

## ***SPHERE OF INFLUENCE***

DESTRUCTION OR ENSLAVEMENT. Earth faces one or the other.

Neither alternative is acceptable to the Administrator of the Solar Empire. So Rhodan contacts Harno, an Energy Being in the form of a sentient globe that has proven helpful to the cause of Terra before.

Added to the cast: Onot, a mysterious ghost from the past.

As the Druufs fight one of their bitterest space battles with their mightiest fleet on the border between two time-planes, and Perry Rhodan schemes to dupe the Robot Regent of Arkon into becoming a pawn in an interstellar war game, Atlan the Arkonide and Fellmer Lloyd, mutant, find themselves in a potentially fatal situation—

## **UNDER THE STARS OF DRUUFON**

### **1/ SPHERE OF INFLUENCE**

SEVEN PLANETS orbited Star # 221-Tatlira, 1012 light-years away from Earth. Almost exactly 60 years before, Terran spaceships had come into this system and freed the second planet—Goszul's Planet—from the rule of the Galactic Traders.

No one knew if all was yet well on the 7 planets circling Tatlira or if some cosmic disaster had swept the inhabitants of the star system out of their own plane of existence.

The data concerning Tatlira lay on the navigation table just in front of the control panel of the small positronicon aboard the superbattleship, Kublai Khan. From the information the positronicon would make the necessary calculations for the hypertransition.

Before the table sat a man.

He wore the light green uniform of the Solar Imperium, bearing the rank insignia of a colonel. The golden stickpin on his chest indicated that he was the commander of the ship, which with its diameter of 1500 meters belonged to the gigantic units of the Imperium class.

The positronicon hummed gently. The last hytrans to the Tatlira System would soon take place. In 10 minutes the Kublai Khan would be at its destination and then it would be determined if old legends always did have some grains of truth.

Actually, the matter was not just a mere legend. It had been recorded in unimpeachable sound and video in the 1990s.

Col. Marcus Everson could still well remember the hour when Perry Rhodan had called for him. The Administrator of the Solar Imperium had had deep furrows of concern and worry on his forehead and his voice seemed to have a slight despairing tone in it as he said:

"In a difficult and almost hopeless situation, one should remember his friends, Colonel. The struggle against the Druufs from the alien time-plane is taking up all our strength and effort, yet at the moment it seems as though we've run up against an enemy we're no match for. I know of a solar system in which someone is waiting to do us a favour. But it's been 6 decades..."

Col. Everson had smiled weakly. "A very long time, sir. I don't know if anyone would have the patience to wait 60 years..."

"This friend would—if Harnahan was telling the truth!" Rhodan had responded, smiling in turn. "I'm going to show you a video report made at the time when we flew back to Earth with the *Stardust 2* from Tatlira. Naturally, Colonel, I'm not doing this without a reason. I'm assigning you the mission of going to pick up our friend."

"Who is it, sir?"

Rhodan had simply smiled once more. For Everson this was where he had come in.

"Just wait a moment." With a few switch-turnings Rhodan darkened the small chamber that was serving as his workroom during his stay on Myrtha 7. A projector began to hum. One of the walls became a videoscreen. "The tape was made in the control room of the *Stardust*. Present were Sgt. Harnahan, Reginald Bell and I, although Bell makes his appearance somewhat after the film begins. Ready?"

"Ready," answered Marcus Everson tensely.

The wall began to live, bringing the past into the present.

Perry Rhodan looked up at a man with rugged yet sympathetic features standing before him.

"Make your report, sergeant! What did you find on the 4th planet?"

"On a moon of the 4th planet, sir!" corrected the sergeant evenly. "I found a sphere half a meter in diameter. It lay on the edge of a rock formation and called to me—yes, it called me to it. I learned that the sphere was a living being which fed off energy. Moreover, it could 'see' over unlimited distances and project what it saw on its bodily surface. The sphere would make an ideal television set."

"If it were so inclined," Rhodan commented dubiously. "Its intentions are friendly," Harnahan asserted with conviction. "I sensed that as it spoke with me—telepathically, of course. What's more, it helped me when a Springer ship attacked me. But look on the vidscreen, sir. There's the 4th planet..."

The vidscreen became visible on the wall. A point of light slid slowly across the screen and sank into the depths of space.

"Your sphere...?" asked Rhodan. "How great was its telepathic range?"

"200 light-years—at least that's what it said."

"Odd. It's always been believed that telepathy was not limited by distance. That's evidently not always the case. Even Marshall can't contact the Earth from here. Nevertheless—200 light-years..."

At that moment the image on the wall stopped. An explanation appeared, written with Arkonese letters: *Telepathic message of spherical being follows, indicated by written text.*

The introduction was replaced with the being's message:

*Now do you believe, Perry Rhodan? Harnahan spoke the truth! Did he tell you I am waiting for you? No return to Earth first. That is more important. But do not forget me, Perry Rhodan, even though you are immortal. I am waiting for you—and if I must, I will wait for ages.*

"Who are you?" Rhodan asked aloud.

Again came the written text:

*You humans are curios—and curiosity is the mainspring of your civilized progress. I think, then, that it will be curiosity which will one day lead you to me. Until then—farewell!*

Col. Everson heaved a sigh.

The video report from the past had lasted longer than an entire hour and he no longer remembered all the details. Rhodan tersely supplied any information that was lacking.

Only one portion of the tape was run twice.

Sgt. Harnahan had just explained that the sphere-being in no way represented any danger. To that Rhodan had thoughtfully commented: "I feel the same way. If the sphere-being is no danger to us, then perhaps one day it will be able to help us."

Sgt. Harnahan, the single human friend of the mysterious creature, replied: "He promised me his help whenever we needed it—whether today or in 100 years. Remember that, sir, if you're ever in a real emergency."

When the film ended, Rhodan had turned on the light again. Pensively he continued with his remarks. "Sgt. Harnahan is dead, so he certainly can't take us to the unknown moon of Tatlira's 4th planet. You will go, Everson, and find the sphere! You are to think about Harnahan until the being responds. Then you will carry out your mission. Further details are at your disposal; just ask."

Marcus Everson asked. Rhodan answered. The picture of the situation was becoming clearer.

"I'll find it," the Colonel then promised. "I'll find Harnahan's mysterious friend even if I have to turn the whole system upside down. You can depend on me, sir!"

Rhodan had only smiled gently. "And I will, Colonel!"

When Marcus Everson received the data from the navigational brain's print-out slot, he gave the calculations only a brief glance and handed them to an officer who had up to now been waiting silently,

apparently waiting for his orders.

"Transition in 10 minutes, Lt. Gropp! Take over the navigation of the Kublai Khan. You know what has to be done."

"Right, sir."

Then Everson turned his attention to the written information Rhodan had given him as a supplement.

The moon on which the sphere had been 60 years before had a diameter of about 80 kilometres. At the time Harnahan had not been able to make an exact measurement and simply gave a rough guess. Now the 4th planet had 50 moons, revolving around it in wildly different orbits. Everson wondered how he was to find just the right one.

Furthermore, it was probable that the sphere was no longer on the moon, for it had told Harnahan it wanted to move to an uninhabited world closer to the sun to soak up more energy.

The mission before Everson was thus all the more difficult.

But the sphere was an effective telepath and therefore a hypno in a certain sense. It could make its thoughts known even to nontelepaths. So Rhodan was convinced that it would answer as soon as it learned Everson's intentions.

The last preparations were carried out and then came the final seconds. The transition itself proceeded according to plan. As the pain of rematerialisation slowly faded from his body, Col. Marcus Everson looked expectantly at the vidscreen.

The star Tatlira blazed only a few light-minutes away. At first it was difficult to make out any planets but then with the aid of the Kublai Khan's astronomical department they quickly came into view. The 4th planet stood behind its sun.

"We'll remain at speol, Gropp," Everson decided at length. "Head directly for planet #2, then take course for #4. As for what we do after that, we'll have to wait and see."

As the giant battleship flew close past Goszul's Planet, the Com Centre received several radio messages from below which clearly indicated that the small Terran base still existed. So the other time plane had not yet reached this system.

Then the inhabited planet sank once more into the depths of space. The sun came nearer, then slid sideways off the vidscreen. A bright star became visible ahead, then began to increase rapidly in size. Finally it had grown into a dully shining globe: Tatlira 4, the uninhabited planet.

"Decrease speed," ordered Everson. Lt. Gropp, who meanwhile had taken the pilot's seat, set the controls for deceleration. The Kublai Khan began to slow down.

It was just as Harnahan had described it.

The planet was circled by a huge number of small and even smaller moons in irregular orbits. Although there was no danger to the ship, should there be a collision, Everson had the Kublai Khan's velocity reduced even further. He was afraid of accidentally destroying whatever piece of rock the living sphere might be on.

Which only showed how much he underestimated the mysterious and incomprehensible creature.

At a speed of 100 kilometres per second, the Kublai Khan cruised through the small asteroid belt until a relatively large moon appeared at the edge of its instruments' range of vision. The moon's torn and irregularly formed surface showed long mountain ranges and deep valleys into which neither the light of the distant sun nor the weakly reflected glow of the mother planet ever shone. Everson estimated the moon's diameter at about 80 kilometres.

It had to be the moon spoken of by Harnahan.

Everson ordered the ship into orbit around the moon.

Then he began to concentrate. *We're looking for you, energy being! We're friends of Harnahan and Perry Rhodan—do you remember them? 60 years ago, our time, Harnahan found you here on this moon. You helped him against the Springers and Rhodan gave you energy! If you're still here, waiting, please contact me!*

Everson thought it over and over again but received no answer. Lt. Gropp, who was aware of the task Everson had to perform, sat silently waiting at his controls. He did not turn his eyes away from the vidscreen; he continued to watch as the rugged surface of the moon slipped quickly past. The sphere was nowhere to be seen.

Everson went on with his telepathic message. *If you're still in this system and perceive my message, speak up! We're in great danger and need your help! Do you still think of your first human friend, Harnahan? He's been dead for a long time now but I have a message from him to give to you...*

Like a shock Everson suddenly felt the at first light and then increasing pressure on his brain. An invisible and intangible hand seemed to be grasping his mind and giving it a gentle squeeze.

And then the soundless, disembodied voice spoke to him:

*I have heard your call, Everson! You seek me in the wrong place! I was waiting for you on the 1st planet of this system. The nearby sun gave me energy. But it is too hot for you. Land on the moon you are orbiting. I will be there soon.*

At first Everson was much too confused to be able to formulate a reply. Even though he had tried to be prepared in case Rhodan's hopes should be fulfilled, he was still overwhelmed by the sudden contact with the living sphere.

"Land on the moon—there, on the plain!" he ordered Gropp, who proceeded to follow the instruction without a word. He did not want to disturb his superior officer.

*How are you going to get here?* Everson thought intently.

But this time he did not receive any answer.

The giant spacesphere sank towards the surface of the moon and at length landed softly on the relatively level ground of the broad plain, which stretched as far as the near horizon. On the other side, rugged mountains and a steep range of hills blocked the view.

Everson stood up. "I'm going outside," he said, looking for some seconds in indecision at the wallcabinet where the hand weapons were stored. Then he shook his head and without further observation left the control room. A lift brought him to one of the many airlocks where he hurriedly put on a spacesuit. Built into the suit were small repulsion units; it could be used in weightless space as a self-contained spaceship.

The small moon's gravitational field was slight. Everson stepped to the edge of the open hatch and looked out across the plain, whose surface lay a good 30 meters below the exitway. Even though it was 'day' outside, it was still not especially bright. The sun was much too far away to supply any great amount of light.

Everson smiled to himself as he simply stepped out of the ship and sank as gently as a feather towards the ground. He knew from Harnahan's report that the sergeant had done the same thing. If he wished, he could leap as high as 150 meters into the sky—so the repulsion units in his spacesuit were as good as superfluous.

He stood under the giant spacesphere, which loomed above him like a colossal mountain of Arkon steel. With a few steps he reached open sky, from which the stars shone unhindered by any atmosphere on the dead world.

And yet, the impossible suddenly happened!

A shooting star appeared at the horizon, approaching at a high speed. Then it grew noticeably slower and came towards Everson in a wide curve.

The Colonel was startled.

In the first place, glowing meteors cannot exist in airless space, he thought automatically, and secondly, meteors don't travel in curves. Besides, it's too fast...

Of course he had no time to complete his thought. The glowing meteor raced on towards him, braked unbelievably swiftly and landed not 10 meters away from Everson on the rocky surface of the plain.

It was the sphere!

It was only about a meter in diameter and shone dark blue—almost black—in the light of the distant stars. There was no sign of any seams in the surface of the sphere, which looked like it had been polished, but the reflected light seemed to pulsate.

Everson did not have much time to ponder it.

*What happened to Harnahan?* rang the question in his mind.

The unreality of the situation forced its way into the Colonel's consciousness. He stood on a dead and desolate moon. A sphere lay in front of him and spoke to him. He suddenly understood what nerve Harnahan must have had, not to have gone insane.

"20 years after your meeting with him, he and his ship were caught in a cosmic storm near the edge of the galaxy. The details of his death were never learned for none of the crew escaped destruction. It was generally assumed that their power failed and the ship drifted pilotless and powerless into the emptiness between galaxies. They were never heard from again."

Everson had spoken aloud, although there was no real need for him to do so. He wanted Gropp to overhear him in the control room and so be constantly informed as events took place. Naturally, Gropp could not understand or even perceive the sphere's side of the exchange.

*So Harnahan is dead! Perhaps I shall find his ship one day. If I had been more alert, this would not have happened.* During the short pause that followed, Everson began to calculate how far it was to the system's first planet. As he came to a tentative conclusion, the sphere went on: *So I was not forgotten by mankind? Perry Rhodan remembered me? He needs help?*

"Yes," said Everson absentmindedly. A difficult problem was lying heavily upon him. "How did you get here? The first planet is 3 light-years away. Can you spring through hyperspace like our ships?"

It seemed to Everson that someone was laughing in his mind.

*I don't spring through hyperspace, Everson, I FLY through it. There is an enormous difference. But now tell me why you have come. Why does Terra need help?*

Everson took his time about answering. He stared at the sphere's smooth surface but could see none of the details Harnahan had reported. The surface was simply dark, seeming to swallow up any light. No, now it was reflecting it again. The pulsation seemed to be irregular, as though the sphere breathed.

Perhaps it breathed light...?

Again there was the laughing in Everson's mind.

*You are even more curious than Harnahan, Everson. Once I would like to meet a human who is not curious—but I would probably then be boundlessly disappointed. A man who does not feel any curiosity, who has no desire to search for the truth and learn the basis of all things—do any such men exist?*

Everson awakened from his trancelike state. He ignored the sphere's question. "I have a message from Perry Rhodan to deliver to you. It refers to the promise that you gave Harnahan. Rhodan asks you to come to him. He needs your help or else the universe is lost. The Druufs are attacking."

*Who are the Druufs?*

"We don't know yet who they really are, although we've already encountered them. They live on another time plane which is in the process of cutting across ours. There are overlapping areas that appear in various places, through which one can enter the other dimension unhindered and without need of any technological means. The Druufs take advantage of it and send huge battle-fleets into our universe, which they intend to conquer. We're trying to defend ourselves but the enemy is too powerful."

After a pause the sphere replied: *I have rested for a long time and did not know what was happening. But it seems to me that those whom you call the Druufs are not unfamiliar to me. Good, I shall come with you to help Rhodan. Where is he?*

Everson breathed a sigh of relief. "Not here in the ship but on the 7th planet of a star we call Myrtha, which is a long way away. How—how can you come into the ship with us?"

*I could make the trip to Myrtha all by myself but to do that I would have to use up much energy which I could only slowly replace. So I will fly with you in your ship. So that I don't endanger you,*

*handle me as you would any other object. I will not move of my own accord unless it's unavoidable. I will also concentrate myself so that I will take up less space. Return to the ship, Everson. I shall follow you.*

And then something took place that seemed miraculous even to Everson, who up to this point had been more or less calm and composed.

Before his eyes the sphere began to shrink. It grew smaller and blacker. Finally it reached the diameter of a mundane and ordinary tennis ball, still lying upon the rocky ground. What had become of its former mass could not be guessed but if it had remained in the small object then the sphere must now be unimaginably heavy.

But that, too, seemed to be an error of logic for the sphere suddenly raised itself as though it were weightless. It floated slowly upwards, coming to a stop close to Everson's face.

*It was a quite natural process, it declared, telepathically as always. Nor am I any heavier. Energy and time have no weight at all. What are we waiting for now?*

Everson gave no reply. He stepped back a pace and looked up. If he leaped up and forward, he might reach the entrance hatch with a single jump. If not, then he would leap again.

He signalled to the sphere, then sprang.

