his Volatians; they could only see man-like shadows in the light coming in through the windows.

They opened fire on the shadows.

Unfortunately for them, the shadows were no longer Volatians but the Administration police coming into the building. No wonder, then, that the police had to assume that they really were facing a group of rebels.

They shot back and the battle was on. Fellmer had reached his goal: by the time the misunderstanding was cleared up—if it ever was—the Gazelle would have long since disappeared into the empty reaches of outer space.

Fellmer Lloyd and his Volatians reached Room 18 in double-time and the seer arrived just in time to see Pucky materialize again. Noir was standing by the door while Rhodan and Thora were in the background by the window.

"Well?" asked Rhodan. Nothing more.

Lloyd gave the Volatians a wave—they returned the gesture and threw their weapons into the room. Then they walked away as though they were no longer concerned with what had happened—which was in fact the case. Some of them went back into the reading room and sat down. Others went to various floors and inquired in the offices there about finding work. The Volatians were doing only what they



otherwise would have done on a normal day. Since news of the excitement on the lower levels had not yet spread to all corners of the building, the Volatians' sudden interest in employment attracted no attention.

"Everything went as we planned," Lloyd announced, pulling the heat-damaged door shut behind him. The lock closed with an audible click, leading Pucky to the observation that people here knew how to make locks that would hold up under anything.

"So the rebels clashed with the authorities, then?" asked Rhodan, wanting to make sure.

"They were so stupid," Lloyd grinned. "Now there won't be the slightest doubt that a group of rebels was plotting to overthrow Arkon's rule here. True, the authorities will try in vain to find the actual conspirators but that doesn't matter anymore."

Rhodan remembered the 2nd traitor and asked Pucky: "Where did you take Yatuhin?"

"To a place he can't escape from alive—the peak of a rock formation. I can bring him back any time."

"Good. It's time we got out of here, then. Thora first. Take her to the plateau, Pucky."

The mousebeaver was back 10 seconds late?. "Kuri's looking after her, Chief. Who's next?"

Noir was the one to go on the following trip. Pucky took only one man at a time, trying not to strain himself on the great spring. Since each teleportation took only, a few seconds to accomplish, time played little role.

Then Fellmer Lloyd returned in that so simple manner to where the adventure had begun, the plateau where dwelt the Omniscient Mother.

Rhodan waited patiently for Pucky's return.

Although only a few seconds elapsed before Pucky came back, the time seemed to drag on forever. Something was going on out in the corridor, however. There were shouts and then the hissing of impulse beamers. Someone yelled and threw himself against the door. Perhaps the burned surface had been noticed, arousing suspicion.

Pucky materialized and grinned. "Kittikat just wouldn't let me leave," he said, explaining the delay. "Frisky little devil—wanted to play with me."

Rhodan remained serious. "10 more seconds and they'll break in. Who's out there? Police?"

"Should I go out and look?"

"Never mind—we've got to get out of here! Our task is done."

Pucky took Rhodan's hand. "Not quite. Should we go get Yatuhin now or leave him for later?"

"To the plateau first—and hurry!" Rhodan answered.

Even as the mousebeaver concentrated and the energy-field built up around them, the door shook from a heavy blow and fell inwards. A man toppled into the room, stumbled over the weapons lying on the

floor and fell against the wall. There he stayed and stared at the 2 figures just then dissolving into thin air.

Rhodan had seen how the door had fallen away, then everything swam in front of his eyes. He could see only the massive body smashing into the room like a cannonball. If the colossus wasn't blind, he would see a miracle take place before his eyes.

Even before Rhodan slipped into the 5th dimension, a shout rang in his ears, a voice that he had heard before. It was a rumbling, deep bass voice that woke memories, calling:

*"RHODAN!"*

Then the darkness closed in.

And then it was light again. He stood on the plateau. He let go of Pucky but the voice still echoed in his ears.

"Did you see him, Pucky? Who was that? He recognized me."

The mousebeaver was no help. "I didn't have time to look—I was too busy with the spring. Should I go back and look?"

"Pucky, herecognized me!"

Pucky's eyes went wide. "He recognized you? That's impossible. Who would know you on Volat?"

"He called my name, Pucky!" Rhodan was completely at a loss to explain it. He mulled over The deep, rumbling voice, wondering where he had heard it before. Again and again his mind returned to the past, back 20, 30, 40 years. 50 years.

The massive figure, almost as wide as it was tall... A fellow weighing as much as a half ton or more... The full beard...

A Mounder? Of course, a Mounder, that was the answer! One of the Galactic Traders' special fighting troops. Only a Mounder could have broken down that steel door.

But he had recognized Rhodan and called him by name.

Most of the Mounders Rhodan had known were dead, a majority having fallen in the last battle for 'Terra'. Only one had not been there, having been intelligent enough to hold back.

