

CHASE THROUGH SPACE

20,000 SWOONS—abducted!

The Swoons specialised in microtechnology. Their scientists could prove of tremendous future value to Perry Rhodan's cosmic agents.

But the sinister foe from the Other Dimension sense the danger of the Swoons...and swoop!

The Robot Regent of Arkon is at work as well, attempting to outwit Rhodan despite the treaty made with the Peacelord.

Enter Jost Kulman, *anew* mutant you've not met before.

Mix them all together and you'll find that big things come in small packages when you encounter—

THE MICRO-TECHS

1/ MICRO MISSION

PUCKY was as mad as if he'd just been given a bushel barrel full of fresh sweet crunchy king-size carrots... and then developed an instant toothache in his sole incisor so that he couldn't eat them!

He was furious. He was frustrated. He was embarrassed to think that he'd fallen for that phony dachshund Muzzel! Muzzel, who was no flesh-and-blood dog at all but an ersatz canine, a robot spy of Arkon's robot Regent. Pucky's sensitive mouse-beaver psyche was psychologically disturbed, to say the least.

"You really brought it on yourself," Reginald Bell rubbed it in. The fact that, with great difficulty, he censored a sarcastic grin didn't help him any since Pucky was a telepath and could read his secret thoughts. "I've warned you often enough. Who would trust a dachshund?"

"Dachshunds are dogs, aren't they?" Pucky retorted angrily. He happened to be very fond of the 4-legged Terrestrial pets, who were usually harmless and friendly. "They're the cutest and truest..."

"Except Muzzel!" Bell interjected.

He would have been wiser to have kept the last remark to himself. It was the straw that broke the mouse-beaver's back. In addition to telepathy he had telekinetic powers, not to mention his gift for

teleportation. Before Bell knew what had happened to him, gravity was seemingly nullified and he found himself floating weightlessly through the spaceship *Drusus* to the closed cabin door. He might have bumped into it like a balloon but at the penultimate moment before collision the door was mysteriously opened as though by an invisible hand and he found himself outside in the corridor. Though he kicked his legs and flailed his arms he knew from bitter past experience this would do him little good: Pucky's kinetic power stream held him prisoner in its pitiless grip.

"I'll show you!" screeched the furious mouse-beaver, losing all control of his English in his mounting wrath. "I'll teach you to pretend sympathy (sympathy) like a hypochondriac (hypocrite) and gloat over my misfortune, you red-haired ball of blabber (blubber)!"

It was an unkind exaggeration to characterize Rhodan's friend and deputy as fat or even shapeless: his figure was simply solid, stocky. But it could not be denied by anyone but a colour-blind person that Reggie was a true redhead. With typical temper to match.

Under other circumstances Pucky's mangling of the language might have provided Bell with some amusement but at the moment he was too mad and scared to do other than bellow menacingly: "Wait till Rhodan hears about this!"

Which only made Pucky laugh hysterically. "Tell him—if you can, fatso!" he challenged.

Anyone unfamiliar with such shenanigans would have gasped at the queer sight of a feather-light Bell drifting just below the ceiling of the corridor and deftly evading all obstacles as the yard-high mouse-beaver waddled underneath him, his ears standing straight up. His animal lips were slightly drawn back, exposing a wicked incisor that sparkled in the light reflected from the lamps. Pucky kept his balance with his broad beavertail which helped support him on his short, rather unsteady legs.

Fortunately no such uniformed individual appeared on the scene. However, Pucky suddenly let Bell drop when he was startled by a man who walked around the corner of the corridor and stopped in his tracks when he saw the wingless man awkwardly flying.

Bell hit the floor with a resounding bang and would have fallen flat on his face if the man hadn't jumped forward and steadied him. His rescuer already knew *what* had happened—he only asked: "Why?"

Bell finally had a chance to vent his pent-up wrath. Pucky had stopped grinning and now displayed a little embarrassment; he was favoured with a dirty look from Bell, who began to roar: "That sawed-off son of a dam builder decided to use me as a pigeon again to display his powers. I went to his cabin with my heart full of the milk of human kindness, meaning to sympathize with him over the little mistake he made with Muzzel, and the next thing I knew, there I was dangling from the ceiling..."

"Is he telling the truth?" the man inquired, regarding the mouse-beaver with his cool grey eyes.

Pucky violently shook his head. "Of course not! He's lying through his feet again, boss! You're a telepath—you ought to know. He insulted me and wouldn't leave me alone."

Perry Rhodan looked back and forth between the 2. "Well, Reggie, what else do you have to say for yourself?"

"He can't take a joke," Bell muttered, adjusting his uniform. "He never could, that doddering waddler."

"Balloon belly!" Pucky countered shrilly.

Rhodan raised his hand. "If you 2 don't cut it out, you'll have to stay home next time. This isn't the time for my comrades to quarrel."

The faces of Bell and Pucky tensed with curiosity.

"What's cooking?" Bell inquired. He gave himself a visible push and put his arm around the mouse-beaver. "We didn't quarrel Pucky, did we?"

"Oh no, whoever gave you that idea?" Pucky chirped, coyly batting his eyes and crossing his forepaws over his heart which made him look like innocence itself. "We were just playing a little..."

"Is that so?" Rhodan clucked. "You had a little fun together? Wonderful! In that case may I assume that you've already settled your slight difference of opinion?"

"Sure, sure," Bell insisted. "But you wanted to tell us something important."

"I did?" Rhodan feigned surprise. "What was it?"

Bell sighed. "I give up. Let's go Pucky! He doesn't need us.

"Just a minute!" Rhodan held him back. "Before you get any notions of playing some more games I want to tell you that Jost Kulman will resume his report in half an hour. So far he didn't have an opportunity to give us detailed information about the events on Swoofon."

"In half an hour?" Bell was intrigued. "I'll be there. But where?"

"In my cabin. I want to be a little more careful in the future. Who knows how many other spies the Regent has smuggled aboard."

With a quick wave of his hand Rhodan continued on his way. Bell and Pucky followed him with their eyes until he disappeared around the next corner.

"Hm," the mouse-beaver uttered, peering longingly at the ceiling.

Bell was taken aback a little but he scratched Pucky's neck and said in a conciliatory tone: "Let's make up. I didn't mean to upset you that much."

Pucky's incisor protruded again, which could be considered a good sign under the circumstances. "OK, slim. I'll try to get along with you even though it means you've robbed me of the pleasure of giving you a flying lesson in the big hangar. Oh shucks, perhaps some other time. Let's go now!"

"How about making it a little snappy," Bell suggested and put his arm around the body of the mouse-beaver. "Rhodan's eyes will pop out when we get into his cabin before him."

Pucky grinned joyfully. He concentrated on the short jump and dematerialised together with Bell. The air flickered as they disappeared and arrived in the same second at another place in the gigantic spacesphere.

When Rhodan entered the pair already sat on his couch and greeted him nonchalantly.

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Jost Kulman was a member of Rhodan's special team known as Cosmic Agents. Most of these agents were mutants with special talents who lived in the most important centres of the Arkonide worlds and communicated with their Central Agency on Terra via hyperradio. This enabled Rhodan to keep in touch with all critical developments in the Galaxy.

Kulman was a micropath. He possessed the ability to control the focal length of his eye lenses which made it possible for him to see objects that were visible only under a microscope to normal people. It was due to this special feature of his that he had been sent to Swoofon because the Swoons who inhabited Swoofon were the most outstanding micro-technicians of the known universe.

Kulman had made himself comfortable in a chair but he glanced a little sheepishly at Rhodan. "I know you've every right to blame me since I was responsible for bringing Muzzel aboard the *Drusus*. That robot dog nearly succeeded in betraying our position to the Regent," he said, conscience-stricken.

"But only nearly," Rhodan smiled. He considered the matter already closed. "It's not your fault. It could've happened to anyone. The whole Mutant Corps was fooled by that imitation dachshund. Even Pucky!"

The mouse-beaver on the couch jerked a little. He cast a sideways look at Bell, who sat next to him, and smiled embarrassed.

Jost Kulman didn't seem to have noticed the by-play and began his eagerly awaited report. "I sent you the hyperradio call when my situation made it advisable and you came to pick me up as arranged. I'm sorry a more elaborated report to you has been delayed because Muzzel..." He paused for a moment but then went on quickly: "The Swoons were given instructions to build a compensator-detector for spaceships whose construction has already been designed."

Rhodan leaned forward and looked intently at his agent. The smile had vanished from his lips as if wiped off. "A what, please?"

Kulman grinned faintly. "I've called the device a compensator-detector because this describes its function. The request was made by the Springers and they've handed the construction plans to the Swoons. The device will make it impossible in the future to keep any hypertransition secret. You can see that my observation is vital..."

"And how!" Rhodan agreed, not looking overly pleased. "Did you obtain any particular details?"

Kulman decided to retrace his story from the beginning. "As you know, sir, the compensator was originally developed by the Springers. It prevented the detection of spaceships going into transitions and materializing again, thereby making the structure sensors virtually useless. As soon as the compensator-detector goes into mass production, all secrecy will be lifted and every ship can be registered whether it uses a compensator for the transition or not. This also means that the position of Terra can no longer be concealed from our enemies."

"We'd be in a terrible jam," Bell muttered and looked at the lean figure of Khrest, who sat quietly in a

chair. "Soon they'll be snooping in our backyards."

"Go on, Kulman," Rhodan said. "How far did they get with their preparations for manufacturing the device?"

"Fortunately the actual work has not yet begun, sir. They've received the plans only very recently. They're in the process of being checked but the erection of workshops has already started. It looks as if they want to mass produce the detectors as soon as possible."

"This must be prevented at all costs," Rhodan said with determination. "Do you have any idea how the detector functions?"

"Just a rough idea, sir. The detector is designed to intercept the frequency of a structure-compensator even when the disturbance of the space-time continuum cannot be registered. This reveals the presence of a compensator as soon as it is activated. It radiates typical oscillations which can be monitored in the 5-dimensional zone. This is all I've been able to learn so far."

"It's more than enough," Rhodan replied. "Do you know the approximate location of the future plant?"

"Yes. They were not very secretive about it although I must've been recognized by the Robot Regent of Arkon or he wouldn't have planted that canine robot-spy on me."

"That's true," Rhodan agreed. "But the incident with Muzzel has also proved something else. What's your opinion, Khrest?"

The Arkonide, whom Rhodan owed so much, looked up. "Yes, Perry, if you mean something about the reliability of the Regent. This little interlude has clearly shown that the robot Brain on Arkon has no intention of dealing squarely with us. It was programmed in such a manner that it will always try to gain the upper hand over organic beings until the Arkonides regain their mental alertness and are able again to rule themselves. Any alliance with humans can serve only the Regent's own purpose and it can never blossom into a true partnership. The Regent was in a dilemma and didn't see a way out alone. The Invisibles, who came attacking from the void and depopulated whole planets, are more than he can handle by himself. He entered in an alliance with us for the purpose of destroying his mysterious enemy. Even though we've not yet succeeded in achieving this goal and the Invisibles are still lurking in space, ready to pounce on us again, the Regent already commits the treachery of trying to locate the Earth. This proves only all too clearly that the Regent has no scruples about tearing up the treaty with Terra the moment we've eliminated the threat of the Invisibles and getting us under his thumb."

"You're thinking exactly the way I do, Khrest," Rhodan answered. "But this time the Regent will have bet on the wrong horse. On Swoofon we'll have a chance to kill 2 birds with 1 stone. Not only are we going to destroy the construction plans for the compensator-detector but we'll also let the Regent know in no uncertain terms that we've seen through his methods. If he doesn't change his attitude we'll rescind our agreement. Let him cope alone with the Invisibles who are out to decimate his Imperium."

Khrest shook his head. "I don't think it'll do much good to destroy the plans, Perry. We'll never be able to prevent the construction of the detector. It'll be built—if not today on Swoofon then later on another world. You can't stop progress. You know the law of the chain-reaction: first there is an offensive weapon and then comes the defensive weapon; soon it is followed by a defence against the defence which is in turn made useless by a new invention. No, the detector is going to be built one way or another. However we can design something to counteract it as soon as it's deployed. All we need are the construction plans. If Kulman can tell us where to find them..."

Rhodan smiled again. He looked very hopeful. "Thank you, Khrest. You've just outlined our next campaign. Kulman, continue with your report. Describe what Swoofon looks like and the living conditions of its inhabitants. How are their relations to the Arkonide Imperium? Each detail can be important no matter how minor it appears to be."

As Kulman elaborated on his descriptions, Rhodan's mind was occupied with the structure-compensator which was his most important defence apparatus. If it was made superfluous, Terra was in great danger. The safety of Terra depended primarily on the fact that nobody in the universe knew where to find it. In the infinity of space it was nothing but a mote of dust.

They won't find this speck, Rhodan promised himself and turned his attention again to Kulman.

"...whose inhabitants are called Swoons. They live exclusively on the 2nd planet of the sun Swaft which is 992 light-years from Earth. The system has 3 planets although only one of them is inhabited. It has oxygen; its surface is mostly a typical desert with very little vegetation. The gravity is $\frac{1}{4}$ that of Earth. The oxygen content of Swoofon is very low but just enough to let humans breathe without artificial equipment."

"Why are the Swoons considered to be the best technicians in the universe?" Bell inquired.

"*Microtechnicians!*" Kulman emphasized. "Their eyes are similar to mine and they can see objects which a normal person can see only under a microscope. They also have extremely dexterous hands and they can shape a grain of sand without optical aids. They measure about 30 centimetres."

"The hands?" Bell asked.

"No. The Swoons!" Kulman corrected him quietly, remembering that he had not yet had much time to talk about them. "The denizens of the planet Swoofon are very small, only about 30 centimetres tall, rather slim, and they don't resemble humanoid beings, they look more like cucumbers with 2 little feet. They've got 4 arms with extremely skilled hands."

"You're putting us on!" Bell shook his head. "Cucumbers that can make watches?"

"They make even much finer things," Kulman exclaimed with admiration in his voice. "Wait till you get to know them. They're really marvellous."

"I can't say that I ever cared much for cucumbers," Bell snickered. He looked at Pucky as if he expected him to concur but he was sadly disappointed.

"I believe the Swoons and I can become good friends," Pucky deliberated. "I'm not bothered by the prejudice to which Bell still clings."

"You're quite right Pucky," Rhodan opined, "but Reggie wasn't serious. I wouldn't take him to Swoofon if he meant it."

"Are we going to...?"

Rhodan nodded to Bell. "Yes, we are and we'll leave today."

"Hooray!" Pucky shrieked and got up to waddle toward the door. "I'll have to spruce up a little. Are we

going to make an official visit?"

"I think so, Pucky. Why, do you have to doll up?"

"A state visit to cucumbers! That's something real special, boss. I don't want you to feel disgraced because of me," and he was gone without opening the door.

"His old instincts are coming to the fore," Bell expounded, staring at the spot where Pucky had just stood. "I hope he won't confuse the cucumber-technicians with carrots. It might create a diplomatic incident."

Kulman stared uncomprehendingly at Bell, who didn't think it necessary to enlighten the agent about the mouse-beaver's fondness for fresh carrots.

Rhodan didn't move from his chair. "Kulman, I think you ought to tell us much more about Swoofon. For instance, I would be interested to know where the embassy of Arkon is located, what troops are at the disposal of the administrator, how the country is governed and so on."

Kulman commenced to give Rhodan all the desired information.

10 minutes later Bell got up and quietly left the cabin. He began to get bored and there were other subjects that interested him much more. He decided to pay a little visit to Lt.-Col. Sikerman in the Command Centre. The First Officer of the battleship *Drusus* had become his close friend which probably had a lot to do with the similarity of their characters.

The burly, dark-haired Baldur Sikerman sat in his pilot seat in front of the control panel of the *Drusus*, a spacesphere with a diameter of 1½ kilometres. As First Officer he was next in command to Rhodan and Bell and in charge of a crew of 2,000 men that was required for the adequate operation of the gigantic ship.

"Hello, Sikerman," Bell greeted as he entered the Command Centre. He took one look around and was satisfied that everything was in perfect order. The observation screens reflected a multitude of unfamiliar stars as they moved through an unknown sector of their own Galaxy. "Bored?"

Sikerman slowly turned around and studied Bell as if he had never seen him before. "Not yet," he said patiently.

Bell glanced at Capt. Rodes Aurin, the greying chief gunner of the *Drusus* who was busy with his catalogues and didn't seem to have heard a word.

"I promise you won't be bothered by boredom so soon, Sikerman," Bell prophesied. "Things might become a little more hectic during the next few hours. Did you oil the stardrive?"

Sikerman winced. "Mangling the language again?" he retorted, turning around to his controls to switch on another rangefinder screen.

"But seriously, I believe we'll soon see some action," Bell announced.

"What kind of action?"

"We're going to drop in on the Swoons, the cucumbermen. You know—the micro-technicians!"

"I don't understand a word."

"Man, don't be a bonehead! Kulman is making his report right now. We're going to fly to Swoofon and look up the natives. They're building a compensator-detector that can register hypertransitions even when the compensators in operation."

"Holy mackerel!" Sikerman exclaimed.

Bell grinned. "Don't worry, we'll throw a monkey wrench into their project. But the cucumbers are supposed to be the nicest creatures and we're not allowed to harm them..."

"What do you mean by cucumbers?"

Bell explained it to him and added: "I'm really curious to meet them. Kulman assures us they're charming in their own way. They've got eyes that let them remove the warts from a flea."

"The warts...?" Sikerman was flabbergasted. "Are they crazy?"

"The warts? Crazy?" Bell inquired.

