

The metal sphere of gigantic proportions was drifting through the boundless expanse of the Universe. If its course were traced back, it would lead into the teeming centre of the Galaxy where the stars are closer together, making the exact determination of position almost impossible. If it were traced forward, however, it would end in the bleak wasteland at the edge of the Milky Way. But the sphere would only reach that edge in several millennia if it maintained its present velocity.

It was not only gigantic, it was of artificial origin.

At first it might seem that one had before him a small planet. Upon closer observation, however, this impression would prove to be false. The sphere was an artificial structure, designed and set in motion by thinking beings.

And, as it seemed, also manned by intelligent animate beings.

Behind illuminated portholes an observer could now and again catch a glimpse of moving shadows. These shadows possessed distinctly humanoid forms, which would lead to the conclusion that the interior of the sphere was not inhabited by monsters but by people.

The sphere was thus a spaceship.

A ship, that is, measuring 1½ kilometres in diameter and certainly affording room for a few thousand people.

Unperturbed, it pursued its path, untouched by all the events taking place on the thousands of inhabited planets that lay in the vicinity. Ray refracting fields, permanently in operation, prevented electronic detection from afar and no roving ship of any race discovered the restless wanderer flying on towards its unknown destination.

There was no one who had ever looked into the interior of the mysterious ghost ship—other than those who were in it. They, on the other hand, knew only the interior and had no idea of what went on outside the metal walls. Certainly they saw the stars slowly drift past but they were part of their existence and provoked no questions. The eternal blackness of the Cosmos was their day and the twinkling stars were their constant companions.

But as enormous as the sphere might have been, compared to the endlessness of the Universe it was nothing but a tiny speck of dust pursuing its course, lonely and undiscovered, until it would one day be swallowed up by eternity.

No one would ever miss it...

1/ MYSTERY OF THE MONSTERS

Machinist 7 finished his shift at work and headed back to his living quarters. He was relieved by Machinist 4, a powerfully built fellow who never uttered a word more than was necessary, usually less, and was therefore of little interest to Machinist 7. He loved a short chat between shifts but No. 4 was a

thankless partner for such sessions.

Sullenly he ambled through the narrow passageway until he reached the antigrav lift. Without hesitation he stepped into the black shaft and was immediately caught up by the gentle current and carried along upward. Seconds later he was joined by another man, who made it clear with a curt nod of the head that he was not particularly talkative either.

M-7 knew that man. He was one of the doctors that attended to the personnel. If he was not mistaken it was Dr. 3, actually a friendly and amiable man, at least when one was sick and entrusted to his care.

Machinist 7 almost regretted not being sick at that moment.

"Doesn't the air seem stuffier than ever today?" he cautiously inquired, trying to strike up a conversation. "I mean it seems warmer than usual."

"Imagination!" the physician answered gruffly. He did not seem to be in the mood to converse with the machinist. But M-7 did not give up that easily.

"How could I be so mistaken, D-3?" he persisted, using the customary abbreviation of names which consisted of branch designation and number. "Perhaps I am sick."

D-3 regarded M-7 with an appraising glance, then shook his head.

"Why should you be sick? If you have the feeling that you are, then report to your section and come see me afterward. Then we'll find out..."

"Report in sick?" M-7 seemed frightened. "Just to—"

He stopped short. He had almost said too much. He could not reveal to the doctor that he simply longed to talk things through with someone. His world consisted solely of questions that were never answered. Sure, the doctor would not be able to supply the answers he sought either, but it would still be interesting to find out if he was asking himself the same questions.

"Just to... what?"

"Nothing," he tersely replied and jumped out of the lift. It did not matter that he had chanced into the wrong corridor if only he was able to escape the searching, mistrustful gaze of the doctor. He saw the legs of D-3 disappear upward and waited two minutes, then stepped into the lift again. Ten minutes later he reached the cabin he shared with M-4, whom he seldom got to see. They usually had different shifts but if ever both were off work at the same time, M-4 would lie about idly on his bed, refusing to get involved in any discussion.

M-7 sighed and lay down to rest.

What was he really living for?

* * * *

The Commander was sitting in the isolation of his cabin. His husky body was slightly stooped, betraying his age. This impression was intensified by the snow-white hair that framed the thin oval face in which two eyes with a reddish shimmer and an almost feminine nose were set above the narrow mouth. His chin was determined, revealing an unusually enterprising nature, but the soft lines around the mouth seemed to testify to the opposite.

The Commander's hands were resting on a thin pile of filmy plastic document files, as if to safeguard that no one took them away. His legs, stretched out, almost reached the other side of the metal table, which was firmly screwed to the floor. The light armchair was the only movable piece of furniture.

One wall was made out of transparent material and presented a view into space. Two other walls were covered with technical command instruments—entire rows of small screens, panels, levers and scales, in addition there were dial buttons, regulators and communication devices. In the fourth wall there were just two doors. One led to the room which no one other than the Commander was permitted to enter.

He looked up as a faint buzz sounded and the upper left viewscreen lit up. Wearily he nodded, got up and switched on the button below the screen. The face of a man immediately materialized on the screen. It made a youthful and fresh impression, despite his white hair. The determined features in his face displayed pleasure in quick decisions and the colourless eyes possessed a keenness that would warn any adversary to proceed with caution.

"Why are you disturbing me, Officer One?"

The man on the viewscreen did not even flicker an eyelid.

"I must speak to you, C-1," he said briefly. "It is important," he added.

The Commander sighed. "I know what you want," he nodded in a resigned manner. "Why doesn't youth bide its time until its turn has come? I know that my time has almost run out but what is the rush, O-1? You are my successor..."

"I hardly notice that," he countered furiously. "How are the young to develop when the old give them no opportunity?"

The Commander smiled. "Develop, O-1? You want to develop yourself? If you knew..."

"I want to know! So—do you have time for me?"

The Commander shook his head decisively. "Not yet, O-1! I will inform you when the time has come. You cannot conceive of the responsibility you are pressuring me to acquire. Once you are sitting in my seat you will regret your rash haste but then there will be no going back. Whoever sits in my seat will become the loneliest being in the Universe!"

"No one can be lonelier than the person who voluntarily excludes all others. And that is what you are doing, Commander!"

"You will do no differently because you will have no choice. One day you will understand me. Until then have patience, please. I am warning, you, O-1! Any pressure you put on me can be fatal for you. The time has not yet arrived..."

The young man on the viewscreen nodded grimly. "Do you determine when the time has come?"

Now the Commander smiled wanly. "You can just assume that I decide—that way your conscience won't be unduly burdened. You will learn the truth only when you are in my position." He looked at the clock above the control panel. "And now you must excuse me. I have things to do."

The viewscreen dimmed abruptly before the officer could reply.

The Commander settled behind his desk again and rested his head in his hands as if it had suddenly grown too heavy. Deep down he could understand the young officer who was designated as his successor. But regulations prohibited any exceptions on penalty of death by converter. The successor had to wait until the sign was given; only then could he assume his office to insure that there was always only one bearer of the secret.

I have to die no matter what, the Commander thought with mounting bitterness. That is just the price I have to pay—everyone before me paid it, just as all who will come after me.

Nothing could interrupt the chain.

Once again he was startled by the buzzing of the communication device. It was his duty to take notice of every call, so he rose and went to see whether it was Officer 1 again.

This time it was Officer 2, the speaker of the crew.

"Commander, Ps-5, D-3 and R-75 have requested an interview. When do you wish to see them?"

The Commander considered a moment.

The fact that the doctor and the psychologist wanted a talk was not unusual. That occurred almost once a week. However, that Repairman-75 wished to speak with him was no normal occurrence. Therefore it was with a mixture of curiosity and astonishment that the Commander said: "You may grant permission. I shall await them at the usual hour." Some inner feeling made him add: "I want to see only the three of them, O-2. You make sure that O-1 is not admitted with them, on no account."

"Understood, sir," the speaker responded and switched off.

The Commander resumed his seat and sank into deep thought. He sensed that trouble was brewing around him; only he did not yet know which sort of trouble.

* * * *

A few days earlier, shiptime...

The psychologist looked up in astonishment as the door opened and Dr. 3 entered his office unannounced. They were both about the same age and if their work clothes were not so different, a stranger would have found it difficult to tell them apart.

"Well now, D-3? A rare visit...?"

"I must speak to you, Ps-5. Only you can answer all the questions I am constantly asking myself—and that are constantly put to me."

The psychologist frowned. "Questions...? Since when does one ask himself questions?"

"This life here poses the questions and I can understand anyone who passes them on to those in charge. That's us! And we are *not* allowed to answer."

The psychologist smiled. "Not allowed, my friend? Even if we wanted to, how could we answer? What do we know about life? We are born here, we live and work here—and we die here when our time has come."

"But—why? Why do we live and die? What is the meaning of our existence? Those are the questions, Ps-5, that I have been repeatedly confronted with in the past few days. What answer should I give? I know that questions like that are prohibited and should be reported to the Commander, but I know as well that the Death Squad comes to everyone who asks such questions and is reported. If we follow those orders, there would soon be no living beings in this world."

The doctor leaned forward and gazed into the eyes of the other man. "What is this world—do you know that?"

"Nobody knows." The psychologist shook his head. Then he suddenly smiled again. "Why do you want to know? We are born and raised in it, we receive our duties and fulfil them. Our world sustains us, it provides us with food, drink and air to breathe, it clothes us and grants us our vacation with the women once in a lifetime. And ultimately it provides for our quick and painless death. We should be thankful to our world for taking such good care of us. Are you of a different opinion?"

"No, I am of the same opinion, but I want to know *why* things are this way and *who* is above us."

"Who?" The psychologist mused a moment, ceasing to smile. "The Commander, who else? He gives the orders and he is—luckily—destined to die just as we are. That thought is comforting enough to many people for them to die joyfully when their turn has come."

"The Commander," said the doctor calmly, "is not the one above us."

The psychologist was visibly startled. His eyes narrowed to a slit and raised apprehensively to the flutes of the ventilator on the ceiling, as if he anticipated a surreptitious eavesdropper. A guarded expression mixed with fear appeared on his face. "Shhh. What nonsense! You will land both of us in the converter if you keep this up!"

Death in the atomic reactor—that was the goal of their life. No one could avoid this goal but any lack of caution could hasten the inevitable end. The Commander was quick to serve a death sentence. And his command was law.

The doctor brushed aside his friend's misgivings with a wave of the hand. "Ridiculous, Ps-5! We are no longer small children who can be seared with the converter. We are strong enough to fight back in a pinch if they want to fetch us. I have made my provisions. Do you think I would have started this without securing weapons?"

"Weapons?" Ps-5 asked in astonishment and with a glimmer of hope. "You know that possession of weapons is forbidden. Besides—how should you have obtained them? No one in our world has weapons except..."

"Right! Except for the guards no one has any weapons. They carry them concealed in their metal bodies. You must destroy one of the guards to get at their weapons."

The psychologist stared incredulously at his friend. "You don't mean to tell me...?"

"Yes I do. I cornered a guard and deactivated him. A machinist helped me. I've taken him into my confidence."

"Just one of the men? Won't he betray you?"

"He can't, my friend. I've made an addict of him. That is prohibited and if it were found out I would be punished—but M-4 would not receive any more drugs and he would perish abominably. You see, I have made my provisions. And I am absolutely determined to find the truth. Do you want to help me, Ps-5? You may think about it for awhile. If you do not agree with me, forget our conversation. I trust your word."

"Who knows about this other than you and that M-4?"

"Nobody!"

The psychologist leaned back in his chair and regarded the ceiling of his room thoughtfully. Here he worked, gave his instructions to the Psychology Sector and enjoyed a certain degree of prestige. Should he risk all of this to satisfy his curiosity?

Wasn't he more or less at the source of all information? Wasn't he the very one in this world, outside of the Commander, to whom all bits of news were brought just by virtue of his profession? Why should he be more curious than the others?"

His glance fell on the face of his friend, who was watching him expectantly. In it he saw hope and faith mirrored but also fear and desperate determination.

He suddenly got an idea.

"Do you have one of those weapons with you?" he slowly inquired.

D-3 nodded. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, compact rod with a glass lens at the front end.

"You have never seen them in action, Ps-5, but I can assure you that the effect is terrible. If I so desired, I could even pierce the outer walls of our world and let in icy death. To kill a person with this is no problem."

The psychologist suddenly shuddered. He sensed that he had never before in his life been as close to death as at that second. But the doctor was his friend!

Or...?

He stared directly into the glass lens and tried to imagine what the death looked like that inhabited that silver rod. Was it quick and painless? Or...?

Once again, question after question to which no one could supply the answer.

"Yesterday a man came to me," he reported and closed his eyes so he would not have to see the silver rod any longer. "He had been sent by his section because he was not taking the necessary precautions while working. I could not get a thing out of him, he stubbornly withheld the reason for his absentmindedness. I had no other alternative than to put him under the psycho-ray apparatus. That loosened his tongue and I learned why he could no longer fulfil his duty as expected. Do you want to hear his story?"

The physician nodded silently. He continued to hold the silver rod in his hand. It seemed as if he had forgotten it.

"Good. Then listen, D-3: the man belongs to the Repair Detail of the 10th Sector and is a plain worker. About 6 months ago shiptime one of the ventilators broke down and had to be repaired. R-75 was instructed to do that. Together with a colleague he set about looking for the cause of the damage. The ventilation system had never failed before, which is why it was not easy to find the defect. Finally they were forced to break through a wall to reach the installation itself.

D-3 leaned forward with great interest. "I hope it wasn't the outer wall?"

"No, it wasn't, otherwise R-75 and his colleague would have been dead instantly. They welded an opening in the obstructive wall, just big enough to allow a man to climb through. Naturally they were acting against standing orders to make no changes whatsoever, as a hole in the wall is a change. At any rate, they crawled through the opening and landed in a large, dark room. In the ceiling, as he described it to me, small lamps were glowing that gave off very little brightness. But the back of the ventilator was now accessible to them. They quickly found the defect and could correct it. However, instead of turning back immediately and disposing of the opening, the two men investigated the mysterious room—at least that was their intention when they were disturbed in the process. Even in those unexplored parts of our world there are guards. R-75 succeeded in quickly reaching safety but his colleague was hit by an energy ray and died instantly. The guards did not pursue R-75, as he had feared. Perhaps they had meanwhile received an order to the contrary, since they withdrew. R-75 welded the hole shut and reported back to his superiors. He told them what had happened and described the death of his colleague but he kept secret what he had seen in the room. He could not keep it secret from me, however, since he was under psychotreatment, and so I came to know what had impressed him. It was a great and terrible secret, which no one may know without dying. That is just why R-75 is still alive today."

"I don't understand," the doctor admitted. The psychologist smiled.

"You will soon understand. The repairman revealed a secret to me about which no one may have any knowledge. If I were to report this secret, R-75 would die. But—I would have to enter the converter along with him, as I also know the secret and perhaps even the others, too, to whom I had reported it. Now do you understand why R-75 is still alive?"

The doctor nodded. "Yes, now I understand. But go on what secret are you talking about?"

The psychologist looked at the menacing silver rod.

"Can you stick that thing back in your pocket, D-3? It makes me nervous to keep looking into the lens

of a death ray. Thanks, my friend. Yes, the secret... Of course R-75 could not see all the details exactly because it wasn't bright enough. Still the dim lighting sufficed for him to make out two long rows of transparent blocks with enough room between them for the guards to move freely. Cables and plastic tubing connected each of the blocks to machines built into the wall. In the blocks themselves was a turbid fluid that must be thicker than water, as it did not move. But in that fluid—people were floating."

"What...?" gasped the doctor, turning pale. "People?"

The psychologist nodded. "In every block there was a naked person—men and women. And do you know who these people are? No, you don't Then I shall tell you, D-3! Those people are our ancestors who, as the story goes, died 10,000 years ago! That's right, they did not die back then, but they descended into the depths of our world and lay down to sleep, guarded by their metal attendants. They dominate not only us but the Commander as well and compel us to obey their will—the will of beings allegedly long since deceased, D-3! Now are you beginning to realize by what deception we are being victimized?"

The physician slowly shook his head. "It can't be possible, Ps-5. I know what you think but I cannot imagine it! We can't be slaves of long dead..."

"They are not dead!" The psychologist almost shouted but then he shut his mouth in terror. If anyone overheard him he was doomed.

"You mean they are still alive?" the doctor said in disbelief. But then he recalled that he himself was a physician and that he should be more familiar with this subject than his friend. "Naturally. What sense would well-preserved but dead bodies make? So they are alive! But—why are they alive? And—who knows about it?"

The psychologist leaned forward. "We do, D-3! We know about it! And R-75—however he doesn't suspect that I wormed his knowledge out of him. And that is good. I dismissed him from treatment without informing his superior of the cause of the disturbance. Perhaps he will keep his mouth shut—then he will still live awhile."

