

Having just performed a great service for Atlan by rescuing the Arkonide 'Sleepers', Perry Rhodan and the superbattleship *Drusus* are present on Arkon 3 when something happens to remind the Solar Administrator of something he had long since dismissed from his mind:

From the far reaches of the universe, Perry Rhodan and his mutants receive a telepathic call which is incredible in its intensity—and with this summons begins the adventurous journey into...

## THE STARLESS REALM

### 1/ A "VOICE" FROM THE VOID

THE 5 GIGANTIC, spherical transport ships had landed on Arkon. They waited in pentagon formation on the vast spaceport of world 3 in the tri-planet Imperial centre.

Anyone with psychological background knew that waiting was the best means of making someone mellow and tractable and doubly effective when the element of uncertainty could be added to the waiting.

Perry Rhodan and Atlan, Emperor of the Arkonide stellar empire, met each other in the luxurious wardroom of the *Drusus*, which had also landed on Arkon 3. The fact that Rhodan did not leave his ship and Atlan had requested to meet him on board was not owing to any possible suspicion or feeling of distrust. Rather, it was because the Terranian wished to return as quickly as possible to the Druufs' fading discharge zone in order to witness the final phase of the battle.

Atlan, who was now Emperor Gonozal VIII, met Rhodan with outstretched hands. His tone of voice was unusually cordial and sincere. "I want to thank you, my friend. Perhaps I should be grateful to you for the survival of the Imperium itself. Now the 100,000 undegenerated Arkonides will be able to help stabilize the Empire. But—tell me about it."

Rhodan returned the double handshake and invited Atlan to have a seat. "Tell you about it...? Well, as you well know, it wasn't easy. After some tribulation we located the Arkonide emigrant ship. It had taken off about 10,000 years ago. Then an accident caused your sleeping ancestors to awaken out of their frozen state of suspended animation—fortunately just a little over 2 weeks ago. As the whole sleeping generation of them awakened there was chaos on board the ship because its engines failed to function. At any rate, the oldest Arkonides among them had had a nice little nap of 10,000 years, and being as fresh and alert as they were in the old days they managed to gain control of the vessel. Our intervention prevented any possible calamities. We brought them all under control with an anaesthetizing gas and then invited them on board the transports you sent us. The only ones we took on board the *Drusus* were the leaders among them. So that's about the size of it... and here we are."

Atlan leaned back in his seat and gazed at Rhodan pensively. "So that's the size of it, you say! Just as

though that's all there were to it. Do you realize that this is the turning point for Arkon, the whole beginning of a new era? 100,000 Arkonides of the original vintage, near descendants of the actual founders of the Imperium, undegenerated and in full possession of their mental capacities...! They are the foundation of our future development."

Rhodan returned his gaze. "Do you mean that I may have done you a favour by finding your forefathers for you and bringing them here?"

Atlan shook his head in wonderment. "Why do you even ask? You know as well as I do that your action will probably be the salvation of Arkon. I am convinced..."

"Maybe I didn't frame my question right," interrupted Rhodan. "I was really wondering if 100,000 Arkonides are enough."

"There are actually 110,000 of them, Perry! Of course it's a pity that not all of them reawakened but one must expect some losses in such an experiment. We must be content that we have at least this many survivors."

"You above all should not be contented! This sudden appearance of people long since given up for dead will present some problems. Just for one example: do you think these proud Arkonides are going to recognize you as their Emperor?"

"They shall!" nodded Atlan confidently. "When they disembark from the transports, my robot army will receive them. This will be timed with the arrival of a fleet formation of cruisers and space battleships back from the front. Don't worry, Perry. I'll see to it that this ancestral generation becomes fully convinced of the present might of Arkon. Besides I'm holding a trump card in reserve that they won't be able to match."

"You mean..."

"The Robot Brain! Of course it was constructed after their time but it will serve to convince them. After all, it was the Robot Brain that put me where I am. At any time it will bear witness to the fact that I am a direct descendant of the first Emperors. Besides, it can also testify to the fact that I am as old as the oldest forebears among them. They are my original contemporaries but I won't be able to explain it to them without revealing the secret of my immortality."

"You'd better not shock them with that one," smiled Rhodan. "At least not at present."

Atlan breathed a sigh of relief. "Certainly it should satisfy them when the Robot Brain makes reference to my direct descent. Then the old guard will give me their oath of allegiance, Perry! Only then will I be able to assign them to their responsible positions of authority... It's time for you to present me to the ancient ones."