Sikerman gave no reply. He tried to ignore Bell's presence and observed intently the radar screens where nothing was to be seen. "Warts! Cucumbers!" he muttered under his breath, shaking his head. You ought to see Rosita Peres."

Rosita Peres was the cosmo-psychologist of the *Drusus* .

Bell grinned and ambled to the door leading to the radio room. He opened it with a push on the button. David Stern was on duty and turned around when he heard Bell enter. "Everything normal, sir," Stern reported. "Nothing has been registered and we've intercepted no radio calls."

"Thank you," Bell said and leaned against a console. "You might as well take it easy now. Pretty soon you'll be a very busy man."

David Stern was a lieutenant and one of the best radio officers of the *Drusus* . He was born in Israel, of medium height, dark-haired and moved with the supple grace of a lion. "A new mission?" he asked hesitantly.

"Squash the cucumbers, Stern!"

"Huh?!" David Stern gasped for air. "What did you say?"

"I said: 'Squash the cucumbers!' Don't you know that the inhabitants of Swoofon are cucumbers? We've got to go in and get something from them."

"Oh," Stern nodded without understanding a word. "We're going to take something from them. Very interesting. When and where?"

"You don't believe in cucumbers, do you?" Bell questioned him in a menacing tone. "Our agent Kulman never lies. He knows better than that."

"But Kulman brought Muzzel aboard," Stern reminded him.

Bell began to chuckle. "Haw-haw! Muzzel! You're giving me an idea. So long, Stern I've got to take care of something. There's somebody aboard this ship who was real chummy with that robot dog. They were scratching each other's necks for hours and I didn't even exist for him."

"Are you talking of Pucky?" Stern called to Bell who was already on his way out of the radio-room. "The little mouse-beaver..."

"That's the one I mean and I'm going to tease him a little."

And so Bell was forced to take his involuntary flying lesson after all. To the delight of the officers and men in the hangar he circled under the ceiling, performed flips and loops, alternately cursing like a trooper and begging for help. All his wails and threats didn't keep him from enjoying the utter amazement of the spectators.

But Pucky, who steered Bell around and around with his flow of telekinetic power, was relentless and he kept him flying and gyrating for a whole hour without mercy.

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The *Drusus* performed 2 transitions in the direction of the Swaft system under the still-effective protection of the structure-compensators. Then the compensators were switched off and the next 2 transitions took place without concealment. The Arkonides were thus in a position to monitor the last 2 leaps with their own structure-sensors but they were prevented from learning where the *Drusus* started from.

The sun Swaft had about the size and brightness of the sun of the Earth and it radiated about the same amount of heat. However it was inexplicable why the planet Swoofon had developed so little vegetation despite the presence of water and rocks which had crumbled into soil. There was plenty of sand but hardly any flora.

About half of Swoofon's population lived in small cities on the face of the planet whereas the other half had preferred to retreat underneath the surface.

Kulman had already found out that there were some Swoons who cooperated with the Springers and were willing to build the compensator-detectors for them. These Swoons lived mostly below the surface.

The arrival of spaceships was taken in stride by the Swoons although they were awed by their staggering dimensions which seemed almost incredible to them. Most of the people who visited Swoofon were Springers and Galactic traders bringing them needed material and food and exchanging them for finished products. They were welcome as business partners but were not considered as friends. In this regard Swoofon was a member of the Arkonide Imperium and Rhodan had based his plan on this fact.

As Swoofon appeared on the observation screens and the *Drusus* entered the Swaft system at the velocity of light, Rhodan assigned the roles to his officers. "Lt. Rous, you take over the K-13 and fly to Earth, using your compensator. Bring back the *Titan* and *Gen. Pounder* with full complements. I can't

take the risk of sending a radio call from here. As soon as the 2 spaceships arrive we'll make a grand entrance on Swoofon by orders of the Regent of Arkon."

"Hm," Khrest objected sceptically. "Aren't you overdoing it?"

"No, not at all. I'll act officially within the stipulations of my agreement with Arkon so that no suspicions should arise. I'll notify the Regent upon his request that Swoofon is threatened by an invasion of the Invisibles and it's none of his business how we found out about it. We know it and that'll have to do. And now we're going to do something about it. Who is going to stop us?"

Nobody answered except Atlan who cleared his throat in the background. "I think it would be wrong if we did anything to hurt the Swoons," he remarked thoughtfully. "In my capacity as a former colonial psychologist of the Imperium, I advise against taking any violent measures and I recommend..."

"I've no intention of hurting the Swoons," Rhodan interrupted him amiably. "We only want to bluff them a little. The real purpose of our show of force is to mask the mission of our agents. This is our plan: we're going to send Kulman with some handpicked mutants to those Swoons who want to build the detector. In the commotion we'll be causing with our appearance, the entire action can proceed unnoticed."

"I guess you're right," Atlan the immortal responded.

Lt. Marcel Rous stepped forward and asked: "When shall I start, sir?"

Rhodan looked at his watch. "It's 13 hours, Terra time. You can be back in 2 hours if you make a transition-jump. Leave at once and take only half the crew. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir," Rous replied and left the Command Centre.

Rhodan followed him with his eyes and then called over John Marshall, the Chief of the Mutant Corps. "I'll see you in 10 minutes in my cabin where we can hammer out the details of the mission. Thank you."

Next he turned to Bell. "Have a look in my wardrobe. There must be a uniform in there which I once used to play the role of an Arkonide inspector. It should come in handy again."

"That remains to be seen," Bell murmured and took off.

Baldur Sikerman, who sat in his pilot chair and didn't take his eyes off his controls, asked: "Are you really going to land the *Drusus* on that planet, sir?"

"We'll land all 3 ships," Rhodan replied firmly. "It ought to be a very impressive sight for the midgets of Swoofon to watch the arrival of 3 spacespheres, each measuring 1½ kilometres in diameter, on their world. The bigger the hubbub, the better it'll be for us. Any other questions, gentlemen?"

Rhodan broke off the briefing after he had answered all questions.

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At precisely 15 hours Terra time the 2 tremendous spaceships *Titan* and *Gen. Pounder* materialized in the vicinity of the *Drusus*. Rhodan was aware that his action could be misinterpreted and even considered ridiculous if he occupied a planet like Swoofon with 3 such gigantic, battleships. The Springers and the Arkonides might call him insane or a hopeless coward but Rhodan didn't care what they thought. He knew exactly what he was doing.

The *Drusus* continued on its course to Swoofon with the speed of light and Rhodan began to send a radio message to the planet, repeating it continuously: "ATTENTION! TO THE POPULATION OF THE PLANET SWOOFON! IN THE NAME OF THE IMPERIUM, THE SWAFT SYSTEM WILL BE COMPLETELY CORDONED OFF. NO SHIP WILL BE ALLOWED TO LEAVE SWOOFON WITHOUT SPECIAL PERMISSION. ALL SHIPS STATIONED ON SWOOFON ARE FORBIDDEN TO START OR TO LAND, EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY. ALL PERSONS ARE ADVISED TO MAINTAIN PEACE AND CALM!"

Rhodan omitted mentioning his name. The Regent of Arkon would learn it soon enough and begin to wonder what the actual intentions of his ally were. Let him, Rhodan smiled grimly, as Sikerman slowed down the *Drusus* to keep the ship from entering the atmosphere too quickly. The *Titan* and the *Gen. Pounder* followed his example.

Kulman stood next to Rhodan and watched the landing manoeuvre. He knew Swoofon well enough to be able to orient himself. "The capital is called Swatran," he explained while he studied the observation screen, which reflected all the features of the ground. "It is built for the greater part on the surface, especially near the spaceport. The manufacturing plants are located underground. They are accessible only through small doors. I'm afraid none of us will be able to get in."

"We'll see about that," Rhodan smiled mysteriously. "Just wait."

Kulman looked at a blurred spot about 200 kilometres east of the capital. "That was the place where I stayed. Nobody knows me in Swatran."

"They must have heard something about you and your activities," Rhodan replied. "I guess you won't have to introduce yourself. But they'll be surprised to see you on my ship and will wonder why you returned with me. However, since the Swoons aren't very kindly disposed toward the Springers, I expect to find no enemies among them."

"Let's wait and see," Kulman answered dryly. Rhodan gave no reply.

The spaceport had been built by the Springers who carried on a profitable trade with the microtechnicians of the Galaxy. Although the buildings the Springers had to construct for themselves and the local Arkonide Administration were relatively low and flat, they must have looked like gigantic skyscrapers to the diminutive Swoons. Kulman had lived in a large warehouse during his sojourn on Swoofon but the warehouse was not much bigger than an ordinary shed and he felt like Gulliver among the Lilliputians.

The tiny size of the houses made the distances look deceptive. With the naked eye Rhodan estimated that his ship was still 100 kilometres above Swatran but the altimeter indicated only a height of 10 kilometres.

The 3 huge ships landed and almost a 100 Guppies—spacespheres 60 meters in diameter—immediately poured out of the hangars of the *Drusus*, *Titan* and *Gen. Pounder* and took to the air to seal off the planet from the outside world.

As soon as this was done Rhodan began to breathe easier. He strode to the radio-room and asked David Stern, "Did we get any calls?"

"Only a few bewildered inquiries, full of confusion, sir. The Springers are protesting and claim that they know of no complaints against them."

"They always say that, no matter how bad a conscience they have. I bet they're racking their brains right now which of their rackets we're after. If the Springers have cooked up this deal with the compensator-detector by themselves, they must be beginning to sweat blood."

Bell, who had followed Rhodan, questioned it. "But they don't know that we're on to this shady deal."

"Uncertainty is not a very pleasant predicament for them to be in," Rhodan pointed out and turned again to Stern. "I'd like to get in touch with the Administrator of Swoofon. Can you get him?"

"I'll try," Stern promised and went to work, "but I don't know how long it'll take me."

"Call me as soon as you get hold of him," Rhodan instructed and walked to the door. "In the meantime I'll change to an official representative of the Arkonide Imperium."

Bell followed him with his eyes and then returned to the Command Centre. He paused at the door and was struck by the eerie silence. All men gaped as if transfixed at the panoramic picture screens which mirrored the surroundings of the ship as clearly as if it had no walls.

Bell too was enthralled by the scene. The landing field was no longer deserted. The ground between the towering Springer ships was crowded with little creatures who looked like ripe cucumbers and walked in a very dignified manner. They were barely 30 centimetres high, had short legs, 4 arms, no neck and a caricature of a face with flat noses and small mouths. Their bulging eyes didn't make the Swoons look prettier either.

Bell knew from Kulman's report that these peculiar creatures had an almost pathetic sense of honour and an extreme desire to be treated politely and with great respect. Anyone who failed to meet their standards had nothing but trouble with them and this was the last thing Rhodan wanted.

"By all the planets!" Bell gasped as he eyed the marching cucumbermen, whose yellow colour astonished him. Although they wore some kind of clothing, their figures were not covered up so much that they couldn't be clearly seen. "They really do look like cucumbers. Can they talk?"

Kulman, who stood next to him, assured him they could. "Their voices are very high-pitched and shrill but they have rather sensitive ears. If you yell at them, they double up in pain. However it's easy to communicate with them with the aid of our translation instruments. Fortunately we've got enough of these sets."

"I can perceive their thoughts," Pucky chirped. His eyes were wide in awe. "They're very peaceful and curious but they don't like to admit it. They want to pretend to be very firm and to protest against the occupation of Swoofon. Here comes some sort of a government delegation, if I'm not mistaken."

"That's wonderful," a voice boomed from the door.

They spun around and were startled to see the colourful uniform of an Arkonide Inspector General but

they quickly realized that Rhodan had changed his clothes and was ready to play his role.

"You look like a peacock," Bell murmured enviously. "Next to you I feel like a drab sparrow."

"And you are nothing more than that," Pucky exclaimed with a merry grin.

Bell wasn't to be sidetracked. "Are you going to leave the ship to talk to the Swoons? Who'll accompany you?"

Rhodan looked around. "Kulman better remain inside the ship at first. They don't have to know that he's with us—at least not yet. You'll come with me, Reggie. Pucky, too, so that we can find out something about the thoughts of the Swoons. Sikerman and Khrest will take over the radio centre and see to it that our orders are complied with. The other Guppies will land on the spaceports of all continents and guard the ships of the Springers. All trading will cease immediately. By orders of Arkon!"

He smiled grimly when he added the last words. Bell chortled while Khrest and Atlan looked concerned and Sikerman had a determined expression. Only Pucky did nothing for a change.

Meanwhile the 3 ships, which had left a good distance between them when they touched down, were completely surrounded by the masses of Swoons streaming in. It was a weird spectacle for the Terrans. The smooth surface of the spaceport swarmed with the diminutive cosmic beings who moved so dignified and majestically as if they were the rulers of the universe. If they had nothing else, they had a good conscience and imperturbable calm and serenity.

"Let's go, Rhodan said. Bell and Pucky followed him. Instead of weapons they took along an electronic translator without which they could not have talked to the Swoons. Bell carried it with the solemnity of a royal chamberlain while Pucky stared with due deference at the colourful pants of Rhodan, who walked in front of him. Nobody knew what memories it recalled for him. It was not the first time that Rhodan wore pants like these.

The exit hatch opened and a walking ramp slid out on which Rhodan and his companions descended to meet the waiting Swoons.

"They're not a bit afraid of us," Pucky whispered. "They're only curious."

"Inquisitiveness is a driving force of the universe," Rhodan replied just as softly.

There must have been tens of thousands of Swoons who had assembled here to greet the pretentious Arkonide. Now Rhodan, who was a much weaker telepath than Pucky, was also able to read the thoughts of the Swoons closest to him, although it was difficult to distinguish them in the confusion of the manifold impulses. He was, indeed, confronted only by curiosity mixed with a little pleasure and satisfaction.

This was quite amazing and even consternating to Rhodan, who decided to solve the puzzle. He kept walking till he was in the midst of the Swoons. Then he bent down and sat on his haunches. Bell followed his example, which was not as easy for him since he weighed quite a few pounds more than Rhodan. However Pucky had no trouble at all because he was only one meter tall.

One of the Swoons, who was treated with obvious respect by the others, began to speak in a squeaky voice. They made room for him as he stepped forward and formed a protective semicircle around him. "Welcome to Swoofon," the Swoon said gravely, intimating a bow. "We're pleased to greet you as our

guests. Did you come on behalf of the Regent...?"

This was the first probing question. Rhodan replied via the translator, which had clearly transmitted the words of the Swoon. "The Regent presents his compliments to the esteemed Swoons. The Imperium is happy to count the Swoons among its best friends."

The Swoons swallowed the flattery with the naturalness that was characteristic for them in this respect. The yellow face in front of Rhodan beamed. "We do no more than our duty if we put our valuable services at the disposal of a common cause," the little fellow assured him, full of pride and self-confidence. "Perhaps the Imperium has another bid for us. We'll be glad to give it our usual attention..."

"The reason for our visit is rather unpleasant," Rhodan interrupted the speaker. "We're in pursuit of an enemy of the Imperium. Our information indicates that he fled to Swoofon. Furthermore this world is threatened by an invasion against which there is no defence unless we succeed in finding a new weapon. I'd like to speak to the government chief of Swoofon."

"There are many of those," came the surprising answer. "Unfortunately our nations and tribes have not yet been able to agree on who is, worthy of speaking for all of us. Our negotiations for unification..."

The same old story, Rhodan thought. The Swoons had not yet mastered space travel nor ventured on expansion into the Galaxy. They lived for their work, traded with the Springers and the other races of the Imperium, earned a lot of money and refrained from interfering in foreign policy.

"...and therefore we must ask your indulgence and to confer with the representatives of Swoofon. We speak for 10 million Swoons."

"Very well. Then I must ask you to cooperate with my instructions. All ships on the spaceport of Swatran are forbidden to leave unless we give our permission to do so. Furthermore, I wish to talk to the Arkonide Administrator. His residence is in Swatran, if I'm not mistaken."

"It was until today," the little Swoon explained. "Unfortunately he suddenly departed when you appeared. We wanted to consult with him because we were anxious to learn the reasons for the arrival of an Arkonide fleet but he was gone from his office and nobody seems to know where he is."

This was very interesting news. What was Arkon's deputy on Swoofon afraid of that he took it on the lam? Did he make any unsavoury deals with the Springers to line his own pockets? Did he fear an exposure by him, Rhodan?

Meanwhile Bell sat down on the ground. Several Swoons sauntered around his legs and studied him with bold curiosity. He could have swept them aside with one move of his hand. However when he looked into their droll faces he was almost touched by compassion. He admired their finely shaped fingers which extruded from the ends of their arms without transition. The little creatures really looked like ripe cucumbers that had suddenly sprung to life. Bell felt as though he were living in a fairyland where he had to play the role of a good giant.

Pucky experienced very similar emotions. He sat on the ground and probed the thoughts of the Swoons surrounding him. He drew their special attention and fondness. As far as Pucky could make out, they considered him to be a pet of the Arkonides but he didn't resent it in the least because he liked and respected animals no less than humans.

"Then I'll have a little talk with the Springers," Rhodan said. "I'm going to pay them a visit with some of my soldiers and put them under arrest."

Rhodan thought he recognized something like joy in the face of the Swoon standing before him. The thoughts of the little fellow confirmed his impressions. He didn't like the Springers yet there were others he didn't like either.

Other Swoons! Swoons that collaborated with the Springers.

"Will you please request all Swoons to leave the spaceport," Rhodan appealed to him, "so that they'll not hinder my military operations. I'll give you half an hour."

"We'll be happy to be at your service," the Swoon assured him. "I presume you'll be good enough to let us know the result of measures when you can. If there's anything else we can do for you..."