"Alright, so we know—and what do we do with this knowledge?"

"If you really look at it—what do we know? Somewhere in an unexplored part of our world lie our ancestors in a deep sleep, preserved through the centuries—at least that was their intention. But perhaps they are really dead by now, perhaps they died because of some unforeseen error and only their bodies have been preserved. We can still imagine their intentions. They wanted to be reawakened one day when our world has reached its destination. The interim generations, so I assume, merely served the purpose of keeping the machinery going. We believed that we were working and living for ourselves but in reality we only did it for the slumberers in the centre of our metal world. I would just like to know whether the Commander knows the truth or whether he too is being led around by the nose."

D-3 looked at the psychologist pensively. "With this weapon in my hand I feel safe—who else besides me has a weapon? Only the guards. They can be outwitted; they are not people, only machines. I, on the other hand, have not one raygun but three. I can give you one. Then we could risk questioning the Commander openly and requesting clarification."

"You've got courage," the psychologist enviously acknowledged. He reflected a few seconds, then continued, "Way back when I was in school my greatest problem was the meaning of our existence. I knew that we were born in children's homes and would never see our fathers. And our mothers were

soon taken from us when we were brought to the institutions. Then school and finally apprenticeship or higher studies. And then our work, until we were old enough to die in the converter. Even in death we serve our people, as our bodies supply energy. The course of our lives is clear and predetermined but the meaning is lacking. What is it all about? Why? Which goal are we striving towards? Or is our world perhaps wandering aimlessly through the universe of the suns?"

"We know very little about the suns," said D-3 reminding him of their lessons in school. "We know the traditions, no more than that. And who knows if these traditions aren't false, concocted by those sleeping in the centre of our world and waiting for their hour." He hesitated a moment, then slowly said: "There is a better solution than asking the Commander. We are going to undertake something."

"What are we going to undertake?"

"We are going to enter that room again together with R-75, the room where our ancestors are sleeping. Perhaps that way we will find out what they planned."

The psychologist was visibly startled but then he overcame his fright and nodded hesitantly.

"Perhaps you are right, D-3. I would rather die with certainty in my heart than live on in ignorance. When do we do it?"

"Today," the doctor replied and got up. "You can have Repairman-75 summoned. I will hide in the adjoining room and appear if it becomes necessary."

As he went to the door he took the raygun out of his pocket and released the safety mechanism. He seemed determined not to take the slightest risk.

That was fine by him, thought Ps-5 as he depressed the intercom button and gave his instructions.

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Repairman-75 could not shake off the memory of that event that was already months past. When he was asleep he was plagued by gruesome dreams. Over and over again he saw his colleague stricken and killed by the glaring energy fingers. Over and over again he heard the metallic footsteps of the guards approaching from out of the darkness to grab him with their cold hands. But each time he awoke just in time to avoid experiencing the dreaded moment.

Perhaps one day he would no longer be dreaming and they would really come to lead him to the converter. Fortunately no one knew his secret. As long as he kept silent he was safe.

And then there were those long rows with the motionless bodies. What were they? Were those dead out of the past who were kept there for some unknown purpose? For what? What was the meaning behind those corpses that had been lingering for millennia in their burial chamber?

Or... were they not dead at all?

R-75 had often asked himself that question without receiving an answer. His knowledge was limited to

technical matters and he understood very little about medical science.

He cringed on hearing the shrill tones of the communicator. The voice of his superior issued from the loudspeaker: "You are to report to the Psychology Sector, R-75. At once! Confirmation, please!"

I understand," R-75 managed to reply. With trembling hands he straightened his suit and went to the door. What did they want from him now? Hadn't he passed the test? Or, worst of all, had they become suspicious and wanted to retest him?

The lift brought him to the right level. As he walked along the corridor he tried in vain to think of one fact that might have aroused the suspicion of the Psychology Sector. To no avail. He knew, though, that there was always a reason for being summoned by the psychologists. That was what bothered him so much.

As he closed the door behind him, he already knew that his situation was not as serious as he had feared. The psychologist smiled at him—at him, a plain worker.

"Sit down, R-75," Ps-5 said patronizingly and pointed at a chair. "I would like to ask you a few questions and I want you to please answer truthfully. You have nothing to fear but you should know that keeping silent can only cause difficulties in your situation. Have I made myself clear?"

R-75 could feel his initial relief vanish in one blow. The psychologist was still smiling but this smile had now come to signify a trap.

I don't know..." R-75 began but he was immediately interrupted.

"You shall know in a moment, my friend. But first I just want to tell you one thing: after our talk there will only be two alternatives remaining, either you and I will continue to live or both of us will be compelled to take the road to the converter. The decision is yours."

"The converter?"

"Yes, the converted. To be brief: a few days ago you were here because you were sent to me. I gave you psychotreatment and discovered the truth about the death of your colleague—and thus I also discovered your secret. Don't be frightened; your secret is safe with me. If I were to report it, I would die with you. I hope that puts your mind at ease."

R-75 indeed seemed to be relieved. He was intelligent enough to comprehend the significance of the psychologist's words. He nodded mutely.

"So far so good. We agree," Ps-5 continued. "Since you have grasped the situation I don't see why I shouldn't just give it to you straight." He turned and called in the direction of the half-open door that led to the adjoining room. "Doc, you can come in. I think we can describe our plan to R-75..."

D-3 shoved the raygun in his pocket as he entered the room and greeted R-75 with a nod of the head. Then he took a seat in the third chair.

R-75 knew at that moment that the number of possible death candidates had increased to 3.

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They encountered neither a person nor a guard.

R-75 was leading them. He didn't feel very well in that role. He knew that the two men behind him were armed and determined to kill every opponent on the spot no matter what the consequences would be. But R-75 still lacked confidence in the unfamiliar weapons. He had never seen them in a person's hand in action.

They glided with the lift towards the centre of the gigantic spherical world and approached the unfamiliar regions of the engine rooms. Neither the physician nor the psychologist had ever come this far. Their world was the sparkling clean hallways of the scientific sections. R-75 on the other hand, was at home everywhere so to speak. His occupation could assign him to any part of the ship.

He stopped. "It isn't far now. Actually no people are allowed in this far. I am surprised that we haven't met any guards."

"The guards are machines. They lack impulsive thinking, at best they think logically. They don't suspect anyone is here because no one has any business here. Let's not forget that they have probably been performing their duties for 10,000 years and as far as we know the history of our race, there has never been an event like this. We are the first who have attempted to probe the secret."

"Perhaps others have tried before us," interjected the doctor. "They died with their secret as no one heard about it."

"Unlikely, my friend. I doubt that even the guards know about it, or at most only the ones that live behind the wall and attend to the slumberers."

"Perhaps," D-3 conceded and fell silent.

"Let's move on," said Ps-5 impatiently and weighed the raygun appraisingly in his hand. He knew from the doctor how it functioned but only trying it could convey the true power of the weapon.

The light became dimmer, they could hardly see their hands in front of them. These regions of the ship were seldom entered, so energy was conserved here. It seemed the supply was not inexhaustible.

R-75 walked on. Then he stopped before one door. It was thick and massive, sunken into the wall, but one attempt proved that it was not locked.

"Behind it is the back room of the entire air regeneration system. From there I alerted my foreman. Shall we go in?"

"That's what we are here for!" Ps-5 impatiently nodded and took up the lead. He held his weapon ready to fire but his precaution was unnecessary. Except for the mighty generator blocks and control panels the room was empty.

The dim light still sufficed to show up the rectangular spot-welded in the opposite wall. It was clear to be seen that a hole had been drilled at that spot and later closed.

"That's where it was," said R-75 and shuddered as the memory overcame him. What he had thus far

only experienced in nightmares seemed to suddenly want to take on reality. "But I have no tools with me. How do you expect to break through?"

Ps-5 did not answer. However, the doctor raised the hand that held the raygun. "With this!" he said with determination. "There is enough energy in here to melt away the entire wall. But it's easier than that. All we have to do is remove the piece you inserted."

R-75 nodded uncertainly. He seemed to suddenly have qualms but then he was convinced by the look on the faces of his two companions that there was no turning back. The decision had been made and could never be revoked.

D-3 winked encouragingly at Ps-5 and R-75.

"Step back a little. It would be best back there in that corner. The energy rays could be reflected. We must be careful. I'm not that completely familiar with the weapon."

He waited until the two men had retreated to safety, then ducked behind a metal block and aimed the lens at the spot in the wall marked by the welded seam.

The pale ray melted on the wall but was not reflected. Fluid metal began to drip heavily onto the ground, solidifying into bizarre puddles. At first D-3 was too blinded by the glare to see but then his eyes became accustomed to the brightness. He knew that he would not see a thing when he had switched off the weapon, at least not for the next 10 minutes.

The molten hole cooled very slowly at the edges. During that time the men were able to become accustomed to the prevailing twilight. R-75 stared doggedly at the hole they had created. Finally he murmured: "If I had known then what I would find behind there, I would never have climbed in. It's strange, really, that I wasn't afraid then. Today it's a different story."

"A danger that you know is no danger anymore," Ps-5 said more cold-bloodedly than he felt. His hand felt its way around the bevelled edge of the entry hole. "It's slowly cooling off. If there is an alarm system, the guards will soon appear. How long did it take that time, R-75?"

"I can't say exactly. I did the repair and then I looked around. Well, maybe an hour."

D-3 looked at his watch. "A half hour has passed, so we don't have much more time." Suddenly he smiled hollowly. "Who's going first?"

The psychologist knew that one of them would have to assume the role of leader if the enterprise were not to fail. His last reservations fell as he realized that clearly. It wasn't actual courage that suddenly inspired him but more the thought that he could no longer avoid his destiny. No matter what would happen to him, it became all-important to discover what was hidden in the centre of the gigantic ship.

"I'm going first," he said and bent over to crawl through the narrow hole. "You may follow if you like."

Without waiting for an answer he forced his way through the opening and straightened up on the other side of the wall after he had moved aside to make room for the others following him.

It was not only dusky but perfectly quiet as well. None of the usual sounds of the ship could be heard here but the air was good, even though ice cold. Little lamps set into the ceiling glowed at regular intervals, providing a murky light. Extensive control panels on the walls betrayed the presence of a hidden

installation that served some unknown purpose.

The psychologist's gaze fell on the two long rows of glass blocks. The fluid must have a high specific weight, as the motionless bodies were lying on the surface, barely submerged. That was just about how a piece of wood would float on mercury.

"Fantastic," a voice whispered beside him. It was the physician. "If I weren't seeing it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it."

It seemed as if Ps-5 were awakened from a dream. "We have no time to lose. Let's go."

He kept his weapon poised in his hand as he slowly walked over to the first block. The doctor followed him, while R-75 remained standing by the opening to cover them from the rear. He, too, had received a raygun and knew how to use it.

They stopped in front of the first block.

The two men looked down at the thin, well-built body of a white-haired youth asleep on the surface of the cloudy fluid. His eyes were closed but it looked as if he could open them at any moment to gaze in astonishment at the intruders. The thin-lipped mouth that fitted so well with the small but energetic chin was also closed. Not even the slightest movement of the nostrils disclosed that there was even a trace of life left in the resting body.

The man was naked. His sallow skin colour differed only slightly from the fluid. The arms lay limply close to his body, as if they did not belong to him. His legs were slightly bent, as if the unknown man had tried to make one last movement before he fell asleep.

The cables and tubing ended on top, in the glass case. Only now did Ps-5 and D-3 notice that a barely visible gas was continually flowing into the container and then being drained out by another tube. The lighting was not adequate enough to determine whether the slumberer was inhaling the gas or not.

Ps-5 carefully placed his hand against the block. Almost instantly he jerked it away. "Cold!" he whispered. "That liquid must be colder than ice."

"Colder than ice but still fluid," the doctor nodded, raising his eyebrows. "The life process was abruptly stopped by freezing. It can set it again anytime. Sometime—today or in the distant future—that will be the case."

The psychologist remained silent. He took one last look at the sleeper before moving on. In the next block a woman was lying.

Ps-5 and D-3 stared down at her and realized that she was unusually lovely. Only once in their lifetime were the men of their world allowed to see a woman. When their studies and apprenticeship was over there was one year of vacation. It was the most beautiful time of their lives. In that year they got to know some sort of family life and had only one responsibility—to produce offspring. When that had occurred, the temporarily coupled individuals were separated, never to see each other again. The man was detailed to the work sector for which he had been trained and remained there until the Commander ordered his elimination. The woman remained in the children's sector for several years until she received her second vacation.

After the birth of the second child her life's task was fulfilled. If she had not excelled at anything or

applied for some special training in childcare or education, death in the converter claimed her...

The girl in the glass case was not only beautiful, she also embodied the most secret wishes and longings of the two men, who knew nothing but their useless and already lost lives.

The voice of the psychologist trembled. "A miracle... she's like a miracle! She's still very young..."

"She is thousands of years old!" the doctor soberly interrupted. "She just looks so young because her body cells haven't decomposed."

The psychologist stared transfixed at the naked figure as his fingers tightened like iron clamps around the raygun. His eyes gleamed menacingly as he whispered: "These monsters...! What a life they have condemned us to, whoever they may be!" He looked up and sought the eyes of the physician. "Now we know why we were never to learn the truth, they knew we could not have stood it any longer! Our entire life is one single lie. We are only to know what we are allowed to see and we are repeatedly told it is the sole beauty existing in the universe. We were unaware of what else there was—except us. But, D-3, now we know!"

"Just what do we know?" replied the doctor, making an effort to appear calm and composed. "Here they lie, the eternal slumberers. So what next? Do they bear the guilt for our existence? Or is there some other guilty one?"

"Who could that be?"

"Perhaps the Commander... I don't know. He must know more than we do."

Ps-5 shook his head and regarded the girl again. "The Commander is mortal like us. When his time has come the converter will be waiting for him too." The psychologist paused briefly, squinted his eyes and added: "Nevertheless we are going to ask the Commander if he knows anything. Now we finally have the courage for that."

"Of course we will ask him," D-3 agreed. "But it will be the end of our lives. Or do you think that we still will be alive one hour after that conversation?"

"I'll take that risk, my friend. We have weapons. If we are at the right spot, we could even hold an entire army of guards in check."

"Mutiny?" whispered D-3 timidly. "You mean you intend to rebel against the existing order?"

"That was not my intention but it is becoming increasingly evident that we will never survive our questions to the Commander without resistance. I don't know who the Commander is and how he thinks. I know him only from various conversations in which not one private word was uttered. Perhaps he himself is tormented by doubts but perhaps he is an unfeeling automaton who mechanically fulfils his duty—or what he considers to be his duty."

With one last, almost regretful look at the naked girl the psychologist turned away. He looked over at the small entry hole next to which R-75 stood guard. It was still perfectly quiet.

"There are more than 200 glass blocks," D-3 said. "I wonder if there are other rooms of this sort? The number seems too small to me."

"You will have noticed that the room is slightly inclined," Ps-5 responded thoughtfully. "My knowledge of mathematics is hardly outstanding but I guess that there are at least 9 or 10 more of these halls in this sector of the ship. I don't venture to say what it looks like in those other parts but there is nothing to indicate that—that the freezer is limited to one section."

The physician shuddered in horror. "That term reminds me how cold it is. I can't stand it much longer. Shall we have a look at the other slumberers?"

"Some," replied the psychologist, suddenly turned monosyllabic. "We will hardly learn any more than we already know—arid the guards could appear at any moment. I am surprised that it hasn't happened yet."

Again they strained to pick up any sounds in the twilight but there was nothing to be heard. R-75 cast them questioning, fearful glances. He raised his hand and signalled. The hour was almost up.

Ps-5 nodded back. "We had better hurry," he said to the doctor. "I want to avoid a meeting with the guards—at least today. One day the showdown will have to take place."

"With those metal monsters," D-3 shuddered. "I don't feel very well when I think about it."

The psychologist seemed astonished. "Why's that? Haven't you done away with one yourself?"

"Sure—but I think we will have to distinguish between the guards on this side of the wall and beyond it. I haven't seen any here as yet it's true but the tale our new friend R-75 told is enough to..."

He suddenly stopped.

Was that a noise?

With lightning speed he turned to the place where R-75 stood guard. The repairman was standing motionlessly, peering into the dimness behind the glass blocks. Somewhere back there metal was scraping upon metal, it seemed as if something were rubbing against the floor. And then it became lighter.

They saw it.

In the background a crack opened, soon increasing in size and revealing a portalway. The room behind it was brightly lit. Against the light, however, the outline of 5 or 6 gigantic shadows appeared, in outline. They proceeded to slowly set themselves into motion.

