

1/ UNIVERSE CONQUERORS

THE CONNECTION between the Einstein Universe and the Druuf time-plane still existed but it grew daily worse. As far as was known, the 'tear' was the only natural access to the Imperium the Druufs had.

But not for long.

Already the ships of the alien race were coming increasingly less often through the discharge cone, as Earthly scientists called the rent in the structure of time. There they met the patrolling forces of the Solar Imperium and the Arkonide surveillance units.

While the Druufs came more rarely, they came with greater determination and bitterness. They knew that for them the gateway to the immeasurable riches of the Universe would soon close and that they would again be the prisoners of their own time-plane—until by chance another discharge cone developed somewhere else. Until then they would be prisoners of a time-plane in which time would again run 72,000 times slower than in the Einstein Universe.

Strange things happened in these days and weeks.

In any case, the report of Lt. Grenoble offered food for thought.

Grenoble commanded a Gazelle and flew patrols close to the edge of the discharge cone, which was clearly visible on the vidscreens with the help of the radar equipment. The scout stood in constant communication with the mothership, which belonged to a battle-ready squadron of the Solar Spacefleet.

In the control room of the Gazelle, a discus more than 30 meters in diameter, Lt. Grenoble sat next to the pilot and stared at the screen. "Well, Sgt. Raft, what's your opinion?"

Raft was an average-sized man, notable for his aquiline nose, which had earned him the nickname 'Indian'. In fact, he sometimes claimed that one of his distant ancestors had been an Apache chief. However, that had nothing to do with the, fact he was continually assigned to missions which depended in large part on a tracking sense.

"Suspiciously quiet here," Raft replied, correcting the course so that the Gazelle approached the discharge cone more closely. "If the instruments are operating OK, then the gap is still 10 kilometres wide here—and getting narrower by the second. If you ask me, lieutenant, it's hopeless for the Druufs."

"The more hopeless their situation, the more desperate they'll act. I wonder what they're looking for in our universe if they won't be able to return to their own later? It almost looks as though they're searching for something that they're afraid of losing when the gap closes."

Raft nodded slowly. "That's just what I think too. But—what could they be looking for?"

Lt. Grenoble shrugged. "I can't answer that, Raft. Sorry."

The two men were silent again and turned their attention to the vidscreens. Here, more than 6,000 light-years closer to the centre of the galaxy than Earth, the stars were more numerous and closer together. There were strange and unfamiliar constellations shining against the dark blackness, unusually bright and radiant. Especially a white-blue star to the right of the Gazelle's line of flight. Its fire blazed calmly and steadily but in spite of its apparent coldness the sun seemed hot and flaming.

Neither Grenoble nor Raft suspected that this blue star had a very important role to play—even for them. And especially for the Druufs.

Beforehand, however, something quite different happened.

It was fundamentally impossible for a metallic body to remain unnoticed in the vicinity of a radar system of the sort that existed on every spaceship. With the advance of technology, radar systems had been brought to a state of perfection no matter which race was developing them. And so it was a mystery for the two men in the Gazelle control room as to why the Druuf fleet suddenly plunging into their universe took no notice of them.

There were about 10 ships—long and narrow cylinders—that came through the tear and sped across their path towards the blue star at half-speol.

Raft watched them, his mouth hanging open, unable to do anything. For his own part, Lt. Grenoble would have done something if it had been necessary. But it was not.

The 10 ships sped up and were finally lost in the confusion of stars. Their course was without doubt headed for the blue star.

Just as Grenoble was about to say something, 5 more ships appeared in the tear. In the meantime, Raft had gotten hold of himself to the point that he was able to act once more. His veined hands lay on the controls, ready at any second to throw the Gazelle into hyperspace where it would be safe. It was impossible for a small scout to engage even one Druuf cruiser in battle.

But the spring into hyperspace was not yet necessary.

Something strange happened to the 5 ships.

First, they came to an abrupt stop and stood completely still. On the Gazelle vidscreen it looked as though a film had suddenly halted and the observers were looking at a single frame. Then the ships' outlines blurred and the ships themselves became phantom-like shadows, ghostly silhouettes outlined indistinctly against the stars.

Then stars could be seen through the ships.

Finally the 5 ships vanished altogether.

Grenoble breathed heavily, staring with narrowed eyes at the frontal vidscreen, on which nothing more was to be seen than empty space. Raft's hands slid off the controls. He turned his head and looked helplessly at his commander.

"What—what happened?" he asked, shaken. "Have they developed a way to make themselves invisible?"

The lieutenant shook his head slowly. "No, I don't think so. As near as I can tell, the disappearance of the ships was not expected and completely involuntary. They wouldn't have stopped dead like that otherwise. I have an idea but it sounds too fantastic to be true."

"Tell me what it is, sir," murmured Raft hoarsely. "What could be more fantastic than the truth?"

"That's true..." mused Grenoble, looking again at the vidscreen as though he expected the 5 ships to return at any moment. "The discharge cone, Raft... It closed just in that second in which the ships were passing through it. They were either thrown back into the Druuf universe or sent into a third universe unknown to us. Perhaps they will never be able to return and are lost forever. Look at the radar, Raft. It doesn't show the discharge cone any longer."

Raft looked at the instruments and saw that it was so. "Your theory's been borne out, sir. There isn't any more tear here. But..." He pointed in the direction of the blue sun. "... What about the 10 ships which were able to get through. Will they be able to find the way back into their own time-plane? What do they want here in our universe, anyway? Why didn't they try to destroy the *Gazelle*? Or did a miracle happen and they didn't spot us?"

"They spotted us, alright," Grenoble told him, "but they didn't have the time to bother with us. That shows that they have a mission. And unless I'm mistaken, that mission has something to do with the area around the blue star over there." He looked at Raft. "Make course for the squadron and spring in 30 seconds. I have the feeling that Perry Rhodan will be very interested in our report."

Lt. Grenoble was just as correct about that point as he was in all the rest.

The *Drusus* was a gigantic sphere 1500 meters in diameter. It belonged to the Imperium Class and was a superbattleship of the Solar Imperium. Col. Baldur Sikerman was usually its commander, but when Perry Rhodan was on board, the Colonel automatically assumed the role of First Officer.

"In comparison to the *Gazelle*, the control room of the *Drusus* was a huge, semicircular room filled with a confusion of many-sided control panels and instruments. Only someone familiar with the complexities of the control room could find his way through it, and not only detailed study but also special hypno-training was necessary to completely understand the mysteries of the *Drusus* .

The chief radioman, David Stern, read Lt. Grenoble's report out loud and asked in conclusion: "What should I say in answer, sir?"

Perry Rhodan stood with Col. Sikerman before the oval panorama-screen, comparing the part of the Milky Way that they could see with a star map spread out on a narrow counter in front of the screen.

He looked at Stern. "Grenoble is to fly into the *Drusus* hangar and report to me."

Stern saluted and disappeared into the radio room to carry out Rhodan's instructions. Col. Sikerman wrinkled his forehead. His squat, heavy-set figure made Rhodan look almost fragile and delicate.

"Do you think Grenoble's observations are important, sir?"

"Everything's important," Rhodan answered with a slight smile. "Even the most inconsequential observation could be of utmost importance in this war against the Druufs. The blue star—it seems to me to be a sort of omen. What do the Druufs want there?"

"Who's saying that the 10 ships were really going to the blue star?"

"We know the Druufs and their methods. When they set course for a goal, our experience is that they never change it, not even to deceive us. That means they are indeed going to the blue star." He looked at the star map. "A hot star, not three light-months from here, and orbited by three planets. Uninhabited but inhabitable. The Druufs are oxygen-breathers like us. Hmm..."

"Are all three planets inhabitable?" asked Sikerman in surprise.

Rhodan smiled. "No, of course not. I meant only the third, outermost one. It's about the size of our planet Mars, very warm and it has mainly mountains and deserts. Yes, I think we'll have to take a look at it. Perhaps the catalogue that the Arkonides and Springers have bequeathed to us is in error. Take care of everything as soon as Grenoble is on board. And inform the other units."

Rhodan nodded to Sikerman and turned to go. At the door he turned again and added: "I'll be in my cabin. Send Grenoble to me as soon as he's reported to you."

Col. Sikerman remained behind. He had the vague feeling that he had not fully understood Rhodan's train of thought.

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The Gazelle landed in the hangar of the *Drusus*. Lt. Grenoble and Sgt. Raft were taken to Rhodan and they made their report. Rhodan was especially interested in the 5 ships that had disappeared but could find no conclusive explanation. Then Col. Sikerman was called in.

"Our first priority is not just seeking the ten Druuf ships and driving them away," said Rhodan. "We have more important tactical considerations. The Druufs are means to an end in a certain sense. Above all, we want to show the subject races in the Arkonide Imperium that we are not inclined to allow interlopers to penetrate our universe undisturbed. Atlan has enough difficulty with the Imperium; we can help him by making it obvious that in us he has a strong and determined ally. I think you know what I mean. Right, Sikerman?"

"You want to attack the Druufs just to show our own allies how strong we are?"

"Precisely," said Rhodan, smiling at him. "The Springers especially could use such a lesson, to say nothing of the Aras. So we'll take the *Drusus* and fly to the three planets of the blue star and look around. If we find Druufs there, we'll attack and destroy them."

"Destroy them, sir?"

"Yes! Consider that the Druufs don't take prisoners and are out to conquer our universe. We're acting in self-defence. Besides, their 10 ships *could* be manned by robots. You know as well as I do, Sikerman, that the Druufs like to have robots pull their chestnuts out of the fire for them. Does that ease your conscience?"

"Yes, it does," Sikerman admitted, relieved. He even managed a smile. "Shall I inform the fleet? Who'll

be accompanying us?"

"We'll fly alone but we'll announce our intentions. If I know the Springers, they'll send along a secret observer—and we don't want to disappoint him. We'll start in half an hour." When Sikerman was gone, Rhodan continued. "You'll stay on board the *Drusus* with the *Gazelle*."

Radio messages flitted back and forth during the subsequent half-hour. Sikerman informed the other fleet commanders of the planned operation and told them to continue their observation of the discharge cone. It could be expected that other Druuf units would come through. They were to be beaten back by all available means or—in case of resistance—destroyed.

The order was acknowledged by the Terran as well as the Arkonide commanders. Despite their differences, Terra and Arkon were as one relative to the Druufs. These beings from another time-plane, three meters tall, were too alien for any rapprochement. The Druuf was by nature a common enemy which had to be fought—if he did not disappear of his own accord. When the tear in space closed and the impenetrable time-wall once more stood between the universes, then one could think about oneself again and of one's own problems and advantages.

But it had not come to that yet.

Shortly before the *Drusus* slid into hyperspace following its increase in speed, Rhodan's assumption was justified. Two slim cruisers were following him on the same course. Rhodan smiled in satisfaction when he noticed them. He knew that they would be able to easily detect and evaluate the coming spring of the *Drusus*. They would materialize in the vicinity of the blue star less than two minutes after the *Drusus*.

Transition.

Rematerialisation.

Not 10 light-minutes away from the blue star the *Drusus* materialized, racing at a rapidly decelerating speed towards the flaming sun. The electronic calculations ran automatically, concerning the central star and the three planets. The data was produced in the form of narrow plastic strips. The navigation's officer checked them over. The information in the star catalogue was found to be accurate.

"As we thought, only the third planet, sir. It's the size of Mars with similar conditions, only warmer. Uninhabited, the atmosphere is only on the border of being breathable. No vegetation, except for primitive fungi and mosses. Not much water, mountainous."

Rhodan had listened attentively. He looked steadfastly at the vidscreen on which the blue star grew ever larger. On one side, the third planet came into his range of vision. The pale wreath of its atmosphere shone like a halo.

Three light-minutes behind the *Drusus*, two slight transitions shuddered the space-continuum. The secret observers had reached their posts.

Rhodan nodded grimly. "We'll continue to decelerate and then orbit the third planet, Sikerman. Try to locate the Druufs."

"If your theory's correct, sir..."

"You mean you think the Druufs aren't here?" Rhodan asked, shaking his head. "That would surprise

me. Perhaps they might even have the intention of establishing a base here in our universe like we did in theirs. Too bad Hades was lost."

The planet grew larger. Already details could be made out. On the stern screen stood two tiny points of light—the two ships of the Springers or the Aras. The only thing missing was the Druufs.

The blue star was very hot. Its rays caused peculiar lighting effects on the surface of the small planet. Fortunately, the thin atmosphere absorbed the largest part of the blue light and allowed the white through unhindered.

At a speed of a few kilometres per second, the *Drusus* entered the upper reaches of the atmosphere. The scanning equipment examined every nook and cranny of the surface. It was easy to inspect the broad deserts because here there could be no hiding places but the search in the extensive mountains was much more difficult. Deep valleys and gorges offered unguessed-at opportunities for concealment. Entire fleets could have been hidden there without being spotted immediately. The beams of the scanners worked only in straight lines. Metal detectors were activated which could sense metallic objects even beneath the ground, although they also indicated substantial ore deposits as well. Nevertheless, they showed the form of the buried object, which allowed it to be identified.

Lt. Grenoble stood with Sgt. Raft somewhat in the background of the control room. He felt the first twinges of conscience. "Perhaps we guessed wrong," he murmured, so low that only Raft could hear him. "It could be that the Druufs changed their course and didn't fly here at all."

"Well, we had to report our observations," Raft assured him. "If the chief chooses to give them an important meaning, that's his business. I, on the other hand..."

Rhodan turned to them. He smiled. "Gentlemen, you're worrying yourselves needlessly. I would have had you arrested if you hadn't given me your interesting report. You can be sure that I'm now completely satisfied. Just the certainty that the Springers are following our trail is enough to make this trip worthwhile..."

"Druuf ships ahead!" Col. Sikerman interrupted.

The *Drusus* was now flying along at only two kilometres per second and had gone lower. A sharply peaked mountain slid by beneath them, sinking to merge with a plain. On the plain, not 20 kilometres from the edge of the mountain, the 10 ships they had been searching for stood next to one another.

Rhodan was reluctant to attack the Druufs without warning although he was more than half-inclined to destroy at least half their ships on the first flyby.

So it happened that the *Drusus* sped over the 10 ships at a low altitude, then made a wide curve to come back, this time with its defence screens activated. That was a move that proved very necessary.

Three of the Druuf ships took off and raced into the planet's dark-blue sky. The other seven opened up a murderous energy-fire on the Terran battleship but could not break down the strong defence screens. Almost at the same time, Rhodan was attacked by the three ships in the air directly from above. One of the torpedoes missed the *Drusus* and sped into the midst of the 7 cruisers. A jet of flame made Rhodan close his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again only four ships were still standing, their guns quiet. Two other torpedoes detonated in the defence field but their explosive energy had no effect on the ship.

"Attack!" Rhodan ordered tonelessly.

On the stern screen, the two points of light were to be seen only indistinctly.

The four remaining Druuf ships went up in vapour from the *Drusus* firestorm. It could be assumed that only robots were on board, since otherwise the ships would have taken off with the other three.

The other three...

They regrouped for a new attack and the manner in which they did showed only too clearly that thinking beings were at the controls. But Rhodan had no intention of taking that into consideration in his counterattack. He wanted to set a terrifying example. Druufs on one side and Springers on the other could be only impressed by force.

"Attack!" he 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 for 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 which had now recovered from their surprise. They had allowed the time that had remained to them for fleeing to tick by without doing anything. On the contrary: they attacked the *Drusus*, seemingly scorning death.

Two of them streaked straight into the destructive fire of the battlespacer and then hurtled relentlessly to the surface of the planet below. Finally the third ship had turned away soon enough to avoid destruction and increased its speed. Rhodan noted with satisfaction that it was taking course towards the two tiny points of light between the stars.

"Follow it but don't destroy it," he said to Sikerman.

The two observers—Springers or Aras—evidently recognized the danger threatening them for in the space of two seconds the points of light vanished. The structural sensor of the *Drusus* registered two hypersprings of low intensity.

Rhodan smiled grimly. "There is no longer any need to destroy the Druufs," he told Sikerman. "We'll let them return to their own universe and report what we do to intruders. Perhaps then they'll see how pointless it is, trying to set up a base in this universe."

"The Druuf ship is changing its course," Sikerman replied, unmoved.

Rhodan nodded. "Yes, in the direction of the discharge cone. Good, Colonel. Prepare the *Drusus* for the spring. We're going back."

"Aren't we going to examine the seven destroyed ships?"

"Why should we?"

"Clues. Perhaps they aren't the first ships there—there might *already* be a base on the planet."

"It isn't very probable, Colonel. But if you really think so..."

Their research proved fruitless. The seven ships were destroyed beyond recognition and offered no data about their crews or their mission. Moreover, Rhodan found no indications that Druuf ships had ever been there before.