His estimate of the distance and the force necessary for his leap had been approximately correct—but only approximately. Just before he could reach the hatch, he began to sink back down. He looked around.

The black sphere floated slowly upwards and now had reached the same altitude as he. It continued to rise... and he followed it!

It was as though an invisible hand pulled him towards the hatch and set him down on the threshold. Then he suddenly felt his natural weight as the artificial gravity field of the ship began to have its effect on him.

The sphere was also in the airlock. It floated in the middle of the room, glistening with dark and yet colourful reflections.

Everson pressed a button and the outer hatch door closed. Air flowed into the chamber until the pressure was equal to that inside the ship itself. Only then did he open the inner hatch.

Wordlessly, Everson climbed out of his heavy spacesuit and hung it in a cabinet. Then he said: "There are many corridors and lifts on the way to the control room. Do you think you can follow me without any danger?"

*Take me in your hand, Everson!*

The officer hesitated. He trusted the strange and inexplicable being and he knew it would do nothing harmful to him but it was still hardly a normal thing to hold a piece of energy or time in one's bare hands.

Slowly he reached out his arm and opened his hand. As though automatically, the small sphere floated through the air and landed gently in the palm of Everson's hand. It felt cool and light.



*That is all*, it thought, amused.

Everson closed his fingers around the sphere and went out into the corridor. As though in a dream he walked through the ship and finally reached the control room, where Lt. Gropp let out a sigh of relief as he saw his superior come in.

"Thank heavens you're back, Colonel. Did you find it?"

"It's here in my hand," Everson answered, showing the sphere to the lieutenant. It still rested harmlessly on his palm, seemingly lifeless. "This is Harnahan's sphere."

Gropp stared at it in incomprehension. "That... that's supposed to be..."

*Perry Rhodan is waiting!*The urgent thought suddenly bore into the brains of both men.*We should not hesitate any longer; too much time has already wasted. I don't know if I can render any decisive help but I will at least try.*

Lt. Gropp overcame his surprise, collected his thoughts and turned to the positronicon for calculation of the data for transition.

Everson spoke to the sphere: "Did you say 'if you can help'? Rhodan was positive that..."

The somewhat cryptic reply interrupted him:*Perhaps what I meant was—if I may help!*

## 2/ INTO THE ALIEN UNIVERSE

Several thousand light-years from the Earth gaped a hole in the universe. It was an opening of some billion kilometres in width and length, fluctuating between half a light-year and an entire light-year. It had been the result of an overlapping between the two time planes and remained astonishingly stable. However, it moved along the edge of the Milky Way at the relatively slight velocity of 150,000 kilometres per second.

The tear in space was a so-called 'discharge vent' in the Einstein Universe: it permitted entrance into the Druuf time-plane without any need for technical equipment and the return into normal space was just as Unhindered.

In front of the tear patrolled the mighty battlefleet of the Robot Regent of Arkon, who had finally recognized the danger threatening its realm. There were more than 50,000 ships, most manned by robots, attacking the emerging Druuf ships in terrible battles and endeavouring to destroy them. The Arkonide units often succeeded but more than once battles ended with wrecks of the robot ships floating helplessly out into the endless reaches of space.

Meanwhile, Rhodan sat on the sidelines, watching the titanic events as a secret observer and, for the moment anyway, as a neutral 3d party.

He sat with the largest part of his Terran battlefleet in the Myrtha system, 22 light-years away from the

scene of the gigantic struggle. The system's 7th planet—Grautier—had been turned into a well-camouflaged base and here Perry Rhodan received the reports from his scoutships.

Things were falling into place.

The light cruiser *Lebanon* reported: *Druuf units penetrating Einstein space, meeting heavy resistance from Regent's fleet. Losses on both sides.*

Message from Guppy K-28: *No further nearing of time planes observed. Difference between two as before. Druufs move half as fast as we do.*

"That's still better than before," rumbled Reginald Bell peevishly. He sat with Perry Rhodan and several officers in the brightly lit, subterranean command centre on Myrtha 7. The walls were covered with vidscreens and other information-delivering equipment. The men had taken their places in the comfortable seats: "At least," Bell went on, "we're so fast for them they can't see us."

Rhodan did not respond to Bell's words. Calmly and quietly, he pressed the button under a vidscreen over which shone a red light.

An officer's face appeared.

New message from the light cruiser *Lebanon*: *An estimated 10,000 units of the Regent's fleet have drawn together at one point. It looks like an incursion into the Druuf-plane is planned. We're remaining at our observation post, 1½ light-years from the opening.*

"This is a fine how d'you do," muttered Bell. His red hair bristles stood on end, showing his excitement. "They're starting before we are!"

This time Rhodan smiled as he answered. "At most they're just saving us some work, Reggie. Don't worry. They'll hardly succeed in destroying the Druufs' home system. It's too big and powerful for that. But the Druufs may be able to put some of the Regent's ships out of commission and examine them."

"So? And then what?" Bell wanted to know.

"And then what? Quite a bit, old friend. For example, the Druufs will learn to their astonishment that they're fighting robots, not normal living beings. That will open up a completely new perspective for us."

"What...?" said Bell, curious. He was completely convinced that he would immediately learn the answer to the mystery to which Rhodan pointed but he had to be seriously disappointed for Rhodan answered:

"Old proverbs don't lose their validity very quickly, I presume. You should learn a few of them by heart, Reggie."

Without any regard for the disappointed look on his friend's face, Rhodan answered the next call from the Com Centre and made the necessary connections.

A familiar face suddenly appeared on the vidscreen.

"Message from the *Kublai Khan*, commanding officer Col. Everson reporting: Mission in Tatlira system carried out and successful. We'll be landing in half an hour, the time required by normal-space flight to reach Myrtha from here."

"Thank you," replied Rhodan and his relief could be clearly sensed. "We'll be waiting for you in the Command Centre on Myrtha 7."

The image on the screen dissolved. The men looked at each other in silence.

Rhodan said: "Well, that's that! Now to see if the legacy of Sgt. Harnahan is worth anything or not."

"I wouldn't count on it being worth much," sighed Bell. "After all, what we're really doing is chasing a will-o'-the-wisp, and a will-o'-the-wisp from the past, at that. A ball that lives off starlight—bah, humbug!"

Rhodan remained serious. "I wouldn't talk like that, Reggie. Who knows—maybe it can hear you and will retaliate. With an electric shock, maybe."

Bell gave a visible start but said mockingly: "I'd rather put my faith in the energy cannon or the mutants. Who can say what fairy tales Harnahan might have dreamed up all those years ago?"

"But you heard Everson reporting the fulfilment of his mission and the mission was to find the sphere and bring it back."

Bell grumbled something but did not say anything more.

One of the officers raised his hand. "There, sir—a message!"

Rhodan pressed a button. On the vidscreen a man with the insignia of a scientist appeared. He belonged to the special scientists' team which played no small role in this gigantic power—struggle now shaking the universe.

"Sir, I fed your questions into the positronicon for evaluation. Can I give you the answers now?"

Rhodan understood why the man hesitated. He did not know if all the men present in the Command Centre would be allowed to listen to what he had to say.

"Go ahead," said Rhodan. "We don't keep any secrets from our top officers."

The scientist read from a strip of metallic computer tape. For the sake of clarity, he also repeated the original questions.

*"First Question: What would have happened had the Regent of Arkon not discovered the opening in space which leads to the Druuf Universe. Answer To First Question: The Regent would have continued its attempt to learn the galactic position of Terra so that it could attack and conquer the Solar Imperium.*

*"Second Question: What are the chances of the Druufs defeating the Regent of Arkon's fleet? Answer To Second Question: The chances are slight. No basis for it.*

*"Third Question: What are the chances that Arkon will defeat the Druufs? Answer To Third Question: The chances are slight Again, no basis.*

*"Fourth And Last Question: The Regent is sending constant calls for help to Perry Rhodan. Why does it want help against the Druufs when it seems to be strong enough to defeat the enemy by itself? Answer*

*To Fourth And Last Question:* Making contact with Terra is wanted only to learn the position of that planet. Help against the Druufs is only a means to an end. Probability factor: about 98.7964%."

The silence reigning in the Command Centre was complete. Reginald Bell did not even clear his throat:

Finally Rhodan spoke. "Thank you, Henderson. I have more questions for evaluation but they can wait until later."

The screen went blank.

Bell stirred uneasily in his seat. "So the Robot Brain is still trying to find us!" he declared. His voice was expressionless and betrayed nothing of his mood. "You would have thought that after all this time it would have finally realized that. . ."

"Are you asking for something like insight from a positronic brain—from the biggest positronic brain in the Galaxy?" Rhodan demanded. "You're making a mistake, Reggie! The Regent, ruler of the Arkonide Imperium, acts only on a logical basis. And that same logic tells it that we constitute a threat. So it must remove that threat. That's how it was programmed to act, thousands of years ago, and that's how it will act—at least until it's reprogrammed."

"Didn't it promise us its friendship?"

"Friendship!" Rhodan pronounced the word sceptically. "Do you really think that a machine can feel friendship? The Regent knows only goals and purpose, nothing of feelings. And if we want to deal with it, then we must think the same way. That's the only way to, do it!"

"Well," said Bell, "at the moment the Regent has other worries. The Druufs are giving it as much to worry about as we are."

"The Druufs," said one of the officers present, summing up, "are thus the common enemy of the Regent and of Earth."

Rhodan suddenly smiled. "I already told Reginald Bell that old proverbs are still valid today. When I said that, I was thinking of this one: The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Now consider this, General! You maintain that we and the Regent have a common enemy in the Druufs and thus we must ally ourselves with Arkon."

"Only in appearance—not really, of course!" the General hastened to reply, looking quite shocked that he could perhaps have been misunderstood.

Rhodan was still smiling. "What would you think if we allied ourselves—only for appearances, of course—with the Druufs against Arkon?"

The room was completely silent, when Bell began to laugh loudly. The General seemed shocked but did not answer—perhaps *because* of his shock.

"With the Druufs against Arkon!" Bell was laughing yet. "You're a genius, Perry! A real genius!" He paused, then suddenly added: "But what for? What do you really have in mind?"

"It's all very simple. We'll make contact with the Druufs and have the opportunity to familiarize ourselves with their home world at our leisure. Our short visit there, being a matter of pure chance, didn't really tell

us much we already didn't know. Now we'll go see Siamed 16 all very officially."

Siamed was a double star system on the other side of the time wall. There was already a secret Terran base on the 13th planet. The 16th planet was twice as large as Earth and had almost twice the gravity; it seemed to be the world from which the Druufs had originally come.

"And how do you plan to go about it?" asked Bell. The thought of visiting the Druufs did not seem to strike him as a pleasant one. "Do you think these overgrown hippopotami will be waiting for us with open arms?"

"No, not at all. But there will soon be some opportunity to demonstrate our friendly intentions to the Druufs—that should give them something to think about and make them curious."

"Hm," mumbled Bell, sinking into deep thought.

Rhodan looked up at the officers. "You can return to your ships, gentlemen. The state of alarm will continue in effect. You'll be hearing from me."

When he had shut the door and was alone with Bell, he said: "In the next few hours a few things will be decided one way or the other. Unlike you, I'm expecting Harnahan's sphere to prove to our advantage. I don't know exactly what it is but certainly it isn't hostile to us—it assured me of that itself. Colonel Everson will be landing at any moment now. Bring him here; I'll be waiting. And inform John Marshall and the other mutants aboard the *California*. I'd like them to be here when we greet our guest."

Bell stood up and went to the door. "Guest!" he growled angrily. "I've never heard such nonsense! The more you have your hopes up, Perry, the bigger your disappointment's going to be!"

Rhodan silently watched him go.

A slight smile played on his lips.

As clever or cunning as Bell might be, he still could not quite think as completely in a cosmic sense as was necessary in the age of space travel.

Vitally necessary!

\* \* \* \*

When Col. Marcus Everson entered the brightly lit room, he looked into the expectant faces of the waiting men.

Beneath the vidscreens and to the left sat Perry Rhodan and Bell; next to them were John Marshall, Fellmer Lloyd, Wuriu Sengu and Ralf Marten. Atlan stood a bit off to the side and had an amused smile on his face. In front of the gathering, the mousebeaver Pucky crouched on his feet, supported by his broad beavertail. His ears were sharply raised but his incisor tooth could not be seen.

Everson stood at attention. "Reporting back from mission, sir," he said in Rhodan's direction. "Mission

carried out."

"Thank you," said the Administrator of the Solar Imperium, smiling broadly. "Please sit down and give your report."

Everson sat down with an inordinate amount of care, almost as though he had rotten eggs in his pockets. He stretched his legs out in front of him, returned Bell's grin and then described in a few words his experiences in the Tatlira system. Rhodan seemed satisfied when he finished.

Everson reached into his pocket. When he brought it out again and extended it towards the others, a small, black ball hardly 6 centimetres in diameter lay on his palm. It could have been hidden entirely in a man's closed fist. Its surface was smooth and seamless—and it seemed to be lightly pulsating.

"This," said Everson quietly, "is our 5,000,000 year old friend Harno—as he wants to be called. In memory of his first human friend, Harnahan."

The men stared at the sphere without comprehending.

Rhodan stood up slowly and walked towards Everson. His gaze rested thoughtfully and expectantly on the black sphere.

He stopped in front of Everson.

"The worth of a friend is not determined by the way he looks but in his intentions and deeds," he said with special emphasis. "Harnahan told me years ago that the sphere had a diameter of half a meter. It spoke to me and him, as well. Can it still speak today?"

The soundless answer suddenly rang in the brains of not only Rhodan but all those present in the Command Centre.

*You are right, Perry Rhodan! Value is not determined by appearance! But if you know that, you need not have had to wonder at the fact I am now smaller. Is not a small sphere easier to transport than a large one?*

"Excuse me," said Rhodan and bowed slightly to the sphere. "I'm happy to meet you, Harno. You know the reasons..."

*I know them, came the silent answer before Rhodan could finish speaking. You need help against the Druufs—as you call them. The mental communication suddenly ceased. Slowly the sphere raised into the air from Everson's hand and floated in front of Bell's face. It remained hanging there while Bell stared at it with large round eyes. What is a ventriloquist? was the question in all minds.*

They all looked at Bell, whose hair stood stiffly on end like red bristles. Rhodan's rather short and stocky #2 man became terribly embarrassed when he noticed everyone staring at him.

Rhodan came to his aid. "You must excuse him, Harno: he didn't mean to be offensive. He thinks one of us is acting as a telepathic ventriloquist—in other words, he doesn't quite believe in you. He'll change his mind in time."

The sphere drew back and floated up to the ceiling. It seemed to suddenly change its colour and

become noticeably larger until it reached a diameter of half a meter. Now it shone in tones of white.

And then, on the cloudy surface of the sphere, a colour picture appeared.

At first the image could not be clearly made out, then it was as though someone adjusted the focus of a television set. The picture grew sharper and more distinct.

Bell cried out and pointed at the sphere. "No...! It isn't possible!"

They all saw it. There was no real reason to be so excited, for there were many people who had droll Venusian badgers as housepets. They were easily tamed, scrupulously clean and obeyed every word.

The badger lay on a sofa and slept. Around its neck it wore a red collar with gold lettering. The name could be plainly read.

"That's Wutzi!" exclaimed Bell, completely unnerved. "Good lord! How can Wutzi show up half life-size on that ball up there? Yes, of course it's Wutzi! I certainly know my own room in Terrania..."

No one said anything. Only gradually did the meaning of what they saw penetrate their consciousness. Up on the floating sphere could be seen something that was taking place at that same moment 6562 light-years away. Harno, the mysterious spherical being, had responded to Bell's challenge and demonstrated his ability.

"Well?" came a squeaky voice with an undertone of malicious joy at Bell's embarrassment. "What do you to say to that, Fatty?"

It was Pucky the mousebeaver. Grinning, he displayed his single incisor tooth, which showed that he was in a good mood. He usually was when his bosom friend Reggie had in one way or another come to grief.

Rhodan looked up at the ceiling. "That's enough, Harno. I think now that our friend Mr. Bell believes you are who you say you are. Now I'd like to talk with you."

The image on the sphere disappeared as it sank slowly from the ceiling to rest close to Rhodan. The sphere remained in its large size and did not shrink any. It was still as white and as dully shining as any of the vidscreens on the wall.

*I could show you the end of the universe just as well, came the usual thought impulses. There need only be someone here who is thinking of it intensely. The subject was abruptly changed. Thank you, Rhodan, for not forgetting me. If I am capable of many things which are riddles to you and seem to be all powerful in your eyes, I too am limited by and am subject to the laws of nature. Together, perhaps we can overcome them. Or at least those which are not forbidden.*

"Forbidden?" asked Rhodan, suddenly believing he could feel the icy breath of a cold wind blowing through the room. "Forbidden—by whom?"

