

## ***DARKER THAN THEY THINK***

A ROBOT dies and his death—because he was a governor in the Realm of Arkon—is the catalyst for an interstellar police action.

Enter the *Finmark*, a spacer of the State Class, and its commander, Maj. Thomea Untcher. Together they and the crew set out for the water world, Opgham.

But en route to this alien planet, Untcher and his men are unexpectedly, dangerously, confronted by the—

## **ENEMY IN THE DARK**

### **1/ DESTINATION: 1358**

PTHAL'S EYES pensively followed the strange twists of the tubular plant to the ceiling of the room where it disappeared in a hole, closing it so tightly with its stem as to prevent inundation by the water.

Pthal was one of those creations who, ordinarily, were not given to embarrassing monologues. Yet at this moment he murmured to himself: "Weird specimens, these tubular plants!"

That was the moment when the door was flung open and a man barged in whom Pthal had never seen before. But there could be no misunderstanding his intentions. He held a short-barreled weapon in his hand and opened fire at once.

Pthal was hit. The explosion of the thermo-gun paralysed his complicated nervous system. Fully conscious—but without feeling pain—his knees buckled and he crashed to the floor.

The man at the door kept firing continuously but Pthal's sudden fall caused his next shot to miss him. The plastic wall behind Pthal was instantly melted to a glowing liquid which ran in searing rivulets over the floor.

Pthal made a concentrated effort to study the stranger. He knew he could not survive his injuries. They were lethal and he had little time left to perform his duty. He scrutinized the features of the stranger with his large eyes and filed the image in his indelible memory.

Meanwhile the intruder had corrected his aim. It took him longer than Pthal to perceive his opponent. Pthal's greatest asset was his ability of reacting with enormous speed, superhuman speed, to all situations.

Pthal concluded, even before the stranger could fire a third shot that he deserved the ultimate punishment for his sneak attack. He triggered his most powerful weapon and killed the unknown enemy in the blinding flash of an explosion.

Pthal rolled over on his side. The movement exhausted his strength. He was aware that he would expire in a few more seconds. He retrieved from his memory bank the image of the stranger he had just killed and silently tried to transmit the information to his point of origin where it would be received with great interest and followed by measures to discover the source of unrest on Opghan with the goal of subduing its spread.

If Pthal had been capable of feeling regret he would have lamented the fact that he could no longer carry out his mission. His injury was much worse than he had assumed. He was unable to assess accurately the damage because the apparatus which performed these functions had already lost its effectiveness.

His energy faded after sending the first sign. But even at this moment he still endeavoured to do his duty. With the last flicker of life he emitted the code signal which called attention to the precarious conditions on Opghan.

Then Pthal lay motionless—a robot who had been destroyed in the faithful performance of his assignment.

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Pthal's last code signal, as well as the preceding unintelligible impulse shreds, were received on Arkon 3. They were interpreted as an effort by Pthal to give a warning and that he was prevented from making a report. The reason was obvious since the robots issued such emergency calls only when they were about to be annihilated.

The sudden death of Pthal caused great concern. He was the highest government officer of the Imperium on Opghan the second planet of the Ep-Hog system. Opghan was a world located on the fringes of the Arkonide influence sphere. It was not unlikely that the enemy, who lurked in the dark, believed that those old times had returned after the assumption of power by His Eminence Gonozal VIII when the Emperor was far away and his officials weak so that it was opportune again to upset the Imperium by launching the upheaval on a remote planet such as Opghan.

A strict police action had become necessary. Pthal's death had to be investigated and his assassin had to be tracked down.

His Eminence Atlan, who ruled the Arkonide Imperium as the Emperor known as Gonozal VIII, requested the support of Terra and received assurance that his wishes would be carried out.

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Sgt. Loodey was a man whose massive figure in combination with a deadly serious face and obstinate expression imposed respect on everybody. The fact that the rather short and thin man who approached Ran Loodey at this moment didn't show the slightest trace of his accustomed respect, irritated the sergeant and caused him to step forward before he would have done normally. He planted himself in the middle of the entrance to the bridge leading almost horizontally from the 8th floor of the administration building to the brightly illuminated cargo hatch in the lower third of a spherical spaceship moored on the landing field.

The wispy looking man didn't seem to notice Ran Loodey at all. He appeared to be engaged in a monologue, slicing the air with nervous gestures and a vague stare. He wore civilian clothes and the civilians were denied admittance to the upper floors of the administration building.

Ran Loodey's bafflement turned into wrath when he saw that the slender man was trying to walk around him without casting a glance at him, ignoring all formalities.

"Stop!" Ran roared, retreating a step on the bridge. "Where do you think you're going?"

The man looked up at Loodey as if taken aback. Then he pointed uncertainly in the direction of the landing field. "Over there!" he said, annoyed. "What's it called? The ship, I mean."

Ran Loodey nodded ponderously. "Oh, the ship," he repeated. "Which one?"

"Heavens above! What fools we're afflicted with," the thin man muttered, shaking his head. "That one, of course! Or do you see another one anywhere around here?"

Loodey kept his cool. "And what do you want with the ship, my friend?"

The man blinked his eyes. "First of all, I'm not your friend. Not as long as you treat me like this. And secondly, your question is wrong. I don't want anything with the ship. I want something *in* the ship. I want to sleep in the ship because I'm tired."

This took Loodey's breath away. When he finally found words again, he shouted at the little man: "Do you think the ships of the Solar Spacefleet are a refuge for the homeless? Start running, man, before I..."

The subject of his ire waved his hand in protest. It was strange to see that the almost helpless gesture cooled Loodey's righteous fury and made him pause in the middle of his sentence. The slender man possessed something that shook Loodey's confidence: authority!

"Stop yelling!" he pleaded in a plaintive voice. "It bothers me. I'm not hard of hearing."

"OK," Loodey growled. "Then I'll tell it to you once more as softly as I can. *Get the hell out of here!*"

"Why should I?"

"Because you have no business being here," Loodey snarled.

"How do you know that? My name is Thomea Untcher."

Despite his rage Ran Loodey began to grin. "It's as beautiful a name as I've ever heard. But even with such a gorgeous name, my dear friend."

Loodey's face suddenly froze. It showed the strain of searching his memory. Suddenly he, blurted: "What was that name again, sir?"

Now the slender man smiled. "Thomea Untcher, sergeant."

Ran Loodey's face turned purple. "I beg your pardon, sir..." he stammered in embarrassment. "Of course... I have to see your pass... You understand..."

Untcher nodded gravely. He put his hand in the pocket of his overcoat, then in the inside pocket. Then he unbuttoned his overcoat and began to search his jacket. It took awhile before he pulled out a small, grey plastic card. Loodey took it gingerly and placed it in the slot of the control box but he knew before the sign of approval lit up that he had lost the game.

The identification card popped out of the slot again. Loodey handed it back and saluted. "I must apologize, sir," he added.

Untcher answered with a slight wave of his hand. "That's alright. No harm done."

Then he stepped on the bridge. The walk-belt carried him through the warm air-curtain which protected the inside of the building from the cool night to the bright airlock of the *Finmark*.

When Ran Loodey thought that Untcher could no longer see him, he turned around and caught a glimpse of the slight figure in a waving overcoat as he disappeared in the hatch. He shook his head, muttering to himself. He had met many weird people in his life but a commander like Thomea Untcher? Never!

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The moment Nathael saw the green blip of the alien spaceship light up on the large screen of the sensor console he knew that the plan could not be carried out as first conceived. The arrival of the alien ship was the best proof that Pthal's death had caused a sensation.

Nathael rubbed his forehead with a tired expression. He took a last look at the screen and switched it over to the automatic recorder. He was not particularly interested in watching the course of the ship. What had to be done now to save the situation was possible only after the ship had landed.

He got up and left the room where the instruments hummed in continual operation. Outside, in the large hall, he was dazzled by the light of the yellow sun streaming through the big windows. He hesitated a moment before he turned to three men sitting in comfortable chairs near the door, waiting for him. One of them looked as if he didn't belong there.

"They're coming," Nathael said in the language they all understood.

The men looked up. "Who's coming?" one of them asked.

Nathael stuck out his hand with the palm up to indicate that he didn't know who it was. "It really doesn't make that much difference," he said. "Whoever they are, they are coming to snoop around here and we can't tolerate that."

One of the three, a young man with a flowing beard, made a contemptuous gesture. "What can happen to us?" he sneered. "As soon as they touch down, we'll..."

Nathael stamped his foot angrily. "Shut up!" he shouted. "It seems to me that our success has gone to your heads. You forget to take the most elementary precautions!"

The young man with the beard didn't seem to be unduly impressed. "I've had my doubts for some time, Nathael," he retorted, "if your nerves aren't beginning to crack under the strain of the past few weeks. You're a little too timid."

"Is that so?" Nathael growled. "Then let me tell you something. You're a conceited braggart who has not the slightest idea of the power and resourcefulness of our enemies' secret service. One careless word... and Opghan will blow up like a sun." He laughed grimly. "Your phony beard will burn beautifully"

The young man remained silent. He didn't like to be reminded that his magnificent beard was not genuine. His mother was a native of this world and he had inherited her hairless skin. The mane of hair on his head was also artificial but Nathael knew that he resented it even more when somebody made fun of his beard.

The second man joined the conversation. "We'll have to finish our preparations," he said. "How long will it take them to get here?"

Nathael wanted to raise up the palm of his hand again but instead said: "I guess three or four tenthday."

"That will be sufficient. We'll be ready as soon as they have found a place to land. They don't have much of a choice anyway. Then we'll have a few more hours till..." He turned to his neighbour, who hadn't uttered a word up to now. "You are all set, Chchaath, aren't you?"

Chchaath twisted his thin mouth into a smile. "Quite," he replied, sounding as if his mouth were full of water. "We can tackle a whole fleet of them."

"Then be on your way!" Nathael ordered.

Chchaath got up, still smiling. He walked past the window and glanced at the endless surface of water which touched the wall of the building. The smooth scales of his skin shone in the reflex of the water.

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Ran Loodey stared at the observation screen, flabbergasted. "Glord!" he grunted. "Water, nothing but water!"

Maj. Untcher's voice rebuked him from the background. "Well, what did you expect? Vodka or orange juice?"

Loodey spun around. "No sir," he retorted. "I seldom consider my private pleasures. All I meant is that we'll have trouble finding a landing place."

Untcher shook his head. "The surface of Opghan consists only of 99½% water," he claimed emphatically. "You shouldn't have trouble finding a landing place on the other half percent."

Ran Loodey doubted it. He doubted there was any firm land at all because all he could see on the face of the planet was an expanse of water.

It was an eerie sight. The *Finmark* had approached Opghan closely enough so that the round outline of the planet filled the observation screen. It faced the dayside and the yellow sun Ep-Hog was in back of the ship. The picture of the sun was mirrored on the infinite ocean and the refracted light surrounded Opghan with a luminous aura. Where the sun didn't reach the water it had the appearance of black ink but the atmosphere beyond the horizon glowed in a warm yellow hue.

It was a spectacle that was new to the crew of the *Finmark* and everybody was deeply impressed with the exception of Thomea Untcher who barely glanced at the observation screen. He seemed to be occupied with a more interesting matter.

The *Finmark* had completed the tricky flight approach manoeuvre and was ready to land, provided they could discover a suitable spot to touch down.

Thomea Untcher had paid little attention to the flight operations during the preceding hours. The trip had taken three days and the crew of the *Finmark* was already used to the peculiarities of their commander and their astonishment had waned. The rangefinder officer welcomed the rest when Thomea Untcher took his place for some unexplained reason. Untcher remained silent and didn't mention whether he had observed anything unusual on the various instruments and panels of the intricate rangefinder system. He scribbled a few notes. Now and then he admonished the First Officer to stay on the ball.

That was all. Nobody thought he had discovered anything out of the ordinary up to the moment when he got up—coinciding with the second when Ran Loodey saw a small island emerging from the desolate waters and declared in a casual tone which was in sharp contrast to the worried expression of his face: "We have been detected, gentlemen. Our instruments have registered a sequence of impulses. As the robot Pthal in his position as the highest government representative of the planet was also responsible for the positronic installations of Opghan—as well as an important component of it—we must assume that somebody else has gained control of the system after Pthal's death and operates the monitor expertly. What conclusions would you draw from this, Sgt. Loodey?" It was one of his quirks to ask people about matters that were already clear to him.

"It means," Loodey answered quickly, "that... that..." His voice changed to a stutter.

"You are so right," Thomea Untcher responded amiably. "Since the natives of Opghan are technologically backward and probably not capable of operating a rangefinder system adequately, it means that at least one foreign technical specialist is present at Opghan... and he might very well be the cause of why we have been summoned here."

And before anybody had fully grasped the seriousness of his conclusions, Thomea Untcher added to the confusion by ordering: I herewith put the ship on alert stage R. All men will proceed to their assigned stations. Lenzer, double the crew at the gun positions! Get going! First Officer! Loodey has located an island. Set the ship down. What are you waiting for? Were not on a weekend trip."

Suddenly the slender, hitherto nervous man, displayed such decisive energy that his men were awed by his competence and it made them realize better than anything else that they faced a real danger.

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With the extreme patience that was typical for his race Chchaath sat before the monitor and waited for the next and final data. When it came at last he had waited more than half a tenthday at his place without moving. The screen of his set showed a 4-digit figure in Arkonide script. After reading and memorizing the number he turned off the instrument and got up.

At the opposite end of the large, almost empty room was some sort of a cabinet. Chchaath opened one of its doors and carefully took a small shiny metal cylinder from a shelf. He weighed it in his hand before he closed the cabinet and muttered a barely audible curse between his thin lips.

1358. They couldn't have chosen a worse place. The sun would set over 1358 in less than half a tenthday and his men would have to complete the job before then. As if he suddenly realized he didn't have to lose a thousandth of a tenthday he slammed the cabinet door shut, took the shiny cylinder under his arm and got ready to leave the room.

The exit was one of those innovations which had disturbed Chchaath a few tenthdays earlier when he saw that it moved without any visible external force. Several tenthdays was a long time and Chchaath had become accustomed to far more crucial changes than entering a room without having to open the door by using a doorknob, or leaving the room to go out in the street as he did now.

For instance, he had already reconciled himself to the hostile glances that met him when he walked through the streets. The streets were far less populated than before when Chchaath was one of the crowd and stopped at every street corner to chat with his friends in the sibilant and smacking sounds of their race. The people stayed mostly in their houses now. Chchaath knew that this was quite unpleasant for them since the Ephogers were extremely gregarious beings. There was not a city on Opghan which was so big that its inhabitants didn't know each other and they loved nothing better than friendly gossip with witty barbs.

Nowadays they preferred to stay home whenever they didn't have to work in the Psimo plantations. They hated the aliens and had good reasons for it.

As far as Chchaath was concerned, he didn't feel the same hatred for the aliens because he had gained considerable advantages from their presence. Yet he was severely disturbed by the contemptuous looks his former friends cast at him. He hurried down the street. He was more spurred by his desire to escape the neighbours who despised him than by the thought that there was less than half a tenthday left before the sun disappeared over the horizon of 1358. He traversed the distance from his house to the big water gate in half the time he normally required. The guard at the gate greeted him with due respect when he noticed him. Chchaath thanked him condescendingly and waited impatiently till one half of the large door slid to the side. He quickly entered the vast bright hall behind the door and looked around.

In former times the hall had been the hub of the city's life. Hundreds of citizens had gathered here for the pleasure of watching the arrival and departure of passenger and cargo ships, to exchange opinions about the skill of this or that captain and to amuse themselves by commenting on the gaudy clothes of some foreigner.

Now it all had changed. Ships had ceased sailing in and out with the exception of the vessels taking the workers to and from the plantations. Very few people had been selected and given permission to enter the water gate. All activities were restricted and the piers were quiet, bathed in a painfully glaring light.

Chchaath was not in a mood for gloomy thoughts. He scanned the hall and when he didn't find what he was looking for he called in a throaty voice whose sound reverberated in the large hall. The echo was accompanied by an answer coming from an old berth. He walked toward the berth. As he approached, the figure of a tall spindly man appeared at the edge of the wharf.

The man waited until Chchaath had reached him. "We wanted to stay out of sight," he said apologetically. "You were gone for quite some time. As we were waiting, a transport came in from across the planet. We thought it would be better if the people wouldn't see us—despite the presence of the guards."

It's still the same, Chchaath thought in dismay. Now they are better off than ever before. They've got everything they need and if they want more, the aliens will give it to them. But they are afraid of their own people whom they have betrayed.

Don't exclude yourself, said an inner voice, It's *notthey* , it's *swe* .

"Never mind," Chchaath replied with a disdainful gesture of his scaly arm. "Our destination is 1358. We don't have any time to waste. The ship must be disabled in a quarter tenthday."

He walked down the steps which led from the pier to the calm water where a dark boat was moored. A door opened and Chchaath climbed in. The spindly man with the sad face and dull scales, which stood out from his skin, followed on his heels.

The inside of the boat was sparsely equipped, mostly with benches. It was dark and Chchaath smelled the men sitting on the benches more than he could see them.

"Pilot!" Chchaath called out in the dark. "Take us to 1358. Hurry up!"

Then he sat down and took the metal cylinder out from under his arm where he had carried it. His eyes were getting used to the dim light and he was able to recognize the men sitting next to him. "We'll have to act quickly," he explained as the motor was started and the boat began to rock and move forward. "The sun will be gone very soon. Do you have your containers ready?"

Smacking sounds from all directions affirmed his question. Chchaath handed the metal cylinder to his neighbour and admonished: "Be careful when you fill your containers with this stuff!"

## **2/ MYSTERIOUS IRRATIONALITY**

"Holy cow, I know there isn't much to see but I want to take a look anyway! Can't you get that through your thick skull?"

Ran Loodey had already learned not to take offence when Thomea Untcher used his colourful language.



Batting his eyes, he managed to answer with a serious face: "I will, if you give me time, sir."

