

Perry Rhodan 061 Spybot 1/ TILT! ATLANTIS. The legendary continent. A survivor into the 21st century-Atlan, after whom the sunken land had been named-had unfolded an unknown chapter of Earth's prehistory before his listeners. Privy in person to Atlan's gripping, vivid narration had been the top officers of the Drusus, flagship of the Terranian Space Fleet, but via the ship's intercom and the viewscreens the ship's complement had been able to share the event either in their quarters or at their posts. When Atlan ended his amazing story a heavy silence descended on all concerned. The giant spherical spaceship stood guard at a point 30 light-years from Earth and watched for the very first signs of any attack from the alien time dimension. It was very difficult to dispel the deep impression made by the historical revelations of the Timeless One of Arkon. For several millennia there had been only one clue to that fabled area of Earth: a brief observation made by Plato in one of his works. Hundreds of dreamers and visionaries from Donnelly to Iknor had attempted to read into Plato's famous lines more than they said and through the centuries they had sought to trace Atlantis to almost every place on Earth. Many theories had been advanced as to what may have caused the Atlantean catastrophe and yet all that time on Earth there was one man in a position to put an end to speculations. One man who could have cleared up the mystery at any time-had he wished to. Atlan the Arkonide. Time's Lonely One. The immortal Crystal Prince. Atlan, member of the distinguished family of Gonozal, which represented the Emperor at the time of their departure from Arkon. Atlan, the man whose followers so revered him that they named a continent after him on the 3rd planet of a newly discovered solar system. Where did all the efforts of the philologists lead? The learned scholars who so emphatically traced the Indo-European word-stem 'tl' or 'tla' to the primitive word tragen, meaning 'to carry', and thus naturally had looked to Atlas the carrier of the globe of the world? What else could it be but a confusion arising from a similarity of sounds in words which were not truly related? Atlan's report was a sensation. But it was more: it confirmed that for over 10,000 years Earth-time the mysterious unknown entity dwelling on the synthetic planet Wanderer had known the tremendous peril faced by the entire galaxy due to the threat of the invisible enemy from the alien time dimension. And It had attempted preventative steps against these beings. Attempted! The word seemed weak, an understatement when one considered what tremendous powers were available to the wonder-thing on Wanderer and how simple it had always been for It to eliminate all other dangers. The immortal being of Wanderer had set Atlan the task of facing the enigmatic creatures from another time-continuum. By human logic this meant the unknown inhabitant of Wanderer could not handle the problem alone.-But if It could not face the menace... who could? Perry Rhodan was the first to break from the spell that Atlan's revelations had cast on them all. He stood up and as he spoke his words were calm and to the point: "I thank you, Atlan, for all of us. Your report was more than merely revealing and of course in a sense it was a bit depressing. But I hope that with your practical experience in this matter we may be able to complete the assignment that you received from the unknown entity so long ago and far away." Atlan smiled faintly. "Not much has been accomplished from all my experience, Rhodan. Whatever I did then was a drop in the bucket... or a shot in the dark as you people say." Rhodan returned the smile. "One should not despair. You know our proverb: a good beginning is half the battle. In our case maybe that sounds a bit ridiculous but in any case when you don't lose heart at the beginning of an undertaking you're in a better starting position." Atlan nodded. "Yes, I know. I have known your human race for a long while and its faculty of faith, which is really no more than a certain stubbornness blended with a kind of illogical conviction. I know of many examples where it has moved mountains. This quality is peculiar to Terranians alone. With other races it's sometimes an insurmountable difficulty for them to jump over their own shadows." He looked tip and offered his hand. "So, my barbarian friend, we shall try." Rhodan

laughed. "And you, my Arkonide friend, must have learned much from us barbarians, it appears to me. Otherwise you'd have thrown in the towel by now and given up trying entirely." Atlan's smile became somewhat rueful. "You touch my sore spot, Rhodan. But in the meantime I have to believe that my people have become nothing but a bunch of dreamers and fatuous blockheads." "There are exceptions," Rhodan reminded him. "Arkon is not lost yet." Atlan nodded. "We will-" At that moment he was interrupted by the sharp buzzing of the intercom. A clear, firm voice came through: "Second communications officer to Commander! Com station 2 to Commander!" Rhodan reached the pilot's master console in a single leap. He switched on the microphone. "This is the Commander. What is it?" "Top priority message from Terrania, Central Intelligence, sir. It came through the relay station from Rigel." Rhodan hesitated while glancing askance at the tense faces of the assembled officers. "Wait," he said. "I'll come to Com Central myself." He smiled regretfully at Atlan and swiftly left the room. Atlan remained rooted to the spot and stared at the door that had closed behind Rhodan. "Speak of the devil..." he murmured with foreboding. Pucky had not taken the trouble to hear Atlan's narration in person. He sat in his small cabin during the report and finally snapped to attention when the viewscreen darkened and the face of the Arkonide disappeared. Pucky was the only mouse-beaver on board the Drusus. Basically he was the only existing mouse-beaver in the Milky Way, if one were to discount the population of a planet called Vagabond which was lost somewhere in the far reaches of the cosmos circling around a dying sun. He was slightly more than 3 feet in height and his fur was a rusty brown in colour. He had the head of a giant mouse and the broad, flattened tail of a normal beaver. But he was endowed with at least 3 astonishing faculties: Pucky could read thoughts and was accordingly a perfect telepath, in addition to being capable of dematerialising at will and simultaneously popping up in other places. Thus he was also a perfect teleporter. Then, too, he had psychokinetic powers which enabled him to move solid objects by mental means, without touching them physically. It was small wonder, therefore, that Pucky was not only Rhodan's special friend but also an outstanding member of the Terranian Mutant Corps. Without knocking, Bell stepped into the cabin. Reginald Bell, Rhodan's chief deputy and best friend, had left the officer's group at the termination of Atlan's report. His first move was to visit the mouse-beaver, with whom he had formed an unusual friendship. In fact, to outsiders there was a strangely spirited bond between the 2, in spite of fairly frequent controversies of a petty nature. Pucky had already sensed his approach and now shook his head. "You will never be a gentleman, Reggie," he said in purest English. Even this would have seemed very unusual to the uninitiated but the mouse-beaver's IQ by far surpassed average human intelligence. "What if I had just been changing...?" Bell had to grin. For the most part Pucky ran around without clothes on; his thick pelt always made a uniform or even underwear seem ludicrously unnecessary. So what would be the difference if he were to be surprised in the act of changing his clothes? "Your sense of humour is about as gross as an elephant's tumour," Bell returned acidly, for openers. "You've some temerity, talking to me about tumours, you overgrown ulcer-maker!" spluttered Pucky, for once not getting his tongue in the way of his eyeteeth. "Don't skrag me or I'll teleport you straight through the ship to where the odour of your remarks would blend in with the surroundings." Bell paled at the vision of being pinned to the ceiling of the lav. "Aw, Pucky, you know I was only kidding. I just wanted to talk to you." "So talk!" The mouse-beaver edged over so that Bell could sit beside him on the bed. "I'm listening though my ears have blisters already-I just got through hearing a couple of hours of Atlan's story. I have to admit that fellow's got a powerful imagination. I wish I could dream up-" Bell cocked an eyebrow at him. "You don't mean to say you think Atlan invented his story of Atlantis?! Puckaroo, if Rhodan ever found that out..." "Why should he find it out, if you keep your mouth shut?" inquired Pucky, the threatening hint of a growl in his voice. "Don't forget the washroom!" "Nobody'll learn

anything from me!" Bell hastened to assure him, adding: "Anyway, I found Atlan's story very interesting and informative." "Well, I suppose I did too," admitted Pucky and made an obvious project out of scratching his back. His reproachful expression was not in vain. Bell sighed and yielded to the unspoken request. He sat closer to the mouse-beaver and began to gently rub his fur. There was no greater pleasure anyone could offer the little fellow. "But everything else is starting to be drag-time around here," drawled Bell. "Here we sit in a giant ship out in space-and we wait. What in the devil are we waiting for?" "Haven't you asked Rhodan yet?" "If you think you can get anything out of him you're mistaken, chum." "Don't be so snooty, lardbird," retorted Pucky. His continuous association with Bell had caused him to develop a slangy vocabulary. "Anyway, I don't mind all this lazing around. But nobody who can barely move a finger doesn't need to fake off." "Flake off," Bell corrected his alien friend, who often had trouble with English idioms. Bell stopped scratching and straightened up. "Are you trying to say that I..." "Are you really so anxious to visit the bathroom?" Pucky almost purred with velvet menace. Bell sighed and muttered: "Why did I come here, anyway? Instead of taking it easy I have to sit around and take a lot of threats. That's the grief you get into when you mess around with semi-intelligent species." He swiftly began to scratch Pucky's pelt in self-defence. "I mean-now surely you can take a harmless little joke, little buddy?" "But of course, fatso," Pucky assured him guilelessly and he revealed his incisor tooth. He normally used this to masticate his food-especially fresh vegetables and pre-eminently carrots-but it also served to delineate the mouse-beaver's form of grinning. And when Pucky grinned there was usually nothing to fear, so Bell breathed a sigh of relief. For the next few minutes a pleasant silence pervaded the cabin, interrupted now and then by a sigh of pleasure from Pucky, who knew well how to put his friend's back scratching mood to the fullest use. But finally this little idyll was abruptly interrupted. A sharp buzzing sounded, followed by a familiar voice. "Hello, Pucky-does Bell happen to be down there with you?" "Rhodan!" Bell jumped to his feet and turned the intercom switch. Then he spoke into the small grid of the microphone on the panel of the ship's communication system. "Yes, I'm down here with Pucky. What's up?" "I'll tell you later. Get up here to Command Central. Don't walk; hurry it up!" Rhodan did not seem to be in a joking mood. "We don't have any time to lose. I'll expect you here in exactly 2 minutes. Pucky will no doubt make it faster if he doesn't take you with him." Bell put his hand on the intercom switch as though to shut off but then he asked one more question: "Does this mean that-?" "Yes," came Rhodan's reply, which was an answer to the unfinished question. "This means the waiting time is over." A crackling sound indicated the connection had been terminated. Pucky slipped off the couch and came up to Bell in order to take hold of his hand. "Okay then, fatty, let's give it a go," he chirped happily. Seconds later the air in the cabin began to shimmer and Bell and Pucky disappeared. In the same moment they materialized in the Command Central of the Drusus. Rhodan waited till things had quieted down. Some of the officers who had listened to Atlan's story a half-hour before were still present in the Command Central. Among them was Baldur Sikermann, Lieutenant Colonel and First Officer of the Drusus, plus Second Officer Major Teldje van Aafen and Capt. Hubert Gorlat, the ship's Security Officer. Altogether the Drusus' crew consisted of 2000 men and officers. Considering the one-mile diameter of the huge spacesphere such a personnel complement was not surprising, especially when one took into account some 40 guppies-small spherical craft with a 100-foot diameters-which lay in the ship's hangars and would have to be manned in case of emergency. Aside from the Titan and the General Pounder, which were of the same class, the Drusus could be considered to be the largest and mightiest ship in the galaxy. At best, only Arkon might be able to match it with anything of an equivalent size and capability. "We've received a hypercom message from the Earth," said Rhodan, breaking into the expectant silence. "I'm not sure whether this may have

something to do with our actual problem but even if it doesn't we will have to respond to this request." From the background Bell asked: "What kind of request?" There was a note of rejection in his words, which was understandable. Rhodan smiled briefly. "I'll read you the text of the message. As you may have surmised, it's come through to us in pulse bursts and coded, as well as by a roundabout route. So there's no danger that it was intercepted and even less possibility of anyone having been able to determine its direction or origin. It reads as follows: To Drusus! A 3-alarm call has been received from Agent Jost Kulman on Swoofon, System of Swaft. Requests immediate pickup. No details. "This is signed by Central Communications in Terrania. I think we'd better take care of this item and make a flight to Swoofon. Are there any questions?" The questioning went fairly fast because no one had prepared any particular questions. Where was Swoofon located? Who lived there? What was Kulman's problem? In fact, who was he, anyway? Were these all the questions the situation called for or was there something perhaps more important? Bell used his prerogative to make a start. "Couldn't Kulman have said what was pressing him...?" Rhodan nodded patiently. "Naturally he could have but he didn't. Next...?" Sikermann saw that he had the floor. "Who will take over our position if we fly to Swaft? That would leave a hole in the control net that has to be closed." "Hardly!" Rhodan shook his head. "We were only buffering the guard front. If we withdraw it will be back to normal." "Then I don't have any other questions." Rhodan looked around at the others. "Anyone else confused? I was beginning to wonder. After turning over our control position we will make a transition toward Swaft and have a look around. It could well be that something may have changed there since Kulman sent his emergency call. I don't intend to run into a trap. So prepare yourselves for a few hours of heavy duty, gentlemen. May I request that Reginald Bell and Capt. Gorlat remain here? I don't want to overlook any precautionary measures. Thank you." He stood motionlessly and waited until only Gorlat and Bell were left in the room. Pucky, who had balled himself together on the couch, was overlooked; at least Rhodan acted as though he had not noticed him. "Swaft," he began, "is a relatively unknown sun which supports life on its 2nd planet, Swoofon. Swoofon is the native world of a very unusual race of people, known as the Swoon. They are reputed to be excellent mechanics and technicians. To be more specific: they are micro-technicians. Their eyes can see better than our microscopes. Their specialty is making instruments and mechanisms which the normal naked eye can hardly detect. In fact this was the main reason why we sent agent Jost Kulman to Swoofon." "If I remember correctly," interjected Gorlat the Security Officer, "Kulman belongs to the Mutant Corps." Rhodan nodded affirmatively. "Kulman is our microoptic specialist. He has the amazing faculty of being able to change the focal length of the lenses in his eyes at will and by this means he can establish quite different visual ratios. Without any optical aid he is able to perceive and identify objects of microscopic size." Rhodan looked at his watch. "I have to give Navigation the coördinates for Swaft. The system is just about 1000 light-years from our sun. Using the hyper-compensator we can risk making it in one transition, without having to fear that anybody will detect the Earth's position." Hubert Gorlat smiled his satisfaction. "Yes, it's really a break for us that we have these compensators. Without them we couldn't make any hyperspace jump and keep it a secret. It'd be a fine mess if everybody always knew where the other fellow was located." "A worse mess," interjected Bell, "if everybody knew where each other's home planet was located." "For us it would be fatal," Rhodan confirmed conclusively. "After all, our most powerful weapon is that nobody but ourselves knows the galactic position of the Earth. Look at all the efforts the Arkonides and the Springers have made to get that information. The hyper-compensator is truly our good luck because what good are the Arkonides' hyper-sensors if they have nothing to sense?" With this, he waved a hand at them and left the room. The others soon followed and went to their respective posts. Only Pucky was left behind, rolled up on the couch. He thought it would be appropriate to take a little

snooze. The Drusus materialized out of the void and the star called Swaft appeared as a bright sun. The 2nd planet lay between it and the motionlessly poised Drusus, which had returned soundlessly into the normal universe out of hyperspace without causing the slightest disturbance of the space-time structure. One of the Gazelles was prepared for takeoff. These excellent long-range reconnaissance ships were disc-shaped, with a 100-foot diameter and a height of 60 feet. Their cruising range was limited to 500 light-years and they could accomplish hyperspace transits of 5 light-years. Rhodan selected the Afroterranian, Capt. Fron Wroma, for its commander. He was an especially talented pilot and officer. 2 cadets were to accompany him, along with Communications Officer Sgt. Redkens. When Swoofon came within 2 light-hours distance, Rhodan gave the order to start. On the equatorial bulge of the Drusus a lock opened soundlessly and a silvery shadow flitted with lightning swiftness into empty space and began to hurtle toward the still-distant planet with increasing acceleration. On board the Drusus the long time of idle waiting began. 2 hours later they received a radio message from Sgt. Redkens: "No sign of Agent Kulman! Where are we supposed to find him?" Rhodan narrowed his eyes at this and looked at Sikermann, who sat next to him in order not to neglect the controls of the Command Central. No one had expected Kulman to maintain radio silence after he had sent such an urgent message asking to be picked up. If one could rely on the Arkonide catalogues, Swoofon was an unusually peace-loving and harmless world. So Kulman couldn't be in any danger. At the most it was no doubt some kind of vital information he'd come across that had motivated him to signal them in the first place. And now he maintained radio silence, although he must have heard the Gazelle's request for coördinates. There was something not quite right about it... Rhodan spoke into the microphone: "Maintain your search tracking, Redkens! Kulman has to answer! In 10 minutes I'll be waiting for your affirmative reply." "I'll contact you, sir," promised Redkens and cut off. Once more, Rhodan waited. Meanwhile, Fron Wroma approached the night side of the silent planet at reduced speed. He saw only a few lights on the surface and then recalled that the Swoon lived mainly under ground. They had only built a few cities on the equatorial crust of their world because the surface was so barren that not even the most primitive plant forms could exist. That was the most surprising thing about Swoofon: there was no vegetation of any kind. Redkens kept sending out an uninterrupted call signal for Kulman and his receiver was open for reception. If the agent couldn't hear the call, then the devil must have a hand in it. But it wasn't the devil. When the 10 minute time allowance was almost at an end, the sergeant suddenly pricked up his ears. Out of the speaker emerged ordinary Morse code, but apparently without making any sense. The tracking antenna swung automatically around and indicated the direction in which the transmitter was located. It pointed to a spot that was obliquely under the antenna. "45° descent, right 30°." Redkens sounded off the coördinates calmly while Wroma swung the Gazelle into a right-hand descent glide. The surface came closer. It was getting brighter as they now approached the day side. On the infrared screen they could see a stony and desolate wasteland in which life could hardly be expected to grow. And here was where Kulman was supposed to be sitting and waiting for them? Obviously so because the Morse had grown louder and stronger. After crossing over a high plateau they were exactly above the transmitter. Unless the twilight here was deceiving, their man would have to be directly beneath them between 2 high crests, down in a fairly deep and narrow canyon. How Kulman had ever gotten there in the first place was a riddle. Neither Wroma nor Redkens suspected that it would always remain a puzzle. The Gazelle pancaked down and streaked past the rocky cliffs toward the bottom of the canyon. Finally it settled gently on the bank of a small race of water that soon lost itself somewhere in the loose rubble of the place. A few yards away an indistinct figure rose up between them and the cliff wall, beckoning to them. "I'm going out to him myself," said Wroma, cutting off the engine. "You stand by in the airlock and keep your beamer