*Talamon!*

Now Rhodan knew. It had been Talamon who had burst into Tropnow's room. It had probably been by pure chance for it was doubtful that the Mounders had anything to do with the conspiracy. Almost certainly he had been engaged in business on Volat, had noticed the shooting and had gone to look into it.

Whereupon he saw Rhodan disappear.

Thus he now knew that Perry Rhodan, the most dangerous man in the universe, was not dead but alive. He would not keep that secret to himself.

"Should I go back and knock out Fatty?" Pucky asked, following Rhodan's thoughts. "If he talks..."

But once again Rhodan was calm and cool. "No, Pucky," he said slowly and thoughtfully. "Stay here. When the Robot Regent finds out I'm alive, we're ready for it. So let's leave it up to Talamon."

"And if he talks...?" Pucky broke off but thoughts seethed in his mind. *War the peaceful period for the Earth over at last? Would Rhodan bend to the will of a robot mastermind? Would the Earth again be the target of ambitious attacks?*

Rhodan shook his head. "Nothing of the sort, Pucky. We're strong enough to take on Arkon and its allies but I don't think it will come to war. We'll wait and see. In any event, the action on Volat is finished."

"Yes—once we've taken care of Nomo."

Only now did Rhodan think of the captive again. "Go get him, Pucky."

Rhodan did not wait for Pucky to dematerialise. Instead, he walked towards the huts where the others were waiting for him. Kuri stood by Thora, whose smile refreshed Rhodan. She was still beautiful, this proud Arkonide—woman of another world, yet married to him, a son of the planet Earth.

Noir and Lloyd wiped the sweat from their brows. "Why doesn't Pucky take me to my Gazelle?" asked Lloyd. "On foot I'd need several days to reach it—if I found it at all."

As Rhodan was about to answer, a high voice shrilled behind him. Pucky had returned. Alone.

"Yatuhin is dead!" he exclaimed—and he seemed genuinely shocked. "He jumped off the rock! More than 100 yards..."

Noir and Lloyd turned to one another to talk about it but Rhodan stood oddly quiet. "I thought as much," he said at length. "Nomo was Japanese and followed the ancient customs of his people. He chose to die by his own hand. If he had found something to do it with, I'm sure he would have actually committed Harakiri."

No one said another word.

Rhodan looked up into the sky. Clouds from the north were passing overhead. It had gotten cooler.

\* \* \* \*

Talamon was still numbed by the shock.

He stared without comprehending at the spot where a fraction of a second before had stood a man the entire galaxy had thought dead for decades.

He knew he had not deceived himself!

That had been Perry Rhodan—and with him had been that odd little animal who seemed to accompany him everywhere and to be the master of astounding talents. The sudden disappearance into thin air had been the best proof. Talamon still remembered well the legends people had told a half century before about Rhodan and his band of sorcerers. With the help of his strange men Rhodan had almost succeeded in rocking the foundations of the Arkonide Imperium.

Then the Earth and Perry Rhodan had been annihilated in a massive attack by the Springers.

Or so it had been assumed, up to now.

Talamon gave a start. Why did he stand around doing nothing? Shouldn't the universe be warned? Shouldn't the Robot Brain on Arkon be informed that Perry Rhodan still lived?

And the events here on Volat...

Talamon suddenly began to understand how certain seemingly unrelated things fell together. Of course it was Rhodan behind the events that sent the Administrator's police to the trade centre—although just what he hoped to gain by that remained for the moment unclear.

For all his clumsy appearance, the Mounder moved with surprising speed and nimbleness. He left the ominous Room 18 with hurrying steps, without having noticed the corpse behind the desk. He had to find cover near the building's exit when men shooting wildly ran past, trying to reach the elevators. The police were in hot pursuit and passed without seeing the Mounder.

Breathing easier, Talamon reached the exit. He was going to dash to his waiting vehicle—then stopped short.

He stared with wide eyes down the street towards the spaceport. A regiment of battle-robots, weapons poised, approached in exact march formation, striding in rumbling step. At the head of the formation came 3 men. Two Talamon did not know but he recognized the 3rd: Mansrin, the Administrator.

He paused for a moment, then strode to meet the 3 Arkonides. In the preceding decades the old prejudices against Arkonide rule and the Robot Brain had died away. The Regent had proved that it could govern better and more logically than a man. The unity of the Imperium had been re-established and even the smallest revolt was mercilessly crushed by whatever force available. It was thus the Mounder's duty to inform Arkon's official representative of what he had seen.

Mansrin slowed up as he saw the Mounder approaching. He spoke a few words to Arona, who immediately gave his robots the order to halt. Curiously, the 3 men watched the mighty Springer running towards them, waving his arms.

"I am Talamon!" he gasped when he came up, breathing so heavily that at first he was unable to say anything more.

Arona became impatient. "What is it? You're holding us up!"