Reassured that he had left no stone unturned, he finally gave Sikerman the order to return to the discharge cone.

The Springer commanders, he knew, had already been informed of what had happened.

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Just as Lt. Grenoble and Sgt. Raft had been sent out in their Gazelle to return to their mothership, a hypercom call came in from Arkon.

The hypercom installation lay next to the *Drusus* control room and was manned by the personnel on duty. Lt. Stern had just been relieved, so it was Cadet Hans-Otto Fabian who came running into the control room, showing the signs of utmost excitement. "Sir! There's a call from Arkon!"

Rhodan, just then in conversation with Sikerman, whirled around. "From Arkon? Is it the Emperor himself?"

"Yes sir. Gonozal VIII wishes to speak with you."

Rhodan left Sikerman standing where he was, walked past Fabian and went into the radio room. He stopped before the oval hypercom vidscreen, on which the sharply focussed features of Atlan could be seen.

Atlan the immortal Arkonide called himself in, accordance with ancient custom, Gonozal VIII now that he had replaced the Robot Brain on Arkon in rulership over the Imperium. A fleeting smile flitted over his tense features when he saw Rhodan. "Hello, barbarian! I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

Rhodan smiled back and sat down. He knew that Atlan could now see him. What was unimaginable fantasy just 100 years before was now taken for granted: communications over tens of thousands of light-years—without any loss of time.

"You never interrupt anything that is more important than your calling," Rhodan answered, mildly ironically, "but I assume that you have a reason for wanting to talk to me. Where's the fire?"

"I don't know if there's a fire but at least there's some smoke."

"The races of the Arkonide Imperium?"

"Yes, them! They have been rebellions ever since I deposed the Robot Brain. The merciless strictness of

the Robot Brain was feared and obeyed. Now, however, an Arkonide with heart and soul is ruling once more. There are intelligences trying to take advantage of that. True, I have the same power as the Robot Brain but I have scruples too—and people know that."

"In other words, you're having the same problems I am. I myself just had to show our friends the Springers with an impressive demonstration of might against the Druufs how strong and determined the Terrans are. And what do *you* propose to do? Shall I turn a planet into a ball of energy for you?"

"Nothing so dramatic, Perry," said Atlan, shaking his head. "That can wait until later if they aren't any more reasonable. What I need are capable men to work with, capable Arkonides and not cowards and donks—of which there are more than enough on Arkon already. I'll give you this much, barbarian—my race *is* degenerate. But merely 1,000 or 10,000 Arkonides of the old sort would suffice to make the Imperium what it was once more. Will you help me with it?"

"Aren't I doing it already?" asked Rhodan.

Atlan nodded, smiling, as though asking for an apology. "Of course you're doing it, old friend, but I spoke of yet another possibility. I spoke of the old Arkonides that I lack for leading the Imperium. I need officers for my ships, commanders for my training schools, directors for the hypno-universities, managers for the automatic factories, programmers for the army of robots and..."

"Hold it a second!" Rhodan interrupted, throwing up his hands defensively. "The way you talk, you sound like you want to raise an entire generation of action-ready Arkonides just like that! Atlan, you can't get something where there isn't anything."

"There is something there," Atlan replied meaningfully. "Or has your memory declined in your old age?"

Rhodan was surprised for a moment. He had no idea what Atlan was getting at. He could only ask in all honesty, "What do you mean?"

"You really don't know? Well, I'll have to remind you of a small incident that took place 8 or 9 months ago, earth-time. At that time, you had been given up for dead and I wasn't yet Emperor of Arkon. It was the end of 2043. Then a fast cruiser under Commander Wilmar Lund returned to Earth, bringing Pucky with it. Pucky was the one who gave us a rather peculiar report. Now do you remember?"

"The Ship of Ancestors!" Rhodan exclaimed. He remembered. So that was what Atlan was referring to.

"Yes."

"I'm listening," said Rhodan calmly.

"I'll refresh your memory. I need Arkonides of the old school to build up the stellar empire. Perhaps if I'm lucky I'll find a few hundred. But I need more. Thousands of them. So—the Ship of Ancestors! During a patrol flight, Pucky discovered an unguided ship of the Imperium class. He sprang on board and found 10,000-year-old Arkonides of the highest class, all in deepsleep. 10,000 years ago, the ship took off with thousands of Arkonides aboard. Men and women. When they reached a certain age, robots put them forcibly into cold-sleep and stacked them in a special freezing chamber in the interior of the ship. The exact number of Arkonides preserved in that manner over the millenniums is unknown. According to Pucky's claims, there must be more than 100,000. Perry, I need those 100,000 Arkonides to rebuild the Arkonide Imperium."

So that was it!

Rhodan thought for a moment, looking pensively at Atlan, then said at length: "Then you want me search for the ship and bring it to Arkon for you?"

"Yes. Am I asking too much?"

"No, not at all. But you're altering a plan of your own forefathers. Do you know what the purpose of the Ship of Ancestors was?"

"I don't know what purpose it *originally* had but I know only too well what purpose it can and must have now, Perry. The Ship of Ancestors and its valuable cargo are a gift from the gods, you might say. Pucky's discovery is a lead that we have to follow up on. The sleeping Arkonides are needed right now to save the empire. Perhaps it wasn't just chance that Pucky discovered the ship."

"Help from Providence, perhaps?" said Rhodan questioningly. "Alright, maybe you're right. Data concerning the Ship of Ancestors is stored in the positronic brain of the fast cruiser *Arctic*. Commander Lund is on Venus at the moment—he and his men are undergoing training. I can seek him out there."

The relief Atlan felt was evident in his face. I thank you, my friend. The Druuf menace will soon be over but then there will be new dangers. Up to now, the Druufs have been the ones who have held the people of the Imperium together because they were a common danger. When the danger disappears..."

Rhodan also knew what Atlan meant. Perhaps the Ship of Ancestors offered the solution. They would have to see.

"Take care that the discharge cone doesn't go unwatched," he told Atlan. "Don't pull any units back. In a few weeks, perhaps..."

"I wish you much luck—for my own sake," Atlan answered. "There's something else that I must tell you: I have enemies! Mysterious forces are appearing everywhere and are struggling against me. The enemy can't be found—as if he's invisible or is capable of magic. I can't explain it in a few words but it's a certainty that all means are being used to shake Arkon's might. Perhaps this was going on before I became Emperor, I don't know, but the enemy must consider the current situation as especially favourable."

"Enemy? And you don't know who he is? Springers, perhaps?"

"I couldn't swear to it, Perry. Up to now I haven't been able to catch even one of these mysterious saboteurs. They work in shadow and seem to be the very personification of caution. But enough of that for now. Find the Ship of Ancestors and bring it to Arkon. I'll have ready for you and your men a welcome like no mortal has ever been given."

"Now you're being *too* dramatic," smiled Rhodan, stretching his hand out to the video image. "You have my word that I'll search for the ship. You worry about the Druufs. I think you won't be having any more difficulties with them. Much luck to you, too, Atlan."

They looked each other in the eyes for a few seconds and then the image dissolved. Each of the two extraordinary men knew that he could depend on the other—no matter what happened.

When Rhodan returned to the control room and sent the radioman Fabian back to his post, his face was

earnest. Col. Sikerman noticed it. "Bad news?" he inquired cautiously.

Rhodan raised his head and looked at him. "No—not really. At least not for us. Arkon is having trouble." He paused for a moment, looking thoughtfully at the colourful vidscreens. Set up the spring coördinates, Colonel. We're going back to Earth. But first I want to give the units remaining here some instructions. Would you please take care of the necessary details?"

The rest was routine.

Two hours later, the *Drusus* began its long journey back to Earth.

Long only in terms of distance.

Not of time.

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It was afternoon. Sunday afternoon.

Even in Terrania, capital of the Earth, Sunday was observed as a day of rest. The gigantic complex of the city that had grown like wildfire where there was once only desert, seemed to be deserted. The straight lines of the avenues lay quietly under the burning Asian sun. Work was going only in the administration building. The nearby spaceport was also never without the necessary personnel.

The once so-feared Gobi Desert had been converted here and there into fertile land. Nothing was reminiscent any longer of a desert, especially in the vicinity of the small salt sea where the bungalows of the city's inhabitants stood. Almost everyone owned a small piece of land with a vacation house where he and his family could spend the weekend. In an age of the highest civilization, freely chosen primitiveness among the simple pleasures of nature seemed to be the best way to relax.

But not entirely without technology.

The low bungalow stood somewhat elevated along the shore of the mirror-smooth Goshun Salt-sea. A tall antenna showed that its owner stood in contact with Terrania and could be called at any time.

Otherwise Bell would have been unable to take a vacation.

Reginald Bell, Rhodan's best friend and second-in-command, had spent the last three days at his weekend cottage. He needed no servants nor maids as the kitchen robots fulfilled his every wish.

The cottage on the right belonged to Mercant who, however, was not there. The owner of the cottage on the left was present.

The two pieces of ground were divided by a disorderly hedge. While Bell favoured a wildly growing lawn, the neighbour seemed to be a devotee of flowers and vegetables. The bungalow was surprisingly low and small but the veranda was surrounded by a right-angled wreath of gorgeously blooming tulips. The latter came in five different colours and stretched their conspicuously large cups towards the blue

sky.

Below the veranda, rows of vegetables ran in straight lines down to the beach. An expert would have easily determined that the vegetables were mostly *Daucus Carota vulgaris*, otherwise known as carrots.

Thus there can be no further doubt who Bell's neighbour was.

Pucky the mousebeaver.

The little guy, about a meter high and covered with rust-brown fur, lay in the midst of his rows of vegetables on his back, blinking in the sun. With his broad beavertail he fended off the bothersome flies which had not died out even in an age of robots. His arms were folded across his chest. All in all, Pucky was the perfect picture of a contented small farmer enjoying his free day.

It would have remained that way if Pucky had not also been a telepath besides being a teleporter and telekineticist in the Mutant Corps. Without wanting to, he picked up the most intensive thoughts of his nearest neighbours. Generally he ignored them and shut off the receiving portion of his brain but sometimes he listened in amusement.

"The gardener's battery needs charging," someone somewhere off to the east was saying to his wife. "He only crawls now and needs nearly an hour just to water the flowers."

Pucky shook his head. "Lousy bones!" he said disapprovingly, presumably meaning lazybones. I water my flowers and my carrots myself."

His thoughts strayed onwards and reached the powerfully built man lying in the shallow shore waters of the sea, letting the sunshine on his brown belly. The red hair bristles were wet and stuck to his head. His eyes were closed and it looked as if the vacationer were sleeping.

But he was not sleeping. Bell tended not to sleep in the water, not even here where the high salt content would not allow him to sink.

"...I could do with a few more days of this," he thought contentedly and lazily. "I hope Rhodan stays away awhile longer. I've really earned this vacation. Freyt's taking care of the government business..."

Pucky sat up a little and looked out over the garden-gone-wild of his neighbour to the right and down to the shore. Bell truly was lying in the water. And it looked as though the water was not as shallow as it had first seemed.

Hm...

Pucky cautiously set his powers into action. As carefully as possible for him, he slowly and unnoticeably pushed Bell away from the shore. The man did not feel it because no one was touching him. The telekinetic forcefield took hold of him and simply moved him along. So slowly that there was not even any movement of water.

Pucky bared his incisor tooth and began to enjoy himself immensely. When Bell opened his eyes, he would have a surprise waiting for him. There were no currents in the Goshun Sea nor was there any wind. So it would remain a mystery why Bell had floated off.

The water supported objects surprisingly well. One could have read a newspaper without going under. Bell was now 200 meters from shore.

Pucky grinned. He let Bell go and watched as the slightest shove sent the man into a slow spin. But Bell was still quiet and his eyes were still closed.

Pucky now stood up and waddled quickly down to the shore. He held his hands in a cone before his mouth and called out with his shrill, resounding voice. "Hey! Reggie! Where are you going?"

Bell's eyes snapped open. He looked around to all sides, surprised and shocked. He cried out and threw his arms up, as though searching for something to hold onto.

There was nothing to hold onto. Bell went under like a rock, came up again immediately like a cork and stood up to his chest in the water. "Just wait!" he roared in the direction of the shore as he began to swim. He did not do very well at it for his body continually slid out of the water and his hands cut into the air instead of into the waves. Slowly, however, he neared the shore, where a grinning Pucky was waiting for him.

"You probably think you're a life-boy, right?" he asked when Bell was still 10 meters from shore. "When you come to a fresh part of the lake, you'll drown like a cat."

Bell's feet found solid ground and he waded out of the water. He shook his fist menacingly. "Are you trying to tell me I floated out into the lake without any help?" he raged without any proof of his suspicion. "Just wait, you furry little..."

"It's always me," Pucky answered, offended, hopping back into his vegetable garden. The small diversion had been fun, no matter how harmless it might have been. "If I hadn't woken you up, Rhodan's second-in-command would have become a pickled herring. How can anyone go bathing in that stuff?"

"It's better than not bathing at all," Bell answered suggestively, beginning to race up the slope of his property.

"Do you mean me?" asked the mousebeaver distrustfully.

"Who the shoe fits..." said Bell evasively, throwing himself into a deck chair on his veranda. He suspiciously watched Pucky, who just then was pulling a carrot with some force out of the ground, cleaning it off and shoving it into his mouth. "By the way, the nice days will soon be gone."

Pucky threw the stalk away. "Are you suffering from premonitions again?" he inquired, crossing through the hedge boundary marker. "Or have you heard something?"

"Both, old boy, both. Freyt thinks Rhodan will be coming back tomorrow. The discharge cone and the Druufs will soon be things of the past."

"Then we won't be bothered by those hippopotamuses anymore," Pucky commented with satisfaction. "Everything's all settled with Arkon. I'd like to know what could happen now?"

Bell waved his index finger. "How many times have I told you to knock on wood when you say things like that? If I had my way, I'd live here in the cottage for weeks and lie out in the water all day."

"Does it take that long to get the dirt off?" Pucky asked, innocently.

"Leave me alone," he rumbled. "Go tend to your tulips!"

Pucky came up to the deck chair and stood erect before Bell. "The tulips! If you knew how many shoots they've sprouted, you'd be amazed. I think we've saved the race of semi-sleepers. We'll soon be able to settle them some place. Perhaps on Mars."

The semi-sleepers were an intelligent, telepathic species of plants. Rhodan and Pucky had once saved them from certain destruction and brought them along to Earth. Here they grew in various places under the care of experienced gardeners. Fifty years had to pass before they reproduced. The semi-sleepers were of five genders, possessed actual eyes and could pull their delicate roots out of the ground to move to a better place.

Pucky's tulips around the veranda were no ordinary tulips but instead intelligent beings from another planet which had been destroyed long before the turn of the century in atomic fire.

Before Bell could answer, a shrill noise sounded from the bungalow.

Both man and mousebeaver gave an involuntary start.

"Krosh!" exclaimed Bell, growing a little pale. Some already dry hairs raised stiffly erect in protest.

"I should have knocked on wood," Pucky said, tapping Bell's skull. "Now go see who's trying to disturb our day off. Probably Mercant wanting to know what the weather's like..."

But it was not Mercant.

It was Freyt.

"You can pack up your pail and shovel and your toy boat, Mr. Bell," said the slim Freyt, who strongly resembled Rhodan. He smiled slightly from the vidscreen. "Rhodan will be coming in with the *Drusus* in about an hour. It doesn't look like he plans to stay in Terrania very long. After getting some information, he'll be taking off again."

"Well?" asked Bell tonelessly. He had a strong suspicion Freyt's simulated jocularly was not as humorous as it seemed. "What's that got to do with us?"

Freyt's smile widened. "I must impart to you and Pucky the cheering news that Rhodan's orders include an instruction for you to go on board the *Drusus* as soon as it lands. Yes, that's all I have to tell you. I wish you a pleasant Sunday..."

The screen went blank.

"A pleasant Sunday!" growled Bell angrily with a vengeful look at the visifone. "Three days vacation and now I have to leave it all behind. He looked around searchingly. "Wuzzi!" he called aloud. "Wuzzi, where are you?"

Pucky groaned and hopped away to take care of everything on his side of the hedge that needed taking care of in such situations. The garden robot had to be programmed, just like the automatic caretaker. Besides, he wanted to avoid a direct meeting with Wuzzi, the 'dachs-hog' from Venus. Bell had gone crazy over the droll little animal and took it with him everywhere he went. At least in Terrania.

Wuzzi came up and leaped into Bell's arms. He indeed resembled a dachshund but he had longer legs, a ringed tail and an actual pig-like snout. His species lived in the Venusian swamp forests and had quickly learned that one could live a pleasant life by being friendly towards mankind.