ready, no matter what. I'm not about to get sucked in by a trick. There's something about this whole setup that scraggs me." "How come?" asked the Communications man, shaking his head. "The tracking coördinates agree. So far so good." "I have the responsibility here," returned the African, thus ending the discussion. He got up and prepared to enter the nearby airlock. Redkens followed him with his beamer in a fire-ready position. He appeared to have figured out that it's impossible to be too careful. With a muffled thud, the hatch door swung open and the somewhat stifling air of Swoofon pressed into the lock chamber. And with it came someone's shout of relief: "Glord (Good Lord), how long did you think you were going to make me wait for you?" Kulman, the micro-eyed member of the Mutant Corps, came walking toward Wroma, who waited for him suspiciously in the open airlock. Behind Wroma was Redkens, who suddenly lowered the aim of his weapon at a small fleeting shadow behind Kulman. "Muzzel, come on!" Kulman called, turning around. Now Wroma also discerned the small shadow and widened his eyes to take a better look. He had definitely recognized Kulman. There could be no further doubt about the agent's identity. But who or what was this small phantom? Muzzel-whoever Muzzel might be-appeared to obey Kulman's command. He had hardly given the order before the thing came running up and sat obediently at the agent's feet. Wroma heard Redkens let out a groan behind him. "Oh no!" the communications man cried out, flabbergasted. "Are we ready for this? It's a dachshund!" Kulman stood below at the foot of the entry ladder. "Agent Kulman reporting back from assignment. Are you going to pick me up? May I come on board?" Wroma leaned forward to look around. "What about your luggage?" "Luggage? What luggage? All I've got is the tracking transmitter. Nothing more-except Muzzel, of course." Again Wroma was assailed with the misgivings that had been assailing him on this trip. Every agent had special luggage containing instruments and equipment. Such devices must never be left behind except in an extreme emergency. But obviously such an emergency had not presented itself here. He decided to leave further investigation of the matter to the appropriate authorities. "OK, get on board-but leave that ridiculous animal where it is." "Do you mean Muzzel? No, I'll not leave him behind. Under no circumstance. I'll stay here myself if Muzzel can't come." "But how did a dachshund ever get to Swoofon?" Redkens wanted to know. He acted as though he had never seen a dachshund. "Or did you bring it here in the first place?" "Muzzel is a possonkal," explained Kulman, with such matter-of-factness that it seemed every Terranian space traveller must know what a possonkal was. But Wroma and Redkens had never heard of such an animal, "Alien animals may not come on board," said Wroma, slightly undecided. "Rhodan would be on our necks if we-" "Then just turn about and leave me here. I cannot leave Muzzel behind. They would kill him, those scoundrels." "What scoundrels?" "Springers! First they gave me the dog and then they tried to do me in. I knew right away that they were pirates.-So? What's the verdict? Can Muzzel come along?" Wroma glanced at Redkens, who shrugged his shoulders. The African decided to take the responsibility without getting clearance from the Drums. After all, what would be the harm if Kulman did take along his little possel... puzzil... or whatever the name of the beast was? "Alright, bring the dachshund on board. But he'll have to be locked up till we get to the Drusus. Who knows what kind of fleas may be native to Swoofon?" "Muzzel does not have fleas," protested Kulman indignantly but took the precaution to add: "And even if he did, we could catch them or kill them." "You can be sure the disinfection unit on the Drusus will take care of that!" Wroma promised grimly and stepped back to let Kulman climb on board. At a word from Kulman, Muzzel climbed the ladder steps with astounding agility and trotted into the lock chamber with his tail wagging. He made a little dog sound and sat down, looking up at the men with a wide-eyed air of expectation. The lock hatch closed. "Take the dog through the pressure chamber and lock him up," Wroma told the sergeant. "Kulman, you see to it that your mutt does what he's told." Kulman winced at the obvious affront to his companion but he maintained his composure. He stooped down to

the dachshund and said: "Muzzel, now you be a brave little dog and go along with your uncle there! I'll come and get you soon, do you hear? Poppykins will pick you up later." It was hard for Wroma to hide a derisive grin. He'd seen some nucks (Equivalent of 1970's slang 'nuts') in his time but that a hard-boiled agent of Terra would be capable of such mawkishness was beyond him. Redkens made a mock bow and beckoned to Muzzel. The smart little animal recognized the invitation and got up. With an almost dignified mien, it strode past Redkens into the entrance corridor. It practically left Wroma breathless. The dachshund strode! It didn't walk or waddle or hop-not at all. It moved with a definite stride! Kulman watched the dog with a smile of proud ownership. "Now listen here, Kulman," the African told him after he and the agent reached the control room and he'd started the engines. I don't get all this. You put half the Terranian war fleet on alert with your Mayday alarm call and here you are keeping a dachshund." The planet of Swoofon fell rapidly into the dark depths of the void and dwindled away among the other stars. "Rhodan's going to be surprised at you." "Rhodan?" Kulman's wonderment was obviously genuine. "What does Rhodan want with me, anyway? Why is he having me picked up?" Wroma gasped while he corrected his course. "Having you picked up? But it was you who asked for it!" Kulman watched the shimmering viewscreen. "You mean I called to be picked up?" He shook his head. "One of us has to be crazy, my friend. I never even dreamed of leaving Swoofon. It was only when I received your search call that I knew anything about it." Wroma began to suspect that his sense of premonition had not deceived him. Something was out of kilter. In fact, a lot of things about this whole situation were downright wacky... 2/ INCIDENT INEXPLICABLE The Drusus still hovered within 2 light-hours of Swoofon. The returning scoutship manoeuvred swiftly through the hangar lock and was drawn into the vast depths of the spherical ship. Meanwhile a message from Redkens had announced that Kulman had brought another passenger with him. So Muzzel had to put up with being treated like an ordinary dog and the first thing that happened to him was a trip through the disinfectant showers. It was a procedure which elicited a lot of howling but otherwise he came through without damage. As for Kulman, he received instructions to put in an immediate appearance in the Command Central and give his report to Rhodan. This he complied with, albeit with very mixed emotions. During the return flight in the Gazelle he had had ample time to converse with Wroma and Redkens. It was pointed out to him that somewhere in the situation there was a gap which apparently nobody was in a position to close. Rhodan stretched out a hand to his agent, which Kulman took while looking at him. He wanted to know who was present here besides himself and Rhodan. Lt.-Col. Sikermann sat in the pilot's seat and took charge of the calculations for another hypertransit which under no circumstances would lead to Earth. Reginald Bell squatted next to Pucky on the couch and watched the meeting with interest. In addition there were also Hubert Gorlat and John Marshall, the leader of the Mutant Corps and Kulman's direct superior. So it was a very estimable reception committee, thought the agent perplexed. What in the world did they want from him? He couldn't recall... "Welcome on board the Drusus, Jost Kulman," said Perry Rhodan as he looked at the micro-visioned mutant searchingly. "You've put out a 3-alarm emergency call and that means a top alert. We responded immediately and picked you up. Now tell us why you wanted to leave Swoofon in such a hurry." Kulman took a deep breath and was prepared to make a big protest but then he remembered that Marshall was a telepath. From this moment on his thoughts would be monitored. There wasn't any sense in deceiving either himself or the others, he figured. "Swoofon is a peaceful and industrious planet. The inhabitants, I mean the Swoon-well, they're pretty likeable creatures and they haven't made any trouble for me. I've lived among them and had free access to their homes, as far as the existing circumstances permitted. You probably know that the Swoon are only about a foot high and so their buildings are correspondingly small. Inasmuch as the factories are all subterranean, I'm sorry to say that for the most part it was impossible for me to visit them." "May I ask that you give us your reason for the emergency

call?" Rhodan showed his impatience. Kulman was startled by it. Marshall straightened up and regarded the agent closely. "I never sent out such a signal," said Kulman. "Only a few hours ago I received a call signal from the Gazelle and was instructed that I was to be picked up. I can't explain it. Did you receive the alarm from Swoofon?" Rhodan's eyes were narrowed as he replied, "Unmistakably, Kulman. And from you! I asked Central Intelligence in Terrania about it and they confirmed that very point. There can be no mistake. Exactly 1 day ago by Earth time you transmitted a 3-alarm alert and asked to be picked up. If anybody has any explaining to do around here, Kulman, it's you." Marshall probed the thoughts of the agent while the latter was searching for an answer. He couldn't discover anything of a suspicious nature. As far as he could judge on the basis of telepathy, Kulman spoke the unvarnished truth. Not a word of what he had said so far was a lie. Kulman had sent out no distress signal nor had he asked to be picked up from Swoofon. "Maybe it has something to do with the experience I had just shortly before the call signal came from the Gazelle," he said with a slow deliberation. "But I don't know..." "An experience?" Rhodan's interest perked up as he glanced swiftly at Marshall, whose expression was suddenly intent. "Tell us about it. Every minor detail can be important." Kulman looked searchingly about and was glad when Rhodan indicated an empty chair for him. He sat down with some relief. He had suddenly come to feel very tired. "You mustn't think, sir, that I am of a timid nature. I've had my tests of courage and passed them all pretty well and besides that there's nothing on Swoofon to make anybody edgy. I even made out pretty well with the Springers and I was able to exchange gifts with many of them—you know, the reciprocity bit. That's how I even got Muzzel, my possonkalah, dachshund, as I guess you'd prefer to call him. Possonkals come from a distant world that's somewhere near Arkon and they're considered to be intelligent and useful house pets. They catch vermin and are normally vegetarian although they also eat meat. They like to play and they're easily tamed. In short, I was glad when they made me a present of him." "When was that?" interjected Rhodan. After an almost imperceptible hesitation, Kulman answered: "2 months ago, sir." Rhodan noticed that Marshall raised an eyebrow at this. "Yes, it was 2 months ago. Since then, Muzzel—that's what I named the little fellow—he's won over my friendship and my complete confidence. We've practically become inseparable." "Doesn't your love for animals go a little too far?" inquired Sikermann sarcastically in spite of Rhodan's warning look. Pucky sat up on the couch and stared at Kulman. No one could have guessed what was going on in his furry head—not even Marshall. "What's the objection to loving animals?" asked Kulman wonderingly. "Muzzel saved my life and I can't say that of anyone else I know—even of you, Lieutenant Colonel." Sikermann started as Pucky began to giggle unabashedly. He went along with the deserved rebuff, especially since he often regarded himself as an 'animal' and had often expressed the opinion that the majority of reasoning animals had better characters than most of civilized humanity. "Nobody's making any objections to your affections for this Muzzel of yours," Rhodan assured him. "But let's get down to that experience you mentioned. Maybe it will cast some light on who it was that put out a 3-alarm distress signal in your name, if as you say it wasn't you who did it." Kulman nodded uncertainly and continued: "Everything had gone along well until today. Every day there are ships landing at the spaceport of the largest city on Swoofon, which is called Swatran. I hadn't paid much attention to them but today a certain spacecraft caught my attention right away because the crew members were acting so strangely and uncivilized. I immediately surmised that these fellows were pirates. "This suspicion was confirmed. They wanted to pick a fight. I had just concluded some purchases in the city and was about to return to the small village where I was staying the last week or so when these fellows jostled me around. I'm sure they were Springers. They were brutish, bearded ruffians with rayguns in their belts. It reminded me of the Wild West in America of several centuries ago. "Naturally I defended myself but they had the edge on me in numbers. I couldn't depend on the Swoon for any help

because for one thing they're too little and besides they always give every fight a wide berth, So I was left to my own resources. I gave the first one a belly hook that sent him to the ground but this only aroused the others more. Like a bunch of commandos they grabbed for me. "I got away as fast as I could and ducked into a side street. You may recall that the gravity on Swoofon is only about 1/4th Earth's gravity and that came to my aid. I leaped through the streets practically broad-jumping, jumping right over the small houses in the native quarter and finally got to safety. "Or at least I assumed as much. I reached the little village, of course, but there I discovered that Muzzel was nowhere to be found. The dog had disappeared without a trace. What else could I do but to go in search of him? Someone had seen him running toward the north." "In the north there was nothing but mountains, deserts and high tablelands. What would take Muzzel there? I put the pirates of Swatran out of my mind and undertook a long hike which finally ended in a plain. And there I found Muzzel. He lay on a flat stone asleep and seemed to be baking himself in the sun. As I stood before him, he woke up, trustingly blinked his eyes at me and acted exactly as if there were nothing more normal and reasonable than to be lying there sleeping in the desert." "That was when it happened. A blinding flash came down out of a clear sky and struck the ground not more than 50 feet away where the rocks began to glow and melt. Then this small ship landed, hardly more than 30 feet in length and cylindrical in shape. 5 men jumped out and ran towards me. I could see by their threatening pistols and old-fashioned knives that they weren't out to have a Sunday picnic." "The whole incident is inexplicable to me because prior to the episode in Swatran I had never seen these thugs before in my life-yet they acted as if they had an old account to settle with me. With a great roaring and shouting they jumped on me. And then, gentlemen, was when Muzzel went into action." Kulman made a slight pause and looked about him with an air of triumph. He noted that his audience had become engrossed. To his surprise he recognized in the eyes of the mouse-beaver an undisguised sympathy for him, for they seemed to glisten happily. Pucky's ears were standing straight up and his incisor tooth had come into prominence as a demonstration of his inner satisfaction over the account so far. Kulman continued: "Muzzel charged all 5 of the fellows and set an example for me because I have to admit frankly that I was pretty seared. He bit the first attacker and made him drop his pistol and then bit his leg until he fell to the ground yelling." "The 2nd Springer didn't fare much better. He came at me in a flying tackle that would have brought him right on top of me. I dodged to one side and was about to bat him one when Muzzel was there ahead of me and bit him in the back of the neck." "I took care of the 3rd one with my bare fists, while Muzzel took on the 4th. The 5th man dropped his gun and sprinted out of there like crazy. In view of the ship and all, Muzzel and I decided to take our leave. From a distance I observed that the wounded men made it to safety. Then the small ship took off and soon disappeared in the sky. I still don't know what those characters wanted from me. Probably we'll never know. Anyway there's one thing for sure: they were not anything I would have sent out a 3-alarm alert for nor would they have been a reason for my wanting to be relieved at my station on Swoofon." "Nobody is saying they were," said Rhodan. "Besides, it would be technically impossible. You say that the ambush occurred several hours before the Gazelle landed. However, Terrania received the 3-alarm yesterday. Where were you yesterday, Kulman?" The question was straight and to the point. "I spent yesterday in my cabin, about 120 miles from Swatran. It was more like a shed. The Swoon built it for me and in their eyes maybe it was a warehouse. Inside the hut I could just barely stand up straight." "And you didn't activate your hyper-transmitter?" "No. I'd certainly have to know whether or not I did that!" "Perhaps you'd have to know," corrected Rhodan. He glanced at Marshall again and received confirmation that Kulman was speaking the truth. Then he cursed inwardly to himself. What could it be that just failed to fit together in the whole crazy story? Certainly Kulman couldn't be telling the truth at the same time he was lying. Or could he? This question started Rhodan on the right track but for

the time being he kept the thought to himself. Kulman appeared to be confused. He ran a hand nervously through his hair. "That's just about all I know, sir. After the attack by the pirates I came back to the village. Muzzel had a slight injury from the fight and could hardly walk. I carried him under my arm and bandaged him up later. After all, the dog had saved my life. You can understand now maybe why I don't want to leave him behind." Without waiting for a comment he added: "Then about 4 or 5 hours ago my receiver started buzzing. A strange voice told me that the Chief was waiting for me and that I was to be picked up. Naturally I was surprised but I kept assuming that there were some tactical reasons why I was to be removed from Swoofon. Then what I get hit with is that I was supposed to have sent a message myself, asking to be relieved at my post. Now maybe you can understand why I'm all mixed up." "We understand completely, Kulman," Rhodan assured him. "And we'll also cut off the questioning for now. The Drusus is going back to Earth. There we will have your full report tested and analysed. I don't believe you will have any more difficulties. It's clear that somebody-I repeat, somebody-has used your transmitter in order to put in a request for you to be picked up. And now just tell me one thing more: for whom do the Swoon work?-I mean their factories. Who are their principal customers?" Kulman prepared to satisfy this inquiry but at that moment the intercom buzzed. Rhodan switched it on and the small videoscreen above the pilot's seat brightened, showing the face of a communications officer. "Please excuse the interruption, sir," said the officer, "but I have something that may be important. We're picking up signals on a little used hypercom frequency. I mean the signal is straight carrier wave, sir, without any modulation. It sounds as though the sender is trying to have us track him." "And where do these signals come from?" Rhodan asked. "We couldn't determine that with certainty, sir. The transmission only lasted a few seconds so we could only try to get bearings on it with 2 closely aligned receivers. The best we can determine is that the transmitter can't be more than 6 miles from the ship." "6 miles!" gasped Rhodan. He was caught by surprise but only remained confused for about a second. When the communications man answered, "Yes, sir," a faint smile touched his lips as though the strange incident were more of a joke than a matter of concern. He turned to his officers. "Excuse me, gentlemen," he said calmly. "Naturally we'll have to shelve Mr. Kulman's detailed report until later, under the circumstances. You've all heard what just happened. It should be clear to you that we have to be exceptionally careful now." The obvious inference was that the unknown signaller would be heard from a 2nd time and they had to prepare for it. So it was that communications men with portable signal tracers were posted in various places and were told to keep their receivers open. Rhodan placed the command of the ship provisionally in the hands of Reginald Bell and transferred himself to the Com Central in order to take a look at the registered carrier wave on an oscilloscope. The communications officer set up the signal raster for him on the scope. What was presented on the screen was an almost mathematically perfect sine wave which did reveal that it was modulated by an equally perfect sine-wave of lower frequency. This was of course a cross-sectional representation of a single signal. There was a separate oscillogram strip which laid out the entire wave-series of the signal on a smaller scale. Rhodan was able to see that the signal train was not in an evenly spaced series. Rather the variations of intervals were more or less randomly distributed. Also in duration the signals were different between the intervals. "What do you make of it?" Rhodan asked the officer. "Do you think it's possible that this may be due to natural causes?" The officer shook his head. "No, sir. If I read you right you're thinking about occasional occurrences of hypercom types of signals that are caused when cosmic particles or sometimes larger quanta of natural energy strike the defence screen of the ship." "Quite correct." "Such a natural phenomenon would look differently, sir," the officer maintained. "In no case would it have this kind of regularity. What we're dealing with here is 2 mathematically perfect wave-forms which in all probability have been generated by a properly