Untcher sighed and turned in mock despair to his First Officer. "Stowes, watch this man! For heaven's sake, don't put him in a critical spot. He won't recognize an enemy until he's about to cut his throat."

Stowes saluted, laughing. "Yes sir!"

Untcher motioned his Second Officer. "Lenzer, let's go! Keep your powder dry."

He closed the helmet of his spacesuit. It was one of his habits and he didn't expect anybody else to follow his example. Although the atmosphere of Opghan was as thin as in the highest mountains, it was breathable and there was no reason to wear a spacesuit for protection. However Thomea Untcher practiced certain principles such as using caution whenever he could find the least justification. In this instance, he opened doors which swung to the outside very carefully and he gave the red light when he left the electronic guide path in his transport suit. He had put on his spacesuit a few minutes after the landing of the *Finmark* to inspect the tiny island in the ocean covering the planet Opghan.

Lt. Lenzer didn't bother to lock his helmet. He merely pulled it over his head in order to operate the built-in transceiver. He followed Thomea Untcher to the walk-belt running through the main corridor, mulling a few private more or less ironic thoughts about the timidity of his commander which he regarded as an exaggeration.

They quickly passed through a small airlock. The threshold of the outside hatch was only two feet above the ground and Untcher jumped down, giving the impression of being a little afraid.

He looked around. Bright sunshine flooded the small spit of land and the strange bushy plants which sprouted from the soil of the island. Fleshy, bright green leaves surrounded the pink three-meter-high stems, thick as a thigh and crowned with radiant yellow blooms the size of sunflowers. However the plant more resembled an overgrown dandelion than a sunflower.

"Amazing," Untcher murmured, "to think that all these gorgeous flowers have only 100 hours to live." He raised his arm to look at his watch. "From now only four hours. Then they will freeze and 100 hours later, when the sun comes up again, they will grow again from the seeds which can withstand the cold of the soil to reach the same height in two hours."

He walked around one of the plants, studied it attentively from all sides and shook his head. "Incredible, what kind of fauna the universe can produce, isn't it?"

Lenzer was not particularly interested in the giant dandelions but he felt that he was expected to make a comment. "I wonder," he said, "if these plants also make one's fingers black when they are broken off."

Untcher grimaced. His face often looked enigmatic as if eternal confusion kept him from responding with the appropriate facial expressions to each situation. "You suffer an acute lack of sensitivity, young man," he replied sadly. "Don't worry about your fingers. Put your gloves on and follow me, confound it!"

Lenzer obeyed. Untcher squeezed himself through the dandelion bushes and headed for the shore which was not very far away anywhere on the tiny island. However the tall leaves obstructed their view and before Untcher realized it he stepped with one foot into the water of a small inlet extending into the flat land. He shrank back and grabbed one of the dandelion leaves to keep his balance.

Lenzer grinned. Untcher turned around at the same moment and noticed it. "Don't you snicker, young

man!" he chided Lenzer. "You don't know any better than I what monsters might lurk in these unknown waters. The Arkonide encyclopaedia is not too specific on this point."

Lenzer didn't believe there could be very dangerous monsters hidden in the water no deeper than the width of his hand but he kept his mouth shut. He was conscious of Untcher's ability to twist the words of a man who contradicted him around in such an elusive manner that his antagonists were rendered speechless.

Without releasing his grip on the leaf Untcher leaned forward to look at the ocean. "Unbelievable, so much water," he murmured.

"Nothing but water all around us," Lenzer agreed.

"Yes," Untcher replied, swinging himself back again, "you are almost as clever as I am. Someday you'll..."

Something interrupted him. The water of the narrow inlet began to stir. Small waves bobbed on the heretofore-smooth surface and splashed the land. Untcher watched them with the mien of utter consternation.

Suddenly the water parted and a head emerged. What a head! A hairless, green-skinned, round form with two large eyes whose pupils had a dull sheen as if kept behind a semitransparent veil, a shin nose and a wide, thin-lipped mouth.

The creature, whose head it was, moved with surprising speed. Less than five seconds after the first ripple appeared on the surface, the mysterious body covered by scales lunged from the water with the unmistakable intention of attacking an enemy.

"Defend yourself, Lenzer!" Thomea Untcher shouted to his surprised companion.

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Kayne Stowes was quite certain that the *Finmark* was not exposed to any danger on the island. Nevertheless he stuck to his duty very conscientiously. He regularly scanned the large panoramic picture screen which clearly showed every feature of the small island. Now and then Kayne Stowes was able to catch a glimpse of Thomea Untcher's slight figure or the tall, broad-shouldered Phil Lenzer, wending their way through the high bushes.

An uncanny, somnolent calm prevailed on the sunlit scene. As time dragged on Kayne Stowes imagined he could hear the humming of bees and he felt an irresistible desire to leave his post and the temptation to go outside and stretch out in the grass under the blue sky.

Ran Loodey seemed to experience the same enticements. He sat in front of his communication sets and was rather convinced that he could idle away the next few hours. Kayne heard him sigh once in awhile and it sounded as if he tried to arouse the sympathy of the first officer with the aim of wangling a couple of hours furlough from his superior.

However the *Finmark* was still in a state of alarm. The gun crews had been doubled and each man remained at his post although many were of the opinion that Untcher could have spared them all this unnecessary trouble. They were tired after an exhausting trip. Their ship was in excellent shape. It was superbly equipped and had landed in an underdeveloped, rather peaceful place. Thomea Untcher should have let them sleep for at least 10 hours instead of subjecting them to his paranoid anxieties and precautions.

Nevertheless, Thomea Untcher's orders had to be respected. Nobody dared leave his post. They kept their eyes glued to the automatic targeters, the sensor screens and rangefinders till they began to blur. Then they called a buddy to replace them and rested their eyes. The entire operation was considered to be an exercise in futility.

Until they suddenly discovered that something was really going on out there! Kayne Stowes was startled from his placid mood when he thought he detected a shadow flitting behind the bushes. He knew that Untcher and Lenzer had chosen another direction and whatever he had seen, it couldn't be either one of them.

A few seconds later he doubted again that he had really seen something. It had passed so quickly that it could have been a trick the strained nerves of his eyes might have played on him momentarily. One leaf of a dandelion bush swayed a little although his instruments indicated no wind whatsoever but the cause was probably completely harmless.

Kayne Stowes' curiosity was aroused though. He scrutinized the vicinity of the spot where he had thought to have seen a suspicious movement. He tried to estimate the speed of the unknown object—whatever it was—and to figure out where it might show up again.

It turned out that he had miscalculated the movement of the object. It was much faster than he had guessed. When he noticed it for the second time, the effect was one of great shock.

A strange individual stood close to the ship. Nobody had seen him come out of the bushes or when he had reached the clearing which had been created by the machines of the *Finmark* when they uprooted the dandelion bushes after the landing.

Kayne Stowes stared at the alien creature. He knew that Opghan was inhabited by a race which looked humanoid at first glance and revealed its adaptive features to a life of many thousands of years in a surrounding of water only at closer inspection. He wore no more clothes than would be expected from a primitive man. His body was shiny and dripped with water. His skin was covered with smooth, palm-sized scales which contributed to his exotic appearance.

Without thinking Kayne Stowes instinctively pressed the alarm button. Sirens wailed nosily throughout the ship. The stranger vanished abruptly as if he had heard the alarm. His reaction was so instantaneous as to give the impression he could dissolve himself into nothing.

Sgt. Loodey jumped up.

"Take 20 men and comb the island," Stowes ordered. "Something's unkosh out there and I want to know what it is."

Loodey was suddenly not a bit tired anymore. Before Stowes had finished speaking, he had already begun to pick the names of his team. Then he quickly turned around to the intercom and called the names into the mike.

Kayne Stowes became concerned about the safety of Thomea Untcher and Phil Lenzer. There were apparently unknown people on the island whose secretive behaviour aroused ill foreboding. Opghan was an Arkonide colony. The Ephogers were not so primitive that they didn't know a spaceship when they saw one. The stranger was not in the least frightened by the *Finmark*. He merely wanted to hide.

Stowes picked up the mike of the transceiver which operated on a continual basis to maintain communications with Untcher and Lenzer. But before he could utter the first word, he heard Untcher's loud command: "Defend yourself, Lenzer!"

Agonizing thoughts whirled around in Stowes' mind. What had happened to Untcher and Lenzer? Where in the world were they and who attacked them?

His attention was distracted from this dilemma when he noticed that the landing place of the *Finmark* suddenly swarmed with a horde of green-scaled bodies on the verge of assaulting his ship. Heaven knew, they looked ludicrous. They had no weapons. Instead they carried some small cylinders which glinted metallically and looked like thermos bottles. The access hatches of the *Finmark* were made of such strong armourplate that nothing less than a thermo-cannon could blast them open.

Nevertheless Stowes was suspicious and reasoned that the strangers must know what they were doing. They were primitive but they were obviously familiar with spaceships and they were probably not go reckless as to attack a colossal warship with bare hands. He supposed that these people had some reason to believe that they could somehow accomplish what they attempted. Kayne Stowes found himself in an irrational predicament and he had trouble deciding what to do about it first. To make things worse, the raiders rushed underneath the curvature of the vessel which made it impossible to watch them on the observation screen.

Stowes toyed for a moment with the idea of strafing the terrain with fire in order to eliminate the danger to the *Finmark* but the range of big guns was very far and the island was small. There was no assurance that he wouldn't jeopardize the safety of Untcher and Lenzer by such an indiscriminate defence.

Meanwhile Ran Loodey put together his commando team. The men didn't know what had happened. Loodey instructed them tersely and concluded: "We'll drive the strangers off or take them prisoners."

Then he led his men outside through the same hatch Untcher and Lenzer had used to leave the ship. Ran Loodey was a man who knew no fear. He had been given the order to chase a few intruders away from the vicinity of the *Finmark* and he would do just that. It was ridiculous to think that the natives could put up anymore than token resistance. He might have to disable a few of them with a few well-aimed shots but the rest would throw up their arms and surrender without a fight.

Loodey didn't even take the time to put his helmet over his head and secure it on big collar since he was confident that he would have carried out big job in a matter of minutes. Holding his weapon ready to shoot, the sergeant jumped out of the hatch down to the soft, resilient ground and his men followed him with the agility of parachute jumpers.

The interlopers were everywhere. Ran Loodey couldn't understand what the green, fish-skinned creatures were up to with their little metal flasks at the hull of the vessel. But the mere thought that some unauthorized persons were invading his territory without big permission and tinkering around the ship was enough to make the well-disciplined sergeant boil. He roared with a stentorian voice: "Get them, boys!"

The nearest of the trespassers was only a few steps away from Loodey. He kneeled on the ground,

hugging the curved wall of the vessel and pressing the container which puzzled Loodey against the shiny surface. He saw Loodey coming but didn't move. As Loodey darted toward him, he put his weapon under his belt. Then he seized the head of the Ephoger, pulled him up on big feet and punched him on the jaw with such force that he would be knocked out for the next couple of hours.

Meanwhile the fisticuffs were in full swing all around him. Loodey's men refrained from using their weapons. As the fish people were unarmed and defended themselves only with their fists, the Terrans would have considered it unfair to resort to their superior weapons. Therefore they used only their hands and devoted themselves to their task with such irresistible Man that the badly bruised Ephogers filled the air with cries of pain.

After the sergeant had knocked out four of his opponents he lost his enthusiasm for the unevenly matched bouts. "Stop it!" he shouted angrily. "This is no work for us. Let them go!"

It took awhile before his men complied. When they finally ended the fight with their adversaries there were only 7 or 8 of the scaly men who were still left to move.

Ran Loodey turned around. He paid no attention to the metallic cylinders strewn all over the ground. "Back to the ship!" he shouted without regard to the effect his order had on the thoughts of his men.

Loodey was struck by the odd thought that Kayne Stowes was wrong when he sent him out to do this job. Suddenly he felt pity for the Ephogers. He paused and looked around. He had a strange feeling of satisfaction when he noticed that some of the natives began to move again and opened their eyes. Sooner or later they would all wake up and beat it. Ran Loodey decided to give Kayne Stowes a piece of his mind concerning the disagreeable task he had given him.

\* \* \* \*

Thomea Untcher had an outstanding ability to react spontaneously to sudden changes of situations. Before Phil Lenzer realized what happened, Untcher blocked the barefisted thrust of the strange creature and drove the foe back into the water. When Lenzer wanted to help him, he came already too late. Suddenly Untcher didn't seem to mind at all stepping into the water. He chased his opponent with great determination till they were knee-deep in water. Then he took a mighty swing at the fish-skinned body. With staring eyes the creature plunged full length into the water and went immediately under. Untcher had no intention of letting him drown. He bent down and searched the turbid water with sweeping movements of his hands. He was surprised that he was unable to find the unconscious stranger. His hands touched the bottom of the narrow inlet as he waded to the other side. There was no place where an unconscious person could have remained unseen.

Baffled, Untcher waded farther out to the open sea without finding a trace of the man he had knocked out. He persevered in his search until he suddenly spotted the same head he had seen earlier in the inlet popping out of the water again far away. Untcher thought he could recognize that the stranger laughed. Then he raised an arm and shook a fist, uttering a few incomprehensible gurgling sounds. He quickly disappeared again and the ocean was smooth and quiet once more as if there had been only a phantom.

Any further pursuit would have been completely useless. Apparently the weird fishman had regained consciousness the moment he hit the water and got away at tremendous speed.

Before Untcher turned around he heard a ruckus erupting behind his back. He heard piercing cries of pain and shouting of orders in English.

He scurried back to the shore and used the helmet radio to contact the ship. He inquired in an unaccustomed sharp tone: "Stowes! What's going on?"

The commotion caused Lenzer to fasten his helmet even before he heard Kayne Stowes' hasty reply: "Some natives are attacking the ship, sir! Sgt. Loodey is out there to repulse them. They don't put up much of a fight. Loodey seems to have them under control. . ."

Untcher interrupted him. "Order every man inside and outside the ship to put on and seal his spacesuit!"

"Yes, yes, sir," Stowes answered hesitantly. He didn't have the slightest idea what the purpose of the order could be.

"Hurry up!" Untcher urged. "Don't lose a second. The situation looks quite harmless to me aside from that. We'll be back on board right away."

Then he forced his way between the dense bushes, moving so quickly in the direction from where they had come that Lenzer had trouble keeping up with him.

"I beg your pardon, sir," Lenzer panted as soon as he was within earshot again, "is there something to cause you specific concern. . . I mean your insistence on wearing spacesuits?"

"Nothing specific," Untcher replied acidly without slowing down. "Did you get a good look at the stranger who was slugging it out with me?"

"Yes, of course."

"Didn't you notice something?"

Lenzer hesitated. "His skin was green and he had scales."

"Good boy," Untcher grunted. "Nothing else?"

"N-no, sir."

"Didn't you see that he carried a small metal flask under his left arm? He was so afraid to drop the flask that he hardly moved his arm."

Lenzer admitted that he failed to observe it.

"You should take a few more lessons to improve your perception, young man," Untcher chided him. "What do you think was in that bottle? Would you believe that the fish people carry their coffee into battle for a coffee break?"

Lenzer found it a little difficult to believe and said so.

"Is that so?" Untcher exclaimed. "Perhaps it contains a poison gas and they hope they can incapacitate the crew of the *Finmark* with it. Who knows? Whatever it is, we have to be careful."

When they reached the edge of the clearing surrounding the landing place of the *Finmark* Ran Loodey and his men were nowhere in sight. The enemy was also gone. Only a mass of footprints were left as evidence that a struggle had taken place.

Untcher surmised that Loodey had taken them prisoners and put them aboard but he didn't think very much of it. It was probably exactly what they wanted.

He asked Stowes to open the airlock and climbed aboard as soon as the hatch was ajar. "Is Loodey here with his prisoners?" he asked Stowes.

Stowes' answer was perplexing. "Loodey is with me," he informed him, "but he didn't take any prisoners. I must say he behaves in a most irregular manner."

"Irregular?" Untcher repeated in astonishment.

"Yes sir. He reproaches me..."

"Hold everything!" Untcher interrupted him. "Wait for me!"

He moved along the walk-belt with long strides. Phil Lenzer followed him, wondering how the diminutive man managed to develop such speed.

The scene he beheld when he entered the command centre was indeed highly unusual. Kayne Stowes had not exaggerated. Stowes stood in his spacesuit and locked helmet near the pilot seat. Ran Loodey had planted himself in front of him and some of the men with whom he had thrashed the fish people surrounded him in a semicircle. Neither Loodey nor his men had locked their helmets. Loodey seemed to be extremely angry. His face was red and he seemed to resent that Untcher had interrupted him in the middle of a tirade.

Untcher stepped into the centre of the room. Suddenly he was no longer the nervous, fuzzy-minded person who never took his words very seriously and always liked to make fun of people. His lined face and intelligent eyes were serious and his voice sounded stern as he turned to Loodey and asked: "I gave orders to wear a closed spacesuit. Why isn't your helmet locked, sergeant?"

Ran Loodey's eyes blinked. For a moment he appeared to be unsure how to answer the question. Then he took a step toward Untcher and declared unabashed: "I don't give a hoot about the helmet, Untcher. You, Stowes and Lenzer can't tell me a damn thing anymore. I..."

He began to rave but Untcher's cold, determined voice cut him off. "And what makes you think so, sergeant?"

Thomea Untcher narrowed his eyes to slits. Phil Lenzer was able to observe him over the shoulders of the men standing in front of him. He marvelled at the change which had suddenly come over the unassuming man. He realized that from this moment on he would never again be able to ridicule Thomea Untcher no matter how weirdly he acted or expressed himself.

"That's none of your business either, Untcher!" Loodey screamed furiously. "I'm sick and tired of getting shoved around by you. I'm my own..."

"Come here, sergeant!" Untcher commanded tersely.