"We're leaving, Wuzzi! Vacation's over!"

Wuzzi understood and extended his ringed tail in joy. It became perfectly straight, then suddenly curled up into a spiral, its original position. This was repeated several times.

An hour later, Bell, Pucky and Wuzzi were peacefully gathered in a turbocar, gliding with increasing speed over the seamless road that led to Terrania.

As they were approaching the city they heard the uncanny thunder of gigantic engines in the stratosphere above. Bright flashes of flame made the sun seem pale and then the enormous globe of the *Drusus* emerged from the blue of the sky. It quickly grew larger and finally landed on the spacefield far ahead.

The vacation seemed to be over, most definitely.

This time, anyway...

2/ NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK

Commander Wilmar Lund had no idea why he and his men had to break off their training course so quickly. They had all looked upon the course as a sort of vacation in Venus City and so had not exerted themselves especially hard on it.

On the same day that the order came in from Terrania, Lund and his men boarded the cruiser *Arctic*. They reached the home planet without incident and landed on the Terranian spacefield next to the huge *Drusus*, the ship generally functioning as Rhodan's flagship.

Lund began to suspect that his arrival here was not coincidental with the presence of the *Drusus*. As quickly as he could, he recalled the events of the previous weeks and months but found no clues. He made the error of not thinking 9 months back.

From headquarters he received the order to put the *Arctic* in the hangar of the *Drusus* and report to the Administration Building of Terrania by the quickest way. Perry Rhodan was waiting for him.

Lund awakened from his semi-daydream and gave his orders. Then he climbed into the turbine car that had driven up to the ship. The automatically steered vehicle brought him swiftly into the city. Without being stopped for inspection, he passed through the energy-dome locks and soon thereafter he was climbing the wide steps of the square building that was generally considered the centre of the Solar System.

Marshal Freyt received him personally and led him into Rhodan's workroom. In the hall they met some members of the Mutant Corps, whose mood seemed to indicate they were on the verge of departure.

Lund was familiar with this mood. There was something in the air, then.

Rhodan stood up when he came into the room and extended his hand to him as though they were old friends. Lund took the hand. He knew that Rhodan regarded every one of his co-workers as a friend and treated them accordingly. That was the reason everyone would have gone through hell and high water for him had he asked it.

"You came quickly, Lund. I thank you. You certainly know Mr. Bell—and I hardly need introduce Pucky. He was along at the time."

Something stirred in Lund's memory. Pucky had been along?

He greeted Bell and Pucky, then sat down in the seat offered him. He waited silently—and he did not have long to wait.

"When you picked up Pucky from his outpost and brought him back to Earth, you encountered an unpiloted Arkonide ship drifting through space," Rhodan began, smiling knowingly. "It states in your logbook that it was deserted by the crew and drifted without power. Now do you remember?"

Lund nodded.

"Good. Surely you measured its speed, as regulations demand, and entered it and its course?"

Lund nodded again, still having no idea what all this was leading up to. Had he perhaps forgotten something?

But to his relief, Rhodan continued. "Are the data stored in the positronicon aboard the *Arctic*?"

"Yes sir. Besides the fact it was my duty, Pucky had expressly asked me to do so. It could have been possible that we would want to take another look at the old ship again. So it would be easy to determine the ship's current position at any time, if that's what you mean."

"That's exactly what I mean, Lund," said Rhodan. "It's good that you can remember and I think the time has come for Pucky himself to tell you the truth. Nine months ago, he kept something hidden from you."

Pucky leaped out of the chair that was much too large for him. He came over and simply sprang into Lund's lap. "You're not mad at me, are you, Lundy?" he asked with his chirping voice, bringing into play his well-practiced cute-little-animal-with-big-brown-eyes look which no one could resist. "I needed four hours then to look over the mysterious ship and you of course wondered about it. Four hours for an empty ship! Well, the truth is this: the ship was not empty. It contained 10,000 living Arkonides."

Lund's mouth fell open and he quickly closed it. "What? And you didn't tell me anything about it? Why not?"

"Well, there were also more than 100,000 Arkonides in a cryogenic chamber, waiting to be awakened. Because there were so many, the re-awakening could only take place on a suitable planet or otherwise there would have been a catastrophe. That was one of the reasons I kept the secret to myself. You might have insisted on investigating the ship yourself. . ."

Lund nodded slowly. He understood. "You're right, Pucky. *I would* have insisted on a detailed investigation—I would have *had* to. And—well, what now?"

Rhodan took over for Pucky. "Arkon needs capable people to build up the empire. Who could be more fitted for that than the sleeping Arkonides aboard the Ship of Ancestors? These are selected men and women of the old sort, like Arkon hasn't seen for thousands of years. They have retained their abilities over the millenniums by being in their deepsleep. Atlan has asked me to bring the ship to Arkon. For that reason, Commander Lund, I had you called."

Lund stood up. "Do you wish the coördinates at once? I'll..."

"We'll be going with you, Lund," Rhodan interrupted. "The *Arctic* is already in the *Drusus* hangar. We'll take off and calculate the coördinates during the flight out of the solar system. We don't have a minute to lose. Are you ready?"

"Of course, sir. But you had only a little time to..."

"Time enough!" Rhodan assured him. "Bell and Pucky are champing at the bit to find the ship. They've been lazing around the Goshun Lake long enough."

Bell wanted to say something but said nothing after a quick glance at Pucky.

The mousebeaver, on the other hand, was grinning happily. "Yeah, there's nothing more boring than a vacation at the Goshun. I'm glad we can once more... well, there's no point in going on. You're much too good a telepath, Perry."

And Rhodan was, though within limits. He grinned. "Don't worry about your tulips and carrots. You might be back tomorrow or the day after, once we've taken the Ship of Ancestors to Arkon. Your pets won't have dried out by then."

That was true.

But was anything else?

* * * *

The solar system slipped away behind the *Drusus* at the speed of light. The built-in time-compensators neutralized the dilation effect. Everyone was waiting for the forthcoming transition.

In the small control room of the *Arctic*, Lund, Rhodan, Bell and Pucky stood in front of the navigation brain. The memory banks were spewing out the desired information. The plastic strips snaked out all over the counter and Lund pushed them into the evaluator.

"About 20,000 light-years away," Bell murmured. "A nice distance for a precise spring."

"The main thing is that the stored information and the calculations based on it are correct. Then we'll find the drifting ship on the first transition."

"Why shouldn't we?" asked Rhodan. "The equipment is operating flawlessly and I can't believe that

Lund made any errors all those months ago."

"I can guarantee the information for you, sir," said Lund, somewhat taken aback.

Rhodan rested his hand on Lund's shoulder. "No one doubts that."

No, no one questioned it, really, but the human soul is nurtured on scepticism. Without scepticism it would seem empty and deserted. Still...

"The ship could have changed speed and course," Bell offered.

Pucky stepped on Bell's feet with all his strength. "Are you starting to prophesy doom again? We'll find that ship exactly where it's supposed to be or I'll..." He suddenly quieted.

Bell looked at him demandingly. "Or you'll what?"

But he received no answer for at that moment the evaluator began to click. The prepared information came fluttering down on the counter in the form of a plastic card. Rhodan picked it up and read: "Sector BV-57-C-99, 19997, 983LJ.2"

That was all.

Lund sighed. "That's clear enough. Now we can go."

Rhodan shoved the card into his pocket. He turned to Lund. "Keep the *Arctic* ready for takeoff. It's possible that the cruiser will be necessary as a ferry. Its bow has the necessary tractor-beam to open the Arkonide ship's freight hatch... if it has one."

Rhodan and Bell went through the cruiser's corridors and crossed the hangar. Within minutes, a lift brought them to the control room of the *Drusus*, where Col. Sikerman was already waiting impatiently for them. The mousebeaver, who had teleported his way there, was already sitting on the couch. He had refused to give out any information and so it happened that Sikerman all but ran towards the incoming men, asking: "What is it? Do you have the data, sir?"

"Yes, we have it," Rhodan answered, giving him the card. "The rest is up to you. You're the commander."

The colonel took the card, glanced at it and then handed it wordlessly to the First Officer, who shoved it into the computer. The calculation process ran automatically. The prepared data slid in the form of coloured plastic strips into the hypertransition machinery.

Sikerman sat down in the pilot's seat.

The Sun had long shrunk to a yellow star. In the control room background, Rhodan and Lund spoke together in low tones. In all probability, the Administrator was answering a few of the cruiser commander's questions to satisfy his curiosity. Bell sat next to Pucky on the couch. The two friends were noticeably quiet and peaceful.

Sikerman looked at the controls as several lamps lit up. "Transition point determined," he said. "We spring in two minutes."

Rhodan involuntarily rubbed his neck with his hand. He thought of the imminent pain of transition, the single unpleasantness of hyperspringing and the dematerialisation connected with it. Otherwise one felt nothing. But that was had enough. Soon, or so he thought, there would be an end to that. The plans Ernst Ellert had stolen on Druufon for the ultra-light-speed linear drive was even now in the hands of Terran scientists, and the new drive was being worked on. Before long, the first ultralight ship—without any transitions necessary—would lift off from Terrania on its test flight.

"One more minutes!"

For decades Perry Rhodan had regarded the hyperspring method as the only means of reaching star systems light-years away. But then the Druufs had appeared with their ships, which did not dematerialise but simply exceeded the speed of light and flew onwards. They were unaffected by any time dilation, which contradicted all the laws of Einstein—unless they used some sort of time-compensator. But even though Rhodan still considered the hyperspring as the best 'Method' he had still always dreamed, of being able to speed through space with his eyes open, so to speak. He longed to be able to watch the stars gliding past the portholes instead of disappearing into the impenetrable nothing known as hyperspace.

"10 seconds! 9... 8... 7..."

The hypertransition proceeded precisely and without incident. When the *Drusus* materialized along with all its contents, it stood exactly at that point in the universe to which it had been sent. The stars were more numerous than as seen from the Earth and they were closer together. Since there was no dust in this sector, even some of the pale light flecks of far distant galaxies could be seen as plainly visible spirals of light which seemed to be imperceptibly revolving. It was a sight that an earthbound man could never properly imagine, no matter how great his power of fantasy. It was a sight that made the theory of being alone in the universe seem ridiculous.

Rhodan broke away from the sight, which always fascinated him. His voice was a little husky as he spoke. "Switch on the scanners, Colonel. According to the calculations, the ship can't be any more than 0.5 light-years from our present position."

The instruments began to operate. A radius of half a light-year! So simple to say, so much in meaning. A sphere one light-year in diameter had to be searched for a point measuring 1.5 kilometres. The search had to be conducted on a three-dimensional basis.

After five hours, this much was clear: there was no solid body larger than a pea within a radius of half a light-year.

Col. Sikerman looked rather at a loss. "I don't understand this, sir. The instruments are functioning flawlessly. Assuming the *Arctic's* positronicon hasn't made an error..."

"Impossible!" Lund protested energetically at once. "Our observations in December 2043 were flawless. Pucky will be able to confirm that for you anytime."

"I certainly can!" The mousebeaver drew up to his full height and looked reproachfully at Sikerman. "You aren't trying to shove the blame on me and Lund, are you...?"

Rhodan knew the signs: there was about to be an explosion. It was high time to intervene. "No one's trying to do that, Pucky!" he said sharply. "We must stick to the matter at hand and try to solve the riddle. If all our calculations are correct and the Arkonide emigrant ship can't be found in this sector, then

there can be only one explanation. We'll have to keep it in mind."

Pucky sank back on the couch. He already knew what Rhodan was thinking. After all, he was a telepath.

Lund remained silent. His reason refused to recognize the enormous significance of the conclusion being drawn.

"Do you think, sir," said Sikerman, "that the Ship of Ancestors has changed its speed or course? That would be..."

Rhodan nodded. "Yes, it would be Terrible. How could we find it in the unending vastness of space? Has it left any traces? No one leaves traces in nothing."

An uncomfortable silence followed. Everyone was lost in his own thoughts. Naturally it would be pointless to continue the search in the same sector; the scanning equipment was as good as infallible. It could not have erred. Nor could there be any doubt about the data of the *Arctic*.

So the Ship of Ancestors had deviated from its course and increased its speed considerably.

Perhaps it had even undertaken a hyperspring...?

Rhodan turned to Pucky. "You were on the ship, Pucky. Were you able to determine with certainty if there was a hyperdrive unit there?"

The mousebeaver shrugged. "Sorry, Perry. I couldn't search the interior of the ship that closely. I had enough to do, freeing the passengers from the mastery of their robots. I found the ancestors in deepsleep and informed those on watch. I can't say with any certainty that there was a hyperdrive. In any case, the officers never thought of it. I assume that they didn't know either."

"Then the only discovered it when you left their ship. Perhaps they wanted to fly to the next solar system and finally leave their ship."

"They were flying below speol," Pucky mused. "If they had maintained their speed and course, they would have reached a solar system 200 years later. It could be that that seemed like too long a time to them. After all, they had been underway for 10,000 years."

Lund looked up. His eyes had narrowed. He seemed to have an idea. "Sir, didn't you just say that no one leaves any traces behind in nothing? Are you firmly convinced of that?"

Rhodan returned Lund's look, then a fleeting smile made a momentary appearance on his otherwise tensed features. "I almost overlooked it! The structural sensor! It records every hyperspring and feeds the data into the central positronic files in Terrania. If the Ship of Ancestors ever made a transition in the last year, we'll find it recorded in the files. Not only that! We'll also know how far the ship sprang, in which direction and if it made another transition. Thank you, Lund. As you can see, I'm only human."

"Thank goodness!" chirped Pucky in the background, rolling comfortably into a ball. "When I think of you as a mousebeaver...!"

* * * *

When the *Drusus* landed, the routine commercial life of Terrania was in full swing. Vehicles and men hurried to and fro in the streets. Airtaxis sped along at low altitudes over the flat roofs, bringing their passengers to the suburbs or to the factories.

The positronic files lay beneath the energy screen.

Accompanied by Lund and Bell, Rhodan entered the building and took the lift up to the appropriate floor. A man in a long white coat received them.

"We've prepared everything, sir," said the file specialist eagerly. "May I ask you to follow me."

"Go ahead, Dirscherl. You know your way around here better than I. It's your job to neutralize the mistakes of others with the help of your numerical manipulations."

"Not only the mistakes, sir." The cyberneticist turned down a corridor. On both sides, the containers with the stored information were stacked as though in an archive. They, too, were arranged in a three-dimensional manner. For example, it was not enough to search under the heading '20,000 light-years'. From the Earth there were more than a million possibilities of measuring a distance of 20,000 light-years and always reaching another sector of space. So the various directions and sectors were divided according to different relative positions. Only in that way was it possible to find a particular place in three-dimensional space from the Earth.

Dirscherl stopped. He pointed to the label on the file container. "Here you'll find all notations for the distance 19,997 to 19,998 light-years. Direction BV-57-C must be the one you want."

"Well, take a look and see," Bell told him sarcastically.

Rhodan waited. Lund, on the other hand, gave the impression of being extremely nervous. He hoped with all his strength that the file would show that the Ship of Ancestors had changed its course.

Dirscherl opened the container and leafed through the file cards until he found the right one. He nodded in satisfaction and handed it to Rhodan.

Only a few seconds went by.

"As far as I can see, only a single transition took place in that sector and that was on September 10, 2044, just 18 days ago. Both the spring into hyperspace and the spring out were recorded. The distance of the spring was precisely 20.3 light-years. Hm, we would have been a long time searching a distance like that."

"Are you certain, sir, that this is the Ship of Ancestors?"

Rhodan looked at Lund. "Anything else would be pure coincidence. It's not very probable." He looked at the card. "Unfortunately, the direction of the spring could not be determined. We'll have to continue our search. But now we at least have something to go on."

Rhodan copied the data and thanked the Cyberneticist. Then they returned to the *Drusus* and took off

for Venus. The side-trip took up only a small amount of time but at least they had obtained certainty.

Rhodan summed it up during the return flight to Earth. "The big positronicon on Venus has stored all the information that a space-faring race needs for finding its way in the Milky Way. We know now that there are only five stars within a radius of 20.3 light-years of the Ship of Ancestors. Which of the five stars was chosen remains a question because we could not find out which of them possesses inhabitable planets. The Arkonides didn't know either. So there's nothing else to do but investigate all five stars. To save time, we'll stay here in Terrania while five cruisers head for the five stars and try to find a sign of the Ship of Ancestors. As soon as we receive some positive information, we'll take off. Any questions?"

Pucky had one. "How long might this take, Perry?"

It sounded a bit reserved and tense. Bell replied, "That depends on how quickly the Ship of Ancestors is found. When we get a report of its position, we'll start."