functioning hypercom transmitter." "In all probability? Not in all certainty?" The communications man smiled. "No, naturally not with absolute certainty, sir. In cases like this there can't be complete certainty. The probability of such a series of wave patterns being generated by natural causes is extremely minute but nevertheless not excluded." Rhodan nodded and stared thoughtfully into space. "The irregular intervals between every 2 signal peaks," he said after awhile. "Wouldn't you regard that as an indication of natural occurrence?" "I haven't given that any thought, sir," admitted the officer. "But I think that any owner of a hypercom transmitter may choose what intervals he wishes to have between signals. He can make them regular or irregular, as he pleases." "You say owner," interposed Rhodan. "It could also be that an automatic transmitter is involved. It would be unusually strange if an automatic device were to send signals with irregular intervals, don't you think?" "Unusually strange, yes," admitted the officer, "but not impossible." Rhodan smiled. "I can see now," he said, "that I'm not going to corner you into giving me any peace of mind. One more question: at the time you received the signals did you notice anything suspicious moving about in the vicinity of the ship?" "No, sir. Absolutely nothing." Rhodan turned to go. "Good," he said. "Keep on the lookout and report to me immediately if you hear something new." ... Upon leaving the Com Central, Rhodan met Atlan the Arkonide. "Aha! I see I've come too late," laughed Atlan. "You have taken a look at the oscillograms?" Rhodan nodded, "You don't have to go in there because I can tell you. They showed 2 perfect wave patterns. According to the communications man, they could only be produced by a transmitter." Atlan appeared to be suspicious of this. "And according to you...?" he asked. Rhodan shrugged. "I don't have any opinion in this case. My communications officer understands more about radio engineering than I do, so why should I try to be smarter than he is?" "I see," said Atlan, nodding thoughtfully. "You are in the painful position of a man who has to be careful while he hurries. You have to find the right speed that will take care of both progress and caution, wouldn't you say? Strange..." They had stepped onto the conveyer strip and now glided along together through the corridor. "What's strange?" Rhodan asked. "Nothing important. I was just thinking that it would be easily solved if there were a specific mathematical formula. The most favourable solution could then be found through a differentiation of equations in which a balance point would be found between the extremes." Rhodan looked at him in amazement. "Atlan, you're a philosopher," he chided him. "But I don't need a philosopher as much as I do a criminologist..." "Oh? You consider the case that grave?" Rhodan answered with a counter-question: "Well, how serious do you think it is?" Atlan pursed his lips and then smirked slightly. "First I'd prefer to hear your own version." "Alright. The way I see it, we could have a slight chance of finding that the signals were caused by natural phenomena. Around large vessels equipped with defence screens there are always hyper-electromagnetic sources that produce some kind of radiation. During space battles when the screens have to absorb one shot after another, these phenomena become so strong that they sometimes disable telecom voice traffic. Of course such interference signals are not uniform in nature. So the probability that we can relax in this case is fairly small. "Secondly: it was not possible for Communications to obtain any precise bearings. With 2 receivers fairly close to each other, my com man was only able to determine that the signal source was within about 6 miles of the ship-and, I noted, from the direction of the sun Swaft. Those are results that I would call a bit vague. It could well be that the signals have reached us from a much greater distance, such as from Swoofon itself, and that they have nothing at all to do with us. That presupposes, of course, that my operator made a wide error." Atlan interrupted. "But you don't like to admit your crewmen are capable of wide errors, right?" Rhodan ignored the friendly barb. "Thirdly," he continued, the possibility naturally exists that somebody has planted a spy in our vicinity, whose assignment may be to inform his principals concerning the position of the Drusus. That of course is dangerous

and we have to take precautions against it." He looked at the Arkonide. "So that's my thought on the subject. And now I wish you'd bring your own idea out into the open." Atlan appeared to be very pleased. "I knew I'd save a speech by letting you say your piece first," he said. "I'm quite in agreement with you: small probability of it being a harmless coincidence and a heavy probability of our having a spy in the neighbourhood. But I'm wondering about the fact that our tracking equipment seems unable to detect anything in the vicinity of the ship." Rhodan returned a grim laugh. "I can answer that one for you. If we're actually dealing with a spy, he isn't lurking about in near proximity to the ship but inside the ship itself!" In the meantime he had decided to wait 5 hours in the same spot. If by that time they failed to pick up any further sign of the signaller, the Drusus would then make a transition of about 200 light-years toward the centre of the galaxy. If they failed to detect the phantom transmitter again at the new location, then they might consider themselves to have been victims of a self-deception. At which time no one would have any further objections to a return to Earth. Because the prime objective of anyone sending out location signals—if indeed there were such a person—would have to be a transmission of data precisely at the termination of each hyper-transit, so that the receiver would be able to get a picture of the overall course-pattern of the ship. Rhodan recalled that on a previous occasion he had fled from Arkonide forces in the direction of the galactic centre. In case the Robot Regent of Arkon was the authority behind the present spy, whom Rhodan suspected of being on board, then for the 2nd time in 60 years he would receive information that a spaceship from Earth was moving toward the middle of the galaxy. The machine possessed an extraordinarily logical thinking capacity. It would consider the fact that Rhodan would never betray the slightest hint of the location of his home planet when he felt threatened or observed and flew a retreat. Rhodan was amused by the thought that this 2nd flight to the centre of the galaxy might nevertheless persuade the Robot Regent that perhaps Terra might lie in this sector Bell watched while Baldur Sikermann fed the transit coördinates into the nav computer. "We still have time, I presume?" "Several hours, sir. For the moment the risk of a transit jump is too great. If there is a transmitter on board the Drusus who could signal our position..." "I chalk all that up to a natural coincidence," said Bell with emphasis and he sat down next to Sikermann. "Don't you think so?" Before Sikermann could answer he was cut off by a shrill voice. Pucky had slipped off the couch and waddled to the door, which he opened psychokinetically. He was fond of employing his mutant faculty for his own convenience. "I'm just going to have a look at this Muzzel," he announced, and walked out into the corridor. "To hear Kulman talk, he must be a model of virtue and obedience." "What's on your mind, Pucky?" asked Bell. Naturally he suspected shenanigans. "Leave that dachshund alone!" "He's been disinfected, so I won't catch any fleas—if that's what you mean," Pucky reassured him. There was a merry twinkle in his brown eyes. "Maybe he can scratch my back!" Having spoken, he disappeared. The door closed by itself. Bell stared at the door. "I hope he doesn't start any nonsense," he muttered. For the present, however, Pucky was not plotting mischief. He teleported himself to the disinfection department near the main entrance lock and arrived in time to encounter some chemists. He asked them where they had put Muzzel. His 2nd jump brought him into the cabin that was assigned to Kulman. The agent was still in the mess room but could return at any moment. Rolled into a little ball under the table was the remarkable animal that Kulman had praised so highly. Pucky materialized himself within about 6 feet of the dog and sat down to observe it. He regarded the animal attentively and noted that it was apparently sleeping. Cautiously he probed with his thoughts and sought to penetrate softly into the brain of the creature, which represented a strange form of life to him. Kulman had maintained that Muzzel was not intelligent enough to make himself understood. And of course the dachshund couldn't speak. But if he had even a minimum of intelligence he should be able to think. And Muzzel was thinking. At first Pucky was

surprised that a dachshund, which after all was only a country dog, should be dreaming of water and plankton, but then he recalled that even more intelligent creatures, as for example man, often dreamed of the oddest things. The consciousness of sleep usually had no relation to the waking state. Now why shouldn't Muzzel be dreaming of plankton? The thoughts were blurred and indefinite but they were thoughts nevertheless. Somewhat reassured that at least there was a starting point with Muzzel, Pucky turned his attention to his outward appearance. Indeed, Kulman's companion truly looked like a dachshund. The comical, sloppy ears were not the only feature that reminded one of its loyal quadruped counterpart on Earth, which in more technical circles was known as a badger hound. Pucky wasn't any expert in these matters. For him a dachshund was a dachshund, whether its legs were crooked or straight. As though the dog had sensed Pucky's arrival in his sleep, he opened his eyes at this moment. Pucky saw that the beautiful golden brown eyes contrasted remarkably with his silver-grey pelt. Pucky grinned and showed his incisor tooth. At the same time he thought intensively: Hello, Muzzel! My name is Pucky and I'm your friend. Do you want to play hide & seek? There was no reaction Pucky could detect that would indicate his telepathic message had been received and understood. On the contrary, the golden eyes seemed to be filled with incomprehensible wonder over the fact that there was a mouse-beaver named Pucky. At first Pucky thought he detected a trace of fright but of course it might have been an illusion. But there were thought impulses nonetheless... They were still weak and not very definite but without doubt they were present. Actually then, this Muzzel could think, even though he wasn't a telepath who could receive thoughts. So telepathy might prove to be a one-sided conversation. Perhaps he could understand English, thought Pucky. Certainly Kulman must have talked to him. So he said, slowly and clearly: "My-name-is-Pucky-and-I'm-your-friend. Do you want to play hide & seek?" It seemed to him that Muzzel was listening. The dachshund cocked his head and peered at the mouse-beaver. A happy twinkle came into his eyes. Then, quite suddenly, Pucky received the faint answer in his brain: You are Pucky. We play hide & seek. What is that? The mouse-beaver was so overcome with joy that he felt like hugging Muzzel. Communication was established. He had found a new playmate! "It's quite simple, Muzzel! One of us gets a minute to go hide somewhere in the ship and then the other one has to search for him. When the searcher hasn't found the one who is hiding within 10 minutes, he loses. Haven't you ever played hide & seek in your life?" No, never. "Then it's about time!" Pucky assured him. "It's a lot of fun. Or are you too tired?" Muzzel yawned, since he was reminded about it. He stretched himself and got up. He pattered over to Pucky and sniffed him. You smell pretty good. The mouse-beaver was so dumbfounded that he couldn't think of an appropriate answer. So he smelled good, did he? Up until now no one had ever told him that, even though they had also never mentioned that he stank, either. Where is Kulman? Pucky pulled himself together. "He should be here any time now, Muzzel. Unfortunately his report was interrupted, because... because..." He considered whether or not he should tell the dachshund what had happened. Actually it didn't concern him. "He was hungry and so he's eating now," he continued, thankful that Muzzel couldn't read thoughts. "Don't you want something to eat?" It seemed as if the question startled Muzzel, although of course Pucky could have been mistaken. Why should Muzzel be startled when he merely inquired about his appetite? I guess I am hungry after all, Pucky. "Then come with me and I'll get you something. Do you like carrots?" Carrots? It seemed too involved for the mouse-beaver to explain to the stranger the excellent features of a fresh carrot. Just let him try one and then he would see. Maybe then the chief cook of the Drusus would have to dish out a double ration. And then perhaps if Muzzel weren't quite so pleased with them, they could still be... well... Pucky became lost in pleasurable speculation, and almost forgot Muzzel. However, he pulled himself together in time to remember his duties as a host. He got up and opened the door into the corridor with his front paw. Muzzel could not have done this because he was

too small. Once outside, Pucky pushed the door closed again and wondered what Muzzel might say if he were to demonstrate to him the art of teleportation. But he must take one thing at a time so that all the surprises would not be used up all at once. An officer came around the corner and approached them. In Muzzel's dachshund perspective he could only make out the legs at first and he moved involuntarily to one side to make way for the man. He had suffered some bad experiences already with the legs of the larger 2-legged species on Swoofon. The Springers weren't very considerate. Pucky marched along straight ahead and if Lt. Hicks had not looked up at this moment he would certainly have stumbled over the mouse-beaver and sprawled at full length on the plastic carpeting. Instead, however, Lt. Hicks came to a halt and rubbed his eyes incredulously. Pucky was taking a walk with an actual dachshund! Where had the dog come from? He didn't know that a dog was on board the Drusus, much less a dachshund, which was a species that wasn't much accustomed to discipline. This had been a well-known fact, for centuries. But to have one on board the Drusus-! "Don't strain your brain, Homo Sapiens," twittered Pucky and he drew himself to his full height in order to give weight to his words. "And now we'd be grateful if you would move out of the way so that we may pass please." Lt. Hicks jumped to one side so swiftly that he almost fell through the door into the room inside. His eyes fairly popped as Pucky said to the dog: "Let's go!" and walked away with him. He watched the unlikely pair depart and muttered to himself: "Is this a battleship of the Solar Empire or are we in some kind of flying circus?" Pucky waited until Hicks was out of sight and then stopped. "Are you a good runner?" he asked the dachshund. Muzzel had sat down on his hindquarters. Why do you ask? I only have short legs and I'm tired. Also I'm hungry. Why doesn't Kulman feed me? "Right away, Muzzel. The kitchen is a long way below. We'll make a jump." The golden eyes beamed with trustfulness but they also expressed the unspoken question: jump? Pucky grinned with glee as he went over to Muzzel, grasped him by the scruff of the neck, then concentrated on a certain well-known destination. When Muzzel opened his eyes again he saw that his location had changed without his knowing it. He couldn't know that he had just been transferred through more than half a mile in the thousandth part of a second, much less that he had been dematerialised and reconstituted in the process, but he recognized nevertheless that he was now in a different place than he had been before. His new friend Pucky had said something about making a 'jump'... Hm-m-m... "So here we are," said the mouse-beaver happily and caused the door to swing open before him. Beyond was heard the clatter of dishes, the mutterings and scoldings of hurrying chefs, the hum and sizzle of the giant cooking installations and all the mysterious sounds of a modern electronic kitchen. "Hey, fatty!" Somewhere in the mist and vapours of cooking food a massive figure started as though struck by a lightning bolt. Then the white-clothed, very fat man stomped through his miracle kitchen and was soon standing before his 2 visitors. "It isn't lunch time yet!" rumbled the deep voice reproachfully, albeit with hidden overtones of fright. 'Fatty' had never forgotten that Pucky had once teleported him and locked him inside the giant reefer where he had left him for several hours. "Is there something special on your mind?" Only now did he see Muzzel. There was a cautious nuance of rejection in his expression. "Well now, what's the little bowwow doing here?" "That's a dumb question!" retorted Pucky. "I brought him here." Fatty drew himself up. "Dogs are not allowed in the kitchen; that's strictly against the rules!" "Muzzel isn't a dog, he's a possonkal." Pucky informed him. "And besides, nobody said we wanted to come into your dumpy old stink place." But it smells pretty good here, thought Muzzel with awakened interest. "Stink place!" exclaimed Fatty, insulted. "If you say that just once more I'll..." "You'll what?" queried Pucky, tensing. Fatty elected to climb down a bit. Once again he was coming out on the short end with this uncanny creature. Only recently his 2nd cook had suddenly become weightless and had flown about through the kitchen for so long that they had finally had to bring him down with a lasso and lash him to the main floor braces of the master

grill installation. Even Pucky hadn't been able to move him then. "Do you wish something?" asked Fatty in mock friendliness. "How can I help you?" "By giving us about 10 pounds of fresh carrots, 1 pound of raw meat and a bottle of water," advised Pucky. "And hurry it up!" Fatty turned about and trudged away. Only a half minute later he returned with the requested order on a tray. "I'll do anything you say, Pucky, but-orders are orders. Dogs are not allowed..." "You already said that," the mouse-beaver interrupted him and turned to Muzzel. "Let's go before he gets melancholy or something. It's a bit more pleasant in my cabin." Fatty waited until his 2 strange visitors had dematerialised. Then he slammed the door shut with a loud curse and went back into the kitchen. For a few hours afterwards his help didn't have it very easy. Pucky and Muzzel, meanwhile, tackled their booty with gusto. Then they lay down on the couch and went to sleep. In the meantime Kulman had returned to his cabin and missed his companion. A short investigation revealed that the dachshund had been brought to the cabin after his disinfection treatment and that he must still be there. But he was not in his cabin, Kulman retorted. He attached great worth to the dog and was sure that everyone would gradually come to regard him as a highly worthwhile creature. Kulman jumped suddenly when a figure materialized nearby and Pucky presented himself. The mouse-beaver's sleepy eyes reflected annoyance. "Man, you'll wake up every telepath in the place, the way you carry on about Muzzel! Relax. Muzzel is with me. We've had something to eat and want to take a rest. Later we'll play games together." "Play!" gasped Kulman. "What's that supposed to mean?" "You should have hung onto some of your childhood sentiments," advised Pucky and disappeared without giving any further particulars. Kulman remained somewhat at a loss.