It was spoken in such a forceful tone that Loodey forgot all about being his own boss and obeyed, standing still one step away from Untcher. For a tense moment Untcher stared into his face with penetrating eyes as if he could find something there to explain his insubordinate behaviour. Then he announced in a calm voice: "You are under arrest, sergeant. Hand over your weapon!"

Loodey was at first taken aback. Then he began to laugh. He leaned back and acted as if convulsed by laughter. Thomea Untcher lunged forward. Nobody saw exactly what he did when he jumped at his throat and he was back at his place before anyone realized what had happened.

Ran Loodey's laughter died on his lips in a gurgling sound. His huge body began to sway and finally crashed to the floor with a thud. He gave one last sigh and lay still.

Thomea Untcher ceased paying attention to him. He scrutinized the men who stood between him and Phil Lenzer. He saw that they were getting ready to pounce on him. There was anger in their eyes and it was obvious that they took the side of their sergeant although Lenzer had not yet become aware of it. If they tried to overwhelm him all together, he didn't stand a ghost of a chance.

Untcher drew his weapon and aimed it at the group loyal to Loodey. He said in an almost friendly tone: "I know what you are thinking, men, but I won't let you do it." Then he added in a firm voice: "Put down your arms! At once!"

They glowered without response. He confronted 8 of them with only Lenzer and Stowes to back him up. Untcher moved the barrel of his weapon a little and pointed it straight at the chest of the first man of the group. "I'm going to count to three, fellows," was all he said.

Then he began to count. Even before he counted two, their impulse-beamers clattered on the floor and the men raised their arms without further prodding. Untcher put his weapon in his belt. If he felt relief, he didn't show it. He ordered Lenzer to lock the men up including the unconscious Loodey. Then he asked Stowes: "Where are the other men who were outside with Loodey?"

"They went back to their stations, sir," Loodey replied.

"That's what you think," Untcher exclaimed. "I want to know where they really are." He looked around. "Assemble all men at each deck," he instructed Stowes. "I mean everybody from every room."

As if in a trance Stowes turned around and switched on the intercom. He began in one of the gun positions on deck A which was manned at double strength since the *Finmark* was put in a state of alarm.

The picture the screen presented was horrifying. The men sat around on the floor and were engaged in an animated discussion. Not one of them was at his assigned place. Kayne Stowes had trouble making his voice heard above the din the men created. None of them found it necessary to get up although one man replied after understanding Stowes' command: "We'll be there when it suits us. Right now we have more important things to do!"

That was all and no further shouting and ranting by Stowes could coax the men into listening. He switched the intercom off and turned around. His face was pale and his eyes mirrored deep shock. He moved his lips tonelessly as if he didn't have the strength to utter words.

Untcher interceded before Stowes found his voice. "I've said each deck and each room," he reminded him calmly.



Stowes turned around again, stopped in the middle of the movement and whirled back. "What's the matter, sir? What the devil got into these men?" he exclaimed frantically.

Thomea Untcher smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, Stowes," he replied. "It's an appalling mystery. We'll have to get to the bottom of it."

\* \* \* \*

The first fact they determined was that all but 14 men of the *Finmark's* crew refused to take orders from their officers. The vast majority acted indifferent or rebellious so that Thomea Untcher feared they were liable to take over the ship in an act of mutiny.

As they had not yet made up their mind what they wanted to do, Untcher quickly took advantage of the situation and closed all bulkheads from the safety control in the command centre. Then he pumped carbon dioxide through the ventilation system into the rooms of the recalcitrant crew thereby eliminating the immediate danger in the course of a few minutes. His forehead broke out in sweat at the thought that the *Finmark* was virtually defenceless during those minutes and that the unknown enemy could have picked no better time for a second attack than during the gassing.

However the minutes passed without an incident. They worked hard to drag the unconscious bodies into the mess hall where they were kept in custody. Thomea Untcher made the intercom available to the arrested men. It was important that they could call the command centre in case they came to their senses again and gave up their resistance.

Next he checked the qualifications of the 14 rational men he had left and considered himself fortunate that a medical expert was among them. He ordered Dr. Dunyan to examine Sgt. Loodey. Dr. Dunyan was the highest ranking officer of the medical staff aboard the *Finmark* and it was a stroke of luck that he had escaped the disaster.

Dunyan began by analysing the air inside the vessel but he detected nothing unusual except the excessive content of carbon dioxide whose origin was known. All signs pointed to the conclusion that the disobedient members of the crew had become the victims of an unknown gas used for chemical warfare. The 17 other unaffected men had without exception worn their spacesuits with properly locked helmets which obviously was the cause of their immunity. Yet Dunyan's investigation failed to corroborate this theory.

Neither did Loodey's examination furnish any sensational clues. Loodey was unconscious and showed no other symptoms than could be expected from a man who had received a well-placed blow to his throat by the hard edge of a hand. All Dunyan could predict was that Loodey would have some trouble swallowing after he awakened.

"How long will it take for you to perform a complete study, Doctor?" Untcher asked after listening to his preliminary report. "I mean a study thorough enough to identify what kind of drug makes him act so irrationally?"

Dunyan estimated 4 or 5 hours and Untcher directed him to get on with the work and finish the job in

two or three hours. He assigned two of the 14 'normal' men to assist Dunyan and called the others into the command centre to plot their course of action.

By this time the sun was going down. The temperature began to drop at an enormous rate. The heat the huge ocean had absorbed during the day dissipated into outer space almost unhampered by the thin atmosphere of Opghan. The water of the ocean contained very little salt. One hour after sunset the sea began to freeze and the tiny island which sheltered the *Finmark* was packed in walls of ice.

### 3/ THE INTRUDERS

It used to be the time when fear gripped the green-skinned scale-covered people at the bottom of the sea. Thousands of years ago, at the beginning of their history, when they had no permanent cities, they always fled before the dark edge of night and followed the disappearing sun. Those who were left behind perished because nature had not provided the Ephogers with the facility to retreat to the depth of the ocean where the extreme temperature diminished to a degree where the water remained fluid.

Formerly they spent their lives as continual migrants. In his life span an Ephogger was forced to swim around his world at least 10 times, the first time in the swim basket of his mother and then under his own power. The small islands dotting the surface of the ocean, 3634 altogether, served as resting-places and meeting points with the others of his race.

Then came the year in which the motor was invented. Subsequently the Ephogers were no longer compelled to swim for their lives in order to escape the cold. They crossed the ocean in large ships and their life was no longer fraught with the multitude of dangers as before. Yet the old fear lingered on. When the sun stood low they became haunted by the dread of staying behind and getting caught in the ice. Although the Ephogers were capable of withstanding the water pressure of the lower depths, they could rarely survive temperatures of less than 250° on the absolute scale.

The period of long travels by ships ended as quickly as it had begun when the Ephogers made the greatest discovery of their history. They found the semi-intelligent tubular plants whose long hollow stems reached the bottom of the ocean. The Ephogers learned that the tubular plants were willing to live with them in an arrangement for their mutual benefit. The Ephogers: protected the plants from the sharp cutting edges of the hchours, the biggest fish preying the waters.

The cooperation brought satisfaction to both partners. The hchours were also a scourge of the seafaring Ephogers. If one was caught in their jaws it meant certain death.

The Ephogers built cities on the bottom of the ocean and the tubular plants provided them with air. The tubular plants alerted the Ephogers as soon as a hchour reared its ugly head in the vicinity and the Ephogers instantly dispatched a party to slay the beasts. They did such a thorough job that the hchours no longer dared approach the undersea settlements after five long Opghan years and gave a wide berth to any light shining in the distance.

However the fear of darkness still plagued the Ephogers. The tubular plants almost touched the surface of the water and participated in the change of days and nights. They changed their colour as soon as the sun went down and the Ephogers soon understood the reason. The plant adopted a mode of metabolism

which enabled it to survive the cold of the night and withstand the heavy pressure of the ice without damage. When the plants that protruded through the ceiling of the rooms into the city changed from green to the colour of turquoise and finally became violet, the Ephogers knew without looking at their clocks that the sun set above their city and the water began to freeze. They trembled with the same age-old fear of nature's mighty forces which so many intelligent beings retain even at the highest stages of civilization.

This evening was no exception. Grghaok, the old fishman whom the intruders had rejected because he seemed too frail, sat in his small room and anxiously watched the strong stem of the plant getting darker till it finally appeared to be almost black in the poor light of the room.

Grghoak still remembered the last days when the Ephogers swam around their globe following the sun. Once he had circled Opghan in a basket with his mother but before he had to do it the second time, the motor had been invented and it was no longer necessary for the natives to use their muscles and webbed limbs for the strenuous journey.

He turned on a second light and shuddered. Grghaok studied the stem of the plant and hoped it closed the hole in the ceiling tightly enough to keep the cold and the water out.

The old fishman recalled an observation he had made that afternoon. How odd, he thought, that I always think of Chchaath and darkness at the same time! He had seen Chchaath as he walked with a metal cylinder under his arm along the street to the big watergate. Grghaok had a childlike curiosity despite his age. He was immensely interested to know what Chchaath intended to do with the cylinder out there. But he also knew that the guard would chase him away when he got too close to the watergate.

He hoped that Nrrhooch would have heard something about it although it was far from clear to him how Nrrhooch could have learned anything since he worked in the plantation which was the last place to get the news.

Grghaok's curiosity grew as the minutes passed. The old fishman paced the floor and mumbled a curse when he bumped into one of the rounded, smooth pieces of furniture in the room.

When Nrrhooch finally arrived, Grghaok quivered in a very excited state. Nrrhooch was tired which was easy to see. The colour of skin was pale yellow and his scales stuck out as if they were about to fall off any moment, He threw himself on his bed with a groan, folded his arms over his body and closed his eyes, breathing heavily.

Grghaok knew that he had to let him rest. The strangers forced the fishmen to work very hard and he would have considered it contemptible abuse not to give a man like Nrrhooch enough time to catch his breath after work.

Finally when Nrrhooch got up to fix a meal for himself, Grghaok inquired: "Did you hear anything about Chchaath?"

Nrrhooch responded angrily. "I hope the hchours get him!" he muttered. "No, I heard nothing at all about him. Why? Is there anything new?"

Grghaok chuckled. "You don't have to bother about fixing a meat my boy. I've done it for you. It's on the stove. Take it and eat. You'll be surprised..."

Astonished, Nrrhooch went to the stove. He lifted the plate which kept the heat from escaping and pulled out the hot metal pot with his bare hands. He took off the lid and let the steam of the meal enter his

nostrils. His eyes popped in amazement. "Lkhregh fins!" he exclaimed. "Flower vegetables! Grghaok, you spent all our money!"

His face didn't show a sign of regret. He was all smiles. Grghaok refuted him. "It wasn't too much. I saw a bargain and I thought you'd enjoy it..."

"...and be more amenable to your plans," Nrrhooch smiled. "Isn't that it? Tell me what you're cooking up now?"

Grghaok sat down on the bed where Nrrhooch had stretched out a little earlier and waited until the young fishman began to eat. "We've got to do something, Nrrhooch," he urged in a low voice. "Now Chchaath is kept busy out of town most of the time. If we want to do something to regain our freedom, we'll have to do it now before Chchaath stays permanently in the city and watches each of our steps."

Nrrhooch couldn't be bothered while he ate. Uttering delighted noises, he swallowed his food without chewing. It took awhile before he dismissed the idea with a gesture and added: "You know as well as I do, Grghaok there's simply nothing we can do. As long as we don't have weapons like the strangers and get soared to death each time a door jumps open or a light goes on without pushing a button, we don't stand the slightest chance."

Grghaok eagerly leaned forward. "That's just it," he insisted. "Chchaath isn't here. From what I know about him, he'll be absent for quite some time. We could sneak into his house. It would be interesting to see what we can find out."

Nrrhooch's eyes widened. "In Chchaath's house...? Are you crazy? If the guard catches us, they'll kick us out of town and no other city will admit us."

Grghoak raised his hand. "If!" he said grimly. "But they won't catch us."

"Oh no? And how do you know that?"

Grghaok turned around. "Lchox, come out!" he called.

Something moved at the wall. A panel opened up and plopped to the floor. It revealed a hole from which the wrinkled, yellow-green face of a fishman emerged who was about as old as Grghaok.

Nrrhooch jumped up. "What's all this? Have you two flipped your flippers? If..."

Lchox crawled out of the hole and stroked his scales. "If," he interrupted Nrrhooch scornfully, "we had said so often 'if' in our youth as you young people, we would still be swimming behind the sun instead of living in safe warm cities." He pointed with an imperious gesture that was in strange contrast to his slight stature to the hole from which he had climbed out. "While you youngsters worked out there for the strangers we old people thought we could make ourselves useful. We have built a passage which leads from here to Chchaath's house and tonight we're going to pay him a visit."

Nrrhooch was flabbergasted and speechless at first. Then he exclaimed: "But if Chchaath returns..."

Lchox snorted angrily. "There you go again!*If!* That's why we want to take you along. In case Chchaath returns we hope you'll be fish enough in the darkness when he least expects it to whack him on his windpipe so he won't disturb us for awhile."

Nrrhooch had recovered from his shock and said gravely: "And after Chchaath has regained consciousness he will investigate how we gained access to his house and discover the passage which leads directly to our house. With the instruments the intruders have, it's not much of a trick to unearth the most secret tunnels."

Grghaok, who had kept silent for the longest time, sighed deeply and turned to Lchox. "We'll have to go alone, my friend," he said sadly. "This young fish is too much afraid."

Although Lchox was only a small fishman, he was one of action. He turned around and crawled back into the hole. "Well, what's keeping you?" his voice came from the opening.

Grghaok followed him as soon as there was enough room for him. Nrrhooch remained motionless and silent in the small room. He heard the two old fishmen creep forward in the tunnel, scraping their scales on the artificial stonewall. He listened till the noise was hardly audible. "Hold it!" he suddenly shouted. "I'll go with you. I can't let you ruin yourselves alone!"

"That's better, Nrrhooch," Grghaok's muffled voice sounded from the tunnel. "Put out the light so they will think we are not at home. Replace the panel carefully and fasten it with the two hooks at the wall."

Nrrhooch did as he was told. After inserting the panel again, the narrow passage was totally dark. He had to crawl backwards because the shaft was too small to turn around and he tried to catch up with Grghaok and Lchox as quickly as possible.

The passage meandered up and down and left and right. Nrrhooch wondered where the oldsters had put all the material excavated from the shaft. He wanted to ask them but at the same moment his feet collided with Grghaok and Lchox whispered up front: "Quiet! We are here!"

Nrrhooch held his breath. He could clearly hear, although the noise was not loud, the sound of metal against metal and scraping of the artificial stone. Something heavy made a soft thud on the floor. Apparently there was the same kind of a cover that closed the other end.

However it remained dark. There seemed to be no light in Chchaath's house. Nrrhooch felt the pressure against his feet gone. Grghaok had moved on and Nrrhooch followed him. He reached a point where his toes stuck out into an empty space.

"Watch out!" a voice said behind him. "You have to go down here."

Nrrhooch stretched out his leg very cautiously. He touched the floor and left the tunnel.

"We'll leave the hole open," Lchox said in the dark. "Now let's find a light."

Nrrhooch wanted to suggest that they look for a small lamp instead of turning on the flood of light in Chchaath's sumptuous home. But at this instant something happened that made the blood freeze in the veins of Nrrhooch and the two old men and they thought the last hour of their lives had come.

Chchaath suddenly appeared in the dark. None of them noticed from where he had come. He simply stood there in an eerie dim light. Then he raised his arm and pointed straight at Nrrhooch, shouting in a deafening voice: "What are you doing here, you scoundrels? I'll see to it that they will chase you out of town!"

\* \* \* \*

"Two reasons," Thomea Untcher said with a sigh as if tired having to repeat everything 3 or 4 times, "two reasons cause me not to break off this expedition. Firstly, Terra and Arkon have made an agreement which obligates Terra, in return for the assistance granted by Arkon, to provide men and ships for police actions within the Arkonide Imperium. Police actions are considered missions that require four ships or less with crews of 2,000 men at the most. Our expedition falls into this definition without any doubt.

"Secondly, gentlemen, I don't see the necessity for terminating our expedition as long as I have 16 healthy and capable men with me," adding with a wry grin, "if, however, we should dwindle to 3 or 4, I would consider calling for help from Terra. Until then we can do effective work.

"In other words: we'll stick to our plan. If we want to find out what's going on on Opghan, we will have to go down into the water. The Ephogers have never used these little islands of the continents except as temporary resting-places. The ocean is their constant abode and we have to contact them down there to learn more about the trouble on this planet. I'm aware that the unknown enemy must be waiting for us in the depth. He probably expects our visit and is setting a trap for us. Well, we'll either fall into it or not. Who knows? This is a chance we have to take."

He turned around and took a few steps, mulling a thought. Then he paused and said, looking back over his shoulder: "Get ready, gentlemen, we'll take off in half an hour."

\* \* \* \*

It was plain to see that Nathael had worries. His face was reddened and he moved in a nervous manner. "I knew we would be in trouble," he growled in disgust. "It was a bad idea to bump Pthal off so soon."

His words annoyed Echnatal. Echnatal was the young man at whose artificial beard Nathael liked to poke fun. "A bad idea?" he snapped. "You didn't object to it when I first thought of it."

"No, because I assumed you would not act so hastily and use a little care to do the job. Instead you simply send a man over to Pthal to shoot him and he got killed himself."

He turned away as if he couldn't stand the sight of Echnatal and stared at the wall. He hated these rooms without windows. He was used to sweeping views, reflecting the infinite universe on the picture screen of a spaceship. Of course he couldn't expect the Ephogers to understand his feelings. They were strange creatures of a curious experiment. Their dwellings had only a single window in the room facing the street. He looked out in the street. But the sight of the bleak, dimly lit street distressed Nathael even more than the cavernous room with the few odd round pieces of furniture where the former chief of the city had performed his government functions.

"I've done my best to carry out the task," Echnatal complained irately. "You told me not to waste any time and so I acted as quickly as I could."