"The guards!" R-75 screamed in terror and bent over to seek salvation in flight. As quickly as he could he jammed himself through the hole, not ceasing to call for help.

"Let's get out of here!" D-3 shouted, grabbing the psychologist's arm. "What are you waiting for? If they catch up with us..."

"They know that we are here," Ps-5 responded with uncanny calm. He might have been fearful of the danger but now that he was confronted with it his composure returned. His thumb clicked back the safety catch of his weapon. "I want them to know that their waiting is at an end. We'll finish off at least one of them."

The doctor hesitated. He did not want to flee alone and abandon his friend to his fate but on the other hand he loved his life, as empty and meaningless as it might be. Having decided, he too prepared to face

the enemy.

"We should at least attempt to cover our retreat he hastily suggested. "Let's shoot when we reach the hole so we can disappear right afterward."

"Good—but quick!"

With one last glance at the sleeping girl the psychologist hurried after the doctor. One second later he reached the opening to the inhabited rooms of the ship. Tensely they awaited the things that were coming.

And they came...

Six robots they were, striding towards them between the long rows of glass coffins. Their arms were bent at right angles and they had no hands but instead the insidiously gleaming lenses of deadly energy ray emitters. They were almost 232 meters tall, true giants. The guards in the inhabited part of the ship were at most 2 meters tall. The difference was obvious and it made itself noticeable in another respect: They possessed the ability to speak.

It was a hard, metallic voice that suddenly called: "Stay where you are! Do not try to escape us!"

Ps-5 seemed to awaken from a dream. His hand trembled lightly as he raised the weapon and aimed at the robots. Poised with one leg in the escape hole, the doctor followed his example.

"If you stand still we will talk with you," answered Ps-5 as loudly as he could. His words echoed through the domed chamber and reflected off the walls. But they did penetrate the mechanical ears of the robots, as the 6 figures came to an instant standstill. Only one of them made another two steps but then it stopped as well.

"You are not in a position to set conditions," the metallic bass voice droned with terrible undertones. "You have been condemned to death since the second you forced your way into this room. No one is capable of saving your life. Why did you come?"

"Can't you guess?" asked Ps-5 sarcastically, although his body was covered with goose bumps. He had never been as close to death as at this moment. "What about those people asleep in the glass containers? Who are they? What is your assignment?"

For awhile there was silence, then the answer came: "Perhaps we shall tell you and your friend the answer but only when it is a mere matter of seconds that separates you from death. Come here and do not flee. We know that a third man got away but he will be struck by the law of the Commander."

"Don't move," ordered Ps-5 as the robots prepared to set themselves in motion. "Why didn't you pursue our friend who fled?"

"We are never allowed to leave the forbidden sector," the robot admitted. It was never to tell a lie, its creator had seen to that—a safety measure which now backfired. "So will you come over to us or should we fetch you?"

"You haven't answered our questions yet!"

"I already made explicit that they would be answered later."

D-3 whispered hoarsely to Ps-5: "You can't bargain with the machine. They act according to their orders and will not change their minds until they are reprogrammed. I know a bit about it. One of my acquaintances, a physicist..."

"Then at least we'll give them something to remember us by," the psychologist grimly replied. "Come on, let's try to put at least two of them out of action. And then high-tail it out of here. They aren't allowed to follow us, we know."

Without waiting for approval he pressed the firing button of his weapon.

The 6 robots were standing with their backs to the light and were easy to see. The glaring energy finger springing from the psychologist's weapon hit the speaker on the chest and hissed as it ate its way into the ice-cold metal. Before the doctor could open fire in turn, a small detonation followed that literally ripped apart the robot leader. Clattering, the giant tumbled to the ground, creating such a din that the two men feared it might be heard in the entire ship.

The psychologist took aim at the second robot.

Three of them were destroyed before they returned fire.

All at once D-3 felt a scorching pain on his left hip and was horrified as he saw that his clothes had begun to burn. He screamed as he stooped to slip through the hole into the generator room. Ps-5 could do what he wanted...

But the psychologist was smart enough to realize that he alone could not stand up against the three remaining opponents. He followed the doctor and helped him reset the metal piece into the jagged hole.

Only then did they notice R-75, who came out from behind a generator block, trembling and weak-kneed and obviously ashamed of his cowardice. But they could understand him and did not hold his hasty withdrawal against him. They had almost done the same.

"Help us, R-75. Weld the edges!"

Ten minutes later they were on the way back to their living quarters. More than once they encountered curious glances when they met up with workers or scientists but no one asked a question.

Before taking leave of one another, Ps-5 said to R-75: "In two days you will report to me for another examination. Come at once, at the beginning of your shift. And another thing, not one word to anyone about what we have experienced! Death is certain if you are unable to keep silent!"

"I'll keep quiet and come the day after tomorrow," the repairman promised and departed, walking away with calm and slow steps.

D-3 watched him go. "Just a simple man but we can rely on him."

The psychologist nodded. "And we have to! Especially the day after tomorrow. Can you guess the reason why we are not going to the Commander today?"

"Yes, I can," D-3 responded. "You want to find out whether the robots are really in touch with him and will report the incident."

"That's it exactly!" nodded Ps-5. "I am not so sure that they will do it."

With a handclasp they took leave of one another.

* * * *

The left door of the two opened and the three men entered the inner sanctum of the ship—the Central Command Room.

The Commander sat behind a table, and watched them enter. When he recognized by the characters on their chests that it was the persons he had expected, he nodded to the guards that had accompanied his visitors to the door.

Without a word the giants wheeled around and were gone.

The door shut by itself.

Long seconds passed in tense silence; then the spell seemed to be broken. With a friendly gesture the Commander pointed at three armchairs.

"Have a seat, gentlemen. You are the only people who requested an interview today. As this is not the appointed day for our routine talks, I am very anxious to find out what brings you to me—especially Repairman-75."

It was indeed unusual that a simple worker wished to speak with the Commander.

The three men had agreed that Ps-5 would be their spokesman. He was familiar with the human psyche and knew the right reaction to even the most baffling impulses of a strange heart.

"Before we disclose the real reason for this talk, we have a few questions to put to you," the psychologist began, consciously breaking the existing order. It was not customary to put questions to the Commander. "If you answer us truthfully, it will be possible for us to speak openly with one another."

The Commander did not move. An astonished expression did appear in his reddish albino eyes but otherwise he did not betray by the slightest grimace how perplexed he was by the psychologist's extraordinary suggestion. His gaze slid over the faces of the three men as if seeking in them an explanation, then he calmly said, "Go ahead, Ps-5."

Now the psychologist was astonished. He had counted on meeting with greater resistance. The unusual readiness of the Commander to bypass all existing laws seemed to indicate that he was informed about the incident in the ship's centre. But perhaps he was only curious.

"My questions are related to the everyday things of our life, Commander. They are not just asked by me but they occupy the minds of thousands of people who are born in this ship, raised here and, ultimately, eliminated. All of these questions can be combined into one: why are we living, Commander?"

The white-haired ruler over life and death looked into the psychologist's eyes with a glassy stare. His

hands were resting on the table before him and Ps-5 noticed that his fingers were twitching nervously. That was an encouraging sign.

"Why we are living? A very peculiar question, Ps-5, if you allow me the remark. But your special profession excuses the curiosity that prompts these questions. What surprises me is that R-75 also comes to me with such a question—that he dares to come to me. You as a psychologist should give some thought to it..."

"You haven't answered me yet," the psychologist brusquely interrupted. His arm was dangling loosely at his side and he felt the comforting nearness of the dangerous energy weapon in his pocket. Don't evade me, Commander."

This time the Commander openly showed his bafflement. According to the existing laws he was absolute ruler over all living beings of the metal world, his word sufficed for the immediate enforcement of the most severe punishment. And disobedience was always punished by death. This was even more than that! It was plain mutiny.

"Alright, Ps-5. You shall have an answer. Every one of us is living so that one day he can serve the community by his death. The disintegration of his body in the converter gives the ship's engines new energy. The living must breathe, drink and eat, the generators must be fed and the course of the ship must be maintained."

"And why? For whom, when all of us die anyway?"

However, this time the Commander did not answer directly. "Every one of us who only thinks of his own small and insignificant fate is committing a crime against the community. The individual does not count. Whoever does not submit to this must relinquish his material energy earlier than was allowed him. None of us is living uselessly. We are all serving the highest purpose."

"What is that purpose?"

"The purpose of the individual is to end in the converter. The purpose of our entire people is unknown."

"I want to get to the bottom of it. That is why I came to you."

The Commander studied Ps-5 with a long and thoughtful look. Then he shook his head. "Even if I wanted to, I could not help you with that. I myself don't know the ultimate goal. I fulfil the task which fate entrusted to me—more I cannot do. It won't be long now and my successor will be sitting in this position. I don't know if he would have the patience to listen to you one more second."

The psychologist sensed that the talk had entered a critical phase. It would be well not to lay his cards on the table and precipitate a decision.

"When your successor takes over your office you will die. Are you looking forward to that moment with particular pleasure or satisfaction, Commander?"

It took a minute for the answer to come. "I regard that inevitable event coldly and indifferently. When I assumed office a generation ago I already knew my mission. I myself brought my predecessor to the converter. That is exactly what will happen to me. I picked the most intelligent lad in the Offspring Sector, made him into O-One and hence into my successor. In gratitude he will kill me as soon as he receives the signal from me."

"And you don't spend one thought on postponing that event because you want to live?" asked Ps-5 dubiously. "Do you want to tell us that you look forward to certain death with no emotions?"

"I feel no different than you do," the Commander responded. "When you decided to ask me these questions you also resigned yourselves to die on that same day. Or do you believe that you will live to see the end of this day?"

"Yes, we believe that, all three of us, Commander. What is more, we will live even longer than today or tomorrow or until the day you think it right to have us brought to the converter. We shall live until nature decides that we must die. We will live out our full lives until our natural end!"

The Commander shook his head gravely. "No you, won't! What you are demanding is total madness! You would get old and become a burden to the community. In its final phase your life would be useless to our people and would destroy all the benefit it brought in your active years. None of us may die a natural death because the whole race would die along with him. Why, our commonsense tells us that. There would be too many children, too many people, too little room."

"It is nature itself that shall decide here. If that were right, we would die in our prime. But that is not what nature does. How long can a person live altogether, Commander? Do you know? How else do you want to determine the time limit set for us? Aren't you uttering the death sentence too early?"

"The period of life is not gauged by the natural life-span but by physical factors of our world. There must never be too many children born or too few adults dying. That balance is what determines our destiny."

"A gruesome and unjust destiny, Commander! We have come to bring about a radical change. We will no longer stand by and watch as life is wasted and abused. We are not just concerned with our lives but that of our entire people. Nature has granted each of us the right to live until his death—if I may put it that way. I don't know who created the laws by which we are supposed to live but whoever it may be, may the Creator of the universe curse him or her!"

The Commander turned pale. His hands trembled. "I forbid you to speak this way!" he cried out angrily.

But the psychologist was far from being intimidated at this point. "You cannot forbid me to do anything anymore, Commander. We three know that our lives are forfeited if we bend to your will, so we have nothing more to lose if we dare to replace the old laws by new and better ones. And you will help us. In repayment you will receive the gift of your natural life. That is our suggestion. You can reject it, if you have the courage and are crazy enough to do so."

The Commander's hand lifted from the table and reached out for a control dial. The psychologist smiled when he saw the movement. "I won't stop you from summoning the guards. The sooner they come, the sooner all the men in the ship will learn what has happened. You may be assured that they won't just sit and watch us being slaughtered. If you don't send out an alarm, however, we will still have a chance to discuss the situation and settle it peaceably. Incidentally..." he took the raygun out of his pocket and released the safety mechanism, "...we are not defenceless."

The Commander stared wordlessly at the weapon. His hand hesitated, then returned to its original resting-place.

The psychologist smiled. "Good," he acknowledged in a friendly tone. "I see that you are a reasonable man. Then we can continue to speak openly with one another."

"Don't have any illusions, Ps-5," the Commander warned. "I only hesitate because I don't want a large-scale bloodbath. That would only upset the existing order. If our number were reduced too radically, the danger would be just as great as if it were to grow. The secret of our regulated life is a righteous balance. You must have grasped that by now..."

"Righteous?" Ps-5 scoffed. "Is it more righteous to kill an unborn child than a living being prematurely?"

"You deny slumbering life its right to exist?" cried the outraged Commander. He seemed very convinced about his standpoint. "You will leave this room in the company of the converter guards only..."

"Just a minute! By the way... you have just reminded me of something. You said something about slumbering. That brings up a new problem. Would you divulge to us who drew up the prevailing laws? Was it your predecessor?"

"You have no right to ask that!"

"That is of secondary importance—I have the power!" The psychologist lifted his weapon. "I can kill you!"

The Commander smiled coldly. "My time will be up in a few short days, then I shall die anyway. I have no more fear of death, for which I have prepared myself my entire life. No, that will not force me to betray secrets to you which maintain our entire people."

"Tell me something, Commander, is only the Commander in office entitled to know the secrets?"

"That's right," nodded C-1 rashly.

"Excellent!" retorted Ps-5. "So you must instruct your successor before you die. Were that not to occur, the existing order would break down, the secret would die with you if I killed you, wouldn't it?"

The Commander realized what a terrible error he had made. He turned even paler than he already was. "You wouldn't dare..."

"Oh yes we would! We shall kill you and your successor would never have a chance to hear the truth from your mouth. Even if we died ourselves he would be left helpless, in your position. You can imagine the consequences yourself."

He stopped to give the Commander a chance to deliberate on the consequences of his stubborn behaviour. He caught the eye of the physician, who had regained confidence. R-75 stood motionless by his side with his weapon drawn. His expression showed determination.

At last the Commander said, "You win, Ps-5. I see no alternative. If I break the laws and tell you what I was only allowed to tell the succeeding Commander, I shall be serving our people and the spirits of the ancestors." He got up and stood straight and proud before the conspirators who were demanding a natural death. "But you won't live long with your knowledge."

"Let that be our problem," Ps-5 replied with composure. "Go on, talk!"

"No, I won't talk much, but I want to show you something." He pointed at the second door in the wall, which was massive and deeply embedded in the metal. "Come with me."

The psychologist suspected a trap but he realized that he had no choice but to trust the Commander. He watched as he went to the door and began turning the wheel.

"Don't worry, gentlemen. Beyond this there is only my cabin. It has no exit, only another door. Behind that is what you want to know." The heavy door opened onto the adjoining room. They followed the Commander.

His cabin was almost identical to the ones they knew or occupied themselves. But it was different in one respect, it had a second exit. There was a door exactly opposite the entrance.

It was a true monster made of metal with electronic locks and other locking devices, which only the initiated were able to open.

The Commander pointed at the door. "Behind that lies the secret to our existence. Only the Commander is permitted to enter the room, anyone else must die. I can't change that law, and even if I would spare you, punishment would be inevitable. The guards would carry out the sentence."

"And how," asked the psychologist, "would the guards find out about what happened here? They are not beings made of flesh and blood but only machines built by our ancestors. Why should we bend to their will? Haven't machines been created to serve mankind? Why should that be reversed?"

The Commander did not answer. He walked on, then stopped before the door. Wordlessly he began to work the controls.

At that point D-3 spoke up for the first time. "My friend Ps-5 has forgotten to mention that we will shoot you immediately if there is betrayal awaiting us behind that door. These are deadly weapons! I took them from a guard."

The Commander ceased moving a moment. His face displayed dismay. "A guard? And he let you do it?"

"What choice did he have? I deactivated him first. Inside he looks like a heap of scrap metal."

"A guard..."

"They are easy to outwit, Commander," the doctor assured him sarcastically. "Soon there won't be any more guards at all on this ship and the humans will rule again."

The Commander no longer hesitated. With a determined yank he turned the wheel, switched off the electronic blockers and opened the door.

The three men followed him with drawn weapons.

They entered the room. It was completely empty. All the walls—with the exception of one—were bare.

But on that one wall there was a large screen.

Bigger than life, they saw there the face of an old, white-haired man.

And then it began to speak

* * * *

For two days Machinist-4 had not seen the doctor. He had meanwhile run out of that wonderful remedy. After taking it he had such splendid dreams and if he didn't get more soon he would go insane. For life, M-4 now knew, was only bearable with dreams.

He reported in sick but a doctor he did not know was substituting for D-3.

Still he managed to get a day off. This didn't give him much pleasure, though, because the curious looks cast at him by his colleague, M-7, who was also off duty, were anything but pleasant.

"You really don't look good, M-4. What's wrong with you?"

"A lot," the addicted machinist grumbled crossly. "Most of all I need peace and quiet."

But M-7 could not be shaken off that easily.

"You can't fool me, old boy. Something is bothering you. A blind man could see that. You can speak frankly with me. We may hardly know each other but still we have been living in the same cabin for years and will probably continue to do so until the end of our lives."