"And do you want to wait here in the *Drusus* and not in your home in Terrania?"

"Of course I'll wait at home. I have a lot to do yet. But—why do you ask?"

However, Pucky was not yet finished with his questions. "Once we get the position report, how long will it be before we take off?"

"Half an hour—at most."

With a sigh of relief, the mousebeaver slid from the couch and hopped over to Bell. "Fatty—we've done it! We can take up our interrupted vacation from where we left off. From our lakeside cottages to the spaceport it isn't more than 10 minutes by car. Just call us, Perry."

Rhodan seemed to have been taken unawares. "Alright, Pucky and Reggie. Under one condition: one of you must stay constantly in range of the videophone in the bungalow! And when the order comes, you must be on board the *Drusus* in 20 minutes. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly clear!" chirped Pucky happily as he pulled Bell behind him out of the control room.

Bell embodied the proverbial two spirits that are believed to dwell in mankind. He feigned regret over Pucky's strategy while at the same time concealing his joy over its success.

Smiling, Rhodan watched the two go. "I think, Lund," he said then, "that we have the prospect of a few days rest. It won't be easy for the cruisers to find the Ship of Ancestors. We don't know what's happened. We might even be coming too late."

"Sir?" said Lund, bending forward, a shocked expression on his face.

"The Arkonides might have made another transition but this time we wouldn't know from where. Then we wouldn't be searching for a needle in a haystack but for a microbe in the Atlantic. Figure it out for yourself. . ."

Lund declined thankfully.

3/ WHEN THE SLEEPERS WAKE

For more than 10,000 years, the gigantic ship had drifted through endless space. A sphere 1500 meters through it was of the same type as the *Drusus*. The Imperium Class of ship had endured for 10,000 years.

Nevertheless, this ship was of a special construction.

In its interior rested in deep-frozen sleep preserved Arkonides, descendants of the first ruling family and its progeny. Only 5000 of them had been present at the ship's takeoff before the alleged death squad had taken hold of them and thrown them into the deep-freeze installation—*if* it had happened in that way.

Now it was the members of the last generation who commanded the ships and who had overcome the robots. The robots who had taken command of the Ship of Ancestors.

Months had gone by in the meantime.

Commander C-1 was master of the situation, which remained delicate. The ancestors rested in the ship's interior, waiting to be awakened someday—to settle some planet. C-1 was not clear as to what had happened 10,000 years before. In order not to increase the disquiet, Pucky had not told him. C-1 was not even aware that he was an Arkonide. The sleepers knew it, however—or at least they would know it once they awakened. And then only the first generations.

The strange visitor had stated that in 200 years the Ship of Ancestors would be captured by a star which possessed suitable planets.

Then the visitor—none other than Pucky—had disappeared just as mysteriously as he had come earlier.

Since then, much in the great ship had changed.

In the first months, the 10,000 awake Arkonides had inaugurated a new way of life. No one was taken by the robots any longer to be put into deepsleep. Whoever died, and not many died, was pushed out the refuse hatch into space. A certain amount of initial velocity insured that the corpse would not circle the ship like a tiny moon but drift out into the unending reaches of space.

No longer were the robots the masters of the Arkonides; now they were their servants. The robots' reprogramming had been accomplished without difficulty.

The mysterious visitor had said that it would take 200 years (Earth time) to reach the nearest star. The largest part of the 10,000 awake Arkonides would live to experience the landing. But even so, 200 years was a long time.

On September 8, 2044 the ship's first officer brought that into the discussion during a conference in the control room. "I don't understand, C-1, why we should wait idly for these 200 years to go by. We have a decent ship here with well-functioning engines. We don't know what the ancestors intended but 10,000 years are a long time. In the galaxy, much could have changed. In other words, I don't see why we should idly wait for fate to overtake us."

Medic M-3 nodded in agreement. Engineers E-4 and E-7 also seemed to concur with O-1. The commander realized that resistance was hardly appropriate but he was also aware of his duties and his responsibility.

"None of us are familiar with the ship's engines. For as long as we can remember, we've been flying far below the speed of light. I've taken the trouble of studying the scientific data contained in the hypno-library, O-1. Springing through hyperspace was developed 10,000 years ago as the best way of getting from place to place. Every ship was equipped with hyperdrive. This one, too, probably. The robots have never used it. Whether that was due to their lack of initiative or to their orders, we don't know. In any case, I don't know if we should dare..."

"Why not?" O-1 interrupted brusquely. "Haven't we become independent? Aren't we now the masters of our fate? Can't we do what seems proper? Who will stop us?"

C-1 saw an escape. "If there isn't any hyperdrive equipment aboard, then we won't have to decide. We'll have to continue until we reach the planetary system we were told about."

O-1's face assumed a triumphant expression. "Allow me, C-1, to let a specialist say a few words. E-7 has discovered a few on board the ship after looking around."

"Alright," said the commander despite his increasing feeling of discomfort.

The engineer, who because of his leading role during the revolt against the robots had practically risen to the rank of officer, stepped forward. "The ship's interior contains machinery for the deep-freeze sleep," he began. But not only that. The engines are there, too. Wonderful engines with which this ship could be steered through the entire galaxy—judging from what we know from the charts as to what the galaxy is and how large it is. I needed several weeks to study the propulsion system. I think I'm familiar with it now and how to operate it. In brief: if a decision is made to take the ship into transition, I can calculate the spring and carry it out."

"I don't, know if the ancestors would permit such a thing," the commander began.

He was interrupted immediately by the first officer. "We won't ask the sleepers. We are in control of the ship. *We* set the course. We were tangled up long enough in a net of fear and lies thanks to the ancestors' machinations. It's time that we took the initiative. We will head for the nearest solar system and land on a suitable planet. Then, for all I care, the sleepers can be awakened. There are enough men and women for us to found a new race."

"Is that the purpose of this ship?" asked the commander.

He did not receive a reply.

Medic M-3 raised both hands and said calmly: "How are we to know the purpose of our journey if we were duped millenniums ago? I believe we have a right to take our fate into our own hands from now on. If E-7 has succeeded in discovering hyper-engines, then we should use them as soon as possible to reach a destination. And our destination can only be an inhabitable planet."

"I agree!" O-1 added.

The two technicians nodded.

C-1 found himself outvoted. "I submit to the majority," he said, "but I want it to be known that for various reasons I'm granting my authority only under duress. The main reason is this: we know too little about the so-called hyperdrive and have no experience with it. If something goes wrong, we'll be lost. Or can E-7 perhaps repair the engines if they fail during their functioning? Maybe we're supposed to reach our goal at our present velocity."

"Why then do we have the hyperdrive?" asked the medic with a side-glance at O-1. "It wasn't put here by accident."

"But it is here!" said O-1 coldly.

The commander looked down helplessly at his hands. "All the arguments that have been brought up here today sound logical and convincing no matter which side they came from. I have no other choice than to submit to the majority."

"Does that mean you're giving us permission to calculate and carry out a hyperjump?" O-1 inquired cautiously.

The commander nodded to him. "It can be interpreted that way, yes. If M-3 agrees too..."

"I'm in favour of the experiment," the medic added quickly, as though he feared the commander might change his mind. "The sooner we land on a planet, the better." Suddenly he shook his head. "Can any of us even imagine what a planet is and what it looks like?"

They had been born on the ship and had never known any world other than the ship. There were books aboard which spoke of huge globes circling flaming suns. They were natural bodies, not artificial, and the inhabitants lived on the globe instead of *in* it. The sun made it possible, supplying warmth and energy.

"Life on such a world must be more pleasant than that in the ship," said O-1, convinced. "I even read in one of the books that ships such as ours served only for transportation, as crazy as the idea may seem. Life on a planet is more natural and worth striving for, it would seem. If we activate the hyperdrive, we'll be following a law of nature. We're searching for a home, that's all."

"A world without manufactured air," mused C-1. "It's unimaginable and disturbing. Who knows what disappointments await us? All right, O-1. See that all the necessary arrangements are made. Take no risks. The first spring must succeed. I'll never permit a second one."

That had been on September 8, 2044.

Two days later the first officer reported that the technical department had painstakingly examined and analysed the hyper-engines. The positronicons appertaining thereto had been activated and were ready for action. However, the commander had not lost any of his scepticism.

"Now you want the star charts to figure the spring?" he asked.

"A directed spring isn't possible without them, because the necessary data is given on the charts. Our position as well can be determined from them."

"We're fortunate," said the commander, "that such charts are on board at all. I found them over in the wall cabinet. We should probably regard their presence as proof that self-determined flight manoeuvres are permitted for the ship."

"The presence of the hyperdrive alone was enough," said O-1 triumphantly. He stepped next to the commander and bent over the charts that were spread out on a table. "We'll shoot for the next star in order to keep the risk as slight as possible. In a straight line... yes, only a slight change of course would be necessary. Assuming the data are correct..."

"Why shouldn't they be?" demanded the commander. For once he seemed more confident than the first officer. "I've studied the textbooks and I'm familiar with the theory of a spring. How it looks in practice, I don't know."

"Well, we'll find out," commented O-1 grimly and determinedly. "Ever since I've known that in the interior of this ship many generations of our people are resting in deepsleep, I've been haunted by the horrible nightmare that they might suddenly wake up."

The commander looked up. His face had gone pale. "Why should that happen, O-1? We won't disturb their sleep until we've landed on a planet. Those ancestors who were present when the ship took off know about life on a planet. They'll have to help us."

The first officer seemed to want to drop the unpleasant topic. "Give me the charts, C-1, so that I can calculate the data. One of the robots has promised his support. He claims he was once a navigation robot. In the past few days our best technicians have studied the fundamentals of the drive in all details. The reprogrammed robots with their experience will be standing at our side. It can and must not go wrong, commander."

"Of course not, O-1. What should I do from here?"

"I'll stay in touch with you. When everything's ready, you have only to pull the camouflaged switch over on the control panel. Everything else will be taken care of automatically. I'll let you know."

The commander sat down, watching him go.

It looked very much like the long journey was coming to an end.

No one knew where the ship had come from. The log-books said nothing about it nor were the other pieces of available information helpful. When the robots had taken over, it had been—insofar as it had been available—destroyed. The goal and purpose of the trip lay just as hidden in the night of time.

The commander thought of the sleepers. They rested stacked up in a huge hollow sphere in the centre of the ship. The surveillance robots had brought them there after preparation in the freezing chambers. The freezing chambers now stood empty, for no one was being put into deepsleep anymore now that the robots had been put back into their cases.

The ship was easily large enough for 10,000 people, but the sleepers, of whom there were 10 times as many, could be awakened only once landfall had been made on a suitable planet. The ship was too small for everyone.

The commander looked at the vidscreens.

Out there was space with its stars. Just a year ago, he had not even known what stars were. Suns, of course. But that they generally had planets, on which one could live and breathe...

A humming sound pulled him out of his musings.

"O-1 here, commander! I'm in the hyper-central. The navigation robots have worked over the data and have given me the result along with the coordinates. It's all programmed. We can spring."

The commander stood up and went to the control panel on the wall. He put his hand on the red switch. "I hope we haven't made an error, O-1..."

"We have done everything to avoid an error, commander."

"Very well." The commander held his breath. "What about the crew?"

"Everyone is at his post."

"Good." The commander didn't take the time to breathe out. "Now!"

He pulled the switch down.

It moved easily.

Nothing seemed to change. But on the vidscreen the stars seemed to be wiped away by an invisible hand. For a fraction of a second there was nothing on the screen, then new patterns of stars formed into strange-looking constellations—and remained.

In his neck the commander felt the pain of rematerialisation. For some seconds the pain was connected with terrible fear but then as the pain slowly ebbed the fear that something had gone wrong also faded.

With one step C-1 was at the intercom. "Hello, O-1! Do you hear me?"

The video unit was activated. The first officer's face was marked by a haggard look but a first triumphant smile was already showing. "I believe—we've done it. Machines running normally. What does the vidscreen in the control room show?"

"New stars! The shift of some constellations shows that we've gone a distance that otherwise would have required decades. There's a white star close by. We're heading straight for it."

"The target star." The first officer mopped his brow. "You're right, C-1! We've done it! Soon we'll be landing on a planet."

"Do you think that we can pilot the ship?"

"The robots will take care of that for us. They obey us."

"Then have the new course calculated. I don't know how long it'll be before we reach the star."

"If we maintain our present speed, about three weeks."

"That's enough time," sighed C-1 in relief.

He did not suspect what the spring had caused...

* * * *

Technician E-7, along with E-4, was conducting his daily inspection tour of the centre of the spacesphere.

Just a year before, this part of the ship had been verboten. Only the robots were allowed entry. Any violation of the ban was punished by death—although a death was not actually death but eternal life. The condemned were taken to the freezing chambers and readied for suspended animation without knowing it. By that time the violators were already unconscious.

At the place where Repair Technician 75 had broken through was now a door. No robot stood guard there.

The two men entered the room beyond it.

The long rows of glass containers in which the bodies of sleepers had once lain were empty. Long before, the frozen men and women had been brought into the storage chamber where they would stay until the ship had reached its destination.

E-7 stopped when he heard footsteps.

Here below, there was nothing for anyone to look for. The former surveillance robots had been withdrawn because they were needed for work elsewhere.

He breathed more easily when he recognized the medic. "Hello, M-3! On inspection?"

The medic walked up to the two men and stopped in front of them. "As I am daily. And you?"

"As we are daily, too. This part of the ship is in our section. But—in a little while, we'll be able to leave the ship. It's incomprehensible—leaving the ship!"

The medic nodded and looked around as though he had heard something. Then he shook his head puzzledly and said: "I'm hearing ghosts. Ever since we made the hyperjump three days ago, nothing's been right down here—as if it's haunted." He glanced at the long rows of glass coffins. I just thought I saw a shadow back there along the partition wall leading to the freezer. I sent a robot to investigate. He did not return."

E-7 had gone deathly pale. "He didn't come back? What does that mean...?"

"Like I said, he went through the hatch into the room where the sleepers are resting—and didn't come back. The hatch closed automatically."

"The robot stayed...*in* there?"

The medic nodded. He was still listening intently but all was silent behind the rows of glass containers. The somewhat murky liquid in which the presumed dead had floated stood motionless within the containers.

"Why hasn't the commander been informed?" asked E-4 fearfully. "Perhaps...?" He suddenly stopped, as though afraid to voice his apprehension.

The medic did not look at him. "What do you mean... perhaps?"

Over behind the long row of glass containers was a noise. Then a shadow emerged from the gloom and approached them.

When it stood before them, they realized what it was.

It was a naked man.

* * * *

With the first breath of returning life, he felt cold—icy, unimaginable cold.

He emerged from a night that had never known light, a night that must have endured for an eternity in the past and had no morning.

But now morning had dawned.

He tried to move his limbs but without success. They seemed to be surrounded by an invisible armour that radiated an icy coldness. His feet, however, were free. When he tried to feel with them, he found that they met no resistance.

Then his memory returned.

The emigrants' ship had taken off and begun the great flight. But it had happened even before the first hyperjump. The robots had overpowered them and continued the originally planned undertaking. Operation Regeneration, it had been called when it started. The living witnesses of the past were to live again in the distant future. The Emperor's advisers had an idea how necessary the realm would someday find the fresh blood of undegenerate nobility.

The robots...?

The awakened man felt terror. Everything had gone wrong. He had awakened too soon.

Or too late?

His name suddenly occurred to him again. He was Alos, the Cyberneticist, responsible for the functioning of the robots on the huge ship. And then the robots had overpowered him just like they had all the other ship's passengers.

Why had they awakened him now?

He suddenly felt wetness. The ice was melting somewhere and becoming water. Then he noticed that he

was naked.

It was only with difficulty that he could move now but only in one direction. Feet first, he slid out of the tiny container. For endless seconds he hung over an abyss whose depth he could not measure. Then his cold fingers could hold him no more. He let go and fell.

He fell less than a meter to the floor.

At the same moment, lights on the ceiling flamed on.

Blinded, Alos closed his eyes, eyes that had not seen light in thousands of years. Only slowly he opened them again. Gradually the nerve fibres began to function again, relaying the received impressions on to his brain.

Alos began to see.

Thousands upon thousands of men and women lay stacked in the room. They lay in long rows, one on top of the other, separated only by the icy walls of the honeycomb in which they rested. Preserved in such a manner, they could endure for thousands of years if the temperature remained constant.

He had laid in the third row from the bottom, precisely on the central corridor. Beneath his place were two more ice-blocks in which two motionless men rested as though dead.

Motionless?

The lower one moved. The feet stretched and pushed away the half-melted ice-cover. It fell to the floor and broke into a thousand pieces.