He was not any more surprised when he did not receive an answer.

The silence was interrupted all of a sudden by Atlan. "Harno, haven't we met before?"

*I know you, Admiral of the old Arkonides, was the telepathic answer. The last time I saw you, however, your uniform was authentic.*

Taken aback, Atlan looked down at his colourful admiral's uniform, which had been manufactured in a Terran workshop as an exact duplicate of the old Arkonidean costume. He chose not to ask any further questions.

Pucky was still grinning. He seemed to be enjoying himself immensely.

Rhodan's voice was serious when he said: "I think we are all introduced, now. You know why I sent for you. I need your help and advice in the struggle against the Druufs. Are you familiar with them?"

*I know of them, Rhodan. They don't look like you do, although the resemblance was greater a million years ago. At that time, their time-plane was separated from ours and it was difficult to encounter them. In the past few thousand years, the overlappings have constituted a great danger which, however, will not endure for much longer. By that time, the respective rates of time will have synchronized; but that alone will not alleviate the mutual penetration of the two planes. It is as if two vast star-clusters are in the process of side-swiping but each will soon go off in its own direction. Some of the individual stars will collide but then peace will return and each cluster will remain undamaged by the other. Do you understand my thought image, Rhodan?*

"Our scientists have pictured it in a similar manner," said Rhodan slowly. "In any event, we were not aware that the danger is lessening."

*It is—seen from a relative viewpoint. Why do you wish to attack the Druufs?*

Rhodan hesitated. "They're forcing their way into our universe and trying to use the overlapping zones to their own advantage. Whether intentionally or not, they have depopulated entire worlds. They endanger our existence."

*I promised Harnahan that I would help you if you should ever be in need of help, Terran. I will keep my promise. Your second opponent is the Robot Brain on Arkon. The struggle against the Brain is substantially more important than the one against the Druufs. Two mighty interstellar empires can be united only when the Brain is put out of action.*

"You're getting a little ahead of things," said Rhodan reproachfully. "First the Druufs—then we'll see what has to be done. In any event, you've given us a sample of your ability, Harno. May we then count on you serving us as a television eye? I'm asking no more than that."

The sphere changed its colour again and became black.

*I am Harno, the television.*

Then the incomprehensible being was silent.

Rhodan knew, however, that he could depend on Harno.

"Half an hour ago, I mentioned a plan to Bell that I would soon like to put into action," he began, looking at the mutants. Colonel Everson and Atlan turned their attention to him; they had understood that it was best to ignore Harno for the time being. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend. That's an old saying that's still good today. The Regent of Arkon is our old enemy. The Druufs are warring against it. Therefore, we shall ally ourselves with the Druufs."



Col. Everson's mouth popped open as though he wanted to ask something but he nevertheless said nothing. Atlan smiled knowingly. Even John Marshall, leader and best telepath of the Mutant Corps, did not understand. Rhodan had shielded his thoughts.

"Not really, of course—it'll only appear that way," Rhodan explained, deciding not to keep his men on tenterhooks any longer. "There will soon be an opportunity to demonstrate our friendship to them. Then, while we're treating with the Druufs, we'll also be strengthening and reinforcing our base in their system. The 13th planet of their system—called Hades by us—is in a favourable position. A mountain was hollowed out and outfitted with a transmission and receiving station for a teleporter device, among other things; teleportation is of course how the base gets its supplies.

"Col. Everson! See to it that the *Drusus*, *Kublai Khan* and light special cruiser *California* are made ready for takeoff. Further instructions will be forthcoming shortly. John Marshall and the mutants will accompany me along with Atlan, Bell and..."

"...And Pucky!" piped up the mousebeaver.

"...And Harno!" Rhodan continued, unruffled. Only then did he turn to the mousebeaver. "Aren't you one of the mutants, too?"

Pucky grinned, pleased, not seeming to be at all offended. "I had almost forgotten that people keep mistakenly thinking of me as a human," he remarked by way of an excuse. "Sounds like we've got the whole gang going on this one. It's gonna be lots of fun!"

"I wouldn't be quite so optimistic," said Rhodan earnestly. "Before us is a mission that is anything but a vacation trip. As the old saying goes, we're on our way to beard the lion in his own den."

"Well, so what!" squeaked Pucky depreciatingly and hopped out of the Command Centre.

It was all the same to Pucky, just as long as there was an adventure to be had.

\* \* \* \*

Lt-Col. Sikerman had turned over command of the light special cruiser *California* again to Marcel Rous, who had been promoted to captain, and once more had taken over the *Drusus*, which was to be the flagship of the operation. For his part, Col. Everson commanded the *Kublai Khan*. Rhodan, Atlan, Harno and the mutants were all aboard the *Drusus*.

The *California*, 100 meters in diameter, seemed like a tiny ball next to the 2 super battleships, each 1500 meters in diameter, as they raised weightlessly from the ground and soared into the sky.

On the surface of Myrtha 7 below, the camouflage slid back over the subterranean base of operations. Then there was nothing to be seen but a level expanse of ground and sparse vegetation. Even a suspicious observer would not suspect that one of the largest Terran military bases of all could be hidden away there.

As the 3 ships increased their speed, the planet sank perceptibly into the depths of space. Imminent was

a spring through hyperspace of more than 22 light-years, yet their spring would not be detected by any structural sensors. Recently all Earth ships had been equipped with the newly-developed wave dampers which swallowed up all disturbances of the space-time continuum caused by a hytrans. Moreover, each ship had at its disposal a matter-transmitter which enabled men and supplies to be sent over great distances as long as an appropriately tuned receiving unit was at the other end.

Sikerman sat at the controls of the gigantic *Drusus*, standing with the *Kublai Khan* and *California* in constant audio-video communication. Rhodan, Bell and Atlan at the same time were in the control room of the *Drusus* for they knew the Regent's fleet would quickly notice their appearance in the vicinity of the rent in space.

Just under the ceiling, small and unobtrusive, floated Harno.

With John Marshall the mutants had taken up quarters in the small wardroom, where they passed the time playing 3-dimensional chess. In comparison with old-style chess, it was a terribly complicated game. Here the playing field was not a 2-dimensional square but a cube. Instead of the once common 64 squares there were 512. Each player no longer had just 16 pieces: now he had 8 times as many. The cube was held aloft by controlled gravobeams and the pieces were manipulated by remote control.

Seen for the first time the game would be confusing by virtue of the large number of pieces floating in the transparent cube. Because the addition of more than one playing level increased the game's possible variations, 3-D chess was more than 8 times more complicated than old-style chess, seen from a purely mathematical standpoint. It took much knowledge and skill to bring a game to an end within a few hours or days.

On the other hand, most of the mutants were telepaths. Even when they shielded their thoughts during a game, their opponents almost always found a small breach in their mental defences and so learned their intentions. However, if anyone thought such brain espionage would make the game easier or even influence it to one's own advantage, he would have been disappointed. The slight help one thereby gained was too insignificant to matter in the face of the game's complexity.

Pucky had been watching the game for awhile but grew bored. It would be half an hour before the 3 ships had attained the speed necessary to go into transition

He waddled out of the wardroom and down the corridor. Then with a short spring he teleported himself into an out-of-the-way part of the ship where he found an unoccupied cabin. He leaped up on the bunk, thinking to treat himself to a little nap in this quiet spot.

He curled up and closed his eyes.

If he did not shield his mind from the thoughts of all the men aboard, he never would get any rest. It hummed like a beehive in his mind. Into his consciousness penetrated every single thought impulse from every intelligent creature aboard—and Pucky was magnanimous enough to count humans as intelligent creatures.

It was an unholy confusion. But since each 'transmitter' broadcast only on its own individual frequency, one had only to tune the 'receiver' appropriately to isolate certain impulses and bring them in loud and clear.

Pucky decided he was not so tired as he had first thought. He was having fun picking out bits and pieces from the welter of thought impulses around him.

*...I shouldn't have treated Betty like that and...*

Pucky moaned, shocked. Why did men have to think of nothing but women—even here, more than 6000 light-years away from Earth? As if there were nothing else to think about!

He continued to listen, changing the 'frequency'.

*...they got some great women in Terrania...*

Lord, that was the fat cook of the *Drusus*. He must be in the middle of a chat with his assistant. And what were they talking about? Of course...

Pucky sighed and listened some more.

*...if that floating volleyball will ever be able to help us, then I'm a monkey's uncle...*

Pucky did not moan nor did he sigh. Rather, he sat up straight with a start as if something had bitten him.

That had been Reggie! Pucky had by chance tuned in to his 'wavelength'. And as usual, Bell was concerned with Harno, of whose ability he did not yet seem very convinced.

That wasn't right at all, Pucky considered. Hadn't Harno already given red-haired Reggie an astonishing demonstration of his powers? Pucky had to grin when he thought of the stupid expression on Bell's face during the demonstration—poor Reggie couldn't figure out what a picture of his tame badger-pig, Wutzi, was doing on Harno's outer surface.

And now he still had his doubts!

Pucky suddenly stopped grinning. He leaned back against the wall, concentrating intensively. *Harno! Can you hear me? Please answer if you do. Harno! This is Pucky...*

He had not really expected so quick a reply, so he was all the more surprised when a powerful thought impulse interrupted him.

*Yes, Pucky—I hear and see you. Why do you close your eyes when you speak with me?*

The mousebeaver sat up straight again and looked around in shocked amazement. But he was still alone in the cabin. No sign of the sphere.

*When I close my eyes, it's easier for me to make telepathic contact. You don't have any eyes, Harno, so perhaps you can't understand. How do you see without eyes, anyway?*

Harno laughed. The incomprehensible being really could laugh, even though one only 'sensed' the laughter in his own consciousness.

*There are many creatures who see without eyes, speak without mouths and hear without ears. The universe is full of wonders when one knows where to look. I like you, Pucky. Where do you come from?*

Pucky swallowed self-consciously. "I like you, too," he said aloud and full of feeling. "Can we be friends,

Harno?"

*Certainly, Pucky. Are we not already?*

"Can you come here to me?"

Unfortunately, I cannot teleport myself. Solid matter is a hindrance I cannot penetrate without causing a disturbance. You can come get me.

"I'm on my way," Pucky announced, somehow glad that Harno could not do everything. He slid down from the bunk, concentrated and sprang.

To his sorrow, he scared no one with his sudden appearance in the control room. Bell looked up and grinned.

"Ever think of going on foot like a normal person?" he said.

Pucky grinned happily back. "Firstly, I'm not a person, and secondly I don't see how it concerns monkeys' ankles anyway."

Bell's lower jaw sank, giving his face an enormously comic aspect. "What did you say?" he demanded, shocked.

Pucky did not pay him any further attention. Instead he turned to look up at the ceiling where the sphere was floating, small and motionless as before.

"Aren't I right, Harno? Shouldn't we call Fatty over there Uncle Monkey from now on? Didn't he say he was a monkey's uncle himself?"

"This beast is a mental peeping Tom!" Bell cried angrily. "You can't even think around here without being spied on...!"

Rhodan looked away from the vidscreen, looked past the discreetly smiling Atlan and raised his index finger threateningly. "Be quiet now! Transition in 20 minutes! Don't you have anything better to do than arguing?"

Pucky pointed at Bell. "He started it! Nexttime he shouldn't make bets like that telepathically—not even with himself!"

Bell's face resembled an overripe tomato that seemed on the verge of bursting. He gasped for air, yet could not get out any words. Had he not such a temper, his spats with Pucky would not have affected him so violently; but when he began to get wound up...

"Let's go, Harno," twittered the mousebeaver sweetly, stretching out his paw. The sphere sank from the ceiling into the tiny hand. "I hope you won't be affected by the dematerialisation."

*I am curious about that myself, came the answer that all could perceive. Spring!*

"See you later!" said Pucky, concentrating. "So long, Uncle Munkle!" Then he teleported.

The last they saw of the mousebeaver was a happily shining incisor tooth.

\* \* \* \*

The hypertransition ran smoothly and without complication.

As the universe and stars became visible once more, the radar scopes automatically began to scan nearby space. Operating on the basis of the hypercom, they functioned faster than light.

The results came through.

"Sizeable formation of fleet vessels ahead, 25 degrees to the right. Flying diagonally away from us. No danger of collision. Hole in space 0.2 light-hours ahead. Scattered individual ships ahead moving in various direction. They should be visible on the vidscreen now."

Sikerman made a doubtful face. Rhodan nodded silently to him.

The commander understood immediately. He switched on the telecom and said, "Attention all hands! Battle stations remain ready! Attention *Kublai Khan* and *California* ! Ready for battle!"

Confirmations came back. The 3 ships converted themselves in seconds into invincible fortresses whose fire-power could shatter entire solar systems.

Harno had long since returned to his place under the ceiling. He had been with Pucky for 20 minutes and no one knew what had been the content of their conversation. Bell had an uncomfortable feeling in the area of his stomach but ignored it with his usual vigour. After all, it had only been a prank...

Several small isolated points sliding across the curved surface could now be seen on the large panorama vidscreen. Those had to be the ships of the Regent of Arkon blocking the entrance to the other time plane.

There were no signs of a battle between the two sides. Everything seemed quiet and peaceful. The Druufs' breakout attempt must have been beaten back.

"Everything would be completely different," Rhodan said to Atlan, "if Arkon were not ruled by a treacherous robot brain but by the Arkonides themselves. The situation is all the more grotesque because we Terrans are forced to fight against both sides without either of them suspecting it. We're the 3d Power, if we want to be."

Atlan nodded. "From the standpoint of the Imperium, the Druufs are the greater danger. If I were Emperor of Arkon I would ally with Terra to destroy the Druufs."

"The Robot Regent came to an identical conclusion, only it won't maintain the alliance once the danger is removed. It would not hesitate to send its battlefleets to the Earth, as soon it knows where the Earth is."

"As long as a machine rules Arkon," Atlan declared, "the Arkonides must not learn in what sector of the Milky Way Terra is to be found. No matter how dependable a machine is, it will not change its opinion—simply because it is dependable. It strives to rule and knows nothing of friendship, only of its

goal. I believe we're doing the right thing, then."

Rhodan turned around and looked at Atlan. "Do you see everything from the standpoint of a Terran, Admiral...?"

Atlan answered immediately. "What else can I do, barbarian? I'm as good as a Terran already, just like Khrest. Only when things are back to normal on Arkon and an authentic Arkonide rules will that change. But until then..."

The rest remained unspoken but everyone knew what Atlan had meant to say.

"Three ships ahead," announced Sikerman. "They're flying at half speed and coming towards us. Should we change our course?"

"Can you identify the ships?"

The answer came from the Com Centre. "Two Arkonide ships are attacking a smaller Druuf ship. They're going to destroy it."

Rhodan's decision came like lightning. "Go in closer, Sikerman!"

The vidscreen revealed further details. There was no doubt now that the two Arkonide ships were manned by robots; the Terrans had often enough encountered ships of that type. They were spindle-shaped Arkonide torpedoes, 200 meters long, with fully automatically functioning engines.

The Druuf ship was smaller and had the usual shape of a rod with rounded stern and bow. Its weapons fired constantly at its superior opponents, whose energy defence fields deflected the oncoming rays with no damage to the ships themselves.

"Its chances are only slight," murmured Atlan from his seat.

"Excellent!" said Rhodan. His eyes were narrowed and his mouth was only a line. He noticed that the Druuf ship altered its course and sped in the direction of the nearby hole in space. The robots followed it. Headlong flight and a merciless pursuit seemed to be in the offing. "Stay close to them, now, Sikerman."

They flew a short distance behind the 3 ships. Presumably the commander of the spindle-cruiser took Rhodan's 3 spacespheres for Arkonide units for he did not pay them any attention. That was easy to understand: the Terran ships had been constructed according to Arkonide plans.

A blinding energy beam shot out of the bow of a robot-cruiser and broke through the protective screen surrounding the Druuf ship. The shot had by chance been fired at the moment the weaponry aboard the enemy ship was being replenished with energy. Flames tongued from the stern of the Druuf ship.

But the beings from the other time plane did not give up so easily. They shot back, racing onwards at high speed towards the sanctuary of the hole in the Einstein Universe and returned to their own plane.

Rhodan's eyes opened again. "Sikerman!" he said. "Order the *Kublai Khan* to open fire immediately on the robotship on the left! We'll attack the one on the right ourselves. But—carefully! Don't destroy it all at once—do it in steps. The Druufs don't need to know just yet how good our weapons are."

Both battlespacers went into action less than 10 seconds later. They fire only their lighter weapons,

which however were enough to break down the robotships' energy screens. Large holes were torn in the hulls at the same time.

The calm and businesslike voice from the radar centre announced: "Other robot units are flying towards us. We are being attacked by a flotilla."