3/ ROBOTS DON'T BLEED

While Perry Rhodan occupied his post in the Command Central, Atlan had soon retired in order to ponder the latest situation. From his own observations he knew that calm, concentrated reflection often produced astonishing results and with these one approached the solution to a problem much more effectively than those who tried to get at the answers by fretful activity and grasping at straws. Nevertheless, after an hour or so the Arkonide came to realize that in this case the principle of meditation didn't especially apply. His points of reference were too meagre. Actually all he had was that the Com Central had picked tip signals resembling tracking or search signals and this was obviously too little to support any really promising mental cogitation. Atlan asked himself whether or not the ship's master positronicon might be able to do something with that one piece of information and so he asked for machine time on the giant computer. Inasmuch as the Drusus hovered motionless in an engine cutoff state, with the planned transition data already in the registers, his request was granted immediately and he was given the use of the machine for an hour and a half. Setting up the program of questioning was no simple task for the Arkonide. Questions, which an organic intelligence such as a Terranian, for example, might have answered without hesitation by merely placing a finger on the forehead, were difficult to formulate for a positronicon so that it would not only reject them but even respond in a form of counter-inquiry in order to enhance the further development of the program. Using a number of facts in the case, Atlan first set them up in a 'computer language' format and fed them into the machine. In this way the positronicon learned that at the moment the Drusus was located in the vicinity of the sun Swaft, that on the planet Swoofon lived the Lilliputian race of the Swoon and that these people were the best micro-mechanical technologists in the galaxy. Also Kulman's assignment as an agent was mentioned and, finally, the incident concerning the reception of the search signals. After Atlan had duly inserted this information he prepared a punched card which requested the machine to formulate an analysis of the present situation. The massive calculating equipment began to go to work. To the normal sounds of the computer operations room were added an increased level of relay noises, a clicking of automatic dials and the rustling of inner mechanical workings as the machine fed the punched card into its data-reading section. Atlan leaned back comfortably in his seat. The question he had asked

was difficult to answer. Even as tremendous a machine as the positronicon of the Drusus would require at least a quarter of an hour to digest the data and then bring forth an answer from the remotest branches of its long chain of logic circuits. The Arkonide leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. While the positronicon continued to labour, he relaxed, concentrating on the welding lines of the ceiling panels and the blue-white light of the fluorescent lamps, which were semi-prismatic in their effect due to the narrow slits his eyes had become. There was no one other than himself in the large room. The subtle whisperings of the computer had penetrated his consciousness with a sleep-inducing effect. Atlan sank deeply into his musings. He did not notice that he was being observed. He did not see the unblinking eyes that watched him from between 2 card cases. He heard a noise but as he straightened up with a start and looked about him, the lights went out. The console and computer parity lamps still blinked and flashed on the panels but after the brightness of illumination which had just filled the room their light was not sufficient now to even reveal his hand in front of his face. The Arkonide sensed the presence of danger. He stood up and drew back against the wide console's control panel. He heard the sound of someone or something slinking across the floor and straight through the room toward him but before he could make rhyme or reason out of it he saw a blinding flash that seemed to explode inside his head. An unbearable pain spread through his body and in less than a second he was unconscious. . . . Precisely at the appointed time the Drusus began its journey. At a distance of several astronomical units it passed Swaft and somewhere beyond it the ship sprang into hyperspace. The phantom tracker was not heard from again. In the Command Central there was new hope that a purely natural interference effect had put a burr under their saddles for nothing and that actually there was no bearing transmitter on board the Drusus. As the pain of distortion in coming out of hyperspace subsided and the new star regions took form on the viewscreens, the men sat at their stations straining to hide their excitement, determined not to miss a single order that might come from the Commander. Minutes passed-silently. Finally Bell, who sat in the First Officer's seat, couldn't control his impatience any longer. "Okay, okay! So we've made it! All our nail chewing was for nothing. The whole thing was nothing but blind-" It seemed as if the intercom had only been waiting for this first sign of erroneous optimism. Its loud buzzing interrupted Bell in mid-sentence. The face of a communications officer appeared on the small screen above Rhodan's position. There was so much excitement in the wide-staring eyes, such a seeming readiness to explode, that Bell knew at first glance he had been mistaken. "We have triangulated his position, sir!" cried the officer, dispensing with the usual formalities. "E-deck, Section 2, at the level of the main corridor." Rhodan seemed to move mechanically. His motions were like those of a machine and equally as swift and precise. The face of the communications man faded from the screen, to be replaced by that of Capt. Farrington. "E-deck, Section 2, main passage level," said Rhodan with amazing calmness. "That's very close, Farrington. He can't get away from you." Farrington merely gave a brief nod. The viewscreen faded immediately. Rhodan stood up. "Reginald Bell has the command till further notice," he announced curtly. "I want to witness this personally, on the spot." The Control Central itself was on E-deck, the central deck of the Drusus. Across to the 2nd section was a distance of 300 yards. The conveyor belt served to cover the distance in less than 2 minutes. Farrington and his men had long since arrived at the scene of action. But one had only to look at their faces to know that they hadn't found anything yet nor did they seem to know even where to look for it. Farrington gave a concise report. "We've blocked off the passage at both ends, sir," he explained in the process. "Not even a mouse could get in or out-or through the adjoining rooms, either. But we haven't been able to find anybody. If somebody was here-" Rhodan smiled in spite of the seriousness of the situation. "Who's telling you that it might be a somebody?" he asked. "It could just as well be a something." Farrington was

not to be confounded. "Well, we didn't find a somebody or a something, sir," he replied with a ready wit. "We've gone through the passage and all adjoining rooms. Everything is in order. In the meantime I checked with Communications as to how exact their fix is. They claim it's down to plus or minus 10 yards, more or less. He couldn't have escaped us, sir." Rhodan raised his brows. "So-since you haven't found him or it on the other end of the passage, would you draw the conclusion that no one or thing has been here, either?" Farrington's expression was an unhappy one. "It sounds unbelievable," he admitted, "but that's exactly my conclusion, sir." Rhodan waved a hand. "None of us knows in this case what's believable or not. But before we give up hope, send one of your men down to technical supplies and have him get a hefty suction bellows. Or better yet a good vacuum cleaner." Farrington's eyes widened. "A... vacuum cleaner, sir?" "Correct," Rhodan confirmed with a nod. "And when you have it, see to it that every square inch of the deck, walls, ceiling and adjacent rooms is thoroughly cleaned. Communications sets the focal point within plus or minus 10 yards. So cover 15 yards all around the midpoint so that we won't be missing anything. Oh yes, and one thing more: the dust you collect goes to the analysts. I want them to examine it carefully. Make sure that your men don't miss the smallest fibre in their cleaning work. Do you understand?" Farrington saluted. "I understand, sir." In his eyes had appeared a faint light of comprehension. Rhodan was certain that he would soon come to realize what he was dealing with here. As he stepped onto the conveyor strip and glided away in the direction of the Command Central, he heard Farrington give an assistant the order to go down to the tech section and procure at least 5 vacuum cleaners. But the man didn't seem to be the comprehending type like his chief, because Farrington had to repeat his order 3 times. When Rhodan got back to the Command Central he informed the analytical section of what lay before them and the analysts assured him that they would be able to fulfil the assignment since he had told them what to look for. An hour later Farrington called. He had made sure that his men performed their task with, extraordinary care and thoroughness. "We've vacuumed everything, sir." "Then send one of your men with the dirt to the analytical section." "Yes, sir, at once." The analysts had made preparations. They required only an hour to sift the dust and examine it. They found what they were looking for and called through to Rhodan at once. "A small plastic ball," reported the officer. "It has a diameter of zero-point-two millimetres. Synthetic, sir." "Wait till I get there!" called Rhodan. "We'll have a look at it together." Bell again took over command of the control centre. Rhodan was suddenly in a hurry. Wherever he used a conveyor strip he didn't just stand on it but instead moved along it with distance-demolishing strides. He only required a few minutes to cover the distance of over 2000 feet to the analytical section. Maj. Hill, Chief of the section, had readied the found article for inspection. "How did you find it?" Rhodan asked. "Well, first of all it's bigger than normal dust particles." Hill answered. "And second, it has a radiation component." "Radiation?" "One of the forms of radiation-electrical energy. It must contain a small battery. The energy flow is clearly detectable." "Good. Open it up!" A microtome was used, since it was an automatic cutter that worked on objects too small for hand-guided equipment. The device cut the sphere flawlessly into 2 halves. Under the microscope it became evident that the plastic ball was only a thin shell that enclosed a tangled jumble of tiny coils, semiconductor elements, clockwork parts and similar components. At the first glance Rhodan knew what he had before him. For anyone who worked daily with such equipment, the construction of a hypercom transmitter was simple to understand. In addition to the transmitter itself, which was comparatively primitive and certainly could not have generated anything more than a single-frequency humming note, there were also some tiny little parts that formed a mechanical timer. Hill had also immediately recognized the nature of the object. But he was racking his brain to explain the timer device. "What could its purpose be?" he asked in astonishment. "Quite simple: the transmitter was controlled to send its

signal at a prescribed time." Maj. Hill stared at him wide-eyed. "But that's still..." Without finishing his statement, he muttered to himself and took another look through the microscope. "It's quite a simple arrangement," he continued after awhile. "It can be set for any desired time by means of a voltage impulse from the battery. But actually only one setting is possible." He looked at Rhodan a bit uncertainly. "You are perfectly correct," Rhodan assured him. "If this thing has been responsible for both signal sequences that we picked up before, it means that somebody has to be on board who gave it the 2nd setting. He had to adjust it so that it would start working again immediately after our hypertransit." "Yes, quite so," confirmed Maj. Hill, hardly breathing. "So that means that in addition to the micro-transmitter we have a spy on board who keeps on setting the device so that the ship's position can be reported at strategic times. Isn't that so?" Rhodan laughed. "That would be possible. However I can't accept the idea-it's too much trouble. The spy would have to place the micro-transmitter in some location, then wait until it had sent out its signal, after which he would have to keep under cover and carefully sneak through the corridors to the hiding place of the transmitter and reset it. This fellow has been too clever for us to suspect him of such a clumsy procedure." "But-" gasped Hill, "then how did he..." "He has a number of such transmitters with him," Rhodan interrupted. Hill stared perplexed, first at Rhodan and then at the tiny device that lay cut in half on the smooth dark tabletop. "Such an apparatus is worth at least 100,000 Solars!" he exclaimed. "For its micro-size alone. Do you seriously think, sir, that our spy is so lavishly supplied with funds?" Rhodan nodded. "Yes, I believe so. Don't forget that he got on board in the vicinity of Swoofon. For the Swoon, such micro-equipment isn't extraordinary. On Swoofon this micro-transmitter isn't any more expensive to come by than a full-scale device of the same quality would be on Earth." "Then we still are not clear of this danger?" asked Hill with concern. "If he has a number of these transmitters in his possession..." "I'm convinced that he'll send another signal after our next transition," admitted Rhodan. "If we can't find any other way to block him, we'll have to make as many transitions as may be necessary to make him run out of his supply of transmitters. The only thing I'm afraid of, though..." He didn't finish the sentence. For the time being, Maj. Hill was deprived of hearing what it was that Rhodan feared. It mattered little at the moment because he was too much occupied with his own worries. It was why he forgot to salute when Rhodan left the room. The discovery of the micro-transmitter had brought Rhodan himself to a troubled state of mind. It was now certain that the Swoon had had a finger in the situation. Undoubtedly they had gotten an assignment from the Springers or the Arkonides to manufacture the micro-devices. Whether or not they had any idea to what purpose the Springers intended to put them was doubtful and also immaterial. The only matter of importance here was the fact that in the struggle of the opposition to obtain data concerning the position of the Earth a new technology and technique had been brought into play. Its exotic, unusual nature and microscopic scale made it almost impossible to come up with an effective counter-measure against it. Certainly the process of maintaining a cautious vigil for further signals, together with precise triangulations applied to their source, would make it possible to find one micro-transmitter after another and render them useless. But no one knew how many of the devices the spy may have brought with him or how long it might take to find them all. The Drusus and her crew did not have an unlimited length of time at their disposal. Who was the spy? The only obvious answer to this question had to be: either Kulman or his dog. Since the departure of the Drusus from the Earth, no one other than these 2 had come on board. However, Rhodan refused to believe that Kulman could have switched his loyalty so drastically. On the other hand, nothing was known concerning the character and make-up of the possonkal named Muzzel. But of course even a possonkal could not carefully hide a micro-transmitter in a selected spot or activate the trigger of the miniature timer. Rhodan toyed for awhile with the

possibility of Muzzel being a robot but then discarded the thought. He recalled that in Kulman's account of the fight with the pirates or Springers, Muzzel had been wounded and had started to bleed. Robots didn't bleed. Moreover, Pucky was Muzzel's special playmate and Pucky possessed powerful telepathic faculties. It would not have escaped his attention if Muzzel were a robot. There still remained the possibility that somebody could have imposed the will of an alien on him. It was not known to Rhodan whether the Springers possessed the means or capability of hypnotizing a person to such an extent that the post-suggestive impressions would have a long-lasting effect but in any case he'd have to take it into account. Anyway, this idea came closest of all to his own personal suspicions in the matter. He resolved to send Kulman at once to the parapsysics experts in psycho-phenomena and have him examined. Although a post-hypnotic state changed mental activity in a very small degree, nevertheless that degree could be detected. The para-psychoanalysts would be able to determine whether Kulman was in a normal state of mind. Rhodan was only a few yards from the bulkhead door of the Command Central when the alarm sirens suddenly began to howl. He increased his pace and arrived in the control room just at the moment when Bell picked up the microphone of the ship's P.A. system, preparatory to putting out a search call for him. He turned and saw Rhodan, then put down the microphone. Without preliminaries he said: "They've found Atlan in the computer room. He's unconscious, apparently from an electric shock!" It required half an hour for the Arkonide to respond to the medical treatment sufficiently to be able to speak. There was no further doubt that he had been struck by the full force of a shock weapon. The charge of the shot must have been considerable. According to the doctors it might have taken Atlan 6 to 8 hours to recover without the aid of the medicine. Atlan's information was scanty. He hadn't seen anything, but he had heard something. The sound he had sensed gave no clue to the perpetrator of the deed. Rhodan ascertained that at the time in question quite a number of crewmembers had been in the vicinity of the computer room. Yet no one had noted anything of a suspicious nature. Which didn't prove much. One of the men who had remained close to the room could have been the guilty one himself. For the time being at least, what was much more important than working on Atlan's vague information was to figure out what the unknown assailant was doing in the computer operations room. Certainly he had not come there merely to work the Arkonide over with his shock weapon. Had he been fooling with the positronicon? Rhodan ordered an inspection of the big machine. The responsible programmers and mathematicians were to determine whether or not the positronicon had been worked outside of its assigned machine times, what work had been done and what information the machine had furnished the enemy agent. During this investigation Rhodan did not forget the plan he had decided upon prior to the alarm: to have Kulman examined. Kulman was still sleeping. This was astonishing when one considered that a hypertransition had occurred in the meantime and that the pains of distortion could normally awaken even the soundest sleeper. Rhodan personally gave Kulman the order to go take the psychophysical examination. He wanted to be able to observe the man's reaction. Kulman didn't seem to be overly astonished when he heard what was wanted of him. He nodded somewhat wearily and said: "Of course, sir. I've been expecting as much. Obviously I should be the first one to be suspected." "It's a relief to see you take it like that," Rhodan confessed. "No one suspected you until now... but we have to maintain security. Trust and brotherhood alone aren't going to see us through this situation. Kulman smiled. "Naturally not, sir." A short while later it became known what the spy had been doing with the positronicon. At 10:32 ship time the machine had been turned on by an unknown operator, which was therefore about a quarter of an hour before Atlan's official machine time began. It was a regulation practice for the so-called 'clear' state of the machine to go into effect automatically 2 minutes prior to the official start of assigned machine times. The purpose of this was to erase all computational or logic operations that had not been completed by previous users and to leave

the machine in unimpeded readiness for use. The automatic 'clear' function had apparently disturbed the unknown operator in his work but at the same time had warned him that someone was about to visit the computer room. He had concealed himself and then knocked out Atlan in order to complete his calculations without interference. And of course he couldn't have had a more favourable condition for doing it. Atlan's machine time had been committed, so that now no visitor was to be expected other than the Arkonide, whereas before he had had to watch out for an interruption at any moment. They had found out also how the lights had been extinguished. Working close to the deck and apparently with the help of a disintegrator, he had eliminated a short length of the main power line. It had not even caused a short circuit. The most alarming discovery was what he had been trying to get from the positronicon. The mathematicians proved that he was attempting to learn the Terranian hypercom code. With very few exceptions, hypercom transmissions were all coded. They were first encoded and then by special means pulse-grouped so that a message that might take half an hour to read could be beamed out in bursts of a thousandth of a second duration. This code system had been developed by Earth mathematicians and differed essentially in its features from the Arkonide system. Even should an unauthorized person succeed in decoding any message, it would contain special internal modifications that would present further difficulties and make a full decodification practically impossible. So the spy wanted to learn the Earth's hyper-communicator code. Undoubtedly it was for the purpose of sending the hard-won information by the quickest means possible to his principal-presumably the robot Regent of Arkon-so that from then on the latter would be in a position to decipher all Terranian hypercom messages. For the present, of course, there was still one question that had not been answered: why hadn't the spy performed his work in a less obvious manner? He must have known that everybody would become alerted after the attack on Atlan in the machine room and that they would try to find out what he was after. And even if he had only a meagre knowledge of the operating method and system of a positronic computer he would have to realize that the experts would quickly ascertain the fact that he was interested in the Terranian hypercom code. Therefore the information obtained would be worthless for him and the robot Regent of Arkon because Terra would naturally develop another code at once. So what did he really have in mind? 4/ BLOOD TEST The Drusus still waited in the empty void. Actually it wasn't 'waiting' in the sense of motion because it was moving at close to the speed of light toward the centre of the galaxy. But in comparison to its velocity during a leap through hyperspace, it was practically standing still. Until now Rhodan had not dared to make the next hypertransit. He had an inner conviction that the attempt would immediately cause another microscopic bearing transmitter to go into action and betray their new position. Then the unknown receiver would be able to place another pin on his chart and on that basis start to get an idea as to the possible destination of the Drusus. Rhodan had to smile when he thought about it. There was no actual danger as long as he didn't decide to return to the Earth in one jump. Eventually, of course, that's what he'd have to do. But only after the spy had been found, whoever he might be. The buzz of the intercom startled him out of his reverie. He was lying in his cabin in order to take a rest after all the excitement. Meanwhile, Atlan may have gotten close to apprehending the unknown assailant. The thought came to him briefly that perhaps the agent had come on board the Drusus by way of Wroma's Gazelle. It was not impossible, yet it was highly improbable. Anyway... He turned a small switch. The face of a slender dark-haired girl appeared on the viewscreen. "Forgive me for disturbing you, sir. Mr. Bell told me where you were and I think this is important enough to..." "Go ahead, Ms. Perez." Rosita Perez was a Cosmopsychologist and a collaborator with the psycho team. "What's with Kulman?" he asked. "Have you completed your examination of him?" "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, sir. Unfortunately I can't give you any conclusive results. But we can't do anything more. Around Kulman's brain there is a block..." "A block? What do