"Stop quarrelling with each other," the third man interjected with a bored gesture. He had made himself comfortable in an armchair behind some kind of a desk. In contrast to Nathael and Echnatal he did not seem to be affected by excitement. "I don't know why we have to worry about them," he murmured in such a low tone that Nathael and Echnatal had trouble understanding him. "Our first raid seemed to have been quite successful and as soon as the Terrans snoop around here, we'll finish them off."

Nathael snorted contemptuously, hissing the air through his teeth. "Finish off the Terrans! Just like that!" He sliced the air with a quick gesture of his hand. "Did you ever meet the Terrans, Aktar?"

Aktar looked surprised. His beard seemed to have a dirty brown colour in the murky light. "No, of course not. You know that."

"Yes, I do," Nathael trumpeted. "And if I hadn't known it you made it clear to me now. Finish off the Terrans! Simple, isn't it? Do you think they're waiting for us to take them by the hand and lock them up?"

Aktar fidgeted in his chair. He narrowed his eyes and frowned. "You seem to be awed by the Terrans, Nathael, aren't you?"

Nathael agreed. "And how, Aktar! You can hold a Terran tightly in your hand, for instance," he pressed his fingers together as if crushing a bug, "and you are completely sure that he can't wiggle out but suddenly your hand is empty and the Terran stands behind you and before you have a chance to turn around he'll beat you over the head and render you senseless. That's how Terrans are, Aktar!"

Aktar was about to make a vehement reply but before he could let off steam the door from the outer room opened and Chchaath entered. All eyes turned to him. He was the man who brought news.

"The Terrans are on the way," Chchaath blurted in his gurgling voice. "They have left 1358 in some kind of a boat and are diving to the bottom of the ocean."

Nathael turned wordlessly around and stared at Aktar, raising his eyebrows. Aktar knew what he meant to imply without saying it. Chchaath waited for the response his report would elicit.

"Go on," Nathael urged him. "How did you find it out?"

Chchaath twisted his face in a broad grin. "My boats are everywhere!" he proclaimed proudly.

"Your boats!" Nathael shouted, horrified. "Are you telling me that you sent your boats to meet the Terrans?"

Chchaath was visibly shaken. "N... no," he stuttered. "I ordered them to disperse and not to confront the enemy."

Nathael suddenly stood face to face with Chchaath "But they were close enough to see the boat of the Terrans!" he yelled at Chchaath. "With these conditions of light that means 100 or 150 meters and the Terranian rangefinders can spot you a hundred times that distance."

Chchaath retreated a step without saying a word. During the past few days he had learned to know Nathael well enough to realize that he would aggravate his fury only more if he talked back to him.

Nathael turned once more to Aktar. "I told you everything would go wrong," he cried. "We have equipped these fish-skinned fools with all those instruments and taught them how to operate the gadgets. We were not prepared for this submarine life and we might have had some trouble detecting the approach of the Terrans. But sooner or later we would have found it out. And now—instead of using the instruments we gave him—he sent out his boats and I bet all the ships of my clan against a hair of your beard that the Terrans are already bursting with laughter at our ineptitude."

Aktar waved his hand. "It isn't as black as you paint it, Nathael," he said in a soothing tone. "After our attack on their ship the Terrans must have assumed in any case that we are ready to give them a cold reception here."

"Yes," Nathael growled, "but now they don't need to assume it, now they know—and that makes a difference."

Nathael paced the floor with lowered eyes. In his anger he pounded the floor so hard with his steps that he shook the walls and the tubular plant, which extended through the height of the room in a corner, began to whimper in fright. Without raising his head, he walked around Chchaath, paused behind his back and inquired in an acid tone: "You have some very important and valuable equipment in your house at Bchacheeth. You know how the people resent you. I hope you made sure that nobody can get into your house and tamper with the instruments during your absence."

Chchaath felt relieved. He might have botched the other job but in this case he was convinced he had exercised exemplary circumspection. "You have nothing to worry about," he assured him hastily, "the audio-visual machines you've given me are set up to go on automatically at short intervals." He laughed obnoxiously. "I want to see the Ephoger who can take such a shock without fleeing headlong and being afraid to open his eyes again for a day."

\* \* \* \*

Nrrhooch was nearly bowled over by something soft and heavy that hit him with the force of an attacking hchour. He staggered and would have fallen down if he hadn't been thrown against a wall. He felt somebody moving near his legs, apparently scrambling desperately to reach the safety of the secret passage.

Nrrhooch would have had to lie if he had said that he was not scared stiff by the apparition of Chchaath and his thunderous voice. But when he realized that it was none other than Grghaok who was thrashing in horror on the floor and that Lchox was close behind him, he couldn't help but laugh. He seized Grghaok by his legs after he had halfway disappeared in the tunnel and pulled him back again. Grghaok began to screech and Lchox joined in. They made such a terrible noise that Nrrhooch had to warn them bluntly, "Shut up! You'll be waking up all the guards. It was only a trick!"

Grghaok was quiet. "A trick?" he asked in astonishment. "What kind of a trick?"

"The strangers have machines which can record the voice of a man and reproduce it any time. They also have a mechanism that can show moving pictures. What you have heard was Chchaath's recorded voice and you saw such a film with his picture."



Grghaok and Lchox breathed excitedly. "But..." Grghaok doubted.

"Wait, I'll show you," Nrrhooch interrupted him. "Where is the light?"

Nrrhooch found the switch and touched it. A bright and pleasant yellow light filled the room. Whatever criticism could be heaped on Chchaath copying the foreigners, he didn't accept their glaring blue-white light which hurt the eyes.

"Look over there!" Nrrhooch pointed out. "This thing which looks like a fine net has held Chchaath's picture and displayed it to us." He turned around. "And back there is the machine which has produced it. Next to it is the box containing Chchaath's voice and..." he turned back to the projection screen, "... there beside the net hangs the loudspeaker making the sound of Chchaath's voice. You see..."

He was interrupted when Chchaath's picture appeared again on the screen. This time it was a little weaker, though, because of the illumination in the room. His voice repeated the same threat as before: "What are you doing here, you scoundrels? I'll see to it that they will chase you out of town!"

Grghaok began to chuckle, buffing and puffing. "That's a great trick," Grghaok admitted. Then he realized the indignity of his position. He got up and dusted himself off. "Let's begin our investigation," he decided. "Since you know so much about the instruments of the strangers, Nrrhooch, you should be able to explain many more of them to us. There's another one, for instance. How about this one?"

He pointed to a large table next to the semi-transparent netlike projection screen. The table was, except for a big cabinet standing in a corner, the only substantial piece of furniture in the entire spacious room which confirmed to Grghaok that Chchaath had adopted a great deal of the intruders' customs because the Ephogers were fond of stuffing their rooms with so much furniture that they were hardly able to move around.

Nrrhooch smiled a little. He went to the table and studied with tense eyes the device Chchaath had set up on the table. "This," he put his finger on a medium-sized box with a milky-white translucent glass plate in its centre, "is used to see and talk to another person at the same time."

"That's wonderful," Lchox marvelled. "Then you can talk to me from here when I go back to my house."

Nrrhooch shook his head. "No. You must have a set like this in order to make a connection."

"Aha," Grghaok said with satisfaction, "you can make a connection, can you?"

"Yes. I've watched one of the strangers do it. They have gadgets like this in their vehicles and use them sometimes on their inspection trips in the plantations."

"Very good. Now turn this thing on!"

"Are you out of your mind?" Nrrhooch exclaimed. "There is a stranger at the other end and when he gets to see us, he'll be on our necks."

"*Chchchch*," Grghaok agreed, "that's right. But I'll be a red-toothed hchour if I wouldn't like to see how it works!"

Nrrhooch thought very hard. It was not easy for him because he never had much practice using his brain; and most of all, he knew virtually nothing about the videophone. He had observed how the foreigner

turned a knob and the panel showed a confusing pattern of flashing lines before the picture. Perhaps...

"Wait!" he decided. "I want to try it."

He sat down on the chair at the table and scrutinized the set. He tried to remember what the stranger had done three quarters of a day earlier when he watched him making a connection. Nrrhooch pressed a button and the set began to hum which reassured him since he had heard the same noise before. Then he turned another knob and the screen lit up. He recognized a similar mass of jumbled lines flashing across the panel and he uttered a sound of relief that he didn't happen to tune in on the bearded face of a foreigner. "This is the way to operate it," he explained to the two old fishmen. "If I keep turning this knob, one of the strangers will soon appear on the glass panel and ask me what I want. And if I were Chchaath I would answer him."

Lchox and Grghaok stared in fascination at the small rectangular piece of glass. Grghaok edged closer and Nrrhooch waited for him to say something. He failed to see the hand of the old fishman and he didn't notice that Grghaok began to turn the knob. However he became startled when the screen changed its colour and a strange voice began to talk in an incomprehensible language.

Nrrhooch spun his head around. The screen showed the face of a man he had never seen before. He was certain that he never had even seen a man like him. The stranger had no beard. He ceased talking and peered attentively at Nrrhooch.

Overcome by panic, Nrrhooch wanted to switch off the set or at least turn the treacherous knob farther. But this time it was Grghaok who kept his cool head. He held back Nrrhooch's arm and whispered: "Wait! This is not one of the strangers who are oppressing us!"

At the same moment the man on the panel began to speak again. This time he used the same language as the strangers, which was also so similar to that of the Ephogers that they had no trouble understanding him. "Hey, fellows!" he said. Don't be afraid of me! Who are you?"

Grghaok pushed Nrrhooch aside and sat down on the chair. "We are Nrrhooch, Lchox and Grghaok from Bchacheeth, stranger. And who are you?" he asked.

The stranger answered with wide eyes: "My goodness, what kind of a tongue is this, friend? Can't you spit out the water from your mouth?"

Grghaok wanted to take offence but the stranger continued: "I don't mean to be rude, my friend. I'll have to get used to your language. Where is Bchacheeth situated?"

"Between Xchaghacht and Pchchogh," Grghaok replied. "One tenthday trip from Xchaghacht and one and a half tenth trip from Pchchogh."

This didn't seem to enlighten the stranger much. "We'll find it," he replied. "Tell me, didn't they kill your highest official?"

Grghaok raised both arms in vehement affirmation. "Yes. That was four days ago. Then the strangers began to crack down on us."

The stranger perked up. "Who are you talking about?"

"Our oppressors. They discharged all our officials four days ago and taken over the government. They

force us to work in the plantations and..."

"Not so fast," the beardless man interrupted him. "I can't understand everything you say all at once but I gather that you are in trouble. Do you need help?"

"Yes, of course," Grghaok spouted. "The sooner the better. We hate the strangers and..."

"In that case I need more information," the stranger interrupted him again. "It is dangerous to talk over the telecom. I better come to see you. Can I get into the city without being detected by the strangers?"

"No, for water's sake," Grghaok threw up his hands excitedly, "not unless you know the secret waterlocks and then only in a tiny boat."

"Oh? But you can leave the city, can't you?"

"Yes and no. I can and perhaps Lchox. But Nrrhooch would be missed right away. He's working in the plantations."

The beardless one waved his hand. "If you can manage to meet me, you won't have to worry about working in the plantations anymore. Please, tell me quickly a good place where we can meet together!"

Without a moment's hesitation Grghaok suggested: "At Pchchogh. It's an old abandoned city where only a few houses are still intact. There are only some old tubes left which aren't even good enough for the hhours."

The beardless one wrinkled his brow. "Tubes?" he murmured. "Hhours? Where is Pchchogh located?"

"I said already that it is one and a half tenthday trip from here," Grghaok replied.

"In which direction?"

"In the direction the sun moves."

"Is there anything else between Bchacheeth and Pchchogh?"

"Only a few low hills."

"Alright. We'll go to Pchchogh and wait for you there."

"Yes... wait a moment! You haven't told me who you are."

The stranger answered with a proud smile: "We are Terrans."

Then he switched the telecom off and the screen on Chchaath's receiver showed nothing but a flickering light.

Grghaok turned slowly around and looked at Lchox and Nrrhooch with a beaming grin. "Did you hear that? They are Terrans!"

#### 4/ STRANGERS' SHIP

Thomea Untcher still gazed at the telecom after he had turned it off and shook his head thoughtfully. Then he turned to Phil Lenzer, who sat next to him at the controls, and said: "Strange, isn't it? They must have tuned in on our frequency by accident."

Lenzer remained silent. He stared at the observation screen which served as a window and tried to penetrate the grey semi-darkness pervading the sea to a depth of 2,000 meters. Phil Lenzer was responsible for the life of six men beside his own, men who had entrusted their safety to his guidance in the multipurpose vehicle on the search for the mysterious opponent in the depth of the ocean.

The transporter had flown west from the island till it had caught up with the sun and reached the border of ice. Then it submerged in the water, diving at an angle of 30° to the bottom of the sea and following a straight course for the past hour.

"I do find it strange," Lenzer finally replied, "that we have received this call just at the time when the tiny boats which had been following us dropped out of sight of our rangefinder."

Untcher scratched his head. "You are right," he admitted. "I would consider this to be a trap just like you if I hadn't seen the sincerely surprised expressions on the faces of those three fellows when they appeared on the picture screen. No, Phil, I'm convinced they are in real trouble. They won't lead us into a trap."

Lenzer shrugged his shoulders without looking at Untcher. He kept his eyes glued to the observation screen.

The grey twilight did not originate from the sun. Daylight did not reach 2,000 meters below the surface of the water. Lenzer as well as Untcher guessed that the diffused light came from luminous marine organisms that had fled from their ship and surrounded it in a wide circle. They were probably much too small to be discernible individually.

The men sitting behind Untcher and Lenzer were silent. Except for a faint sigh or a low yawn which was caused more by the tension than boredom, none of them had spoken a word—other than the rangefinder observer—since the vehicle had plunged into the water.

The world by which they were now surrounded gave them an eerie feeling. They were familiar with the wide-open spaces of the universe or the inhospitable surfaces of other worlds but rarely ventured into the deep regions of oceans. Although deep-sea cruises in land-sea-air transporters had been part of their training they had assumed they would spend all their time in the comfort of a spaceship and never seriously contemplated a life underwater.

As soon as they entered the water the observer had detected small semi-metallic objects moving in the vicinity of the ship. The way they moved indicated that they must be steered. Untcher tried to contact them with the short-range intercom but received no answer.

The unidentified boats finally left as if they had been suddenly called back. They had trailed their ship to a depth of 1500 meters. After they retreated the seven men went down another 500 meters and then the trip was uneventful until the conversation with the fish-skinned people who had such unpronounceable

names.

Thomea turned to the navigator. "Did you take your bearings?"

The man sitting at the rangefinder replied without looking up. "In a moment, sir. The evaluation hasn't been completed yet."

Untcher looked at the observation screen. The monotony of the twilight caused his mind to wander. He began to ponder the conversation he had with the three men from Bchacheeth—or whatever that place was called. Lenzer was right. Anybody in his right mind would have suspected that the call was a trick and a clumsy one at that. It was designed to lure him and his men to a certain spot where the enemy had assembled a strikeforce to eliminate the uninvited intruders with the least possible trouble. Didn't he himself use the argument only 15 minutes earlier that the Ephogers had no telecoms? How did they suddenly get hold of one? It had to be a trap...! And yet! Untcher did not know what induced him to trust the three natives as he did without any reservations. He was determined to go to Pchchogh and keep the appointment, taking all necessary precautions of course.

At this moment the navigator reported: "13 kilometres radius vector, sir. Phi 186, Theta 103."

Untcher followed his custom in these cases for gaining a visual image of the rangefinder data: he put both hands together in the direction and at the angles the navigator had quoted, a habit which seemed almost ridiculous to an experienced spaceship commander. "Flat," he murmured, "very flat. How high are we above the bottom, Phil?"

"Approximately 2000 meters," Lenzer replied. "We are about halfway up in the water."

"Well, you know the course. According to the information of the Ephoger, Pchchogh lies directly west of this point. Don't get too close to the city. I'm afraid there might be some people with rather unfriendly intentions swimming around there. I don't want to run into them before we talk to the Ephogers."

Phil Lenzer turned his head and looked at Untcher with raised eyebrows. "If we get a chance to talk to them..." he said ominously.

\* \* \* \*

When Aktar returned he reported that all necessary measures had been initiated. "We did all we could," he assured Nathael. "Unfortunately there aren't very many of us and I can't depend on Chchaath's people."

Nathael nodded grimly. "You are absolutely right, my friend. But what's the matter with Plougal's men?"

Aktar made a dubious face. "You know how Plougal and his people comport themselves. They are scientists and they live and die for their vocation. But they are not fit to fight. The slightest breeze can blow their scrawny figures away."

Nathael disputed it, shaking his finger. "Don't be fooled! I've seen Plougal's people fight more than once. They are dangerous opponents."

"Yes... when they can apply their cunning methods and concoctions but not otherwise."

"You shouldn't jeer at their tactics. You have used one of their tricks yourself to disable the Terranian spaceship."

"Of course," he growled, "because I had no other choice. And you saw what we accomplished by it. We really have put the Terrans on their guard."

"Fortunately they didn't have many men left who could be aroused to take action against us or they would have sent out more than one boat."

Nathael raised his hand in an affirmative gesture. "I guess you are right but I can't say I like the looks of it. Can we rely on Chchaath's information? How can he be sure that the Terrans will reach the bottom of the ocean between this city and Bchacheeth? What if they don't stay on a straight course? Our instruments are designed for outer space and we won't be able to detect the Terrans till they approach us within a few kilometres. I'm asking you, what assurance do we have that our plan will work?"

Aktar's face betrayed little confidence. "Our ship's complement is only 200 men and we can deploy them to control a limited sector of the ocean's bottom at best. On the other hand, we far outnumber the Terrans and we will be in a most advantageous position once we succeed in locating their whereabouts. The question is if we can detect them in time. If we can do that the rest will be like shooting fish in a barrel. Well get them before they..."