For a moment Alos forgot the incident. Twinges of stabbing pain wandered through his limbs, in which life was gradually returning. The blood prickled in his veins. But he knew that the revival process must have been in operation for hours. The pain was not serious and therefore meaningless.

Now the other Arkonide was moving too. As he kicked away the floor plate, the other made his way into the open, where he was greeted by Alos.

"Commodore Ceshal... you?"

The newly awakened man looked at Alos carefully, as if he were seeing him for the first time. Then he shook his head. "The robots must have realized that they were acting wrongly. They've reawakened us. They probably can't get along without us."

Alos realized that the commander had not yet grasped the whole truth. It would be a shock for him.

"Commodore Ceshal—how long have we slept? How long does it feel like to you?"

"Going by how I feel? I'd stay about an hour. But the robots would certainly need time to freeze us and stack us up. Anyway..."

He stopped suddenly. He had looked around while he was talking. The light was burning brightly now, shining on the long rows of frozen people stacked up to the vaulting ceiling. It was not necessary to count them. With one look Ceshal realized that there were 10 or 20 times as many people here as there were

aboard the ship when it took off.

"Onevery long hour, Ceshal," Alos murmured bitterly.

"By the Imperium!" the commodore gasped. "What happened?"

In the meantime, the third man had been able to free himself from his block of ice. It was the scientist Ekral who now stood up and took in with widely opened eyes the unbelievable sight. His crystal-clear logic began to operate with precision almost at once. His voice was strangely husky as he finally summed up.

"Thousands of years must have gone by! The robots have done exactly what we planned. Only they did it in a way appropriate to their mentality. I can remember them pushing me into the converter—then I was dead. And now—many generations resting in an icy grave. But to what purpose? Why?"

"We'll find out," Ceshal told him reassuringly. "Anyway, they've activated the waking mechanism now. We must have come to a planet. Perhaps they succeeded in repairing the defective hyperdrive. Didn't the hypercom break down after the explosion?"

Alos nodded slowly. "My memory is muddy and I no longer recall exactly what happened." He stepped to one side as two more Arkonides slid out of their ice coffins and helped a third to his feet. "It's going to get crowded in here if more awake."

"The machinery probably thawed everyone simultaneously," said Ceshal in a choked voice. "We've got to get to the exit. The evacuation of the ship must proceed in an orderly fashion or we'll have a catastrophe on our hands."

The three men hurried down the corridor past the reawakened people and finally reached the end of it. A wall covered with crystals of ice marked the termination of the corridor. An iron wheel, such as are found on bank-vault doors on Earth, showed where the exit was but the wheel could not be moved.

"Locked!" cried Ceshal. "Of course—what else! The deep-freeze chamber can be opened only from outside. We'll have to wait until somebody lets us out."

"Who's this 'somebody'?" asked Ales with an ominous undertone in his voice. "The robots?"

"We can't wait much longer," Ekral observed, pointing to all the awakening sleepers. "If they all wake up now..."

The prospect was horrifying.

Wild with desperation, Ceshal shook at the door wheel but it did not move a millimetre. Meanwhile, the water from the melting ice flowed in little streams to the centre of the spherical room and collected there. But it did not rise. It sank gurgling into the depths, soaked up by some unknown mechanism that had been called into mysterious life none too soon—but also, none too late.

At least they would not drown.

Thirty or 40 men pushed their way through the corridor and surrounded Commodore Ceshal, Ekral and Alos. Others followed them. The air was already getting worse. The lights burned brightly down from the ceiling and made the room hotter. Somewhere a woman's scream echoed.

"We've got to get out of here!" someone cried, balling his fists. "If all of them wake up..."

The rest went unsaid but the thought alone was horrifying enough. One hundred thousand people in this small room. Prone and surrounded by thin walls of ice, they'd had room enough. But the ice was melting and they were awakening. They needed air to breathe, a place to stand...

Ceshal shook again at the door-wheel. "They've awakened us, men," he said, trying to give his voice a ring of authority, "so they'll let us out of our confinement soon enough. Perhaps the landing isn't completed yet."

In the background the woman's voice was still screaming. Someone was trying to assure her that her husband was not dead but had yet to awake. And her child...

Her child would be a man himself, perhaps older than she.

Commodore Ceshal suddenly froze. The wheel had trembled slightly under his hands, then turned a few centimetres.

He raised both his arms and asked for quiet.

The wheel turned some more. A tiny crack opened in the impenetrable wall. It was dark outside. A figure came into the room and stopped.

Ceshal acted completely by instinct.

He threw up his hand and turned the wheel in the opposite direction. The door closed again. When the intruder turned around it was too late.

Ceshal stared into the robot's expressionless face. "What has happened outside in the ship?" he asked. "Answer me!"

He actually expected no answer at all, since the last time he had seen a robot it had been master of the ship. But to his astonishment this particular robot showed obedience.

"The hyperspring must have activated the waking mechanism, master. This was not anticipated."

'Master', the robot had said. Ceshal registered the fact with perceptible relief. Had the robots changed their minds—now that it was too late?

"Hyperspring? The mechanism is functioning again?"

"It was never defective, master."

Ceshal stared at the robot. "What?"

"I know only that it was never defective, master. My memory was partly erased and that is why I know no more than that. I was directed to come into this room to investigate a noise that was heard outside. Let me go back so I can report what has happened."

"Report to *whom*?"

And then the robot began to explain...

* * * *

Commodore Ceshal fearlessly opened the deep-freeze hatch door and went out to the three men, who upon seeing him all but froze with terror.

"Well?" he said into the deathly silence that followed. "Now that you've awakened us, see to it that we receive clothing. We've been cold ever since the blood began to flow in our veins again. You've broken the mastery of the robots; now solve this problem too."

M-3 was the first to recover from the shock. "Who has awakened—how many are awake?"

"Everyone—I hope. We don't know how reliable the mechanism is. Ekral and Tunuter built it together and were responsible."

The medic had gone pale. "Everyone? It'll take us three weeks to reach the planet. From where are we to get the clothing? Go back into the sleep chamber and calm your people. There isn't enough room in the ship..."

"You're crazy!" said Ceshal coldly. "There are more than 100,000 of us, Arkonide men and women, crammed together in the least possible space. We need clothing and nourishment. Besides, I am the true commander of this ship."

M-3 foresaw the imminent developments with a clarity that was uncanny even to him. If only he could at least inform C-1 of the danger without exciting the suspicion of the reawakened man. "Of course your rank will be respected," he said cautiously, "but I am not empowered to make any decisions. I'm only one of the physicians on board. I've been bearing responsibility ever since the robots were reprogrammed. Before that—it's a very long story, which I believe will make sense when combined with your story. Come with us, if you please. We'll introduce you to the commander. He's in the control room."

Ceshal looked at M-3 questioningly. "You can't lie to me, Doctor. I was born thousands of years before you and belong to the ruling class of the Imperium."

"What Imperium?" demanded M-3.

Ceshal began to realize the forgetfulness that had settled over the descendants. The robots had seen to that. They must have had plans of their own as to the available human material. But what sort of plans...?

"We are Arkonides, rulers of a stellar empire on an unimaginable scale. There was an experiment we were supposed to carry out but it went wrong—or perhaps not. My memory fails me. There must be indications of some kind in the control room if the robots haven't destroyed them. Well, Doctor, take me to the commander."

The change in intentions came so suddenly that M-3 was surprised. He went to a wall cabinet and

searched through it until he found a blanket that he handed to Ceshal.

"Let's go. I think we don't have a minute to lose if we want to avoid a disaster. You stay here, E-4 and E-7. Make sure that no one else leaves the freezer." He hesitated for a moment, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a small needle-beamer. "Under no circumstances *is anyone* to come out."

Ceshal wanted to say something but then he was silent and wrapped himself in the blanket. He did not look very impressive and began to realize the psychological effect of a well-fitting uniform. The medic motioned to him and walked ahead. Silently he followed. Before he bent to go out the connecting hatchway, he looked back one last time.

The two technicians had gone to the freezer hatch and taken their positions. Their faces showed grim determination.

Ceshal suspected that the difficulties were just beginning...

* * * *

The commander displayed excellent self-control.

When M-3 entered the control room with the awakened Arkonide, he had just received from O-1 the not very reassuring news that the engineers had discovered considerable change in the machine room. The hyperspring must have caused some short circuits. The energy storage units had discharged without any reason and no one knew what had used the energy. There could be no doubt that the transition mechanism was no longer operable.

It was true that the spring over 20 light-years had succeeded but it had cost them dearly. C-1 realized how dearly when M-3 came in with his involuntary guest.

"Who's that?" he asked calmly.

The first officer went pale but said nothing.

"The sleepers are awake, C-1," answered the radio in a choked voice.

"Where did you find him?"

"He came out of the cold chamber. They overpowered a robot that I sent in. It also opened the hatch for them. I left E-4 and E-7 behind as guards. We must reinforce them at once if we want to avoid a catastrophe.

O-1 took hold of himself. He nodded to C-1 and hurried out of the control room.

Ceshal felt himself taken unawares. "What are you thinking of?" he demanded, pointing to the door. "Surely you don't intend to set armed men against unarmed people? Do you know who I am? I am Commodore Ceshal, the leader of this expedition. You are my subordinates. I'll see to it that..."

"I fear that you misunderstand the situation," M-3 broke in. "You were commander of this ship, 10,000 years ago. Then you allowed the robots to take over and all but breed people with which to later settle a planet following their plans. The robots were to be the masters, the people to be the, servants. We refused to submit to the rule of the robots and won. And now you climb out of the grave and claim to be the commander..."

C-1 nodded to the medic. He was thankful to him for the support. "You see, my dear friend, your moral claims are tenuous indeed. If you really were commander of this ship once, that was a long time ago. At the moment, that happens to be me. It was under my leadership that the revolt against the robots was carried out."

"I am Commodore Ceshal..."

"Very well," replied C-1. "Call yourself what you like. But see that your people remain in the ice-sphere. We'll reach a planet in just three weeks and land. Then everything else will take care of itself from then on..."

"Three weeks!" cried Ceshal losing self-control. "You're insane, man! Well all be frozen to death, choked to death or starved to death in three weeks! You're the one who woke us up too soon. Now see that we don't perish!"

C-1 could not dispute Ceshal's argument. Of course he bore the responsibility for the awakening of the sleeping generations but neither did he see any way to help them without endangering himself and his crew.

"We have neither enough food nor clothing on board for so many people, Ceshal. Of course well try to alleviate the worst suffering. We'll distribute blankets. Emergency rations will be given out. But I demand utmost discipline. None of the sleepers may leave mid-deck. We'll post guards. I think that it's possible this way to..."

"You want to fire on the old Arkonides?" demanded Ceshal, outraged. "You forget that we are the pureblooded descendents of the ruling families. Our blood is related to that of the Emperor..."

"Imperator?" contemptuously snapped O-1, who had just returned to the control room and had heard the last words. "What's your Imperator to us? We live according to the laws of the ship, like those before us. Who was it who brought us to this pass? You!"

Ceshal realized that his arguments were now inappropriate. "Let's not talk about guilt but about the future. *Our* future! When did you last have contact over hypercom with ships of the Imperium?"

C-1 looked at Ceshal without understanding. "Contact with other ships? Do you mean there *are* other ships?"

Ceshal began to realize it would not be simple to reach an understanding. Between him and the descendents yawned a vast gulf of that which was forgotten and that which was never known. Just as he was about to launch into an explanation, a shrill ringing sounded.

It came from the corner of the control room. The first officer hurried to the vidscreen and turned a few knobs. When the screen lit up, a face appeared that was known even to Ceshal.

"E-7, what happened? Where are you calling from? I mean, you..."

"Middle deck! We weren't able to keep the ancestors back, O-1! They simply overran E-4 when he tried to stand in front of them with his weapon in his hand. I was able to get to safety in time and close the mid-deck hatch. They won't get through that very quickly."

"Have all hatches manned, E-7! The ancestors must be prevented by force of arms from overrunning the whole ship. That would be the end."

"With the help of the robots we'll be able to do it," affirmed the technician and disappeared from the vidscreen.

Rendered mute by fear, Commodore Ceshal had heard the exchange. It was clear to him that the awakening Arkonides could not be crowded together into cramped quarters without an explosion ensuing. At least his companions in misery had been able to flee the icy sleeping chamber. The middle deck was large. It included the 12 circular halls with the preparation equipment, the glass containers, and some machine rooms. With the most economical distribution and strict organization, it should be possible to accommodate the awakened Arkonides within that area...

"Well?" demanded C-1 angrily. "What do you say now, Arkonide? All hell is breaking loose down below in the ship—and it's all your fault."

"Oh, sure, who else's fault could it be?" asked Ceshal bitterly. "Let me go back to my people now so that I can calm them. Perhaps we'll get by with the middle deck."

"You'll *have* to get by with it," C-1 told him sternly. "I will suppress any attempt at a breakout with all means at my disposal. You will receive rations through the hatches but only when you follow all my orders. Also, I'll arrange for blankets and pieces of clothing to be distributed. There won't be enough but at least the women won't have to go around naked. Warm air will be directed in sufficient quantity to the middle-deck. I hope that will cover everything necessary to make life for you as bearable as possible."

"Thanks," answered Ceshal and it was not easy for him to say the word. In his eyes, C-1 was an ignorant barbarian which an incomprehensible chance event had made commander. The Emperor of Arkon and his scientific advisers had assumed correctly when they foresaw a degeneration in the race. If there was only some way to find out how much time had really gone by in the meantime...

"You can return to your people, Commodore Ceshal." C-1 nodded condescendingly to the man clad only in a blanket and went back to the vidscreen to issue new instructions.

M-3 took Ceshal by the arm. "Come with me. I think you're needed down below."

Everywhere in the corridors they met armed men hurrying to their stations. Robots laden with rations, blankets and pieces of clothing stepped into the antigrav lifts and dropped down to the middle deck.

"You see," said the doctor as they waited for the lift to be free, "we don't have any intention of ignoring you down here and letting you go to your ruin. You must understand that anarchy would mean death to us all."

Secretly, Ceshal had to agree with him but his pride refused to allow him to show it. Reluctantly, he nodded. "One day you'll be happy to call upon our help. We know how to live better than you who were born on the ship and have never before seen a planet. You'll need us when there's a civilization to be built and contact to be made with the Imperium."

"Imperium! Who knows if it still exists? Wouldn't it have shown us some concern by this time?"

Ceshal did not answer. That was just the point that had already given him enough problems. Something must not be altogether in order with the Imperium; otherwise the fact of the severed communications was inexplicable. It must have happened when the robots took over. And the Imperium had tolerated it.

The lift became free and they sank down into the depths towards the centre of the ship. The posted guards, heavily armed, let them pass by. A light portable cannon had been mounted in front of the hatch. The mouth was trained towards the closed door.

M-3 stopped. "We'll open the door, Ceshal. You'll order your people to step back and let you in. If even one member of the crowd takes a step in our direction, he'll be killed instantly. We are forced to do this, Ceshal, if we don't all want to die. Now, are you ready?"

Ceshal looked the doctor in the eye. "You consider us as primitive as you are," he said. "Do you really think it would be so bad if we became masters of the ship again?"

M-3 saw the gaze of the other man trained on him, so his answer did not quite completely reflect his convictions. "You would only cause turmoil. Our present generation is more moderate and perhaps more primitive than yours is, but we will certainly act more than you. Besides, we don't have any choice. Now go."

He waved to the two guards next to the door.

The hatch could be manually operated. Only in case of an alarm did the remote control system go into effect and the hatch became operable by the commander.

A crack grew visible.

But only for a second. Then the crack became a wide opening, ripped apart by two or three thousand naked sleepers.

"Stop!" cried Ceshal, shocked, raising his arms. "Stay there!"

But his words were lost in the cries of the desperate Arkonides pushed ahead by a still unseen mass of people. M3 could see that his men could hardly stand on the floor; they were no longer in control of their movements. But they were in the forefront and so the first targets of the cannon crew.

Not even M-3 could prevent the battle.

Nude figures leaped through the energy fire and the rising smoke, throwing themselves, scorning death, upon the armed guards and pushing them down by dint of sheer numbers.

Ceshal saw his only chance. He turned around and went with the current against the ship's crew, which turned and fled in panic-stricken fear. He himself was the one who beat M-3 down with his bare fist and watched him disappear under the trampling feet of the naked sleepers. His blanket had long since fallen off his shoulders. Unclad like all of the others, he fought his way to freedom.

But the alarm was already sounding throughout the ship.

The next bulkhead sealed itself automatically.

But the first generation had considerably enlarged its territory. An additional section of the sphere's shell belonged to them.