Talamon could see that he owed the Arkonides a swift explanation. "Your presence is no longer needed in the Trade Centre over there," he said. "If I'm not mistaken, Arkon sent you?"

"I am Commander Arona," came the proud reply. "The Robot Regent sent me to establish order on

Volat."

Talamon could not keep back a smile. "There's a lot of that going around today," he said mockingly. "Administrator Mansrin acted quickly but I'll wager that he didn't know what was going on."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Mansrin.

Now Talamon's smile seemed more thoughtful. "I'd be glad to believe you, Mansrin, but let me just tell you what's been happening so that you can see—"

"We don't have time for that!" Arona said sharply. "Arkon will be waiting for a report from me that the rebellion has been crushed."

Talamon was astounded. "What rebellion? Do you mean that little scuffle over in the Trade Centre? Don't be ridiculous, Commander. I could take care of those 5 or 6 'rebels' myself. But there's a lot more than that involved. Listen to me well: I finished some business with a friend here and was just going to leave the building when I heard the shooting. I wanted to see what it was all about and ended up in a room where I saw something that made my hair stand on end."

Mansrin made an involuntary stroke through his own hair, glistening white in the sun, before he said in annoyance: "Well, tell us then, Talamon! What did you see?"

Talamon paused dramatically, then replied slowly and with emphasis: "I saw Perry Rhodan the Terran!"

Arona had evidently never heard of Rhodan: his face remained expressionless. Nor did Lt. Ro show any signs of surprise.

It was different for Administrator Mansrin.

The highest official on Volat looked as if someone had struck him. "Rhodan...?" he stammered. "Talamon, you've gone crazy!"

"Is that what you think?" asked Talamon. "True, I can't prove it was Rhodan because he disappeared completely just as I was coming into the room. But I saw him plainly and with him was a peculiar animal that played no small role 50 years ago. And Rhodan himself—men, I know Rhodan personally. It couldn't have been anyone else."

"But Rhodan is *dead!*" exclaimed Mansrin in desperation.

"Yes, we all thought so," said Talamon, unmoved, "and the Terran was content to let us go on thinking that. But he hasn't been asleep all this time, you can be sure of that. His sudden appearance should be a warning to us. We must inform the Regent immediately."

Arona regarded his robots. "I'll see about the revolt first." He spoke some orders into his transmitter and the army moved out once more. "We'll meet later, Mansrin."

Mansrin remained, indecisive, with Talamon. "Do you really think we should tell the Robot Brain? What if you were wrong?"

"I'm not wrong, Administrator, Talamon declared. "I can trust my eyes, even if I am getting old. Come with me—we'll take my car."

10 minutes later the 2 dissimilar men entered the hypercom station in Mansrin's palace and the connection with Arkon was quickly set up.

"I'd like to speak with the Regent myself," said Talamon. "That way I'll bear all the responsibility and not you. Agreed?"

"Of course," said Mansrin, relieved.

The familiar metal dome appeared on the vidscreen and the hard, metallic voice said: "Arkon speaking. Go ahead, Volat."

Talamon stepped before the camera. "This is the Springer Talamon, Mounder clan, speaking. I am acting in accord with the Administrator. The revolt has been crushed and we can assume it was a diversionary manoeuvre whose purpose is unknown. I have an important announcement to make: *Perry Rhodan is alive*. I saw the Terran with my own eyes here on Volat not half an hour ago."

There was a short pause, then the cold voice spoke: "From where you now stand, a man spoke to me yesterday. I could not see him because he was just out of camera range. His voice awoke memories in me. Wait, Talamon: I am checking in my memory banks."

The picture remained but the sound died.

"What's it doing?" Mansrin whispered.

"It's not hard to guess," Talamon replied. "A voice seemed familiar to the Regent. If it has ever heard that voice before, it will find it recorded in its memory banks. A comparison will be made and..."

"Regent of Arkon here, Talamon. Your eyes did not deceive you. The man who spoke with me yesterday was Rhodan the Terran. I made the inexcusable mistake of not, checking on it immediately."

So the Robot Brain made mistakes, too. Talamon felt slightly disturbed by the fact, although it soothed his human feelings. "And... does the Earth still exist?"

"That is not certain, Talamon. Possibly Rhodan escaped when the Earth was destroyed. I recall at that time he slipped into hyperspace in his ship, the *Titan*, after the battle, and was not heard from again."

"In any case," said Talamon, "Rhodan is still alive. By warning Arkon, I've done my duty. What happens now?"

"I shall decide at the proper time," the Regent answered. "Arona is to return with his fleet, as I presume his task is finished on Volat."

"I'll see that Arona takes off soon," said Mansrin, joining the exchange for a matter he felt concerned him.

The Robot Brain confirmed and signed off.