"We'll notify you as soon as possible," Rhodan promised and got up. Bell and Pucky followed his example although both gave the impression that they would have preferred to sit around a little longer. Maybe they would later get a chance to have a conversation with the cucumbermen.

Rhodan switched off the electronic translator. "You wait here with Pucky," he said to Bell. "I'll go to the *Drusus* and come back with Marshall and 5 of his mutants. Don't let anything distract you. I'll be back at once." Without waiting for an answer he walked away. Before he reached the ramp, he pushed the button of the transceiver on his wrist.

David Stern answered: "Sir?"

"Get in touch with Arkon by hyperradio. You know the code signal of the robot Brain. Request the Regent to send Talamon's battlefleet to Swoofon as reinforcement. Okay?"

"Request Arkon to send Talamon. Yes, sir."

"And if anybody should wonder why, tell him it's my business and that I know what I'm doing. Is that clear?"

"I understand, sir."

Although Rhodan was not convinced of that, he knew he could depend on Lt. Stern.

Bell and Pucky sat down again and began to talk to the few Swoons who still remained on the landing field. All the others slowly strolled back to the city as if on a little recreational stroll.

Pucky stared at them with astonishment and a little scepticism. Although he was quite enamoured of the intelligent cucumbers, he still had an uncanny feeling about them.

* * * *

Khrest, Atlan and Sikerman waited for Rhodan in the Command Centre.

Khrest looked extremely worried. "I'm afraid you went overboard," he greeted Rhodan. "Now the Regent is informed about what we're doing here."

Rhodan shook his head. "Not really, Khrest. It only serves to mislead him about our actual intentions. He'll never find out the true reasons that brought us here. While he's trying to figure it out we'll locate the plans for the compensator-detector and ascertain at the same time how serious the Regent is concerning our friendship."

"I hope you're right," Khrest said dubiously.

Atlan didn't utter a word. Although he was an Arkonide like Khrest, he was broader and more forceful. His eyes had the same reddish glint of the albino race and they reflected the timelessness of his immortality whose secret Rhodan hoped to discover. If not today, sometime in the future.

"We'll pull it off," Rhodan said optimistically and gave a few short orders on the intercom. A couple of minutes later John Marshall and 4 mutants entered the Command Centre.

"You're coming with me." Rhodan turned to the head of the Mutant Corps. "We're going to roust the Springers but I don't think they'll put up a fight."

"Not if they know what's good for them," Sikerman interjected with a defiant look at the armament control panel. "We also got a few more Guppies on board."

"I'll call for them if necessary," Rhodan assured him, leaving the Command Centre. "We'll keep in touch with you by radio."

Meanwhile the landing field had been vacated. Only a few stragglers were striding away pompously, displaying no hurry to reach their goal. They were still plagued by the suspense of finding out what the excitement was all about.

Bell and Pucky rose to their feet when Rhodan returned with the 5 men. The last 3 Swoons strutted away, giving the impression of hardly being able to drag the weight of their little bodies.

"We won't need a vehicle," Rhodan said to Bell when he noticed his quizzical expression. "If you give yourself a good push, you can fly 10 meters through the air and land gently on the ground again. Kulman says he likes to take a walk on Swoofon."

"Nice little walk," Bell grumbled, peering at the flat buildings in the distance where he suspected the Springers to be. "I've got a funny feeling..."

"In your stomach?" Pucky inquired. "Must be hunger."

"Nonsense! I'm not hungry."

"Aha!" Pucky exclaimed triumphantly, grinning at Rhodan. "Then he's afraid. It must be hunger or fear. Since he denies being hungry..."

"Let's get going," Rhodan cut him off. "We don't have time for blunking (tomfoolery). Marshall, have your gun ready to shoot. Although I don't believe the Springers would do something foolish. At least not what Reggie fears."

The 3 battleships formed an equilateral triangle. Between and around them were several cylindrical Springer ships. The Springers heeded Rhodan's radioed warning and kept quiet. The Swoons now were all gone, making it plain that they had nothing to do with the threatened cleanup campaign.

The teleporter Ras Tschubai, the huge Afroterranian with a good-natured face, stuck close to the hypno André Noir. Wuriu Sengu, the Japanese seer, walked alongside the detector Fellmer Lloyd and Marshall followed behind. Rhodan, Pucky and Bell were at the head of the little column and proceeded toward the edge of the landing field in the direction of the office buildings which blocked the view to the city.

Nobody was in sight. Once in awhile a shadow moved behind the closed windows.

Fellmer Lloyd, who could analyse thoughts better than read them, said: "The Springers are in an uncertain mood and the atmosphere is charged with tension. They don't know what to make of our visit. At any rate they've no intention of fighting back in earnest, since they've got a great respect for the Regent. It seems that he has already taught them a good lesson once before."

"That suits me just fine," Rhodan commented with satisfaction. "It'll make it that much easier for us. As long as they remember it, they'll be more careful and tractable."

"I'll be happy to refresh their memory if necessary," Pucky suggested.

Meanwhile they had almost reached the largest of the buildings, which had been constructed at a very low height. Only 2 steps led to the entrance, which stood wide open.

Rhodan looked around. "Tschubai, Noir, Sengu and Pucky, you wait here. Marshall, Bell and I go in alone. If we need help, Marshall will send you a telepathic message to join us inside."

Without waiting for an answer he kept walking, Bell and Marshall close on his heels. Marshall was the only one carrying a weapon.

The wide corridor was empty and brightly lit. There were numerous doors on both sides and it wasn't difficult for Marshall to find the door to the right room. "The Springers are in here," he whispered. "They don't know where we are. At the moment they're still busy thinking up some good alibis. They've got plenty to worry about. They may even be responsible for the deal with the compensator-detector."

"We'll soon find out," Rhodan replied in a low voice. "We're going to ask them some blunt questions on our visit. Reggie, open the door!"

Bell instinctively reached for his holster, where he usually kept his gun. Then he shrugged his shoulders, quietly turned the doorknob, pushed the door open and barged in with Rhodan and Marshall close behind him. "Good morning, gentlemen. I hope you don't mind if we have a little chat."

There were 6 men gaping at the intruders. All had more or less neatly trimmed beards. They wore civilian clothing but carried the usual rayguns in their belts. They sat around a table and sprang up from their chairs when they were so suddenly caught unawares.

"For crying out loud...!" one of them exclaimed perplexed. "How did you find us so quickly? Anyway, we've obeyed your orders. We haven't moved our ships out there..."

"Well," Rhodan broke in, leaving Marshall to protect his rear, "did we say anything to the contrary? Or is

your bad conscience bothering you?"

A red-haired giant slowly walked toward Rhodan and stopped close before him. He looked the alleged Inspector General up and down and said haughtily: "We're citizens of the Imperium and abide by the law, I don't know you and I've never seen you but if you don't change your tune we'll soon get to know each other better."

"It'll be a pleasure," Rhodan said amiably. Yet there was a hint of steel in his voice. "May I ask you what business you have on Swoofon?"

The red-haired Springer snorted contemptuously: "What do you think there's for us to do around here? We're carrying on our normal trade with the Swoons. They produce the finest precision merchandise which fetches high prices in the Galaxy. It's no crime to buy the products of the Swoons and sell them some place else."

"Did I say it is?" Rhodan retorted.

The Springer seemed stumped. "No, of course not but..." He suddenly paused and studied Rhodan closely. Then he continued: "Let's put our cards on the table. What do you want of us? Why this big alarm? Who're you after?"

"Aha!" Rhodan ejaculated. "That already sounds much more sensible. I think we're going to get along much better under these circumstances. Tell me, have you ever heard the name Berenak?"

"No, never!"

This didn't surprise Rhodan in the slightest. He had never heard the name either because he had just made it up. "So you don't know Berenak," he asked. "He comes from a planet in the vicinity of Arkon. He's the son of Arkonides and Springers but belongs to neither one. He's also a criminal and a master of disguise. We're searching for him."

"What did he do?"

"It would be too involved to relate all his misdeeds. Suffice it to say that he's on Swoofon according to our information. The Regent has given us orders to apprehend him. He could be almost anyone among you and it'll not be easy to expose him. That's why we went to such extreme lengths with our measures."

"I'm not Berenak," sneered the red-haired Springer indignantly. "I'm the patriarch Gol and a reputable trader."

"That may very well be so," Rhodan countered, "But you'll have to prove it to me. I'll have to insist that you remain until further notice on Swoofon and that you obey my regulations. I don't have to point out to you that you don't stand a chance against the 3 battleships of the Imperium. Do I make myself clear?"

"Quite," Gol grumbled in disgust and sat down again. He seemed to have lost his desire to persist in the fruitless conversation.

In the meantime Marshall had probed the thoughts of the other Springers in the room. However he was unable to find the slightest clue to the planned construction of the compensator-detector and he secretly passed the word to Rhodan.

"I prefer not to arrest you," Rhodan said in closing and walked to the door. "Nonetheless, consider yourselves my prisoners for the time being. I advise you not to leave the building. Whoever contravenes the orders of Arkon will be held responsible and the consequences will be highly unpleasant for you. I trust you understand me, gentlemen."

Rhodan didn't expect an answer. The Springers were tough and audacious men who had been forced to give up much of their personal freedom since they joined the Imperium. They didn't feel very friendly toward Arkon but they practiced sensible restraint and obeyed the commands of the robot Brain.

They remained motionless as Rhodan, Marshall and Bell left the room but their eyes betrayed an evil glint even though they had—as yet—no intention to defy the wishes of Arkon.

Once Bell was in the corridor he sighed with relief. "They were getting under my skin. I can't read their thoughts and I don't understand why they let us get away with it. Earlier..."

"Times have changed, Reggie," Rhodan said. "In former years the Springers were not as close-knit with the Arkonides as today. They're very careful to stay on the good side of the robot Brain. Besides, they really don't have the slightest inkling of what we want. So they have a comparatively good conscience, if you disregard their normal practice of fleecing the Swoons. However this is none of our business."

They combed the whole building and found about 50 more Springer captains who were also warned not to leave Swoofon. But they found no trace of the Springers who were connected with the construction of the detector, leaving them completely baffled.

When Rhodan and his 2 companions stepped out in the sunlight again, the other 4 mutants waiting for them seemed to breathe easier. Pucky was stretched out on the ground and gave the impression of a tourist who soaked up the sunshine with his belly.

Before Rhodan could utter a word, they heard a shrill whistle in the air which quickly became a muffled roar. A mighty shadow whooshed over the landing field before a gigantic spacesphere touched down precisely in the middle of the triangle formed by Rhodan's vessels. Talamon had arrived.

With the power Rhodan had concentrated here he could have conquered half the Galaxy, not to mention a harmless planet like Swoofon. This tremendous overkill potential should drive the Regent up the wall, Rhodan hoped.

David Stern called by radio from the *Drusus*. Talamon requested further instructions as to his assignment. Rhodan asked Stern to switch the connection directly to the Mounder. When he heard the voice of the old man his tense face broke out in a happy smile. "Hello, Talamon! It didn't take you long to get here."

"The Regent ordered me to step on it. Where's the fire?"

"On Swoofon, Talamon."

"And for that you've requested a powerful battleship when you have 3 invincible dreadnoughts yourself? What are you afraid of, Rhodan? The Swoons?"

Rhodan was still smiling but Talamon couldn't see him. "It's better to err on the side of caution and it doesn't always mean fear, old comrade. Be that as it may, your job will be to seal off the Swaft system hermetically. No ship is allowed to come or go. This is important. Swoofon must be isolated to give me

time for ferreting out each Springer. Not a mouse must sneak out, if you know what I mean, Talamon."

"I got it. May I ask...?"

"We're looking for somebody," Rhodan said curtly, making it plain that he didn't wish to say more.

Talamon knew him well enough not to persist with further questions. "Very well, Rhodan. You're the boss. Perhaps we can talk some other time about the advisability of taking certain measures. If you don't mind my saying so, I find your precautions a little exaggerated."

Rhodan waited a few more seconds but the tiny loudspeaker remained silent. He switched it off with a sigh. "Nobody can get used to taking orders without asking questions," he stated philosophically. "I can hardly blame Talamon, though. But the Brain of Arkon will soon join the quiz and then it'll get critical."

"You can always let me talk to that metal monster," Pucky proposed in a cantankerous mood.

Rhodan gazed thoughtfully at Talamon's ship without responding to Pucky's offer. He began to wonder why the Regent—the greatest positronic brain of the Galaxy—had dispatched the requested battleship. Was he faithful to their agreement? Rhodan remained sceptical.

"Let's go back," he finally said. "We've got a job to do. And as far as you're concerned, you'll soon have an opportunity to work off your surplus energy. You, Kulman and Sengu will take on the task of hunting down the plant where the compensator-detector will be manufactured—and find it."

"Glad to," Pucky said as eagerly as if he had been told to get a carload of carrots at a hydroponics store.

2/ CRIMINAL AT LARGE

Swatran was situated almost exactly on the equator. Since the length of a day on Swoofon corresponded to 18 hours on Terra, the sun shone here for 9 hours before it was night for another 9 hours.

Now it was midnight and pitch-dark. Pucky, Wuriu Sengu and Jost Kulman stood in the main plaza of the capital. They moved carefully to avoid stepping on the vehicles of the Swoons parked in the street. Although the cucumbers had street mobiles up to one meter long, they were not easy to see because they had no lights in the square where Pucky and the 2 men wanted to start their search.

"It's dead around here," the Japanese murmured nervously. "Don't the Swoons have a nightlife?"

"No," Kulman muttered. "They like their sleep."

"The subterranean Swoons too?" Pucky inquired.

"Yes, they too," the agent Kulman confirmed. He had lived long enough on Swoofon by orders of the Solar Imperium to know their customs. "They prefer to live quietly and modestly."

"They're absolutely right," Pucky pronounced with admiration. "They're satisfied with what they have accomplished and feel happy. They've every reason to be proud and they have ambition without overdoing it. One can almost be envious of them."

"Yes, in some respects," Kulman agreed, trying to look around. His eyes were unable to penetrate the darkness. "Can you see anything?"

Wuriu Sengu shrugged his shoulders. "I can see through the molecular structure of matter with my eyes but when it comes to ordinary darkness, I'm lost. Sure I can see the Swoons lying in their beds but not very clearly. Anyway, this won't do us much good."

Pucky took the 2 men by the arms. "What do you have me for, friends? Let's investigate the dayside first. I'll take you 2 pint-sized boys with me."

The 'pint-sized boys' were grown men, more than twice as heavy as the mouse-beaver. But he could have carried more than 10 times his own weight on a teleporting jump if necessary.

The air flickered and the main plaza was empty again except for the parked vehicles. There was nobody to watch their disappearing act.

They materialized again several thousand kilometres away, a little north of the equator. Kulman had told them that the other zones were too cool and that life was mostly concentrated in the region north and south of the equator.

They stood in the middle of a vast plain which was rimmed by mountains in the north and an ocean in the south. Rolling hills stretched endlessly toward east and west. There was no sign of a town or settlement anywhere in sight.

"Lonely country," Pucky pouted, looking up to the dark-blue sky whose colour ranged into violet. They noticed the effect of the thin atmosphere. "What are we looking for around here?"

"It isn't quite as lonely here as you might think," Kulman replied, pointing to the rocky ground. "The Swoons live here under the surface. I don't know how far down their cities are located but we can find out where they are. Since all their big factories are placed underground the detector will also be built somewhere down below."

Now that Wuriu Sengu had been made aware of the subterranean installations, he applied his special talent. His eyes had a fixed stare as he focused below the ground and soon an expression of amazement crossed his face. He began to talk slowly while Kulman and Pucky listened breathlessly. "There's a city directly underneath us. It's about 50 meters deep and stretches on one level. But there's a 2nd level 20 meters farther down in the rock. No, the lower level is not a city, it's a huge factory with long machinery halls and workbenches. They're jammed with thousands of Swoons. Heavens, how tiny!"

"The Swoons?" Pucky asked.

"No, the stuff they're building; it can hardly be seen with the naked eye."

"They make transmitters no bigger than the tip of a little pin," Kulman added. "It's miraculous what they can do. I've seen incredible miniature work..."

"Wait a minute," Sengu interrupted him to get back to his observations. "The facilities down there are

tremendous. I can't see all of it. If we follow this method we can keep looking for months before we get results. We don't have that much time."

"Of course not," Pucky growled, staring jealously at the stones which was all he and Kulman could see. Everything that was hidden underneath remained invisible except to the seer Wuriu Sengu. "They've got trains connecting their installations and transporting goods. Where do they take them, Kulman?"

"To the cities on the surface," Kulman informed him. "And to the spaceports where they're exchanged for food. They grow virtually nothing on Swoofon. It's a puzzle to me how the Swoons lived before they were discovered by the Springers. I've never been able to find that out."

"I believe the streets are wide enough for us," the Japanese pointed out, "and the houses look high enough to let us move around without too much trouble. We ought to pay a visit to the city."

"But the entrances to the subterranean cities are too small," Kulman explained. "I've already tried it."

"We'll teleport ourselves," Pucky decided, showing great interest. "That's the best way to get in, of course. But I'll have to estimate the distance precisely so we won't materialize inside the rock."

They muted their voices as the mouse-beaver telepathically perceived the thought impulses of the Swoons far below them and oriented himself in the area. Sengu tried to pick a place where they could emerge. The best he was able to find was a public square which unfortunately had a lot of traffic. Since the vehicles were driven electrically, the air was unpolluted.

"By the way, they already heard the news about the arrival of our spaceships," Pucky finally said. "They've got excellent communication media. However it has not disturbed their life. They act as if nothing had happened."