"Lives...?" M-4 echoed contemptuously then grew apprehensive and stopped. He had already said too much. But M-7 suddenly smiled.

"I find life just as useless and hopeless as you do. I'm not risking anything in saying it to you, because you think the same. What are we two waiting for, anyhow? For the Death Squad to lead us to the converter. Am I right?"

"Absolutely!" M-4 acknowledged and he could feel that a decision was forthcoming. Either M-7 was a spy or he was a friend. If he—M-4—were still alive the next day, he would know the truth.

"Good. Then tell me what is bothering you. Is it this life itself or is it something in particular?"

"Why should I burden you with my problems? Doesn't everyone have enough to do with his own?"

"A shared burden is easier to bear."

That made sense to M-4. He thought it over another couple of seconds, then he said: "Doctor-3 and I cornered one of the guards and put him out of action. We stripped off his weapons and took them. After that D-3 gave me a sedative that I got used to. I can't get along anymore without the dreams. But for two days D-3 has been missing."

M-7 was beginning to sense what was concealed within that brief description. Not just he but other men were dissatisfied with the existing order and had decided to break the supremacy of the robots and the Commander. It was pure coincidence that he had now made contact with one of those men but, as it seemed, M-4 was only playing a minor role. Still he was the most important connection.

"Is a guard that easy to destroy?"

"It's not hard. Actually the robots were constructed in such a manner that nothing should be able to harm them. However, the inventors didn't forget to include one safety factor. It seems they had some bad experiences back then in that respect. There is a small, inconspicuous screw in the neck. One turn is enough to deactivate the guards. In a pinch, a hard blow will serve the same purpose. Then they are perfectly helpless, despite their treacherous energy weapons."

"So if one wanted, all the guards could be eliminated?" M-4 seemed so terrified by the mere thought of it that he turned deathly pale.

"But that would be madness...!"

"Would it really, M-4? What would happen if a group of determined men set out to trick every guard and deactivate them? They could gain possession of the weapons and get all the way to the Commander. The reign of terror would be at an end."

"Are we used to anything else? Didn't our ancestors live as we do? When did it all begin, I wonder?"

"I have already racked my brains with those questions, too, but not anymore. Now it's time for action. It was coincidence that D-3 chose to take you into his confidence. He needed a machinist for his venture and he took you. Now I, too, am part of it. We must speak to D-3 at once..."

"He has been missing for two days, M-7. I don't know what has happened. Perhaps his crime was discovered..."

"Then you wouldn't be alive anymore, either." M-7 shook his head. "Or do you think the doctor would have kept his mouth shut?"

"Perhaps he kept quiet," M-4 contended somewhat uncertainly. "But if he is still alive—where is he?"

"That can be found out. He is the physician for our section. If I report in sick..."

"There is a substitute!"

M-7 was morosely silent. He had forgotten that.

But then he said: "We will simply take action! In the next shift we shall begin to eliminate the guards. As long as no one knows our secret, all will be well. And if the incidents are discovered, other men will join in with us. In reality no one can be satisfied with this existence as long as the destination of our journey is not revealed to us.

But before they could realize their intention, the intercom shrieked in the cabin.

A voice that was obviously disguised said: "Hello, M-4. Answer me!"

"M-4 here," the machinist answered after he had switched on the intercom.

"Are you alone in your cabin?"

M-7 nodded emphatically so that M-4 replied: "Yes, I am alone. Who is speaking?"

The intonation of the voice changed and suddenly seemed very familiar to the two men.

"Listen hard, M-4. Take your tools and come at once to the Central Sector, Command Room. You are being awaited."

"Dr-3?"

"Yes, it's me. And now hurry!"

"Don't switch off!" M-4 called in desperation. "Are you still there?"

"What is it?"

"May I bring along a friend?"

A brief pause. Then D-3 asked: "How does he know?"

"He is with me. I can't say anything now but he is on our side. And I need my sedative again..."

"Bring your friend along," D-3 decided. "But don't hesitate another moment. It's a matter of life and death—not just for you or me but for all of us living on this ship. Got it?"

"We'll come at once.

"Another thing, M-4: pass by the Medical Institute and pick up a package that is waiting for me there. You only have to mention your name."

"And if anyone asks..."

"The Commander gave you an assignment—that's what you say to anyone who stops you. Understand?"

"The Commander...?" gasped M-4 but the physician had already switched off. He looked at M-7. "What has happened? Do you understand?"

M-7 slowly nodded.

"Yes, I think I do. At last a man has had the courage to give our questionable existence meaning again. Let's hurry, M-4, so he won't have acted in vain. We must help him."

In rapid stride they hurried along the corridor.

2/ THE DEATH SQUAD

The face looked down at them.

It belonged to an old man. It was furrowed by deep wrinkles and displayed something akin to resignation. The eyes had a reddish cast and out of them were shining both goodness and inflexibility. Below the thin nose was a pinched mouth that exhibited mercilessness—or was it only resolution.

The Commander bowed in the direction of the screen. He, the unlimited ruler over life and death of the people, bowing to a mere picture.

Or was it a picture?

No, it wasn't, for now the face began to move and the mouth to speak. From a hidden loudspeaker there issued a pleasant-sounding, not unlikable voice, which, however, seemed devoid of any emotion.

"You have opened the door, Commander, and brought three men with you. What is the meaning of this? I had expected you to come with your successor. What are these three men doing here?"

The Commander bowed once again. He was pale and made a downcast impression. His fear of the unknown being on the screen must have been unimaginably great.

"They forced me into it, sir. If I hadn't brought them they would have killed me before I could pass on the secret to my successor. Our people would have been without a leader."

The face displayed fury.

"You have failed, Commander! Death is too mild a punishment, as you were doomed to it anyway." A short pause ensued during which the face became almost expressionless, then the voice continued: "What do you want of me and who are you?"

Ps-5 tried to escape the spell of the face, whose rigidity made a tremendous impression upon him. Somehow it seemed dead but on the other hand the picture could not lie. The man up there on the screen was living somewhere in an unknown region of the enormous ship...

...and he was the actual sovereign over their people!

The Commander was nothing but a puppet!

It took a great effort for the psychologist's lips to form the words: "We have come to find out the truth. Up until today we regarded the Commander as the guardian of old and obsolete laws but now we have come to realize that there is still someone else above him—you. Who, I ask in turn, are you? Where do you keep yourself hidden?"

The face registered astonishment that soon changed to wrath. However, these emotions could not be detected in the voice itself. Calmly and as detached as before it said:

"Your questions are monstrous and contrary to the existing order. I hereby sentence you to death by converter. Commander, see that the order is carried out and alert the Death Squad. The sentence is to be enforced immediately."

Ps-5 smiled fiercely and aimed his weapon at the Commander.

"Good, great master," he said, ice-cold. "Then I shall proceed to kill the Commander before your eyes."

We'll see what happens then."

He placed his finger on the firing pin.

The physician and R-75 were still standing next to the door that led to the private chamber of the Commander. They held their weapons in readiness as they stared at the big face. They expected to hear the rumbling of metal footsteps at any instant but all remained quiet.

"Don't worry, friends," Ps-5 said over his shoulder. "No one will come. Who should alarm the robots if not the Commander? The great master on the screen won't do it because no one knows about his existence. Perhaps not even the guards." He turned to face the screen again. "Now, shall I kill the Commander or are you ready to negotiate?"

"What do you want?" asked the loudspeaker as the lips of the unknown being mouthed the words. He seemed to be able to adapt to the respective situation with astonishing skill.

"What is the secret that only one living being may know? It must be of fantastic significance, since when to know it, one of them must die. Still, it is just as terrible if the secret dies with the Commander. So I am asking you up there. . ." his manner was increasingly one of disdain rather than familiarity "—you, up there, what is that secret?"

For a second nothing happened. Then the answer ensued: "You have said yourself that no more than one mortal may know the secret. If several know it, they must die. Do you wish to die?"

"Just let me worry about that, Master," Ps-5 responded derisively. "You had better answer!"

"As you like. I am the personification of the will of your ancestors and transmit this will to the Commander. He is nothing more than a mediator between the dead and the living. His task is to maintain the existing order and to choose a successor. Then he dies—and with him the secret. That is all."

Ps-5 nodded. If he was disappointed he did not show it.

"So that is all? And what about the guards? They are mechanical constructions selected to dominate human beings. On whose instructions are they acting?"

"On mine!"

"That means on behalf of the ancestors, right? I want to tell you something: ancestors who require machines to enforce their will are not worth being remembered. We shall forget them and create new laws! We shall banish violent death from the laws and cease to end our natural life prematurely. We shall rule ourselves and see to it that the machine again becomes what it originally was: the servant of mankind!"

It took an entire second before the face changed horrifyingly. Fury, anger, disappointment and terrible hate flashed in turn over the features of the unknown one.

And then, when the voice spoke again, it was just as expressionless and icy—as before. But it was also melodious and even pleasant to the ear. The contrast was so baffling that it prevented any conclusions about the actual thoughts of the speaker.

"You underestimate the value of the machine and its positronic aid. Machine and positronics not only

replace the human being, they are superior to him. The ancestors knew that when they created and employed the guards. To ignore their will signifies the end of this civilization."

"Then let it come to an end!" Ps-5 cried in outrage and absolute determination. "It would not deserve more than ending now if it didn't defend itself."

"That is what others have tried before you. They all ended in the converter."

"Yes, the converter! Another machine! That will be a joyful day when we throw all the robots to be found on board into the converter. That will supply energy for countless generations."

Once again hate distorted the face of the unknown one. His red eyes gleamed like fiery coals.

"Your life is forfeited, mutineer! Commander, call the guards!"

The Commander's face took on a deathly pallor. "He will kill me, sir! Who will instruct my successor?"

"I will, coward! At least die like a man, if it must be! But first do your duty and inform the guards!"

Ps-5 held the weapon. His hand was not trembling. "Before you'll have taken one step, Commander, you will be dead! How do you intend to inform the Death Squad?"

Despite his desperate situation, the Commander smiled somewhat. "That, at least, you will not be able to prevent, psychologist. Look at this little case in my hand." He lifted two fingers and a small object came into view which he had previously concealed in his hand. "I have had it for quite awhile. Even if I were to die this very second the guards would appear within minutes. When my hands let go of this case the stopper is released and an electrical current closes. That signals the Death Squad. So now you may fire, psychologist."

The Commander had become very sure of himself. He knew that the three conspirators would not simply kill him impulsively in this situation. They were too cautious for that. If his life could gain the slightest advantage for them, they would spare him.

His conclusions were correct.

"Will you alarm them if I do not shoot?" asked Ps-5 warily, his weapon still trained on the Commander. "If you obey that guy on the screen, you are done for. He will see to it that you are killed. He said so himself. But why do you want to die if it is not for the benefit of the people? Have you still failed to realize how we are being betrayed? Isn't it time to take our fate into our own hands instead of following the laws of a past generation that have no validity any longer—simply because the present has overruled them?"

The Commander seemed undecided. The voice from the loudspeaker spoke with no particular emphasis: "Follow my order, Commander! Call the Guards!"

But the seed planted by the psychologist had already taken root. His entire life the Commander had accepted his violent death because it had been the precondition for his life. Now, all at once, he was offered the prospect of living on until he was old enough to die a natural death.

He did not look at the face on the screen as he said: "You will guarantee my life if I do not call the guards?"

The psychologist breathed a secret sigh of relief. The battle was decided. "We give our word," he nodded and lowered the barrel of his weapon.

He pointed at the door. "Let's go to the Command Room. It is not necessary to discuss our next moves in the presence of this phantom."

He turned back to the screen. "We shall inform you of the results of our negotiation. Until that time we must ask you to be patient."

"For the last time, Commander—sound the alarm!"

Ps-5 took the Commander by the arm and led him out of the room. Without a word D-3 and R-75 followed, closing the door behind them. The order of the unknown being ineffectually faded away: "...give that command, Commander! Sound an alarm..."

Then the voice ceased.

Ps-5 drew a deep breath.

"It is good, Commander, that you thought it over in time. You are honourable and conscientious in character, there is no doubt about that. What moved you to change your mind? Was it just the prospect of living longer? Speak openly—but perhaps it would be better if you got rid of your alarm device beforehand."

The Commander nodded, pressed his index finger on a barely visible button of the small case and carefully placed it on the table. Then he sighed in relief and sat down in his chair. He gestured to the three men.

"Sit down. I shall be frank with you but allow me to begin at the beginning. I was still very young when I was called to the Commander, who instructed me in my duties. I brought him to the converter as my duty prescribed and then assumed my office. Ever since I have been lonely. Believe me, my life is more monotonous than yours, which knows companionship and work. I am not even granted the year of vacation and I have no offspring. My only diversions are the daily conferences, composing the death list and following the orders of the Master, as he wishes to be addressed."

"Who is the Master, C-1?" asked the psychologist. "Do you have any idea of where he lives, in which part of the ship he is hidden away?"

The Commander shook his head. "Unfortunately I don't. He only appears to me in the form you have experienced. That screen is my sole contact with him."

"How could he gain such enormous influence on you?"

"That is easy to explain, Ps-5. Ever since my youth I have known only that face on the screen. I received my instructions daily and was threatened with the most gruesome punishment if I did not obey. However, the constant reference to the legacy of our ancestors was the most impressive of all. The Master emphasized time and time again that it was their will that we place our lives in the service of the people until the ship has reached its destination. What that destination is, I never learned. I have never met the Master personally but his greater-than-life image harbours such suggestive powers that it is impossible to evade his influence. Moreover—who has the courage to break with tradition that has lasted for thousands of years?"

"We do!" answered Ps-5 coldly and nodded grimly. "I can understand you but it is peculiar that the Master was not capable of making such a deep impression on me. Something about him bothered me. I don't know what it was but somehow the picture did not seem real and life-like enough. And there was a certain discrepancy between the picture and the voice, as if the transmission wasn't functioning perfectly. I don't know if that makes sense technically."

"I know what you mean," the physician interjected. "I had a similar impression but I cannot explain what struck me, either. Still I am convinced that something isn't quite in order. What do you think, R-75?"

"I can only agree with you. It's too bad that I am not an electronics specialist but the men in the Mechanic Sector should be able to supply us with an answer."

"The Mechanic Sector, the machinists..." D-3 mused. "Yes, that might be a good idea..."

"You are thinking of your contact, of M-4, aren't you?" The psychologist guessed the thoughts of his friend. "Indeed, we should ask him."

The Commander had followed the discussion without comprehending. It must have required a tremendous adjustment on his part to regard the picture of the Master, hitherto his absolute ruler, as a faulty technical television image whose synchronization no longer functioned perfectly.

"I am not sure that we should pay this much regard to that matter..." he began hesitantly.

"Oh yes we should!" Ps-5 instructed him emphatically. "In fact, I consider it extremely important. We must find out if it is a defect at all. You see, it is possible that the transmission apparatus is in perfect order."

The men looked bewildered. They did not grasp what he was driving at but the, psychologist did not have the chance to explain as the intercom buzzed at that instant.

Someone wished to speak to the Commander.

"Should I answer?"

Ps-5 nodded. "Naturally. We must not arouse any suspicion until we are definite about our actions. Perhaps it is a routine matter."

The Commander depressed a button in the viewscreen panel after he had arisen. The left outermost screen lit up.

It was the liaison officer.

"What is it, O-2?"

The young man with the white hair gestured distractedly as if to apologize for the intrusion.

"O-1 insists on speaking to you at once, Commander. I explained that you were in the daily conference but he refuses to be turned away. What shall I do?"

"He has to wait," the Commander replied with a questioning glance at the psychologist. "I'll let you know

when you can send him to me."

"Alright, C-1," O-2 asserted and seemed relieved.

The screen darkened.

"Who is this O-2?" the physician inquired. "He makes a good impression, don't you think, Ps-5?"

"You mean we could use him as an ally?"

"Doesn't he look that way? I even think that not just he but almost all the men will be our allies when they learn the truth—I mean when they know what we intend to do."

"I am positive of that," Ps-5 nodded and turned to the Commander. "What about O-1? Will he cooperate?"

"I can't say for sure. He is waiting to replace me. You can see he wants to talk to me. I am convinced that he not only wants to talk but that he wants to do away with me right now. He can hardly wait any longer."

"Hmmm." Ps-5 sank deep into thought. Then he raised his head. "When is O-2 due for destruction by the converter?"

The Commander seemed astonished but he didn't ask any questions. He got up and went over to the wall. There was a block standing there that had a diagonal panel on which electronic controls were mounted. The finger of the Commander began to play with them until a plastic card fell out of a slot. He lifted it and read the data on it. Then he said: "O-2 has one-fifth of a generation left to live."