Rhodan's decision came instantly. "Everson and Sikerman are ordered to destroy the two robotships. Immediately!"

The damaged Druuf ship had not increased its speed. It sped at a constant velocity towards the hole in space, less than 1 light-hour away. Since it flew at only half speed, it would not reach safety for some time. But the commander of the Druufs must have realized he had found an unexpected ally. He ceased fire.

At the same moment, it happened.

The concentrated destructive fire of the *Drusus* and the *Kublai Khan* struck the two Arkonide spindleships. The immediately detonated atomic reactions converted the matter of the two ships into radiant suns, speeding off at a constant velocity and then merging into one. Soon only the gas cloud was left, slowly expanding and thinning out.

Then it was gone.

A cold smile played at Rhodan's lips as he said: "I wonder if the Druufs know anything about things like gratitude? In any case, it's already noteworthy that the fellow up ahead isn't shooting at us. Take us closer, Sikerman!"

They slowly—or so it seemed—drew nearer to the rescued vessel, watchful and fire-ready. Only a few kilometres separated them from the other ship. Although the stern of the Druuf craft was for the most part destroyed, a number of jets—if that was what they were still functioned. The ship was no derelict by any means and would be able to return to its base without outside help.

Again the announcement from the radar centre: "Regent's ships coming toward us. Distance..."

Rhodan nodded. "We'll probably have a chance to rescue the hard-pressed Druufs again. Excellent! We've already saved them once but a second time will make our intentions all the clearer. I've always been both a suspender *and* a belt man, as the saying goes."

They did not have to wait long. Just an hour, perhaps.

From out of the void came 7 small units, attacking without warning. From their behaviour it was easy to tell one of the ships was piloted not only by robots. At least the commander had to be an Arkonide—or more probably, a Springer.

"They must know that we aren't Arkonides," murmured Bell in the background. "Maybe they picked up a radio message from one of the robotships we just blew up."

Rhodan did not reply. He initiated the counterattack. The Druufs altered their course slightly and it looked as though they wanted to assist their unknown rescuers but then they returned to the old course and raced on-towards safety.

The battle was only a short one.

Six of the attackers vaporized in their collapsing defence fields. The 7th alone received an energy burst that only grazed it and it turned away. Rhodan had intentionally spared the ship with a man aboard. His action also had the advantage that the Regent would learn of the Druufs' new allies.

Along with the Druuf ship they broke through a loose Arkonide cordon around the hole in space and plunged unhindered into the alien universe. Behind them glimmered the hole in space and the stars of the Einstein Universe disappeared.

New stars came into view to replace them.

The stars of the Druufs!

### 3/ INVISIBLE ALLY

The Druuf universe operated on a different rate of time than the Terran. Because of the now more slowly progressing adjustment, the difference had sharply lessened. Although at the beginning all life in the Druuf universe functioned at a rate 72000 times slower, the relationship was today only 1:2. In other words, a Druuf lived and moved only half as fast as someone coming from the Einstein Universe.

Shining in the centre of the forward vidscreen was a strange double star. It scintillated reddishly, occasionally marked by a greenish tinge. This, Rhodan knew, was the home system of the Druufs.

Before Rhodan attempted to make contact with the Druufs, he changed his original plan. The secret base on Siamed 13—the planet Hades—had to be strengthened.

Hades was about half of Earth's diameter, enjoyed a gravitation only 35% of Earth's and revolved around its mother sun with the same face perpetually towards it. Because of an unusually high libration, the twilight zone between eternal night and day was 80 kilometres. While the temperature on the day side climbed as high as 168° Centigrade, unbearable cold ruled on the constantly dark side. The twilight zone was the only place where life was possible for any length of time. The terrible cold on one side and the terrible heat on the other often caused unimaginably violent storms in the twilight zone, one more reason for building the base underground.

The cave in the Hope Mountains—as Rhodan had dubbed them—was a Terran bastion in the midst of the Druuf realm.

Lt. Stepan Potkin reported to the control room of the *Drusus*. "You called me, sir?"

"It's time now, Lieutenant," said Rhodan. "Are your men prepared?"

"Everything's ready to go, sir!"

"Well," smiled Rhodan indulgently, "I'm not sure if you can call this 'going' in the usual sense of the word. With the help of the matter transmitter you will transfer to Hades. The station in the Hope



Mountains has been notified and is even now ready for your arrival. The transfer of supplies from the *Kublai Khan* and the *California* to the base is in progress and you and your men will teleport last. Good luck, Lieutenant."

For the first time Potkin smiled too. "Do you think we'll need it, sir?"

"Most likely, Lt. Potkin. Without luck we would not be where we are today. We would have never done it with power and ability alone."

Lt. Potkin stood at attention, saluted and left the control room.

Atlan watched him go. "Brave man," he said thoughtfully. "Not everyone could so calmly step into a transmitter to be broken down into atoms. It could happen that not everything at the other end is running according to plan. When I think that I could step into the machine as Atlan and come out as Bell..."

"You are irreplaceable," said Rhodan with an odd emphasis, "but when I consider that I would then have two Bells at my side—the thought is genuinely tempting."

Atlan looked surprised. In the background, Bell rumbled contentedly: "You see?"

"But don't worry," Rhodan went on. "Such things might have happened at the beginning but today they are as good as impossible. I don't want to say that complete identity changes took place but I can well imagine that there might have been some cases of people coming out mangled or, shall we say, garbled. However, I don't know of any such incident. When we found the transmitters in the Vega system, they were already perfected."

"Fortunately!" said Atlan with a weak attempt to make up for his supposed defeat. "When I think of having to spend the rest of my days as Reggie..."

"Hypercom ready for message transmission," announced a flat voice over the intercom.

Rhodan shrugged his shoulders and turned to face the vidscreen. "Send the following message, repeated at close intervals, in uncoded Arkonese: *To the Druufs! We request an opportunity for negotiations! Your enemy is also ours! Why can we not defeat him together? If you can understand me, please reply on the same wavelength.*"

As the screen's image dissolved and the great game began, Rhodan felt something like a tinge of doubt. He had been convinced from the beginning that his plan would succeed but that did not eliminate the possibility the Druufs were more mistrustful than he assumed. What if they were growing suspicious now and luring him into a well-laid trap? Even the incident with the rescued Druuf ship might not have achieved its desired effect.

What then?

Another old saying occurred to him: cross that bridge when you come to it. Which is what he decided to do. But nonetheless he could keep his eyes open and see what he could find out beforehand.

While the matter transmitters operated at full capacity and filled the meanwhile extended cave on Hades with men, weapons and food, the still manoeuvrable Druuf half-wreck was placed under radio surveillance. No transmissions could leave the ship without being picked up in the Com Centre aboard the *Drusus*.

One more thing worked in Rhodan's favour.

Nature itself!

The Druufs lived half as fast as Terrans. Even their ships flew half as fast when they remained below speol. And normal radio waves also travelled only half as fast.

But the radio waves from the *Drusus* sped towards Siamed at the normal speed of light.

Rhodan's message reached the Druufs' homeworld earlier.

Perhaps that was no advantage at all. It depended on what the commander of the ship Rhodan saved reported to his headquarters.

They would soon find out.

The intercom hummed.

Rhodan switched on the speaker. It was the communications officer.

"Sir, the Druuf ship has radioed us! In Arkonese!" Rhodan was not surprised. "They learn fast," he admitted. "What do they want?"

"They thanked us, sir," the com officer went on. His voice betrayed surprise and disbelief. "They thanked us very correctly and promised to give their headquarters a full report. That was followed by a longer transmission in an unknown code. We assume that was the message to headquarters they mentioned."

"Thank you," said Rhodan and switched off. He looked at Atlan and Bell. "Well, what do you have to say to that?"

Atlan shrugged. "It could be a trick to lull us into feeling safe. They assume of course that we're following them. Perhaps they are even clever enough to see through our ruse..."

"Hardly," said Rhodan, shaking his head. "No intelligent being could be so distrustful: We did them a favour..."

"What of it?" Atlan was still sceptical. "They could still be careful enough to scrutinize us closely before they believe any selfless friendship of us..."

"Who said anything about selfless?" asked Rhodan. "In my message to the Druufs I emphasized that their enemies are ours. From that the meaning is clear that we're acting out of necessity and not affection. That will convince even the Druufs."

"Hm, that's quite possible," said Atlan, the eternally distrustful.

Bell, who had been silent up to now, remarked: "And they're going to fall right in."

Rhodan glanced at him but said nothing more. He looked reflectively at the vidscreen. The Druuf ship flew rather close alongside the *Drusus*. The damage did not seem to be very serious, although half the stern was gone.

Behind the *Drusus* came the *California* and then the powerful *Kublai Khan*. Outwardly nothing was happening that could be seen with the naked eye but in reality the transmitters were working constantly, sending the vital goods and weapons to Hades.

"What should we call Siamed 16, the Druuf's homeworld?" Bell suddenly asked. "After all, haven't we already given Siamed 13 a name? How does *Terraterra* sound? On Siamed 16, everything is twice what it is at home. The diameter, the gravity. Even the inhabitants, the Druufs..."

"But that's all it has in common with our Earth. Of course, we saw it only from underground, but the surface won't be much better. That short visit caused by the overlapping of a foreign transmitter field was enough for me. I wonder who it was that came to our aid then?" Rhodan sank into his thoughts. The events flashed through his mind once more. They had stepped into the energy grating of a transmitter on Hades for a return to the *Drusus* but instead they came out in the Druufs' subterranean mathematics centre on Siamed 16. An unknown individual had made telepathic contact with them and helped them escape. Who it had been, no one could guess. A prisoner of the Druufs? But who? It had to be a telepath—and Rhodan was not missing any of his mutants!

"Don't like that name, huh?" said Bell less than politely when he realized his suggestion had not been approved.

Rhodan awakened as though from a dream. "Why not something simpler? Let's call it Druufon."

"Druufon?" Bell repeated, then his face seemed to light up. "Yeah, that's a better name than mine," he admitted frankly. "We'll dub it Druufon!"

"I'm agreeable," said Atlan, who did not seem to care one way or the other what they called it. The official appellation would remain in the catalogue as Siamed 16. "As long as it seems simpler to you..."

The double star had grown nearer. The two stars could not be perceived as separate by the naked eye. The red mother star was circled by a smaller green companion. 62 planets attempted to come to terms with the complex gravitational relations in irregular orbits. Many of those planets, actually almost all of them, possessed moons which in turn were orbited by smaller satellites. It was a gigantic system, one that up to now had remained hidden behind an invisible wall of time.

"A few hours more," murmured Atlan, who now stood next to Rhodan and looked at the vidscreen, "and we'll know if the plan has succeeded."

"Maybe we'll know even sooner than that," said Bell, giving expression to his hopes. He half lay in his comfortable seat and stretched his legs and arms. "Most of all I'd like to sleep a little."

Up on the ceiling, the sphere Harno slowly changed his volume.

Harno grew larger and sank lower.

*I can show you Druufon if you wish.*

With a start Rhodan whirled around. His face showed surprise. "I almost forgot you," he admitted, thus answering the message of his new ally. "You can show us the world of the Druufs? Fine—I'd like to see what it looks like."

*Then look at me—I show you Druufon...*

\* \* \* \*

In the caves of the Hope Mountains on Hades, the matter transmitter seemed to be overflowing.

New shipments from Rhodan's 3 ships arrived constantly and were unloaded and taken away by the base personnel. There was considerable uproar when Lt. Potkin arrived with 100 men and 500 Swoons.

The 100 men were hardly astonished by the transition but the Swoons certainly were. These small beings, who looked like cucumbers and measured barely half a meter tall, were the most capable microtechnicians in the universe. They worked for the Arkonide Imperium but Rhodan had been able to make friends of a large number of them and bring them to Earth.

Potkin's Swoon company had been given the assignment of developing and building as fast as they could a device that would neutralize the unavoidable vibrations resulting from the operation of a matter transmitter. The base on Hades must under no circumstances be located or even detected by the Druufs.

At about the same time the last supplies reached Hades and the transmitter was shut down, the living vidscreen of the sphere creature Harno faded out and the image died.

Rhodan leaned back and waited until Harno had shrunk once more to the size of an apple. Atlan, Sikerman and Bell returned to their seats.

"Fantastic," said Rhodan and it was not immediately evident if he meant Harno's ability or what he had just seen. "It's really fantastic."

"Druufon looks more like the Earth than I first thought," commented Bell drily. "Even the vegetation shows similarities. The Druuf cities are impressive conglomerations of concrete and metal; their houses are just as impressive. I have to admit they've built up a powerful civilization."

"It would be all the same to us if they'd just leave us alone," Atlan observed bitterly. "And when I think that we're dealing with the same Druufs who once had more than a little to do with the sinking of Atlantis... since for them only a few months have gone by while in our universe 10,000 years have passed—you're right. It really is fantastic!"

"But what are 10,000 years, really...?" Rhodan began. He was interrupted by the humming of the intercom.

It was the communications officer. "We have contact with the Druufs," he said hastily. "We've picked up a message being sent to us. It isn't from the wreck—it's from the Druuf planet."

Rhodan sprang from his seat. "Is the connection still in existence?"

On the vidscreen the Siamed system was now presented. The red-green double sun shone like gorgeous coloured jewels in a corner of the screen. Large and round and fully illuminated by the reflection of its 21 moons, Druufon resembled an oversized Earth. Only the continents and oceans had unfamiliar outlines.

Druufon was still 5 light-seconds away.

"Connection in effect," answered the com officer.

"I'm coming myself," Rhodan called, hurrying to the door. "Now we'll see if I can talk with them."

Lt. David Stern was on duty in the com centre.

He pointed to the vidscreen on which nothing was to be seen but patterns of colour moving slowly in the shape of odd spiral.

"Unfortunately, I can't pick up any picture. Perhaps the frequencies are too different."

"It would be more the difference in time," said Rhodan. "All intelligent races come sooner or later to the same conclusions and use identical methods for reaching similar goals. The only thing that surprises me is that we can receive their speech normally..."

David Stern smiled fleetingly. "We've hooked in a regulator, sir. It speeds up messages coming to us from Siamed and slows down ours going out."

Rhodan smiled back in acknowledgement. "One often forgets the simplest things. Now, let's get on with it! I'm curious to find out what they have to say to us."

Stern made a few adjustments, then a voice suddenly sounded loud and clear from the loudspeakers: "...repeat. To the aliens from the other universe: We have received your message as well as the report of our commander, whom you saved from destruction. We are interested in entering into negotiations with you. Let us know your conditions. End of message."

Rhodan looked at Stern. "Adjust for a transmission. I want to try it." Then he spoke in the microphone. "To the Druufs—as we call you. We have received your broadcast. We wish permission to land on your planet and the promise that we may take off again at any time. We also desire an escort for landing. End of message."

The answer came 20 seconds later: "Granted. We are sending a fleet out to you. End."

There were no further transmissions. David Stern looked questioningly at Rhodan.

"Keep the receiver open," Rhodan told him. "But I don't believe we'll learn any more. The Druufs will transmit messages between themselves in a language unknown to us. I don't know yet how our translating devices are working."

Then he returned to the control room where he informed Sikerman, Atlan and Bell of what had happened.

About half an hour went by. The 3 ships had meanwhile sharply reduced their speed and flew at only a few kilometres per second. The damaged Druuf ship had long disappeared from their field of vision to land on Druufon.

Then the announced fleet finally appeared: 100 rod-shaped vessels rushing towards them in regular formation and then surrounding the Terran ships. The armada sank towards the Druuf planet at a constant

speed and prepared to land.

It was now proving a good thing that Harno had showed them Druufon. But the special abilities of the sphere-being now also gave them a look into the interiors of the ships accompanying them. It could be seen that these ships were not manned by the usual members of subject or allied races, or even robots, but by Druufs alone. This was another unmistakable proof that they were approaching the nerve centre and headquarters of the Druufs. Here slaves were not admitted. And, so it seemed, even robots were distrusted.

"The Druufs think very logically," said Rhodan. Another 10 minutes remained before the landing would be complete. "They have clearly recognized that a strong power is standing guard on the other side of the time opening. If they want to force their way into our universe, they have to eliminate that power. Our offer came to them at just the right time and is quite welcome to them."

Atlan's expression was apprehension. "Up to now I haven't warned you yet," he said earnestly. "Your tactical considerations are of course justified and I am very much in favour of feigning an alliance with the Druufs for the purpose of turning the tables on the Robot Brain of Arkon. But there is one thing you must be well aware of, Rhodan: when the Robot Brain is decisively defeated by the Druufs, the Solar Imperium will be lost too. The Druufs will swarm out all over the entire galaxy and conquer it."