"Will they get a surprise!" Sengu predicted, taking the paw of the mouse-beaver. "What are you waiting for, Jost? Pucky is ready to jump."

And so Pucky took the leap.

* * * *

Drog, a husky Springer, wended his way through the 2 meter high tunnel connecting the 2 laboratories, stepping on the slender rails of the railway system and causing the repair crews of the Swoons plenty of work.

The tunnel was brightly illuminated and the air-conditioning functioned excellently. A draft of fresh air prevented the feeling of suffocating in the depth of the planet.

Drog kept swearing in a low voice as he cautiously walked through the tunnel. He had to be careful because the slight gravity could 'lift him out of his boots'. A little too much push from his legs and he would knock his head against the stone ceiling. This had happened to him once before and since that time he was extra careful.

He had been given a task and was obligated to finish it. He sought comfort in the thought that he wouldn't have to stay much longer on this weird planet which was inhabited by strange creatures who were called Swoons and were famous as the best microtechnicians of the cosmos.

The passage took another turn and then rose gradually. He was getting closer to the construction offices where he was to meet Markas. Today they had to arrive at a decision as to a date when the project would get rolling.

Blast it! Here he had to walk all the way because the trains were too small and fragile to carry him. It wasn't so bad on the surface where the slighter gravity made it easier for him to move around. But down here?

Drog cursed again. His well-groomed beard was a characteristic of the Springers. He was dressed like a man with a profession: a physician or a scientist. Since only the Aras were physicians, Drog had the appearance of a technical expert. His bearing didn't reflect the usual swashbuckling of the Galactic traders and he seemed to lack the sly, speculating instincts of his people. A little of the future glimmered in Drog's eyes, as Bell would have put it.

The rails under Drog's feet were running horizontally again and the tunnel widened. The tracks branched out into a regular railway station. The ceiling was higher and there were more lights.

Drog was almost there. He began to relax and paused a minute to watch the loading of a freight train which stood at a dock. The locomotive was barely 1 meter long and 50 centimetres high. It pulled about 20 cars. In the engineer's cab he noticed 2 Swoons who paid no attention to him. They pulled up the train at regular intervals to bring the next freight car to the loading conveyor. Drog was unable to recognize the product they were loading into the cars. They were probably made in the nearby factory which built television sets with screens no bigger than a fingernail and cameras which were so small that they could be mounted on a ring to be worn on a finger.

He resumed his walk and reached an open square which was bordered by flat buildings. They looked like sheds to Drog but they were enormous buildings as far as the Swoons were concerned.

One of the houses had some walls and ceilings removed so that Drog had enough room to move without being afraid of hitting the ceiling unexpectedly with his head. He entered the room and was glad to find a stool which had once been used as a bed for a Swoon couple. The small table had been specialty made for him.

Markas was already present. His yellow skin somehow looked paler and more unhealthy under the ground than on the surface. The little fellow crouched on the table and studied some papers which were bigger than he. Apparently there were still some problems which he was anxious to straighten out.

Drog got up again and took a little box from a cabinet. It was one of the translators without which communication between the Springers and the Swoons could not take place.

He put it on the table and sat down. "Well, Markas, did you examine the plans? What do you think of them, my friend?"

"Before I form a final opinion, Springer, I have to ask one question: will the gadget be used for military purposes?"

Drog shook his head indignantly. "But no, Markas! Never! We need it only as an aid to navigation of

our merchant fleet. As I've already explained to you..."

"You've told me that it's an improvement for space travel," the little Swoon said astutely. "Naturally I've no way of knowing whether you speak the truth or not and I must accept your assurances. However you know as well as I do that no war materiel may be produced without the explicit permission of the Regent and I've no intention of violating this restriction."

Drog was boiling mad but he was careful not to show it. These Swoons were always creating difficulties and wanted to be treated with kid gloves. It was necessary to flatter them in order to gain their goodwill and he was forced to play the game. "There's nobody in the universe who can build such a device except you, Markas. Some parts are so small that they have to be made under a microscope by anyone else whereas you can do it without optical aids. You're in a position to help us and we'll be glad to reward you generously."

"That's not the point," Markas reiterated firmly and with obvious pride. "You still haven't answered my question regarding Arkon's approval."

"The Regent has no objections to manufacturing this instrument which we want to produce in great quantities as soon as the tests are satisfactory. Why should he have anything against it?"

"Hm," said Markas, pointing his protruding eyes at the Springer. "Then you can perhaps explain to me why the Regent has cordoned off the Swaft system from the Galaxy and taken over control of all Springer ships on Swoofon?"

Drog's face paled and the tip of his beard quivered. "What?" he panted, "What did you say just now? Arkon has...? No, I can't believe that!"

"Then see for yourself," Markas suggested and jumped from the table. He slowly floated to the floor where he landed on all sixes. He tripped to the wall where a low console stood. A picture screen covered about 1 square-meter of the wall above the console. "We've got a direct connection to the capital, Swatran." The screen began to light up and Drog had to stoop down to watch it. "Here you can see a part of the spaceport."

Drog saw a plastic picture on the screen. The 3 gigantic spheres of the Arkonides were only partially in view. Several robot fighters stood guard with drawn energy-beamers. Otherwise the landing field looked deserted.

The cameras swung around and depicted another sector of the terrain.

"As you can see here," Markas pointed out in the same even tone, "the heavy guns of the battleships are aimed at the ships of the Springers, preventing them from escaping to safety. Arkon has issued orders that no ship is allowed to take off. Furthermore, Inspector General Rhodan has announced..."

"What's the name of the inspector?" Drog stammered, narrowing his eyes. "Did you say Rhodan?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"The name sounds familiar," Drog murmured, trying to place the name in his memory. "If I only could remember where I've heard it." He reflected for a few seconds and shook his head. "He had something to do with a big commotion, if I'm not mistaken but I can't recall what it was. It occurred way back. Well, it'll come back to me eventually." He looked at Markas. "Did the Arkonides state a reason for their

measures?"

The little Swoon ambled across the room and manipulated the controls of a transmitter. He performed a strange movement with his 4 arms which meant: why ask me? Then he alluded: "I thought that you might know something about it. Perhaps Arkon has some reservations about the contract for the detectors?"

"Why should they? With it, Arkon's enemies..." The Springer let slip unwarily, realizing his mistake at once. "I mean..."

"Thank you," the Swoon said with a touch of satisfaction. "You've given yourself away. I'm fully aware of your hidden contempt for my people and that you only treat us like equal beings when you need us. There are not better microtechnicians, in the world than the Swoons..."

"And everyone knows that you're superb but nobody holds you in higher regard than we," Drog replied unctuously. "Misunderstandings will happen but good friends can always clear them up."

"I'm about to do that," Markas hinted, rolling his eyes, which was his way of nodding the head. He turned another knob and the face of a Swoon appeared on the little screen.

Drog listened in on the conversation with the help of the translator.

"Did you find out something new, Habrog?"

The Swoon on the picture screen made an affirmative motion. "Yes, Markas. Arkon is trying to apprehend a criminal and they have reason to believe he's on Swoofon. He's supposed to be a Springer."

"I see," said Markas, looking at Drog. "And what crime did that Springer commit?"

"They didn't say," Habrog reported. "The Elders of Swatran talked to the Inspector General but all they could learn was that he's looking for a criminal. That's all they wanted to know. We are not involved in this matter."

"Thank goodness!" Markas ended the conversation and switched off. He slowly turned to Drog. "It's possible that they're concerned about the detector, Springer. Until I find out for sure..."

"We've already made a down payment, Markas," Drog said slowly and with emphasis. "You can't back out of the contract. Moreover, I can assure you that we've nothing to do with the wanted criminal."

Markas seemed to hesitate but then he said surprisingly: "Alright, I believe you. I'm going to take the necessary steps to construct the first model as quickly as it can be done. I assume that you'll put one of your spaceships at our disposal for the installation of the new detector. Then we can take it out in space and test it against another spaceship with compensator during a transition. Is this agreeable with you?"

"Fine," Drog replied happily and got up. His back was beginning to hurt him. "Then I can go back to the surface and tell my boss that you're ready to go ahead with the project?"

"Yes," said Markas with all the dignity he could muster. "It's alright."

Drog turned around in the door. "Did you already decide where the detector will be assembled? Don't you think it would be best to choose a central location?"

"That's what I have in mind, Springer."

Drog's face lit up. "Here, I assume..."

"No, about 2 hours by air father north. After studying the plans you've given me, I've decided to erect a separate complex for the fabrication where all parts can be produced. Whatever else we need can be brought in easily by a subterranean train."

Drog was a little disappointed but he knew better than to show his dissatisfaction. "Very well. I'm going to move in there. As you know I've been appointed as project supervisor."

"By whom, I wonder?" Markas asked, unperturbed.

He received no answer and Drog's broad back disappeared through the door which took up 2 stories of the building.

A few seconds later the alarm shrilled through his department.

3/ HE WOULD BE LORD OF THE GALAXY!

When they materialized they were pushed hard against the floor. It was better for Pucky. At least he was able to stand up in the low tunnel but Sengu and Kulman jackknifed and sat down in a crouching position.

"Rotten luck," Kulman murmured, rubbing his neck. "We must have landed in one of their railway tunnels. I can feel the tracks."

"I seldom make mistakes but this wasn't my day," Pucky brushed it off.

"So we noticed," the Japanese grumbled, trying to orient himself. He stared at the arched tunnel wall and penetrated it with his 'farsighted' eyes. "This is a very interesting neighbourhood."

"I'd like to know what's so interesting around here," Pucky said. "All I can see is that we sit in a hole in the ground."

"This isn't the only tunnel," Sengu contradicted him without letting up on his concentration. He sat with his back leaning against the wall and gazing at the opposite side. "There must be a whole system of passages which connect the cities and factories. If I hadn't been on the surface I'd have thought that the Swoons always live underground."

"Some of their nations really do," Kulman interposed. He was the one to know. "Especially those who live too far north or south of the equator. All their factories are located underground. Sometimes I have the impression that this was done to impede espionage."

"That's a good reason," Sengu agreed and concentrated on another sector of the region invisible to his

companions. "Who could bother them here? It was difficult enough for us to get in."

In the meantime Pucky's eyes got used to the darkness. It was not completely dark since a weak ceiling light glimmered in the distance. Apparently it was considered unnecessary to illuminate the tunnel because nobody was expected to trespass.

Suddenly Pucky thought he heard a noise. He pricked up his ears and listened in the direction of the ceiling lamp which was at least 300 meters away. There was a bend in the tunnel farther back. He picked up a slight rumbling sound in the somewhat musty air and began to feel a faint vibration of the rails under his feet.

"There's a train coming!" Sengu suddenly called out after looking into the tunnel. "It's still 2 kilometres away but it's approaching at considerable velocity. We've got to get out of here. Pucky, let's take another jump!"

"Where to?" Pucky inquired calmly. "The train will be here before I can figure out where to go. I don't want to take the chance of winding up in a sewer or a blast furnace. It was bad enough to land in this tunnel."

"But the train..."

"Let me handle it," Pucky answered. "The Swoons are so little, their locomotives can't be so big either. I can stop the train with one hand if necessary. But I've better ways: I can do it telekinetically. Sengu, tell me when the train is getting close!"

Sengu saw the ceiling lamp growing dim and shouted: "Now! It's coming fast. The locomotive is at least 1 meter long. Can you stop it?"

Pucky had held back more than that. Once he managed to make an atomic-powered space-pursuitship perform wild manoeuvres in the air against the will of its pilot.

And Sengu asked if he could stop a toy locomotive!

* * * *

Rulf-On, who for 10 years regularly made the run between the factories in the north and the city of Gorla, gradually stepped up to full speed. He still had a distance of 200 kilometres to go. Of course the Swoons used other length-units than the Terrans or the Arkonides but it was 200 kilometres if the units were converted.

One last curve and then it was straight home. Rulf-On glanced at his velocity indicator and became puzzled. What was wrong with it? He should have been going much faster. Instead, his velocity dropped at a troublesome rate. A breakdown in the tunnel was not the most pleasant thing.

Rulf-On pulled back the drive-lever and pushed it forward again for acceleration, expecting a surge of power and a leap ahead.

But nothing happened! On the contrary, the train stopped and started to move in reverse. Not particularly fast or evenly but with a jerk as if reluctantly.

When Ruff-On happened to look forward instead of backward at this moment, he thought he saw a huge shadow on the rails in front of his train. In fact his locomotive's strong headlamp seemed to reveal not one but more shadows; 3, if he was not mistaken.

Judging by their size, they could only be made by the Galactic Traders, the Springers. But what business did they have down here? And how did they get in? The tunnel stretched without a break all the way to Gorla. Would the Springers—if that's who they were—have crawled such a long distance on their knees? And if so, why did they do it? Many of them were authorized to enter the subterranean plants and there was no reason to take such a roundabout way.

Of course Rulf-On found no answers to his questions. Besides he had another problem which occupied his attention even more urgently: what made his train suddenly reverse?

Unfortunately he was also unable to solve this problem because he collided a few minutes later with a freight train going in his original direction. Luckily it had just started to move. Nevertheless the impact was violent enough to knock him out and he awakened some time later in the hospital.

There he was asked why he was driving backward. This was exactly the question he asked himself.

* * * *

"I don't know," Sengu questioned, "if this was the right thing to do."

"What else did you want me to do?" Pucky asked a little indignantly. "You ought to be glad that you weren't run over by the cucumber transport. The least I could do was to send it back."

"We'll never reach our goal this way," Kulman objected. "We must talk to the Swoons' scientists to obtain some information about the planned project. We could pose as agents of Arkon. How about it?"

"OK, let's try it," Sengu said. "The station from which the train left is only 3 kilometres from here. Start crawling!"

"Thanks," Kulman said without making a move. He looked at Pucky.

The mouse-beaver sighed. "I'll have to do some accurate telepathic reconnaissance, then we'll jump. I don't care to take a long walk around here either."

5 minutes later they materialized in the middle of an immense factory yard which was brightly illuminated. There were long flat buildings all over the place. They almost touched the 10-meter-high ceiling of the vast excavation. Keeping in mind how small the Swoons were, they had accomplished a gigantic feat with their subterranean installations. There were regular streets with many types of vehicles driven at high speeds. Transport belts carried the Swoons to their work. An elaborate rail system was an indication of the heavy traffic between factories and other cities. Yet it gave them the impression that a huge toy world had been built deep below the surface.

"I've never been down this far," Kulman admitted. "They didn't want to show me their factories."

"That's understandable," Sengu said. "They must be afraid that we giants will trample down their installations. After all we're 6 times as big as they are and that's a lot."

"I'm only 3 times bigger," Pucky murmured. He seemed to be a little miffed. "I hope they won't be astounded to see me. They are only used to the looks of Arkonides or Springers."

In the meantime they had already been noticed by some passersby. One would have thought that their appearance down here would have caused a great sensation since there was no direct connection to the surface. Kulman had reported that only a very few Springers had managed to visit the underground factories by using freight elevators.

However the Swoons remained cool as cucumbers. Some of them jumped off the transport belts and ducked into the nearest buildings but others came closer and stopped at a respectful distance as if they had never before seen human beings. Their faces mirrored only intense interest, no panic. They evidently wanted to know what the Springers wanted here.

A somewhat taller Swoon, who must have measured all of 35 centimetres, stepped forward and waved his 4 arms. Kulman pulled out his translator and bent down. With a prudent gesture he picked up the Swoon, who seemed to be treated like a superior by his companions.

When the Swoon sat comfortably on Kulman's arm, the agent said: "May I assure you of my highest esteem. I beg your forgiveness if we've startled you by our sudden appearance. However we had good reasons for coming here without having announced ourselves first."

"What entrance did you use?" the Swoon asked. "The freight elevator stopped working a few hours ago due to a power failure. Therefore it was impossible for you to come..."

"We found another way," Kulman said evasively. "We must search every place for the criminal. I assume you're informed about the Imperium's warrant for his arrest."

"Only vaguely." The Swoon's squeaky voice seemed to express regret. "All I know is that 3 ships of the Imperium have landed on our planet and have blockaded it. The reasons are unknown to me."

"We're looking for a man whom we believe to be on Swoofon," Kulman explained. "As soon as we've apprehended him, our measures will be cancelled and everything can go on its regular way again. Can you take us to the leading scientist and technician in your city? We need some information which you may be unable or unwilling to give us."

"I'm an electronics engineer and I can't act in an official capacity. Perhaps I could take you to the mayor of our city which is located above us. I'm sure he can be more helpful than I."

"But the freight elevators..." Kulman reminded.

The Swoon seemed to grin. "The connection to the city is intact. The breakdown occurred in the elevators to the surface. Will you please go over to these 2 doors."

Kulman and Sengu walked ahead followed by Pucky who waddled through the one-meter-wide street and carefully tried to avoid brushing against the Swoons who stood everywhere, gazing with curiosity.

Pucky probed their thoughts but they didn't reveal anything that was new. The Swoons harboured no suspicions, they merely tried to figure out what these big strangers were after. They had hoped to be left alone below the ground. On the surface the giants would have caused no amazement.

"Here we are," the Swoon pointed to the elevator cabin with his thin arms. "It'll take only a few minutes to get to the city."

The cabin was big enough to accommodate one of them at a time. Pucky was last with the Swoon. The mouse-beaver read the thoughts of his little guide and learned that he took him for some kind of a watchdog. It never occurred to the Swoon that he might be an intelligent being.

This annoyed Pucky considerably and he decided to use the next opportunity to close this gap in his education in a spectacular fashion.