you mean?" Rhodan felt his tension rise as he saw now that his original suspicion might be threatening to prove itself out. There had been something unexplained about Kulman from the beginning. "Don't keep me dangling in the air Ms. Perez." "Perhaps it would be better, sir, for you to come here. If we attempt to break the block with shock treatment there may be certain risks. You yourself know..." "I know," said Rhodan, reaching for his jacket. "Don't do anything more until I get there-in 10 minutes." He switched off the intercom, pondered a few seconds, after which he depressed a button contact that connected him with John Marshall. "John, send André Noir to the parapsych department right away-and tell him to hurry. Thanks." Only then did he get under way. He had hardly finished greeting Rosita Perez then Noir also appeared on the scene. "Did you want to see me, sir?" "I don't know whether or not I'll need you but well soon find out. Ms. Perez, will you give us your report?" By now they had stepped into the white-tiled room and were being given a respectful nod of greeting by the scientists present. Jost Kulman was lying motionlessly on a type of operating table. He could not have moved even if he were conscious because he was held in position by thin leather straps. Hovering over his head was a curious contraption of metallic construction, which was vaguely similar to an ultra-violet lamp, but in its true nature it was considerably different. Electrical conductors connected it to a control apparatus which was humming softly. "He keeps repeating everything he told us before," began Ms. Perez, indicating the unconscious patient. "However we're certain that a hypnotic block has restricted his ability to remember. To put it simply, he's lost his memory or more to the point: it's been replaced by a false one. So you can see how it was possible for Kulman to lie to you and still speak the truth as he knew it. That's why John Marshall couldn't recognize the deception." Rhodan nodded. "I thought as much. But now why? Do you have an explanation?" "It's as simple as it is frightening," said a tall man in a white smock, joining the discussion. "Somebody erased Kulman's memory of the truth. He no longer knows anything about what actually happened on Swoofon. The only thing he can recall is what some unknown person has suggested to him. Whether or not this was done by mechanical means no one is able to say yet with certainty but we'll find out. The only question is: should we force Kulman's true memory to the surface or should we... ah... be more cautious?" "You can speak plainer than that, Mr. Grothe. "What risk are we taking if we use force, as you say?" "Kulman could be killed by it, sir." "Then we will not take the risk," ordered Rhodan quietly. "But we have other possibilities." He turned to the mutant. "Noir, I want you to try to penetrate that block. Don't use force because Kulman's life is too important to us-which is aside from the fact that no life is unimportant. Anyway, try to break that hypnotic spell of his." André Noir nodded. He understood what he was supposed to do. As a hypnotic telepath, or 'hypno', he himself was capable of superimposing his will on another entity and giving hypnotic commands. He was equally capable of lifting the influence of commands so given. Oblivious to the others in the room, he set to work. No one disturbed him. They stared at him as though transfixed. After 10 minutes, Noir finally relaxed and turned to Rhodan. His face was drawn and tired and in his eyes was not only a look of disappointment but also surprise. "Impossible, sir. I can't even break through the defence screen that has been placed around his mind. The hypno who did that is stronger than I am. Perhaps given time, and with patience, we may succeed." "A stronger hypno than yourself?" Disbelief was in Rhodan's voice. "Is that possible?" Noir nodded. "Why not, sir? We could of course be dealing here with the work of a synthetically created hypno, in other words, a robot. But in that case the question would still remain as to whom it serves. Certainly somebody must have given the order to transform Kulman's will." Now Rhodan's suspicions had been confirmed but he wanted to know something else that seemed important. "One more question, Noir. If this is what's happened to Kulman and he's lost his memory, then if his present actions are the result of a newly created memory can a telepath see through him? In other words: if the new Kulman knows he is the spy, can he conceal that fact from

Marshall?" "No," replied Noir. "There's no way he can do it." Rhodan was relieved. "Then he can't be the spy. That's all I wanted to know for now. But keep on trying, Noir. I have to find out who sent that 3-alarm distress call, of which Kulman apparently knows nothing. Perhaps Kulman even sent it himself but the memory of it has been erased. However, if he sent the call there had to be some very serious reason for him to want to be picked up from Swoofon! We have to uncover that reason. Once we have it we'll have the key to the mystery, perhaps even a clue as to the identity of the spy we have on board the Drusus." Noir looked at him askance. "If it isn't Kulman, the only one left is his dog." Rhodan smiled faintly. "Muzzel? No, I consider that completely out of the question. Muzzel is always with Pucky and you can believe me, nothing gets past the mouse-beaver. But I'll warn Pucky since we have to consider all possibilities. Anyway, the dachshund can't be a synthetic dog because he generates organic-type thought impulses, which no robot is capable of. The one proof of anything being a robot is its lack of true thought impulses. And if Muzzel isn't a robot he also can't be the spy because he lacks the necessary intelligence." "Hm-m-m," muttered Noir and looked again at Kulman. "Well, I'll keep on trying, sir, and I'll let you know if I have any success." "Please do that, Noir." Rhodan nodded to the others and left the psychoanalytical department. Deep in thought he walked along the corridor and took the antigrav lift, which brought him several decks higher. Then he continued on the conveyor strip. He stepped off the glideway in front of a cabin door, where he paused a moment before suddenly jerking it open. Pucky sat motionlessly upright in the centre of the cabin with his eyes half-closed as though he was strenuously cogitating. Of course he saw Rhodan, who slowly closed the door behind him, but he took no notice whatsoever. Rhodan, who was himself slightly telepathic, strove in vain to penetrate the mouse-beaver's thoughts. The many-sided little devil had screened off his mind. "What's going on?" asked Rhodan in some surprise. "Where's Muzzel?" When he did not receive an answer, he added: "I heard that you 2 have become close friends and I was told I'd find him here." Pucky didn't answer. Almost imperceptibly the finger of his right 'hand' turned toward the ceiling. Otherwise he didn't move. "Are you supposed to be meditating?" inquired Rhodan amusedly. However the question got him an almost disdainful glance from the mouse-beaver, who did not seem inclined to be disturbed in his strange occupation. "Now talk or else I'll really give you something to meditate about!" Pucky opened one eye completely and looked reproachfully at Rhodan. "Don't distract me. I'm concentrating!" "What on?" "On that lousy possonkal who wants nothing else but to lead me around by the nose." "I don't understand a word of that," confessed Rhodan. "Where is Muzzel, anyway? And why are you concentrating on him?" "We're playing hide seek, of course," explained Pucky gravely. "First it's his turn to hide, then mine. Meanwhile, the other one has to search. Naturally I thought it would be simple for me, since I'm a teleporter and can trace him down everywhere with telepathy. But horsefeathers! The little dickens always finds new hiding places... and better ones! If I couldn't sense the weak emanations from his canine cranium, I'd probably never find him." "Can't you take a break for a moment? I have a few questions I'd like to ask you." "Does it have to be now?" Pucky seemed indignant. "When we're just in the middle of a real keen..." "Yes, right now! When you're alone. A question: can you communicate well with Muzzel? Does he talk at all?" "No, he thinks," Pucky informed him, apparently reconciled to losing this round of the hide & seek game. "I read his thoughts." "And how does he understand you?" "I speak English. He must have learned it from Kulman. For a dog that's stretching it, I guess, although I've always maintained that an Earth dog..." "So then he understands what you say? And then he answers mentally so that you 'hear' him? Very interesting. And what does your dachshund friend think about when he's alone? You know what I mean, don't you? Everybody thinks continuously, even though they may not be aware of it. Is it the same with Muzzel?" "Yes-I suppose so." Pucky hesitated where particulars were concerned because he wasn't sure what the purpose of Rhodan's

question was. "Actually he does keep on thinking, even if it's not much and kind of vague. Most of the time he thinks more feebly than when he wants to tell me something. But he thinks." "Aha." Rhodan nodded thoughtfully, discovering that his idea was confirmed. In no way could Muzzel be a robot. "And what does he think?" Pucky emitted a silly giggle. "Idiotic things for a dachshund, I'd say. Why doesn't he think about rabbits or mice, or about foxes, or just running away to the woods? Why not hot sausages or raw meat? No, he doesn't think of any of those things. Do you know what he thinks about?" "Now how would I know that?" asked Rhodan impatiently. Pucky nodded. "Come to think of it, you're right. How would you know? When he's alone he is always thinking about water. He swims in water and catches plankton. I haven't the slightest idea what that may be but..." "Plankton is the name for the smallest life forms that swim in ocean water. They serve as food for crabs, molluscs, small fish and..." "Ha!" cried Pucky and he began to laugh with a shrill squeaking sound. "Then at one time Muzzel must have hunted for crabs and he can't get it out of his mind!" Rhodan nodded but said nothing. His brow furrowed in thought while his eyes narrowed almost to slits. Pucky assumed that the interrogation was at an end. He closed his eyes, then suddenly jumped almost 3 feet into the air. "I've got him!" he squeaked gleefully. "I finally caught him. He slips up every time he gets lost in his daydreaming about water. He's hiding in F-deck right over our heads-in a storeroom. Just a sec, I'll go get him!" Pucky disappeared instantly but rematerialised again almost at once. The dachshund whined and jumped out of his arms. He came over to Rhodan and sniffed at his legs, after which he wagged his tail in a friendly manner. "He likes you," announced Pucky contentedly. "Dogs have a terrific sense of telling who's to be trusted and who isn't. He likes you, for sure." "I'm happy for that," admitted Rhodan as he bent down toward the dog. "Well, little fellow? Do you like it here with us? Have you made friends with Pucky already?" Muzzel looked at Pucky. There was silence for about 3 seconds, after which the mouse-beaver cried out suddenly. "There! Did you catch that? He also thinks you're pretty neat!" Rhodan shook his head. "I caught nothing. Are you trying to tell me he sent a telepathic message? Then under these favourable conditions I should have picked it up." On Pucky's face was a look of wonderment. "But he telepathed quite clearly! Maybe I'm the only one who can catch his signals? I'm on his wavelength-that's it!" "Nonsense! There must be another explanation. Let's try it again." But even the 2nd and 3rd try produced no change in the situation. Of course Rhodan sensed that the dachshund was thinking but he couldn't understand him. Nevertheless he was convinced that they were not dealing with a robot, especially after Pucky also related to him what they had both had to eat. No, the thought was absurd that Muzzel could even be a spy, much less a robot. Robots did not chew meat and carrots or drink water. He waved a hand to Pucky and went out again into the corridor. It was time to prepare for the next transition. Since they still had to assume that the spy might immediately transmit the ship's position after his return to the normal continuum, the hypertransit again had to be made in the direction of the Milky Way's centre and a minimum of 200 light-years at that. Extensive preparations were made. Now as before, communications men took up positions in strategic places throughout the ship equipped with portable signal tracers. They were all in direct contact with the Control Central in order to give the results of their traces straight through. These calls would be coördinated. Thus within seconds the exact location of the spy transmitter could be determined, should it go into operation again. Capt. Farrington kept his 15-man unit in readiness near the Command Central so that they could jump into action immediately when the tracer reports were in. Also, the Drusus was placed in battle ready status. So each man waited at his post and was not permitted to leave it without special permission. Rhodan arrived in the Command Central and gave the nod to Sikermann, who had once more taken over Bell's position. The 2 men sat beside each other before the massive flight-control console and waited. The programmed hypertransition was close at

hand. Just a few more seconds... And then Sikermann threw in the red-capped switch. Outside the stars went out and with them the universe seemed to disappear, only to reappear immediately with altered constellations. The ship had been transplanted through 200 light-years of distance. The swarm of stars had become markedly thicker. A breathless silence reigned in the Command Central. Everything was the same as during the previous experiment. But this time Bell sat calmly in his seat, not showing the slightest sign of premature optimism. Which was well, because Rhodan's fears were realized. 8 minutes after the transition, the alarm sounded throughout the ship. The individual tracer reports came in and promptly within half a minute the Communications Chief announced the transmitter's location: it was below on the lowest deck, near the vertical axis of the Drusus. The following action was practically routine and everything happened in the same sequence as during the first time in the Swaft System. When Farrington arrived with his men in A-deck, there was no trace of the spy to be found. Without waiting for orders from Rhodan, the vacuum cleaner detail went to work. The analytical laboratory became active immediately afterward and within 1/2 hour Maj. Hill had found the micro-transmitter. The apparatus resembled the first one to a hair. It was a crude, single-frequency transmitter with a tiny, incredibly powerful fusion battery and the same simple clockwork that could be set once. So they had found another transmitter but other than that they had not come a single step further. Rhodan's face was stern and forbidding. "One possibility we haven't thought of before," he said, speaking suddenly into the silence of the room. Everybody looked at him. Bell leaned forward, watching him. "It's not a foregone conclusion that the spy must have come on board in the Swaft System. He could have been on the ship a long time already and only now gone into action. Now would be the most favourable time for him to perform his mission because he'd assume that we're going back to Earth with Kulman. And certainly Kulman's hypnotic block is somehow tied together with it all." Bell shook his head. "But those tiny transmitters! The only place they could have been manufactured would have to be on Swoofon." "Alright, so what! You know Swoofon has been around a little longer than a week or 2. The Swoon have already been working for centuries for the Arkonides and the Springers." Bell nodded and fell silent. The argument was unshakable. Rhodan got up. "So lees have the 3rd transition in 2 hours. Until then I still have one more thing to take care of. You will find me in my cabin." He left the Control Central but instead of going to his own cabin he went to Pucky's. A spaceship one-mile in diameter is a world in itself. If one doesn't know his way around in such a ship he can become hopelessly lost and may only be found again after days of searching-if ever. For Pucky the tremendous hollow sphere of the Drusus represented an ideal playground because he could always find his way about in it. With his teleporting capability it was no problem to hurry from pole to pole or to circumnavigate its equatorial ring. But for Muzzel it was difficult. The dachshund was new on the ship and did not possess the slightest parapsychological characteristic. When it came his turn to go and hide, Pucky would let him out of his cabin and give him a fair head start. Sometimes he would also bring him to some spot and then return to his cabin. But at least Muzzel never had to worry about getting lost in the depths of the ship or going hungry. Pucky would always find him and thus Muzzel always lost the game-which didn't seem to bother him in the least. One more reason for Pucky to take the dog to his heart. Pucky opened the door and said: "This time I'll give you 10 minutes, Muzzel! Go find a safe place. And don't think so much-otherwise I'll catch you right away." The dachshund stirred his crooked little legs, lay back his sloppy ears and raced along the circular passageway like a streak of goosed lightning. Then without pausing he jumped into the dark opening of a lift shaft and allowed himself to be carried gently downward on the antigravity beams toward the centre of the field of gravity, which was the reference point for 'up' or 'down'. After sinking several hundred yards he jumped out of the lift onto C-deck. Again he turned on the speed in order to put as much distance between himself and Pucky as

possible. Naturally, however, this didn't do him any good because the mouse-beaver could spot his prey equally as well at a distance of 100 yards or 6000 miles. But how could the possonkal suspect this? He turned a corner and ran along a narrow passage which led off to someplace or another. It made little difference to him. Soon he would find one of the doors standing open and he would go inside. Then he would hide there very quietly and think of absolutely nothing. Pucky could search for him until he was blue in the face. Muzzel noticed the pair of legs in front of him too late. He ploughed into them pell-mell and turned a couple of somersaults. But the unexpected stroller was also surprised by the collision. He staggered back with an Arkonide curse of anger-Karchak!-then caught himself against the wall. He had almost lost his balance and fallen down. But he collected himself with amazing rapidity and revealed a remarkable presence of mind. By the time he took a 2nd look, Muzzel was still flying through the air. Actually, Muzzel fairly flew because of the force of the collision. The dachshund somersaulted twice in the air before his back crashed into a door panel and he slid down to the deck. The lone stroller was Atlan. He bent down to look at the obviously injured animal but to his great astonishment the possonkal was already back on his 4 legs. Although there was a bloodied scratch across his silvery back, he seemed to give no evidence of any internal injuries. There was only a mild reproach in the gold-coloured eyes. Atlan shook his head wonderingly. Then a strange expression crept into his eyes-a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. "I'm sorry, little fellow," he said, at the same time stroking the dog's wound. His fingers were reddened and he felt the living warmth of the blood that welled up in pearl-sized droplets from the fresh injury. He noted carefully that it coagulated on his finger and did not streak out through the dog's silky pelt. "Does it hurt very much, little one?" Muzzel whined slightly as though he wished to answer. He timidly wagged his tail and sniffed Atlan's legs, which had been the cause of his heavy tumble. Then with a half-whine that was half an expressive little growl he let it be known that he wasn't mad any more at these 2 sources of his collision and that he was quite ready to forgive their owner. Or at least this is what Atlan gathered. "What are you doing down here on C-deck?" the Arkonide asked while shaking his head suspiciously. "Are you playing hide & seek with Pucky again?" Muzzel began to whine once more, this time apparently a whimper of pain. It was no wonder, since the impact of his fall must have been hard. In fact it was a wonder he hadn't broken his bones. But before Atlan could consider what he should do about the situation, Pucky appeared. He had searched mentally for Muzzel from his cabin and so had become aware of this incident-also that Atlan had started an audacious line of reasoning as a result but one which Muzzel's deportment had quickly deflated. Especially by means of the fresh blood from the wound. "Atlan, why do you have to be blundering around in just this particular passageway?" Pucky inquired shrilly with a hint of anger. "The ship's a mile wide and yet you-" The immortal interrupted him. "Would you do me the kindness of taking Muzzel to sickbay so that his wound may be treated?" he asked. "I'd appreciate it very much. Next time I'll be more careful." He nodded to Pucky and walked away. However, he was careful not to brush anything against his right hand, which was still smeared with the dog's blood. Pucky watched him go with narrowed eyes but he sought in vain to penetrate the mental screen that Atlan had placed around his brain. And so it wasn't possible for even Pucky to find out what the Arkonide was thinking. The mouse-beaver sighed and turned to Muzzel. "Does it hurt, little guy? Come on, I'll take you to the sawbones and they'll patch you up again." It isn't necessary, Pucky. It doesn't even hurt any more at all. "No back talk, Muzzel! A bandage doesn't hurt. Come on, hold on tight!" Muzzel whined again but obeyed the command. When the 2 of them materialized in the medical section, Chief Physician Dr. Arnold Skjoldson was almost frightened to death. The somewhat portly man with straw-blond hair recognized Pucky, of course, since the mouse-beaver was known to everyone on the Drusus, but who wouldn't be startled out of his wits if something suddenly appeared out of the air in