Rhodan was suddenly quite serious as he replied: "It'll never come to that, Atlan. We'll wait for the right moment, then switch sides. That may sound rather dishonourable but it's the only reasonable solution. And then, together with a Regent desperate for help, we'll beat the Druufs back and weaken them so much they'll never again try to attack us."

"If you see it that way—your plan could succeed," Atlan admitted. It looked as though he had not completely overcome his scepticism. "In any case, I'll be sure to remind you when the time comes to change flags so we don't let it go by."

Rhodan did not reply. He looked down at the surface of the huge planet slowly drawing closer. Some of the escort ships were already preparing to land. Then his eyes rested on Bell.

"Summon the telepaths, Reggie. John Marshall and Pucky. I have an idea."

At the door, Bell said: "If they're telepaths, why don't they already know they're supposed to come here? If I were a thought-reader..."

...No one would ever feel safe from your snooping!" Rhodan said, finishing Bell's sentence. "No one could even dream without you looking in on their secret thoughts. No, it's better this way that those who are telepaths aren't very curious and..."

The word stuck in his throat.

In the middle of the control room the air shimmered and Pucky materialized. He grinned in apology, showing his incisor tooth. "Excuse me but I just happened to pick up some thoughts..."

"Just happened!" exclaimed Bell, emphasizing the words and looking at Rhodan pointedly. "Don't make me laugh! I'm not the only curious one around here. Oh well, I'll go get Marshall. At least he—"

He opened the door and collided with John Marshall, who moved to one side with a courteous smile and went on into the control room. Bell turned around.

"Pucky informed me," said Marshall.

Bell groaned. "They stick together like glue," he complained. "A normal person doesn't have a chance against them." To Rhodan he turned and said: "Order carried out without moving a finger, sir."

Rhodan was about to say something but suddenly fell silent.

Alien impulses forced their way into his mind, so powerful that they overpowered everything else. Judging from the faces of the other men present in the control room, he saw that they too were receiving and understanding the telepathic message.

*Do you hear me, Perry Rhodan? I am the friend who saved you weeks ago. Think of me so that I may know I am reaching you with my call.*

But Rhodan answered aloud in order that the others could hear him as well.

"I hear you, my friend. Who are you and what are you?"

*Perhaps you will meet me on Druufon—you call this world. Who am I? I do not know, Perry Rhodan. But it seems to me we have known each other for a long time. I warn you—turn back before it is too late! Do not land on Druufon!*

"You tell me not to land on Druufon—and yet at the same time you express the hope that we'll meet there. What is the meaning of this contradiction?"

*I knew that you would ignore my advice—that is why!*

"How will I find you?"

*You have capable telepaths, Perry Rhodan. Any attempt to give you directions would only confuse you, so have them track me.*

Rhodan looked up to the ceiling where Harno floated. The sphere-being knew what Rhodan wanted of him even without receiving any mental orders.

Harno sank slowly lower, becoming larger as he came until his surface was a vidscreen.

Pale impressions flashed across the sphere's surface, then stabilized. A technical control room could be seen, crowded with unknown equipment and an abundance of incomprehensible details.

In front of a giant control panel stood a Druuf.

From him came the thoughts of friendship to Rhodan.

*Of course I am a Druuf—what else should I be? I have been a Druuf for as long as I can remember. Can you see me?*

Rhodan realized that keeping any secrets would be pointless and could only anger their helper. "One of us is able to transmit a picture of you here so that we may see you. How is it that a Druuf is inclined to be friendly to us?"

*I don't know!*

That was not only mysterious, that was absurd!

"You don't know?" said Rhodan, astonished. "If you want to help us, you must have a motive!"

*I do it because I must. But I don't know why I must.*

Suddenly Pucky said: "He's the Chief Physicist of the Druufs on Druufon! He has enormous responsibility and a knowledge that seems unbelievable. He's the greatest living genius of the Druufs. But he doesn't know where he knows us from. He's the smartest Druuf of them all but he doesn't know who he is himself."

Rhodan looked sharply at the mousebeaver. "And how do *you* know that?"

"My friend Harno told me, asking that I pass it on. He saves energy that way."

"You're maintaining contact with each other without the rest of us picking up any impulses?" asked Rhodan, who was only a weak telepath himself. "How?"

"Nontelepaths don't normally receive any telepathic messages. The alien has to radiate suggestive impulses at the same time for you to hear anything."

Rhodan was silent for a few seconds, then he requested: "Try to learn more about the unknown Druuf. Where is he?"

"In the subterranean control room of the Druufs. The general direction can be made out—and now the contact's just been broken off!"

Pucky had said it in a shocked and slightly helpless voice.

The others had already noticed it.

The impulses suddenly died and did not return.

Harno's picture had vanished. His curved surface showed nothing but deep black. Simultaneously he grew smaller again and climbed up to the ceiling, remaining there without moving. But he must have stayed in touch with Pucky for the mousebeaver spoke slowly, as though repeating what the sphere-being told him.

"The unknown helper is beyond all doubt a Druuf. It is inconceivable that this fact could be denied. He's searching in his memory for something but he can't find it. The incident can't be explained. We'll have to wait for our next contact. Until then, we can't do anything further in that direction." Then Pucky was silent.

Lost in thought, Rhodan stared at the large vidscreen. The Druufon spaceport could now be plainly seen. It was surrounded by structures of gigantic proportions. On the edge of the field stood hundreds of the slender, rod-shaped warships of the Druufs.

In the middle, a considerable area had been cleared.



"Order the *Kublai Khan* and the *California* to land," said Rhodan to Sikerman. "We'll land with the cruiser in the middle; that way we can cover it with our weapons if need be." He waited until Sikerman had given the necessary instruction, then turned towards the others, added: "However, I don't think it'll come to that. The Druufs have never needed a friend and ally more than they do now."

"Or so we hope," said Atlan, still sceptical.

And then they were silent and looked down on the capital city of the Druufs, stretched out before them as though on a map.

A city in which all life moved and existed only half as fast as on any planet in their own universe.

#### 4/ TO CONQUER THE ARKON IMPERIUM

The broad spaceport seemed devoid of all life.

The Druufs were evidently waiting for the aliens to initiate something. They did not make themselves evident in any way, not even to make radio contact.

Meanwhile, work in the physics laboratory aboard the *Drusus* proceeded without pause, feeding the data to the control room. Rhodan read the reports and announced his summary:

"The atmosphere is breathable as it's more or less identical with our own on Earth. We can therefore leave the ship without spacesuits or breathing apparatus. A day lasts 48.6 hours, twice Earth's. I don't think we have to worry anymore about Druufs' time-rate. The difference is no longer noticeable and the Druufs will hardly be concerned if we move twice as fast as they do. We're smaller and thinner than they are. Besides, I think it's possible that they're already aware of the difference. They've penetrated our universe often enough."

"What's supposed to happen?" demanded Bell impatiently. "Are we just going to wait here until the cows come home?"

"The Druufs will contact us, never fear," Rhodan assured him. "In the final analysis, *they* are the ones who need an ally—or at least they think they do."

"Are the translating machines ready?" inquired Atlan. "We still don't have any idea if..."

"Oh, they'll work," Rhodan assured him. "Of course we don't even know yet if the Druufs can speak at all—which doesn't mean that the translators won't be any good, should that be the case. I think we shouldn't worry about it, though, until the Druufs actually show up."

Sikerman, who had been observing the spaceport, spoke up. "Here comes a Druuf—he's alone."

Rhodan looked at the vidscreen. For the first time now they had the opportunity to examine a Druuf without disturbance or distraction.

The creature was at least 3 meters tall and had a squarish, clumsy body. No hair could be seen but the colour of the leathery skin was clearly evident, a range from brown to black which might have been due to the odd twilight of afternoon. The massive body rested on two ponderous legs that resembled pillars. The spherical head was 50 centimetres in diameter. Most astounding were the eyes: there were two under the forehead, facing ahead, plus two more where a human's temples would be. The arrangement enlarged the Druufs' field of vision by no small amount, although they could not see directly behind.

There were no visible ears or nose but there was definitely a mouth, resembling in form an isosceles triangle. At the end of the two bulky arms were slender, delicate fingers, all out of proportion to the rest of the massive body.

The Druuf approached the three ships with slow and cautious steps. He carried neither weapons nor any kind of equipment with him.

"A negotiator," Rhodan ventured. "We should show him we've seen him. Reggie, go to exit hatch B-4 and extend the ladder."

"But that's a freight hatch..."

"Do you think that giant out there can climb up a normal personnel ladder?"

"Will he come voluntarily into our ship...?"

"He will if you invite him in."

Bell shrugged his shoulders and left. Rhodan then issued various orders calculated to make sure that nothing would happen on the other two ships which might raise the suspicions of the Druufs.

Less than 10 minutes later, the monstrous being entered the control room of the *Drusus* with Bell at his side.

The doors, halls and rooms aboard the battleship could not be considered small but the Druuf had to stoop to avoid hitting his head on the ceiling. Rhodan offered him a bunk to sit on. The negotiator sat down cautiously, taking care he did not damage anything. Luckily there was just enough space to accommodate him.

"He understood me immediately," said Bell, a bit pale, "but he didn't say anything. I'd like to know what he has that triangle mouth for."

"To take in nourishment, in any event," answered Rhodan. "Harno told me they communicate by ultrahigh frequencies, which they produce with organic transmitters in their own bodies. They also have an equivalently tuned receiver in their bodies. So they're organic radio stations, although their range isn't very extensive. They aren't telepaths at all because they can't pick up thoughts. Or at least we don't have any proof of that yet."

"Can't he understand what we're saying?" asked Bell, concerned.

"No, not without our translators, which by the way have to be equipped with an auxiliary device. We'll soon find out if it works."

Atlan switched on the machine, already tested in other parts of the universe.

The tension climbed to its high point when Rhodan spoke. "You are welcome on board our ship, Druuf. We are happy to be able to receive you. Do you hear and understand us?"

Although the 3-cornered mouth did not move, the answer came loud and clear through the translator's loudspeaker. The voice sounded mechanical for it had been created artificially.

"We accept the name 'Druuf'. What do you call yourselves?"

"You can call us Terrans, Druuf."

After a short pause, the guest came immediately to the point. "Two different universes are in contact—a rare occurrence. It is inevitable that alien races encounter one another and fight each other. We have encountered two very warlike races. One is at the moment forcing its way into our universe and must be defeated if we wish to survive. That race has ships manned by robots."

The Druuf paused momentarily and Rhodan asked tensely: "And the other race?"

"The other was encountered a short time ago. Its members penetrated our universe with the help of technical means. They kidnaped prisoners and slaves..."

"Prisoners?" Rhodan exclaimed, astounded. "How could you have prisoners if they were the first ones to come to you?"

There was then a pause in which the Druuf seemed to be considering the question. Finally he said: "Our scientists have calculated that a synchronization can be attained with the capture of organic creatures from the other time-plane. I am no scientist and cannot explain it to you."

"Who are you?" Rhodan asked directly.

"I am..." and out of the loudspeaker came an indefinable noise similar to a scratching, "...and thus a politician."

Rhodan bent forward and adjusted the translator. Experience had shown that some terms were untranslatable, so the colonization ministry of the Solar Imperium had developed a list of type names which stood for the general concepts referred to by such terms.

"Repeat the sentence, please."

The Druuf was not stupid and understood Rhodan's intent, or at least had guessed it. "I am Tommy and thus a politician."

Rhodan leaned back and surveyed the Druuf more closely.

The type name 'Tommy' stood for something on the order of 'High Dignitary and Director'. So the Druuf belonged to the ruling class.

He nodded. "We'll call you Tommy-1. I'm Rhodan." The Druuf took hardly any notice. "You want to help us?" he said. "The commander of our ship reported that you destroyed 8 enemy vessels. Why did you do that?"

"In order to help you and weaken our enemies. We have been at war with them for millennia."

"Thus you are in need of allies?"

"Just like you!"

The Druuf was silent again and seemed to be considering.

Rhodan used the pause to transmit a mental message to Harno. *Is it possible for you to read the Druuf's thoughts?*

The answer came promptly and clearly. *It is possible for me. His thoughts are identical with what he says. Was that what you wished to know?*

Rhodan could just as well have asked Pucky or Marshall but that would have been somewhat more of an effort for him and he did not wish to be diverted unnecessarily from the Druuf.

He nodded in the direction of the ceiling where Harno floated small and inconspicuous.

Finally the Druuf called Tommy-1 spoke again. "The Council of 66 has decided to speak openly with you. We have the intention of synchronizing the other universe with ours. Neither the process nor the result will have any physical disadvantages for either side. In the absence of any constant reference points, it makes no difference how quickly or how slowly time passes."

"Very true," said Rhodan in agreement, not moving a muscle, "but that makes me want to know all the more why you wish such a synchronization."

The Druuf reflected again. The pause was unnaturally long and not because the Druuf required relatively more time to ponder; for him time only went slower, that was all.

"We want to conquer the realm of those who attack us," he explained at length. "As you said, those are your enemies. You wish to help us in destroying them. We are thus doing you a favour."

"Yes," said Rhodan slowly. "And what happens then?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Very simple. Once we've smashed the enemy together, will you continue the war? Against us? Have I expressed myself clearly enough?"

"No, we will not do that!" Tommy-1 emphasized.

*This time he is lying,* came Harno's warning.

Rhodan had known it. They wanted to conquer the Arkonide realm and then bring all the intelligent races the galaxy under their rule. And they would succeed unless someone took care at the right time that their advance was stopped.

Naturally, Rhodan had not come to Druufon to offer a genuine alliance or even to fight on the side of the Druufs. The purpose of his operation was primarily to land undisturbed and unchallenged on Druufon and

locate the unknown ally. If the Druuf realm could be weakened from within, many victims would be spared.

"We may very well be ready to fight together with you against the others," said Rhodan, "but before we sign any treaties, we'd like to get to know you Druufs. You can understand this, I'm sure."

"We understand. However, we in our turn have the same request. You will describe conditions in your universe so that we can orient ourselves. Agreed?"

"If we describe those conditions, you will permit us to move about freely. That is our suggestion."

The Druuf stood up carefully and stood bent under the ceiling. "I will discuss it with the other Tommies. Until then, I must request that you not leave your ships. I shall return once a decision has been reached."

Rhodan gestured to Bell and was silent until the two had left the control room. Then he asked: "What was he thinking, Harno? You can tell me by way of Pucky so that all of us may hear it aloud."

Pucky listened for a second, then explained. "They have no intention of giving us the freedom of movement we want but they don't know yet how they can bring us to fight on their side against Arkon. That's the reason for the time they're taking time to think it over."

"Just what I thought!" said Rhodan. His expression grew earnest. "Then the best thing to do is to make use of the time we have left. We're safe here at the spaceport. They will only keep a watch on us. But they don't know we have Pucky!"

*And Harno!*

Rhodan smiled once more as he looked up at the ceiling.

"Of course—and Harno!"

\* \* \* \*

Three hours later there were still no signs of Tommy-1 returning with the decision of the Council of 66. Accordingly, Rhodan gave the order for going into action.

Pucky let his incisor tooth disappear, demonstrating symbolically by so doing that the situation was threatening to become serious. At least for him. What Harno would do in the event of danger remained a riddle for the time being.

But Pucky needed Harno. Without him, he could not track their hidden goal, for guiding thought-impulses were lacking.

The mousebeaver stretched out his right hand. Harno slid slowly down from the ceiling and landed in the small paw. Pucky's fingers closed around the walnut-sized sphere.

"Good luck, Pucky!" said Rhodan. "And don't forget to send us a report now and then. Marshall and

Lloyd will attempt to get a fix on the location from two different places on the ship. Try to find our friend!"

Pucky's shining incisor tooth could be seen for only a second; then he dematerialised. And with him disappeared Harno.

Pucky sprang blind. He suspected that the city showed on the surface only what an alien would be permitted to see. The important installations and secrets of the Druufs lay hidden below the ground, along with the unknown helper who had to be found.

Nevertheless, Pucky did not dare teleport himself blind into a planet's interior. He materialized in the middle of the city, on the edge of a rectangular plaza surrounded by tall, massive buildings.

There was little activity. A few Druufs moved slowly and heavily over the almost empty streets, not seeming to notice the small mousebeaver who had quickly ducked into a shadowy niche. There were no vehicles at all to be seen. The building walls rose steeply, curving outwards, into the sky. High above was a second trafficway. They probably drive their autos up there. Pucky thought. Down here, it's all reserved for pedestrian traffic.

His communication with Harno was based on telepathic principles but the effect was as if they spoke with one another.

"Nice little town they have here, Harno. Wonder where the next grocery store is."

Harno transmitted a laugh to Pucky. "We have other concerns than carrots, little friend. Here comes a Druuf!"

Pucky looked in the indicated direction. Not 20 meters away a giant Druuf walked along, dignified and sedate and he was coming directly towards them.