As the Swoon had said, they quickly arrived in the city, which was crowded with traffic to a much greater degree than the lower factories. The narrow streets were so jammed with vehicles and pedestrians that their guide had to ask the police to block the street to the city hall. The pedestrians retreated into the houses and all vehicles were banned from the street.

"Now we can proceed," the Swoon said to Kulman and took up his seat on his arm again, which he seemed to enjoy greatly. "May I introduce myself: my name is Engineer Waff. The mayor has been advised of our visit."

"How far is it, Waff?" Kulman asked.

"We'll be at the residence of the mayor in a few minutes. Please be careful not to do any damage. It's best if you walk in the middle of the street. The mayor will receive you in his garden."

"Garden?" Sengu repeated. "You've got gardens down here?"

"Don't forget," Kulman pointed out, "that our translator merely gives us the corresponding meanings of foreign words. For example, the Swoons don't have mayors in the same sense we do. Neither is 'garden' our correct nomenclature for an artificially created world. We'll probably get to see nothing but bare rocks and sandy desert in the so-called 'garden' but it is a strong reminder of the Swoofon's natural environment, which is all that counts."

His prediction turned out to be true. They entered the garden of the mayor through a narrow gate which was only half a meter wide and one meter high. They saw a surprisingly blue sky which was a good imitation of the real thing. Even the sun was reproduced. A little creek meandered through sand in tight curves around steep cliffs. The free space was bordered by the walls of the surrounding houses.

The mayor, a slightly built Swoon, was already waiting for them. He sat on a little bench and eyed them with great interest. The ensuing conversation was mainly conducted by Kulman, who had the greatest experience with the inhabitants of Swoofon.

Sengu sat down on a boulder, which must have looked like a mountain to the mayor, and Pucky chose a place near the little brook. He couldn't take his eyes off the Swoon. One could tell what went on in his brain. He was enamoured of the droll creatures and would have liked nothing better than to take 2 or 3 of the peculiar cucumber beings with him.

However there was nothing to indicate at the moment that the Swoons had any interest in leaving their own world. They were happy to live in their home and enjoyed their work which netted them a comfortable income and—most of all—earned them the respect of the intelligent communities in the Imperium.

Kulman, who was also sitting on a rock, talked to the mayor. He tried to explain to him that they were looking for a man whom he could not describe because he constantly changed his appearance. Sometimes he looked like a Springer but he also could look like an Arkonide or Ara. He was a master of disguise and a skilful impostor who could personify anyone he chose. His ambition was to set himself up as Lord of the Galaxy, Kulman assured him with a straight face.

"Of course I'll be glad to help you any way I can but frankly I don't know why a man like that would come to Swoofon. Furthermore I expect you to finish your mission here in a very short time because there are very few humanoids present in our world. It shouldn't take you long to investigate all of them."

"You're absolutely right," Kulman agreed, pretending to show relief. "However we're up against a difficulty here on Swoofon: It is easy for a fugitive to hide in one of your subterranean cities and it'd be hardly practical for us to search each one of them. It was already a problem for us to come here."

"How did you do it?" the Swoon wanted to know.

"We happened to be lucky," Kulman ducked the question. "Could you give me some advice where I can locate those Springers who are in your cities and factories right now?"

He managed to divert the Swoon by his own question. "There's really only one Springer residing with us down here, a technician by the name of Drog. He's been here a long time and can hardly be identical with the man you want. Am I right?"

"Of course. But we can't afford to miss anybody. He might be able to give us some useful information. Where can we find Drog?"

"He's usually in one of the plants. Waff should be able to help you to get in touch with Markas."

"Who is Markas?"

"He's one of our best scientists in the field of microelectronics. He conducts the negotiations with Drog and the other Springers who come here to buy our wares. I'm afraid this is all I can do for you. Waff will show you the way. Come to think of it..." He paused for a moment with a worried look in his eyes. "The strangest thing has happened. There must be other Springers in our town. One of our trains met with a strange accident. It caused a collision which could've been very serious. The locomotive engineer claims to have seen 2 or 3 Springers in the tunnel."

He looked sharply at Kulman, who maintained his air of innocence. "Hm, maybe we're on the right track," he said gratefully. "We're going to ask Markas whether he knows something about these friends of Drog. Please accept our sincere expression of gratitude and highest regard, mayor. We'd be happy if your assistance would enable us to..."

After exchanging polite pleasantries and flowery phrases for 10 minutes they took their leave. The way back to the elevator created another small sensation for the citizens but due to the vigorous support of the police the 3 visitors and Waff quickly reached their destination and went back down again.

After they reached the square at the exit where numerous streets branched out to the various factories, Waff said: "I'd like to ask you to wait here. It'd cause too much confusion if you'd go with me. I'll go and find Markas and bring him back with me."

Pucky read in the thoughts of the engineer that he was speaking the truth and discreetly gave the nod to Kulman.

"We'll wait here," Kulman assured him and sat down on a stack of plastic sheets with a sigh. His eyes followed Waff as he left. "I'm mystified. I don't know what we're doing here. We're trying to find somebody who doesn't exist."

Pucky stretched out on the concrete floor and corrected him in a shrill and excited tone. "But we're looking for something that does exist. We'll have to find the Swoon and the Springer who are behind this deal about the compensator-detector. We're on the right track, Kulman. All you have to do is follow it up."

"I know that all clues point to this city," Kulman replied slowly. "I've already talked to some technicians on the surface. They claimed that the person who is seeking the contract lives somewhere around here and often visits Gorla. It could very well be Drog and it could be someone else. The same technicians I've talked to also mentioned something about a totally new and self-contained complex of caves to be built in this neighbourhood but I've no idea how far they got with it."

"It shouldn't be very difficult for me to find out, Kulman. The Springers and the Swoons can't keep any mental secrets from me." The mouse-beaver looked in the direction of the building which Waff had entered. "Here they come all together."

Sengu and Kulman saw Waff and a slim Swoon come out of a door which was unusually high for the normal proportions of the buildings. The Swoons were followed by the figure of a tall man who, they guessed, must be Drog.

Pucky sat motionless and listened. He picked up their thought impulses as they approached, and analysed them. He winked an eye at Kulman.

"I hear," Drog said, "that you're looking for a criminal. My name is Drog and I've been here on Swoon for 10 Swaft-years on official business for my clan. I can't understand what connection I'm supposed to have with the man you want."

"Nobody said you did," Kulman replied, "and you're not under suspicion. We've orders to make spot-checks and if your statements are correct, you've nothing to fear."

Kulman acted as if the investigation had already ended but the relief of the Springer was so great that he seemed to regard the disturbance as a welcome diversion. He smiled. "Are you leaving already? Tell me what's new in the Imperium."

Kulman had the impression that Drog tried his best to keep the Swoon Markas from getting in a word. "Why does Arkon occupy a peaceful world like Swoon and seal it off?"

"I'm sorry but I'm not at liberty to reveal the reasons. Don't let me keep you from your work. I assume that you're very busy."

Pucky remained still but there was a spark of satisfaction in his brown eyes.

"Oh, it's not that important." The Springer bellowed a laugh as if the idea that he was busy was very amusing. "A break can never hurt."

Markas pushed his way past Drog in an effort to attract attention. He began to speak loudly into the translator which transmitted his communication clearly. "I'm Markas, the scientist in charge of this department. I wish to ask a few questions and would be very much obliged if you could answer them. It has something to do with..."

Pucky suddenly interrupted him in a shrill voice: "We're not here to answer questions, Swoon."

Kulman and Sengu were vexed and stared in amazement at the mouse-beaver. Why did he suddenly break into the conversation and why shouldn't the Swoon ask questions? However they remained silent when they caught a glance from Pucky that told them not to interfere. "We're hunting a criminal and your affairs are of no concern to us. Perhaps you'll be kind enough to show us the way to the elevators?"

Markas was visibly disappointed whereas Drog was so elated that he had trouble hiding his satisfaction. His face beamed as he cast a triumphant look at Markas, which conveyed the idea: Now you can see for yourself how arrogant these imperial emissaries are!

"As you wish," Markas replied through the translator. He was not only disappointed but also felt deeply insulted. The strangers lacked all due respect and were not worthy of his decent treatment. "If you care to follow me," he added.

Drog shrugged his shoulders and remarked: "I hope you'll be lucky and find the culprit, whoever he is. You don't mind if I go back?"

"By all means," Kulman consented. It slowly dawned on him what Pucky had intended with his interruption. The mouse-beaver must have learned something important which he didn't want to discuss in the presence of the Springer. "You may leave."

Drog walked away. He stooped down and entered the door of the building across the street. His fears were allayed. The Arkonide investigators were too haughty to pay attention to some little Swoon. Markas had been given have to stay much longer on his weird planet which was he would not bring up the subject of the compensator-detector again.

Markas had already gone ahead to show the visitors to the elevators. "I don't know when the elevators to the surface will be back in operation again but in the meantime you're guests of our city. Waff will take care of you." He seemed to have no further inclination to waste his valuable time on the strangers. "I believe there's nothing left for us to discuss further."

"I'm afraid you're wrong," Kulman demurred. "I'm sure that our colleague here"—he pointed at Pucky—"would like to ask you a few questions. Right, Pucky?"

The mouse-beaver nodded and looked around. "Where can we talk without being disturbed, Markas?" He bent down and picked up the Swoon. "You'll have to forgive my bad behaviour but I had reasons for being impolite to you in the presence of the Springer. I want to explain it to you."

"Who are you?" Markas inquired. "You're not a humanoid."

"Of course not. Even the blind can see that," Pucky chuckled. He pointed to the station with its

numerous tunnels. "How about in there?"

They ducked into the tunnel and after walking a few meters Kulman asked: "What are you up to, Pucky? You don't want to walk all the way to Gorla, or do you?"

"Do I look like a hiker?" the mouse-beaver taunted him. "I think we'll go up for a breath of fresh air. We're through down here. Markas is our man. He's the Swoon who is responsible for the compensator-detector project. I think he's going to tell us all about it."

Waff and Markas stared at each other, utterly perplexed. Pucky's words had been duly translated by the machine. Finally Markas stammered: "How do you know... how could you...?"

"I'm a telepath," Pucky enlightened him. "Now let's see how we get to the surface."

In contrast to the teleportation down into an unknown depth the jump to the surface was child's play. In less than 2 minutes the 2 men, Pucky and the 2 Swoons were back in the desert again in the light of the setting sun.

As they took their bearings, the transceiver on Sengu's wrist began to buzz. The sound fluctuated up and down 3 times, a sign that the message was very urgent.

4/ STOLEN PLANS

The interstellar cargo ship *Ramo 7* was skippered by the Arkonide Alban of the Ozol clan. He had travelled these more or less familiar routes already several decades in a cylindrical ship which had been built by the Springers. He was engaged in trade with Arkon and now was on his way to the Swaft system where he intended to pick up some urgently needed micro-electronic parts.

Alban had not yet visited Swoofon but he knew the strange planet and its odd inhabitants from the Arkonide catalogue and the descriptions of Springers who had been there. He was looking forward to his first visit.

The more unpleasant was his surprise when he was stopped by a spherical spaceship the moment he emerged from a hyperspace transition. Of course he was quite familiar with that type of ship since the Guppies were built like Arkonide models and were units of the Arkonide Spacefleet.

At first Alban simply refused to pay attention to the command which he considered to be inane. After all he flew under the flag of the Imperium and nobody had the right to challenge him. But when a pale streak of energy crossed his bow, he changed his mind very quickly and slowed his momentum enough to let the Guppy tie up alongside. Forthwith a boarding party stormed aboard the *Ramo 7* and demanded to see the Commander.

Alban awaited the 'pirates', as he called them, in his Command Centre. He made a point of putting a raygun in the belt of his uniform, which increased his confidence.

For a moment he was baffled when he recognized 2 Springers and an Arkonide who were shown by his

men into the Command Centre. He felt frustrated by his failure to understand what was going on.

"What's your purpose in the Swaft system?" the Arkonide questioned in a harsh voice. "Which is your home port?"

Alban struggled to maintain his self-control. "I'm Alban, Commander of the *Ramo 7*. My homeport is Arkon 2. Who gives you the right to stop me? Who are you?"

"We ask the questions, Alban, and you answer them! You'll not be allowed to land on Swoofon. Our action must not be disturbed by anyone. Swoofon is under blockade and nobody is permitted to leave or land on the planet."

"And how do you justify your action, may I ask?"

"We're acting on orders of the Regent's representative and can't give you any reasons. Our fleet has been dispatched by Arkon."

Alban shook his head uncomprehendingly. "I don't get it. I've come directly from Arkon myself where I've been given instructions to exchange my cargo with merchandise from the Swoons. The deal was set a long time ago. And now you forbid me to land. Something is rotten in Karzakjon."

The 2 Springers and the Arkonide had the same feeling but they were careful not to show it. The orders of the Regent could not be questioned. "We're in no position to make decisions, Alban. We must ask you to comply with our instructions and to turn back if you wish, you may wait outside the Swaft system."

"I don't have time for that," Alban stubbornly shook his head. "I'll return at once to Arkon and request an audience with the Regent. I'm going to find out why an important contract like mine can be invalidated without notice. May I ask you to leave my ship?"

He waited patiently while the 3 men disembarked. Then he changed his course and performed a transition shortly afterwards. He was so irate that he was prepared to disregard all his misgivings and he was determined to challenge the gigantic brain of the Imperium's Regent for some explanation. He had no intention of pussyfooting with the positronicon.

* * * *

Time and space relative to distance were concepts which had been long ago relegated to the past. 5 hours after Alban had been intercepted near Swoofon, the Arkonide was already in the reception hall of the Regent of Arkon.

And before another hour elapsed, the mechanical voice of the hyperradio receiver aboard the *Drusus* asked to speak to Rhodan. The radio officer on duty contacted the Command Centre by intercom and notified the Second Officer since Sikerman was off. Rhodan was not present in the Command Centre either because he used the lull to catch some sleep. The short night of Swoofon was ending and a new day dawned in the east.

When the telecom buzzed Rhodan sensed that he faced a decision. He had expected this critical time to

come sooner and he was glad that it was postponed long enough so he could get some rest. "Rhodan speaking. What is it, Maj. van Aafen?"

"The radio room has received a hyperradio call from Arkon, sir. Do you wish to take it in your cabin?"

"I'll be over right away, Major. Notify Bell and Khrest in the meantime that I expect them both in the radio room. Tell them to get there as soon as possible."

He put on his uniform in a great hurry, walked out onto the corridor and took the nearest antigravitor to the circular corridor, entering the radio room 20 seconds later.

Rhodan walked to the picture screen of the hyper-communication set, which showed the image of the Regent, a tremendous metallic sphere with antennas and screen panels, all anchored in the ground. It was impossible to guess the true size of the huge installation.

"Tell the operator I'm ready," Rhodan said to the radio officer.

"Go ahead, sir!"

Rhodan stepped before the camera to make sure that the Regent could see him too. "You wish to speak to me, Regent?"

"You've deceived me by asking me to send a battleship as reinforcement for an attack on a peaceful stellar system. I was under the misapprehension that you were engaged in an action against our common invisible enemy from another time-plane. Instead you're interfering with our trade in a tranquil sector. You failed to explain satisfactorily why you request my assistance although your own battlefleet is more than adequate to cope with far more serious situations without my help. I must therefore conclude that you're trying to involve me in something for which you don't want to take responsibility yourself."

"We've made an agreement, Regent," Rhodan replied calmly. He was glad to see Khrest and Bell enter the radio room at this moment since he preferred to have witnesses present during his negotiations with the robot Brain. "The agreement states that you unconditionally put all your forces at my disposal upon my request. You've merely acted in accordance with the stipulations of our agreement by assigning Talamon's battleship to me but now you imply that I've violated our treaty. How am I to understand this?"

"You understand it very well, Terranian. Our treaty is restricted to our fight against the invisible ones. It doesn't give you any authority to intervene in the internal affairs of Arkon, which is exactly what you've done."

Rhodan was disturbed by a suspicious feeling. Why was the robot Brain so anxious that he be kept out of Swoofon? Was it possible that the Regent knew something about the compensator-detector which would enable him to discover the position of Earth despite Rhodan's efforts to keep it secret? Perhaps the Automaton itself had given orders to build this potent device.

"Our mutual contract was not limited to the invisible enemy, Regent. It was conceived to encompass the entire field of our collaboration. If it is broken in any one of its parts, it becomes invalid in every respect."

"I don't agree with your opinion, Rhodan. I suggest that we both comply with the terms of our agreement, which was intended to cover only our relations with the invisible foe. I urge you to withdraw from Swoofon and to quit your heavy-handed transgressions against our legal and vital trade. I'll order

Talamon to return immediately to Arkon. The Invisible Ones can launch an attack any time and we must be prepared to repulse them. You're aware of the dreadful danger which threatens our Galaxy. Another time-plane wants to impose itself on ours and the various dimensions have already intersected in many places. The Invisible Ones exist in another time. They live much slower relative to us. Nevertheless they constitute an enormous danger and if we don't succeed in defeating them, our very existence will come to an end. Have you forgotten all this, Earthling? Your home world, wherever it is, is periled as much as the rest of us."

"I'm well aware of the mortal menace we both face, Regent," Rhodan replied coolly, casting reassuring glances at Khrest and Bell. "We've begun to develop a weapon against the Invisible Ones and we believe that we'll be able to penetrate into their zone and to establish contact with them. We've not been idle and I'd not have undertaken our action on Swoofon unless I considered it to be absolutely necessary. Now what is your decision?"

"You already know my decision. Talamon returns to Arkon and you must leave the Swaft system as well."