front of him without the slightest warning? "Good heavens!" cried Skjoldson and he backed up a few steps, momentarily pale, to support himself against a table. Another doctor who had been busy at an instrument cabinet turned around quickly without understanding what had caused his superior to have such a shock. He assumed merely that Pucky and Muzzel had entered through the door. "Don't get Heaven mixed up in this," advised Pucky and he pointed to Muzzel. "This poor dachshund just ran into some very hard shinbones and came close to breaking every bone in his body. Do you have some gauze bandage?" Skjoldson had recovered from his astonishment. He was a great animal lover and was especially partial to dachshunds. He had hardly perceived Muzzel's wound before he became maudlin about him. "There now, my poor little puppy!" he murmured and he stooped down toward the dog, which was an effort in view of his portliness. "Where's the waw-waw, hm-m-m? Does the little tyke bite at all?" Pucky rolled his eyes up in his head and plopped down on his hindquarters. "Who'd ever think that a grown man could ask such childish questions? Instead of talking silly you should be helping!" "Skjoldson cast a scornful glance at Pucky. "What do you know about psychological therapy?" He straightened up and turned to the other doctor. "Behrends, bring me some disinfectant and bandages. Let's hope it's a simple case. We might have to use Q-ray if there are any broken bones." Fortunately, however, such was not the case. A superficial examination revealed that it was only a harmless flesh wound. Only the skin was ruptured, nothing more. Minutes later, Muzzel went out of sickbay wearing a bandage on his back and he allowed Pucky to teleport him to their cabin. The incident could be forgotten. However, Atlan was of another opinion. Pucky and Muzzel had no sooner disappeared than he altered his leisurely pace. As fast as he could move, he got to the antigravitor and directed himself toward the physical sciences department, which was closely associated with the analytical laboratory. When he arrived, Maj. Hill looked up with sudden interest, noting that his visitor was Atlan. His eyes widened when he saw blood on the Arkonide's hand and he jumped from his chair. "Good heavens, Atlan, are you wounded? Is it bad?" "Hardly," replied the immortal reassuringly. "It's not my blood that you see. But I have a favour to ask: I want you to analyse this substance." "Substance? I thought it was blood." "Yes, it's blood, too. Nevertheless I'd like to request that you perform a careful examination of it. Use your facilities here as though you were being asked to investigate an unknown chemical and to find out what it consists of. I won't answer any of your questions, in order not to influence you. Please don't take my mysterious reticence amiss. I have my reasons. And you can believe me when I tell you that those reasons are vital and perhaps decisive for all of us. Can I count on your full support?" Maj. Hill nodded and smoothed out his white smock. "Naturally I'll do what you wish. I know very well that it will be all right with Rhodan. Incidentally, does he know about this?" He pointed to Atlan's hand. "I mean, did he send you?" Atlan shook his head. "Don't ask any questions, Hill. I beg it of you..." For a moment Hill looked as though someone had just poured a bucket of cold water over his head but then he desisted in his efforts to get anything out of Atlan. He went to work with a machine-like precision. The blood was carefully removed from the Arkonide's hand and placed in several capsules, which were then sent into the laboratory. "How long will it take?" asked Atlan. "At least a good hour or so," replied Hill. "Let me know immediately about the results. You'll be able to reach me either in my cabin or Rhodan's-otherwise in the Command Central. And thanks very much, Hill. Once again, I'm asking you to take special pains with this. It's extremely important!" Hill nodded his acquiescence. Atlan took the conveyor belt and happened to run into Rhodan before he had a chance to knock on his cabin door. "Hello, Barbarian. You going in for hiking these days?" "I wanted to see Pucky, but he wasn't there." Atlan tensed. "When was that?" "About 15 minutes ago. Why?" Atlan smiled and told him about the recent incident. He did not conceal the fact that he had been with Maj. Hill and requested a full analysis. Rhodan looked at him for awhile and then said, "I'd like to ask you a few questions, Atlan.

Should we go to my room?" "It's closer than mine," agreed the immortal. It was only after the cabin door had closed behind them and they were seated in comfortable contour chairs that Rhodan opened the conversation and revealed what was on his mind. "Atlan, do you harbour some suspicion concerning Muzzel?" The Arkonide nodded. "Yes, I do," he confessed candidly. "I still suspect that he is the spy. Nobody can read Muzzel's thoughts." "Pucky can." "It's still a mystery to me how Pucky is deceived by that. There are no robots that can emit thought impulses like organic life. If Muzzel is supposed to be an actual robot, he would be constructed along completely new concepts which would make it impossible to detect the disguise. Perhaps the blood sample may shed some light on the matter." "It's still surprising that he even bleeds," Rhodan remarked. After some moments of silence Atlan said: "In my past I have been familiar with the possonkal breed of dogs. For more than 10,000 years they have always been considered as lovable house pets among the ancient Arkonides. They even took them with them on their migratory expeditions. They caught vermin and went hunting with them and were generally very easily trained. Muzzel may be an especially trained animal." Rhodan smiled. "Aha, so you even took them with you to Atlantis? Then maybe the claims of many dog lovers may not be such a joke after all-that is, that dachshunds aren't really dogs." Atlan stared at his friend in some amazement. "Do you mean to say that some people make that claim?" Rhodan nodded. "Yes, there are such people. But it's easy to see why. Dachshunds are unusually self-willed animals who have a pronounced sense of individuality, as though they had psyches of their own. They usually do exactly what they're not supposed to do. Actually there's a whole humorous tradition about the dachshund breed which links such a characteristic to the comical little quadrupeds but of course nobody has yet conceived the idea of linking them to an ancient immigration from the stars. Yet it's close to the point. For instance, consider the cat. It can be proved that it's the only creature on Earth that can orient itself perfectly in a weightless condition. If you throw a cat into the air, it will turn and put its paws toward the Earth in the exact moment of weightlessness at the top of its flight. Mind you, that's at the peak of the trajectory, prior to falling again. I take that as an indication that cats have a sort of racial memory of weightless conditions elsewhere. Now, the dachshund..." "We always had antigrav fields on our ships. "That's just the point!" said Rhodan. "And I was getting to that next. The possonkal is not accustomed to weightlessness. Nor are dachshunds. So I'm convinced-and this is my main point-that at one time some of your dear Possonkals ran away from you and learned to become self-sufficient. The result is the charming but puzzling mystery of the dachshund psyche-a subject which men have long wracked their brains about." "Very bold theories but not so easily proved," admitted Atlan. "But since you know so much about dachshunds, can you imagine that one of them could run like a greyhound?" "No, that I cannot." "Aha! Then you should have seen Muzzel down below on C-deck! I thought for a moment that a cannonball had shot between my legs, the rascal was coming so fast. He almost bowled me over." "Is that so?" Rhodan narrowed his eyes at this. "I'll admit that Possonkals can run fast but not like that!" Rhodan finally shook his head. "That still is a long way from proving anything against him. If Pucky heard you talking like that you'd be in trouble." "And I'll bet you-!" Atlan began but was interrupted by the shrill buzzing of the intercom. Rhodan got up and switched on the connection. Maj. Hill's face appeared. He apparently could not see Atlan. "Excuse me, sir-I thought Atlan was with you." "He is. Do you wish to speak with him?" "Yes, I would, sir." Hill waited until Atlan came before the pickup camera. "We have finished the tests. The result..." "Yes?" interrupted Atlan tensely. "And what was this red fluid that looked like blood?" Maj. Hill's face remained expressionless. "Sir, the red fluid-is blood. Just ordinary blood..." 5/
MYSTERY MALODOROUS After spending some time in the Control Central, Rhodan went back to his cabin again. At the moment of entering it, he noticed that it was filled with a strange odour. He sniffed about, seeking to trace its source

but without success. After some minutes of investigation he found that the smell had abated finally so that he, couldn't detect it any more. So he put the incident-if it could even be called that-out of his mind. There were other things to think about. Atlan, he mused, had followed a wrong clue; this much had been determined. There was nothing wrong with Muzzel or at least he was not a robot. Such mechanical creations do not bleed nor do they feel pain. He called Bell on the intercom. "I want Sikermann to prepare for the next transition-again toward the middle of the galaxy. One hour." "Will do, Perry. What's new?" "Nothing. Set up the same precautions and preparations as last time for the hypertransit. Have you seen Pucky?" "No, he isn't here. Why?" "I'm looking for him. Maybe he's in his cabin. I'll be with you in Command Central within a half hour." "I'll get the transit calculations started in the meantime and I hope that spy character has run out of transmitter pills." Rhodan cut off the connection and got under way. This time he found Pucky at home and Muzzel was with him. The dachshund crouched in one corner of the daybed and didn't appear to feel well. There was a sad expression in his golden eyes. He looked almost imploringly at Rhodan. In place of a greeting, Pucky said: "Muzzel has pains-thanks to Atlan and his iron shinbones." Rhodan raised a warning finger. "What business did Muzzel have down below on C-deck?" he asked sternly. "If you have to play, do it in the hangars. There's plenty of room there." He stopped talking suddenly and sniffed. Here was the same smell he had noted in his cabin. It was the same unusual odour that he had just dismissed from his mind. "What's causing that stink in here, Pucky? The mouse-beaver sniffed industriously. "I don't smell anything unless maybe one of Bell's awful puns laid down and died somewhere..." "Don't try to be funny!" snapped Rhodan angrily. "It stinks in here! And I noticed the same smell in my cabin! Strange..." His gaze travelled along the walls and stopped at the grating of the ventilator. Without saying a word he pulled over a chair and got up on it. With his nose directly in the incoming fresh air stream, he sniffed. No doubt about it. The strange smell issued from the air-conditioning system. He got down off the chair. "It seems as though somebody has dumped some kind of refuse or garbage into the airshaft. I think the cleaning detail is going to have an assignment. I'd like to know who that slob was. "Not me!" protested Pucky. Rhodan looked at him. "Has anybody accused you of it?" Without waiting for an answer he went out of the cabin as though he'd forgotten what he'd come for. From the Command Central he ordered that the air-vents be inspected and cleaned. He designated the specific sector. "As soon as it's done, let me know." Bell sat beside Sikermann, who was busy with calculations. "You mean the air vents smell bad?" he inquired with a grin. "And in Pucky's room too? I've been telling that little rascal to take a bath once in awhile!" "Knock off that!" snapped Rhodan again. "It isn't a laughing matter. By the way, he made a disparaging remark about you in this connection." Bell turned slightly pale. "That confounded carrot-chomped Blame it on me, will he! I'll flatten him on the deck!" "And he'll flatten you against the ceiling, from what I know of him..." Bell fell silent, suddenly remembering past events. The nav computer hummed softly and chucked out the coordinate data onto the console in front of Sikermann. The transition was imminent but the normal space drive would not be affected by it. Once more Farrington stood ready with his security detail. The widely distributed signal tracers were turned on. Perhaps the hidden transmitter would signal sooner than expected. 10 minutes before transition time the maintenance section called in on the intercom. "The cause of that bad odour has been located, sir." "What is it?" "Refuse, sir." "What kind of refuse? Cheese wraps? Potato peelings?" "We haven't gone into it completely yet, sir. This stuff seems to be pretty indefinable and it stinks terribly. One cadet has already gotten sick from smelling it." "Take a sample of it and have it analysed. We have to find out who's throwing garbage into the air vents. Do you happen to have found out from what location the rubbish was dumped?" "The way it looks to me, sir, it wasn't dumped in at all. It lay in the vent as if somebody had carefully piled it up

there." Rhodan was dumbfounded. All he could say was: "Well, alright-look after the analysis. Tell Maj. Hill to let me know about it." He cut off the connection and encountered Bell's amused expression. "What have you got to grin about?" "Hill's going to love this. First he has to scrabble around in a lot of dust samples and now smelly garbage." Rhodan dismissed the comment with a wave of his hand. "Analysts are accustomed to distasteful things," he said calmly. The moment of transition drew near. Only a few minutes more. The intercom buzzed again. Rhodan answered. It was Maj. Hill. "Well? Are you ready so soon?" Hill nodded and held a hand to his nose in an expression of repugnance. "It's devil of a substance, sir," he said. "The basic components are simple: meat and carrots. But..." "Carrots...?" interrupted Rhodan. "Continue!" "The mess is mixed with a kind of enzyme," Hill explained. "It's a ferment designed to rot the mash and cause it to decompose as rapidly as possible. That's what makes the murderous stink, which unfortunately is taking over the laboratory here. The curious thing about it is that this enzyme isn't known to Earth chemistry, sir. I've made every analysis possible but I am still unable to write down its composition. However, there can be no doubt that it's something alien." Rhodan nodded slightly. "That doesn't necessarily mean much," he mused. "We have a number of creatures on board who were not born on Earth and who might produce such a substance by a natural process." "That could be, sir," admitted the analyst. Rhodan smiled. "In any case, keep studying that enzyme," he advised him. "Maybe you'll make an epochal discovery. And thanks." The viewscreen faded. Rhodan supported his chin in his hand and looked into the room past Atlan. "Carrots..." he murmured. "Perhaps I may be able to refresh your memory a bit," said Atlan suddenly. "Your nice little mouse-beaver feeds on-pardon me... Isn't he particularly fond of eating carrots and radishes?" Rhodan looked up in surprise. "Of course! I remember now that the cook has standing orders to provide for such fresh vegetables every time Pucky comes on board." "So what conclusion do you draw from that?" Rhodan's suddenly narrowed eyes blinked thoughtfully. His answer did not reflect too much concern. "It's quite simple: Pucky swallowed too many carrots. He got sick on them and being the sensitive creature that he is he retreated into the ventilator shaft in order to disgorge the contents of his stomach without being observed. Would you say that's a fair deduction?" Atlan laughed heartily. "Exactly. As you people say, you hit the nail on the head!" Rhodan turned and picked up the microphone of the ship's P.A. system. As he spoke, the momentary touch of humour had faded from his voice: "A lot of refuse has been found in the ventilation system. It's possible that some unknown person dumped it there while we were at some other place, but this is a very unhygienic practice and is also dangerous for the whole air-conditioning plant. So, I want you to report to the commanding officer immediately whenever you detect any unpleasant odours in your quarters. That is all." Atlan looked at him doubtfully. "If this matter has something to do with our undiscovered spy, you just tipped him off." Rhodan laughed. "You have a ludicrous imagination, Atlan! What would a spy have to do with a mess of regurgitated carrots?" Atlan's face remained expressionless. For long moments he studied Rhodan searchingly and finally said: "I'd certainly give a lot to know what you're thinking about..." 6/ PROJECT: BLINDFOLD The planned transition took place. 5 minutes later the now familiar transmission of their position went out and the hiding place of the micro-device was located. The tiny transmitter did not differ in any way from its predecessors. Rhodan was not surprised. But perhaps the spy himself could be surprised. He gave an order to Sikermann and Bell to prepare for the next transition and in the same direction as before. The hyperjump was to take place in exactly 2 hours. Then he got tip and went out without explaining where he was going. The wide corridors of the Drusus appeared to be quiet and deserted. The crews were at their weapons stations. Not a man moved from his post without express instructions to do so. Ahead of him all he heard was the soft humming of the eternally gliding conveyor strips. Rhodan had set the new transition for

23:30 ship time. Until then he still had enough time to speak with Pucky concerning the mysterious carrot situation. Instead of summoning Pucky to the Command Central he chose to visit him personally. He needed a little exercise yet he confessed to himself that what had induced him to take a walk was the rather unrealistic prospect of running into the spy by mere chance. He dispensed with using the conveyer. Instead he walked along next to the wall of the passageway with his head lowered in thought. This spy was beginning to get on his nerves-especially since he didn't want to reveal his anxiety to his men. A time-tested axiom from the Academy in Terrania stated that a nervous commander was the worst thing possible for a threatened ship. And Rhodan considered the professor who had formulated this principle to be a very smart man. Oh well, he thought, what good is that to me? Nervous or not, I'm going to find that this spy keeps sending out his position messages after every transition. We're both pulling with equal force on opposite ends of a rope and neither one of us is moving forward or backward. How long will it go on? We don't have any more time to lose! Thus lost in thought he happened to pass the wide sliding door of the positronic data bank room. Having passed it by only a few paces, he thought he heard a noise. He stopped and looked behind him. Nothing was there. "Think of the devil..." he muttered half-aloud. "I shouldn't have brooded so much about my nerves." Nevertheless he retraced his steps and opened the door to the data room. He stood in the open doorway and looked around. The data retrieval consoles were arranged in a horseshoe half semicircle. Linked to the ship's positronicon through invisible conduits, these consoles were equipped to furnish data to an astronaut attempting to determine a course or ascertain the position of an unknown star or many kinds of information for a great variety of purposes. Information was organized here by machine groups in accordance with the relative importance of the data. General information usually available to anyone-mostly of a kind that would be needed in an emergency-was kept in Transfor language, which was the simplest computer coding system. Other information, which was less frequently used or somewhat restricted, was coded into Sira 3 language, or Hangol. A 3rd classification of data-the most restricted and secret of all-was in the central console that formed the apex of the entire installation. This information was electronically registered in the data bank in a complex and almost undecipherable coding format known as the Fermat system. All of this went through Rhodan's mind with lightning rapidity... before he saw the red signal light glowing on the front panel of the Fermat data console. He reached it in a few long strides and read the back lighted indicator: DEFECT... The rest he did mechanically in a flashing movement without premeditation. His fist struck the alarm button on the wall beside the sliding door and he was relieved when the shrill howl of sirens filled the corridors. Seconds later, Bell's excited voice was heard on the P.A. speakers throughout the ship: "Emergency in Data Bank, E-deck! Capt. Farrington-on your way! See what's wrong!" Rhodan remained near the wide bulkhead doorway. The clamour of the sirens stopped suddenly. Moments later, Farrington's troops came into sight through another bulkhead hatchway from an adjoining section, with Farrington in the lead. The latter saluted while still running. "Block off the Data Section, Captain!" Rhodan ordered. "Nobody gets in or out." He looked at his watch. It was 22:35. Farrington posted his men. He was just about to ask whether any vacuum cleaners were needed when Rhodan turned to him again. "I'm sending some math programmers down here so that they can investigate the defect. You will let them pass inside, of course. Understood?" He looked at his watch again. He was about to leave when an idea occurred to him at the last moment. "How long did it take you and your men to get here, Farrington? I mean from the second you received Bell's instruction?" "Not more than a minute and a half, sir. The alarm sounded just after 22:33 and at the same moment we were dispatched by Bell." Rhodan thanked him. Then he left the scene. The report from the scientific programmers was very bad news. Perry Rhodan called his officers together in the Command Central, from the rank of Major on up. He opened his announcement by saying: "We are