"Ssssst!" Nathael admonished him smilingly. "I've already warned you of the Terrans. I'll be happy if we can capture them but I don't expect this to be very easy."

"Well," Aktar replied, "we are going to..." He paused as the door was opened and Echnatal entered in an agitated state."

Chchaath has been trying to keep track of the enemy's boat," he announced. "His instruments spotted it for a few seconds northwest of here. Then it disappeared again."

Nathael and Aktar were both perplexed.

"Northwest!" Nathael exclaimed. "Does that mean they have changed their course?"

Echnatal raised his hand. "Apparently," he agreed.

"In which direction are they moving now?"

"They're going west."

Nathael stared pensively and muttered a few incomprehensible words. Finally he raised his head and looked at Aktar. "I know it sounds silly but it looks as if they were heading for Pchchogh."

\* \* \* \*

Kayne Stowes was startled from his brooding by a call on the intercom.

"Guard, sir," a firm voice reported. "Sgt. Loodey has regained consciousness and wishes to talk to you."

Stowes looked surprised. "If he wants to annoy me with his insolent remarks again, tell him he can go to hell. I'll talk to him only after he has spent a few weeks in a good Terranian hospital."

The man on the picture screen suppressed a grin. "I beg your pardon, sir, but Loodey seems to act very rational. He says he regrets what he did and wants to apologize to you although he doesn't believe that this will cause you to withdraw your report to the Fleet Command, requesting disciplinary action."

"Fidstix!" (Fiddlesticks) Stowes scoffed. "I didn't have an opportunity to make the report. Doesn't Loodey have an intercom in his cabin? Tell him to call me!"

Stowes ended the conversation and wondered about Loodey's request. He didn't have to wait half a minute before the intercom buzzed again and when he switched the picture on he saw Ran Loodey's broad, conscience-stricken face.

"Sir," Loodey called. "I'm terribly sorry that I behaved insubordinately. I can't understand what made me do it..."

"It's alright, sergeant," Stowes interrupted him benevolently. "How do you feel now?"

Loodey seemed to sigh in relief. "Thank you, sir. I feel excellent. Dr. Dunyan was here when I woke up and he gave me some medicine which put me back on my feet. I have a hoarse throat as you might notice but otherwise I feel fine. I thought you could use me since so many of our men..."

He paused as if unable to find the right word to describe the state of the majority of the ship's crew. He had touched on the problem which was foremost in Stowes' mind. The *Finmark* was badly shorthanded. He was afraid that he would be unable to guarantee the effective repulsion of a determined attack by the enemy, which could be expected at any moment.

"If you feel yourself again, you may come to the Command Centre," Stowes replied with little hesitation. "I can certainly use you. By the way where is Dr. Dunyan now? Is he still with you?"

"No sir," Loodey answered quickly. "He left 20 minutes ago. He said he had to do some important work in the lab."

Stowes glanced at the clock. If Dunyan was busy in the lab, it was better not to disturb him. There was time to check with him later if he had found out what was wrong with Loodey. "Report to me!" Stowes ordered the sergeant and Loodey replied at once, "Yes sir."

Stowes pressed a button and ended the connection. He leaned back in his chair and tried to assess the new situation as to the beneficial effect Loodey's change of mind would have on the discipline aboard the *Finmark*.

In his cabin where he had been locked up, Loodey donned the uniform which Dr. Dunyan had taken away from him and locked the magnetic wires. He even took a critical look at his hair in the mirror and combed it neatly.

Satisfied with his appearance he was ready to knock at the door of his cabin and request the guard to open the door. However he hesitated and opened the wardrobe closet with the mirror he had used for his inspection. Inside he pulled a few pieces of clothing apart which covered the bottom shelf of the closet, thereby exposing the motionless limp body of Dr. Dunyan. He examined the gag and the ropes with which Dr. Dunyan was tied up and determined that they were satisfactory.

\* \* \* \*

Nrrhooch pressed himself into the small, shallow niche. He was unable to see the guard in the twilight but he could hear the sound of his brisk steps on the artificial pavement.

He knew that all would be lost if the guard failed to turn around before reaching him but he also knew that this was too much to hope for. The Ephogers who sided with the strangers were even worse than their masters. They were expected to ride roughshod over their fellow citizens and they had as yet never failed to live up to their evil reputation. Nrrhooch trembled although he felt hot and his scales were covered with streams of sweat. The niche was much too flat to hide in. If the guard had appeared on the scene only an instant later, he could have slipped through the waterlock and nobody could have followed him.

He called himself an imbecile because he had consented to take part in Grghaok's scheme. But it was too late to turn back. The guard came closer. The last lamp of the street threw his long grotesque shadow on the pavement. He was sure to arrest and lock him up and the strangers would make him work for days without pause in the plantation.

Nrrhooch breathed hard. He was ready to junk the whole idea and give himself up before the guard decided to shoot him with his terrible weapon. However the situation took an unexpected turn.

The guard had noticed his loud breathing. But the sound had bounced back and forth between the walls and the guard was unable to trace it back to the dark nook. He stopped, spun around and listened in confusion. Nrrhooch could see him quite clearly now as he stood quietly with his back turned to him.

Nrrhooch was suddenly struck by an idea that took his breath away. He saw his chance and—with the strength and agility acquired by his work in the plantations—he hurled himself in a mighty leap from his nook onto the shoulders of the guard. Nrrhooch acted instinctively and without premeditation. He pressed the palm of his right hand against the neck of the traitor and simultaneously slipped his left hand under the man's arm, squeezing him so tightly against his own body that his victim was unable to move.

The guard was too surprised to put up a good defence. He made a hissing noise and then began to moan under the painful pressure exerted by Nrrhooch whose right hand pressed his airpipe together. The airpipe was a peculiar organ which was attached to the nape of the Ephogers' necks. It resembled a snorkel and was capable of being extended up to two meters above their necks. This enabled to Ephogers to swim under water while breathing through their airpipes at the surface. The airpipe was the most sensitive and vulnerable part of their bodies and Nrrhooch knew exactly why he had selected this organ.

The weird struggle did not take much time. The guard soon went limp and lost consciousness. Nrrhooch let him slump to the floor and pulled him by the legs to the dark niche. He stood next to the unconscious



man for awhile, breathing deeply, and tried to grasp what he had done. If the strangers found out that he had overpowered one of their guards and caught him, they were sure to kill him. Yet he felt no fear. His success filled him with too much joy. Now he gained a terrific weapon such as only the strangers and the traitors carried. He could call Grghaok and Lchox out of their hiding places without waiting till the coast was clear. They could leave quickly to go to Pchchogh and meet the strangers who had promised them help—those strangers whom Grghaok had praised so highly because they were Terrans.

Still half-dazed by his boldness, Nrrhooch opened the small gate leading to the water and looked around in the small dank space behind it. Then he dragged the senseless body of the guard inside. They were sure to find him there if he didn't wake up before the next guard came to relieve him. He patrolled only a short stretch of the street and if his colleague failed to see him, he would look for him behind the watergate. After discovering the missing man they would turn the city inside out and learn that Grghaok, Lchox and Nrrhooch had left the city during the sleeping hours. Naturally they would assume that the three were the perpetrators of the crime and launch a hunt in their pursuit. However by that time they would be far away on their trip to Pchchogh and nobody knew the secret eaves and crevices on the bottom of the ocean better than his old friend Grghaok.

Nrrhooch made sure that his new weapon was well concealed in his loincloth and hurried back to the street. After running past several houses he began to worry that he might look suspicious in his haste and he slowed down to a tired walk like a man who was on his way to his bed.

Lchox's house was only a short distance away from the watergate but the time it took Nrrhooch to reach the house had never seemed to be that long before. As soon as he had closed the door behind him, he called out: "Come quickly! I've knocked out a guard and the way to the water is clear. I also got his gun!"

There was a muffled noise at the rear of the house. A door opened and the two old men jumped out, jostling each other in the doorframe.

"What did you do?" Grghoak asked in astonishment.

"Did you say you knocked down a guard?" Lchox gasped.

"Don't ask questions," Nrrhooch rebuffed their curiosity. "Nobody is there to block our way now but it won't be for long. Are you ready? Let's go!"

They went out into the street, which was still empty. Yellow lamps shed a dim light on the streets of the city that was quietly asleep. Nrrhooch glanced along the irregular rows of oval windows at the house walls. They were all dark but this was no proof that a curious onlooker did not watch them in the dark. However Nrrhooch had no reason to be disturbed by this. The citizens of Bchacheeth shared a common hate against the strangers and those who had defected had been transferred to serve in their pay long ago. If a neighbour happened to witness the flight of the three men, he would not betray them to the despised strangers.

Nrrhooch did not have to prod his two old friends again. They ran down the street as fast as their thin legs would carry them and headed for the small watergate whose use was forbidden since the arrival of the strangers.

Opening the gate, Nrrhooch quickly checked that the unconscious guard was still at the place he dumped him. He held the door open for Grghaok and Lchox and after a last look to see that the street was still deserted he entered the small dark room as well. "Are you sure you can find your old boat

again?" he asked Grghaok.

The old fishman trembled with excitement. "Of course," he replied. "It's been quite a few days since I hid it out there but I would never forget the place in all my life."

"Go on!" Nrrhooch urged. "We don't have any time to lose."

The waterlock contained only a single berth. Lchox nimbly walked down the slippery steps and released the mechanism which opened the outer door. Nrrhooch heard the swish of the water and became taut. He knew what would come next. He remembered the strange sensation he experienced since his childhood days whenever the waterlock was opened. The air would get thick and make it difficult to move. His ears would ring and soon he would be unable to hear anything at all for awhile. He would feel a sharp pain in his airpipe till it got used to the change. A languid feeling of tiredness would follow and disappear only when his body was ready to enter the water where he could move with the swiftness of a hchour, the predator of the ocean, until his supply of air was exhausted.

He heard Lchox' faint voice that was almost drowned out by the rushing water. "Come down! The basin is full."

Nrrhooch moved slowly at first but quickly regained his strength as his airpipe ceased to hurt and the ringing in his ears diminished. He was ready to plunge into the water.

The water slightly illuminated the dark waterlock. Of course Nrrhooch was familiar with the fact, as all children of the Ephogers, that the seawater radiated such a light and had always taken it for granted. But lately he had heard that the strangers were amazed by the phenomenon and claimed that tiny organisms inhabited the ocean and caused the water to glow.

Cautiously walking down the steps, he let the cool water bathe his legs. Then he slid into the water and submerged himself in order to fill his ears with water and to test his breathing through the airpipe. When he rose again, Grghaok and Lchox floated at his side. They began to swim along the narrow basin and dived down when it became completely filled with water. Nrrhooch had to use all his skill to move in the water and he heard Grghaok call to him: "Not so fast, young fish! Remember, we are a little older!"

The voice had the familiar sound of speaking under water. Soon they reached the end of the basin where the lock was open and they swam out into the beautiful fantastic world at the bottom of the ocean.

Nrrhooch almost collided with a lkhregh. The fish, a long lithe creature, had lingered near the exit of the basin and became frightened by the three strange figures as it was too late to keep a cautious distance. The lkhregh slunk away in graceful curves and turned both heads around from afar to cast a disapproving look at the intruders. Nrrhooch laughed and the lkhregh hastily took off.

Grghaok took over the guidance. He spryly swam over the rounded top of a hill and descended into the valley beyond. Then he turned right and followed the base of the hill. The opposite side of the valley was fairly steep. Nrrhooch surmised that Grghaok had stashed away his boat in one of the caverns of the hill.

Suddenly Nrrhooch became concerned about the weapon he had tucked away in his loincloth. He touched it to check that it was still there. He was worried that the weapon of the strangers might fail to function under water because they were no denizens of the ocean. He was about to shout a warning to Grghaok because the caverns in the hills were often infested with the repulsive and wily chchorls as well as hchours, who would cause a lot of trouble, but at this moment Grghaok took another turn around a jutting corner and the wide dark opening of a cave appeared before their eyes.

Grghaok paused in front of it and uttered, as was his custom, a roaring noise in order to chase away the dangerous animals who might lurk in the dark recesses of the cave. But all he did was startle several grey and white snakelike nschchrachi who slithered out in a panic.

The cave was quite deep and Grghaok's boat was anchored at the far end. He opened the hatch and let Lchox enter. "Hurry up," he gurgled, "I'm running out of air."

Lchox closed the hatch behind him and quickly began to pump out the water, causing the swirling stream to stir up the mud. Lchox was out of sight when the door was opened again by Grghaok. Nrrhooch told him to take his time because he had an ample supply of air left.

Finally Nrrhooch slipped through the hatch. After pumping out the compartment, he blew out the rest of his air, which had become unfit to inhale. He climbed inside the boat. The two oldsters asked him to take his place at the steering control. He sat down and started the motor. Then he carefully steered the boat out of the cave and asked Grghaok for directions to Pchchogh.

"It's best if we keep to the right," the old fishman suggested.

"That would take us too close to the plantation," Lchox said apprehensively.

"That won't make any difference," Nrrhooch assured him. "The western part of the plantation is not yet ready to be harvested. We'll be just as safe between the Psimo bushes as elsewhere. The strangers will go there only when the harvest begins."

The boat soon left the valley behind and veered to the right again. Nrrhooch made the motor run full speed. He was impatient to reach Pchchogh because he was extremely anxious to meet the strangers.

"Who are these Terrans?" he asked Grghaok. "What do you know about them, Grghaok?"

"I've talked to Pthal about the Terrans," the oldster replied eagerly. "The whole world is full of stories about them. Oh, benign sea, it is such a pity that Pthal had to leave so soon. He was such a good..."

"You were going to tell me something about the Terrans," Nrrhooch reminded him.

"Yes, that's right. Well, not too long ago the Terrans were a small unimportant people somewhere in a remote region. But then they began to build ships in which they travelled out into space and soon were known by their exploits. They ventured into the realm of the Arkonides and acted as if they were at home. The Arkonides tried to destroy or repulse them but the Terrans could not be defeated. They are a battle-hardened people and have aided more than one oppressed race to gain its freedom. I am sure they will help us to fight against our tyrants too."

"I hope so," Nrrhooch murmured. "If they don't, we won't have a place to go. I mean the three of us. We can't return to Bchacheeth and they would arrest us in any other city also."

"We could stay in Pchchogh," Lchox said. "Some of the houses are supposed to be still intact."

"*Hehchchch*, not in Pchchogh!" Grghaok shuddered. "If I didn't know that the strangers will be there when we come, I would never set foot in it."

"Why not? Because of the Phchauchols?"

"Of course because of the Phchauchols. Don't you believe in them? They are invisible as long as they stalk you and can be seen only after they have seized you and suck your blood. Why do you think the people have abandoned such a beautiful city as Pchchogh—if not because of these monsters?"

"Well, I don't know. I'll believe in the Phchauchols when I've seen one."

"Then it will be too late," Grghaok contended emphatically. "It will already be on your neck and drink your blood."

"Or yours," Lchox said mockingly. "If it's on your neck I can see it too."

Nrrhooch squelched their arguments. "Stop quarrelling now! We are approaching the plantation. I think we might as well pass straight through it. This is the western section and nobody will notice us here."

The two old ones leaned forward and peered through the thick plastic window. In the twilight they were barely able to see the outline of the Psimo plants at the border of the forest a few meters away. The Psimo was a unique plant of bright red colour—neither tree nor bush—whose countless branches and twigs rose in grotesque whorls without leaves from the ground and grew so high that the tips could not be seen from the boat. The ends of the twigs were studded with small tufts of yellow-white filaments which slowly floated around in the water. Some day they would blaze in all colours and make the deep sea glow in a magic light. That was the time of the harvest. The tufts would be collected and put in large containers. Then the containers were carried to the border of the forest where the strangers picked them up.

The Ephogers never were interested in the Psimo forest—unless it was to enjoy the splendour of magnificent colours when they were ripe. They knew that the strangers had come to Opghan solely for obtaining the Psimo blossoms and had forced the natives into slavery for the purpose of gathering them.

Nrrhooch chose a gap between the mass of plants and steered the boat toward it. He manoeuvred his boat very cautiously between the trunks because he was anxious to avoid a collision with the extremely hard plants. It would not have taken much of a blow to break up his old boat.

The two oldsters stared with wide eyes at the red plants as if trying to figure out why the Psimo forest had caused such hardships to Opghan but Nrrhooch concentrated on his course. He saw these red Psimo forests 10 times each day when he slaved in their midst and was allowed only enough time to return to his home to catch a little sleep. He had come to hate the red forest almost as much as the strangers because he blamed their existence for the encroachment by his tormenters.

Suddenly the plants opened to form a clearing in the middle of the forest. Nrrhooch searched for another gap on the opposite edge of the clearing in order to continue his trip but before he discovered a suitable spot, one of the huge plants toppled over on his left hand side and sank to the ground, stirring up clouds of mud.

Nrrhooch was stunned by fear. What kind of a monster was it that could fell a Psimo plant? He stared with morbid fascination at the swirling mud, expecting to see an enormous hchour or another gargantuan beast emerge from the depth.

But no such monster appeared. Instead he saw the sleek metallic bow of a ship with a hull of colossal dimensions. The blood froze in his veins. The Ephogers did not possess vessels like this!

It was a ship of the strangers!

## 5/ ARAS & SPRINGERS VS. TERRANS & ARKONIDES

Kayne Stowes had waited for Ran Loodey's entrance with suspense but when he finally stepped into the Command Centre it was entirely different from what he had expected.

It was Stowes' misfortune to be alone in the Command Centre. Loodey pointed the thermo-pistol he had taken away from Dunyan at the First Officer who didn't have a chance. Loodey disarmed Stowes and knocked him out with a hard blow, using the butt of his gun.

Then he quickly went to work with great efficiency. He unlocked the hatch of the crew's mess from the control panel of the Second Officer and watched with satisfaction on the intervideo how the horde of suddenly freed prisoners overwhelmed their few guards standing at the entrance and locked them up in turn after quickly disarming them.