"We'll disappear when danger threatens, Harno, but I'd like to know how they'd react to me. It would make our job easier."

"It does not matter to me," answered Harno. "I can escape to safety at any time."

"Me too," said Pucky, preparing himself for a swift escape. He was convinced that he could outrun a Druuf without any trouble—even assuming the colossal Druufs could run at all.

The Druuf came by and stopped when he saw Pucky. His four eyes trained on the strange creature crouching so harmlessly by the building wall and looking up at him. He had never seen such an animal—was it even an animal?—before.

The Druufs had forced many races to be their servants. In their realm there was such a vast number of the most widely varied creatures no one could be familiar with them all. But it was still unusual that such a slave would be running free in the capital city.

*Caution!* Harno signalled. *He wants to capture you!* Pucky reacted accordingly. He would have most liked to take advantage of his telekinetic gift and make the Druuf fly but that would have attracted too much attention. It was better to simply disappear. The Druuf would believe his senses had deceived him and keep his funny-looking mouth shut.

Pucky concentrated on the other side of the street and disappeared.

The Druuf stared at the spot where he had seen the little creature for 10 seconds after it had vanished, then his brain finally had to accept what had happened. Certainly on a very logical basis. It had to have been his eyes playing tricks on him. No one could simply dissolve into thin air.

The Druuf shook his massive head and resumed walking. Pucky could see perfectly from the other side of the street.

"These guys are so dumb," he murmured softly. "If they were any brighter they might qualify as morons..."

Harno overheard him. "One should not underestimate one's enemies," the living sphere warned. "Did you catch what he just thought?"

"No, why?"

"He was thinking of the three alien ships at the spaceport. For one whole second the Druuf thought you might have come from one of the three ships. As you can see, we have to be careful."

It was already getting dark but no lights were turned on. It looked as though the Druufs retired quite early.

"What about our helper?" asked Pucky. "Can you see him?"

"It is not safe enough here," Harno replied. "Can we go someplace where there is no chance of our being disturbed?"

Pucky looked down. "What do you make of the underground complex?"

Harno did not answer. He became larger suddenly and floated next to Pucky above the smooth stones of the street. His black surface grew milky and turned into a vidscreen.

"There aren't any impulses from the unknown Druuf."

That Pucky also knew He looked silently at the sphere. He still stood by the building wall. The entire extent of the open plaza lay before him but now even the last Druufs had disappeared. Outside the city, out on the plains, the sun must be already close to the horizon. Darkness was gathering.

Harno displayed gleaming laboratories and giant technical installations, all harshly lit. Vaulting corridors and wide streets, sealed off from above by arching ceilings, stretched for kilometres. Light blazed everywhere, producing black shadows. While the Druufs on the surface went to sleep, life began below the ground.

Or were there any Druufs on the surface at all during the night?

Harno's spherical vidscreen suddenly went out. Pucky went numb.

The impulse was only a short one but therefore all the clearer.

*Leave Druufon or you are lost! The Druufs want to betray you! I will contact you again—if I*

can...

Harno 'spoke' before Pucky could undertake an attempt to make contact. "I have located him and know where he can be found. I shall give you the direction..."

10 seconds later, Pucky teleported. Harno had shrunk again to his original size and remained that way when they rematerialised.

\* \* \* \*

The light of the setting double sun caused strange, almost magical coloured reflections on the mirror-smooth landingfield and the surrounding buildings, most of which had dome-like or beehive characteristics. Spiral towers cast bizarre shadows towards the three Terran ships, as though they wanted to attack them. Extensive trafficways snaked through the city and connected the outer areas with one another.

All this would be comfortably observed from the *Drusus*, for the outside cameras were 1½ kilometres above the ground. There was nothing here which exceeded the size of the *Drusus*.

Marshall listened for telepathic impulses, trying to get in touch with Pucky. He shook his head. "Just a bit ago they were on the surface and met a Druuf. Then Pucky sprang, rematerialising only a few meters away. The third spring followed and since then there hasn't been any sign of them."

"That's impossible!" Rhodan declared. "Pucky must be thinking! Every living being thinks constantly. The impulses should be coming here and you should be able to pick them up."

"I'm not getting anything," apologized Marshall. "I can't explain it but Pucky is silent."

"Even if Pucky were dead, at least Harno would be sending."

Bell sat in the background. He looked up when Rhodan spoke. The sudden worry that his little friend could have run into trouble seemed to make him look years older. The affection the 2 'enemies' actually felt for each other was obvious only in such situations.

"Harno can think without his impulses leaving his body," Marshall reminded. "But he would send a message if the situation were critical enough. There must be some sort of a barrier that blocks telepathic impulses involved."

"A blockade...?" said Rhodan. "That's also possible, of course. The question is whether the blockade is artificially produced or of natural origin. If only our unknown helper would make contact! Perhaps he would know the answer."

Sikerman entered the control room. He had rested for some hours and was now returning to his post. He sat down at his place and asked: "Are you going to go on forever without getting any sleep, sir?"

Rhodan did not respond to the question. "Pucky's on a mission in the city and we've lost touch with him."



Sikerman's expression showed concern. He had been informed of the mission as a matter of course but he had assumed the mousebeaver would be back by this time. "Maybe they captured him."

"A teleporter, Sikerman? That doesn't sound likely." Bell stood up. His lower lip trembled a little as he spoke. "We shouldn't underestimate the Druufs. It could be that they have access to means we can't even imagine. They fought against Arkon 10,000 years ago..."

"Two months ago—their time! They can't have learned too much from it!"

"Well, maybe they knew all sorts of things before-hand!" Bell was silent for a moment, then said decisively: "I'd like to go into the city and find out what's happened!"

Rhodan shook his head. "You can just forget about that, my friend!"

"But if Pucky—"

"*Even if Pucky—!* The Druufs must under no circumstances find out we have mutants. Pucky will get himself out of whatever jam he may have gotten himself into. We can only wait!" He turned to Marshall and continued. "Stay alert to every telepathic impulse! The two will send us a message sooner or later! Or at least our unknown friend, the mysterious Druuf, will."

Their mood depressed, they continued to wait silently.

\* \* \* \*

It looked as though Pucky and Harno had missed their destination.

The mousebeaver materialized in a room with high, vaulting ceilings, whose boundaries were covered by a confusing number of machines and other technical equipment. Enormous masses of metal and humming generators stood everywhere; work tables and control panels blocked the view and pathways wound their way in between, leading to unknown destinations.

In the air was a strange vibration.

Then Pucky saw the Druuf.

The colossus stood behind a gigantic instrument panel and watched the dancing pointers on the control dials. Directly next to him flickered vidscreens. Tiny lamps lit up in different colours, then went out just as quickly.

*There he is!* thought Pucky and let Harno go. The sphere raised itself and floated slowly up to the ceiling. Inconspicuously he paused near a spark-gushing cable that led from the control board into the depths of the room.

*I am receiving his impulses,* Harno thought to Pucky, *but nothing about them. indicates that he is our friend.*

That's true, Pucky had to admit.

The Druuf at the instrument board was occupied with some scientific problem Pucky did not understand in the slightest. It had something to do with time. The Druuf was a researcher attempting to come to grips with the nature of time.

Only once had Pucky seen the unknown helper as a Druuf, and who could tell one of those creatures from another? This Druuf might be the one and it might just as easily not be the one.

Nevertheless, the laboratory seemed familiar to Pucky. But couldn't there be hundreds of them just like it?

How could they communicate? Certainly he could receive and understand the Druuf's thoughts but the Druufs were not telepathic. If any conversation at all could result, it would be rather one-sided.

The Druufs did not have ears; could they hear?

Pucky cleared his throat and said: "Hey—Jumbo! Don't we know each other?"

The Druuf did not react. He continued to work with his instruments and to watch the dials anxiously. But as he turned his head a bit to one side, he must have spotted his visitor. With a speed no one would have ever guessed he possessed, he whirled around and stared at the mousebeaver with wide-opened eyes.

*By all of the 66! came his thought-impulses clearly to Pucky. Who or what is that?*

Tensed and concentrating, Pucky answered: *We're the ones you warned! Do you understand me?*

But the Druuf's answer showed only too clearly that he in no way was identical with the unknown helper who, whatever else he may have been, was a good telepath.

*...Never seen anything like it! Does it have something to do with my experiments—or is it pure chance...?*

Pucky now knew one thing: this Druuf was *no* telepath!

He waddled a few meters back, preparing to disappear with a teleportation spring.

*Come down, Harno! We goofed!*

*That is impossible! I tracked the mental impulses of our helper from the surface. This Druuf here must be the one!*

Pucky was at a loss. He made use of the short pause by beaming a short message to Marshall aboard the *Drusus*. He was taken aback when he did not receive a reply. Marshall had to have heard him! Why was he not responding?

*Let's go, Harno!*

*Wait a moment!*

The Druuf thought in an uninterrupted stream but there was nothing coherent for Pucky. Whatever he was thinking, it had nothing to do with the unknown helper. They were not one and the same, even if they did possess similar-looking bodies.

Then a quiver showed in the monstrous being's face, as though he felt pain. The slender fingers moved crampedly, closed, then opened again. He slowly turned around. The massive arm rose only with difficulty. Then his fingers wrapped around a lever.

It all took place in slow motion, giving the impression the Druuf acted while in a dreamlike state and was being forced into action from within. He tried to resist but finally fell subject to the order of his subconscious.

The humming in the room suddenly died away.

At the same time, Pucky received a relieved message from Marshall: *Ah, there you are, Pucky! What happened? We couldn't track you or hear you.*

*Don't disturb me just yet!* Pucky answered. *Everything's alright!*

Marshall's impulses died away immediately. He had understood.

But Pucky had also understood.

When the Druuf had shut off the machinery, telepathic contact with the *Drusus* had been reestablished. Since contact had existed previously between him and Harno, it could be concluded that an energy field of some kind had sealed the subterranean chamber off from the outer world.

But something more happened.

A crystal clear thought-impulse drove into Pucky's mind and it did not come from Harno who was still floating motionless on the ceiling.

*You have found me? That was risky! I don't know how you managed to come here, but you are in great danger! I cannot help you now! This Druuf will soon repress me again...*

Pucky stared at the Druuf, who seemed to be frozen in the middle of his movement. He stood there motionless, one hand still raised and just above the lever he had pulled down.

*You aren't the Druuf? Who are you, then?*

Even though the colossus did not move, thoughts emanated from him perfectly: *I am not the Druuf—and yet I am! I am in his body but he does not know it. His spirit is still stronger than mine when I act against his will.*

*Who are you?* Pucky asked, repeating the question that had not been answered before. *Why do you want to help us?*

This time, some seconds went by before the Druuf replied. *I don't know who I am. I have always lived in alien bodies. They were always other intelligences—when I was lucky. Often my spirit inhabited the bodies of creatures of lesser intelligence, which I easily learned to control. But it was not interesting.*

*But you must know why you're helping us against the Druuf!*

*No, I don't know why. But I do know Perry Rhodan!*

That was the first direct clue!

*Where do you know him from and how long have you known him?*

Again the hesitation. The answer came only slowly. *I don't know—if only I knew...!*

Pucky sensed that the impulses were growing weaker, overpowered by other, stronger impulses that could come only from the Druuf himself.

*Can you take over other bodies?* Pucky asked.

The reply did not answer the question. *I must go now—I cannot hold the Druuf back. I will get in touch with you later. Get yourselves to safety. This Druuf is the Chief Physicist of the Druufs. He became so thanks to my knowledge. When I leave him, he will be as stupid as he was when he was born. Or else he will die. Farewell...*

The Druuf began to move again in the same second. For him no time must have elapsed, for his thoughts took up again where they had left off.

*...must have been pure chance! Even when I create artificial time-fields and superimpose them, no creatures from the past or future could materialize here. I think I'll try to catch it...*

Pucky drew a few meters back. Harno came quickly down from the ceiling and landed safely between the mousebeaver's small paws.

Before the Druuf could get to them, Pucky and Harno dematerialised.

Behind they left a Druuf staring without comprehension at a spot where there was nothing more to see.

## **5/ "YOU'RE IN OUR POWER, PERRY!"**

"Many of their names and terms are unpronounceable," reported John Marshall, who had spent the whole night trying to telepathically listen in on individual Druufs in the city. He had no idea who or where the Druufs he listened to were, he only collected their impulses and put them together like a mosaic. The result, however, consisted of valuable information which created an entire picture. "We have type names for them. 'Tommy' we have already. An 'Oscar' is an officer or scientist. The translator uses 'Mike' to refer to a simple Druuf. They've built the social structure of their civilization on this division into three parts."

Rhodan listened attentively. Outside on the spacefield and over the city, it had become day again. The night had passed quietly and without incident. Pucky and Harno had returned and reported their

experience. Certainly no light had been thrown on the mystery of the unknown helper but nevertheless Rhodan had plunged into deep thought and retired to his cabin. The thought-screen he put up around his mind could not be broken even by the curious Pucky.

"The Druufs have conquered all the worlds in this universe and are the absolute masters of their time-plane. No wonder, then, if their Tommies have decided to conquer our galaxy too. Their weapons are mostly of a destructive nature but so far as I can tell we and the Arkonides have better ones, though not enough of them."

"Are you sure of this, Marshall?" Rhodan asked.

"I listened in on a high officer who was contemplating the upcoming offensive against Arkon. He belongs to the Council of 66 and thus was informed of these matters. They're planning to ally themselves with us if we can prove to them we have a strong fleet. If we can't, they'll try to take us by surprise and confiscate our ships. In thinking about that plan, the officer thought of our weapons. They don't have either gravity bombs or Arkon bombs. Their energy defence screens aren't as strong as ours. If we attack them with our entire fleet, it might be possible..." Marshall was suddenly quiet and looked at Rhodan.

"Well?"

"Perhaps I'm being too confident, sir. On the other side of the coin there are aspects which recommend that we be cautious. The Druufs have weapons we aren't familiar with. The officer thought briefly of them but I couldn't make out any details. In any case, they're able to displace an entire planet into a plane of existence where time stands still. No matter how much the inhabitants of that world might defend themselves, it would be pointless. Thousands of years would go by before they could fire a shot."

Rhodan looked attentively at Marshall. Deep creases appeared on his forehead. "That would be monstrous, Marshall!" he said slowly. "I can't believe they have such means at their disposal. Playing with time..."

"It wasn't very clear if it involved just attempts or successfully completed tests. It's an insane thought, anyway."

"Our unknown friend and helper is holing up in the skin of a time-scientist," Pucky reminded from the control room bunk where he lay still somewhat exhausted.

Rhodan threw a quick glance at him before he looked up at the ceiling. "Is there a connection, Harno?"

Oscar-1 and our friend are the same person!

"What a crazy idea," commented Bell, who had enjoyed a good night's sleep after Pucky's return and now made a refreshed impression. "First he helps us, then he designs a weapon that can wipe us out at any time. This is a case of first-class schizophrenia and then some!"

"I don't know if that's quite it," said Rhodan, shaking his head. "Harno, what's our friend doing now?"

But the answer, which Pucky relayed, was disappointing. "He must have turned on his artificial time-field again for experimenting because none of his thoughts are coming through. Harno can't even get us a picture of him."

Rhodan was about to say something but at that moment Sikerman, who in the meantime had also resumed his post, called. "The Druuf is coming again, sir!"

It was plain to see on the vidscreen. The Druuf who had visited them the day before approached the ship at a calm, slow pace. Perhaps it was not the same one; it was impossible to tell the monstrous beings apart without the help of a translating device.

Again it was Bell who went to meet the negotiator and bring him to the control room. The translator was in operation and the conference could begin at once.

"We are happy that you have returned, Tommy-1," said Rhodan, opening the discussion whose content was already as good as known. "What has the Council of 66 decided?"

The Druuf had sat down on the wide bunk. He observed the men carefully with his 4 eyes. His gaze wandered searchingly over the numerous controls and instruments in the room and finally settled for some time on the panorama vidscreen which showed the area of the spaceport. Then he answered. "We have decided to accept your offer. Together we will be able to defeat and destroy our enemy. When the war is over we will make a new treaty based on the new situation. Until then we will exchange our experience and military secrets. If you are agreeable, your commander may go with me to the Council of 66 to seal our alliance."

"The commander can't send any representatives?"

"No, only the commander himself—you, in other words!"

That could be a trick—a trap! If they seized the most important man, they could put forth their own conditions. And they certainly had a means of enforcing agreements once made as binding and unbreakable on the partners, though just how they could do that remained their secret for the time being.

*They're going to take you prisoner, Rhodan, Harno warned silently. Then they'll nominate a new commander who will be responsive to their wishes. Extortion, you might say.*

Rhodan stood up. "Alright, then," he said to the Druuf. "Let's not lose any more time here and go before the Council. I'm ready to accede to your conditions. We need a strong ally; otherwise we would have already dealt with our enemy."