Commodore Ceshal was sighing in relief when he suddenly saw Alos. "Cyberneticist Alos—over here!" He waited until Alos had come up to him. "Do you know your way from here? Can we reach any essential parts of the ship without having to go through any other hatches?"

The Cyberneticist lowered his hand—which held an iron bar. "The air renewal, Commodore. Is it important enough for your purposes?"

"Yes," said Ceshal, no longer repressing the triumphant gleam in his eyes. "The air renewal system is important enough. With that, the first generation is again in control of the ship."

And he revealed his battle plan to Alos.

4/ A SHIFT OF COMMAND ON THE SHIP OF ANCESTORS

The white star on the vidscreen had grown larger.

With the help of O-1 and O-2, the navigation officer had made her calculations and reached the unsettling conclusion that in a few days the ship would be captured by the enormous gravitational field of the star.

However, the engines were defective. They no longer reacted. That meant the ship would not stop until it fell into the star and vaporized.

The technicians laboured unceasingly in the engine rooms, trying for at least a change in course. Their efforts remained without success. The ship proceeded undisturbed along its path, inexorably approaching its destruction. The long trip was threatening to have an abrupt and fearful ending.

In the midst of this hopelessness came another piece of bad news: the air in the ship was getting worse and no longer renewing itself.

C-1 called the technicians together for a conference in the control room and learned that the air renewal system lay in the section occupied by the awakened sleepers. That made the situation clear.

The commander called the 'rebels' over the intercom, which was still functioning perfectly. When the vidscreen lit up, he recognized Ceshal in the company of other men dressed in blankets and work uniforms. Without exception they were armed.

"Ah, the commander! Our manner of warfare is no longer a secret, it seems. Do you have a suggestion for us?"

C-1 ignored the mockery. He spoke earnestly. "We'll only have 10 more days for our war, I fear.

We're falling into a white star. The engines have failed. They must have been damaged in the transition—the same transition that woke you. My suggestion is that we make peace."

Ceshal smiled coldly. "You speak of peace, Commander, and seal us off in the innermost part of the ship. We hardly have room now and only half of us have awakened. When the rest come out of the cold chamber there will be a catastrophe. Open all the hatches to the outer regions or we'll let you choke to death."

C-1 shook his head. He raised a piece of paper on which a few numbers were written. "You surely have a mathematician there who can verify my calculations. If I open up the ship and if all the sleepers awake, we'll be lost. If we ration the food on hand it'll last for a week. But we won't reach the nearest planet for at least three weeks even if the engines are repaired. Therefore, I make the following suggestion: close the freezing chamber! Let no one else outside! We must sacrifice those who are still sleeping to survive ourselves."

Ceshal looked at C-1, shocked. Then he shook his head. "Your suggestion is refused, Commander. We'd rather let you suffocate than sacrifice 50,000 Arkonides. I admit that it will be crowded in the ship but not so crowded that we'll trample ourselves to death. There is enough room for all of us in the meeting rooms, storerooms, hangars and corridors. The food rations will last until the landing if we divide them and direct all available energy into the synthetic food-producing equipment. If we work together, Commander, it's possible that we'll all come out of this. In any event, I'm putting forward one main condition: you will personally reinstall me in my former office, which is still rightfully mine. I am commodore of this ship."

C-1 tried to take a deep breath but he nearly choked on it. He suddenly noticed how bad the air had grown. A few more hours now... maybe.

"We'll give you food—in return for air to breathe!"

Ceshal smiled coldly and shook his head. "No conditions, Commander! If anyone will be setting them forth, we will! Air is more important than food; we can hold out longer than you can. When you've suffocated, we'll reopen the ventilators. We too have the necessary knowledge and scientists to repair the engines. Well...?"

C-1 looked away from the screen and glanced around the control room. He met faces that were utterly at a loss. Even the always-so-clever and self-confident O-1 seemed to have exhausted his wits. He simply shrugged.

The commander turned back to the vidscreen. "Alright, Ceshal, I'm going to have the hatches opened. Come with some technicians to the control room. We can discuss everything here calmly. See to it that your people behave themselves and don't plunder the supply rooms. Otherwise they'll be shot immediately."

"You should not forget that we have no weapons of our own, Commander." C-1 was secretly surprised that Ceshal still called him 'commander' but since he knew no other name for him, he had no choice. "But have no fear. I have some capable officers in the first generation. They'll arrange for calm and order. But also for an effective counterattack if one is necessary."

"The rest we'll leave to Fate," said C-1, gesturing to his first officer. "We will now open the main hatch. Have the air system put back into operation at once. And come quickly to the control room. We don't have much time."

The various ship's cameras, vidscreens and incoming intercom reports kept C-1 informed as to what was going on aboard the ship. The 10,000-person crew watched the peaceful invasion of naked people in helpless dismay but their feeling of desperation grew as the human stream pouring from the hatch simply did not end. The intruders lost themselves in the endless corridors of the inner ship, of course, but their numbers were constantly being replaced.

Officers of both parties saw to order. Those on one side could be recognized by their uniforms, those on the other by their blankets.

Commodore Ceshal scientist Ekral, technician Tunuter and Cyberneticist Alos were brought to the control room by a liaison officer. On the way they met armed troops sent to keep order, their grim faces boding nothing good.

Somewhere the first energy weapons discharged hissingly.

"It's starting already," said the officer apprehensively. "I hope we can get to the control room in time. I can't..."

They never learned what he could not do.

Up ahead, a new troop of swiftly assembled militia came around the corner of the corridor. When the leader spotted the four men wearing blankets, he brought up his gun. Perhaps he thought the officer in the middle was a prisoner of the ancestors.

"Halt!"

Commodore Ceshal stretched his hand out towards them.

The five soldiers were so surprised by the gesture that only one of them was able to fire his gun. It was an imprecise, unaimed shot, striking the officer who was to bring Ceshal and his men to the control room.

They hurried over the dead body as fast as they could to the nearest lift. It would not be good for anyone to find them there. No one would believe it was self-defence. They would be blamed even for the death of the liaison officer.

They knew the ship, for it only seemed a few days to them since the robots took over and put them into deepsleep. And yet it must have been thousands of years, thousands of years in which their descendants had been fruitful and multiplied.

When they reached the vicinity of the control room they heard the ventilators in the hall ceiling sucking up the bad air. It was high time because one could now hardly breathe. Cool, fresh air streamed in from the shafts. It brought life and confidence.

Two administration officers met Ceshal and his three companions before they reached the entrance of the control room and demanded their weapons.

Ekral's expression showed dark disapproval. He held his energy pistol in the hand hanging loosely at his side but no one could tell how quickly he might raise it.

Ceshal shook his head. "We aren't your prisoners, lieutenant. Your commander has promised us

complete freedom of movement. Anyway, any resistance against this ship's commander will soon be strictly punished—just like in the old days. Let us through Lieutenant!"

Ceshal's voice rang with the sound of one accustomed to giving orders—the voice of the old Arkonides—and besides, it was domineering and arrogant. The lieutenant involuntarily stepped back one or two paces and let his own gun sink.

Alos took advantage of the opportunity. He stepped quickly forward and pushed his way between the two lieutenants. Ceshal stepped over, followed by Tunuter. Ekral held the mouth of his gun under the surprised men's noses.

"Gentlemen!" he began with a stern voice. "If you hold us up, you will be making yourselves guilty of insubordination to your superior officers. You had best accustom yourselves as quickly as you can to the changed situation aboard this ship, which will fall into a sun unless we do something about it."

Meanwhile, Ceshal had reached the control room. He opened the door and stepped in. The others followed him.

C-1, standing in front of the controls, looked up at them.

"We have come," said Ceshal with dignity, "to take over command of the ship. I hope that you have informed your men of the change, Commander."

C-1 did not flinch. "I'm afraid, Ceshal, that a change in command will not affect the situation. You can consider yourself Commodore again if you like, as far as I'm concerned. I have nothing against it."

Ceshal looked around without understanding. He stared into the expressionless eyes of some officers. Over in the corner the blank screen of the intercom seemed like a piece of fog.

He suddenly felt cold. "What happened?" he asked. "Why is it that you suddenly don't care? Surely you don't want to..."

"We've lost control over the crew, Ceshal. The officers are mutinying. The intercom connections have been broken off. Some of the men I sent in to scout around and report back to me were murdered. Open warfare has broken out between the awakened sleepers and the present-day crew. No one is following my orders any longer." C-1 smiled bitterly and made a gesture of resignation. "Commodore Ceshal don't you also think that in these special circumstances it doesn't mean anything who commands the ship?"

Ceshal shook his head slowly. "No, I don't think so. On the contrary! It seems to me of utmost importance that I take over the command. We'll bring an end to the war in the ship, and that as fast as possible. Ekral, you're a scientist—can you think of some way to make the crew docile but still able to work? Or how to deal with the robots? That's more Alos' job. In any case, the engines have to be looked over."

C-1 stepped back somewhat as Ceshal began his work without much ceremony or delay. The difference between the millennia became apparent. Ceshal was a young, active man from one of the first ruling families of Old Arkon. The subsequent degeneration had passed over him as it—had passed over all the other members of the first generation. And that was a situation that was already making itself throughout the ship.

The 5,000 men and woman who had once seen the sun of Arkon standing in the sky, went into action. They took over all the important positions of the ship and manned them with trustworthy officers. The clothing depots were cleaned out and their contents distributed. The food supplies were enough for the first hot meal. Even while it was being passed out, production of more food was in full swing once again. The robots obeyed the new rulers.

In other parts of the ship, members of the first and last generations encountered each other and launched into bitter battles. No one wanted to even listen to the arguments of the other side. Contact with the leadership level had been lost on both sides, but while C-1's men became anarchists, Ceshal's subordinates acted in accordance with discipline and tradition.

However, hunger among them was stronger than any tradition.

The women had remained in the middle deck. They received food and clothing through the hatch but the supply line was choked by the press of new awakees coming out of the ice-sphere. Each of the new arrivals could not be individually informed of the situation. There developed differences of opinion and constant friction.

In the following days, Alos was able to assemble a troop of seven heavily armed robots and program them for his own purposes. He'd had to 'catch' and overcome each of them individually since they did not obey him. Now, however, with electronically delivered orders and programmed patterns of operation, they formed a group of invaluable allies.

Protectively surrounded by this fighting squad, Ekral, Tunuter and Alos made their way towards the engine room where the mechanical defect had to be found. If they could find it in time, it might be possible to save the ship. And that meant everyone on board as well.

If not...

More than once their weapons went into action.

A group of hysterically shouting workers turned a corner and attacked the robots with bared knives, hatchets and metal scrapers. Ekral tried to warn them but his efforts were in vain. Besides, the robots went into action automatically.

The second attack was made by naked men in whose eyes the first glimmers of insanity were beginning to shine. They did not listen to warnings shouted at them and were not frightened away by the robots' threatening weapons.

Alos cursed the ship and his mission and wished only that he could die as soon as possible so that he would not have to kill anyone else.

But—if he gave out now, many more would have to die. Everyone!

He went along behind the others.

He came around the corner of the corridor in time to see 6 or 7 rag-clad figures fleeing.

They had left something behind.

Alos saw Ekral and Tunuter staring at it with wide eyes.

It was the naked body of a man.

Or rather, what was left of it.

5/ PUCKY & RAS TAKE CHARGE

The ship's calendar showed 09/29/2044. Earth-time: 16:57 hours.

Commander Kyser narrowed his eyes as the automatic inscriber began to tick. The gravity meter fit up, announcing that it had registered a change in the gravitational field. The vidscreen flickered uneasily.

Nothing changed on the front vidscreen. The white dwarf star shone in ice-cold beauty in the centre of the screen and did not seem to move. Its gravitational field was incredibly enormous and tore fiercely at the light cruiser's stabilizing field.

"Solid matter of slight mass off the starboard bow," said Lt. Lunddorf from the navigation section. "A small moon—or the ship."

"Hopefully the ship," commented Kyser. While it would be an unbelievable piece of luck if he of all people were to find the missing Arkonide Ship of Ancestors, he would be able to attribute a part of the success to his crew—and himself. "Track it!"

Ten minutes later there was no more doubt: they had found the Arkonide ship.

It fell powerlessly and with increasing speed directly towards the white sun, in whose gravity field it had already been caught. Swift calculations showed that it would vaporize in the flaming atmosphere of the hot dwarf in exactly 3 days and 14 hours.

Commander Kyser had the position data fed into the navigational positronicon's memory banks and went into the com centre. Half an hour went by before Terrania came through Marshall Freyt himself was at the other end.

"We've found the ship, sir. What are your orders?"

"Transmit the exact data and then wait."

While Kyser sent on the positional information, Freyt got in touch with Rhodan. Everything ran like clockwork and not a second was wasted. Even while the last instructions were crossing the huge distance of nearly 20,000 light-years, the *Drusus* was being made ready for takeoff. Rhodan sped towards the spaceport in his turbo-auto and Bell and Pucky rather abruptly ended their brief vacation in the sun. They had no time for vehicular transport. The mousebeaver took Bell by the hand and teleported with him directly into the control room of the *Drusus*, where Col. Sikerman was already sitting at the Right controls and waiting for the results of the position calculations.

Rhodan came in five minutes later. He ignored Pucky's triumphant grin and turned directly to Sikerman.

"Have all the mutants ordered on board arrived yet?"

"Yes sir. Ready for takeoff!"

"Good—then take off! You'll receive the final data soon."

That was all.

The engines roared into life and the ship shot up into the sky. The Earth sank behind them into a blue-green star. Then the first transition was made.

Rhodan made his report in the meantime. "According to what we know, the Ship of Ancestors is drifting without any pilot. I presume that the hyperspring damaged the engines. It's falling helplessly into a white dwarf star with a strong gravitational field. We must try to capture the ship with the tractor beams and pull it into a new orbit. Whether we'll succeed is another question. We only have a few hours."

Relays clicked in the positronicon.

"Should I try to make contact beforehand with my cruiser?" asked Commander Lund eagerly. "You said I'd be able to do it because the shape of my ship is—"

"We don't have time for experiments," Rhodan interrupted more curtly than he intended. "I'm afraid we'll have to put the teleporters into the field. We don't dare lose a second."

He did not suspect how right he was.

The second spring was precise enough.

When the Einstein Universe rematerialised before their eyes, a small, luminous sphere stood off to the side—the light cruiser commanded by Kyser. Precisely in the direction of flight flamed the white sun which was tagged in the star catalogues with only a number and had no actual name. To the right was a phantom-like shadow—gigantic and round.

"I've tried to make radio contact," reported Commander Kyser, "but no answer. Either they don't want to answer or their equipment isn't working."

"The latter is probable," Rhodan replied. "When the engines fail, the communications equipment will be damaged as well. Remain at your present position. We'll be sending Pucky and Ras Tschubai to the Arkonides first. Later you can help us with an antigrav field. We'll need it."

Ras Tschubai came into the control room. The African teleporter was one of the founding members of the Mutant Corps. Together with Pucky he had already experienced many dangerous adventures. He was familiar with the Ship of Ancestors from the descriptions of the mousebeaver and was eager to see the ship at first hand. Had he known what surprises were waiting for them, he would have certainly been less enthusiastic about the mission.

"You two will spring from here," Rhodan told them. "Find out if the engines are totally out of commission or if at least some of the equatorial rim motors can be started up. I'm afraid the gravity field of that star there is too strong. We'll need reinforcement or else we'll never bring this off. If any complications develop, spring back here at once and report. Is everything clear?"

The two mutants nodded. They took each other by the hand so as not to be separated during the dematerialisation.

Then they disappeared in a violent shimmering of the air. The place where they had just been standing was empty.

Rhodan turned back to the vidscreen and waited.

* * * *

The first thing Pucky could see was a group of 6 or 7 scantily clad women. They were attacking a man in uniform. When he no longer resisted, they fell upon him and stripped him of all his clothing except for his underwear. Without paying any further attention to their victim, they divided the booty and used it to cover their bareness.

"Why are they doing that?" whispered Ras, shaken. "Do you understand it?"

"Not completely, Ras. But evidently they're concerned only about the clothes and not about the man. No wonder—he's anything but pretty in his underpants." Pucky chuckled to himself, considering his observation a well-told joke. He still had no idea how quickly his laughter would die.

The women spotted Ras before he could answer.

"There's another one!" cried one of the women in surprise. "And what kind of animal is that next to him?"

"He'll roast nicely, I think!" exclaimed another and rushed toward the mousebeaver with a raised steel bar. "I saw him first...!"

Pucky had no desire to be guest of honour at a mousebeaver banquet. He brought his telekinetic abilities into play and lifted the would-be Diana the Huntress straight up into the air. The screaming Arkonide woman floated along the ceiling to the next bend in the corridor then disappeared around the corner. A muffled fall could be heard when Pucky let her go.