The rest was easy. The other stations aboard the ship were manned by single guards. There were only four of them, three at the most important gun positions. Ran Loodey issued his orders to the men he had released so unexpectedly and was pleased to receive the report only a few minutes later that the ship was in the hands of his men.

He made no announcement of his plans because he believed that his men were aware of them. He was convinced that their thoughts were the same as his own. He merely assigned them to their posts and admonished them to keep their eyes open. After a few calm hours the *Finmark* appeared to be the same as after the landing. The ship was in a state of alert—but the identity of the enemy had changed.

Ran Loodey left no doubt about his unwillingness to relinquish the command aboard the ship despite the fact that there were two lieutenants and five members of the Mutant Corps with the rank of officers among the men he had set free. Nobody seemed to challenge his leadership.

Loodey summoned two of the mutants and one lieutenant to the Command Centre before he beamed his infamous message to Earth, which was later exhibited as an oddity in the Galactic Museum. It read:

"FINMARK ON OPGHAN. ALL QUIET ON OPGHAN. NO SIGN OF REBELLION. EPHOGERS PEACEFUL AND HAPPY. NO CAUSE FOR ALARM AS ARKON'S WARNING OBVIOUSLY UNJUSTIFIED OR MISTAKENLY TRANSMITTED. WILL RETURN AFTER FIVE DAYS OF CLOSE OBSERVATION."

\* \* \* \*

Thomea Untcher's men listened to his voice on their helmet radios as he mused: "In all my years of roaming in the Galaxy thousands of light-years away in space I have never seen such a remarkable sight

as this city, I must admit."

His figure looked fragile as he stood in his pressurized spacesuit among the ruins of the long-deserted city on an old street where the grotesque animal plants of the deep-sea pushed up through the cracks of the pavement under the yellow somniferous light of the lanterns which still functioned although they had not been attended for centuries.

It was like a scene conceived by the fantasy of a surrealist painter and its unreality was enhanced by multifarious colourful and luminous fish that swarmed around him at a safe distance.

Crumbling walls lined both sides of the street. The darkened oval window holes offered glimpses of old rooms shrouded in a grey twilight where nobody had dwelled in ages. In some places the algae covered outlines of rounded objects discernible in the murky light. They seemed to be pieces of furniture that had withstood the ravages of the sea as most things were built by the Ephogers to last for eternity in the erosive environment of the elements.

The lamps extended the full length of the street. They were far apart as if the Ephogers required little light in those bygone times. Each was still intact and their small incandescent globes shed a yellow, almost pastoral light which imitated the effect of the sun Ephog. The mud squirting out under Thomea Untcher's steps seemed to form luminescent fingers.

Untcher walked along the street, mindful of the information given by the Ephogers that there were a few livable places left at Pchchogh. He wondered how this could be possible after the destruction wrought by the centuries in the aquatic desolation. High above the roofs he could see in the beam of his helmet lamp the ruins of the city's dome which had protected Pchchogh in ancient times against the tremendous pressure of the water. The remnants had jagged edges which he took as signs that the cover of the city had been destroyed by force.

They had entered the city through one of the breaks in the dome. There had been no need to look for an entrance with a complicated gate if they could do it the easy way.

Untcher paused in front of a dark window and peered into the water-filled room. He tried to overcome a vague feeling of anxiety which had disturbed him since he had left the transporter by himself. He did not know what caused it. Perhaps it was the eerie sight of the city or an unconscious fear of unknown monsters or some other menace of the mysterious sea.

It did not help to abate his apprehension either when he turned on his helmet lamp to inspect the room behind the window and caused several grey, eel-like fish to flee over his head close enough to make him jump back nervously.

He called himself a fool to have such silly jitters but it did not make him feel much better. Each time he turned around he had the uncanny feeling he would see a dangerous enemy. However he was not to be deterred from pursuing his investigation. He kept walking until he reached a place where a narrow alley branched off from the street which aroused his curiosity. It was only two meters wide and very short. The end was closed off by a wall between two opposite houses and it gave the appearance of being younger than the yellowed facades of the adjacent buildings of the Ephogers.

Untcher warily entered the little lane which the light of the street lamps failed to penetrate. In the bright glare of his own searchlight he detected a seam in the wall which outlined a one-meter-wide rectangle from the floor to a height of two and a half meters.

Furthermore Untcher was puzzled by another observation. The pavement of the lane was devoid of all growth. Whereas weeds proliferated on the other streets and deteriorated the tough pavement to a degree that it could not last much longer, the lane was smooth and undamaged.

Untcher slid his gloved hand across the wall and was hardly surprised when the rectangular part of the wall swung open and revealed the entrance to a room. He noticed only a negligible flow of water which indicated that the room had been filled with water before or that he had touched a release with his hand which flooded the room.

Untcher reported his findings to his men in the transporter. "I stumbled onto a waterlock," he said. "I think I would be stupid to stick my nose into this all alone. I need some volunteers who are less afraid than I am."

Thomea Untcher was one of the few commanders who could afford to talk about their fear without losing the respect of his men. Although they believed him that he was not always immune to fear, they knew he could master it and accomplish incredible deeds if necessary.

Untcher stood in the opening of the wall in an effort to block the locking mechanism of the door and waited for the arrival of his men. He turned his head so that his helmet lamp illuminated the dark room and determined that the chamber was only three-by-three meters wide and three meters high. The opposite wall showed the same rectangular pattern of a door and Untcher's guess that the box built into the lane was an airlock became a certainty.

The chamber had no visible equipment. Untcher could not recognize where the machinery was which equalized the tremendous water pressure at the depth of more than 4000 meters. The walls were even and did not give away the secret.

The men he had called to join him soon appeared at the end of the lane. Silhouetted in the light of their helmet lamps, they resembled ghostlike phantoms. They made their way, leaning forward at an angle which would have made them fall down under normal circumstances. Untcher waited impatiently till the group of three men reached the small chamber. There was room enough for all of them together in the chamber. This was important since nobody knew what surprise might be in store for them on the other side.

"I don't have to tell you that you must keep your weapons ready to fire," Untcher said as they went into the chamber. "Behind that hatch is no man's land and the one who shoots first may be the one to get out alive." Then he left his place under the entrance and the hatch closed again as he had expected.

Untcher wondered how the Ephogers had learned to build such technical refinements as this perfect hatch. He had noticed that they usually opened their doors manually. There was only a lock and a bolt which had to be pulled back before the door was opened. The Opghan technology had no facilities for constructing automatic systems of this advanced type.

Untcher braced himself for the worst possibilities. He kept looking around to see when the concealed pumps would begin to empty the water. His heart stopped for a moment when he suddenly noticed that a part of the chamber was already empty before he had perceived any movement of the water. At first he believed his eyes had fallen victim to a hallucination created by the confusing optical conditions at the bottom of the deep sea. But the phenomenon spread and when the water had receded from half of the chamber without anybody able to understand where it had gone, he could not deny that something fantastic took place before their eyes.

They watched with fascination as the water retreated to the opposite hatch. A wall of water reached from the floor to the ceiling, seemingly defying all laws of nature. The wall moved toward the hatch as if it were on rollers and pushed back by an invisible being. The operation was performed without a sound and the weird silence confounded and frightened the men as well.

Untcher stood motionless after the last drop of water had disappeared. Finally he lifted his arm mechanically as if without purpose. When he glanced at the measuring instruments attached to his wrist he found that the gauge registered a pressure of 1.2 atmospheres. The chamber was filled with a gas under a pressure which caused no discomfort at all to Terrans.

Thomas Untcher sensed that his mind began to stray from his normal rational control under the impressions of an experience he had never witnessed before. He closed his eyes to concentrate his thoughts, trying to regain his clear logic. Then he weighed an idea which could explain the facts he just had observed. He remembered the conclusions of the modern field theory—a branch of physics which had gained new prominence on Terra by the discovery of the matter transmitter by the Ferrons. He considered it possible that the water had been displaced by a gas by the application of the principle of transport fields. The longer he thought about it the more he became convinced that it was the only reasonable explanation and liked the consequences to be drawn from it less.

Establishing a transport field presupposed a knowledge of five-dimensional energy theory. The inhabitants of Opghan could be interesting beings with unusual and amazing talents but they most certainly knew nothing about the theory of five-dimensional fields. The chamber had been built by strangers whose technology was at least equivalent to that of Terra.

His men were still in a state of apprehensive silence when Untcher looked up and noticed that the inner hatch began to move slowly. As yet he was unable to see what was behind it. He tightened his grip on his weapon and was prepared to face the worst trouble at any moment.

\* \* \* \*

Nrrhooch was so frightened that he became paralysed for a few seconds. His little old boat was smack in the course of the big foreign craft which moved so fast that he could not have avoided a collision, even if he had reacted instantly.

But he was saved by some kind of a miracle. As the other ship emerged from the cloud of mud stirred up by the fall of the Psimo plant, it pulled up its sleek bow abruptly as if it had only waited for the clearing to escape the tangled mass of the red forest. Its keel missed the little boat by a hair although Nrrhooch could swear he heard the scraping of the two bodies. He watched incredulously as the ship ascended till it disappeared from his view in the murky light of the ocean.

Nrrhooch didn't trust his eyes. The strangers had been so close that he could have reached them with his hand. They had forbidden the Ephogers to use private boats. If they had seen it they would have stopped and seized Grghaok's boat. Apparently they had not even noticed their tiny tub and simply continued on their way.

Nrrhooch turned to his two old companions and squealed in delight. "Onward!" he shouted. "The sea favours our journey. We'll soon be in Pchchogh and greet the strangers!"



\* \* \* \*

Ran Loodey had no objections when the aliens boarded the *Finmark*. They were six tall broad-shouldered men who behaved as if the spaceship belonged to them. Loodey was in full agreement. He was persuaded that the bearded aliens were the masters of the ship and he put no obstacles in their way.

He failed to profess the slightest curiosity. Neither did he ask who the aliens were, where they came from or what they wanted. He permitted them to take over the command and felt a certain relief that he was no longer responsible for the ship. His men seemed to harbour similar feelings.

In their relaxed mood of indifference Ran Loodey and his men paid no attention to the small metallic cylinders the aliens brought with them and hid in many places of the ship where they would be hard to find. But even if Loodey had taken notice of them he would have done nothing because it did not trouble him at all.

Finally one of the aliens entered the Command Centre and demanded that Loodey prepare the *Finmark* for the takeoff.

"You will fly back to Terra as quickly as possible," the bearded giant ordered.

\* \* \* \*

By contrast there was one man aboard the ship who found no solace in his situation. It was Dr. Theodore Dunyan.

When he woke up he had a gag in his mouth which kept his tongue from moving. His head hurt and he had trouble breathing. He was unable to see anything because he was covered by a pile of blankets and clothes which shut him off from the light. Nor could he move his arms. That scoundrel Loodey had done an expert job of tying him up!

Ali, Ran Loodey...?

Ted Dunyan had already found out why Loodey and his men acted in such an irresponsible manner. The result of his investigation was so astounding and incredible that Dunyan at first believed he had made a mistake and repeated his succession of experiments a second time.

Yet the diagnosis remained the same and he realized that he had made one of the most remarkable discoveries in decades.

After Loodey finally had regained consciousness, he acted as if he were of sound mind. He claimed to feel sorry for what he had done and was anxious to be allowed to talk to Capt. Stowes to offer him his

apologies.

Ted Dunyan had anticipated this phase of development and when it manifested itself he took it as proof of the accuracy of his diagnosis. He tried his best not to let Loodey know that he saw right through his deception but somehow he must have betrayed his true opinion or Loodey decided it would be better in any case to have one opponent less. Whatever it was, Loodey took advantage of a moment when Dunyan was absorbed with his instruments and jumped up. It was the last Dunyan remembered up to the time he woke up in the dark and half choked to death.

Ted Dunyan's bent was to be a scientist. He had joined the Solar Spacefleet as a young man because he endeavoured to broaden his knowledge on journeys in the far corners of the Galaxy. The concern about his personal welfare would not have given him as much strength and perseverance to escape his imprisonment as the fact that he had succeeded in making an important discovery and that he had to return to Terra in order to reveal his miraculous achievement to the whole world. It made him furious that he had to gasp for breath in a dark closet and it spurred his frantic efforts to free himself of his bonds.

When he felt he had managed to loosen a knot, he suddenly heard voices. He stopped to listen. At first he believed Loodey had returned to look for him but then he noticed that the voices spoke in the Arkonide language. This puzzled him and he avoided making the slightest noise that could lead to his discovery.

One of the unknown persons burst out laughing and said in a booming voice: "By the time Terra finds out that the stuff has been dispersed throughout the atmosphere it will be too late for them to do anything about it."

His companion joined in his malicious laughter and Ted Dunyan knew what they were talking about. He was the only Terran who realized to what they referred by 'the stuff'. As soon as the voices and the steps faded away again, Dunyan resumed tearing desperately at his ropes. All of a sudden it had become crystal clear that Terra was in the most terrible danger.

\* \* \* \*

The lane continued behind the chamber. It looked exactly the same as where it branched off from the street but the houses were well preserved and instead of the murky water the space between the buildings was filled with fresh air.

Thomea Untcher did not get a chance to look up to the dome over the city to determine why it was undamaged in this part of the lane although it was gutted with holes on the other side of the chamber. Nor did he get a chance to use his weapon despite his fierce determination to fight all comers.

The reason was that he never saw his adversary. The lane was empty and quiet in the yellow light. Untcher walked a few steps ahead of his men after he became convinced that his fears had been groundless.

Suddenly he was struck by a stunning blow. Although he had walked slowly and cautiously he felt that he had hit a wall of steel with the impact of a racing car.

He staggered and fell. Once more he suffered a crushing wallop and blanked out completely.

\* \* \* \*

The yellow cozy light of the city penetrated the milky water and Nrrhooch's breathing quickened with the thought that he would soon see the Terrans about whom Grghaok had told such fabulous stories.

He kept thinking during the rest of the trip about the huge ship which almost rammed and killed them in the Psimo forest. It vexed him what business the strangers had in that section of the plantation, as the blossoms were not yet ripe. After surviving the first danger he became intrigued with the adventure and would have liked to follow the strangers if the Terrans had not waited for them in Pchchogh.

Nrrhooch went around the city to enter it from the north where a watergate still existed. From there it was only a short way to the district of Pchchogh where some of the houses were still intact.

Following the advice of his two old friends, Nrrhooch dipped into a gulch outside the city before approaching it openly. When he cautiously peered over the opposite rim of the gulch he saw the same ship as before in the red forest.

Perhaps because he had expected it or because he felt stimulated by a new sense of adventure, Nrrhooch felt bold enough to dare unheard of challenges. He suffered no more panic; he reacted without shock and before the two others had caught a glimpse of the strangers' ship he switched off his engine and allowed his boat to sink into the gulch again.

Nrrhooch listened intently. The bottom of the gulch was so dark that he was unable to see farther than two swim strokes. However he was certain he could hear the movement of the water if the strangers came closer.

The two old fishermen chattered with each other to still their fears. After everything remained quiet for awhile Nrrhooch started his engine up again and rose once more to the rim of the gulch. The ship was gone and he had managed to escape the strangers for the second time. In the light of the old deserted city he saw the flat bottom of the ocean lying empty before his eyes.

He wondered why the strangers had come to Pchchogh and it occurred to him that the Phchauchols who scared Grghaok and whose existence Lchox doubted might in reality be the bearded strangers who had chosen to live in the deserted city for some reason. Nobody really knew where the strangers were most of the time. They were all over Opghan but where they lived had remained a secret.

It was not implausible that they had made their headquarters at Pchchogh. The Ephogers knew that there were some comfortable houses left in the city because a few courageous young men had visited the city despite the bloodcurdling tales of Phchauchols although none had dared linger very long or enter those mysterious houses. It was in the power of the strangers to prevent the Ephogers from discovering their private retreat. Those who failed to come back from Pchchogh were said to have been killed by the Phchauchols but it was more likely that they were victims of the strangers.

Nrrhooch had a vision of the strangers holed up in Pchchogh like the chchorls in their caves and lunging out with their tentacles at an unwary suspect. From Pchchogh they spun the threads of their nets, which

ensnared the unfortunate inhabitants of Opghan. And there was another thought that haunted Nrrhooch. He believed that the Terrans, as Grghoak called them, were in utmost danger because they had no idea what secrets awaited them in Pchchogh.

\* \* \* \*

Ted Dunyan was on the verge of fainting before he made the first progress. Struggling with his bonds took a lot of breath out of him and he had none to spare. Several times he saw stars before his eyes and had to give up his efforts in exhaustion until he recovered again.

Finally he got one hand free and he immediately pulled the gag out of his mouth. Then he pushed the blankets and clothes under which he was buried aside and filled his lungs with precious air. Next he freed his feet and got up. He opened the door of the closet and stretched his legs in the cabin to get his blood flowing freely again. He had no illusions about the perils of his situation. Loodey was in a position to turn on any intercom in the Command Centre and inspect each room of the *Finmark* whether the intercom in that room was switched on or not. If Loodey suddenly decided to take a look at his cabin, Ted Dunyan's plans would be nipped in the bud.

As soon as the prickly pain caused by his blood's renewed circulation diminished, Dunyan considered himself ready to cope with the strenuous efforts he contemplated. He opened the door of the cabin a crack and peered into the corridor. It was empty.

The corridor ended 10 meters away at the main corridor of the deck where a walkbelt ran at a fair speed. Dunyan decided to take a chance although he did not know whether Loodey had posted guards along the main corridor.

Dunyan reached the main corridor unseen. All was quiet around him except for the slight hum which usually filled spaceships and the faint whirring noise of the conveyor belt. There was nobody in sight and the ship looked deserted.

Dunyan could not have wished for more. He had mapped his strategy and after riding only 30 meters on the belt he would be virtually safe because he could duck into a maze of little hallways where he was not likely to be detected by anybody.

Not once did it occur to Dunyan that he engaged in a foolhardy enterprise if he attempted to conquer single-handedly a big and fully manned spaceship.