The Druuf stood up carefully. "Let's go."

*Do you really want to go with him?* Harno asked soundless.

Rhodan switched off the translation device and took the portable silvery-shining box under his arm. "Of course I want to go with him, Harno. Pucky, don't let me out of your observation for a second! And when I give the order, come get me! Understand?"

"I'll teleport myself right on those leather monsters' fat bellies and make them lose their breakfast—"

"Marshall will stand watch with you," Rhodan interrupted, then followed the Druuf who had already gone ahead. "Reggie! During my absence you'll take over command of the three ships."

They watched him go as he disappeared with the Druuf around a bend in the corridor.

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan did not accompany the Druuf because he expected anything out of the parley with the Druufs; instead he went because he might possibly get in touch with his uncanny friend again. Besides, he was curious to see how the Druufs would react to a few suggestions.

As they left the landingfield and descended the wide steps to a sunken street circling the spaceport, Rhodan felt the almost double gravity of the planet. He had been able to tolerate it better during the first few minutes. He was irritated with himself for not having put on a spacesuit which could have neutralized the change.

A vehicle was waiting at the edge of the street. It was shaped like a torpedo and had only one door. The Druuf pressed a hidden button and the door opened. A wide seat, on which three Druufs could have found places next to each other, became visible.

Rhodan felt oddly small as he sat on the seat. The weight of his body barely made an impression: the upholstery had been made to accommodate different weights.

Then came the Druuf and shut the door. He pressed a button on the instrument panel and the vehicle started off. It was remote controlled, probably from some central headquarters somewhere in the middle of the city.

The scenery was just as Pucky had described it. The streets were all but deserted. Only occasionally did Rhodan see a Druuf, making his slow and ponderous way along the looming building walls toward an unknown destination. The auto raced through the empty streets at a relatively high speed, then glided up a diagonally ascending trafficway.

Rhodan looked down at the giant complex of the spaceport. Hundreds of ships stood at the edge of the field, ready for takeoff. Small caterpillar-tractors brought weapons, munitions and equipment. A column of Druufs marched somewhere in the twilight of the double sun. Their slow and weighty movements seemed dreamlike and unreal, as though happening in slow motion.

The city sank into the depths. Then the auto reached the upper trafficway. Here there was more traffic but it was hardly a problem. The automatic remote control functioned smoothly.

They sped towards a dome-like building rising from approximately the centre of the city. The road branched off and led directly to the building. Although no Druufs could be seen, a wide door opened and the auto rolled inside.

Behind them the door slid back to its original position. Daylight was extinguished. The domed ceiling of the building lit up harshly, allowing Rhodan to see where he was.

*Hey, Pucky! Marshal! How's the contact?*

If he fell into a field that blocked telepathic impulses as Pucky had earlier, then the situation would be critical. How could Pucky ever find him then? But the answer came instantly and quite clearly.

*The connection's fine! We're waiting for your signal!*

*It's not necessary yet,* Rhodan answered, then devoted his attention to his immediate surroundings.

They did not especially surprise him.

The vehicle stopped as soon it had reached the centre of the circular arena. It had a diameter of at least 100 meters and was bounded around the edge by a wall 3 meters high. At first Rhodan could not help but think of a comparison with the ancient Roman circuses in which gladiators fought for their lives in order to entertain Caesar. He also noticed the rows of oversized seats circling the arena in steadily elevating rings up to the ceiling 50 meters above the ground.

The Druuf ordered Rhodan out of the car with a wave of the hand. Rhodan turned on the translator and asked: "What's the meaning of this? I thought I was being taken to the Council so that we could work out the terms of the treaty."

"You are now in the Great Hall of the Council. You will wait here until the Council appears."

When in Rome... Rhodan thought resignedly and climbed down from his seat once the Druuf had slid to one side to allow him to pass by. Then, as the car drove away, he stood alone and deserted in the middle of the arena, feeling like a lost gladiator.

*Should I come?* asked Pucky, who had been following along telepathically. *We'll put on a circus of our own—with Druufs for clowns! With a little assist, that is, from The Great Pucko and his telekinesis!*

*There aren't any Druufs here,* Rhodan told him. *Stay there and wait until I call for you!*

The harsh light bothered Rhodan. He looked up, blinking at the ceiling, and saw that a door up there had been opened. Right under the roof by the uppermost row of seats. Dignified and ponderous Druufs entered the room one after the other and took their places. It looked as though the general populace was allowed to attend sessions most of the time but today only the 66 themselves were on hand. The leaders of the Druuf race sat scattered around the uppermost row of seats. They were at least 70 meters away from the ground, barely visible in the glare from the harsh lights.

Their gaze rested appraisingly on the tiny Terran who had dared to make them a proposition. Rhodan's feeling of helplessness was increased by the fact he stood small and alone in the middle of the illuminated arena and had to look up.

Because of the 'wireless' means of communication the Druufs employed the distance from him to them was not a problem. Besides, the 'Tommies' had their own translation equipment as well. So communication was not difficult.

"You are the Terran who commands the three alien ships?" came the first question out of the translators' loudspeakers. "You would like to ask us for help against your enemy?"

Rhodan had to laugh inwardly at the blatantly slanted way in which the question had been formulated and he would have liked most to have responded with a few unflattering remarks about the Druufs. But now he had to keep his self-control. The Druufs were still more powerful overall than the Terrans. Perhaps even more powerful than the Arkonide fleets.



"Together we may be able to defeat the enemy," Rhodan answered.

"What weapons do you have?"

Another Druuf must have asked that, although no acoustic difference was apparent in the translator's mechanical voice.

"I can ask you the same question," said Rhodan.

Silence reigned for some seconds. Rhodan tried in vain to call the unknown helper during the pause. He did not reply.

"You are in our power, Terran."

They could not get much more primitive than that. Rhodan had honestly expected more intelligent methods. Why did the Druufs drop all pretenses so quickly?

Didn't they have any time?

Rhodan suddenly began to suspect there could be no other explanation for the Druufs' undiplomatic conduct of the meeting. They were in trouble. Every second counted.

Something had happened!

But what?

"You're wrong, Druuf! I am not in your power. You've asked me about our weapons—well, I'll show you one right now. Do you know how one can render matter invisible?"

"He's trying to divert us!" broke in one of the Druufs. "Let's take him prisoner and force his people to turn their ships over to us. Then we'll find out about their weapons. Maybe they even have the gate to the other time plane with them."

Rhodan knew at once what they wanted to have: the mirror field generator with which the time window could be produced. They had guessed the Terrans were behind it. But did they also know it for a fact?

*Perry Rhodan! It is too late!*

The thought impulse rang loud and clear in Rhodan's consciousness and drowned out the spoken words over the translators. Whatever the Druufs had to say at that moment was without importance. Contact with the unknown helper had been reestablished.

*I must speak with you!* Rhodan thought intensively in reply.

*If you can, take yourself and your ship to safety! Arkon's robotships are attacking! An unimaginably large number of them have broken through the great hole in space and are advancing on Arkon. In an hour a tremendous space battle will have ignited. The Druuf ships are already taking off*

The impulse wavered and grew weaker.

*Can't I take you along, Oscar-1?*

The impulses came faltering and uncertain. *Call me Onot, Perry! That is the name of my host body. Search for me when you come back!*

Then it was finally gone. The original mind of the Druuf must have regained the upperhand. Rhodan knew that it was now pointless to wait for further messages.

The last useless words of the Druufs died away in his ears. He did not even know what they had said but he saw the effect of their words.

Around him opened doors that had previously been hidden in the wall around the arena. At least 20 muscular Druufs advanced toward him, carrying in their hands dangerous-looking instruments which resembled weapons and steel handcuffs.

This was how the Druufs behaved with their allies? Rhodan smiled sadly and tucked the translator back up under his arm. *Pucky!*

When the mousebeaver materialized, the nearest Druuf was just 10 steps away. The flashing incisor tooth showed the desire of its owner to give the Druufs a lesson they wouldn't forget but Rhodan spoiled his fun. There was not a second to lose.

*Let's get out of here, Pucky! Immediately!*

The 66 rulers of the Druufs and their 20 minions in the arena below had noticed the inexplicable appearance of the small creature but before they could understand at all what had happened, their prisoner disappeared from before their eyes.

The glaring spotlights illuminated an empty spot in the arena.

## **6/ ONOT DOES NOT REPLY**

Arkon's attacking battlefleet had evidently surprised the Druufs and sent them panicking. Without paying any further attention to Rhodan's 3 ships, the rod-shaped cruisers took off and shot up into the coloured heavens of Druufon.

Rhodan sounded the alarm and ordered the ships ready for takeoff.

Then he considered and sent the *California*, under the command of Capt. Marcel Rous, into the probable battlezone. The light cruiser could accelerate incredibly fast for operations involving speeds of less than speol. The *California* would serve as a relay station and stand in constant video communication with the *Drusus*.

When the *California* vanished into the sky 10 seconds later and a new vidscreen lit up in the control room of the *Drusus*, Rhodan leaned back in satisfaction. "We could have asked Harno to help us a little but that would have taken him away from a more important task."

Sikerman and Bell looked content; their curiosity about the matter had just been satisfied.

"But Harno should try one more time to contact Onot," Rhodan went on. "It's odd that the Druufs' chief physicist should have a pronounceable name."

It was a seemingly unimportant fact but under certain circumstances it could prove to be of immense importance.

Pucky sat on the bunk, eyes closed. He was 'in touch' with the Druufs of the Council.

"They're planning to throw Arkon's fleet back and destroy it, figuring that they'll never have another opportunity like this again. The Robot Brain must have gone crazy to risk half his fleet on this. And if the Brain loses, we'll be in trouble!"

Rhodan smiled, though without mirth. "I'm surprised that they've left us unwatched. Still, they must be assuming we'll follow the *California*."

"I didn't quite understand it," Pucky said, "but I think they want to hold us here. Onot is already at work on it. A time-field or something like that..."

Rhodan's smile vanished abruptly. He looked at Sikerman. "Take off, Colonel! Tell the *Kublai Khan* to do the same! Now!"

Pucky opened his eyes sluggishly. "I thought that would interest you! Our schizoid spirit-friend is certainly many-sided! First he helps us, then he tries to hold us here. You would almost think he's a woman..."

No one paid any attention to Pucky's wise observation, Rhodan least of all. As Sikerman issued the instructions, Atlan stared grimly at the panorama vidscreen. He seemed to expect that any second now everything outside would begin to move a million times faster, which would mean Onot's time-field was already in operation. A second for the Druufs could mean years for them. The universe would be thousands of years older before they could take another breath. Meanwhile, the Druufs could do whatever they wanted to them without fear of being disturbed.

But Rhodan had understood too quickly.

Together with the *Kublai Khan* the *Drusus* lifted and swiftly soared into the sky. Over on the edge of the field, the Druuf defence fleets were still taking off, disappearing without a trace into the heavens seconds later.

Rhodan glanced down at the gigantic city one last time, although he knew he would see it again. Then he turned his attention to the vidscreen displaying the transmission from the *California*.

The light cruiser was stationed off to the side of the sector in which the battle would probably break out. A cloud of silvery shining points coming out of transition one after the other approached from the direction of the hole in space. Rhodan soon gave up trying to count them.

The Robot Brain was attacking with many thousands of ships.

From Druufon raced the Druuf units towards them. The planet had shrunk to a fist-sized ball when

Arkonide battleships breaking through the lines attacked and bombarded the Druufs' capital world with atomic bombs. Glaring energy beams ploughed blazing furrows in the concrete canyons of the city and melted the surface away until the first underground levels were exposed to view.

But then the Druuf reserves which had stayed behind went into action.

It developed into a violent defensive battle whose progress Rhodan could no longer follow because of the distance. There could be no doubt, however, that the Druufs were driving the Arkonide robotships back.

"I must repeat my warning, Rhodan!" Atlan said pointedly, his voice earnest. "If the Druufs inflict a grievous defeat upon Arkon, the Earth will be in great danger. We can't sit idly by while these monsters overrun our universe."

Rhodan smiled. "You must be thinking of how Druufs gave Arkon such a hard time 10,000 years ago—or so I assume. No, don't worry—I don't think of you as stupid or thirsting for revenge. But certainly your bitter memories have their effect when you think of the Druufs. Rest assured, however, that we'll ally ourselves with the Robot Brain in time to put the Druufs back where they belong. On the other hand, a small reversal won't damage the Robot too much. And a small reversal is just what the Robot Regent is about to suffer."

Atlan did not reply. If his heart belonged to Terra, it still beat for Arkon.

Once the *Drusus* and the *Kublai Khan* strayed into the crossfire between two flotillas. Only their augmented energy screens protected the ships from being blasted or vaporized. They dodged to the side as quickly as they could and paid no more attention to the opponents who fought doggedly on.

"What course are we taking, sir?" asked Sikerman when they were many light-minutes away from Druufon. "Myrtha?"

"What are you thinking of?" Rhodan asked, shaking his head. "We still have some things to do before we can go back. Make course for Hades."

"Siamed 13?" Sikerman asked to make sure, without showing his astonishment. "Won't it attract attention if we land there?"

"Who said anything about landing. What I have in mind is going down with a few people to take a look at the new base. You and Col. Everson will return to Grautier and wait to see how the situation develops."

Atlan looked up. "Are we going to Hades by way of the transmitter?"

Rhodan nodded. He looked intently at the vidscreen displaying Capt. Rous' transmission. The two battlefleets had collided and were fighting it out hammer and tongs. The outcome was not in doubt for new flotillas were constantly emerging from the depths of the double star system and entering the fray. Soon the Robot Regent's ships were surrounded and overwhelmed with a hail of energy beams.

"It's awful!" commented Bell, who had been silent. "It is awful but there also isn't any way to prevent the battle. It had to come sooner or later—and I think it's better that the Druufs annihilate unmanned robotships rather than our ships. Besides, both sides will be weakened, which may be reckoned as an incalculable advantage for us."

The *Drusus* sped onwards, followed by the *Kublai Khan*. They dodged attacking Druuf squadrons until dodging was no longer possible. From all sides the slender battleships approached the monster which outwardly did not resemble their own form of construction in the slightest.

Rhodan ordered the opening of defensive fire.

Then David Stern called from the com centre. "Sir! A message from the Druufs!"

"Read it!"

*To the Terran Commander! read Lt. Stern. You have not honoured the agreement! If you do not at once return to our planet, we will destroy you! Tommy-1.*

Rhodan smiled coldly. "Stern, make contact with the Druufs," he said. "I have something to tell them."

Not much time went by before Stern was able to announce the contact was made.

"Attention Tommy-1!" Rhodan spoke into the microphone. "Rhodan here, Terran Commander. If anyone broke the agreement, it was you! Let us depart freely or we'll side with our common enemy. And we now know a great deal about you—we even know about the secret project on which Onot is working! Time-fields are no longer a secret for us."

They waited but no answer followed.

However, the Druuf units suddenly gave way, no longer blocking the Terrans' passage. The ships sped off in all directions and disappeared seconds later.

"Glord!" exclaimed Bell. "You certainly gave them a good scare."

"And I'm not quite sure how," mused Rhodan.

\* \* \* \*

The matter-receiving station on Hades announced itself as ready.

"It's time," said Rhodan to Atlan, Bell, Marshall, Lloyd and Marten. "Sengu will remain on the *Drusus*. Pucky and Harno can come separately—Pucky doesn't need a matter transmitter. Sikerman, resume course once the transmitter is shut off and we have arrived safely on Hades."

"Right, sir," answered Sikerman. He did not ask any questions although he suspected Rhodan planned more than an inspection tour of the base on Hades.

Shortly thereafter, the 6 men entered the transmitter's energy cage. In the more than 6 decades since the transmitters had first been found in the Vega system, they had been steadily improved, especially in the realm of their capacity. Today one transmitter could transport loads that earlier would have required 10 of these 5th-dimensionally operating devices.

In spite of the high degree of safety, it was always a strange sensation to step into an energy cage. It was known that the distance to the receiver was crossed wirelessly, so to speak. Matter was converted into nonmaterial hyper-impulses and transmitted across the timeless 5th dimension.

Not everyone can comfortably face the idea of being broken down into impulses.

Bell shuddered as the door shut and the green light came on. "When I think of what could happen to us, I don't feel too well."

Rhodan laid his thumb on a red button, smiling unconcernedly. "What are you worried about? Absolutely nothing happens! When I press the button—like so..." Whereupon he pressed the button and then drew his hand back slowly, "... it's already over with. This button is no longer the same button on which I pressed. A second ago, this button was still half a light-hour away."

The green light still shone but they knew that it was the light of the receiving station on Hades.