confronted with the immediate prospect of a catastrophe. Any hope of averting it is very slight. Our unknown intruder has retrieved the Earth's position from the data bank!" He made a short pause in which to observe the reaction of this announcement among his men. He saw a shadow of consternation cross their faces. There was a brief moment in which even a spark of fear appeared in their eyes but it disappeared as swiftly as it had come. They were not ready to shy away from the awful consequences which might face them. "So we have to consider that our carefully protected secret will shortly become known to the spy's principal authority-probably the Robot Regent of Arkon. Let me give you a few details in this regard." "As you know, this enemy agent has already succeeded in learning the Terranian code system from the positronicon. If he has the proper equipment-which is a foregone conclusion-he is completely capable of deciphering any coding modifications. The simple ones will break down fairly fast for him, the difficult ones correspondingly longer. "The galactic position of the Earth has been memory-stored in Fermat logic, which means it is in the most complicated modification language that we possess. Our spy is going to need a number of hours to make a breakdown of the position data sufficiently to be able to beam it out of here-and according to our estimate this may be as much as 4 or 5 hours. That is exactly how much time we have for averting the catastrophe. "You understand that we haven't much certainty of success against this danger. Some of you will be placed under command of Mr. Bell. With the help of the positronicon, you are to work out a scenario of strategic action in case we are not able to prevent a betrayal of the Earth's position. As of this moment, all machine times issued to other users are hereby cancelled; the positronicon is solely at your disposal. "Proceed from the premise that the Robot Regent of Arkon will no longer be our ally as soon as he knows the position of our home planet. It's true that he has placed the larger part of his war fleet under our command as a defence measure against the unknown menace from the alien time dimension; but presumably he can revoke this arrangement very quickly. "So I want you to come up with a plan which considers that the Regent will be our enemy... and try to find something that will still give us a chance in all this mess!" Bell picked out his team, altogether 15 men. Among them were 7 mathematicians and scientific programmers, 5 Academy officers with expertise in political strategy and 3 technicians who were especially familiar with the positronicon. Bell's group left the Command Central ready to go to work. Shortly thereafter the remaining officers returned to their posts. The Command Central itself was only lightly manned now. It was not intended any longer that the Drusus should make a move before the time had elapsed in which the spy would be completing his task-or until they had apprehended him. Atlan the Arkonide was the only one who didn't have anything to do. "Why do you believe," he asked, "that the spy may not have simply transmitted the Earth coördinates right along with the coding system he learned from the positronicon before? Then if his principal has the whole package in hand, he could be cudgelling his brains over the decipherment right now." Rhodan shook his head. "I consider that improbable," he answered. "If he has a hypercom transmitter that puts out more than his micro-tracker gadget-and we have to assume that, because otherwise he's not going to get any information out of here-then I'm sure it'll be a small piece of equipment that can only handle one specific transmitting code. And certainly it can't in itself break everything down to what we'd call a literal translation. His transmitter, naturally, will be an Arkonide model and must work with Arkonide word formats or some Arkonide code. So he is not able to beam out any information that's in Terranian code. In addition to his transmitter he'd have to have a code transformer, which is the only thing that would make it possible for him to decode our position data and transform it into his own coding system. So any way you look at it, it's going to take him time-thank God!" He stood up and added casually: "If you're free, why don't you come along with me to the Data Bank? I'd like to take another look around." "Playing detective?" smiled Atlan. "Alright, I'll come along." Capt. Farrington still had guards at

the single entrance to the Data Bank room. 2 of the mathematical scientists that Rhodan had assigned to the area were still busy with their investigation of the defect in the equipment. "Have you uncovered the defect yet?" inquired Rhodan. "Yes, sir. You see, there's been a short through some of the diode logic gates and..." Rhodan waved a hand. "I'm afraid I wouldn't understand much of the details. Just tell me-how was the defect caused?" "By inexpert operation," came the prompt reply. "The spy must be an amateur with this kind of equipment. He's tried to use the data retrieval board as if it were a hand-crank calculator. Apparently he hit every button in sight in order to extract information. Unfortunately he chanced on the right combination and did retrieve what he wanted before he made a mess of the internal logic and fouled up the machine." Rhodan nodded casually and seemed only mildly interested as though he had expected as much. "And when did the defect occur?" "That we have determined to the exact second, sir," answered the scientist proudly. "The machine registered its breakdown at precisely 22:30:14, ship's time." Rhodan also acknowledged this information but of course with a more marked expression of interest. He took the Arkonide to one side. "That casts a new light on the subject," he explained. "I gave the alarm at exactly 22:33, which means just about 3 minutes after the defect occurred. I had come from the Command Central without using the conveyor belt, yet I wasn't exactly dragging my feet. I would have had to see the spy, without any question, if he had come out the door." "Is that true?" asked Atlan. "I mean, have you double-checked it?" "Yes, to such an extent that I'm now convinced our culprit was here in the Data Bank room when I first went by the door. I heard a sound in here-and I recall at the time that I thought I had only imagined it because I was pretty uptight about everything. But now I'm sure that the sound came from the Fermat-system console... at the moment in which the defect occurred. "Then I went back to the bulkhead door. I had gone some distance past it already and I also spent a few moments deliberating whether or not I should really look into it. So I opened the door and looked around. I discovered the red warning light and went over to it in order to read the indication on the panel. It was only then that I put in the alarm. "Yes, it's in agreement with the time span involved here. So the spy did not leave this room by way of the door. We have to find the hole he slipped out of, because he certainly isn't here anymore." Atlan did not contradict him. All traces of patronizing humour on the subject had disappeared from his shrewd countenance. The hunt for the unknown intruder had begun to fascinate him. They scoured the room thoroughly. They pounded on all the walls because it was entirely possible that the spy could have used a disintegrator to burn out an exit hole for himself and afterwards have cleverly disguised his passage. They brought in ultra-sonic sounders in order not to have to depend on the knocking alone... but they found nothing. Until suddenly Rhodan had an idea. He remembered the rotting carrot mess that the maintenance crew had discovered in the airshafts and he investigated the 4 dust screens that terminated the cross shafting of the air-conditioning installation in the walls of the room. 3 of them were completely intact and probably had not been removed from their locations since they had been installed originally. The 4th one, however, was lacking the small screws which held the screen frame fastened to the plastic flange of the feeder airshaft. Rhodan obtained a grip on the fine wires of the screen with 2 fingernails and pulled on them. The screen moved out of its niche almost without resistance and fell forward. "Oho!" muttered Atlan. Rhodan lay flat on the floor and shoved his right arm into the feeder duct. His hand reached the place where the ducting opened into the almost vertically running larger airshaft but he found nothing. He sat up and looked silently at the Arkonide. "Do you believe that... that he went out that way?" asked Atlan. Rhodan nodded. Atlan was obviously impressed. "That," he said softly, "gives a new look to the situation, right?" They went back to the Fermat console where the scientists were just replacing the front panel. The red warning light had been shut off. The defect had been corrected. "What's that?" asked Rhodan suddenly and pointed to a fine white groove that had been

made in the front panel—from the row of retrieval buttons almost down to the readout slot—in a vertical line. The mathematician observed the white line. "A scratch sir," he answered. It had not escaped Rhodan's attention. "Have you ever seen it here before?" The man shook his head. "No, sir." "Don't you think that the spy could have done that?" It was apparently embarrassing to the mathematician that Rhodan was including him in his investigation. He nodded faintly and said quietly, "That would be entirely possible, sir." "But he would have had to at least used a very tough knife blade," interjected Atlan. "This panel is made of metallic plastic. How do you think he was able to cut such a deep scratch in it?" The mathematician didn't know. Rhodan smiled. "I think it's simply explained. He took out his pocketknife and scratched the front panel in order to leave a sign, just like many psychopathic criminals on Earth. It's supposed to mean: I was here." He glanced at Atlan. The Arkonide laughed. "You're right. That must have been the reason exactly." The mathematician stared confusedly from one to the other but neither of them enlightened him further. Rhodan and the Arkonide exited the data room. "So now we know him, right?" asked Atlan in a better mood, as the 2 of them stepped onto the glideway. "I believe so," answered Rhodan. "Why are we still waiting? All we have to do is close in." Rhodan made a deprecating gesture. "Don't be too sure! In the beginning perhaps he felt pretty sure of himself. He probably thought nobody would suspect him. But in the meantime he's wronged off a number of times... or maybe had no choice in the matter. I'm certain we won't find him right off the bat." "You think it's the mouse-beaver...?" Rhodan looked at him startled. He smiled but gave no definitive answer... Nobody knew when the next transition would take place. The one that had been planned had been called off. Did Rhodan want to confuse the spy? Bell was on his way to his cabin to take a half-hour's rest when a thought came to him. He took a new direction and wandered through the corridors without any apparent goal. Finally, however, he stopped in front of a certain door. Without knocking, he went in. Pucky was waiting for him in a sitting position. "I'd like to live long enough to see you act like a gentleman," he grumbled and gave Bell a scornful look. "Didn't you ever hear of knocking?" "Depends on how you want to take that," countered Bell. He wrinkled his nose and added disdainfully: "You've got a nerve talking about good manners. It stinks like a pigpen in here." The mouse-beaver drew himself up slowly. "Let me tell you something, Fatso. In the first place, it doesn't stink in here, and in the 2nd place... if it should stink here, it's none of your business. It can stink here as long as I want it to!" "OK, shortso. Makes no difference to me." He looked around. "By the way, where the heck is your new friend, Muzzel? You 2 are supposed to be just about inseparable now." "Jealous?" Pucky beamed gloatingly. "Do you have complaints about Muzzel too?" "Quite a few," acknowledged Bell despite Pucky's penetrating glare. "A dachshund like that isn't very trustworthy, which you know is common knowledge. I wouldn't rely on him so much and..." "Now lay off, fatnik! You can eat your heart out if you like but Muzzel and I have a perfect understanding and you're the last one who can separate us." Bell slowly sang a horrible rendition of an old bit song that was in mothballs by now. "We 2 will never part again...!" He grinned. "But frankly: that smell in the ventilators came from carrots. That has been established without any doubt. What do you have to say now?" "Huh? Carrots? And what else did they find out?" "Rhodan will fill you in on that when he gets a chance. At the present time things are pretty glum around the Drusus. The spy has stolen the Earth coordinates from the data bank. And incidentally you haven't answered my question yet: where is Muzzel?" "Down in the kitchen. He was hungry and wanted to stretch his legs. Why?" "Because.—You say he wanted to stretch his legs? Those crooked little dachshund hocks?" Pucky again raised up indignantly. "I'll not permit you to insult my friend. Have you ever looked in a mirror when you're in a bathing suit?" "Well, no-o-o..." stammered Bell, caught off guard. "Then do it sometime! It'll make you think twice as to who has crooked legs and knobby old knees!" Without favouring Bell with so much

as another glance, the mouse-beaver jumped onto his daybed and rolled himself into a ball in the farthest corner. Seconds later a series of evenly cadenced snores announced-presumably-that he had gone to sleep. Bell went to the door. "You'll lose that snooty air of yours before long, just wait! Before long you'll be begging me to play with you or scratch your back. But if you do, I'll..." He didn't say what he'd do but instead left the room. As fast as he could go, he went down to the kitchen. The chief cook appeared and hastened to answer the questions put to him by Rhodan's second-in-command. He shook his head decisively. "No, sir. There must be a mistake. That little Muzzel was not here asking for meat. Pucky always asks for it-and double portions," he added pointedly. "Besides, I stick to the rules: no dogs allowed in the kitchen!" "Rightly so!" agreed Bell approvingly and he thanked him. In a deeply pensive mood, he finally returned to his cabin in order to catch the planned half-hour of sleep. After all, it wasn't so easy to play the role of Sherlock Holmes. "It could be," said Atlan to Rhodan. They both stood in the observation dome of the Drusus with the mighty panorama of the universe around them. They had retired to this location in order not to be disturbed. "Yes, that could of course also be true. We have to take every possibility into consideration-and I mean all of them!" Rhodan nodded gravely. "Good, then let's stay with this thought: the ventilator shaft incident is not conclusive evidence. Somebody, meaning the spy, is deliberately trying to cast suspicion on Pucky and Muzzel. The scratch made by a pocketknife was supposed to draw our attention to the ventilator and thereby make us suspect the 2 smallest passengers on board the Drusus. Unfortunately I haven't had time to question Pucky about the carrot mess. I'm sure he was the guilty one there and is ashamed to admit it." "Hm-m-m," was Atlan's only response as he declined to comment. For some moments Rhodan stared out into the endlessness of space. Somewhere out there, more than 1000 light-years away, the tiny Earth spun on its course. To discover it, somebody had smuggled an unusually clever spy on board the Drusus, probably a robot-and that somebody was undoubtedly the robot Brain of Arkon. But when had it occurred? The stars gave no answer. Motionless and unblinking they hung there in space and seemed to be waiting. They had already been waiting for millions of years. What for, actually. The end? Atlan appeared to divine Rhodan's thoughts. "They're waiting for the Beginning," he smiled sagely. "Who waits for the end?" Rhodan candidly returned the smile. "Do you know something, Arkonide?" he asked and he pointed outward toward the sea of stars. "Do you see those suns out there, radiating their heat away and giving life to the planets yet always retaining it?" As Atlan nodded hesitantly, he placed a hand in front of the other's eyes. "And what now? Do you still see those suns?" Atlan waited until Rhodan took his hand away. On his face was an expression of astonishment. He shook his head. "Naturally I didn't see them. What are you trying to say?" "Well, to simplify it: if we undertake another transition and make the jump-let's say for example toward the Earth-and if the Arkon spy is in our direct presence during that time... can he transmit then?" Atlan's timeless eyes suddenly narrowed. "And how will you arrange that?" "We will collect the suspects and have them with us when the transition takes place. The time of the transition will not be given out ahead of time so that his timer can't be set. If then the transition happens and our signal tracing crew fails to detect a bearing transmission, then the informer will have to be one of the suspects in our company. He wouldn't have had any opportunity to do anything without drawing suspicion on himself-which he'll be doing anyway without knowing it. Well, what do you think of it?" "Rhodan, you should have been a criminologist. I'd say OK but would make the suggestion that the transition be announced beforehand. So when do you want to do it?" "But then there's still the problem about the stolen coordinate data. I didn't want to make any transition until we caught the thief. Maybe it'd be wiser to revise my idea." Atlan changed the subject. "Have any results come through yet on Kulman?" "Unfortunately, no, Atlan. I'm afraid we'll have to be patient there." "Do you want me to tell you what I think happened?" As Rhodan gave him a receptive nod, Atlan looked up at the

stars. "Good, then I'll lay out a theory for you that I think comes very close to the facts. On Swoofon, Kulman made a very important discovery, which brought him to the act of putting out a major alarm call. And that's when the, Arkon agent had to step into the picture. Kulman was given a new memory that made him forget what actually happened. He regards his being picked up by us as a routine situation. When he came on board he brought with him a well-prepared spy. The objective of the manoeuvre has been achieved and Kulman has been fixed so that he can't blab or reveal the perpetrator." Rhodan had listened attentively. "I'm afraid it's exactly the way you describe it. But even if we have the spy in our hands there's another question remaining: why did Kulman send out the alarm? What did he discover on Swoofon?" Atlan laughed mirthlessly. "Always one thing at a time. First let's put your plan into operation. Let's blindfold the informer so that he can't see the stars..."