Talamon still looked at the blank vidscreen. "That pile of scrap metal could have at least thanked us," he murmured, displeased. "When all is said and done, it concerns *its* existence."

"And if Rhodan is still alive," said Mansrin, "*ours*."

"He's still alive, Mansrin—that's certain!" added Talamon leaving the com-station with a determined walk.

Mansrin followed. "How long do you plan to remain on Volat, Talamon? You surely have more business here?"

"Oh, business here, business there," the Mounder rumbled. "I'm going to get on my ship as fast as possible and take a nice giant leap through hyperspace. I want a goodly distance between Rhodan and myself."

"Do you think he's still here?" asked Mansrin.

"I don't much care—I'm still going to get out of here. I'm afraid we'll all hear much too soon from Perry Rhodan. I don't feel comfortable with the thought that he's had so many decades to prepare for a new confrontation with us. As I said before, I don't think he's been sleeping all this time."

The Administrator did not answer. He suddenly looked very unhappy.

Volat had been such a nice, quiet assignment.

The 2 men split up. Talamon hurried off into the direction of the spaceport while Mansrin went back into his office. There he was met by the police commander, who had been waiting for him. The officer reported that the revolt had been put down and that all the participants had been taken prisoner. "What should we do with them?" he inquired.

"Arona, commander of the Arkonide fleet, will have to decide," answered Mansrin, divesting himself of the responsibility. "Until he does, keep them in safe custody."

And so it happened that quite a number of persons, originally recruited to attack the Earth and destroy it, suddenly and unexpectedly wound up on Arkon, suspected of being Rhodan's secret allies.

They posed some riddles even for the Robot Brain.

\* \* \* \*

Some of the men signed up by Yatuin and Tropnow avoided the doubtful pleasure of a compulsory trip to Arkon because at the time of the revolt they were not in Kuklon but in a rather small jungle clearing between the city and the plateau. The place was off the beaten paths and could be reached on foot only with difficulty.

The men's mission: stand watch over the gleaming silver discus-shaped spacecraft lying hidden beneath the tree branches at the clearing's edge.

They performed their duty without especial efficiency for besides them a 2nd ring of sentries had been posted a little over a mile away. The 2nd group would report the approach of any intelligent beings.

When the owner of the spacecraft returned, he would be greeted by a most unpleasant surprise.

No one knew who had actually discovered the ship first—but the 2 leaders had been extremely excited, even fearful, when they learned of it. Instead of simply destroying the discus-craft, however, they had ordered round-the-clock surveillance over it and the arrest of any and all persons attempting to reach it.

It was already towards evening when Lobthal the Luraner returned from his tour of inspection, having found everything in and about the clearing in perfect order. Lobthal belonged to one of the widely-scattered clans of Springers and was happy to have found such good-paying work on Volat. As a former officer aboard a trading ship, he was familiar with quasi-military life and kept his men under rather strict discipline.

The discus-ship stood untouched, which obviously comforted him.

He went to the barracks hut set up on the edge of the forest and sat down for awhile on a wooden bench, watching the cook prepare the evening meal. Then he went out to inspect the men posted in the jungle. They had been positioned along a circle around the aircraft, serving as a line of last resort should someone manage to break through the outer blockade.

He was crossing the clearing to the other side and had already gone a few yards when something peculiar happened. It was as if a transparent haze formed in the air between him and the spaceship, not 30 feet away, and began to vibrate. Then 2 figures emerged from nothingness, their backs to him.

One was unquestionably human—a Springer, perhaps, although he wore a greenish uniform of a type Lobthal had never seen before. A hand-beamer of Arkonide construction had been shoved in his belt.

The other was not human at all. Clothed only in smooth brown fur, the animal was perhaps only a yard tall, standing on its 2 hind legs as though it were not accustomed to anything else. It held its companion by the hand and was utterly without a weapon.

Lobthal tried to comprehend the incomprehensible.

The pair had formed out of nowhere before his eyes, so they must previously have been invisible. There could be no other explanation. With that Lobthal made the mistake of not seeking another explanation but it was in character for him: whatever was closest to his own experience always seemed to him the most likely.

He yanked out his beamer and pointed it at the back of the man, whom he considered the more dangerous half of the pair.

"Halt!" he exclaimed. "Don't move!"

The stranger seemed startled, then turned slowly and carefully. His hands hung loosely at his sides, kept deliberately some distance from the grip of his beamer. The animal also turned, looking at Lobthal with a surprised and—or so it seemed—reproachful air. Lobthal did not quite understand it.

"Who are you and how did you come here?" the Springer demanded.

Fellmer Lloyd read Lobthal's thoughts and emotions and realized the threat this man constituted. It would be pointless to disappear again, although it would be easy with Pucky's help. So the Gazelle had been found and was being guarded. Very smart, but unfortunately for its discoverers it had all been for



nothing.