Meanwhile Ras had taken the iron rod from the other attacker. "What kind of madhouse is this?" Ras shouted angrily at the startled women. "Would you tell me what's going on here?"

But Pucky had already examined the thought-content of the still-wavering women and learned some things that nearly took his breath away. He whirled on his own axis and clutched the Afroterranian's arm.

"The ancestors have awakened, Ras! There's hardly enough room for them on the ship. Not enough clothes for all of them! No food! There have already been cases of cannibalism. Some people have barricaded themselves in the food production centres and are defending them bitterly. Glord, Ras, what kind of hell have we stumbled into?"

"Not to mention the fact the ship is about to fall into the sun if something doesn't happen soon. Now, how could all this have come about?"

"The automatic waking impulses must have been triggered by the transition. We have to find the commander. Well spring to the control room; I know where it is."

The ship was of the same class as the *Drusus*. It was not hard for Pucky to orient himself. The first spring brought him into the command section of the spacesphere. Ras materialized next to him.

The bewildered officer—a lieutenant—was much too slow. Before he could raise his beamer, Ras had disarmed him. There was a second man present in the corridor leading to the control room. He too was armed and seemed uncertain what to think of the two ghosts that had appeared from nowhere.

"We wish to speak, to the commander," Ras told him, playing with the commandeered energy pistol without pointing it directly at the man. "Lead us to him."

Meanwhile the lieutenant had gotten hold of himself. "Who are you? Where do you come from?"

"There'll be time for that later, little man," Pucky said to the lieutenant, who was twice as big as he was. "Are you going to take us to the commander or aren't you?"

"We have been ordered not to allow anyone to..."

"Save yourself the rest," growled Pucky in irritation. "I know the way."

He turned the job of watching the rear to his friend Ras and waddled along the corridor, straight for the control room door. While doing so, he sounded out the thought-impulses of the Arkonides on the other side of the wall.

The commander was not alone. With him were some of the ancestors. The awakened sleepers and the men of the present generation were not enemies everywhere.

Pucky opened the door by tripping the electronic lock. He entered the control room together with Ras and suddenly found himself looking at a rather large number of Arkonides who broke off their discussion upon seeing him and stared at him as though he were an apparition.

Pucky was not bothered by it. After all, it wasn't every day that one ran into a mousebeaver. He wore the uniform made especially for him with its narrow gunbelt but it was clear from the first glance that he was not human. He was too small for that. His broad beavertail, which he generally used as a support, slid along the floor.

"Hello, friends," said Pucky, bowing in the direction of the one man he recognized. "Here we are. Didn't I promise you that I would come back when I could, C-1? Of course I couldn't know you'd decide to try out the hyperdrive in the meantime..."

C-1 had recovered from his surprise. He stepped forward and bent down to the mousebeaver. "You've kept your promise! You freed us from the rule of the robots once but I'm afraid you won't be able to help us this time. The ancestors..."

"...are awake. I know. They're running around all over the ship and pulling the crew's pants down. Nice way to go! But what's much worse is this: the ship's falling into a sun, C-1! If you don't do anything, three more days and you've had it. What's wrong with the engines? Don't they work?"

"Our technicians have been at work unceasingly on them but so far without success. Besides, we're impeded in our work. All hell is loose in the ship. Bands of robbers attack our people and loot them of everything they have. There isn't any more order. The stronger take all."

Pucky looked at C-1 no longer, turning his attention to another man who had stepped forward and was following the conversation with evident interest.

"Who are you?"

Commodore Ceshal gave a start, as though bitten by a snake. "I am Commodore Ceshal of the first generation. I have taken over the command of the Ship of Ancestors, as is my right. And who are you? Where do you come from? Where have you been hiding till now? How is it that you speak my language?"

Pucky looked at Ceshal sourly. "Have I walked in on a quiz show? Well, if I have, *I'll* ask the questions! First generation, eh? Got up a little early, didn't you?"

Ceshal gasped for breath but Pucky cut him off before he had a chance to speak.

"I already know what you want to say—it's written all over your face. Don't worry. I won't try to take your job away from you and I'll show you proper respect when I have time for it. But now *Idon't* have the time! We're going to put a tractor beam on your ship and tow it out of the sun's field of attraction. My master wants me to tell you that when that takes place, you are to briefly fire your engines in the direction opposite your current flight path. Have I made myself clear?"

"The engines are not yet functioning," C-1 put in.

For his part, Ceshal did not seem ready to lend his help without knowing some more. "Do you come from a planet in the Arkonide Imperium?" he asked, looking down at Pucky. "You don't show the necessary humility, or have conditions changed so drastically in the time that has gone by?"

"Boy, have they!" exclaimed Pucky with malicious delight. "You won't believe your eyes! However, I can reassure you, Ceshal. We come from Terra, the main planet of another stellar empire which didn't exist in your time. Arkon and Terra are friends; that's why we've come to help you."

"Terra?"

"You'll get used to it," Pucky prophesised, "just as you will to the fact that Ras and I are teleporters. Well—what about it? Do you want to be helped or don't you?"

Ceshal seemed to have reached a decision. "What can we do? My best technicians are closed off in the engine room. They have some robots with them, yes, but they're being attacked constantly and can hardly do any work. They took a supply of food with them which people are trying to take away from them. In this ship only hunger rules."

I know, but nothing can be done about it. If no new problems pop up and everything comes off like it should, then this ship will soon land on some planet. Perhaps even on one of Arkon's planets. But I need support. The engines have to work at least partly or otherwise we won't be able to pull you out of the sun's range."

C-1 looked at Ceshal. "Why do you hesitate, Ceshal? You're commander of the ship now, but this little

creature standing in front of you once helped us to defeat the robots. He is our friend. Your hesitation insults him."

"That isn't it," Ceshal replied slowly. "But you know as well as I who the actual master of the ship is. Neither you nor I—but chaos, hunger, war, force. We don't even have a regular intercom connection with Ekral, Alos and Tunuter. Now and then a messenger fights his way through. That is all."

"That's enough," said Pucky at once. "I'm a teleporter and I'll spring to the room the technicians are holed up in if you'll describe it to me. Ras will stay here in the meantime."

"Don't you think it would be better to let Rhodan know what's going on here?" Ras Tschubai looked worried. "He should know about it."

Pucky decided instantly. "Good point, Ras. You spring to the *Drusus* and report. I'll go see about the technicians. We'll meet back here in the control room. Tell Reggie 'hi' for me when you relate the story about the women to him."

Ras grinned. "He'll be surprised," he said and dematerialised after concentrating for a second.

Pucky remained behind, alone. "And now for the engine room, Ceshal. Show me where it is on the ship's chart. It would be best if someone came with me so that I don't have to go into long explanations. We don't have a minute to lose."

He did not realize that in reality they did not even have *asecond* to lose.

6/ ARKON'S LAST HOPE

No one had a complete overview and no one knew what exactly was happening in the ship. Everyone fought against everyone else; it was a war of all against all. And a *warfor* all.

At first the fighting was for pieces of clothing and blankets. Then hunger was added to that. And finally room was fought for, for every square meter of floor on which one could lie down and rest.

In the machinery section of the gigantic spacesphere, Alos had organized the resistance and had arranged for all entrance hatches to be hermetically sealed. The engine room proper was a circular room with innumerable machines and control panels. Heavy banks of converters formed passageways and separated spaces—and a huge number of hiding places.

Two or three dozen awakened sleepers and members of the original crew as well succeeded in finding refuge in the machine room. They had barricaded themselves in 3 or 4 places with their looted food and weapons and allowed no one to cross an arbitrarily designated line.

As long as they did not interfere with the work, Alos left them alone. He felt responsible for the safety of the two scientists, Ekral and Tunuter, and it was his concern that they repaired the engines so that the ship would not fall into the sun.

The seven robots formed a semi-circle around the assisting technicians that Ekral had chosen. Each of the robots was armed and would obey only Alos.

"I can guarantee that at least three of the rim motors will function again," Ekral was just then saying to his colleague, Tunuter. "Unfortunately, that is hardly enough to change our course, We have to get at least three more motors into operation. Then we might possibly succeed in shooting on past the sun into space. By the time we start to fall back, we'll have the other motors going."

I don't know if our efforts are worth it," Tunuter answered doubtfully. "Out there in the ship, a civilization is collapsing. A culture millenniums old is being overrun by primitivism. What will we save if we save this ship?"

"For the time being, us," replied Ekral practically. He was now removing the housing of a converter. "What will happen then we'll find out soon enough. In any event, I can't sit by idly and wait for the end."

Tunuter was about to answer but a terrific explosion interrupted him. Debris whizzed through the hall, ricocheting with ugly-sounding noises. Miraculously, no one was injured.

At first Alos thought that one of the machines had blown up but the triumphant howl of a mob of half-wild Arkonides showed him his mistake. The attackers leaped through the newly-created hole into the engine room, swinging their weapons, for the most part pieces of broken furniture and iron bars.

Alos reached the robots in one leap and gave them the order for defence. Ekral and his staff sought cover behind several blocks of machines. They were unarmed and had to depend on Alos.

The Arkonides already in the room automatically took the part of the scientists and began to shoot from all directions at the intruders. Conditions being as uncertain as they were, each man carried his own food—or as much of it as he had around with him. So when someone was killed, the survivors fell on him at once and began stripping him of his property. When that happened, even allies became bitter enemies.

Only the robots were unaware of the concern for food and kept strictly to their orders by shooting at the intruders, not even sparing the looters.

Pucky popped up right in the middle of the battle.

He suddenly materialized with O-1 behind the robots and a little to one side and recognized Alos by his thought impulses. Before the Cyberneticist could aim his gun at the strange creature that had so mysteriously appeared from nowhere, Pucky spoke up. "You're Alos —Ceshal sent me! Don't shoot!"

Alos was so surprised to hear the animal—as he thought of it—speaking that he let his pistol sink. Then he became conscious of what it had said. "Ceshal—the Commodore?"

"Yeah—him! I'm supposed to help you."

Alos saw that the surviving intruders had fled and the robots had ceased fire. He sent two of them to the damaged wall with the order to let no one in. Only then did he find time to turn back to the mousebeaver. "Who are you? I've never seen you before."

"I come from another ship, one that Arkon sent. We'll pull you out of the sun's gravity field but our equipment can't do it alone. How many motors are working here?"

Ekral had come over. His alert and active mind saw the chance for salvation at once. He did not wonder very much at the who or why of the matter but only at the bow. "Three motors! Fired in the opposite direction, is that enough?"

Pucky nodded. "It's enough. When can you start 'em up?"

"Whenever you wish."

Alos came into the discussion. His curiosity was greater than his worry. "How did you get here? Is there a contact with another ship? You'll be stopped and possibly killed out in the corridors. I don't know..."

"I'm a teleporter," said Pucky, cutting off all discussion. "Could you turn on the motors in five minutes?"

"Yes—of course, Ekral replied. "Unfortunately, we have to work blindly, since we don't have any direct communication with the control room. The intercom was broken off. Is Ceshal informed?"

The scientist's terse manner pleased the mousebeaver. This was a man who preferred action to asking questions. "Everything's all set, then—in five minutes! See you later."

And before anyone could say anything, he had vanished. O-1 remained behind.

Alos was still staring at the empty spot while Ekral was already on his way to the control board. He checked over the controls and readied the three counter-thrust motors. Then he looked at the chronometer.

"Three more minutes, Alos. If the other ship is strong enough, we'll do it. But as far as I can tell from the instruments, the magnetic field of this small white sun is enormously large. If the distance between us and it gets much smaller, we'll be lost."

They waited in silence.

Somewhere between the metal blocks an injured man moaned. No one had time at the moment to care for him.

* * * *

Capt. Unista and a number of men and women from Ceshal's entourage had made their way into a remote section of the ship. He also belonged to the first generation and was firmly determined to prove it at any opportunity. First he made sure that he secured a gun. Then he made himself leader of the small group, stormed a food depot and then withdrew into the ship's weapon centre.

From here the ship's defences could be controlled.

Capt. Talasi, who was with him, understood something of communications technology. While he could not repair the intercom so that communication with the control room could be reestablished, at least some of the outside screens were functioning.

They froze when they saw the gigantic spacesphere slowly coming alongside. It was of the same construction type as their own ship but unmistakably of a newer design. Nor were the markings painted in Arkonide letters.

Capt. Unista nearly bit off the tip of his tongue. Was this the opportunity to show his courage and far-sightedness that he had been longing for?

"They want to capture us," he murmured, so lowly that only Capt. Talasi, standing next to him, could hear him. "We're helpless and they want to capture us."

"We can prevent it!" said Talasi. "We have the weapons to do it!" He spoke loudly enough that everyone could hear him. Exclamations of agreement sounded. Unista's last doubts sank in a flood of enthusiasm. While he was not a weapons specialist, a study of armaments was part of every officer's training. With the support of the others...

A second vidscreen showed a large white sun. It had to be standing rather close and seemed to be directly in the current path of the ship. The alien ship had pulled more closely alongside and seemed like an ominous curving wall.

And then a jolt went through the metal floor of the weapon centre.

Some of the women fell. The men stumbled and held onto each other. The jolt was not repeated but the gravity shifted. It seemed like everyone was being suddenly attracted by the left sidewall, as though the ship was describing a curve to the right without the antigrav equalizer being activated.

Capt. Unista pulled himself together. "A tractor beam! The aliens have seized us! It's high time we show them our weapons. To the guns, people! We'll open fire together so that the surprise will be all the greater."

Two or three minutes went by before all were at their posts.

Then Capt. Unista ordered: "Fire—in 10 seconds!"

* * * *

The attack came to Rhodan as a complete surprise.

Labouring under great difficulties, Col. Sikerman had succeeded in capturing the Ship of Ancestors with a tractor beam. Almost simultaneously Pucky materialized in the *Drusus* and announced that three Arkonide engine motors would fire in another minute. They would support the action of the *Drusus* and help it succeed.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the disastrous course of the Ship of Ancestors and the *Drusus* changed. Neither ship was now falling directly towards the brightly flaming sun but instead would shoot past to the right at a slight distance. The additional gravitational pull would prove useful to them.

All the reserves of energy aboard the *Drusus* flowed into the tractor beam. The rest was distributed

among the rearwards rim motors.

Rhodan stared at the wide frontal vidscreen. He saw the hull of the Ship of Ancestors directly before him and could make out every detail. A few pockmarks showed that the ship had been flying through space for a long time at a velocity below that of light; otherwise it would not have been possible for meteors to strike it.

And below the fine lines of hatch openings could be seen.

Hatch openings...?

When Rhodan realized it, it was almost too late.

Just above the equatorial rim, small, round openings suddenly appeared. Like the mouths of cannons.

Cannons—!

"Defence screen!" Rhodan shouted to the astonished Sikerman, who after an incredibly brief second of fright acted at once. His right hand flew over the controls and pulled a switch. Almost simultaneously the engines ceased to howl. The tractor beam, however, remained. Sikerman had instinctively done the right thing and shut down only the engines.

The defence screen went into operation—and not a second too soon.

The first energy bursts were already striking the outer edge of the screen and flowing away to one side. The masses of energy rolled away like coloured tears, to be hurled off by the acceleration which was still in effect. Then, however, only the three motors of the Ship of Ancestors were in evidence, slowing the two ships in a negative acceleration.

The Arkonides' fire hit squarely on the screen, concentrating at a single point in an effort to break through

But it was already too late for that.

"Thrice—damned fools!" Sikerman exclaimed angrily, wiping his damp forehead with the back of his hand. "They almost got us. Now why did they do that, the idiots? Do they want to roast themselves in the sun?"

Rhodan shrugged and turned to Pucky, a puzzled thoughtfulness in his eyes. "Now, what do you think about it? Which of your friends could that have been?"

"I'll soon find out," the mousebeaver replied. "I'll skin 'em alive for that! Just shooting at us like it was duck season! But I think that over in the ship out there the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing."

"Take care of, that," answered Rhodan tersely and precisely.

Pucky nodded, concentrated—and sprang.

* * * *

Alos and the scientists, who were very satisfied with their efforts, were horrified when Pucky told them of the attack. For as long as the defence field of the *Drusus* had to remain in operation, the engines could not be activated. To say nothing of a double hypertransition.

"Some madmen must have been able to occupy the weapons centre," Ekral concluded soberly. "Alos, this would be a task for you and your robots."

"And who would see to order *here*?"

"Where is the weapon centre?" asked Pucky as something else occurred to him. "Listen to me, Ekral—I have an idea. Why should we risk our lives just to pound some sense into some dumb donks? We'll leave them in the weapon centre and let them push the firing buttons all they like. Is it possible to cut off the energy supply from here? If I understand right, we have all the generators and converters under control from here..."