"So he would be thankful if we were to prolong his life span. But O-1 is a different story. He wants to become Commander, even if he must one day die by the hand of his successor. He prefers the temporary power, which makes him our enemy."

"That's how it is," nodded the Commander. "What do we do next?"

"Why don't we officially announce our decision," D-3 asked eagerly. "It should be easy..."

"It is not easy," Ps-5 shook his head. "You forget that there are the guards. They are armed. Our people are defenceless. And we do not know what measures our friend next door has undertaken. We can defend ourselves here in the Command Room, it was equipped for that. Therefore none of us can leave this room without taking the risk of being killed out there. The guards will strictly uphold the old laws, for that is all they know. They obey their 'Master,' whoever that might be. No, we must find some other way to end the rulership of that unknown being. Not force but cunning will help us. We must inconspicuously put the guards out of action, one after another. Our friend M-4 will help us with that."

The physician beamed. "You are right, Ps-5, as always. I shall have M-4 summoned. Can we do that from here, Commander? Perhaps through O-2..."

"Better not," Ps-5 interjected. "We must do it directly. You connect us, Commander."

"I'll talk to him myself," the doctor volunteered. "He will bring tools and food provisions with him. I'll instruct my medical sector accordingly." He grinned. "Orders from the Commander."

Thus it came about that the four conspirators received reinforcement a half-hour later.

Only then was the second officer called and briefed. He unconditionally joined the side of the friends and promised to do everything towards realizing the determined plan of action. They decided to send him back outside to recruit additional confederates. The two machinists were given the task of eliminating individually posted guards and bringing the dismantled weapons to Central Command. They would wait until there were enough rayguns collected before making a frontal attack upon the actual rulers of the ship.

Thus far nothing had occurred that might have justified suspicion that the Master had undertaken countermeasures. It seemed he was biding his time. Or was it possible that he had no connection whatsoever with the people other than the screen behind the Command Room...?

That was an important question yet to be clarified.

Still and all, project 'natural death for everyone' was in progress.

And nothing could stop it.

* * * *

And yet the relentless machinery, once set in motion by the ancestors and never interrupted, was still running as well.

The death commands issued by the Commander long in advance were carried out by the special squad of guards punctually to the minute. That type of order had never been retracted, that was almost unthinkable.

The six robots marched in their droning uniform step, approaching the technical sector. A certain T-39 had lived long enough. Today he must die so that with the energy of his life he would repay the community what he owed it. It had clothed and fed him and now he would give everything back. Nothing was presented as a gift in this ruthless world, not even death.

T-39 did not know that the time had come. No one knew. They all could guess the deadline of the elimination, as they knew their approximate life expectancy, but the actual date of the execution remained secret until the last moment.

T-39 was not alone in his cabin.

He had been astonished when he recognized the visitor who wished to speak to him. It was not an everyday occurrence that O-2 called upon the technical personnel, even if T-39 was the man in charge of the section.

T-39 pointed at an empty chair. "Have a seat, O-2. I hope your visit has no bad significance."

"Don't worry," responded the young officer, who had already informed the heads of other sections of

the changes in progress. "I am seeking you out today with a friendly message and with a request to help us. It's a long story... and yet a short one."

T-39 listened in silence without interrupting him. He thought of the Death Squad that would appear any day to fetch him. The end awaiting him was so taken for granted that it held no terror for him. But now, all at once, the opportunity presented itself to live on without ending in the converter. From one moment to the next the picture he had made of his future shifted. He could live instead of die! Death, hitherto something all too self-evident, suddenly became a nightmare.

He snapped to his feet. "I am with you, O-2! What can I do to help you and your friends? The guards..."

"They must not find out anything until the very end. Everything must proceed as it always has. We must avoid arousing suspicion, T-39! You inform the people that you trust and do not hesitate to eliminate any possible traitor immediately. We can only declare war upon the guards when we have sufficient weapons."

T-39 recalled his own situation. He did not want to disclose to O-2 that he had himself in mind when he asked: "What do we do if the Death Squad comes to get someone? Should we attempt to rescue the unfortunate man?"

"By no means! That would be wrong. The six guards of the Squad would react immediately and contact their Command Central. And that, my friend, has nothing to do with our Commander. No, we must sacrifice those due for the converter in order for the rest of us to live. That cannot be changed."

"I understand," nodded T-39. He suddenly felt a choking lump in his throat but he tried not to let the Second Officer notice anything. "Nothing must happen that could arouse the attention of the guards. The existing routine must not be interrupted..."

"...*Not yet!*" O-2 said with peculiar emphasis as he got up. "I shall have to go now. Do your duty—and you will have to admit that it is a brighter and better duty than the one we knew until now. Life and the future lay open and danger free before us."

T-39 watched the door close. It seemed to him as if he were suddenly alone in the world or in that ship. He had never before felt that lonely or in need of help.

Where should he begin? With his own crew, naturally. He would inform them and prepare them for the great moment when the resistance to the guards would begin. Then it would be decided whether their race was worthy of beginning a new life.

Footsteps...

T-39 listened intently and all at once he turned pale.

There were steps outside in the passage. Regular steps with a metallic ring. Guards!

At least six guards...!

The technician's blood curdled in his veins, as he comprehended the significance of what he heard. There was still the possibility that they had come to fetch someone else from his section and not him. But who else lived along this corridor? Only T-18, who had only taken over his post a few weeks previously

so that one day...

At that second T-39 became conscious of the fact that T-18 was his successor. It had never occurred to him when he had trained the young man and made him his assistant.

His successor...

The footsteps stopped abruptly.

Metal knuckles knocked hard against the door.

The time had come!

T-39, bearing the hope of a continued, peaceful life in his heart, suddenly saw himself exposed to a gruesome disappointment. The Death Squad was totally unaware of the impending revolution and was only doing what it had been doing for millenniums. Nothing could stop it.

T-39 was incapable of making one sound with his paralysed lips. He stood in the middle of the room that had been his home all of his life. A meagre and wretched home but he had known no other. Life was nonetheless desirable, even if it had remained senseless.

What magnificent sense it did make, however, to die a natural death, he thought agitatedly. It came not as the merciless ender of life but as the redeemer. When a human being became old enough he went to sleep. Forever... that is what it was, no more and no less.

But here and now...

The door opened. One of the guards entered. The others remained in the corridor, barring every avenue of escape. That was not mere routine, as there were cases in which the death candidate resisted the inevitable and had to be led to the converter forcibly.

"No—!" T-39 cried and retreated until he bumped into the bed. "No! Not yet...!"

The guard looked at him expressionlessly with his gleaming lenses. It was a robot and knew no feelings. It was constructed for this task and it meant nothing more to it than stoic fulfilment of duty. "The Commander has ordered your elimination," it said mechanically. "We urge you to come with us."

T-39 feverishly tried to find some way out of his dilemma. Would O-2 rescue him if he knew about it? Would the Commander?

"Why wasn't I informed of this?" he said as calmly as he could manage. A sudden ray of hope had returned his composure, although a storm of desperation continued to rage inside him. "I cannot abandon the projects in progress without endangering the community. There are important provisions to be made... may I speak to the Commander?"

"The Commander has ordered your death," the robot replied coldly. "He will have seen to it that he left no gap behind. Come with us!"

"He might have overlooked..."

"The Commander is infallible!"

Yes, T-39 thought bitterly, that he is! But he has forgotten that he sentenced me to death and now I must die without being able to call for his help.

But why not?

Without hesitating, he jumped to one side and lifted the head of the intercom off the base. In that position he established direct contact with the liaison officer.

O-2 was not in his cabin but he had adjusted the intercom. T-39 was connected with the Commander.

"Commander speaking!" a voice responded. "Who is calling, O-2?"

"T-39. The Death Squad is here and wants to take me but five minutes ago I spoke to O-2. You know..."

"I know!" the Commander interrupted. A short pause followed. "I cannot help you, T-39! You know why! Go with the guards."

T-39's entire world crumbled. He saw the robots set in motion, heading for him. A cry of horror wrested itself from his throat and with his last strength he clung to the bed.

"I won't, I won't! Commander, do something! You have the power to do something! Now, when the future..."

But he could go no further. Something seemed to have suddenly closed his mouth. He thought about the many thousands of people in the cabins and corridors of the ship, how they all had been faced with the same fate and now were to receive a chance to live for a better future.

If he, T-39, did not betray them!

Limply his arms sank to his sides. The intercom was still connected and T-39 knew that the Commander was listening. He would be able to hear everything happening in his cabin.

The technician's desperation transformed into incredible heroism. The contrast was only an apparent one, however, for every true heroic deed springs from the ultimate despair in face of certain death. Heroism, so T-39 perceived with singular clarity, is nothing else but the last, flickering spark of hope of a life about to be extinguished.

"Alright, alright, guards," he said calmly. "I won't resist any more and shall join you. Goodbye, Commander. And... I wish you all the best."

"Be brave, T-39!" came the voice from the loudspeaker, clearly containing regret. "What you are about to do will not have been in vain. You are doing it for all of us. Good luck."

"Thank you," T-39 quietly replied, then he turned to the guards. "Let's get going!"

With no trace of astonishment the guard registered the almost unbelievable change in the attitude of his victim. He stepped aside to let the technician pass. Without looking back even once, T-39 left his cabin and turned right in the passageway. He knew the robots of the Death Squad had come from that direction.

They placed him in the middle and led him through countless corridors. The humming of the large consoles in the interior of the ship, otherwise soft, barely audible, became more distinct. He passed mechanics and other technicians who stopped to let the weird group pass. Almost every day one met the Death Squad somewhere in the ship. It would eventually fetch everyone, it was nothing special.

T-39 looked straight ahead, neither to the left nor to the right. He did not wish to see anyone because he was afraid of letting something slip. For the second time in his existence he had come to terms with the inevitable end.

They turned into a narrow passage that ended in a single door. As if by magic it opened onto the room behind it.

T-39 walked on, then came to a halt in the middle of the room. The guards took their positions after the door had shut behind them.

T-39 knew that no one was permitted to be present at the executions. No one had ever been able to report what the death room looked like. The oval lid over there in the wall—that must be the conveyer to the converter.

The leader of the guards went over to the panel and operated the electronic controls. Slowly the oval metal lid swung open, revealing a dark hole that was large enough to contain a human being. Beyond it a downward slanting conveyer belt was visible. What was down in its depths could only be guessed.

T-39 shuddered. An irresistible urge to do something and not simply allow himself to be killed stirred in him.

But then he thought he heard the penetrating voice of O-2 depicting the future of their people. And the order of the Commander, his last good wishes.

No, there was no way out! He had to comply.

"Stick your head into the opening!" the guard ordered callously.

T-39 felt as if he were placing his head on the executioner's block although he had never in his life heard of decapitation. He heard the approaching steps of the robots behind him and then he felt them grasp his legs.

He received a strong push—and then he slipped down the slide into the black uncertainty of the reactor.

Somewhere before him death must be waiting.

The lid closed above him and it became pitch dark.

The atomic glow...?

Where was the heat of the atomic flames that were to consume him? Perhaps his nerves were not reacting properly, perhaps he had already lost consciousness.

And then, all at once, the slide stopped...

3/ ONE OF THE GREATEST

SECRETS OF THE UNIVERSE

The patrol ship of the Solar Empire materialized and returned from paraspace to the normal Universe. It had traversed more than 2,000 light-years in the course of one single hyperjump and now required a good half hour to calculate the data for the next jump and anchor them in the positronic robot computers of the navigation controls.

Commander Wilmar Lund breathed a sigh of relief as his First Officer, seated next to him, got up and shook off the last of his pains of transition.

"It's always the same," he reassured him. "It's no different for me either. Ask at sickbay if there were any accidents."

That was rare but it did occur once in awhile. The breakthrough from the 5th to the 4th dimension and the materialization connected with it caused certain structural changes which were generally so minimal that they could go disregarded.

As the First Officer switched on the readout screen, Lund enjoyed the undisturbed view of the star-studded Universe. The enormous panorama screen created the impression that one was looking directly into the swarm of suns, actually, however, it only reproduced what it was fed by electronic impulses. In other words, one was seeing only a picture, not actual Space.

They were now 20,000 light-years from Earth. The *Arctic*, a light cruiser of the Solar Empire could execute hyperjumps up to 2,000 light-years. Another six or seven hours and they would be landing on Earth.

The *Arctic* was returning from one of its surveillance flights in the Sun system and had on board some agents of the Solar Security Service who were taking the opportunity to report back to their native country. Among them was a lieutenant of the Mutant Corps, a certain mousebeaver Pucky.

Pucky, as just stated, was no human being. Somewhere on the planet of the dying sun lived the remainder of his declining race, facing their uncertain destiny. Some day the cold sun would be extinguished—or become an all-consuming nova. That might still take millenniums or perhaps just a few years.

Pucky, a successful mixture between a giant mouse and a beaver, was covered with rust brown fur and had a unique command of the human language. In general he squatted on his hind legs and supported himself with his broad beaver tail to keep his balance. When he grinned, his one solitary incisor became visible; otherwise it served to grind raw carrots, making them more palatable for his digestion.

All of this might not have been so remarkable, however, if it weren't for additional circumstances which contributed to making some sort of miraculous animal out of Pucky. It was for good reason that this so inconspicuous creature was a member of the fabled Mutant Corps, a special troop of the Administrator of Earth, Perry Rhodan.

Pucky was a telepath, he was able to receive the thoughts of other living beings over great distances and to understand them. Furthermore he was psychokinetic, without touching an object he could cause it to move—and that over greater distances. And, finally, he enjoyed the reputation of being one of the finest teleporters of all, with the power of his mind Pucky could transpose himself to some other location by simply dematerialising.

Thanks to these three characteristics, Pucky was more highly esteemed by the Terranians than any other member of the Mutant Corps, despite his droll appearance and barely one-meter stature. In fact, he was approached with respect, if only to avoid arousing his displeasure. For it had long since been established that Pucky quite often played with his talents—usually for his own pleasure and edification, which did not always mean that his subject was pleased.

As the *Arctic* materialized, Pucky was just on his way to the supply room. He felt hungry and intended to satisfy that pang as soon as possible. Ever since he had been picked up from Blisher 3, an utterly superfluous planet as far as he was concerned, he had not had anything worthwhile under his incisor. It was time for a change.

Cadet Brugg liked animals very much but it wasn't that quality which had gotten him this post as mess officer. Still and all he did have something to do with animals here, even though it was only frozen fresh meat for the crew. Fortunately for his tender makeup he did administrate food concentrates, vegetables, canned goods and every sort of foodstuff required by the kitchen to prepare the various meals.

As mentioned, Cadet Brugg liked animals very much but when the door to his domain suddenly opened and a little monster with rust-brown fur entered, looking like a runaway teddy bear at that, and furthermore grinning saucily with one yellowish incisor, he almost got a heart attack. He had never in his entire life seen Pucky, although he did know that there were members of the mysterious Mutant Corps on board the *Arctic*. And while animals or intelligent beings resembling animals from foreign planets were nothing special in the age of spaceflight Brugg—to be honest—would never have gotten the idea of suspecting a particularly intelligent creature in Pucky.

"Whom did you run away from?" he asked suspiciously, overcoming his initial fright. "Did your owner forget to lock you in?" He bent over slightly to pet the peculiar visitor. "Well, come on over and tell the nice man where you belong..."

At first Pucky lost his tongue but then he realized by telepathic means that Cadet Brugg was gentle and good-natured. He plumped down on his feet and squatted like a trained rabbit. He held his forepaws extended vertically, the 'hands' hanging down, something like a doggy begging for food. He blinked his brown dog eyes guilelessly and grinned expectantly.

"My oh my! The little fellow can do tricks," Brugg commended him and bobbed his head back and forth appreciatively. "Now what shall I give him as a reward?"

Pucky would have most liked to point out that carrots sweet as sugar would be no mean reward but he did not want to end the fun yet. It was such a rare occurrence that he met someone who did not know him yet. So he pricked up his big mouse ears and expectantly smacked his broadtail on the floor. His behaviour was reminiscent of a seal before whose nose a herring was dangling.

"A nice piece of sugar?" asked Cadet Brugg, naturally without expecting an answer. Everyone speaks to dogs and cats without expecting answers. So great was his astonishment when the odd visitor shook his head vehemently.

"Oh—no nice sugar?" Brugg was truly amazed and wondered who might have taught that to the playful little guy. "A piece of sausage perhaps?"

Pucky's head shaking became more vehement and he did not conceal his aversion to non-vegetarian food one bit.

Cadet Brugg began to assume that his little *gestal* always shook his head because that was all he knew how to do. He would have to guess what to offer him. Deciding on the spot, he opened the small cupboard and spotted the remainder of his own lunch in a bowl. Vegetables, potatoes and a piece of meat made up the medley. With an enticing "now here's a tasty treat!" Cadet Brugg bent down and set the bowl in front of Pucky's nose.