\* \* \* \*

Thomea Untcher opened his eyes and saw the three men who stood before him studying him with cold, almost scientific interest.

A veil seemed to lift from his eyes as he gazed at the men. Suddenly he knew who had staged the plot

on Opghan and he realized clearly the tremendous stakes for which they played.

Two of the men were robust, broad-shouldered and very tall. Both had bushy beards although the beard of the younger looked artificial. The third was the epitome of ugliness. He was taller than the two others and incredibly thin. His narrow head came to a hairless rounded point and his eyes looked cruel though intelligent. The lips were thin and tightly pressed together. His neck rose abnormally high from slender shoulders and the rest of his figure looked as though it was so fragile that it would break into pieces under the flimsiest load.

However Untcher knew that this was seldom the case. The Aras were tough people who possessed abundant vitality and their looks were deceiving. They were the descendants of an ancient race that also was the progenitor of the Arkonides and Springers. Living by the principle that the world was created to be explored by them, they had produced clans of scientists who put knowledge above morality and had no respect for the scruples of others.

The Aras had achieved their greatest success in the areas of medicine and biophysics. They were physicians without peer in the Galaxy and they were known to dissect bodies of patients in the pursuit of discovering the secrets of human life. They used their medicines and drugs to subdue entire planets and they sold their narcotics at tremendous prices in the farthest regions of the Galaxy. The artificial monsters they had produced in the retorts of their laboratories had given the Terrans a lot of trouble on their journeys in the universe.

The Aras had put their clutches on Opghan! Thomea Untcher could feel nothing but pity for the Ephogers. Their happiness would be sacrificed forever if they had something the Aras wanted to exploit.

The other two men were easily identified too. They were Springers, members of a nomadic race of traders who claimed the right of monopoly throughout the world for their business. They were independent traders who were bound together by a common belief and, if necessary, stuck together like a pack of wolves. Terra had already become embroiled in many fights with the Springers in its short galactic history. Some prominent captains of the Springers had become temporary allies of Perry Rhodan but never his friends. Most of the time they had caused Terra a great deal of trouble and the days were still fresh in Untcher's memory when the patriarch Cokaze reluctantly left the solar system of Terra and was forced to abandon his plan to subjugate in a single attack the Solar Imperium.

In any case it was not the first time and not very surprising that the Aras and Springers had combined their forces in a marauding venture and that such an action was directed against Terra and the Arkonide Empire too.

After sorting out his thoughts Untcher began to contemplate his precarious situation. He sat on a chair and was not chained, yet he was unable to move. The only muscles he was able to control were his eyelids, his mouth and those which enabled his lungs to breathe. He remembered that he had received two vicious blows and concluded that he had been the target of a shock weapon. The resulting paralysis was due to the shock inflicted on his nervous system and it was only a matter of time, till it would be cured.

As far as he could see, his companions were not in the room where he was kept. It was rather large and seemed to be furnished exclusively with medical paraphernalia. The place looked like a room one could expect to find in a city of the Aras. Apparently the Aras had established themselves at Pchchogh. They had built an airlock which made a part of the city inhabitable again. Thomea Untcher could not forgive himself that he had walked into the trap like a little child.

The three men noticed that he had regained consciousness. One of them, the Springer with the genuine beard, stepped forward and announced: "I am Nathael patriarch of my clan. Whoever you are, you would have done better not to stick your nose into other people's affairs."

"It's my affair too," Untcher replied calmly, as unperturbed as if sitting in a comfortable chair and exchanging views in a conference with reasonable and concerned partners. "The Arkonide Empire requested us to initiate a police action on Opghan and this made it our business as well from that moment on. Terra made a pact with Arkon which calls for assistance by the Terranian Fleet to the Empire in such cases as this and you must know that we always carry out our commitments."

Nathael did not seem to resent the needling Untcher intended with his hint at the unreliability of his compatriots. On the contrary, he replied in the same relaxed vein: "This is a business, my friend..."

"My name is Untcher the Commander interrupted him. "Thomea Untcher, so you won't have to call me your friend."

Nathael was taken aback for a moment. Then he continued. "We are involved in a certain business here and such deals are our exclusive right. We won't tolerate any interference from outsiders and if you choose to ignore this fact you will have to pay with your life or, at least, with your free will."

Untcher saw an opportunity to learn something about the strange metamorphosis that had occurred with his men aboard the *Finmark* "Is that so?" he said in a casual tone. "And how do you want to accomplish that?"

Nathael smirked and pointed to the Ara. "Very simple. Our friend Plougal has worked for quite some time on the development of a new drug whose ingredients are produced in the germinating cells of the Psimo corals which are native to Opghan. Recently he succeeded in isolating the most potent components of the drug. You have seen the result on your own crew."

"Do you mean my men will remain in this state forever? Doesn't the drug lose its efficacy after a time?"

"Not naturally," Nathael replied. "The drug contains neoamino-dysprosionat. This ingredient can only be transformed by radiation with thermic neutrons. It causes the effect to diminish and gradually eliminate the substance from the body. Therefore radiation is the only means to counteract the effect of the drug."

"And you don't mind telling me all this?" Untcher asked.

Nathael made a disdainful gesture. "You won't have a chance to use this knowledge," he contended.

"Want to bet?" Untcher challenged him.

"Nathael frowned. "What? I see...!" Then he burst out laughing. "You'll never be able to pay off your bet if you lose."

Untcher dismissed it a little regretfully. "Too bad. What made you come to Opghan in the first place and what are your future plans?"

Nathael seemed to enjoy his role and reported eagerly. "Opghan has been for thousands of years the object of studies by our friends, Plougal's people. You have seen some of the Ephogers yourself and you will have noticed that they have certain features which are evidence that they are descendants of Arkonide pioneers. However no Arkonide has as yet developed webbed hands and feet or airpipes no

matter how much he was surrounded by water. These traits are of a contradictory nature. The puzzle is solved if one learns that Plougal's people have established a settlement on Opghan shortly before the Arkonides arrived. However no more than two of their ships landed on Opghan because there was only limited room for people to live on the tiny islands of the planet. Plougal's people were frustrated by the prospect of eking out a meagre living on specks of land surrounded by all that water where billions would have enough space to live if they could adapt themselves to such conditions. The Aras decided to tackle this problem. With or without the consent of the immigrants, they created a new race in the course of generations, the race of Ephogers, the fish people. You know how Plougal's people are. They will do anything for the sake of science. The experiments took more than a thousand years but in the end they were crowned with success. They had bred a new race."

Thomea Untcher shook himself. He noticed that his muscles and nerves obeyed his command again. "It must have been quite a shock for the immigrants to see that their children had webs and snorkels," he observed.

"Yes," Nathael sniggered, "it must have been. But in the interest of science the Aras are perfectly willing to sacrifice the happiness of a race if they consider it necessary."

Untcher was able to move his head again. He looked into the face of the Ara, Plougal, and tried to guess what went on in his mind. However he looked inscrutable. Not a muscle moved in Plougal's face. The story about the inhuman atrocities of his confreres seemed to leave him cold.

Nathael seemed to be in love with his own voice and he continued his tale in an affable mood. "For thousands of years the Aras maintained only a few sparse settlements on Opghan. The results of the complicated experiments had to be observed patiently for an extended time. There was no sign that Opghan had to offer other attractions until they discovered the drug contained in the Psimo corals. At that time their interest in Opghan took on new dimensions. They conducted some experiments which looked highly promising and they decided to cultivate the Psimo forests growing on the bottom of the sea. This necessitated the services of the Ephogers. However the Ephogers showed no inclination to work voluntarily in the Psimo plantations and had to be forced to submit to this task. You know the mentality of Plougal's race..." he spread his arms in a vague gesture as if he wanted to excuse the foible of a good friend, "...they are incapable of using naked force. On the other hand they had not yet extracted enough of the drug to influence the Ephogers. Therefore they made a deal with us and we did the dirty work for them. Now it will take only a few more days—one day in this world is about as long as 9 days on Terra, as you know—till they get enough of the stuff to control the Ephogers permanently and then the real business transactions can be started. We expect a pretty profit."

Thomea Untcher was stunned. It was a display of frivolity that went far beyond the usual tolerance of his unprejudiced mind. The degree of callousness made Untcher shudder. Now he knew the sad history of the Ephogers. How they had been developed from Arkonide pioneers and how their civilization retrogressed under the influence of detrimental biological changes until they reached a primitive state which the Arkonides had overcome many thousand years earlier. Yet the tradition of certain technical practices had only remained dormant for a certain time and was carried on by the more gifted members of the new race who eventually perfected a new civilization in a few thousand years which, however, exhibited some remarkable discrepancies. The Ephogers possessed excellent submarines—better than Terra had in the last century—but they had no idea what a radio was. They hunted the fish in the water with pressurized air harpoons and had never learned the use of firearms.

Untcher was deeply impressed. He saw how his men were affected by the drug and he easily imagined the tremendous business the Springers expected to do in this trade. They were not hampered by scruples anymore than the Aras. The only difference was that they justified their greediness by business whereas

the Aras justified their lack of qualms by the label scientific progress.

"There is one more thing I would like to know," Untcher finally inquired in a tired voice. "What happened to my companions?"

"Oh, don't worry about them," Nathael laughed. "We got them all. They came to look for you when you failed to return after some time and they got caught in the same trap as you. They are well taken care of. The Aras have chased away the inhabitants of this city centuries ago by spreading horror stories and staging mysterious attacks in order to set up a base for their operations in Opghan. They have more than 200 well-preserved houses here at Pchchogh and were generous enough to give each of your men a separate apartment."

Untcher had to resign himself to the fact that he could not look for help to anyone else at the moment. He would have to use his own wits to escape from Pchchogh.

His gloom seemed to be reflected on his face and Nathael who deemed it essential to crush the spirit of his prisoner, persisted. "Not only that, Untcher. We have also taken over your ship. Our men boarded the *Finmark* and ordered your Sgt. Loodey to return to Earth. Loodey will obey us and the *Finmark* will be launched in a few hours—with a devastating cargo, needless to say."

Untcher did not doubt that he spoke the truth. He tried to hide his distress but was not entirely successful. He hated to give the Springer the satisfaction of seeing him aghast and he was glad to be distracted by a commotion behind his back.

Nathael, Plougal and the other Springer looked up in surprise. "What's the matter, Aktar?" he heard Nathael ask.

"Three Ephogers: have knocked out a guard in Bchacheeth and fled the city," an excited voice answered. "Chchaath has sent out all the men he had available to look for the fugitives. He came with me as quickly as possible. It's possible that the fugitives are headed for Pchchogh."

Nathael was amazed. "Do you worry about three Ephogers?" he asked scornfully.

I wouldn't be," Aktar replied apologetically, "if Chchaath didn't insist that one of the three is a certain Grghaok who knows each nook and cranny on Opghan. Chchaath thinks that he might even be able to slip into Pchchogh without being noticed."

## 6/ RHODAN TRIUMPHANT

"Yes," Grghaok declared with emphasis, "I know a way!"

Nrrhooch and Lchox looked at him in astonishment and a little awe. "You do...?" Nrrhooch whispered.

Grghaok made an affirmative gesture. "When I was a young man, I had a yen for delving into mysteries. Pchchogh was one of them. I know this city better than anyone else."



"What about the Phchauchols?" Lchox wondered. "You admitted you are afraid of them."

"Of course I am," Grghaok replied. "I had a very nasty experience with them."

"How come?" Nrrhooch and Lchox asked in one breath.

Grghaok turned the palms of his hands up. "It's difficult to describe exactly. It's been a long time. All I remember is that I was struck a terrible blow from behind when one of the Phchauchols jumped on me. After that I can't remember a thing until I woke up again and found myself lying in the middle of the street."

"In the water?" Nrrhooch asked puzzled.

"Of course not. It was in the undamaged part of the city. Otherwise I would have drowned. Nobody can hold enough air to survive a coma in the water."

"*Mchchm*," Lchox asserted, "if I understand you right you never even saw the Phchauchol?"

"No," Grghaok replied. "I didn't see it but I certainly felt it."

"*Mchchm*," Lchox grunted again. "In that case it might have been one of the strangers who, in Nrrhooch's opinion, live at Pchchogh."

"Could be," Grghaok admitted. "Perhaps we will soon find out."

He got up and opened the little air chamber. "We better hurry up," he suggested, "the Terrans may be in a real danger."

Nrrhooch, as the youngest, left the boat first. The little boat had pulled up next to the ruins of the simulated stone cupola which had completely enclosed the city and protected it against the water pressure. Now the cupola was cracked in numerous places and the city could be entered without going through a watergate. Most of the locks were no longer serviceable anyway. They were nothing but holes as for instance the northern entrance which was located nearby.

Grghaok first showed them the way into the flooded part of the city. The old man swam swiftly but cautiously, using any suitable place to hide and his companions followed him in the same prudent manner.

Nrrhooch felt quite apprehensive when Grghaok swam through a gaping window into one of the houses but he followed him unhesitatingly, tightening his grip on his weapon and hoping fervently that the water would not destroy its effectiveness.

Grghaok's voice came out of the darkness. "For some reason I don't know, this house is equipped with a special air chamber. Perhaps its owner was a very cautious man who was afraid that the water might inundate the city some day and he wanted to have an exit to be on the safe side. In any case, this chamber can lead us into the dry section of the city. The last time I was here about 500 days ago the strangers had not yet discovered this chamber. I put a mark on it and I can see it is still untouched."

A dim yellow glow was cast through the open window. After Nrrhooch's eyes got used to the darkness, he could see that Grghaok was busy at the wall in the background of the room. He swam over and helped him to move the hatch closing the chamber. It seemed to be undamaged by the water which had flooded the city for centuries.

The room behind it was so small that they had trouble squeezing in together. They closed the hatch behind them and waited for the pumps to begin their work. However nothing happened. Grghaok inspected the opposite hatch and examined the clues he had put in place many days earlier. "They haven't detected it yet," he exclaimed with joy.

That won't do us much good, Nrrhooch thought sadly, if the pumps...

But at that moment the water began to swirl and foam. It was sucked to a corner of the room and drained away through a funnel in the floor by the pumps. Before long the chamber was filled with good fresh air.

To open the other hatch required their combined strength. Bright yellow light streamed in through the opening, revealing the dry well-preserved street of the former city where the houses looked as if the old inhabitants were still at home.

Nrrhooch was the first to step into the street. The eerie calm of the city made him feel uneasy and he did not dare release his grip on the unfamiliar weapon, trusting it would do the job when he needed it.

The two oldsters chattered excitedly but before he could admonish them to be quiet something attracted his attention. The door of a house farther down the street moved a little. The crack widened gradually as if reluctant to reveal the secret behind the door. Nrrhooch saw a glaring blue-white light through the opening.

He nudged Grghaok and Lebo with his elbows and showed them the unexpected light. They silently jumped back into the shadow of the nearest house and took cover in a doorway as well as they could.

The door was finally pushed open and for a moment.

Nrrhooch could see nothing but a blinding rectangular source of light which hurt his eyes. Then two figures emerged, one of normal stature and the other unbelievably tall and thin. At first Nrrhooch did not believe his eyes because of the glaring light and the distance. The long figure looked much too unreal. But then the two strangers walked out of the door and into the street and the spook did not go away.

Nrrhooch was flabbergasted when he recognized one of them. His skin had a green sheen and was covered with scales. The hairless skull glistened as if it were wet. It was Chchaath.

He and his spindly companion walked up the street, heading in the direction of their hiding place. Nrrhooch could feel that Grghaok began to tremble behind him and Lchox tried to suppress a frightened moan. He realized that he had to do something if he did not want to be cornered by Chchaath and the ugly stranger. He hesitated for a moment, thinking that the thin man could be a Terran because as far as he knew nobody else except the bearded ones and the Terrans were present on Opghan. But when he thought of the praise Grghaok had showered on the Terrans he found it hard to believe that they would make common cause with a turncoat like Chchaath.

He slowly raised the barrel of his gun, making sure not to let it protrude from the doorway and without being seen himself. Nrrhooch did not know how to operate the weapon but it had only one button and he hoped to get the desired result by depressing it.

Chchaath and his repulsive companion had approached him within a few steps when Nrrhooch touched the button. The effect surpassed all his expectations. A blinding flash hissed through the barrel of the gun

and a white-hot flood of energy shot across the street, hitting the wall of a house. He watched in terror as it instantly burned out a hole and caused melting stone to flow down and spatter into the street in a sizzling stream while spewing forth stinking smoke.

Chchaath and the stranger stopped in their tracks and staggered in surprise. Nrrhooch saw that he had failed to hit them and he corrected the aim of his deadly beam. Chchaath and his companion clung to the wall of a house and made a futile attempt to run away before they were caught by the swift and terrible weapon of Nrrhooch. Their bodies disintegrated under the incandescent beam.

Suddenly Nrrhooch feared that he would burn up the whole city unless he stopped his fire and he pressed the button again, almost overcome by panic.

Not a trace was left of Chchaath and the stranger. They had gone up in smoke under his fire. He looked around to gaze at the havoc he had wrought and was stupefied by the terrible sight. It made him wish that he would never have to use such a horrible weapon again.

But he knew only too well that the time had not yet come. First he had to find out how many more enemies were hidden in the old houses of Pchchogh.

\* \* \* \*

Thomea Untcher heard the echo of the shooting in the street and felt a breath of hot air coming from a suddenly opened hole in his vicinity... and he acted instantly.

The Springer Nathael was the only one who had stayed with him. First the Springer with the faked beard whom they called Echnatal had left—he knew not where. Then the Ara and the Ephoger departed and finally the Springer Aktar left as well.

Whatever was taking place at that moment was something Nathael had not expected. He spun around, uttering a horrified cry, and stared at the door. Untcher was quick to seize the unique opportunity. Ignoring the pain of his tortured body, he jumped up from his chair. Nathael heard the noise and wanted to turn around, his hand at the butt of his gun. But Untcher was too fast for him. He was an expert at his job and before Nathael realized what happened, Untcher knocked the burly Springer out with two sharp blows to his neck and was on his way to the door before Nathael's body slumped to the floor. He brandished the victim's weapon in his hand.