"Put that thing away," said Lloyd, indicating Lobthal's weapon. "You won't get me to talk waving it around."

"Can you make yourselves invisible?" the Luraner demanded, ignoring Fellmer's request. Greed and curiosity mixed in the man's voice and his thoughts revealed the rest of what was on his mind. Lloyd decided he could make use of Lobthal's feelings.

"It's not hard when you know how," said Fellmer. "As you must know, the old Arkonides knew the principles and constructed devices for invisibility, although such equipment today isn't available to just anyone."

"You've got one of those devices?" Lobthal seemed to have forgotten his original duty and was interested only in invisibility. It even seemed to bother him that one of the sentries in the forest had become aware of what was going on in the clearing and had decided to make a patrol in that direction.

"We have it in our pockets," Pucky chirped up. "Do you want to see it?"

Of course there were a great many kinds of intelligent creatures in the galaxy but Lobthal was stunned when Pucky addressed him in pure Arkonide. He had not been expecting it.

"Huh...?" gasped Lobthal, staring at the mouse-beaver.

Pucky was enormously amused but he did not take his eyes away from the oncoming guard. "If you like," he went on, "I'll make myself invisible. But first you must send your men away. This doesn't concern them."

Lobthal was not exactly stupid but then again he was not precisely smart either. He did not in the least suspect that the strangers had come because of the spaceship he was guarding. They would have acted differently had that been the case, since they could make themselves invisible.

"Hey, Khortu!" Lobthal called. "Go with the other men to the advance posts and make sure that no one breaks through the lines. And take the cook with you!"

"But...!" protested the guard.

"Didn't you hear me!?" Lobthal exclaimed. "Now get moving before I give you a swift kick."

Lobthal had his men well under control. The somewhat unkempt-looking soldier obeyed immediately, although he muttered something inaudible into the beard that identified him as a Springer.

Lloyd watched the guard go. The Gazelle stood undamaged at the jungle's edge, right where he had left it.

Lobthal was almost feverish as he turned to Lloyd. "Now show me how you make yourselves invisible! If you'll sell me the device, I'll pay you anything!"

"You don't even have 5 Credits in your pocket," said Pucky dryly.

"I've got more money—but not here," said Lobthal. Then he lifted his beamer. "Anyway, I'm the

strongest one here. I could force you."

"Don't try it," warned Pucky. "And if you want to turn invisible, put that toy down before you hurt somebody."

"Let my weapon out of my hand?" demanded Lobthal. "Never!"

Pucky shrugged and started to walk towards the Gazelle. "Alright, have it your way."

Lobthal Bensed that he was not being taken very seriously and it increased his rage against the animal, who had been doing most of the talking. Nevertheless... "Stop! What do you want over there?"

Pucky stopped and looked back at Lobthal, sizing him up. Then he nodded kindly. In the meantime, all the soldiers had disappeared and the clearing lay empty and deserted in the gathering twilight. The sun had long set.

"Okay, I'll show you," Pucky decided and came back.

Lloyd stood a short distance away and looked at the shimmering discus, lost in thought. He seemed to have no interest in his companion's experiments.

"But I'm holding onto my weapon," Lobthal announced firmly.

"Go ahead, then, if you're afraid." Pucky agreed. "I'll take hold of your hand—the free one, since you don't want to lose your pop-gun—yes, that's fine. Now watch carefully, my bearded friend..."

And Lobthal did indeed become invisible, if only to the eyes of Fellmer Lloyd. As soon as Pucky and the curious Luraner had disappeared, Lloyd walked casually up to the Gazelle. The brainwave pattern-register functioned perfectly and the hatch opened the instant Lloyd stood beneath it and pronounced the code-word. Without worrying about Pucky's return, he climbed up the narrow ladder almost before it had been completely extended.

He sensed the thought-impulses of several men as the hatch closed behind him and he made his way into the control cabin. They could do little to him now, whether they were suspicious of him or not.

A few twists of the switches and knobs on the control panel and the Gazelle was ready for take-off. A humming from the engine chambers, a vibration rippled through the metal floor and then the clearing below shrank into a small light area in the dark jungle fastness. No more could Fellmer Lloyd hear the excited cries of men racing to the spot where the discus-craft they should have been watching had once stood.

He set his course for the not-so-distant plateau and not many minutes later it came into view. Then the beehive-like huts, and then finally the group of Volatians running to meet the incoming ship.

Lloyd climbed out and walked by the friendly natives, waving to them. Thora, Rhodan and Noir, who had recognized the Gazelle and had watched it land were already waiting for him.

"Is Pucky back yet?" asked Lloyd and read the answer in the other men's expressions. He started to get the feeling he had made a mistake.

"Why?" Rhodan wanted to know. "Did that little rascal take off by himself again?"