Rhodan nodded slowly. "Very well but first I have to take care of a private matter. As soon as this is done, Swoofon will be made accessible again to all ships and I'll report to you again, Regent. At any rate we've reason to believe that another foray by our enemies will soon take place but I hope it'll be their last one."

"Private matter?"

"You heard me," Rhodan said, waving at his radio officer. The connection was abruptly cut off and the picture of the Regent disappeared from the screen.

Bell clucked his tongue and said: "Aren't you a little rough on the Regent?"

"With the Regent?" Rhodan asked in amazement. "Since when do you feel sorry for the robot Brain? I remember a time when..."

"That was long ago but now I find the Regent to be quite conciliatory. After all, his prestige has already suffered badly."

"Bell is right," Khrest joined the debate. "It could be to our disadvantage some day when the Regent loses his patience and repudiates our agreement."

Rhodan laughed mirthfully. "But Khrest! You must be joking! It was the Regent who was so anxious to conclude the agreement with us. He's not likely to back out of it now—not as long as the invisible menace from the other time-plane is around. At any rate, now I'm wise to his double-crossing intentions. He wants to find out the position of Terra and uses every trick in the book. I believe his best trick is—Swoofon. Well, let him have his way! He can build his compensator-detector there, for all I care."

"Aren't you going to destroy the blueprints, Perry?" Bell cried in disbelief after he recovered from his surprise.

Rhodan shook his head. "No. They'd just draw up new ones sooner or later. You can't stop progress: we all agree on that. Besides a new fact enters the picture. I'm convinced that the Regent was in on the deal and we'll just have to outsmart him together with the Springers and the Swoons. Come with me, Khrest. I've got to ask you a few questions. Reggie; meanwhile you get in touch with Pucky. I want him

to return at once with Sengu and Kulman whether they got any positive results or not."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Bell saluted in an exaggerated fashion and turned to the radio technician as Rhodan and Khrest walked to the Command Centre.

10 minutes later Pucky materialized in the *Drusus* with 2 little Swoons and disappeared again immediately without an explanation to return with Kulman and Sengu. Then he announced triumphantly: "Lt. Puck, mutants Sengu and Kulman, reporting back from their mission, with 2 defectors from the enemy, Engineer Waff and Chief scientist Markas, director of Project Compensator-Detector."

Pucky stood on his hind legs before Rhodan, Bell, Khrest and the officers of the *Drusus*. The 2 Swoons planted themselves left and right of him like ripe cucumbers, grinning all over their funny faces. They looked indeed as if they were growing out of the metal floor of the Command Centre, waiting to be harvested.

Pucky was startled when he suddenly heard the men break out in hilarious laughter. However he was relieved that it didn't sound mean. It was full of happy abandon. Naturally Bell laughed the loudest and longest.

* * * *

Markas related his story and the picture began to take final shape.

As was his custom, Khrest sat silently in a corner of the room. Atlan, whose timeless eyes reflected a pensive mood, was next to him. Pucky reclined on the couch with his eyes half-closed and the little Swoon Waff nestled in his arm, watching the meeting with the greatest interest.

Rhodan, Bell, Marshall and Kulman sat around the table on which Markas stood beside the translator box and answered all questions with alacrity. Although he failed to understand everything that was going on around him and had no knowledge of the underlying facts which so deeply troubled Rhodan, he gave them all the information he had. "...and so we decided to enlarge the vacant part of the big vault in order to use it later on for the production of the detectors. The construction of the factory is going on full blast at present and as soon as the first experimental model has been tested, we'll be ready to proceed with mass production."

"Where exactly is the area located? I've got a map here of Swoofon's surface." Rhodan showed Markas the map. "This is Swatran, your biggest city. Can you show it to me on this map?"

The Swoon looked hesitantly at the map. "I hardly know the surface because I spend most of my time underground where I was born. Let me see now, I can orient myself by the subterranean railway lines shown on this map. You said that Kulman obtained the desired information on his trip at this spot?" His tiny arm with the ultra-sensitive fingers moved across the map. "This must be Gorla and here is the rail link to my city. About there"—his arm slid way up north—"the future plant for the detector is situated."

"Where do you keep the blueprints for the device?" Rhodan asked.

"In my office, locked up in a safe. Only Drog and I have the key. There are really 2 keys. He's got one

and I've got the other. It takes both to open the safe."

"You don't trust each other, which is not uncommon." Rhodan pondered awhile. "Do you think it'd be possible to let me have the blueprints for a short time?"

The Swoon was reluctant. He was still dubious about the role Rhodan and his friends played. If they really represented the Imperium in an official capacity, why didn't they act more openly?

Pucky piped up from his couch: "You ought to let him in on our endeavours, Perry. Markas will be our friend only if we trust him."

Rhodan approved. "Very well, Markas. You shall learn the truth. The compensator-detectors will be used to discover the location of my home planet. Arkon wants to find it in order to destroy our globe and the Springers are very anxious to support the Regent for selfish reasons of their own. I've entered into an agreement with Arkon but the Regent is not interested enough in observing it although we're facing a terrible peril which threatens to obliterate all life in the Galaxy. I wish to see the blue prints so I can learn something about the detector that would enable us to design a defence against its effect. It is vital that at least a remnant of private life be conserved by the intelligent races in our universe. It is incumbent on you, Markas, to help us. We have no intention of forcing you."

The Swoon's eyes wandered back and forth between Rhodan and Pucky who sat up on his couch and watched him intently. "I'm willing to do everything in my power to help," Markas declared, "because you're different from the Springers who feel only contempt for us even though they need us. And if Arkon wants the detector for the purpose of conducting a war, I prefer to destroy them myself."

"This would be the wrong approach," Rhodan pointed out. "They might as well go ahead with building the detector as long as we can determine with certainty that we can devise something to counter it. For this we'll have to see the plans but we can put them back in their place later."

"And how do you propose that I get them?" Markas asked, finally convinced.

Rhodan smiled. "Your friend Pucky will go with you. As you know, distances present no problems for him because he's a teleporter."

"How about Drog? What can I do to make him give me the key?"

"Our mutant André Noir will accompany you. Believe me, Drog will do anything you wish."

"You've got very powerful friends, sir. They can do more than other humanoids. You must live in a fantastic and wondrous world."

Rhodan leaned forward. "Would you like to see it?"

Markas seemed to grow. He exchanged a quick glance with Waff, who also perked up and looked questioningly at Rhodan. The sudden tension infected everybody in the room as they began to sense that an important plan was taking shape.

"Well?" Rhodan asked.

Markas took a tiny step forward toward the Earthling. "Yes, I'd like to know your world. But isn't it big and far? Can we live on it and will we ever be able to return to Swoofon?"

"That's a risk you'll have to take, Markas. But I can guarantee you that you'll live well and safely on Terra. I'll be responsible for that. Perhaps you can have a new home on the 4th planet of our solar system where the conditions are similar to those on Swoofon. We can look into this possibility more closely later on but first we have to get the blueprints for the detector. When will you be ready to pick them up with Pucky and Noir?"

"Right away," the Swoon said with determination.

"So let's do it at once," Rhodan decided.

* * * *

Drog flicked the radio set off. Deep in thought, he kept staring at the darkened picture screen where he had seen the face of a powerful, energetic-looking Springer. The instructions had been clear. Time was of the essence. He could not risk losing another second. The Terran Perry Rhodan seemed to have become suspicious and the hunt for the escaped criminal was probably only a ruse to search Swoofon at his convenience in his quest for the plans of the detector.

Nevertheless, it was still mostly guesswork. The arrival of the battleship from Arkon seemed to indicate that the Regent approved of Rhodan's activities. On the other hand, Talamon had pulled out again with his vessel and only Rhodan had remained with 3 battleships and a flotilla of auxiliary ships.

Drog shrugged his shoulders. Whatever Rhodan had in mind, he would be bitterly disappointed as far as the blueprints for the detector were concerned. And as to Markas, who had so suddenly disappeared...

Drog didn't have a very high opinion of the Swoons although he had to admit that there were no better technicians in the Galaxy. Nobody else could manufacture the minuscule parts of the detector as quickly and proficiently as the cucumbers. He needed the Swoons whether he liked it or not.

Of course Drog knew already about the new factory and where it was located. He could use the only railway to go to the factory and take the valuable blueprints with him. Markas would look dumbfounded when he returned and found that the blueprints were gone. Moreover he would have trouble opening the safe in contrast to himself since he had the 2nd key in his possession.

Satisfied that he had found the solution which would please his superiors, Drog first inspected the premises and then went to work on the safe which was no bigger than a mailbox but consisted of indestructible Arkon steel. It could not be melted by normal energy rays. Besides it would have destroyed its contents as well.

The door swung open and the inside revealed a brown briefcase containing the plans. Drog picked it up, locked the safe again and went to the railway station where he gave the station master instructions to assemble a train as quickly as possible since he had to go to the site of the factory.

One hour later he comfortably stretched out in 2 freight cars which had been welded together for him. His head rested on the brown briefcase. He smirked contentedly as he watched the smooth ceiling of the tunnel gliding back at increasing speed.

If necessary, he could have the detector built without Markas' help and he would get the first experimental model finished this week.

5/ PERRY'S PLAN

The freight elevators had been repaired again so that Pucky, Noir and Markas could return to the city the regular way.

To the inhabitants of a remote and isolated world the 3 figures could perhaps present a strange, even frightening sight. Noir, the Terran, was the tallest of them. He wore the uniform of the Solar Imperium and was armed with a raygun. Then came the mouse-beaver Pucky who was one meter high and unclothed. Finally there was Markas, the little creature that looked like a cucumber. Despite their different appearance they were endowed with approximately the same degree of intelligence and sense of responsibility. They were beings of vastly dissimilar origin, totally unrelated, yet they belonged together. They were not united by a planet or a solar system but they were denizens of the Galaxy and were threatened by a common danger.

They went down in the same elevator cabin. It was big enough to accommodate all 3 of them so that they arrived at the same time at the suburb of Gorla. Without stopping they rode down to the railway station at the factory level which was already known to Pucky.

Several Swoons stared curiously at the group but Markas sent them back to their work with a few reassuring words. They knew Springers but Pucky attracted their attention and he would have greatly enjoyed it any other time. Now he was disturbed by their curiosity and he urged Markas: "Let's find Drog as quickly as possible. Noir will give him the business. He's a hypno and can impose his will on the Springer making him forget all about it afterwards."

Markas pattered with tiny steps along the factory road, trying to get ahead of Noir and Pucky who virtually slowed down to a crawl in order to let him be first. "We'll be in my office in a minute. There I can find out where Drog is," Markas said.

Noir had no trouble getting into the altered office building. He sat down on the same stool which Drog always used. Pucky looked around and saw the unconcealed safe at the wall. "Is this where the blueprints are kept?" he inquired.

Markas confirmed his question. "But we need Drog. I expected him to be here. Wait a minute!"

He went over to another wall and adjusted the controls of a transceiver which connected him to all factories and the outside world. In a few seconds he made contact with the communication centre. "I'd like information as to the whereabouts of the Springer Drog."

In a couple of minutes he received the answer: "The Springer has left sector NH/K/075 2 hours ago after he requested a transport train to NH/K/078 for his trip. Shall we get in touch with him?"

Markas seemed undecided until he caught the look in Pucky's eyes. "No, thank you. That won't be

necessary."

He switched off the transceiver and turned around. "Now what?" he asked perplexed. "What could have caused Drog to go already today to the detector assembly plant. What does he want to do there?"

"I'm more interested in knowing how we can get the blueprints out of the safe since it's necessary to have his key to open it," Noir said.

"We must get Drog," Markas murmured, disappointed.

"Why?" Pucky demanded. "Listen, Markas, what kind of lock does the safe have? Is it electronic or mechanical?"

"Both," the Swoon sighed. "It's impossible to open it without the other key, if that's what you mean. We've made very sure that nobody can take our construction plans."

"That's perfectly understandable," Pucky chimed in, his glittering eyes directed at the safe. "I'd love to know if I'd make a good safecracker. You say it's also electronic? I should be able to operate the relay contacts if I can find them. As soon as the current flows the safe ought to open. The mechanical bolts won't present much of a problem."

"But how are you going to move them?" Markas wondered and Noir explained to him: "Have you ever heard about telekinetics, Markas? It's a flow of power generated by the brain of a mutant. It can be used to make matter move at a distance. Pucky is a telekin."

The Swoon gazed at Pucky with increased awe. "He's a telepath and a teleporter and he's a telekin besides? What kind of a super being is Pucky?"

The mouse-beaver drooled over his admiration but he was not diverted from his task even for a moment. "May I ask you to be absolutely quiet? I'll try to open the safe. It shouldn't take more than a few minutes."

Noir and Markas moved a few steps back and left Pucky standing alone in front of the safe. The mouse-beaver concentrated his mind and his brainwaves penetrated the maze of electronic connections which obstructed his direct access to the mechanical obstacles and which had to be activated before everything else.

As soon as he heard the first soft click Pucky's tense body relaxed a bit but he kept right on going with his effort. Only Noir's breathing was audible. Markas stood motionlessly and rigid as if he really were a cucumber that couldn't move from the spot.

There was another click and Pucky murmured: "Now it ought to go..."

And then the door swung open. Markas squealed with delight and astonishment. He rushed forward as fast as his short feet would allow him, stopped before the safe and stared inside with Pucky.

"Well?" Noir, who had joined them, asked. "Where are the drawings? Are they on microfilm?"

Markas pressed against the safe and almost crawled inside. Then he turned around and exclaimed: "They were lying right here but now they're gone. Nobody except Drog and myself has a key. The safe can't be opened unless both keys are used together. I don't understand it."

"I do," Pucky said grimly. "Drog must also have a key just like yours, Markas. He's tricked you. Which means he's tricked all of us. What are we going to do now?"

The Swoon regained his wits with amazing speed. With a last look at the empty safe he urged: "If Drog has stolen the blueprints we'll have to go after him. We know where he is. What are we waiting for?"

Pucky glanced at Noir. "Looks like we can learn something from Markas," he chirped. "He's right. Let's get on the wall!"

"Huh?"

"The doll?"

"The *ball*, Pucky."

"Crazy language, English!"

They didn't bother to take one of the many trains constantly commuting between the factories but returned instead by teleportation to the surface. Using the map Noir had brought, they determined their position and Markas marked the location of the new factory on the map. This made it easy for Pucky to reach the place in 2 more jumps, one horizontally on the surface and another one vertically down.

They materialized in an almost empty hall whose floor and ceiling consisted of stone. The hall was unusually high for the Swoons but it had to have enough room for the instruments which were to be installed in the ships of the Springers. Furthermore, the Springers were expected to send their observers once the production was in progress.

There was nobody to be seen on the premises and they could assume that their unusual arrival had not been noticed. Now they had to get hold of Drog. This shouldn't prove to be too difficult.

* * * *

Drog didn't know what was in store for him but he sensed instinctively that something was amiss. His anxiety had diminished considerably since he had appropriated the precious drawings. He knew that these were the only existing prints of the originals which were in a secure place on a small planet of the Galactic traders.

Now he was firmly convinced that there was more to the blockade Rhodan had imposed in the name of Arkon than met the eye. It wasn't necessary to cordon off an entire solar system in order to search for one man. Moreover he began to worry about the disappearance of Markas.

He climbed out of his wagon, chased away some Swoons with a bellowing voice and walked down the unfinished street to the factory hall where his future office would be located. Why not make himself comfortable there now as well as its preliminary state permitted it?

The Swoons he encountered gave him a wide berth as soon as they caught sight of him. To them the big

Springer looked like a gigantic ogre who disdained to show any consideration. They had learned as much from bitter experience.

Drog didn't care much for the Swoons. The only time he feigned respect was when he needed them because it was so important to their egos and he didn't mind the lie.

On his left he passed the metal wall of a workshop. Following a sudden impulse, he changed his direction and entered the hall through a very low door, bending down to avoid hitting his head. "I've got to make some changes around here," he murmured angrily and then abruptly stopped in his tracks. He almost dropped the briefcase he carried under his arm.

In front of him—or rather below him—stood Markas. Drog recognized him at once although it was not easy to tell the Swoons apart. It was just too bad that he couldn't talk to him as no translator machine was handy. "Out of my way, you worm!" he barked.

Markas was scared and covered his little ears but he stood his ground, trusting the mouse-beaver and Noir who were hiding in the background. Although he failed to understand the words the behemoth shouted, he could guess the meaning. Nonetheless he stubbornly refused to move. He held up the key to the safe in one hand—hardly the proper name for such a delicate extremity—and showed it to the Springer.

Drog understood it perfectly well. "Oh, the drawings! Too bad, my trusting friend, I've got them now. What do you want with them, anyway? And where have you been all this time?" He suddenly remembered that the Swoon couldn't understand him and was annoyed that he had wasted so much time. Why didn't the dwarf get the first model of the detector built as they had agreed? He pointed to the exit. "Follow me! I've got to talk to you."

Although Markas must have understood his gesture, he didn't budge from his spot. Drog started to grab Markas but he froze in the middle of the movement.

Something invisible exerted a sudden pressure on his brain and pressed against his mind, paralysing his will. He felt a pain but it was not severe. The hall began to rotate before his eyes. He didn't lose consciousness and knew exactly what happened during the next few minutes but he lacked the ability to counteract it.

Now 2 figures appeared from the background, one as tall as he was and the other only half as tall. This funny beast looked familiar.

Plucky grunted disapprovingly. "He called me a beast," he said to Noir, shaking his head. "I'd have thought that this mercenary bad-for-nothing was smarter than that. He doesn't know Pucky very well, not yet."