"Right!" Ekral understood at once what Pucky meant. "We'll cut off their ammunition."

"You bet," grinned Pucky happily, nodding to Alos. "You stay with Ekral and see that he can work without being disturbed. As soon as the cannon fire stops, the *Drusus* engines will come on again. In the meantime, try to repair the other motors. See you later."

He sprang back to the *Drusus*.

Rhodan was astonished to see the mousebeaver again. "What is it? They're still shooting at us and..."

"Not for long, Perry. Ekral's cutting off their power."

Rhodan looked at the vidscreen. The deadly energy was still striking the defence screen, making sure that the *Drusus* engines would be unable to function. The course of the two ships was once more nearing the white star in dangerous fashion.

"I've named it Magno," Rhodan suddenly murmured pointing to the star. "Magno—the great. We'll see if we're not stronger, though."

Col. Sikerman gave a start. "There...! They've stopped firing!"

"Told you they would," muttered Pucky. "You can depend on Ekral. You can turn the engines on again, Baldur."

The highly unmilitary form of address made Baldur Sikerman give a second start. He glanced at Rhodan questioningly. Then, when Rhodan nodded, he shut down the defence screen and directed the freed energy into the engines. With a sudden howling, the *Drusus* once more fought against the gravitational field of Magno.

Slowly, incredibly slowly, the white sun crawled toward the left side of the vidscreen.

"We should bring order to the ship over there," said Rhodan during the tense silence that followed. "Ras

has given me his report. If we wait long enough, they'll kill each other. Even if we make course for Arkon with a short transition, it might take days."

Sikerman did not turn around as he said: "The tele-transmitter!"

Rhodan did not blink an eyelid. "I was thinking of that myself. Pucky, what should we send?"

"Someone who sleeps commits no sins," squeaked Pucky dreamily.

Rhodan nodded. "We understand each other. I assume that the air renewal system aboard the Ship of Ancestors is identical with that of the *Drusus*, especially as to its location. We'll use the tele-transmitter to send the knockout gas into the air distribution system of the Ship of Ancestors." He stood up and rested his hand on Sikerman's shoulder. "Stay on course, Colonel. Away from Magno! No matter what happens." He looked down at the mousebeaver. "Let's go, Pucky. To the weapons arsenal."

"We'll be putting the little darlings to bed," Pucky piped up and waddled along behind Rhodan, who was already at the door. "But it would be good if I brought Ekral a gas mask beforehand. I'd feel better if he wasn't asleep during the show."

Five minutes later, Ras Tschubai appeared in the control room of the Ship of Ancestors and Pucky showed up in the midst of Ekral and his helpers. They both brought an ample supply of gas masks and explained to the astounded Arkonides what would happen.

"The ancestors woke up too soon, so they have to go back to sleep," Pucky stated flatly. "Those who sleep don't eat. Nor can they do anything stupid. Put the masks on and don't let it disturb your work. In exactly 10 minutes the sleep-inducing gas will penetrate all the rooms in the ship by way of the ventilator shafts. My master hopes that we'll be landing on Arkon's main world in 24 hours. Close to 10 transitions will be necessary for that. Try to repair the other motors. We might need them for reinforcement."

He did not wait for a reply; he simply dematerialised.

Meanwhile, Rhodan stood in the room in the *Drusus* in which the tele-transmitter had been installed. The glass containers had been brought in and had been so prepared that they would release their contents five seconds after rematerialising. Then the coördinates that had been calculated were programmed into the machine.

When Rhodan pulled the switch, the flasks vanished.

Instantly, they would be aboard the Ship of Ancestors.

Armed with a gas mask, Pucky haunted the overcrowded rooms and corridors of the spacesphere, convincing himself of the success of the operation. Everywhere lay Arkonides on the floor, to some extent neatly piled up. They were no longer cold nor hungry. For two days they would sleep. But then, when they awoke...

Better not think about it. Two days were a long time and had to suffice for making the awakening a happy surprise for the Arkonides.

Rhodan listened to Pucky's report and was about to breathe more easily when the intercom shrilled.

"Bell here! Rhodan wanted in the control room! Bell here! Attention! Rhodan wanted in the control

room..."

"Take me there!" said Rhodan.

Pucky took his arm and sprang. Bell was still standing at the intercom unit, giving his call. Sikerman was staring at the controls. His face was earnest.

"Very well, Bell. Here I am."

Bell whirled around and stared at Rhodan, shocked. When he saw Pucky, the light went on. He switched off the intercom.

"The positronicon has just finished its calculations, sir," said Sikerman. "I'm sorry, but we won't be able to attempt any hypertransitions. The mass of the two ships is too much. We would be caught in fifth-dimensional hyperspace. What that would mean, sir, I don't have to tell you."

No, Sikerman really did not have to.

Fifth dimensional space—hyperspace. There was no way out of it once it had caught something firmly. Perhaps one would not even sense his own existence any longer, for neither time nor matter existed there. One would simply 'stay there'.

"Well, continue the towing, Colonel. The technicians in the Ship of Ancestors will shortly set more engine motors into operation for reinforcement. Kyser and his cruiser will help, too. That way we'll manage to escape the gravitational field of Magno. Everything else..." He grew silent.

Pucky nodded. "Yeah, that would be best, chief."

He had once again read Rhodan's thoughts, much to Bell's dismay. "What's the best?"

"Informing Atlan," Rhodan told his friend. "I'll do that myself."

He went over to the com centre and made a connection to Arkon over the hypercom. It took nearly an hour.

Meanwhile, Magno had wandered off the screen to one side. Three stern engines of the Ship of Ancestors had been set into operation and were reinforcing the *Drusus*. The braking front engines had been shut down. Now they would have only hindered the flight.

Pucky had just returned from an inspection spring and was reporting that everything was going according to plan on the great emigrants' ship when Lt. Stern announced the connection with Arkon.

Atlan looked down at Rhodan from the vidscreen. "I hope you have only good things to report, Perry. I'm almost afraid of what you might have to tell me."

"We've found the ship, Atlan," Rhodan reassured him, "but the sleepers are awake. The situation on board is simply unbelievable. We were able to restore order with knockout gas. Now they're asleep again. Some technicians were given masks so their work would not be interrupted. Unfortunately, the hyperdrive has been damaged. Some motors are working. We were able to pull the ship out of the gravity field of a small, heavy star. That's the situation now."

Atlan's relief was quite evident. "The ship is saved! Thank you. And you can't bring it to Arkon?"

"Impossible!"

"What should I do? Can't you have the sleepers brought on board the *Drusus*?"

"More than 100,000 Arkonides? That's just as impossible, Atlan. You have to send me some transports. I'll give you the position of the white dwarf. Then we'll load them aboard the transports. By the time the sleepers awake again, they could be on Arkon. That's the only possibility."

Atlan considered for only a moment, then agreed. "Very well. I'll send you five ships. That should be enough."

"The leadership staff of the ancestors' ship has gas masks. I'll have Commodore Ceshal and his officers brought aboard the *Drusus*."

A thoughtful expression crossed Atlan's face. "Ceshal...? If I only knew in what connection I've heard that name before. It must have been when we were defending Atlantis against the invaders. An expedition...? I don't know any longer..."

"You will have a very interesting conversation with Ceshal," Rhodan predicted with a smile. "You're both about the same age. With this the old rulers of Arkon will be back in power. Is it really only a matter of chance?"

"In any case—assuming it was planned, the originator of the plan was a genius. But his name must have long been forgotten"

"Machines don't forget, Atlan. Perhaps the Robot Brain can tell you. Anyway, you now have tens of thousands of undegenerate Arkonides at your disposal. Of the oldest blood, like yours, Atlan."

Then Rhodan told him the position of Magno.

Later, Rhodan, Bell, Ras Tschubai and Pucky went on board the Ship of Ancestors. The gas had dissipated and they no longer needed gas masks. Everywhere lay sleepers, looking as though exhaustion had suddenly surprised them. It was unbelievable how much space was now suddenly available.

When the control room door opened and Commodore Ceshal walked in to meet Rhodan, surprise showed in the features of the 'old' young Arkonide. He suppressed his curiosity and extended his hand to the Terran. Rhodan shook it.

The resemblance this being bore to Atlan was unmistakable. The Arkonides must truly have been a magnificent people—noble, brave, but also a bit arrogant.

"I believe," said Ceshal after greeting Bell, "that we owe you our lives. Without your help we would have been lost."

"We did it for our friend, Gonozal VIII, the Emperor of Arkon," answered Rhodan. "He has already sent some transporters to pick you up. Your ship must be given a general overhaul. It is no longer fit for a flight to Arkon. May I invite you to come with me? You'll be flying with me at the wish of the Emperor. We'll also take Ekral and his men along."

Ceshal bowed slightly to Rhodan. "Your wish is my command," he said politely. "Especially when at the same time it's also the wish of the Emperor." His forehead suddenly wrinkled. "What is he now called...?"

"Gonzal VIII."

Commodore Ceshal gave his officers a strange glance, then commented: The Gonzals are one of the best-known families on Arkon. So they haven't died out in the course of millenniums but have maintained themselves, That is astounding, after what I've learned. We were underway for 10,000 years..."

Rhodan did not explain any further about Atlan and his origin. The future would clear that up—if there was anything at all to be cleared up. It was not improbable that a Gonzal was around when Ceshal took off 10,000 years before. Possibly one of Atlan's many relatives.

They picked up Ekral, Tunuter and Alos.

"I think we would have been able to make the ship spaceworthy again if we'd had the time," the scientist said, not without pride. "We would have been able to repair even the hyperdrive, although I'm afraid we were lacking some important spare parts."

"The future has great things in store for you," Rhodan told him, smiling. "Arkon needs scientists and technicians like you. It needs active and dynamic leaders, The Imperium withstood a dangerous crisis but now it again has an Emperor. He awaits Arkonides who will help him defend the realm against its enemies."

Ekral bowed to Rhodan, who could not shake himself of a strange feeling. They, the proud Arkonides, who were at the height of their power when mankind was still living in caves, were showing him, a Terran, their respect. Their humility showed their true greatness.

A shrill buzzing emanated from Rhodan's wrist.

Sikerman!

Rhodan switched on the wristor. "What is it, Colonel?"

"We're out, sir! I'm towing the Ship of Ancestors at only half power. Should we link up the main hatches of the two ships?"

"I'd be thankful to you if you did. Let me know when you've done it."

The Arkonides had not understood a word, for Rhodan and Sikerman had spoken English. Somewhat disconcerted, Ceshal spoke. "The robots took away our wrist communicators way back then. It was the hour of our greatest humiliation. Fortunately, they changed nothing about the original plan but they gave it a different purpose."

"Yes, we know that now. They wanted to land on an inhabitable planet and build up a robot civilization. They would have succeeded, I think. Men would have been slaves and after awhile would not have known that things were once different. It was fortunate that their plan failed."

They walked through various corridors and finally reached the hatch entrance. While they waited, standing around in small groups, Pucky rummaged through the adjoining room. It seemed to him that he

had picked up a familiar thought impulse. Somewhat distorted, admittedly. It probably came from one of the sleepers, who would soon awake. But somehow...

In any case, Pucky told himself, I've met the man once before. He took another mental sounding and sprang. Thirty or 40 meters away he materialized in a pressure chamber. He did not know what purpose the room served but he saw at once why the sleeper in the little room did not sleep as deeply as the others.

The Arkonide was naked. The blanket he had used to cover himself had fallen away. In the room stood a row of pressurized tanks filled with liquid air. Pucky looked up. Naturally there was the usual ventilator shaft here, too, but the Arkonide must have grown suspicious in time. He had still had the strength and presence of mind to open one of the tanks. The sleeping gas had been accordingly thinned out.

Now the restless sleeper turned over on his other side.

Pucky stared into the strange face. No, he had never seen the man before in his life but he knew the thought impulses. It was possible only to a practiced telepath to catalogue thought impulses. Each person thought in a very definite pattern which could be recognized. Pucky compared it to fingerprints, although the analogy was not perfect.

The Arkonide awoke and began to think more clearly.

In the same moment Pucky realized who he was.

Now he knew where he had sensed the thought pattern before. He had sensed it only once before, in a moment of uttermost danger for the Arkonide—at the time when T-39 believed the robots were going to throw him into the atomic converter.

Technician T-39 sat up and saw Pucky. His first thought was to defend himself from the attacker but then he saw that no one was trying to attack him. But the strange being remained. It was no hallucination.

"Who are you?" he asked, moaning. He had a headache.

Pucky bent down and helped T-39 onto his still weakened legs.

"I'll explain everything to you, T-39. But now come with me. The commander is anxious to meet you. After all, the entire expedition has you to thank for its survival. If I hadn't picked up your cry for help, I never would have discovered the Ship of Ancestors. And if I hadn't done that... oh, it's a long and crazy story. But however it went, it all begins with you."

"I don't understand a word," murmured T-39 and staggered out of the room. Uncomprehending, he saw sleepers lying everywhere in the corridors. He began to suspect that he had been lucky again. Once more, death had slipped past him. "Expedition?"

"Wait a bit," Pucky told him. "Then you'll find out everything."

T-39 was told but it was probably more than a normal man could absorb. The technician nodded constantly and acted as though he understood but Pucky could see that there was nothing in his head but confusion.

Rhodan's telecom sounded.

"Link-up made, sir," announced Sikerman. "You can open up."

The Arkonide technicians went to work. Normally such a hatch would be activated mechanically from the control room but in cases of emergency like this one the manual control had to be used.

The Arkonides entered the *Drusus*, Rhodan's flagship.

With a single step, they crossed a span of 10,000 years.

Later, Rhodan expressed it like this when he sat with Bell, Pucky and some friends in his cabin and set the *Drusus* into its first transition towards Arkon: "This Ceshal is perhaps 50 years old, relatively young. He slept through the high-water mark and the decline in his empire. Now he's awakened in time to help in its reconstruction—so he really hasn't missed anything. Even the generations born in the ship after him and put into deepsleep haven't degenerated. They have remained fresh and active. We can trust Atlan: he's our friend. But I think we'll *have* to trust him. Because by giving him the ancestors we're putting power into his hands that we don't dare underestimate, ever. Arkon can become again what it once was."

"And all that," Pucky mused, "because I picked up the mental call for help from T-39 awhile back. What would have happened if I had been sleeping just then?"

Rhodan smiled and stroked Pucky's fur. "Well, little fellow, what would have happened...? It can be easily figured out. There are always two possibilities. A revolt was even then brewing, so perhaps it might have succeeded, or perhaps not. There was always the star Magno. It lay in their direction of flight. The ship would have been caught by its gravitational field in around 30 or 40 years. But Magno doesn't have any planets. The sleepers would have awakened..."

They were silent. There was nothing else to say.

Pucky sighed. "You can say what you want," he decided. "It can turn out well when a fellow does some spying now and then. And if that funny cadet Briggs hadn't given me the shrivelled carrot back then on Lund's ship..."

Rhodan's hand was still stroking Pucky's fur. "I think," he murmured, "that two possibilities is underestimating things considerably. Each situation is the departure point for millions of possibilities. But only one of them becomes reality. When you rightly consider that, chance takes on a new meaning—*if* it has a meaning."

"*If!*" chirped Pucky, curling up in Rhodan's lap. "I propose that the little word 'if' be expelled from the vocabularies of all intelligent races. It's been misused too often! For example, if..."

"Ha!" exclaimed Bell triumphantly. "You said *if*...!"

But Pucky had already gone to sleep. Or at least he pretended he had.

ORDER OF THE ACTION

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[2/ NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK](#)

[3/ WHEN THE SLEEPERS WAKE](#)

[4/ A SHIFT OF COMMAND ON THE SHIP OF ANCESTORS](#)

[5/ PUCKY & RAS TAKE CHARGE](#)

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BLAZING SUN

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

INVISIBLE INVADERS

THEIR HOME GALAXY hung close to the horizon. If one were to consider it as the sun it would be possible to say that here it was late afternoon. Its spiral arms appeared to be slowly turning but of course that was merely an illusion. The other island universes were cold, dim light flecks of not much apparent significance. Barkon was a planet without light and now it was apparently a world without hope.

Rhodan looked down at the ground.

Somewhere below the Barkonides must be residing if they still lived. He had witnessed their preparations for burrowing into the planet. It had appeared to them to be the only way of surviving the long journey through emptiness.

"The ship!"

Pucky's frightened voice was the only sound they had heard in their helmets since they had stepped onto Barkon. Rhodan whirled about. What he saw filled him with amazement—or rather it was what he failed to see.

The ship had vanished.

* * *

This is but one of the many startling sequences in next month's terrific tale of—

THE STARLESS REALM

By Clark Darlton