"Someone interfered with us," Fellmer explained, "and Pucky wanted to get him out of the way. We telepathically agreed that he would return directly to the plateau so we wouldn't lose any time."

Rhodan glanced at his watch. "Well, we're ready to go. The Volatians have already given us a brief but warm sendoff. You ought to go pay your respects again to the Omniscient Mother before we start, Fellmer."

"And Pucky?"

"You can be sure he'll show up at the last minute. Don't worry yourself unduly over him. But be as quick about your leave-taking as you can."

The group had been waiting for 15 minutes in the Gazelle's open airlock when Pucky finally materialized on the plateau. Another leap and he was aboard the ship with them. Before anyone could say anything, the mousebeaver chirped innocently, as though nothing was amiss: "We can get going now, folks!"

Rhodan's expression grew severe as he grabbed the furry culprit by the ears and pulled him along the narrow corridor to the control central. There, he roughly set him down on the couch and Lloyd started the ship.

On the vidscreen, Volat quickly shrank until it was no more than a bright star against the blackness. The Gazelle streaked towards simple speol, its artificial gravity-field activated, while in the com-centre Noir attempted to contact Capt. Jim Markus aboard the *Lotus*.

"And now, my furry little friend," said Rhodan, "you're going to tell me where you hid yourself for so long. A teleporter doesn't need half an hour to take someone from one place to another."

Pucky looked positively miserable as he sat guiltily on the bunk, his loyal brown eyes lowered. His ears drooped sadly and his otherwise always-smiling incisor tooth was tucked away. "I took him to Kuklon, Chief. That's why it took so long."

"So? Is that all you have to tell me?"

"If I do something without being expressly ordered to do it but it helps our cause, will I still be punished?" Pucky asked.

Rhodan tried in vain to read the thoughts of his little friend: Pucky's mind block had stopped him. He was looking at the vidscreen when he answered: "That depends on the circumstances. If you don't cause any real damage, your unauthorized actions can perhaps be excused. But out with it now! What business did you have in Kuklon?"

Pucky sat up straight and began to grin shyly. The lower end of his incisor tooth became visible. "I took Lobthal into the city and..."

"Who in heaven's name is Lobthal?"

"The guy guarding the Gazelle, who else—oh, sorry! The thought screen! I forgot about that!" He swiftly gave Rhodan access to his mind so that his boss could pick up the situation's background. "I dropped him off in the middle of the city, where he looked rather awkward with that beamer in his hand. The police moved in then and I couldn't have stopped them if I'd wanted to, which I didn't. My next spring

took me to the palace, since I wanted to know what had been going on there. Well, I learned enough. The guy who recognized you was Talamon, alright. And now that Arkon has been informed of it, the Administrator seems to have gone into hiding. Anyway, it's confirmed now, Chief. That computerized junkpile 30,000 light-years from here knows the Earth still exists. It also knows it was you here on Volat. I guess we can say goodbye to our game of keeping the Earth hidden."

Rhodan had listened without interrupting. What Pucky was telling him was neither new nor surprising, and besides, he had always had to act, keeping the possibility of discovery ever in mind. There was only one thing which Rhodan did not understand: why had Talamon betrayed him? After all, they had been good friends. Or had the Mounder done it in the first shock and now regretted it? It was quite possible that the shock of seeing someone he had thought dead for decades had not lent itself to Talamon's clear thinking for awhile.

Whatever, the Regent of Arkon knew that its great opponent was alive and active again. It would prepare to take up the struggle once more against the man who threatened the existence of an empire in which more than a thousand stars shone.

Noir called proudly from the com-centre: "Contact with the *Lotus* —the tracking signal!"

"Correct our course accordingly," Rhodan ordered, then added: "Try to get Markus on the vidscreen. There are some things I want to ask him."

Noir was not a trained hypercom operator—had he been, things would have gone more quickly—but even so, Rhodan had to be happy that within 10 minutes of being given the order Noir could report: "Contact with Capt. Markus, sir. He wants to speak with you—and he seems rather excited."

Rhodan hurried into the com-centre and took Noir's seat. He had to turn the dial somewhat to adjust the vidscreen focus: not only did Markus' face become sharper but small details in the *Lotus* grew visible as well. Noir was a good hypno but he understood little of electronic communications. As a telepath, he'd of course never had the need.

"Markus? Rhodan here! How's the connection?"

"I can understand you, sir. Your position?"

"53 light-minutes from Volat. Why?"

"I'm coming towards you, sir. Who knows what might happen in the next half hour? How did they discover you?"

It was like a blow to Rhodan. How could Markus have known? "Discover us? How did you...?"

"Someone must have informed the Robot Brain that you were on Volat. Or didn't you know that?"

"I'm already aware of it, Markus, but what I don't understand is how *you* know. Did you pick up Mansrin's hypercom message?"

"No, but we picked up the Regent's."