Noir couldn't be distracted. His powerful brainwaves seized the mind of the Springer and enveloped it. His victim never realized that someone else had taken over his brain and nervous system and gained control of his entire body. It was a kind of hypnosis but much more efficient and persistent. The orders were transmitted by telepathy and carried out without the slightest compromise or hesitation.

"Hand over the briefcase with the drawings," Noir ordered. He knew already from Pucky what the briefcase contained. Drog gave him the briefcase. "Come with us!"

They left the hall and walked down the street where they met many Swoons none of whom could realize

that the Springer who accompanied the chief scientist Markas, the Arkonide and the strange furry creature, was not in control of himself. They all knew Drog and he behaved the same as always.

Markas stopped in front of a portal. "This is the administration building. One of the offices is to be used for Drog. I suppose this is the best place to wait for you. How long will it take you?"

"I don't think I'll be gone very long," Pucky replied. "I won't have any trouble finding the spaceship. Rhodan can look the blueprints over and have them copied. I guess I'll be back in half an hour. In the meantime you'll have to watch Drog here because it'd be too early to let him loose now."

"No problem," assured Noir, who kept holding the Springer in a tight mental grip.

When they finally closed the door behind them and were alone they breathed easier. The quizzical and curious looks of the harmless and good-natured Swoons in the streets had been rather hard to bear. Although they were not disturbed by Drog's behaviour, they were worried by the presence of the alien visitors and Noir would be unable to eradicate the memory of each as he aimed to do with Drog.

"Go ahead, Noir," Pucky said and waved Markas to come over to him. "Now you're going to see, shortly, how nicely the Springer'll tell us all we want to know."

Noir gave Pucky the briefcase and put Drog in a corner. The mouse-beaver quickly perused the papers and Markas confirmed that they were genuine.

Drog's eyes became glassy and he stared into the distance with a peculiar look as he underwent Noir's 'treatment'. He remained motionlessly in his corner and seemed unable to move.

"For whom are you building the compensator-detector?" Noir asked.

The answer came like a pistol crack: "For the Regent of Arkon."

"Who invented the detector?"

"One of our scientists. I don't know his name."

There couldn't be the slightest doubt that he spoke the truth.

"How many do you intend to produce?"

"The new detector is slated for installation in every ship of the Imperium so that all transitions can be observed. The main purpose is to discover Terra, the home planet of Perry Rhodan."

"Is this the reason for the secrecy about the construction project?"

"Yes, the main reason. The device consists of so many minute and sensitive details that only the Swoons can manufacture it. Later on we're planning to move the fabrication to one of the Springers' planets."

Noir glanced quickly at Markas before he put his next question to the Springer: "With consent of the Swoons?"

"We're going to take as many of them with us as necessary."

"Did the Regent give you this order?"

Without hesitation Drog answered: "No. This is my own idea. My clan will acquire the monopoly by destroying the drawings at the appropriate time."

"And what about the inventor and his original documents?"

Drog smiled as if he had a pleasant dream. "We'll make sure that the inventor won't live very long after the first detector has been tested. If it turns out to be a success, the inventor, whose name I don't know, will die and his plans will be destroyed by us. Nobody will be in a position to take retaliatory action against us or they won't get the detectors because we'll be the only ones who can make them."

Noir looked at Pucky. "A fine mess," the mouse-beaver sighed. "A regular conspiracy against Arkon, no less. Well, we're going to fix his flagon, as Bell might say. This is all I want to know. Just you wait till I get back. It won't take me long."

Noir and Markas nodded. The Swoon had already picked up the gesture. He was a very fast learner.

Pucky dematerialised and first jumped to the surface. Then he concentrated on the Command Centre of the *Drusus* and landed to his own surprise right in the lap of Bell who happened to be sitting next to Sikerman on a couch.

"Stop yelling at me!" Pucky implored his startled friend and slid down to the floor, the briefcase squeezed under his short arm. "Where can I find the boss?"

Rhodan had already heard Pucky. His thought impulse reached Pucky before Bell could answer him. "Okay, fatso," Pucky consoled him and waddled to the door. "He's expecting me."

Then he disappeared. Bell stared at the closed door and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "One of these days," he mumbled under his breath, full of misgivings, "he's going to give me a heart attack, I swear."

* * * *

Hubert Gorlat, the red-haired Captain of the Security Service went to work at the Defence Agency of the *Drusus*. Rhodan and Pucky stood by as he spread out the drawings one by one and copied them. So as not to disturb Gorlat, Pucky gave his report about Drog to Rhodan by telepathy.

It took about 5 minutes before Rhodan suddenly asked loudly: "If I understood you right, Drog wants to abduct the Swoon specialists from their planet and keep them on a foreign world where they'll be forced to build the compensator-detectors?"

"Yes, that's what Drog said under the influence of Noir."

"Then it must be true." Rhodan paused for a moment and added: "When you take the drawings back and pick up Noir, please bring that little Swoon with you. I think Markas is his name."

"Gladly, boss. You promised him and Waff to take them to Terra."

A smile crossed Rhodan's face as he said to Pucky with an almost tender gaze: "You really like the Swoons, don't you?"

Pucky beamed: "I love them, Perry. They're not only small and gay, but also very intelligent and gracious. I'd be happy if I didn't have to leave Waff and Markas behind. I'm sure they'd like to accompany us."

"I've got a very interesting proposition to make to them. No, Pucky, it's no use trying to find out what it is. I'm not going to tell you now. As soon as you return with Noir and Markas, I'll satisfy your curiosity."

He glanced at Gorlat, who switched off his copier, and asked: "Finished, Captain? I'd like to examine the plans with Khrest and Atlan. A good idea occurred to me." He took Drog's drawings and folded them so that they fitted again in the Springer's briefcase and handed it to Pucky. Patting the mouse-beaver on the shoulder, he said: "Hurry up, Pucky! I expect you in Khrest's cabin. And don't forget to bring Markas."

Pucky grinned impishly, showing his incisor. "I'd sooner forget my tail," he assured him. Then he concentrated himself and disappeared.

The last thing Rhodan saw of him was his furry brown beavertail and he believed the little fellow that he would bring Markas back just as sure as his tail.

* * * *

A little later—at the same time as Drog headed for the administration building with the coveted briefcase and tried to figure out how he had spent the last 2 hours—a critical conference took place aboard the *Drusus*.

Khrest, the host, sat at the head of the table and listened quietly to the words of the immortal Atlan, who held the copies of the drawings in his hands. In addition to Rhodan, Bell, Pucky and the 2 Swoons, Chief Engineer Gunter Forster and Chief Mathematician Dr. Ali el Jagat attended the meeting.

"The principle of the detector is easy to understand," Atlan expounded, "if you know the basic features of the structure compensator from which it was evolved. It'll be no more difficult to design its correlating instrument, the absorber. This absorber will assimilate all impulses from the compensator, making it impossible for the detector to register anything and thus rendering it superfluous."

Rhodan gazed intently at Atlan. He knew that he could fully depend on his new ally but he didn't know whether he might overestimate his ability. "Are you absolutely sure that the construction doesn't tax our capability?"

Atlan nodded and pointed to Jagat and Forster. "Ask these 2 experts. They'll confirm what I just told you. However there is one matter which bears closer consideration: the detector is to be manufactured on Swoofon where they can build those microscopically small parts. The absorber will have to be made of similar small parts. This is the only weak point in my assessment."

Rhodan replied with a smile: "Thank you, Atlan. We'll consider this point later. As you state, we can assume that we'll not run an undue risk if the Springers equip their search ships with these detectors in 3 or 4 months. By then we'll be in a good position. As our absorber will have been developed with the assistance of the Swoons."

"Theoretically yes..."

"Very good!" Rhodan looked at Pucky who had the 2 Swoons sitting on his lap and seemed to have forgotten what was going on around him. "Now may I ask Markas to answer a few questions? Pucky, will you please put him on the table?"

Markas shuffled back and back, a little undecided, till he settled at the right place near the translator. Engrossed, Waff watched him from Pucky's lap, over the edge of the table.

"What would you like to know, sir?" the Swoon asked. "I'll be glad to answer all your questions."

Rhodan leaned forward and looked into the bright, clear eyes of the Swoon. He could read an honest affection in them and he was deeply touched by the warm feeling. These little, funny-looking beings were blessed with a good and decent character that was rarely to be found among human beings. How foolish it would have been to spoil the friendship with these lovable creatures if he had made no effort to treat them as equal, intelligent beings. Rhodan suddenly began to understand Pucky's fondness toward them.

"You've expressed the wish to know the world I call home, Markas," Rhodan began. "I'd be happy to fulfil your wish and at the same time I'd like to submit a proposition to you. I hope you'll give it your careful consideration but I wouldn't hold it against you if you fail to accept it. I want you to take your time before you make a decision."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I'd like to suggest to you that 10 or 20,000 Swoons leave your planet with you and Waff and accompany us to Terra. We're in great need of such capable and clever microtechnicians like you. I offer you for your cooperation any work and living conditions you might desire in a community of your own. We intend to reward you with salaries and a generous bonus equal to those our highest paid experts in the field receive. Your people would have to sign on for 5 years and we obligate ourselves to bring everybody back to this planet who wants to return after that time. There's only one condition on which I have to insist: all Swoons must be taken on a blind flight to Terra so that none of them can learn the galactic position of our planet."

Everybody in the room listened in fascination to Rhodan. Khrest's face expressed satisfaction as if he had expected something along this line. Atlan smiled and also seemed to be pleased that Rhodan had conceived a wise plan. Pucky stroked the little Waff on his lap and cast a taunting look at Bell, who preferred to ignore him.

"As far as I'm concerned, sir," Markas answered, "I'll be happy to consent. I'm convinced that Waff will join me. What kind of specialists would you require?"

"If possible I'd like to have experts from each branch of science which would enable the Swoon colony on Terra to produce all the things you manufacture on Swoofon. I'm sure you'll know how to make the best selection, Markas."

"Leave it to me, sir," Markas said. "How much time do I have to put the workforce together?"

Rhodan raised his eyebrows. "Not very long, I'm afraid; the sooner I can leave the better. I don't want the Regent to get any ideas that I intend to stay here permanently. Besides, we must start the construction of the absorber without delay. Make sure to bring all the scientists necessary for this job."

Markas glanced at Waff. "If Waff comes with me, sir, we can get it done a lot quicker."

"Why don't you take him with you, Markas?" Rhodan suggested. "One more thing. Not one Swoon can be permitted to remain behind with the knowledge that anyone has left Swoofon with us. This means that you'll be able to ask only those friends of yours who are absolutely certain to accept your invitation. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly, sir. The task is not as difficult as you might think. There's a Research Centre for Applied Technology east of Gorla. It serves as a training institute for our future specialists and employs our best scientists as teachers. Its workshops are equipped with all the special tools that exist on Swoofon. If it were possible to transfer the entire university with its 20,000 teachers and students to Terra we could build anything we do here, from miniature TV sets to compact hyper-propulsion systems."

Rhodan's face lit up. "Thank you, Markas. This could be the answer to our problem. Will you be able to persuade all the members of the Research Centre? What happens if they refuse?"

Markas replied with a thin smile. "Nobody will raise objections, sir. You can take my word for it. When can I leave?"

Rhodan looked at Pucky. "Go with Markas and Waff. Who else would you like to accompany you? Anne Sloane?"

Anne Sloane was a telekin like the mouse-beaver. Pucky, who had already grasped what Rhodan intended to do, shook his head. "Nobody, Perry, It can't be done with telekinetics or teleportation by itself. I'm the only one in the Mutant Corps who can combine both. You can see what I mean. I'll handle it all by myself when the time comes. You can trust me."

He kept Waff on his arm and got up. Then he carefully picked up Markas with his other hand. "I'll report back as soon as possible. So long!"

A second later only a slight flickering of the air indicated where he and the 2 Swoon had stood. Bell stared at the empty spot. "I don't get it," he admitted grudgingly. "What's going on now? What does he want to do by combining teleportation and telekinetics?"

Rhodan smiled at Khrest and, Atlan as he replied: "Well, Reggie, life would be simpler if you were a mind reader, wouldn't it? But I don't want to keep you in suspense. Now listen and I'll explain it all to you..."

Bell was all ears.

The commanders of the 40 Guppies were more than a little surprised when they received a radio call from the *Drusus* 2 hours later:

TO THE COMMANDERS OF ALL G-SHIPS! ALL UNITS WITH THE EXCEPTION OF G-33 WILL RETURN UNDER THEIR OWN POWER TO EARTH. MAKE SEVERAL TRANSITION JUMPS PROTECTED BY YOUR COMPENSATORS. EXERT EXTREME CAUTION! G-33 REPORT TO ME AT ONCE. RHODAN.

The *Drusus* received several inquiries about the order but Stern, who meanwhile had taken charge of the radio communications again, cleared up all doubts. The blockade of Swoofon was indeed lifted and the Guppies were not to return to the *Drusus*. Those stationed on the *Titan* and *Gen. Pounder* were called back to their ships which were ordered to leave the stellar system as soon as the auxiliary ships were aboard.

It amounted to an orderly retreat, although the strategy could be more fittingly described as a tactical chess move. However this was to be considered as an official secret.

Mike Tompetch, a stout straw-blond American, was the commander of Guppy 33. 10 minutes after receiving the radio call he cautiously steered his spherical ship in to the wide open hatch and docked in the hangar. These berths for the auxiliary ships circled the huge *Drusus* like a ring and they were able to accommodate 40 of the Guppies which had a diameter of 60 meters.

Lt. Tompetch was a little stiff-legged as he climbed down the ramp after dismissing his crew from the G-33. He apparently expected no other immediate assignment. The men returned to their regular stations. The *Drusus* needed them badly in the absence of the contingents on the other Guppies.

On his way to the antigravitor Tompetch ran into Reginald Bell. Tompetch hailed him and fired a few questions: "Perhaps you can tell me what this is all about? Don't they trust me to find my way back to Earth like all the other Guppies sent on that little jaunt...?"

"Keep your shirt on," Bell admonished with a broad grin. "Your old tub needs a lot of fixing, doesn't it?"

Tompetch was stunned for a second. "Old tub? What do you mean by that? It's no older than the others. I admit the collision with the asteroid didn't help it much but all damaged parts have been replaced. At any rate, we could have flown back to Earth without trouble."

"It really has nothing to do with it, lieutenant," Bell suddenly assumed an official attitude. "I've orders to inform you that you'll no longer fly the G-33. If you have any personal effects on board, please remove them at once. This goes for your men too."

Tompetch looked flabbergasted. "I'm not supposed to fly my ship any more? But why?"

"The boss is going to explain the matter to you, lieutenant. First you must see to it that your stuff is taken out of the ship. I've assigned a few technicians who will help you to strip it of all valuable instruments. Please report to Rhodan when you're finished. See you later, lieutenant."

Tompetch stared at him in disbelief. He scratched his straw-blond hair and uttered a deep sigh. Then he went back to the hangar and switched on the intercom to call his crew back in order to comply with Bell's instructions although he didn't have the foggiest notion of the reason.

2 hours later he stood before Rhodan and reported that the job was done as ordered and that the G-33 was nothing but an empty shell with a propulsion engine. His fervent hope for an explanation was bitterly disappointed when Rhodan merely acknowledged: "Fine, Lt. Tompetch. Now report to Lt.-Maj. Sikerman for your next assignment. Well, the G-33 is now ready for the scrap pile, right? We want to do away with it."

Tompetch left. At the door to the corridor he briefly turned around and saw the laughing face of Bell, which did nothing to enlighten him, either.

As soon as the door was closed, Bell remarked: "His curiosity is going to kill him, Perry. I feel a little sorry for him."

"Really," Rhodan answered with a smile, "you should feel sorry for yourself. You've got a lot of work to do. Take all the men you need to clean everything out of our hangars and make the necessary preparations. I want to take off in 5 hours."

Bell went slowly to the door. "Provided Pucky is ready by that time?" he questioned.

"He will be!" Rhodan said with emphasis, pointing to the tiny radio set on his wrist.

Bell realized that he was almost as much in the dark as Tompetch. With a gesture of resignation he left Rhodan alone.

* * * *

As long as there's life, there will be accidents and catastrophes. This is an indisputable law of nature. Swoofon had its share of such mishaps too but they were rare and relatively harmless most of the time.

Nevertheless Pucky had to proceed very carefully. He studied the map. "Well, there's only a single railway line connecting the Research Institute with the surface and the other cities. This is in our favour."

Waff sat on the table and looked over Pucky's arm, confirming his findings.

"You say there's only one train running per day, Waff? Fine and candy! It left an hour ago and we've got a whole day before another one comes. Where is Markas?"

"He's making his appeal to the faculty and students of the optical department," Waff informed him. "None of them will choose to stay here."

"How many have so far declined to come with us?"

"Less than a thousand. What'll happen to them?"

Pucky shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, nothing much. They'll forget Markas' invitation, that's all. Noir'll take care of that. Then I'll take them to Gorla and they'll rack their brains trying to figure out how they got there. I'm beginning to realize now that I won't be able to tackle the whole job alone. I'll have to get

some help. Wait here, I'll be back in a minute."

Waff skipped to the edge of the table and jumped to the floor. He watched Pucky concentrate and disappear. The Swoon was already used to the phenomenon and it didn't consternate him as it did the first time

He went to the window and looked out on some of the building clusters of the university which was located only 20 meters below the surface. The 'sky' consisted of a smooth ceiling of stone with a regular pattern of lamp fixtures. The subterranean world was well illuminated. It was almost as bright as under the sky outside but it was much warmer.