The mousebeaver did not believe his eyes when he recognized the glorified stew. No one had ever offered him the likes of that! It was even worse than the mush Tschin-LaDjen had served that time and that later turned out to... no! Don't think of it! Pucky valiantly blotted out the memory. His incisor disappeared instantly. He got down on all fours, took the bowl and with a well-aimed pitch, sent it flying right into the gullet of the garbage disposal. Then he leaned back again and grinned expectantly at Brugg.

But now the cadet was at a complete loss. "Spoiled beast!" he declared before fully realizing what the mousebeaver had done. Suddenly he jerked to a halt on his way to the intercom and stared in complete bewilderment at Pucky. He saw the brown, good-natured, somewhat mischievous eyes. With a peculiar feeling of uncertainty he went over and contacted Central Command.

"Commander Lund! What is it?"

"Cadet Brugg here. Food Depot. I would like to report a stray animal. Has there been any report of the loss?"

"An animal?" Commander Lund apparently did not know what to make of that bit of news. "Dogs and cats are forbidden on board a cruiser!"

"This is neither a dog nor a cat," Brugg said, throwing a sidelong glance at Pucky. The mousebeaver was still squatting near the door, 'begging' and grinning impudently. "I don't know how to describe it. It's got ears like a young elephant, a pointed snout, a flat tail and looks terribly stupid..."

It was as if someone suddenly pulled his legs out from under his body and he fell broadly on the extension of his spine. Commander Lund heard the thud over the intercom.

"Hey, Brugg! Cut out the nonsense! Do you hear me...?"

"Oh... my back!" came the groans from the loudspeaker in the command centre. "I think there are ghosts here..."

"Nonsense! Wise up, man! Do you know who your visitor is? Pucky, the mousebeaver! Never heard of him? What does he want there?"

For 10 seconds he remained quiet, then he answered distractedly: "Pucky...? The mutant? This is supposed to be that famous Pucky?"

"Who else?" Lund snapped back. "Give him what he wants. The next hyperjump will take place in 20

minutes. Got it?"

"Uh... I... yes, I got it!"

A clicking sound and Cadet Brugg was once more alone with his guest. He slowly got up, held his back and looked at Pucky mistrustfully. "Excuse... excuse me, Lt. Puck." He had heard that the mousebeaver liked to be addressed like that. "I couldn't have known... why didn't you introduce yourself?"

For the first time, the squeaky voice of the mousebeaver could be heard. "You didn't either, my son! Anyone can see that you are a human being! Why shouldn't you see that I am Pucky?"

There was no arguing against this disarming logic. Cadet Brugg sighed in distress and shook his head.

"So what may I offer you? Honestly, I thought you were..."

"Yes, I already know, a stray! Do you have any fresh carrots?"

"Do I have... huh?"

"Carrots!" Pucky repeated patiently. "Preferably frozen. I'll thaw them out myself. Two or three kilograms would be just the amount..."

He cut off abruptly.

Cadet Brugg noticed that the brown eyes of the mousebeaver had suddenly become immobile, as if they were seeing something terrible, incomprehensible in the far distance. The grin disappeared. He seemed to be listening inside himself, as if he heard voices there.

"What is..."

"Quiet!" Pucky ordered indignantly and sank again into the peculiar trance. He seemed to have forgotten his surroundings.

Brugg shook his head and went into the adjoining room to get the required carrots. These mutants did have funny habits, he admitted to himself. Well, that fellow shall get his carrots and then he can get out of here. But perhaps it would be better not to think so much. Telepaths can be uncomfortable companions.

He returned with a plastic bag full of carrots in time to see Pucky dissolving into thin air. The only thing remaining behind was the fine scent of toilet soap, about which a certain Reginald Bell always claimed that it stank so obnoxiously that even the most callous fleas, on simply sniffing it, would leap into the eternal hunting grounds.

"What luck," Cadet Brugg mumbled, both disturbed and relieved. "So he isn't a telepath but a teleporter." He regarded the bag in his hand. "I would like to know why he couldn't wait."

Shaking his head, he brought the carrots back to the freezer.

* * * *

Commander Wilmar Lund started when Pucky materialized two meters beside him in the Command Room. He raised his index finger admonishingly. "I don't like it when my crew is bothered," he said in a mildly reproachful tone. "You gave Cadet Brugg quite a scare. Did he get your carrots?"

But to his amazement the mousebeaver took no notice of his remark. "I picked up a call for help, Commander! Some human's life is in acute danger!"

Lund stared at Pucky in bewilderment for a moment, then he began to roar with laughter. "But—that is impossible! Who could be in danger on the *Arctic*? The First Officer has received the 'all is well' report. I wouldn't know..."

"It is not on the *Arctic*, Commander!" Pucky interrupted. "The call for help is coming from another ship."

Lund shook his head and regarded the panorama screen. "In a radius of 0.2 light-years there is neither another ship nor a planet. So you must be..."

"...mistaken?" Pucky finished the sentence for him. "Out of the question! The cry for help was strong, concentrated and in greatest distress. The man was close to a violent end. Quite aside from the fact that I must save him or at least would like to get to know his murderers, it would interest me to find out on which ship the incident is taking place. It must have been a ship because the man was thinking about atomic converters and robots."

"Besides there are no inhabited planets in this sector of the Milky Way," Commander Lund agreed. "A ship it is! Hmm, you are right, Pucky! That would be interesting. Perhaps they are Arkonides."

Pucky slowly turned until he was exactly facing the direction of flight. "I can determine the direction but not the distance. I lack exact experiences, I don't know how far I can receive telepathic impulses. Is there any point in making small jumps with the *Arctic* straight ahead? Maybe we will find the other ship."

"What do we have tracking devices for? Coupled with the hyper-transmitter they work over light-years with no time loss." Lund smiled. "I will see to it that the bow sector is painstakingly examined. Satisfied, Pucky?"

The mousebeaver shook his head. "I will only be satisfied when we find the other ship."

Lund had meanwhile instructed the Communications Central. He turned back to Pucky.

"If you are not mistaken, that will soon happen. Are you, quite certain that no one here on the *Arctic* has taken the liberty of playing a practical joke?"

"I could tell the direction, Commander." Pucky pointed to the middle of the panorama screen. "The Command Room of the *Arctic* is on the outer wall. Can you tell me who might still be *in front* of us?"

Lund realized that there could be no more doubt about Pucky's assertion. Before he could answer, the intercom buzzed. It was Communications Central.

"Unknown object 1.57 light-years ahead. Moving away from us diagonally, direction sector BC-JS-78. Size and shape: diameter about 1,500 meters, spherical. Material: known and unknown metal alloys and plastic. We suppose that it..."

"I already know!" squeaked Pucky. "A battleship of the Arkonides! I thought so!" He reflected a moment. "Someone needs help! I'll look into it."

Commander Lund was much more interested in the fact that a battleship of the Arkonide Empire was roving about in this sector. What was it doing here? Was it on some official mission?

"We shall jump as close as possible," he told Pucky. He threw his First Officer a quick glance. "Calculate the jump coördinates in conjunction with the data from Com Central."

Ten minutes later the *Arctic* made a short transition and materialized seconds later a good 1½ light-years away from its previous locality.

The other ship could now be clearly and distinctly recognized on the screen. It was flying fairly slowly and thus was easy to follow.

It was indeed one of the enormous spherical battleships which, with its millennia old and still modern weaponry, was capable of destroying entire sun systems. The Arkonide Empire, ruled by a gigantic robot computer, sent them out time and again to discover the Earth. Thus far they had not succeeded.

Was this giant also underway to find the Earth?

Commander Lund had ordered the protective energy screen laid around the *Arctic* and was in readiness for a hyperjump, should the alien ship attack. So far there were no signs of that.

To the contrary!

The spherical ship was continuing imperturbably in its path, as if it hadn't noticed the *Arctic* at all. At a distance of barely 200 kilometres the Terranian warship was gliding behind the giant and waiting for a reaction.

It did not come.

Squinting his eyes, the Commander asked: "What trick are they trying to pull? Can't you find out anything, Pucky?"

The mousebeaver had already been occupied for quite awhile with checking the thoughts of the other ship's crew. However, that was not as easy as one might assume. Thousands of impulses of the most diverse nature were received by his small but capable brain and had to be sorted. How was Pucky to know what was important and what was not?

"There is a general atmosphere of alarm," he mumbled. "But it has nothing to do with us! If only I knew..."

He submerged once more in reflective concentration. "I will jump over there," he mumbled decisively. "Retain our present flight position, Commander, so I can return at any time. And should anything happen to me..." he suddenly grinned in amusement, "...then you make a pretty junk pile out of that gigantic football."

"I would have to call for reinforcements first," Lund replied somewhat gloomily. "We'll wait for you, Pucky. Don't stay too long."

Pucky nodded and began to concentrate. Then he vanished, as if dissolving into thin air.

* * * *

Before Pucky dematerialised he concentrated on the place from which the telepathic cry for help had originated. It was only this pinpointing that made an exact teleport jump possible. His body dematerialised and covered the 200 kilometres through the 5th Dimension to the other ship, materializing again at its destination.

It all took a fraction of a second.

Commander Lund disappeared before his eyes and when the dark fog receded he was standing in an unfamiliar room.

The six figures were robots, he saw that immediately. On the one hand, that was good, because if he had to use force, then he would rather be confronted with robots than by men. On the other hand, he could not telepathically read the thoughts of robots, so that what they thought and planned remained their secret. But robots do not lie. They answer all questions—when they do answer—truthfully.

Pucky was unarmed. He replied on his abilities.

One of the robots was about to close an oval lid that was built into the wall. He could not pick up any thought impulses that referred to this lid or to the six robots. The man who had called for help must thus be unconscious by now or dead.

"What have you done with him?" he asked in the galactic universal language of the Arkonides, which was understood by all of their colonial peoples. And these robots were doubtlessly of Arkonide construction.

Without a sound the machine men went to their posts. Three blocked the only door, two others took up positions against the wall. The sixth, the one that had closed the lid, turned to Pucky. In a metallic voice he said: "The Special Squad has just eliminated T-39. Who are you?"

"The Emperor of the Andromeda Nebula," Pucky replied and scrutinized the robots. His eyes did not miss a movement, since they now had to replace his telepathic perception faculty. "What did the man commit to be put to death?"

"He reached the required age. The Commander ordered his elimination."

Pucky had to accept that he would have to judge the situation on this ship by new standards. The sociological structure seemed to harbour a few surprises. But before he could ask any more questions the robot said:

"It is prohibited to enter this room." He walked over to the lid in the wall, opened it and continued: "Stick your head into the opening."

Actually Pucky could have been offended by the fact that the robots were not even amazed by his

appearance. They simply registered that he had entered a forbidden room and sentenced him to death. Who he was did not seem to interest them beyond that.

But Pucky knew that robots were not curious but that they acted and thought just as had been provided for by their construction. This did not exclude the possibility of independent thought as long as it remained within the framework of their prescribed duties.

"The Commander has sent me," he said as emphatically as his high, squeaky voice would allow. "He has revoked the death sentence for T-39."

He said this on impulse, not dreaming what he was unleashing. It had never before occurred that the Commander revoked an elimination order, simply because that would have been impossible. It would have signified revolution.

But revolution...

The robot leader said: "T-39 has already been eliminated. The Commander is acting against the law. We shall examine the case. Now stick your head into the opening.

Pucky lost patience.

"You numbbell! If anyone is going to be looking into that funny hole, then it will be you. Go on, take a look. See what's down there."

He put his psychokinetic gifts to work. Invisible currents of the mind grabbed the robot and raised it. It floated horizontally for the last stretch, then glided into the black opening. The sudden scraping sound soon lessened, then it ceased.

"Would you like to have a turn at sliding?" the mousebeaver inquired in a friendly voice of the five remaining robots. "It doesn't cost anything."

Instantly they raised their weapon arms.

Pucky realized that it was high time to change his location. Blindly he teleported himself, just before five pale energy fingers crossed at the exact spot where he had been a fraction of a second before.

He materialized in a brightly-lit room somewhere in the ship. Several men were standing around in groups, involved in animated discussions. Instrument panels and screens on the wall showed that it was some technical central. In the middle of the room there was a robot of Arkonide design lying motionlessly, apparently lifeless and partially dismantled.

Pucky was not noticed right away. He kept very quiet and attempted to obtain the necessary information from the thoughts of the men assembled. What he did ascertain was quite remarkable but it did not suffice to relay a total picture. At any rate, it seemed as if a certain Machinist-4 wanted to convince the men that a revolution or mutiny was necessary. The strange thing was, however, that he repeatedly insisted that the Commander of the ship was on their side.

What could that mean? If there was mutiny on a ship, that could only entail an uprising by the crew against the commander. And this time the Commander was rebelling *with* the crew?

Against *whom*?

Pucky could be very logical. He recalled the encounter with the six robots and their words. Here lay the deactivated robot, by all appearances dismantled by the men. Only now did Pucky notice that the weapons were missing. The picture was becoming more complete. If there was any mutiny here, it was aimed at the robots.

And then he heard M-4 saying: "...above all it is most important that the guards do not find out what is going on. And they must not know that the Commander is on our side. We can only oppose them openly when we have gathered enough weapons."

Pucky realized that he had stabbed the people in the back who were rebelling against the robots. He had committed an error that he would have to rectify.

He stepped forward and said: "Good day, friends, I have come to help you."

The men were alarmed by the sight and sound of him. Their talking ended abruptly and all eyes were trained on the mousebeaver. No one attempted to take the initiative.

Pucky realized that they were afraid of him because they suspected that he was a messenger sent by the 'Master'. He grinned soothingly and shook his head. "No, I come from another ship. I will help you. The robots already know what you are planning. They will take action. Now shut your mouths—no, better still, you can just leave them open and tell me what has happened. You are a ship of the Empire, I assume?"

The responding impulses conveyed to him instantly that none of the men had ever heard the concept 'Empire' before.

"Aren't you Arkonides?"

They did not know that there was such a thing as Arkonides.

The thing was getting crazier and crazier. They were Arkonides, that could be seen at first glance. The white hair, the reddish albino eyes, the delicate limbs—everything indicated that he was dealing with pureblood descendants of that humanoid race.

Pucky realized that he would have to proceed individually to make headway. He turned to the man who had come to his attention before. "OK then, M-4! Pull yourself together and tell me about it! You needn't be afraid of me."

The machinist took heart. He stepped forward, looking somewhat embarrassed as he shoved a small, silver rod with a lens at the front end into his pocket and said in Arkonese: "The sight of you arouses my astonishment but not fear. I believe we can trust you, wherever you may have come from. Let us tell you what has happened..."

Silently and with growing amazement Pucky listened to him, and though he did not learn everything at once, he did begin to sense that he had accidentally stumbled upon one of the greatest secrets of the Universe.

4/ THE GREAT MYSTERY SOLVED?

O-2 and M-7 were lingering in the Commander's room to exchange reports with him and their new friends. Two days had meanwhile elapsed. In that time they had been in the adjoining room twice but the picture of the Master had not changed in attitude or manner of expression. He continued to threaten them with the most terrible punishment but undertook nothing.

At least they had not noticed anything.

O-2 was describing how the heads of the various sections were informed about the new situation and instructed in their tasks. He had not yet met anyone who was not enthused and ready to break with the old and gruesome tradition. If all section heads had passed on the message, the entire population was informed by now.

M-7 had a positive report to make as well. Thanks to the advance work of the Second Officer, he had soon found helpers with whom he ambushed the individually posted guards and deactivated them. That had not always gone smoothly; more than once they had to employ the weapons they had taken in order to destroy a robot. This had to happen quickly to prevent their issuing warnings. It was known that the robots were in constant contact with one another by means of built-in transmitters. Hence the scheme could not be kept secret much longer, as the deactivated robots had ceased to turn in position reports.

The two men had barely finished their reports when the intercom buzzed. It had been doing so constantly for two days. O-1 was demanding to speak to the Commander.

Ps-5 nodded. "I think we shall have to acquaint him with the truth. If he is sensible, he can become our ally. If not, he must die."

"I'll instruct the Death Squad."

But that was premature. "First let us see how he reacts to our suggestions, Commander," Ps-5 suggested. "Let him come in."

Ten minutes later O-1 entered the Command Room. He stopped in front of the automatically closing door and regarded the assembled in astonishment. Then he said in a brittle voice: "What's the meaning of this? I wanted to speak to the Commander alone."

Ps-5 undertook the job of enlightening the First Officer.

"Sit down and listen hard. It is all up to you, you may choose to lead a peaceful and worthwhile life in safety and freedom from now on, or the Death Squad will come to fetch you. Don't interrupt me, and listen! Afterward you can make up your mind."