Rhodan was gradually getting used to being surprised but some moments passed before he could respond. "The Robot Brain sent a message? To Mansrin?"

"No, sir," answered Marcus. "To you."

Rhodan lost his patience. "Enough of this, Markus! What's going on, anyway?"

"Half an hour ago we began to receive a constantly repeated summons over hypercom. It's in plain Interkosmo—that is to say, uncoded—and is being broadcast automatically every 2 minutes. Should I read it to you, sir?"

Rhodan gasped audibly for breath. "Of course, Markus, of course! Get on with it!"

"Right, sir. Here's the text of the message:

*Calling Perry Rhodan of Terra! I know that you are still alive. Get in touch with me over our old frequency. I guarantee you your life and your freedom.*

*Regent of Arkon".*

## **6/ WILL REGGIE BELL THE CAT?**

Even before the *Lotus* landed, the robot psychologists in Terrania had much to do. Rhodan had sent the data over hypercom and requested immediate evaluation. He wanted the results ready by the time he landed.

Markus guided the *Lotus* skilfully through the asteroid belt at light-speed, past Mars, and soon landed it in Terrania, the greatest City on Earth.

There, Rhodan was told to expect the results of the psycho-cybernetic evaluations in just a few minutes and that, as a precautionary measure, they would be sent to him in his office.

Rhodan, Thora, Noir and Lloyd took a car into the city, driving through the perpetual energy dome by way of a special lane, and in 5 minutes entered the room they had left only a few days before.

Reginald Bell sat behind the table surrounded by a number of intercoms. He looked up at the newcomers with an indefinite expression. His chin rested cupped in his hands and his elbows rested on the table. He rather resembled cartoons of high-powered executives.

"I almost strangled in all the red tape!" he complained with such exaggeration no one took him seriously. "It isn't easy, running a government. While you were off having a lovely vacation, I had to stay here and... ah, Thora? You're back, too! Wonderful!" Then his eyes suddenly narrowed. "Uh, where's Pucky?"

Rhodan waited until the general exchange of greetings was done with, then said: "Pucky's out looking for a new home for his friend."

"What is this I keep hearing about Pucky's new friend?" Bell demanded. In his voice was something not far, from a twinge of jealousy. "Pucky never told me anything about it."

"You'll meet him," Rhodan promised. "Anyway, Pucky only ran across him recently. You'll be enthusiastic, Reggie."

"Hmmm," growled Bell, sceptically. He did not have a chance to say more as at that point one of the communicators on the table hummed.

Rhodan stepped over to it and pressed a button. A small screen on the wall lit up and a face appeared. It belonged to a middle-aged man whose white coat identified him as a scientist.

"Rhodan here. What are your findings?"

"This is Dr. Gertz, sir. Our conclusion is that the Regent would not guarantee your life and freedom if there were not circumstances which force it to. The positronicon on Venus agrees that there can be only one explanation for the Regent's hypercom message."

"What would that be?" asked Rhodan, trying to conceal his excitement.

"The Regent needs you, sir. It finds itself in a dilemma which we know nothing about and needs the Earth's help."

Rhodan took a deep breath. "Are you sure of this, Doctor?"

"A mistake in our analysis is 100% impossible, considering what we had to work with. All our evaluations agree—the Positronicon, the Regent of Arkon, is in a jam and is even in a certain sense happy—as much as a robot can be happy—that you and Terra still exist. You represent salvation at the 11th hour."

Rhodan shook his head. "Arkon in trouble? I didn't get any impression that the Imperium was having difficulties. Quite the opposite, in fact."

Thora whispered: "Perhaps there are problems only the Robot Brain is aware of Perry. Maybe you ought to get in touch with it."

"I'll do that as soon as our more pressing concerns are out of the way," said Rhodan. "At least this means there isn't any danger to us."

The videoscreens had gone blank. Bell stood up, offering Rhodan his seat. Rhodan, however, showed no great desire yet to resume his post as Administrator of the Solar Imperium.

"We've earned a day off, I think," he said. "I'm afraid you'll just have to hold out until tomorrow."

Bell watched the group leave and his face showed agitation as he said: "Pucky could at least stop by to say 'hi' to me, Perry."

At the door, Rhodan turned and smiled cryptically. "I'll tell him, Reg. He can use the opportunity to introduce his new friend to you."

As Bell looked on, the door closed as the others stepped out into the hall. Then he bent to the task of taking care of the current business of government. It was all trivia with which he need not have bothered but Bell felt a need to keep busy...

There was a noise at the door.

Bell looked up and noticed the knob turn and the door open a crack. Why didn't this guy—who was almost certainly bringing him more work—knock first?

Or was it Pucky?

No, it *wasn't*.

Bell rose slowly out of his chair and felt his hair rise on end. Of course he had not brought any weapons with him into the office—who would have thought that wild tiger would be running around loose?