Rhodan got up and pressed a call button on the ship-wide video intercom. The prominent features of Col. Baldur Sikerman flashed on the screen.

"Sir...?"

"I'm taking Atlan to the awakened sleepers now. Is everything in order?"

"Yes sir. I believe that Chief Marshal Bell has taken care of the essentials. But sir—if I might make a

comment?"

"Please do, Colonel!"

"Well... I mean, Chief Marshal Bell may be going a bit overboard, sir. He's posted an honour guard and arranged for 10 heavy combat robots to present arms when Atlan comes into the hall. Also he's given orders for a 10-second blast on the sirens all over the ship, as a salute. I wouldn't be surprised, sir, if an energy salvo weren't fired off at the same time..."

"Relax, Colonel, it won't *go that* far, I can assure you. But you seem to forget that while these people were sleeping through the ages Atlan has become the Emperor. Now... of course *you* know that, but the old ones *don't* know it! So that's why we're putting on the show. Do you go along with that?"

"Yes sir... naturally I go along with it. I only thought..."

"Alright, Sikerman. You say everything's set? Good, then let's hear those sirens!"

Sikerman's face reflected perplexity before it disappeared from the screen. The Colonel was an extremely capable officer but he did not understand much about the 'sabre-rattling' brand of diplomacy—or perhaps he didn't wish to. But the sirens came on.

Flanked on either side by the honour guard, Rhodan and Atlan entered the hall where the awakened ones awaited. The towering robots presented arms just as the bedlam of sirens ceased.

Bell had been standing before the old ones and now stepped forward and came to attention. When he announced that the awakened ones were ready to greet the emperor, Atlan and Rhodan walked along the lineup of the Arkonides who had departed 10,000 years ago on an incredible journey.

It was all very ceremonious and impressive. But somewhere inside of Rhodan's brain there was an impression of a soft, restrained *telepathic* giggle. Somebody seemed to be greatly amused by the diplomatic show but it was someone who could also read Rhodan's thoughts at the same time—because the giggling was immediately 'silenced'.

Rhodan made a mental note to find Pucky later and give him a lecture.

For after all, if the leading Arkonides gathered here could be convinced of Atlan's power, then it would also work for the others who were waiting in the 5 transport ships.

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Telepaths John Marshall, Betty Toufry, Ishy Matsu and Pucky the mousebeaver were sitting in the crew messhall with a few other mutants passing the time until the takeoff of the *Drusus*. As usual John Marshall and Betty Toufry were engaged in a hard-pitched battle of 3-D chess. As though entranced, the others watched the unique game. Supported by antigrav fields, the 256 playing pieces floated within the cube which contained twice this number of individual cubic fields. The figures could change into other levels or even make jumps into other fields.

"It's your turn, Betty," chirped Pucky as he slid restlessly back and forth in his seat. "Now it's just child's play. You can checkmate at least one of his kings!" (After all, the game included 8 kings!)

Betty continued to stare at the shimmering force cube while she stroked Pucky's reddish brown fur. "So? You think it would be real smart to make a killing at one level—and meanwhile lose at least 2 pieces elsewhere? I thought you could play better chess than that, Pucky."

A player could actually lose 8 pieces in a single play. But one had to think more than 8 times as hard as he would in an ordinary chess game. So it was not surprising that 3-D chess was usually played only by mutants.

Betty moved. She pressed a button on a control panel beside her; one of the figures glided onto a lower level and into another cubical field. John Marshall sank into deep meditation.

Pucky looked suddenly toward the door. Seconds later it opened and Rhodan entered the room. The Administrator of the Solar Imperium nodded to the mutants and sat down in one of the empty chairs which were placed at random around the chess table. It appeared to be mere coincidence that his chair was close to Pucky. The mousebeaver sank comfortably back into his upholstered seat and quickly focussed his attention on the game.

"You should have seen the big parade," Rhodan told him almost in an undertone. "It was quite impressive. I'll bet anybody that all 110,000 sleepers will give their oath of allegiance to Atlan."

Pucky gazed at the ceiling. "And he can thank me for that," he murmured, alluding to the indisputable fact that it was he who had discovered the ship of the ancient ones. "Hopefully Atlan will always keep in mind that we're friends."