"I don't understand..."

"You will in a moment," Ps-5 assured him and began his lecture. Calmly and dispassionately he reported the events that had taken place, not forgetting to weave in impressive speculations designed to influence the young man in their favour.

"The present Commander will of course remain in office. But when everything is over," Ps-5 finally

concluded, "you will remain his successor, if you join in with us. You will have the prospect of living longer. None of us knows how long he will really live. It could be three or four generations, perhaps even longer. The bodily disintegration of our cells will end our existence. D-3 would be happy to explain his theories on the subject. We are awaiting your decision."

O-1 had listened with growing excitement. Several times he nodded approvingly, then misgivings crossed his face. When Ps-5 had finished, he said: "It is a revolution! It means the end of all traditions and it will be difficult to relearn that quickly. I admit that many of my views concur with yours but I fear that the unknown lords of our ship will not comply without resistance. Are we strong enough to succeed?"

"We hope so," Ps-5 earnestly responded. "We hope so and we believe so."

The Commander wanted to add something when a buzzing signal sounded. At first they assumed the intercom had been activated but the Commander looked at the door.

"The guards never announce their arrival. They simply come when they think it is appropriate. We have 10 seconds until they enter, that is how long the electronic lock takes to open. Quickly, into the next room! O-1, you stay here!"

The men acted with the speed of lightning. As the door swung open letting in the robot, only the Commander and his successor were in the Command Room.

But the robot was not alone. It was accompanied by four other guards. Had it been together with five others, the Commander might have guessed who his visitors were. As it was, he considered them completely normal guards. He had no idea whatsoever that the Death Squad, whose ranks Pucky had reduced by one, had come to him.

"Since when is the Commander allowed to change a scheduled elimination?" asked the first robot to have entered. "Violations of the existing order will be punished accordingly. We shall..."

"I gave no such order," the Commander interrupted. "For whom was it supposed to have been?"

"T-39. He was brought to elimination today."

"That is completely out of the question. T-39 requested postponement, which I could not grant. I have never issued the order to revoke his elimination."

"We do not believe you," the robot replied coldly. "You shall come with us and receive just punishment. Your successor will assume office."

"But he is not instructed," the Commander insisted.

Now the guard hesitated. He was not allowed to kill the Commander if there was no informed successor. In the short indecisive pause that ensued, Ps-5, who had unobtrusively slipped in from the next room, said: "The Commander is telling the truth, guard! I am a witness to that."

M-7 also came in unnoticed, sliding along the wall behind the robots who had meanwhile entered the room. In his hand was the key which loosened the all-decisive adjustment screw. If he made it in time...

He managed with two of them. The third seemed to have noticed his first touch, for he awkwardly turned to aim his weapon arm at M-7.

Ps-5 acted instantly. The energy ray of his hand weapon hit guard three in the head and drilled its way hissing into the positronic brain. Seconds later it deactivated the fourth robot as well.

It was only the leader who had a slight chance, which he did not get around to using, because D-3 had meanwhile emerged from his hiding place and was participating. He did not switch off his raygun until the fifth robot was a glowing heap of half-molten metal and the almost unbearable heat made breathing difficult in the Command Room.

"You were very lucky," Ps-5 said calmly as he put his weapon back into his pocket. "You almost became the victim of your own order—or at least of those orders the 'Master' issued. Now, O-1, have you decided?"

The officer nodded. He was very pale.

"I am on your side—but I have one request. I want to see him, the one you call 'Master'. Is that possible?"

"You are entitled to see him, in fact," the Commander was the one to answer him. It had all happened so quickly that the Commander had not had the time to be shocked. Before he had comprehended, the danger was over. Only the five deactivated robots reminded him of how close he had been to death. "Come with me, O-1. I will introduce you to the Master."

The two men left for the adjoining room. Ps-5 watched them go.

"I think," he said, "it won't take long now. Somehow the robots must have discovered what we are planning and they will take action. Perhaps the Master is in touch with them after all. If we only knew! Until now there hasn't been any sign of that, let alone proof."

D-3 went over to the wall and opened the sliding door of a built-in closet.

"We have enough weapons to withstand any attack by the robots. All section heads are likewise armed. I see no more point in keeping our intentions secret. Let us officially declare war on the Master."

Before the other men could express their agreement, the intercom buzzed. Ps-5 depressed the button. The screen lit up and M-4 said: "Report from the Laboratory Sector: we have acquired an unexpected ally. He suddenly showed up right in our midst. He has come from another ship and he doesn't look like us either..."

"From another ship?" the psychologist interrupted, baffled. "What does that mean? Are there other ships?"

"The Universe is full of them," M-4 explained concisely. "There are inhabited worlds and entire realms of stars—but it would be too complicated to explain it in a few words. The stranger will do that when everything is over."

"I still don't understand—we didn't notice another ship. Where is it? How did the stranger get here?"

"He will tell you himself. Don't be astonished when you see him. I already told you that he doesn't look like us. He is smaller, covered with fur and speaks our language."

A certain suspicion was aroused in Ps-5. He cautiously said: "Perhaps he didn't I come from another ship at all. There is a lot in our world that we do not yet know. In the unknown regions

The face of M-4 was suddenly shoved to one side and another face appeared. The psychologist was struck dumb when he saw it. Aghast and full of amazement he stared into the brown eyes of a creature the likes of which he had never before seen. He could not find any malice in the eyes, at most a jolly curiosity. What particularly struck Ps-5 was the yellow incisor.

"You can believe M-4," the stranger said in a high and squeaky voice that would have drawn a smile from Ps-5 under different circumstances. "No, I have nothing to do with your 'Master'. Who is he, anyway?"

Ps-5 frowned. "Can you read thoughts?" he asked, startled.

"Yes," Pucky admitted simply. "And I can do more than that. I'm coming to you now and bringing M-4 with me. It won't take long—five seconds at the most."

"Five seconds...!" Ps-5 gasped in bewilderment. The laboratory sector was at least 800 meters away from Central Command.

However, Pucky's face had already disappeared. Almost simultaneously a phenomenon occurred in the middle of the Command Room. The air began to flicker and out of the whirling circles of overlapping dimensions two figures crystallized: M-4 and Pucky.

"Here we be!" squeaked the mousebeaver behind the back of the psychologist, who had still been staring at the screen. Now he whirled around as if bitten by a tarantula and stared at the two intruders as if seeing ghosts.

"By the spirits of the ancestors...!" he gasped.

D-3 had the opportunity to witness the materialization. While he could find no explanation for the miracle, he possessed enough imagination to envisage the wonderful capabilities of alien living beings. This did not even seem frightening. Instead it made an innocent and peaceful impression.

"Leave your ancestors in peace," Pucky recommended to the psychologist and listened in the direction of the cabin. "There are two men next door. Who are they?"

"How do you know that?" Ps-5 stammered, laboriously trying to regain his composure.

"I already told you that I could read thoughts," Pucky declared curtly. "Oh, I know—the Commander and a young officer. They are discussing something—but it seems senseless. It is as if they were talking to a third party who doesn't hear them and doesn't answer."

Ps-5 had recovered from his surprise. His brain began to function normally again. He realized that the little stranger could read thoughts. Perhaps this was their opportunity to expose the Master. In his delight at having found a way at last to uncover the secret, he failed to hear Pucky's last remark.

"The two men are speaking with the Master," he explained, and described to the mousebeaver in a few words what was happening in the adjoining room. He concluded: "They have controlled our people since time immemorial and ruled through the respective commanders. They gave us the laws according to which we lived and died. They live somewhere in the unknown regions of this ship and only show

themselves in the form of the old man who is called 'Master'!"

"On a picture screen," Pucky nodded. "This I have to see."

Together with Ps-5 and D-3 he entered the room where the Commander and O-1 were standing in front of the big screen, the face of the Master looking down at them.

For a few minutes Pucky listened to the discussion which was going in circles, leading to no positive result. The Master stubbornly rejected all explanations, repeatedly demanding obedience and the return to the old state of affairs.

The mousebeaver narrowed his eyes and listened intently. His incisor had disappeared. Silently he squatted across from the screen and regarded the picture. However, try as he would to find the Master's thought impulses among the many that reached him, his efforts were in vain.

It was not easy to find the thoughts of a man who was to be seen on a screen. Bodily he was at some other place, which first had to be located. But Pucky had never needed more than two minutes to trace this sort of speaker.

Until today!

For almost 10 minutes he concentrated his listening, then he shook his head and waddled leisurely up close to the picture. Ps-5 had explained to the Commander and O-1 in two or three sentences and they had taken a waiting stance.

The Master interrupted the lecture he had been rattling off as if he had learned it by heart. After a short pause he asked: "Who are you?"

"I just wanted to ask you the same question," the mousebeaver squeaked. "Where are you? Are you here in the ship?"

As the Master answered, Pucky tried again to get the bearings of the 'source of thoughts', to no avail. There was only one explanation for it!

"I am the Master, the deputy of the ancestors who built and started this ship. The secrets will clarify themselves when the ship reaches its destination. Until then I demand obedience. But you don't belong to us. Who are you?"

Pucky was quite sure by now but he wanted one last proof.

"Your goals may be good but do you think it is right that people are ruled by machines? Why does no one here know anything about the origin of this race? Why doesn't anyone know that they are Arkonide?"

The face of the Master registered astonishment but the voice remained placid and expressionless as ever. "The machines are more reliable and infallible than people! Counter-question: what do you know about Arkonides?"

Pucky bobbed his head. He had been expecting that. Without paying any further attention to the picture of the Master, whose eyes stared fixedly at him, he turned to the anxiously waiting men, the leaders of a revolution against robots. "I think we can do without entering this room in the future. We may ignore the

Master, who claims to be the deputy of the ancestors. Furthermore I assume that something went wrong when the ship was started. This was not planned! Well, we shall soon see."

Ps-5 stepped forward and faced Pucky. "Words alone do not remove the Master from the world. He is there on the screen and he can see and hear everything that happens here."

"How right you are," Pucky admitted sarcastically. "That is why we shall not enter this room again. And then, friends, the Master is blind and deaf. By the way he is even mute!"

That no one understood, but Pucky knew exactly what he was talking about.

They locked the room and returned to the Command Room. There the Commander asked: "And—what now?"

The psychologist pointed at D-3. "Now would perhaps be the right moment to think back on the weird discovery, we made in the centre of the ship. It must somehow be connected with the Master. Our ancestors are sleeping there

Pucky let the psychologist tell him about it and found that the pieces fit together. Still what the purpose was of the undertaking remained unanswered—if there was, a purpose at all.

"I think," the mousebeaver said after Ps-5 had finished, "I'd like to have a look at that. While we are at it, we will just turn off the Master's electricity."

"Turn off the electricity?" M-7 cried in astonishment.

Pucky nodded. "Naturally! Or can one of you imagine a robot without energy—whereby it is of no consequence whether the robot has a face of metal or of plastic."

With his incisor exposed, Pucky enjoyed the amazed admiration his revelation received. With one sentence he had solved the great mystery.

Or at least it seemed so...

5/ WAR DECLARED!

Technician-39 did not fall for longer than a second but that second was like an eternity that would not end.

At any rate he had enough opportunity to perfectly perceive the fate awaiting him. It seemed to be of a different nature than they had all assumed.

The slide did not end in the atomic fire of the reactor. Ever since T-39 had begun to slide towards the gravitation centre of the ship, the temperature had not increased but steadily decreased. In those few seconds it had become downright cold.

The technician did not know that his limbs had already been brushed by the breath of eternal frost, which bit into his flesh, soon penetrating it. Still he was able to see, even though it was perhaps the last sensory impression his brain could register as it rapidly waned.

As he plummeted unsupported into the depths, he could make out an enormous hall below in which the motionless guards were awaiting him. They were standing around a rectangular basin made of some white material that looked like marble. It seemed to be filled with water, a fog-like film spread over its surface.

T-39 submerged into the fog and then into the water. He did not feel the icy cold that immediately froze his body and decomposed his synthetic clothing.

The guards had been waiting for this moment. Cumbersomely they moved towards the edge of the basin. With pole-like instruments they pulled over the floating body of the technician and carefully lifted it out of the waters. They were not bothered by the fact that the average temperature in the hall was about $-3,180^{\circ}$ Fahrenheit.

A stretcher was wheeled into the hall and T-39 was placed on it. The robots went about their work with great caution, they knew exactly that the slightest negligence could cause the stiffly frozen body to break.

Two guards rolled the stretcher out of the room. The others remained behind and took up their posts again.

They were awaiting the next victim but they did not know that they had just handled the last one.

Their time had run out.

* * * *

Ps-5, D-3 and R-75 accompanied Pucky. The Commander and the others remained in the Command Room so that they could alarm the crew, should the robots rebel.

R-75 pointed at the wall. "That is where we made the hole. Behind it are the coffins. But the combat guards are there, too, and they are waiting."

Pucky nodded his satisfaction. "They will be surprised alright, I think. You are well armed and will put on a fireworks show that will make their lens eyes pop out. I myself—well, I think I'll just have some real fun again, playing with them."

"Playing?" The psychologist was full of doubt as he looked at Pucky. He had still received no satisfactory answer to his question about where the mousebeaver had come from and who he was. Ps-5 had merely accepted the fact that they had found a good confederate. "Do you think you can get rid of the guards that way?"

"It is called psychokinetics," Pucky nodded, watching R-75 welding open the thick perimeter of the metal insert. "There is only one way to move matter without touching it and that is with the help of concentrated thoughts. I have deactivated entire armies of robots with it."

While that was an extreme exaggeration, it was true that the mousebeaver had employed his psychokinetic talent to overcome many an opponent who could have otherwise crushed him with his bare hands.

The lid clattered to the floor and the opening was free.

"The guards normally appear within an hour," Ps-5 hastily explained. "Only—maybe they will be quicker this time."

"We shall see," squeaked Pucky and squeezed through the hole after the rim had cooled off somewhat. "Now come on, friends!"

This time they did not have to fear an attack from the rear and could concentrate all their attention towards the front, where the long rows of transparent glass blocks stood in the dusky hall. In them the motionless bodies of the slumberers were still resting.

Pucky took a few steps and stopped next to the first block. With one leap he swung himself onto the edge of the basin and looked in at the naked body of the Arkonide. What his companions did not know was no insoluble mystery to him. He had been aware of what was going on there even before entering the hall—he just did not know what purpose it all had.

Ps-5 came over and looked down at the slumberer. And then he was suddenly taken aback. He squinted his eyes and cast a quick glance at D-3. "Have a good look at him," he said in a husky voice, "and then tell me if I am crazy."

The physician nodded. "You are not crazy," he confirmed in a hollow, quavering voice. "I know what you mean but before we make a mistake let's look for proof. In which block was the girl?"

"In the next one," replied Ps-5 and went over to the neighbouring block. He looked in and recoiled in alarm, "Yes, I was right, they were switched. Why?"

Pucky, who not only heard the conversation but could read the men's thoughts as well, learned the whole story within seconds. He checked it. "You are definitely sure? This is the same room...?"

"A mistake is out of the question," Ps-5 declared. Other people were in those very same basins just a few days ago."

Pucky had to admit that he no longer understood anything. At first it had seemed that here in the centre of the ship Arkonides were lying in cold sleep. The milky fluid seemed to testify to that. It would have to maintain a temperature far below freezing without changing its aggregate condition, which remained liquid. That seemed to check out.

But why were other people now in the peculiar basins...?

Pucky's stream of thought was interrupted when the doctor suddenly cried out: "I know this man... it is T-39. I have often treated him. He is here where the girl was. But..."

The psychologist cringed. He backed away in fright as both horror and a question crossed his face.

"The technician," he said hoarsely, "was picked up by the Death Squad an hour ago and put into the converter. He is dead."

Gradually Pucky began to piece things together. "An hour ago...? He was to die—and now he is here before us? Well, Ps-5 and D-3, are you slowly catching on?"

The two men gazed expressionlessly at the mousebeaver.

"But it is so simple," Pucky squeaked animatedly. "They have always told you that you must die when your time is up but in reality no one died. Now I know that those sentenced to death landed here in the freezing room and not in the converter. Just like this technician. That should be clear. But a new question arises: what happened to the people who were in this basin before T-39? Where has the girl gone? We have to follow her trail to make progress."

Ps-5 slowly nodded. Even though it was extremely cold, he began to sweat. From one second to the next, all laws lost their validity. From one second to the next, the guards no longer appeared as merciless machine creatures but as benefactors.

But—what was the meaning of it all?