*Tigers?*

It was the biggest animal Bell had ever seen—or so it seemed to him, seeing it come into the room unexpectedly. The beast opened the door the rest of the way and walked in. Tail flicking back and forth, purring comfortably, it padded up to Bell—rigid in fear—not letting him out of its eyes. Bell did not take the time or trouble to look closer at those eyes—otherwise he might have noticed something.

The tiger—or whatever it was—stopped and seemed about to prepare for a pounce. It continued to purr. Bell did not dare move for fear of alarming the beast unnecessarily.

How had the animal gotten in? It was impossible...

Now the tiger stretched and rumbled happily, seeming to suggest the corpulent Bell had just the right dimensions for its supper.

Then it lay down on the carpet at Bell's nervous feet, curled up, yawned once heartily... and closed its huge eyes. It seemed to have no more interest in its prey.

Bell started to heave a sigh of relief—then quickly guarded his mouth, lest the noise awaken the frightening apparition.

Outside the room, another sound. Bell froze as he envisioned the possibility: the maneater's mate, coming for her share? But, no—it was only Pucky. The mousebeaver waddled around the corner, fully erect and grinning shamelessly as he strutted into the room.

"Well, old boy, have you made friends with Kittikat yet?"

Bell stood motionless. "Kittikat?! You mean this... this... beast on the floor? You've gone crazy, mouse!"

"Watch your tongue, Chubby, or I might instruct somebody to bite it off! Kittikat's no ordinary beast—he's my friend. Kitti, show Mr. Bell your cute little teeth and your freshly manicured claws. Or should I say kitticured?" It was perhaps the first time Pucky had ever punned. Was he taking on still another bad human trait?

Without opening his somnolent eyes wider, Kittikat parted his jaws to let Bell observe his teeth. They looked like a matched set of stalactites and stalagmites. The sharp claws did not look any less menacing.

"Well, Reggie, what do you say? Shall I have Kittikat tickle you?"

"Is he tame?" was all Bell could hoarsely manage.

"Oh, perfectly—when I want him to be." Pucky's incisor tooth flashed malevolently. "But if you don't behave yourself from now on, I'll sic him on you. In the place where I got him, he once dined on 3 men your size at one sitting." He paused for dramatic emphasis, then continued: "And that, I might add, was right after lunch."

For the first time Bell felt relieved. The worst danger was over. If the tiger belonged to Pucky, things were only half as bad as he had imagined. "Of course he's intended for our zoo?" he ventured.

"Zoo?!" Pucky's tail shot up like an exclamation remark. "Kittikat in a zoo? If that happens I'll make sure you're the main course at his first feeding time!" He bent over the great cat and solicitously stroked its back. "Humans are all alike, Kit. They think that what doesn't look like *them* belongs in a zoo. Better if in the beginning humans had been put in zoos and *animals* allowed to move freely about—we animals would all have been saved a lot of trouble."

Kittikat purred in agreement.

"I've got work to do," Bell said timidly.

Pucky gave him a scornful look. "Alright," he said patronizingly. "Kittikat, let's go. Humans are stupid creatures and, well, Reggie is after all only human."

The tiger cat rose to all fours and followed Pucky obediently. Bell sank back into his chair. "See you later, overweight human!" Pucky called insolently. "Now that I have such an influential friend, we'll be able to reason with you in the future. I'm going to introduce Kit to the others."

Bell stared after the retreating figures, then the closed door. "Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle! I'd like to take a cat-o'-9-tails to—"

At that moment Pucky materialized on the desk directly before his eyes. "Yes?" he chirruped. "You were saying?"

"Er, that I think I'll take a catnap... 9 winks" He cast a furtive glance at the door. It was open a crack and Kittikat's whiskers poked in.

"Oh, really?" Pucky chided. "Don't forget I'm a telepath. Hm? Nothing to say, eh?"

Outside the door, Kit coughed impatiently.

Bell remained silent. It seemed the cat had his tongue.



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THE DEAD LIVE

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## THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

DANGEROUSLY CLOSE.

That point in time so long secretly feared by Perry Rhodan is now perilously near for the Robot Brain of Arkon has been informed that the apparent destruction of Sol Planet 3 and its leader, Perry Rhodan—both were but an ingeniously planned deception.

The Positronicon of Arkon now knows, inside its incredibly complicated circuitry & information banks, that the Earth lives. Perry Rhodan lives.

The inevitable result: the time for a test of strength between Arkon and the Solar Empire is at hand.

Is the young empire of the Terranians strong enough to defend itself against the might of the ancient Arkon menace?

As if this were not enough, Perry Rhodan has still other worries: recently on Earth certain restive elements have become active again and are working toward the overthrow of the prevailing order of science & sanity.

These disruptive elements are the—

SOLAR ASSASSINS

by

Kurt Mahr