7/ REVELATION An order was issued to the Control Central to prepare for the next transition. The hypertransit was set for 5:30 ship's time and was to span a distance of about 1300 light-years directly to the Earth. At least it was so publicized and was even announced to the crew over the P.A. system. Rosita Perez and Chief Physician Skjoldson were very much astonished when Rhodan appeared in their department and ordered that their patient, Kulman, would have to be kept in the Control Central of the Drusus during the transition. They expressed their misgivings but Rhodan would not be dissuaded. Kulman smiled his gratitude after being released from his unenviable condition. He was convinced that the efforts of the doctors and psychologists had been futile, anyway. He was aware of what they had put him through. The assumption that he could have acquired a new and false memory was in his opinion based on nothing but a vague theory. Meanwhile, Atlan went to get Pucky and Muzzel. That is, it was his intention to do so but the 2 playmates could not be located. The only alternative was to announce over the P.A. that Pucky and Muzzel were wanted in the Command Central. Meanwhile the ship's chronometer moved forward inexorably. Instead of returning to the Command Central, Atlan disappeared in the direction of the analytical laboratory. From there he went on to the sickbay, asked a number of seemingly senseless questions, took the conveyor to the kitchen and conversed with the chief cook. Finally he returned once more to Pucky's cabin and remained there for 10 minutes. Only after that did he reappear in the Command Central, where he occupied his accustomed place without a word. Rhodan gave him a penetrating look but said nothing. The digital time indicator clicked to 5:20. As usual, Farrington stood ready with his vacuum cleaner detail. The portable signal tracers were strategically positioned. Kulman conversed quietly with Bell and inquired specifically of him what the findings had been concerning his dog. He was not too happy with the information he obtained. Rhodan checked the time, and was about to go to the P.A. broadcast board when suddenly the air shimmered in the room. Pucky materialized—and with him Muzzel. The dachshund wriggled out of the mouse-beaver's arms, looked about him in some surprise and then let out a little yelp of pleasure. He ran to Kulman, who greeted him happily. "What took you so long?" Rhodan asked the mouse-beaver gravely. "I announced that you..." "We were playing," pouted Pucky as he sat down on his broad hindquarters. He pleaded so soulfully with his big brown eyes that it was hard for Rhodan to keep a frown on his face. "Before going to the Earth, Muzzel insisted on romping about a little while through the ship." Atlan took an interest in this remark. "Aha—so Muzzel suddenly had an urge to play as soon as it was announced that we were definitely flying to Earth?" Pucky nodded wonderingly. "We were asleep when the announcement woke us up. We had just eaten." "Meat and carrots as usual?" Pucky nodded again but said nothing. The chronometer registered 5 minutes before transition time. Atlan took a few lithe steps into a far corner of the Command Central and beckoned Pucky to him. The mouse-beaver responded hesitantly. Out of hearing range of the others, the immortal whispered a few words to him while screening his mind so that no one including Rhodan could detect his thoughts. Pucky gave Kulman a quick glance. Then he nodded slowly and returned to his place. 1 minute to

go. At this particular moment there were only 4 persons aboard the Drusus who knew that the forthcoming transition would not be back to Earth but simply another 100 light-years away into the starry ocean of the Milky Way. These 4 individuals were: Rhodan, Atlan, Bell and Sikermann. Time-05:30... It was just a short transit but everyone in the Control Central experienced the pulling pains of distortion although they didn't last more than 3 or 4 seconds. The reaction manifested itself in definite contractions of the face and body. Atlan opened his eyes and noted a curious fact which seemed to confirm his suspicions: Kulman didn't notice him. He continued stroking the pelt of his possonkal as though there were no other concerns at all on board the Drusus. Rhodan continued to wait. At any moment the signal-tracing team could be reporting in, in case the spy had succeeded in dropping another transmitter somewhere. "Pucky," asked Atlan-and it appeared that he was giving a prearranged signal- "where were you with Muzzel, actually, before you came here?" "Down in the hangars. To be specific, in hangar K-37." Atlan merely nodded but he waited. Suddenly Pucky waddled determinedly over to Kulman. He drew himself up before the agent and then swung out. The powerful blow struck Muzzel on his furry hindquarters and knocked him out of Kulman's lap. Kulman sat there in frozen astonishment as the unbelievable action registered on him. Bell understood even less of the action and he stared at Pucky almost stupidly. Pucky raised a hue and cry: "You dirty little devil, you miserable-!" He swung again in an attempt to hit Muzzel but this time the dachshund was alerted. He eluded Pucky's striking paw by making an incredible jump clear over his playmate, a leap which brought him close to the ceiling. At this moment nobody other than Rhodan noticed Atlan who had brought to light a small weapon which was a powerful thermo-gun. When the possonkal came down to the deck from his mighty jump, the immortal fired. The highly concentrated energy beam struck Muzzel's skull and reduced it to smoke and steam. A hideous odour pervaded the Command Central where the corpse of the funny little dachshund lay, lifeless and still. At the same moment, Pucky disappeared. He had done precisely what Atlan had requested of him. He had placed a blind trust in what the immortal had told him, even though it was almost beyond his power to do so. Now that he had seen the disfigured form of his little dachshund friend lying there shattered on the deck before him, he had preferred to simply teleport himself from the terrible scene-presumably to his cabin. With a cry of horror, Kulman had jumped to his feet. He stared down incredulously at what was left of Muzzel. His mouth opened and he commenced to stammer but finally everybody could make out what he was blubbering: "Muzzel!... My poor little Muzzel! Atlan killed him! What am I doing here? 3-alarm alert! That's right, the Earth is in danger! Rhodan! I have to speak to Rhodan at once!" Atlan nodded to Rhodan and replaced his weapon in his belt. "Kulman has suffered a shock. I believe that a proper scare can often do more than the best psychological approaches. I'll wager that Kulman has gotten his memory back. Kulman do you know now why you put out a 3-alarm alert?" The agent nodded hesitantly. "Yes... Do you mean to say I didn't know before? Besides: why did you shoot Muzzel? What did he do to you?" Atlan looked at Rhodan "You ought to see that Kulman gets a good rest. When he has slept a few hours he will be able to give us his report." He waited until the medical personnel came and took Kulman away. Then he continued while he bent over to observe Muzzel's remains. "Too bad about everything that was in his skull. I don't believe that we'll find anything in his body. Skjoldson managed to sneak a Q-ray of him. Muzzel has a valid skeletal structure, nerves, blood-quite everything that a natural form of life possesses. But inside the skull there was a small capsule. Since Muzzel came from Swoofon I presume that this capsule was the actual robot. Everything else about him was a normal biological development. So you couldn't call Muzzel either a robot or an android-actually he was both." He straightened up again. "Rhodan, do you know what he did that definitely betrayed him?" "No." "In former years there was a time when I'll have to admit I was wealthy. Since I wasn't burdened by honorary positions and heavy duties of any kind, I often

went hunting and I used possonkals. They are the best tracking animals in the galaxy. They can pick up any scent or trail—even when only 10 days old. They are extremely versatile but there is one thing they cannot do—jump! Under normal gravity, a possonkal can't jump more than a foot high. But this one almost hit the ceiling. I had asked Pucky to cause him to do it. So Pucky had to betray his best friend because he would have soon placed the Earth in the greatest danger. You see, even robots make mistakes." At this moment, Farrington called in: "Hello, Command Central! The position transmitter has been found and demolished." Rhodan looked at Atlan. "So this time he had it placed beforehand. There was time enough then and now I see why he insisted on romping about the ship." He spoke into the intercom to Farrington. "Where did you find the transmitter?" The answer eliminated any last doubts: "In hangar K-37, sir." Atlan walked to the other side of the room and sat down. "I believe I probably owe all of you a full explanation." Everybody agreed. . . . Since Rhodan felt that everybody on board the Drusus had a right to be kept abreast of events, the main video P.A. system was turned on. So it was the same as before when Atlan had told them the story of Atlantis. Everybody could join in with the recounting because they could both see and hear what was going on in the Command Central. Atlan turned toward the hidden cameras and grid microphone. "You probably haven't gone to sleep yet, Mr. Kulman, and so I'd like to ask you to participate in the resolution of this case through this means. It involves you principally since your return on board the Drusus brought about the appearance of the mysterious spy. Other than the opening or closing of the batches of the Drusus for the Gazelle, nothing else left or entered the ship. There was no other possibility: either you or Muzzel had to be the spy! Or to put it another way: the unknown agent would have had to come on board when you and Muzzel did. "You were the first one I suspected, Kulman. Then we discovered you had a mental block, though that didn't exclude the possibility that you could still be setting out the micro-transmitters. However, once under the care of the psychology department you didn't have a chance to do anything. Ms. Perez was able to confirm that you didn't leave the operating table, although during the time you were there more position-transmitters showed up and were physically located. With such facts before us, that left you out as the perpetrator, Kulman. So it left Muzzel. "But how could one possibly suspect a possonkal of playing such a treacherous role? Such an animal is not intelligent enough to respond with such precision to hypnotic direction. That was completely out of the question. Unless one was to entertain the crazy notion that Muzzel was a robot. Yet there were a number of things which undermined even that idea. You yourself had seen Muzzel bleed, shelving for the moment the question of whether or not such an observation could be attributed to your actual memory or to a post-hypnotic suggestion. We'll be able to determine that well enough later. At any rate, I also saw Muzzel bleed and I had the blood examined in the laboratory. There could be no doubt about it: Muzzel's blood was genuine blood from a possonkal. "In addition to this was the fact that Pucky was constantly with Muzzel. We are all aware of the telepathic faculties of the mouse-beaver. If Muzzel had been a robot, undoubtedly Pucky would have noticed it immediately. But Muzzel's thought processes turned out to be those of an organic, semi-intelligent creature. And he even thought about microorganisms swimming in water. Whatever the explanation of that small aberration might be, I was able to deduce that Muzzel could not possibly be a robot because a robot has no brain, at least not one with which a telepath could be en rapport. So Muzzel was also excluded—until we discovered the strange carrot mess in the ventilators. "Pucky is the only one on board who gets to eat fresh carrots. The rest of the crew is limited almost exclusively to food concentrates or canned foods because of their lower cost and their space-saving features. Pucky on the other hand always needs something to nibble at or gnaw on. Since he had taken Muzzel so close to his heart, he shared some of the carrots with him, even though he claimed the main portion of the now doubled ration for himself. Muzzel ate practically everything, including the carrots, so Pucky

assumed that they must taste all right to the possonkal." "But what can a robot do with organic food? It can't adequately assimilate it so it has to get rid of it somewhere. And that's what Muzzel proceeded to do. He deposited the contents of his stomach in the airshafts. Although he was for the most part an organic being, Muzzel's digestion didn't quite work the same. His-um-designers, shall we say, came to his assistance there. They had to take into account the fact that their robot-android creation, Muzzel, would have to get rid of his food intake sooner or later if he was to be kept from bursting. So they added a sort of extra gland which permeated the masticated food with an Arkonide type of fermenting enzyme so that it could activate the swiftest possible digestion. Nobody would have noticed such an arrangement had Muzzel relieved himself in a proper location-but he did it in the ventilating system and that was his first crucial mistake. I found the first clue and followed it up. "The most damaging evidence, however, was found in the data retrieval room. While the Drusus was in its top emergency situation, he had sneaked in there and stolen the Earth's coordinate data. He hardly possessed any specialist capability in the operation of positronic equipment-especially this kind, which is of Terranian origin-yet he did operate the data retriever. And one other thing: he was too small to be able to reach up to the upper switch panel, so he had to jump. In doing so, he scratched the panel board. The claws of a normal possonkal would have been too soft to be able to scratch a metal-plastic panel plate but after all Muzzel was part robot and not everything on him was genuine. The claws, for example, were not. They also consisted of plastic metal and were much more prehensile than dog claws, since they had to carry out difficult manipulations. "At the moment lie had finished, Commander Rhodan appeared on the scene. We don't know if Muzzel had planned all along to sneak out through the ventilation system. Certainly an escape route through the air duct had been prepared beforehand because Muzzel had removed the screws from the dust screen. "In any case his robot brain told him-he actually had 2 brains as you will learn later-that Rhodan would have seen him if he had gone out through the main hatchway. So he got away by his usual route. The square ducting of the air system, even in the smaller distribution channels, was just right for him. In this manner he could reach any desired place on the ship and allow Pucky to search for him, since Pucky didn't concern himself much about how the dachshund could get from one place to another so quickly. As a teleporter, perhaps Pucky doesn't have a proper time-sense for foot travel. "And oh yes, that 2nd brain of Muzzel's! The designers of the almost perfect spy had thought of everything. They also knew that we had telepaths at our disposal who would have immediately recognized a soulless robot. So Muzzel had to radiate genuine thought impulses. "We will probably never find out what kind of brain they transplanted into the Possonkal's head but Pucky has given us certain clues which lead us to believe that it was the small brain of a water animal, perhaps some kind of a fish or maybe a jellyfish..." Atlan stopped in amazement as somebody started laughing, loudly and in unabashed glee. It was Reginald Bell who stood near Rhodan, holding onto his sides. His laughter was so loud and roaring that it seemed to be catching. Soon half the crew was laughing without knowing what the cause of the merriment was. Finally Bell fell silent but as it turned out it was only because he was out of breath. Atlan turned to him courteously. "May I ask what has excited such hilarity in the gentleman? I don't seem to recall..." Bell was almost ready to explode but he finally pulled himself together. Almost inarticulately he blurted out: "When I think... ha-ha!... that all this time Pucky was... hee-hee!... playing around with just a squishy jellyfish... and slept with him... and even gave him carrots to eat!" He burst out laughing again. Atlan waited patiently, unmoved, until things quieted down. Then he continued speaking. "Kulman knew nothing of all this. He believed that he had already known Muzzel for weeks or perhaps months but perhaps yesterday was the actual first time he saw him. What is in all probability quite certain is the fact that Arkon gave the assignment to the unknown leaders of the project to give him a new memory. Kulman had to forget

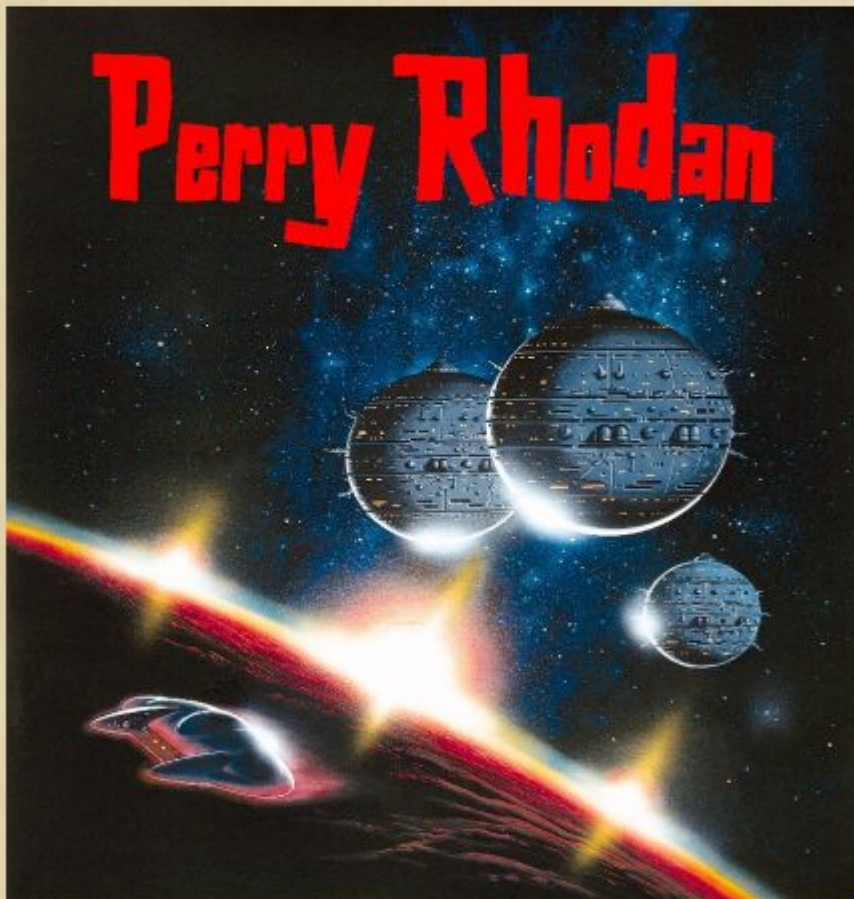
why he sent out the top alert and secondly he had to bring Muzzel on board the Drusus or some other ship that would be returning sooner or later to the Earth." Rhodan spoke when Atlan made a slight pause. "And the micro-transmitters...?" "Oh those!" Atlan nodded as though they had just now come to mind. "Muzzel had about 150 of them in his stomach. We would have had to do some real fancy jumping around out here to trick him out of those, one at a time. Each transition only subtracted one from his supply, which was kept in a sort of storage pouch. By a certain movement, Muzzel could shove a transmitter into a small tube at any particular time, and this tube terminated in his mouth. Also, when a transmitter left the pouch to enter the outlet tube, it would set the device's timer for the desired time. "Muzzel's procedure was as follows: after waiting for a transition to end, he would leave Pucky under the pretense of going somewhere to hide. He would spit out one of his transmitters somewhere and then let Pucky search for him and find him. It all went quite smoothly and without arousing any suspicion. "It was only in connection with our last transition, which was announced beforehand and was ostensibly to take us back to Earth, that Muzzel placed a transmitter prior to the hyperjump. Pucky had heard the P.A. broadcast and Muzzel had learned from him that the 2 of them were supposed to remain in the Command Central during the transition. Oh yes, and during that transition I noticed something else." A faint smile touched Atlan's lips as he looked at the remains of the android-robot spy. They had been placed in a box for thorough examination later. "While each of us including Pucky suffered the usual pains of transition, Muzzel remained unaffected. He sensed nothing-absolutely nothing. But a possonkal is a living creature like any other. He would have had to suffer pain like the rest of us. When I observed this fact I was completely certain of my deductions." Rhodan broke into the momentary silence. "I think that very soon now we're going to have to pick a bone with somebody about this." "With whom?" Bell wanted to know, while Atlan continued to smile. "With the Robot Regent of Arkon-if I'm not hurting the sensitivities of our friend Atlan." Atlan made a minimizing gesture. I think I've already explained to you how I feel about that 2 or 3 million ton metal monster. That's no true Arkonide: you can don't have to handle the Regent with kid gloves on my account." Rhodan knew that 3 vital tasks lay before him. A return visit to Swoofon could not be avoided. The Earth could not afford to have in its immediate vicinity a world whose marvellous micro-technology was at the beck & call of the Springers... which in the final analysis meant Arkon itself. This grim realization reminded Rhodan that he had not yet heard Kulman's actual account of what happened. The details must be retrieved as soon as the agent awakened from his convalescent sleep. The 2nd task before him was the refreshment of the Robot Brain's memory in regard to the treaty between Arkon and Earth and emphasis that in no way could Earth be pleased by the way Arkon's ruler was choosing to interpret that agreement. It had to be drilled into the Regent's armour plated skull that without Terra's help the positronicon would lose its battle against the unknown menace from the alien time dimension. A machine has very little sense of real time and this fact worked against the interests of Arkon. The most difficult mission of all, however, would be to confront those timeless beings who were lurking out there somewhere in the interstices of spatima, only waiting for the 2 space-time continuums to make contact in order to manifest again. They remained the greatest danger of all, a menace that the Peacelord took very, very seriously. Rhodan nodded once more to Atlan, then turned to Sikermann. "Put the Drusus on course for the Swaft system. I'll give you the time for the hytrans as soon as we have Kulman's report. Till then, for my part I'm going to give my eyeballs a rest for an hour. I'd suggest you do the same if you don't have any deck watch coming up soon. See you later." Bell watched Rhodan leave for a well-deserved nap. "Actually I should be following suit," he said to himself, "but I guess I'd rather have a chat with Pucky. Now that he's lost a friend he'll probably need some consolation." As he departed on his errand of mercy, Atlan called after him: "If you can use some consolation in a little

while, I'll be around." In deep space, there being no atmosphere to filter their rays, the stars do not twinkle, else there might have been the stellar spectacle of a panoply of stars blinking at the unconscious irony of Atlan's statement. "I'll be around." An immortal man, whose life history already spanned many millennia. The End



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