Pucky recognized the conflict in the psychologist's heart. He said: "The possibility does exist that we were unfair to the robots but still they kept you in uncertainty. It is all the same to me what will happen from now on. I only came because a telepathic cry for help reached me and from a man who was in deadly peril—it was probably this man here, whom you call T-39. It seems that he is still alive—and may even live for quite awhile, until this ship reaches its destination, I assume. Therefore I could return to my ship and leave the rest to you..."

"Conditions must not return to what they were, in no event!" the physician protested. "In the future we shall take our fate in our own hands and will not allow ourselves to be ruled by the laws of the Master. Who is the Master anyway?"

"That," Pucky said tranquilly, "I would still like to find out before I take leave of you. Wait here."

And before anyone could respond, the mousebeaver had disappeared. They remained behind in the dusky uncertainty.

* * * *

The situation in the Command Room had meanwhile become more critical than anticipated.

Pucky and the three men had barely left on their expedition when an alarm sounded. The guards, so the report went, were banding together and marching through the corridors towards the Command Room. They were ruthlessly shooting anything getting in their way.

That was the declaration of war!

The Commander issued the order to counterattack.

Section heads distributed weapons and organized combat groups. The dreaded moment of the outbreak

of hostilities had arrived.

The Commander was still issuing orders when the intercom connection was interrupted. The current had failed. The real rulers had attacked.

But they were minutes too late.

The men already knew what they had to do.

One of the assault parties led by M-4 and M-7 rushed ahead of the guards, reaching the corridor leading to the Command Room before them. They laid a trap and waited in feverish tension for the robots.

They did not have to wait long.

The guards came marching, their arms bent at right angles, ready to shoot.

The two mechanics knew that the time of cunning had come to an end. Now it was a matter of who was quicker and stronger.

It was a weird sight, the 20 guards marching in their usual order. It seemed as if the desire to kill had etched itself into their metal foreheads, although their rigid facial expressions showed no change whatsoever.

M-7 waited until the first row had passed the hidden marksmen and were a scant two meters away from him. Then he gave the prearranged command.

His energy ray ripped the first giant off his feet and hurled him against the wall. The detonations that immediately followed destroyed two more guards.

Rays flashed from all sides, putting the awkward guards out of action. It all went much easier and quicker than they had dared to hope. Before they could organize any defence, the once so-dreaded guards were destroyed.

However, three men paid for the battle with their lives.

The door to the Command Room opened. The Commander stepped out into the corridor with O-1 and O-2 and stared in silence at the horrible scene. Trembling, he wiped his eyes before saying: "The first attack of the guards... how long will it take until they come again?"

M-7 managed a cramped but relieved smile. "These here," he answered pointing at the motionless metal bodies, "at least these here will never attack again. I think we will make it. How many guards are there altogether?"

"Around 100, I think," the Commander haltingly estimated. He had to admit that he did not know exactly. "The battle is not won yet."

"We know that," M-7 replied and signalled to his men. "But we are not alone. All over the ship the guards are being awaited by our assault units. Soon we will be the masters of the ship and able to live our own lives—until we have reached our destination."

The Commander nodded and returned to the Command Room. He was followed by the two officers.

"What now?" O-1 uttered uncertainly. "The energy for the intercom is cut off. We are blind and mute..."

"I shall see what the Master has to say," the Commander replied and opened the door to the adjoining room. "Perhaps he is ready to surrender. You never know..."

But as he entered the room and looked at the large screen his heart skipped a beat.

Grinning and with mouse ears perked, the face of the peculiar creature that had so unexpectedly rushed to their aid was looking down at him.

Pucky had taken the place of the Master.

* * * *

The mousebeaver was very familiar with this type of large spherical ship, for after all the Solar Empire was equipped with several units of this superclass. There was no corner in which he could not find his way.

Ps-5 had explained to him that there must still be 9 or 10 of these curved rooms, perhaps containing other blocks with slumberers. The gigantic ship had been wandering through space for millennia. Generation was, replaced by generation—and the surplus vanished into the converter.

That is at least what had been believed thus far. But now a new picture presented itself.

Those sentenced to death were not dead but conserved for the future. The Arkonides in the glass blocks were not only the ancestors, they were all those who had meanwhile 'died'.

As said, Pucky was familiar with the ship and he could figure out that the rooms containing the blocks were not the centre of the ship but merely surrounded it. There still remained a room in the form of a hollow sphere that had a diameter of about 200 meters.

If it were accordingly arranged, it would have room for more than 100,000 people!

Pucky shuddered. No one had thought of that possibility! Whoever conceived of this insane plan must have either been mad himself or a desperate genius.

And he, Pucky, had severed the chain!

He jumped blindly but not without concentration. As he materialized he saw at first glance that his deductions had been correct.

The first thing he felt was the unimaginable coldness that penetrated his fur and ate at his skin. He knew that he must not remain there longer than a second if he were to avoid becoming the victim of the cold. One look sufficed, however, to reveal the truth.

Heaped like packages in the enormous spherical room lay thousand of Arkonides, frozen and apparently dead. The men and women were naked and if Pucky had not known that they were merely sleeping, the sight would have terrified him. So this is where the generations had remained, which for millennia had disappeared into the depths of the ship.

Why?

Pucky could not find the answer. He had long since teleported himself back, landing in a room filled with humming machines that lay outside the ring with the blocks. Robots were moving back and forth silently, paying him no heed. They were checking the generators and control panels. This must be the gigantic Central Control Room of the ship's interior.

In the background there was a wide door. It was not closed. Pucky crossed the room and without hesitation went straight through the doorway. His supposition was confirmed.

He was standing before the solution.

* * * *

It occurred to neither Ps-5 nor D-3 that robots had the ability to learn. R-75 would have never suspected that, either. And so it came about that the attack of the guards completely took them by surprise.

At first they again heard the scraping sound somewhere at the back of the hall. The wide door opened slowly, then some of the guards entered and slowly marched towards them.

The psychologist mumbled in fright: "They are coming! Where is our little friend? If he doesn't appear we will have to escape without him."

"We can hold them off for a few minutes," the physician reassured him and pulled his raygun. "Let's take cover behind the glass cases. They would not dare to endanger those."

R-75 joined them but then he decided to reach safety in time. He rushed to the exit hole—and was met by a blinding flash that at once extinguished his consciousness and his life.

Two robots were standing at the opening, cutting off the path of retreat.

Ps-5 watched R-75 die. He felt as if his heart suddenly stopped as he realized that there was no way out.

The other guards had come closer and stopped.

It was the same cold, metallic voice they had heard the other time. "Give up your resistance! You have entered the forbidden regions of the ship and must die. The law prescribes that."

Ps-5 pulled himself together. "Your law no longer exists!" he called out loudly, hoping to draw the mousebeaver's attention to the danger that had arisen. He did not know where their ally was keeping

himself. Perhaps he could hear him. "There is no chance of our surrendering. We must fight."

"That is pointless!"

The guards opened fire without further warning, shooting above the glass cases so as not to damage them. Then they grasped the situation. In a regular pincer movement they closed in on the two men while the two robots at the exits also advanced with drawn weapons.

The two men exchanged a short glance, then they nodded. If they had to die, it would not have been in vain. They had called the revolt to life and started the ball rolling. Their lives had been meaningful and, if need be, their death too would be meaningful.

Their concentrated fire hit back at the guards. The robots no longer returned it. Motionlessly they stood in their original positions, weapons raised to fire.

But they remained that way.

Two or three of them sank in the flames of the destructive energy rays, then the two men stopped firing. Why should they destroy an opponent who no longer defended himself?

"Why aren't you fighting?" Ps-5 called excitedly. "What's going on?"

No answer!

Instead all at once the air glimmered between them and the mute robots. The little mousebeaver reappeared. Paying no attention to the enemies, he waddled the few steps over to the psychologist and proudly squeaked: "They are done for! I switched off the electricity in Central Control. As the robots are all on remote control, you are now free."

"Remote control?" stammered Ps-5. "What... now what is that supposed to mean? What have you found? Where were you?"

Pucky grinned in amusement.

"We'll meet at the Commander's room. Wait for me there. I still have a trifle to take care of."

And again he vanished.

6/ FINAL REVELATIONS

"I have been occupied with the Master," Pucky reported a half-hour later to the men assembled in the Command Central. The officers and all section heads had come to be briefed on the new situation. "He consists of a plastic film which is synchronously connected to a speaking robot. Here on the screen in Central Command the impression is created of a living man speaking before a camera. In reality the robot is talking. A bit complicated, I would say, but still the show was not without effect for many millenniums. So the orders were issued and the ship was ruled by means of that picture robot. It seemed absolutely as

if at least one of the ancestors was still living and directing the flight. Actually all of these ancestors are still alive, although not consciously. They were removed to the cold sleep from which they will awaken only when the appropriate machinery is activated.

"Death in the converter was—just a pretext. Everyone picked up by the Death Squad was frozen, remaining in the glass cases a few weeks for observation and then properly stacked in the storeroom. That way the slumberers do not take up much room. Down below, in the centre of the ship, there are about 100,000 people resting! The nucleus of an entire planet population, just as was planned.

"But something did not go according to the plan!"

Pucky paused briefly and enjoyed the astonishment and admiration of the listening men. They were Arkonides, as he had assumed, but why should he tell them everything now? Why should they know that their race had ruled the Milky Way—or at least had ruled it until they met with the same fate as the crew of this ship?

Let them solve the puzzle themselves some day!

"During the early centuries of the flight, which was to be nothing but an experiment, the robots obeyed the orders of the various commanders. One day they outwitted the commander then in office and replaced him with his successor. With the aid of the telecast they conveyed to him the new instructions that were valid until today."

The men listened in silence. They grasped nothing.

Pucky continued: "I do not know why the ship is flying along at this relatively slow speed. Perhaps the hyperjump system failed, so that only normal flight remained. But there is neither navigation nor steering. If the present course is retained within about two centuries it will enter the gravitation field of a large sun about which 20 planets are revolving. I had that worked out by the computer of my ship. So in two centuries you will reach your destination. And then what the ancestors wanted will occur. You will orbit around the sun. This will automatically engender a process that will awaken the slumberers. One after another. And then the ship will land. The people will populate the planet. A new civilization will begin—if the planet can support life."

The Commander glanced over at Ps-5. Somewhat helplessly he said: "And if it cannot?"

Pucky motioned with his hand to dispel the doubt. "Don't worry. Perhaps it was only coincidence that led the ancestors to choose this course but there is reason to hope. The sun I am talking about has at least three inhabitable planets."

"And who was the Master?" the physician anxiously inquired.

Pucky grinned again. "A gigantic robot computer in the centre of the ship. It seized the power many thousands of years ago. Its intention was to land on the planet, awaken the slumberers and use them as slaves. A real robot civilization was to come into existence. The planet settled by you was to become the centre of a gigantic empire ruled by the robot computer. A pretty surprise that met with failure, luckily. And basically we have one man to thank for all this. I am talking about T-39, who is still slumbering below in his glass coffin. If he hadn't thought of his death and I hadn't been in the neighbourhood... perhaps it might have all turned out quite differently. The robots would have noticed the revolution brewing and prepared themselves accordingly for the counterblow. I was able to switch off the central energy at the last moment, which would have been quite impossible without psychokinetics. Just one last

reprogramming and the energy will belong to you, the people. With that I will have fulfilled the task here with which coincidence presented me. Perhaps it is possible that we meet once again. Perhaps we can endow your ship with the speed necessary to reach the planet within a few years. As I said... perhaps."

The Commander shouldered his way to the front. He stretched out both hands towards Pucky. "Your thinking is very human, although you are not a member of the human race," he said, deeply moved. "We thank you. Convey our greetings to your people."

Pucky nodded patronizingly. It amused him to be taken for the representative of Terra. "We will make efforts to help you, so that eternal peace will reign between us. But in the future take care that the robots remain your servants and do not become the masters again. Before I go I would like to speak to the technicians and scientists. Without the help of the reprogrammed robots, you are lost. But the Master..." he grinned triumphantly, "he is finished. The entrance to the cryonics system is open and one of you will take the place of the Master. But let the slumberers rest until you have landed. If a false alarm were to awaken them—an incredible catastrophe would result. There is room for more than 100,000 slumberers on this ship but only for a few thousand living beings. You see, the robots think in human terms too. They saw to it that only a few thousand people were alive at one time. And they lived a long time, since what you call a generation is 100 years to us. The time concepts have shifted."

He answered a few more questions, instructed the technicians about their responsibilities and then took final leave.

"Farewell, friends... and prove yourselves worthy of your regained freedom. Obey the commander but resist the orders given by a machine! The human being should always remain the ruler of the machine, which poses a great threat the moment it begins to think. But even if it is more logical, it can never be as intelligent as a man in the long run. Farewell..."

And before the bewildered eyes of the spectators, Pucky vanished like a good spirit which, after fulfilling its duty, returns to the realm of the inevitable.

Nothing remained but the now present that finally guaranteed a meaningful future.

The door opened and a guard appeared.

The Commander turned to him and said: "Section RC is dirty. See to it that a cleaning squad goes to work on it immediately."

In the robot's voice was the usual lack of expression as it answered: "The order will be carried out at once. Any other instructions, sir?"

The Commander smiled slightly as he pointed at the assembled men. "Yes, plenty. You will receive them from the various channels. You may go."

The men watched it in silence. They knew that a new era had begun.

* * * *

Cadet Brugg was almost frightened to death when he heard a voice behind him saying: "You must have forgotten me by now, Cadet."

As he said this, Pucky waddled up to the dismayed man and, flashing his familiar grin, planted himself before the cadet, his tail serving as a support. "Well?"

"I thought..." stammered the cadet, futilely seeking an explanation for the whereabouts of the mousebeaver in the past hours, "I thought..."

"There, there. Thinking is something one should just let be, if he is incapable of it," Pucky advised in a fatherly tone. Then his voice grew sharper. "Where are the carrots, young man?"

Although Cadet Brugg was almost twice as tall as Pucky, he did not answer, wheeling about on his heels instead. Ten seconds later he silently handed the mousebeaver the plastic bag, which proceeded to disappear as quickly as Pucky did. Brugg was alone again in his domain but he did not feel like its ruler. To avoid any further trouble he had piled up over one hundred pounds of the accursed carrots, just in case...

Pucky had meanwhile materialized in Central Command. Unlike Brugg, Commander Wilmar Lund was not startled this time. "Well?" he asked. "What about that ship? You took pretty long. Almost three hours..."

"What are three hours if you have to correct the history of 10,000 years?" Pucky asked in return. He did not intend to completely inform Lund about all he had experienced and learned. That was a matter for Perry Rhodan alone to decide. A new civilization could represent enormous support for the Solar Empire but it could pose as great a threat as well. "The ship is drifting through space with no steering control. One day we shall have to see to it."

"If we find it again!"

"The data is already stored," Pucky assured him and swung the bag containing the carrots. "And now I would like to eat at last, if you will permit me."

Lund was not satisfied with the scanty information. "That is all? A ship without steering? Nobody on board? And you needed three hours to find that out?"

Pucky began to leisurely nibble. In between bites he said: "Back to Earth, Commander. What are we actually waiting for?"

Lund concealed his annoyance behind a forced smile. "What shall I enter in the logbook? I have to explain the delay somehow. After all, we did lose four hours."

Pucky grinned slyly. "The following explanation: the *Arctic* was forced to detour because it encountered a ship with 100,000 Arkonides, which was investigated. Sounds good, huh?"

Lund shook his head. "What rubbish! I demand the truth, not fairy tales!"

Pucky sighed. "You want to know the truth? If I were to tell the truth you would think I was a liar. Do you understand that? You don't? Frankly, neither do I!"

He turned his attention to the carrots once again. And when Commander Lund finally lost patience and

stepped forward the mousebeaver was no longer there.

In the background the First Officer began to giggle. "The coördinates, sir... shall I relay them?"

Lund wheeled around. His face was still purple with rage as he ordered: "Yes, relay them! Hyperjump in 10 minutes! I'm going to tell Rhodan..."

"Better not!" advised the First Officer and went about his work.

Commander Lund felt like exploding but he managed to remain calm. With a steady hand he wrote in his logbook:

Date... Location CM-13-HB. Flight delay because an Arkonide battleship without steering control crossed our course. Investigation was without result. No one was on board. Course data stored. The next hyperjump scheduled for...

Pucky had reasoned correctly.

Truth is simply more often fantastic than the unlikeliest fantasy.

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

SPACESHIP OF ANCESTORS

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

COMBAT for galactic supremacy.

The Imperium of Ancient Arkon.

The domain of the Druufs.

And imperilled by both: Earth!

The safety of the Solar Empire is at stake and Terra must somehow weaken these two warring giants.

Julian Tifflor?

Ah, yes, the Cosmic Decoy of adventure #21

He's back and he doesn't hesitate to make the move he believes most beneficial to his homeworld in—

CHECKMATE: UNIVERSE

by

Kurt Mahr