The door opened to another room where Phil Lenzer sat in a similar chair as he had occupied himself. His nerves seemed to be paralysed worse than his own had been and this probably was the reason that he was unguarded. Untcher took two precious minutes to raise Lenzer from his chair and revive him by shaking, massaging and shouting. Untcher cocked an ear to listen to the continuing din emanating from the street but was unable to determine the source.

Together with Lenzer he headed for the adjacent room where he found two of his men in the custody of the Springer with the artificial beard. Echnatal was on the way to the door after he became startled by the unusual noise and they collided under the door. Untcher assaulted him furiously and flattened him with devastating punches.

Now their team had grown to four and they had two powerful weapons. It enabled them to take the risk of searching the city in their effort to free their other comrades.

They finally located them in another one of the numerous rooms of the house under the watchful eyes of two Aras. The Aras were too far away from the door to be overpowered in a hand to hand fight. Untcher began to shoot as soon as he was able to judge the situation and the Aras never had a chance to defend themselves.

Untcher gathered his group and ordered: "We must get back to our boat. We now have weapons again and if somebody tries to stop us he must be shot down. Let's go!"

They tried several doors at random until they found one leading from the brightness of the Ara dwelling to the gloomy yellow light of the street.

The street looked as if it had been demolished by an earthquake. The facade of a house was smashed and molten masses of stone had poured into the street and coagulated. The air was filled with smoke but Untcher was able to discern the figures of three Ephogers through the veil. He paused and hailed the three men. They turned around and came closer with obvious hesitation. Although Untcher was reluctant to waste his time, he waited for the Ephogers because he had a feeling they might be the same people with whom he had talked on his boat and to whom he had promised help. He did not want to let them down even if he had no time to spare. As soon as they had come close enough he asked in the Arkonide language: "Are you the men from Bchacheeth, Nrrhooch Grghaok and Lchox?"

The Ephogers confirmed it with jubilant voices and hastened their steps.

"We are Terrans," Untcher continued. "The aliens captured us but we managed to escape from them. Which is the quickest way to get out of here?"

One of the Ephogers, a young man, pointed silently down the street. Untcher followed the direction with his eyes and saw a dark, equilateral opening at the side of a house.

"It's a long-forgotten airlock," one of the older, scaly men explained in his sibilant voice with smacking sounds. "That's where we came in."

Untcher turned to his men. "Close your helmets! We'll make our exit through that airlock."

The Ephogers followed the troop without further words. The airlock was too small to accommodate all of them simultaneously. They split up in groups of fours and left the city. Untcher and Nrrhooch were the last to depart from the debris-littered street.

Neither the Springers nor the Aras had made a move. It was difficult to understand the reaction of the Aras for those who were unfamiliar with their mental attitude. They probably had heard the noise and felt that something was wrong but if they happened to be occupied at the time with an experiment they considered to be important, it was typical for them not to let anything disturb them. They were apt to stick to their microscopes and measuring instruments if a hostile army invaded the city and smoked them out.

That none of the Springers was to be seen led Untcher to the conclusion that no other member of their clan was present at Pchchogh beside Nathael, Echnatal and Aktar. Nathael and Echnatal were in no condition to join the fray and Aktar might already have fled the city.

Untcher noticed the thermo-weapon Nrrhooch carried in his loincloth and he began to understand what had caused the clamour and awesome destruction at Pchchogh. The inexperienced man had not the vaguest idea what great energies he could release with a touch of his finger and Thomea Untcher began to feel the highest respect for the temerity of the Ephoger.

After waiting an appropriate time Nrrhooch opened the hatch of the airlock for Untcher and the last two men and found the chamber empty of water. They waited impatiently until the chamber was filled with water again and the pressure became equal to that prevailing at the bottom of the ocean. Then they opened the other hatch and swam through the dark house out into the street where they joined Grghaok, Lchox and the other men of Untcher's team.

By making Grghaok press his ear against Untcher's helmet so that he was able to pick up the soundwaves of Untcher's voice, he made it possible to describe to Grghaok where they had left their transporter. Grghaok was anxious to lead them back. Untcher had no way of knowing what the Aras had done with the boat but he wanted to make at least an attempt to get it back so that they could use it to reach the surface again.

Grghaok had to restrain himself. The Terrans were not as accustomed as he to move around at the bottom of the ocean and their clumsiness made him nervous. He swam beneath the half-destroyed dome over the roofs of the houses and showed the Terrans how to use the tubular stems of the air plants to push themselves forward and gain speed.

It took them half an hour to reach the transporter. It was where they had left it and nothing indicated that it had been tampered with in the meantime. They boarded it quickly without difficulties. The cabin was uncomfortably tight with the unexpected addition of the three Ephogers but Untcher's crew did not mind the restricted quarters as long as they were saved from the Aras and reached the surface of the water unmolested.

Untcher took over the controls of the boat. He made it rise in a steep curve and steered it through the dilapidated cupola of the city. Once he was in free water he pushed the engine to the limit, keeping in mind Nathael's claim that the *Finmark* was in the hands of the Springers. He had no reason to believe Nathael had lied and was aware that a difficult rescue operation and time-consuming work lay ahead of him.

\* \* \* \*

Ted Dunyan had reached his goal. He waited in the little compartment where the main valves of the ventilation system were located. Dunyan felt that he had the ship in his power with his controls at his fingertips without having to fear that Loodey's men would suspect him to be here if they should discover his disappearance.

Now he would be able to pump the *Finmark* full of a narcotic gas from the plentiful supplies in stock but the trouble was that he did not know how many of Loodey's men wore their protective suits and thus would remain unaffected by the paralysing effect of the gas. Moreover, Dunyan had been unable to get hold of another spacesuit on his way to the valve control room and would be exposed to the narcotic effect as well because Loodey had taken away his helmet.

His ruse could only be successful if he could learn the precise moment when Untcher returned from his expedition. Then he would find piles of unconscious bodies scattered all over the ship, unable to put up any resistance—provided of course that none of Loodey's men wore a closed helmet.

Therefore Dunyan decided that it would be of crucial importance to watch the surroundings of the ship on an observation screen. He knew that it was still night, but he hoped that the stars in the cloudless sky of Opghan shed enough light to let him recognize if someone approached. Of course there was no such observation screen in the valve control room but two of the instruments were installed in the main control room of which this compartment was a part. It would be a much more dangerous place for him to hide from the crew of the *Finmark* but he went there nevertheless to spend most of his time keeping his eyes glued to the observation screen and hoping for Untcher's early return.

Hours elapsed before he saw the shadow of the transporter glide across the glistening sheet of ice. He slipped back into the valve control room and began to saturate the air of the ship with Oraldin, an odourless and safe narcotic gas, praying that it would incapacitate the crew before they could become suspicious.

As far as he was concerned he was very happy with the result. As soon as he opened the valve the contours of the room's equipment began to blur before his eyes and he lost consciousness with a last sigh.

\* \* \* \*

Thomea Untcher returned at the right moment. Leaving the three Ephogers who were too vulnerable to the cold, behind in the transporter, he crept up with his little band to the *Finmark*, opened one of the small hatches and climbed aboard. He was astonished not to meet the slightest resistance but the puzzle was solved when one of his men flipped back his helmet and collapsed within three seconds.

Untcher searched the ship and determined that the state of paralysis had spread everywhere without exception. After finding Ted Dunyan in the valve control room they put the transporter back into the hangar aboard the *Finmark* and then rounded up the unconscious men who had mutinied under the influence of the Psimo extract and confined them once more in the crew's mess from where they had broken out due to Loodey's cunning scheme.

Untcher knew that the safety of the ship depended on the speed with which he could leave Opghan. In the meantime the Springers had become aware of the turn the events had taken and they were loath to see a handful of Terrans gain their freedom with the knowledge of the Psimo drug secret whose trade promised to produce such enormous profits.

Ran Loodey had already taken the necessary measures to prepare the *Finmark* for the takeoff in compliance with the command of the Springers. Untcher risked catastrophe if he gave the signal to start with no more than 17 able-bodied men aboard. He had to reckon with the possibility that the Springers had called for help and they would be pursued. With a mere 17 men he had available to launch and navigate the vessel, he was unable to man a single gun position.

Anticipating trouble, he sent a hyper-radio message to Terra and requested assistance. As he was unaware of the peculiar message Loodey had beamed to Terra several hours earlier he had no inkling of

the consternation his call for reinforcements would cause on Earth.

During the next half-hour Dunyan purified the air until it was breathable again. The three Ephogers wanted to be useful and tried to help him although they knew nothing about his work. Their insistence on lending him a hand was obviously more due to their desire to get out as quickly as possible of the protective suits which they had been compelled to put on.

On the spur of the moment Dunyan decided to conduct a bold experiment. Although he did not yet have an opportunity to report his discovery to Untcher he knew that Untcher was already acquainted with some aspects of the Psimo drug's effects. Untcher had informed him that the drug could be rendered harmless by radiation with thermic neutrons. Consequently Dunyan put together a mixture of gaseous radium and beryllium-hexafluoride and injected it into the air of the crew's mess room. The combination of radium and beryllium created a powerful source of neutrons. Dunyan counted on the equipment of the mess which consisted of artificial carbohydrates to produce the desired thermionic effect in conjunction with the high velocity neutrons. Dunyan figured out that the next 10 hours would either show a favourable result or that the experiment would have to be terminated because the men in the mess room would have received the maximum dose in that time and any further radiation would be injurious to their health.

After Dunyan had cleansed the air of the Oraldin and initiated his experiment Untcher gave the final order to lift off. Up to then the ship's sensor system had picked up nothing that could menace them. But as soon as the ship rose beyond the horizon and entered outer space, the rangefinder reported five unknown objects at a distance of eight light-minutes, a sign that the Springers had become seriously worried about the future of their business.

\* \* \* \*

The flap Untcher's message had created on Earth was solved as soon as Perry Rhodan intervened in the investigation. He did not know what had happened on Opghan, 10283 light-years away from Earth but he considered it irrefutable that the first radio message from Opghan had to be erroneous and that the second one sent by Thomea Untcher required a quick and positive response.

It took only half an hour from that decision to the moment when the superbattleship *Barbarossa* blasted off with Perry Rhodan on board. The ship was already fully manned and got ready to leave after Untcher's emergency call was first received.

Perry Rhodan jumped in a single transition to the spot which Untcher had designated as rendezvous without waiting for an answer. The place was about one light-year from the Ephog system and Perry Rhodan surmised that it was Maj. Untcher's intention to take immediate action on Opghan.

The *Finmark* was already waiting to meet Perry Rhodan at the arranged spot, Also present were five of the Springers' cylindrical spaceships that had come to annihilate the *Finmark*. The sudden emergence of the mighty *Barbarossa* took them by surprise. Three of their ships disintegrated in a rain of fire and the other two retreated in full flight, considering caution the better part of valour.

The tracking instruments of the *Barbarossa* verified that the two ships did not flee in the direction of Opghan but away from it, making it look like the Springers were ready to revise their plans with respect to Opghan if the pressure became too strong.

Perry Rhodan requested Maj. Untcher to report to him aboard the *Barbarossa*. Untcher came accompanied by Ted Dunyan who had assured him that he had to make a sensational announcement.

"I had the opportunity to watch Sgt. Loodey, one of the men under the influence of the drug, for several hours and I was able to isolate the drug in his nervous system. Its structure was fairly uncomplicated so that the analysis presented at first no difficulties. However the picture changed when I repeated the procedure a little later in order to check the accuracy of my results. The synthesis had undergone a change. Not a radical change but certain side effects had varied enough to produce different reactions if the same drug were injected again into the human nervous system. This caused me to suspect that the effect of the drug was not limited in the sense that it caused a certain fixed and permanent reaction in a person. If this were the case Loodey and all the others affected by the drug would have done no more than persist in their mutinous attitude. They would have defied the orders of their superiors but would not have developed any initiative of their own. Yet this is exactly what happened and Ran Loodey is a living example for it. Furthermore my investigation also revealed another feature of the ingredient in this connection. An analysis of the air inside the *Finmark* undertaken shortly after the victims exhibited the first symptoms of a toxin showed no trace of a foreign substance. It was clear to us that the substance had been introduced in a gaseous state. The micro-particles of the gas penetrated the massive hull of the ship with incredible ease so that the Ephogers who were abused by the Springers and put up to this job had only to open the containers and hold them against the outside of the *Finmark*. If the gas had been really inert some quantity would have been detected for days after the sneak attack. Since this was not the case it indicates that the gas possesses a certain affinity to the human body. It concentrated around their bodies and was completely absorbed without leaving a trace in the air. Once it was deposited in the nervous system it became active in the brain."

Ted Dunyan leaned back and wiped the sweat from his brow. Now that he had to present his hypothesis for the first time he had a nagging doubt. What if he was wrong? If he had made an error in his observations? Could there be another theory to explain the effect of the Psimo drug?

"I know how you feel, Doctor," Rhodan said affably. "Don't worry about saying it out loud. I'm sure that the Galaxy abounds with wonderful surprises that are even more mysterious than your intelligent gas."

Dunyan was taken aback. "How do you know, sir..." he stammered.

Rhodan smiled. "After all you have described it was the only possible conclusion. You contend that it is inherent in the drug to adapt itself to various conditions, don't you?"

Ted Dunyan made an affirmative gesture.

"I regret," Perry Rhodan continued, "that our language has not kept pace with our new insights and has no better word to describe such a behaviour than 'intelligent'. Of course it would be nonsense to consider a single molecule as an intelligent being. This attribute of the gas to conform to a multitude of different conditions for the purpose of achieving the goals desired by the Aras is a result of its chemical composition and without doubt a masterly performance of organic chemistry. But a molecule does not 'think'. It has only a statistical capacity because not all but only a majority of the molecules will react at the given moment as if in a purposeful manner to accomplish those goals without requiring a direct act." He looked at Dunyan, who seemed to agree wordlessly. "It would take a more thorough discussion to cover the subject in all its ramifications," Rhodan said in conclusion. "The fact stands out that the magnificent accomplishments of the Ara chemists should have been dedicated to worthier endeavours than enabling the Springers to engage in shady and despicable deals."



The meaning was clear. Perry Rhodan had resolved to persevere in his efforts to crush the resistance on Opghan.

\* \* \* \*

A few hours later both ships, the mighty *Barbarossa* and the *Finmark* which looked almost dainty by comparison, were on their way back to Opghan.

Ted Dunyan's experiment had proved to be a smashing success. After five hours the men locked up in the mess hall had lapsed into unconsciousness and when they woke up again 15 minutes later the effect of the Psimo drug had been eradicated without deleterious after-effects.

Not without embarrassment the men, who were fully aware of their period of mutiny, returned to their jobs. Untcher had given strict orders not to mention the Psimo drug and its disastrous consequences by a word until after the conclusion of their mission on Opghan.

Perry Rhodan won his campaign in a single Opghan day. Confronted by his overwhelming power the Springers fled from Opghan in a stampede and made no further attempts to return.

The stronghold of the Aras was raided. Under a psycho-interrogation they confessed to have no other bases anywhere else on the planet. They were given the opportunity to contact their home world and they requested a spaceship to evacuate them from Opghan.

Rhodan sequestered the city of Pchchogh. It was the only favour he asked of the liberated Ephogers and it was gratefully granted without reservations.

Old Grghaok saw the praises he had heaped on the Terrans even before he had laid eyes on them come true and he enjoyed the highest esteem among his fellow citizens of Bchacheeth. He was honoured together with Nrrhooch and Lchox as the man who initiated the liberation of the Ephogers.

Perry Rhodan preferred not to disclose his faith in the Psimo drug which he considered to be a most significant progress in the defence arsenal of Terra. In his opinion it was one of the matters which were more effective the more they were kept secret.

\* \* \* \*

Thousands of light-years from Opghan a robust man aboard a cylindrical spaceship scratched his whiskers and said to another man with an even more luxurious-looking beard: I knew that our venture was doomed to failure the moment the Terrans stuck their noses into our business. It's always the same."

The man with the artificial beard replied meekly: "We should beware of suffering a 'Terranian complex' because of the unfortunate outcome."

Nathael rebutted him gruffly. "That's easier said than done...!"

\* \* \* \*

Sgt. Ran Loodey snapped to attention when Thomea T. Untcher—in mufti again—entered the Command Centre. With a suspicious look at Loodey he inquired: "Well, no more remarks about a refuge for the homeless?"

Loodey shook his head, grinning from ear to ear. "No sir. Not after all those hours after which I deserved to be locked up in the donk house (booby hatch) myself."

## **ORDER OF THE ACTION**

[1/ DESTINATION: 1358](#)

[2/ MYSTERIOUS IRRATIONALITY](#)

[3/ THE INTRUDERS](#)

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[5/ ARAS & SPRINGERS VS. TERRANS & ARKONIDES](#)

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[THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME](#)

## ENEMY IN THE DARK

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## THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

"ATTACK!" Rhodan ordered for the second time inside a few seconds.

Grenoble and Raft were witnesses to an event which previously they could only have imagined in a dream. Filled with admiration, they watched their chief, Perry Rhodan, standing next to Col. Sikerman at the controls and giving his orders. The Administrator's eyes were a little narrower than usual but otherwise his face showed no signs of excitement. And yet Rhodan had just pronounced the death sentence of several hundred Druufs. He would not do it without reason, for when he could avoid it, Rhodan preferred not to kill his enemies. When he killed them, it was only to save the lives of others.

The *Drusus* wheeled about and climbed into the sky at a crazy speed towards the waiting Druufs.

Two of the Druuf ships streaked straight into the destructive fire of the battlespacer...

This is but a sample of the action and excitement that awaits you in—

BLAZING SUN

by

Clark Darlton