Waff was startled when Pucky made his entrance again. He brought Andre Noir back as well as a muscular black Terranian, the teleporter Ras Tschubai.

Markas came in at the same moment through the door which was only half a meter high. The place looked like a medium-sized room to Noir and Tschubai. At least they could move around in it without bumping their heads against the ceiling.

"The optical technicians have all agreed to leave Swoofon and work for Perry Rhodan," Markas announced joyfully. Then he looked at the 2 Terrans. "Oh, we've got visitors."

Pucky introduced Ras Tschubai to Markas, whom he met for the first time

"And now it's time to break off all connections with the outside world," Pucky said. "We'll have to disrupt the railway service, the radio stations and so on. How many radio stations do you have down here, Markas?"

"Only one. Waff knows all about it." Markas was rather impatient. "I still have to talk to a number of other groups of the academy. Those who have opted to stay on Swoofon will go to the railway station after packing their bags."

"Very good." Pucky was pleased. "Noir and Ras will attend to them."

Noir removed the last shred of memory from each Swoon as to what they had heard and seen of the exodus. Ras performed a short tele-jump in order to reconnoitre the surroundings and then transported the group in batches to Gorla where he simply deposited the Swoons close to the elevators. Afterwards not a single Swoon was able to tell how he managed to get to Gorla. For the present nobody showed very much interest in them anyway because there were more important problems to worry about.

Meanwhile Pucky waddled to the entrance of the railway tunnel and teleported himself into the tunnel to a place about 5 kilometres from the Research Centre. It was a simple matter to dislodge telekinetically a supporting arch so that the rocks crashed down with a thunderous noise and buried the tracks. He made sure that no train would get through for a while.

Then he jumped back and enlisted the help of Waff to interrupt the radio service. This presented no difficulties either. All he had to do was to cut off the power reactor by forcing an insulating shield between the critical elements. If anyone wanted to restore its operation again, he would have to take it apart, which would require at least 10 hours. But by then...

Pucky removed a few atomic batteries as well as some vital parts of the transmitter and placed them in a crevice between the rocks on the surface. After he was satisfied that his task was completed, he returned

to the room where Tschubai and Noir waited for him together with Waff and Markas.

"We're ready," Markas said. "All the Swoons that are still here want to go to Terra. How are we going to transport them? There's only room for 10 in each elevator cabin. They were only provided for an emergency and..."

"No problem, Markas. Ras and I'll organize a—how shall I call it?—a teleportation channel from here to the *Drusus* which will land directly above us. This can be done thanks to our special abilities. Then we'll send your people as well as the scientific equipment of the Research Institute through this channel directly into the *Drusus*, which has already been prepared to receive the whole works. Wait and see, Markas, it'll be no trouble at all. I'll notify Rhodan whenever you're ready."

"Let's go, Pucky!" Markas replied.

Rather than jumping to the surface, Pucky used the little transceiver he wore on his wrist to contact Rhodan and waited till he answered. He briefed Rhodan on the situation and asked for further instructions.

Rhodan's low voice emanated from the tiny speaker: "I'll set down the *Drusus* exactly over the academy in 5 minutes. Make sure everything is ready when I call you.

Pucky gazed at his transceiver and said to Markas after switching it off: "Tell all Swoons to gather their personal belongings and meet on the big square in front of the auditorium in 25 minutes. Ras Tschubai and I will begin at once to secure the desired instruments and experimental equipment from the Institute. We don't want to forget anything. Let's get to work. Noir, you can help Markas and Waff. We'll see you in half an hour outside the auditorium, where they always hold their graduation exercises. This time, everybody is leaving the university from the auditorium once again."

He took off together with Ras Tschubai.

* * * *

5 minutes after Pucky's radio call the officers and men of the *Drusus* witnessed a strange and baffling spectacle.

The gigantic sphere had silently taken off from the spaceport at Swatran after Rhodan had officially ordered the end of the blockade by a public radio announcement. The interned Springers were set free and permitted to return to their houses or ships. The normal life of Swoofon was resumed again—with a few minor exceptions.

The radio connection with the University of Swoofon was broken off. It was the only institution on a planet shared by many nations, where no discrimination between races and people was tolerated, a place where the elite of the Swoons lived. However they would live here only for another half an hour if everything went according to plan because that puzzling spectacle was already underway.

As far as the men on the *Drusus* were concerned, the spectacle was more amazing than puzzling. Pucky and Ras teleported the whole complicated-looking apparatus of the Research Centre. Machines, large

and small generators, consoles and cabinets with special instruments and loads of intricate equipment were stowed away along the walls of the hangar for later use.

Mike Tompetch stood near his dismantled G-33 with his mouth open. Pucky suddenly appeared above his head with a big metal trunk and moved it telekinetically to the growing pile of equipment. Ras Tschubai followed him with a big generator which was still anchored to its base. Then Pucky appeared again with an entire residential block, measuring 20 by 5 meters. Tompetch could see a complete kitchen through a transparent wall.

The hangars of the *Drusus* were filled with a collection of everything from the Swoons' world. This much Tompetch could see for himself although he still was at a loss to understand the purpose his Guppy was to serve and how it tied in with the action in progress.

Suddenly he felt how the ship's usual gravity of 1G was diminishing. Normally the antigrav field inside the *Drusus* was regulated to correspond to the gravity of Terra. Wherever they happened to be—in free space or on alien worlds—no change could be felt inside the ship.

However now a modification had occurred without warning. Some of the younger cadets in the adjacent hangar took advantage of the light gravitation, now reduced to 0.25G, to have a little fun. They performed daring leaps that would have broken their bones under the customary conditions of gravity.

Under any other circumstances Mike Tompetch would have thoroughly enjoyed the performance but now he was in no mood to be amused. Not as long as he was in a state of uncertain suspense himself. But his tension was soon to be relieved.

Ras and Pucky materialized once again one meter above the floor of the hangar with a flock of Swoons. Pucky let them float down to the floor in slow motion where they dispersed with astounding speed. Although they had never before been on the *Drusus*, they seemed to know exactly what to do and where to go.

Tompetch and the crew had already been earlier informed of the Swoons' embarkation and consequently were not in the least surprised. The cadets ended their frolics and assisted the Swoons. Soon a torrent of lively cucumbers flooded the *Drusus* and the crew was hard put to show them quickly enough to their quarters to prevent a logjam in the hangar of the G-33 which was filled to the brim.

"The invasion of the cucumbers!" a booming voice exclaimed from the door to the inner corridor. Tompetch looked around and noticed Reginald Bell on a raised platform. There the proud and self-important deputy of Rhodan stood, shaking with laughter. His merriment was justified if one didn't look too closely at the scene which could give the superficial impression that a cargo of cucumbers was being taken on by the *Drusus*.

Suddenly there was another figure standing next to Bell: Perry Rhodan. "I wouldn't laugh so much if I were you, Reggie," he said with a serious face. "Do you think that the Swoons look that funny..."

"It isn't that so much as the way they come in bundles and then drift to the floor like wilted leaves."

"Well, your exhibition of glee could lead to misunderstandings, although I must admit that I've a little trouble myself to keep a straight face. The Swoons are our friends and they'll make it possible for us in the next 10 years to leap a century of micro-technology. Think of it, when you feel like laughing." And after a little pause he added: "Come to think of it, you probably look a little ridiculous to the Swoons yourself. Only their good manners keep them from expressing their true feelings."

Dumbfounded, Bell followed Rhodan with his eyes as he left again. Then he caught Tompetch's quizzical glance and decided to leave the hangar very quickly, too.

* * * *

4 hours later the transfer was completed.

20,000 Swoons had come aboard the *Drusus* with their special tools and their best machines to seek a new home in the Solar system. The huge excavated hall 20 meters beneath the surface of Swoofon was empty. The Research Institute was liquidated.

Rhodan was convinced that the Swoons would reestablish their academy in the course of the next 5 years but he was also quite certain that the construction of the compensation-detector would be delayed by a few weeks or even months by an imminent event.

The event he was thinking about was related to Tompetch's apprehensions and he alleviated them by informing the lieutenant of his plan.

"The *Drusus* lifted off after issuing a vague radio call and went into orbit in the stratosphere of Swoofon at an altitude of 300 kilometres.

Pucky had taken up his position aboard the G-33 for his mission. This time he was all alone. The entire responsibility rested on his shoulders if he failed to pull it off. But why worry? Everything would turn out just as he and Rhodan had planned.

There were no more Swoons in the berth of the G-33. The doors to their quarters were closed. It was unnecessary that they witness what was going to take place.

Pucky crouched tensely behind the controls of the Guppy. There was hardly anything left of its instruments. The technicians had stripped it almost completely. The propulsion system was still intact but all navigation instruments and steering controls to keep it on a normal course were missing. The ship had to be steered by sight and could no longer pass the speed of light.

But this was not what Pucky intended to do. He watched through his optical instruments how the big hatch doors of the *Drusus* slid back and opened the way into space. His big moment had come.

His wrist radio clicked. "Hi, shorty!" It was the voice of Bell, who supervised the action from the Command Centre of the *Drusus*. "Are you ready?"

"What are you waiting for, fatso? I'm raring to go!"

There was a short pause. Then: "Start in 10 seconds! Take course as instructed. Acceleration steady at 1G. Five seconds to go..."

When Bell called out "one... go!" Pucky pushed the drive lever forward. The Guppy rose off the floor and glided between the magnetic field barriers of the hangar, through the hatch, and blasted off into

space.

Pucky glanced at the observation screen. The *Drusus* fell back rapidly but then followed him in a graceful curve as if they wanted to overtake the Guppy. Simultaneously David Stern broadcast a radio call from the communication centre, which was received by all stations of the Springers on Swoofon:

ATTENTION! FUGITIVE CRIMINAL ESCAPED IN ROUND AUXILIARY SHIP. THE PUBLIC IS HEREBY WARNED NOT TO ABET THE FUGITIVE. THE AUXILIARY SHIP IS ARMED. PERRY RHODAN.

The radio message was designed to accomplish 3 things. First of all it should make the population of Swoofon believe that the action initiated by Rhodan on behalf of Arkon had been successfully concluded. It was a diversionary trick. Secondly it should explain the catastrophe about to overtake their brethren and keep them from speculating about other purposes and reasons which, in any event, would be too difficult to fathom for them. Third, it would serve to cover up the disappearance of 20,000 Swoons.

Pucky grinned happily when he heard the message on his tiny transceiver. He changed the course of his ship to make it enter the denser atmosphere. His velocity diminished as he held back with his acceleration. The gravity of Swoofon grabbed the G-33.

"Attention!" Bell shouted over the radio. "Circle halfway around and you'll be there!"

The *Drusus* followed Pucky's craft at a distance of no more than 50 kilometres. The strength of the radio signal was barely enough to reach Pucky so that there was no danger that anyone else could intercept their communications without a special receiver.

"You'll have to describe the target very precisely," Pucky requested. "You know I don't have a map."

"Don't worry, my pet. I'll put you right on target."

Several long minutes elapsed as Pucky raced aimlessly, or so it seemed, around Swoofon. The ship lost altitude and was apparently unable to get back in orbit. Several poorly aimed energy shots from the *Drusus* made it obvious that the fugitive would under no circumstances be allowed to escape.

Bell gave his final instructions in a calm and efficient manner: "Watch the mountains coming up over the horizon, Pucky. First we're approaching a plain with several peaks jutting out like needles. The one in the middle is the highest. There are 2 lower ones to the left and the right. Got it?"

"I can see the peak in the middle right in front of me," the mouse-beaver confirmed. "Hurry up, I'll be there in 8 seconds."

"In front of that peak is a little round valley. It can be clearly seen. It looks like a dry lake. Aim straight for it! There!"

"I see!"

Pucky stared at the observation screen as he bore down on the described valley with blinding speed. At an altitude of 20 kilometres the Guppy was set on a collision course.

Higher up, the *Drusus* made no effort to follow the plunging auxiliary ship. To an outside observer it would have appeared that the controls of the little ship were blocked by remote control so that it would

be forced to crash.

10 kilometres!

Pucky began to sweat a little but he stuck to his guns. He had already taken his hands off the vessel's controls. The course was right on the button and needed no correction. What was he waiting for? If he kept sitting there much longer he would crack up with his Guppy and get blown to smithereens.

Now he was down to the height of the peak, which seemed to shoot up into the clear sky. Down below the valley widened as if it wanted to swallow the diving craft following its inexorable path to destruction.

Pucky concentrated his mind on Bell in the Command Centre of the *Drusus*, closed his eyes with a shudder

—and jumped.

Not a second too soon.

The Guppy crashed into the rocky ground like a tremendous meteor, piercing it to a depth of 20 or 30 meters before it exploded and tore a huge hole in the surface of Swoofon. The impact of the ship's body slowly began to raise a circular wall around the site of the crash as if the rocks were a viscous mass.

And then, seconds later, an eruption hurled glowing and liquid masses of rock up into the air for kilometres. The mushroom of an atomic explosion began to sprout in the sky and spread its fearful clouds.

Bell breathlessly beheld the awesome display without paying any attention to Pucky, who had materialized on his lap and watched the spectacle with him. Rhodan stood not far away. His lips were tightly pressed together. The question whether he had acted correctly and responsibly crossed his mind. There couldn't be any doubt of course that the deed was in the best interest of Terra. But could the question be answered in the affirmative with respect to the Imperium?

He tried to dismiss his qualms. In the end, of this he was convinced, the net result of the action on Swoofon could only prove to be beneficial to the common cause of Terra and Arkon. Taking the long view, the operation must be considered as a step forward for all concerned, and not for Earth alone.

Khrest stood beside Rhodan and looked pensive. A mental shield prevented the reading of his thoughts. His reflections would remain his secret, as was so frequently the case.

Atlan was different. The immortal Arkonide sat in his chair and observed the mushrooming cloud with a cold smile. During his long life he had formed the opinion that truly great goals cannot always be attained exclusively by well-intentioned and praiseworthy deeds. He believed that the just sometimes were compelled to use the forces of evil to bring victory for the good. He had already learned beyond doubt that Rhodan was striving to achieve the best not only for Earth and its mankind.

Down there on Swoofon steaming lava sizzled in a huge crater. It measured almost 1 kilometre in diameter and must have been at least 50 meters deep. Swoons and Springers alike must all be persuaded that the University of the Swoons was demolished in the disaster. The nuclear reaction of the hyper-propulsion engine in the ship had failed to be shut off and the resulting explosion had devastated everything around it.

20,000 Swoons, the elite of the Swoons' nations, had perished in a terrible catastrophe perpetrated by an unknown outlaw. This was the sole judgment to be drawn.

Rhodan seemed to wake up after a dream. Moving almost awkwardly, he went over to the communication centre and silently sifted through the incoming reports, which confirmed his expectations. 2 minutes later he said to Stern: "That's enough, Stern. Switch to hyperradio. We're ready to leave."

He returned to the Command Centre where Khrest walked up to him and put his hand on his shoulder. "It had to be done, Perry. Remember that nobody got hurt. Not one Swoon lost his life."

"But the others believe that 20,000 of their people died. Where is the difference? The population of an entire planet is convinced that the elite of their people has been killed. As far as they're concerned they've lost 20,000 of their best brothers."

"The difference is to be found down there in the hangars where the Swoons are already busy setting up their machinery under the guidance of Markas," Khrest said slowly and with emphasis.

Rhodan looked at Khrest. Suddenly his face broke into a smile and the doubts vanished from his brow. "Not only did we outwit the Springers on Swoofon but also the robot Brain on Arkon. As long as they believe they'll have a detector with which to discover the position of Terra, we'll have gained a respite. We'll need this pause because we'll soon be forced to make another decision. You know who I'm talking about, Khrest."

"Yes—the Invisible Ones from the other time plane. But we'll be able to defeat them, Perry. They may seem to be timeless and eternal and even invisible but in their own continuum they're just as mortal and visible as we are in ours."

Rhodan agreed. "Our plans are based on these assumptions, Khrest."

Sikerman called out his commands. The planet Swoofon receded and grew smaller as the *Drusus* began to accelerate, rushing to the point of transition. Terra was not far distant but distance didn't count, only time.

Pucky took his eyes off the panoramic screen and slipped from Bell's lap. "You ought to eat a little more," he advised gruffly, rubbing his backside. "Your bones are beginning to stick out."

Bell gave him a bemused look. "Bones?" he said in feigned astonishment. "You always accuse me of being too fat! Which is it?"

"Take your choice," the mouse-beaver allowed magnanimously in an effort to get himself off the hook. As he waddled away toward the door he called back: "If anybody asks for me I'll be..."

"I know," Bell growled indignantly. "With those cute cucumbers. Some peop—some animals don't know who their true friends are." He obviously resented that he no longer played the important role in Pucky's life he once had.

The mouse-beaver turned round at the door. "I'm your pal, Reggie, and I want to give you a friendly warning. I've asked Markas to build a vibrator for me. It's an impulse receiver that's no bigger than a grain of sand. One of these days without knowing it you'll have swallowed it with one of your steaks and then each time you so much as think a nasty thought about one of the Swoons I'm going to push a little button and you're going to wish you'd never been born."

"I already wish it without your stupid vibrator!" Bell flared. "With a friend like you, who needs a vibrator to be shook up?"

CONTENTS

[1/ MICRO MISSION](#)

[2/ CRIMINAL AT LARGE](#)

[3/ HE WOULD BE LORD OF THE GALAXY!](#)

[4/ STOLEN PLANS](#)

[5/ PERRY'S PLAN](#)

[6/ 20,000 DIE](#)

[THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME](#)

THE MICRO-TECHS

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

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