Without being aware of it, they had travelled a distance of nearly half a billion kilometres. No time had passed.

The *Drusus* and the *Kublai Khan* were already on their way back to Grautier. The energy cage aboard the *Drusus* was empty once more.

Rhodan laid his hand against a certain portion of the grating. The door swung open. Lt. Stepan Potkin saluted stiffly as he walked towards Rhodan.

"Welcome to Hades, sir. I haven't been here long myself but I must admit that this certainly is one hell of a world. Hopefully you aren't planning to spend your vacation here."

Rhodan did not smile as he replied. "This is no time to go on a vacation. At present a vast space battle is going on in the Druuf system. Arkon has decided to attack the Druufs on their own home grounds."

Potkin was disconcerted. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't know about it..."

"That's why I told you about it," Rhodan said, smiling briefly. "Are you in touch with the *California*?"

"She just called and announced their desire to land. I gave an order for the underground air-hatch to be made ready."

"Very good, Lieutenant." Rhodan looked searchingly around. "By the way, has Pucky arrived yet?"

Potkin began to grin broadly as he replied. "He most definitely has, sir! The odd part about it though, is that he must have misjudged his spring because he didn't land in the control room where you told him to go. He turned up in the deepfreeze among all the fresh frozen vegetables."

"The glutton!" complained Bell—then glanced around, shocked at what he had said. Pucky was not especially fond of being called a 'glutton'. People who used the word carelessly might easily find themselves floating in midair, hurled aloft by the mousebeaver's telekinetic energy streams.

But today Pucky was in a peaceful mood. At length he materialized behind Bell and jabbed him in the back with his index finger. "Don't you know carrots are good for your eyesight? Did you ever hear of a

rabbit wearing glasses? Here—have one." And he pressed an already well-chewed carrot into the speechless Bell's hand.

Harno came floating by and rapidly grew larger. His surface changed once more into the milky white of a vidscreen.

*A new flotilla of the Robot Regent's ships has arrived and is attacking.*

Rhodan glanced only briefly at the event transmitted by Harno, then shrugged his shoulders. "The Regent will learn soon enough that it has underestimated the enemy. That almost would have happened to us. Well, if it loses these ships, too, so much the better. I think it will then be more receptive to negotiations."

Bell, obediently chewing on his carrot, said, "It's about time, too. These Druufs are getting on my nerves."

Rhodan turned to him. "You, Pucky, and Harno will come with me. We're going to venture a second advance against Arkon with the *California*. I'm going to try to get Onot out."

Bell's mouth fell open, then he managed to close it again. He did not comment. For his part, Pucky squeaked: "Great!"

He did not need to say any more.

\* \* \* \*

Just an hour later, the *California* landed.

Meanwhile, Rhodan had inspected the enlarged tunnels which had been eaten out of the rock of the Hope Mountains by energy beams. Here, beneath the surface of the hellish planet, nothing of Hades' deathly character could be felt. Equipment produced air and warmth. Optical and other sensory instruments placed on the surface transmitted an exact picture to the control room of what happened above.

But for the moment, nothing was happening.

Rhodan reduced the crew of the light cruiser to the bare minimum so that as few lives would be endangered as possible. He knew that a second trip to Druufon would be a flight straight into Hell.

Bell went around with a worried face, expressing his apprehension and discomfort at every opportunity. Pucky, on the other hand, whistled shrilly some melodies he must have picked up in Terrania, and his lack of a musical sense was horribly evident. He did it so long that Bell finally lost his patience and yelled angrily at him. To Rhodan's surprise, the mousebeaver chose not to retaliate in the traditional manner—or at all.

And then the time had finally come.

Capt. Marcel Rous announced that the *California* was ready for takeoff.

10 minutes later, the spacesphere shot out of a hidden opening in the Hope Mountains and raced at an insane velocity into the twilight sky of Hades.

They did not go into transition; instead, they reached simple speol after just 5 minutes. Harno served as a universal vidscreen, warning them in time of ships of either warring party. The unusually high acceleration of the *California* insured their escape from all attackers without being drawn into a battle.

Druufon drew swiftly nearer. With it increased the danger of being discovered.

"Can you pick up Onot's impulses yet?" asked Rhodan.

Pucky responded mutely, in the negative. He sat on his bunk, hunched up and eyes shut. Up to now he had attempted in vain to make contact with the unknown friend. Pucky was not even able to locate the real Onot, Chief Physicist of the Druufs. It was quite probable that he was in the middle of an experiment that blocked off telepathic impulses again.

Nevertheless, Pucky knew that that would not prevent teleportation jumps.

Rhodan did not give up. "When we're close enough, perhaps you can spring."

Now Pucky did open his eyes. He met Rhodan's questioning gaze. Bell sat off to the side and watched him a little fearfully. It was easy to tell he would not have gladly traded places with Pucky.

"I'll try it," said the mousebeaver, unusually softly and, in contrast to other occasions, with little enthusiasm. "The spring is the least thing to worry about because I can always teleport to safety. But what happens if you have to flee from here in the meantime? What'll I do then?"

Rhodan stood up, went to Pucky and stroked his ruffled fur. Warmth filled his voice as he reassured the mousebeaver. "No matter what happens, we won't go past your teleportation limit before you come back. You can depend on us."

Pucky slid down from the couch. "Great! When do I start?"

Rhodan smiled and stepped back. "In about 5 minutes—in the event you don't make contact with Onot before-hand."

The hope was not fulfilled. Nothing was heard from Onot.

It was as though he had never existed.

Three, four minutes went by. Not even Harno could help them. It was as though bewitched. As if Onot had simply disappeared. More than once Harno showed the image of the Chief Physician's laboratory but nothing was to be seen of the Druuf himself.

"The best thing is for you to go to the laboratory," said Rhodan.

Pucky nodded, looked at the clock and concentrated on his jump.

Then he was gone.



## 7/ THE TIME PARALYSER

He reappeared immediately—at least on the milky curve of Harno's outer surface. Telepathic contact between the sphere-being and the mousebeaver remained in effect, so locating Pucky was no problem. As long as the contact went uninterrupted, there was no acute danger of losing Pucky from view.

Pucky knew that he was under observation thanks to Harno, who kept him informed of the situation at that end.

Confident of his goal, Pucky landed in the laboratory he was already well-acquainted with. The control board and the entire technical installation in the underground experimental station were deserted. There was not the slightest sign of Onot. To have found him among the thousands of excited and agitated thought-impulses flooding the air would have required unbelievable luck; Pucky was certain the original Onot would not be thinking of him.

*Don't try to understand the nature of the time-paralyser!* Harno warned silently but urgently.

Pucky did not stir from the spot. Instead, he stared with all his senses alert at the glistening metal box on a table right next to the main control panel. It was studded with glassy knobs and coloured switches in between small, unlit light bulbs and dials. A number of cables led to the generators and other machinery.

*Time-paralyser?* asked Pucky in surprise.

Harno explained. *The invention on which Onot is working when he is no longer identical with our friend. It is probable that without our friend he never would have been able to do it. Can you sense him yet?*

Pucky told him no, then made a few steps forward until he stood before the table.

Time-paralyser?

Once it was ready, it would be the Druufs' most powerful weapon. With it they could knock entire worlds out of action and perhaps conquer the universe. They simply turned time off for their enemy. They put him in a state where he was entirely at their mercy.

A devilish invention!

And more! An unimaginably effective weapon against which there could never be any defence.

*Should I destroy it, Harno?*

There was a pause while Harno discussed the matter with Rhodan. Finally he replied, *Onot isn't far enough along yet. Who knows if he can get anything out of his invention once the spirit of our friend leaves? It would not be good to destroy the invention because it is not only a weapon: it is also a means with which the phenomenon of time may be deciphered. Perhaps one day we shall need Onot's invention for our own purposes.*

Pucky answered that he would act accordingly. He did not understand much about technical things—or anyway, not enough to comprehend how the time-paralyser operated. When he stood up, the control box was on a level with his face. He looked attentively at the many switches and levers.

Did he dare make an attempt to experiment?

Harno had been listening in. *Careful, little friend!*

*Let me have my fun, Harno!*

Pucky laid his paw on the nearest lever and saw a number of lights come on. A light humming and vibration suddenly filled the room. In any event, the box was now hooked up to the power.

Only now did Pucky take the trouble to follow the cables and wiring which led from the box. Some of them ended in a round object on the ceiling that resembled a spotlight. The concave mirrored surface seemed to have been assembled from small, silvery-shining individual parts.

The mousebeaver moved other levers determinedly. Then he was warned by a strong thought-impulse that increased by the second. Someone was approaching the laboratory. He must be coming from the direction opposite Pucky. However, between him and the door lay that area 'covered' by the 'spotlight', perfectly circular and large enough to accommodate any incomer for irradiation.

Was it Onot returning to his laboratory?

Whoever it was, Pucky had decided to test for himself the effects of the time-field he had so confidently activated.

The door across from him opened.

In came a Druuf who could have been Onot.

The Druuf did not notice the mousebeaver immediately. He shut the door behind him and stood for a moment right at the probable edge of the time-field. Pucky tried to read his thoughts and the mousebeaver's suspicions were confirmed.

It was Onot! But he was not thinking of Rhodan or how he could help him, he was thinking more of how he could help his race defeat its enemies once and for all. His invention had been tested and was ready. Now all that remained was building an amplifier and some way to transport the device, then the invention could be placed in action anywhere. Besides, there was only this one field generator here in the laboratory. If it were damaged, it would take years before a substitute would be ready.

*Can you hear me?* thought Pucky intensively. It must be possible, after all, to make contact with the mind of his friend who occupied Onot's body. Or was it so strongly overpowered by the Druuf's own mental impulses that contact was impossible?

Evidently, for there was no answer.

Pucky held his breath when Onot started to move again, for the Druuf was heading straight towards him. Only a few more meters and the Druuf could not help but discover him.

To be safe he readied himself for an instant teleportation spring.

Onot spotted him the same instant he stepped into the area of the time-field. The edges were not sharply delineated and the effects did not show up at once, only after a second passed and his body had had the opportunity to come completely within the circle and receive the full brunt of the radiation.

Even while his eyes opened in astonishment, Onot froze.

In that moment he resembled one of those creatures Lt. Rous had once found on the Crystal Planet. However, there life had been only slowed down 72000 times; by careful examination one could see that the apparently motionless statues actually did move, if only interminably slowly.

Here and now it was quite different.

Pucky did not move from the spot, keeping his eye on Onot. He had no desire to fall under the influence of the time-paralysing field himself. Certainly he could then exchange small talk with the Druuf but thousands of years would have gone by before they could even get around to shaking hands.

Nothing moved. The Druuf's eyelids—which looked like leathery folds—did not move, even in the bright lights. The monstrous creature did not seem to be breathing anymore. The arms and legs, frozen in the middle of a movement, resembled pieces of a statue.

*It works!* Pucky triumphed, as though he had created the technical wonder himself. *But if I wanted to do something to the Druuf now, I couldn't without becoming a Sleeping Beauty myself. So what's the point?*

*We have already determined that the creation of a time-field was still in the experimental level,* Harno told him. *Turn the field off and try to bring Onot here.*

Pucky nodded, knowing that Rhodan could see him by way of Harno. *Alright, then—but I'm positive that...*

Just at that moment, it happened!

\* \* \* \*

Pucky's impulses broke off so abruptly in his mind that Rhodan gave a start. It could not be because of the time-field for Harno's image showed that Pucky had not moved from his place.

The Druuf, too, stood motionless and seemingly frozen.

Now Pucky moved. It was an almost mechanical and automatic seeming motion as he bent over and pushed the levers on the control device back into their original position. Then he turned and looked at the Druuf.

Onot finished the movement he had begun and walked towards Pucky.

*Disappear!* Rhodan exclaimed mentally, shocked. *How could you be so crazy as to let him go? Bring him here if you can!*

But again Pucky did not answer.

The mousebeaver, as they could plainly see, was waiting for the Druuf.

Suddenly there were alien mental impulses in Rhodan's mind.

*When Onot was seized by the time-field, I was freed and could take his body over. However, it will not long endure for his spirit will soon become the more powerful. In the time-field I could even leave his body and take over Pucky's. While in his body I turned off the time-field because now I know what I had wanted to find out! Perhaps I will find my original body this way—if it still exists.*

Pucky moved once more and drew back a little. His thoughts took up again immediately. And his first reaction, a question, proved only too clearly that Onot's spiritual parasite had spoken the truth.

*Who turned off the time-field?*

Onot himself answered. *I did! And now get yourself to safety because the robotships are attacking our world. You must leave me some time yet because there is something I have discovered. I have you to thank, Pucky! You have shown me the way, even if I still cannot remember who I am and how it is that I know you, Perry Rhodan...*

*I'm beginning to have a suspicion,* Rhodan replied. *But it would be too fantastic...*

Onot's thought-impulses suddenly broke off.

The real Druuf Onot came on towards Pucky, massive arms outstretched to capture the mousebeaver.

Pucky did not spend too much time in reflection.

He teleported back to the *California*.

\* \* \* \*

The ship raced at the speed of light through a glowing blockade—through the midst of the surprised Druufs and past the attacking robot-ships of the Regent.

Soon Druufon was just a star in space.

Rhodan looked at the videcreen. "I fear we haven't seen Druufon for the lastime. Our mission is only now beginning." He sighed and gave Capt. Rous his instructions. "Back to Hades. We'll stay there for awhile and go back to Myrtha later. I'd like to watch the progress of the battle from here."

"And what about Onot?" asked Bell.

Rhodan shrugged his shoulders. "You've heard that he made a discovery. Perhaps thanks to Pucky he now knows how he can master the spirit of his host body. Why he didn't come with us is certainly a riddle to me. It could have been out of consideration, I suppose, because he would have had to have taken over a Terran's body."

Bell's eyes narrowed to slits. "They say I have a good memory, Perry, and if that's so, then I'm not mistaken in thinking you made a certain remark awhile back."

"What was that?" Rhodan asked, smiling expectantly. "You hinted that you had a suspicion who Onot might be."

Rhodan quickly shielded his thoughts before Harno or Pucky had a chance to find out his secret, a secret which might not really be a secret at all. "Oh, that...?" he answered, still smiling. His true thoughts remained hidden. "Forget it, Reggie. It's just a crazy idea I had which has nothing to do with the present. It's better to let sleeping dogs lie—at least until they get up again and wag their tails."

Bell shook his head. "You speak in riddles, O Great Master. Who may thus become wise?"

"You, maybe!" Rhodan answered with a laugh. "But you lack the imagination to draw your own conclusions. I have it!"

He looked up at the vidscreen.

Capt. Rous skilfully avoided a Druuf squadron and then led to a short transition which brought them near Hades. The system's 13th planet had so far escaped the Druufs' attention. No one suspected that Rhodan had built a base there which could very well serve one day as the starting point for a great invasion.

The *California* radioed Hades and learned that everything was ready for their landing.

Rhodan did not protest when Pucky teleported to the nearby planet with Harno.

Capt. Rous startled him out of his thoughts. "Hypercom contact with Grautier, sir! A message!"

"Give it here!"

Rous gave Rhodan the strip of plastic tape on which the message had been embossed.

Rhodan read out loud. *Lt. Stern, DRUSUS, to Perry Rhodan! The Robot Brain on Arkon is sending incessant calls for help. As ordered, we have not answered. It seems that Arkon is in serious trouble. We are awaiting instructions in this matter. End of message.*

Rhodan laid the tape slowly on the control panel. He met Bell's expectant gaze. "Hm," he said, meaningfully.

Bell moved restlessly on the couch. "What do you mean, 'Hm', if I may ask? Aren't we going to answer? It would seem high time we did."

Rhodan shook his head. "No, we're going to let the Regent stew in his own juices for the next 14 days. That's how long I intend to stay on Hades, by the way. By then, some matters here may have been

decided one way or the other. The battle between Arkon and Druufon could go on for days, even weeks. We have time, Reggie, because time is working in our favour."

"Time... ?" said Bell, staring up at the ceiling. "Perry, what really *is* time?"

Rhodan smiled ironically. "We'll ask Onot one of these days... I think he may be able to tell us." He looked at the vidscreen again and, after awhile, thoughtfully added: "Perhaps..."

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## UNDER THE STARS OF DRUUFON

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## THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

ARKON STAR REALM, Alert!

The Cosmic Chessboard is set for a conflict of Galactic Giants.

And Perry plays a perilous part between them!

But Rhodan is not alone-mysteriously, the gross body' of a creature from the stars hosts the ghost (?) of an Earthman and comes to the aid of Earthman #1.

It's Arkon pitted against Druufon, the Robot Regent vs. the Druufs, as titanic interstellar powers clash in—

## THE BONDS OF ETERNITY

By Clark Darlton