"That he will never forget, little one. Atlan is more of a Terranian than he is an Arkonide. There is nothing that can ever cause him to be our enemy."

Rhodan had no way of knowing how mistaken he was but the event that was to set him straight still lay in the far future.

Pucky appeared ready to abandon his scepticism and change the subject. After glancing at the players and deciding that John Marshall was about to lose the game to Betty Toufry, he turned to Rhodan again. "When are we blasting out of here?"

"Sikerman already has his instructions. We'll be making a slight detour before we return to Earth. I'd like to pay a visit to a few other planets."

Pucky didn't look too pleased. "But I was counting on..."

He got no further. Something totally unexpected and inexplicable happened at that moment.

Although Rhodan could clearly hear Pucky's words, he suddenly experienced a physical pain in his head. It was as though a mighty invisible hand were attempting to crush his brain. He had an involuntary impulse to grasp his head but his limbs seemed to be paralysed. He could hardly move at all.

The same was happening to Pucky and the other telepaths.

*Perry Rhodan!*

The mental call came sharply and forcefully into each mind. It emerged from the void so intensively that it caused pain. None of the mutants would have been capable of telepathing so powerfully as to cause such a painful sensation.

*Perry Rhodan!*

This time the thought was still more urgent and compelling. It was as though the sender was groping through dark endlessness in search of Rhodan.

John Marshall groaned aloud and collapsed. Not being able to withstand the physical pain, he had fainted. On the other hand the two girls appeared to have better resistance. They sat hunched over in their seats, pale and motionless. In their widened eyes was an expression of boundless amazement—and fright.

*Perry Rhodan—answer!*

A suspicion leapt into Rhodan's mind. There was only one living entity in all the universe who possessed such telepathic power. But that source was many thousands of light-years distant from Arkon.

As the pain in his brain subsided slightly for a few seconds he ventured a side-glance at the others. John Marshall lay back in his chair, apparently out cold. Betty Toufry's widened eyes were staring at the ceiling of the mess hall as though waiting for something more. Ishy Matsu gazed helplessly at Rhodan. On the other hand, Pucky had closed his eyes and appeared to be listening inwardly.

Before a new message came, Rhodan decided to answer the call. Any more mental signals like the last one could bring about serious consequences for John Marshall. Rhodan had a fairly accurate comprehension of the powers which the unknown entity possessed. Even across thousands of light-years, *if it wanted, It could kill a person.*

"I have sensed your call, old friend!" Rhodan said aloud. He was thinking of a certain synthetic planet that hurtled along its strange course in the immensities of the interstellar void. "Do you have to frighten us out of our wits?"

In the chair next to him, Pucky opened his eyes abruptly. In them shone a new light of comprehension—and a measure of relief. Then he nodded, satisfied, and sank back into expectant meditation. John Marshall stirred feebly. He groaned softly and straightened up with an effort. When he opened his eyes he encountered a warning look from Rhodan.

Pucky spoke to him in almost a whisper: "Better screen yourself so you can weaken those impulses! Your brain is too sensitive!"

Before Rhodan could say anything, the answer came to them through the inner void.

*I await you, Perry Rhodan! Come at once!*

Although this time the mental thrust had lost nothing of its intensity it was not as painfully penetrating as before. Rhodan even caught the impression that the thought impulses expressed a certain note of relief. But it could have been his imagination.

"Where are you waiting for me?" asked Rhodan, breaking the suspenseful silence.

The answer returned within the same second: *On Wanderer! It is urgent! Come at once!*

Rhodan nodded to himself. Certainly nothing indefinite about it. The Immortal Being on Wanderer was calling him. And it was no idle summons. There was a note of trouble in the mental voice from afar, almost of despair. Had the Druufs launched another attack? Or was it a new menace?

"Give me the present position of Wanderer!" Rhodan asked while he had the chance, for instead of being anchored at a fixed position in space, the artificial planet followed a course directly across the galaxy. If he let this opportunity pass, in order to determine its location, Rhodan would have to question the great robot Brain on Venus. This would cost precious time.

He waited. But the undying, incomprehensible entity did not reply. The voice from the void was silent.

Marshall made a visible recovery.

"Give me the position of Wanderer!" repeated Rhodan more insistently. "What's wrong?"

But again there was no reply. The Immortal maintained *its* silence.

"*It*'s pulled back," said Betty Toufry. "What do you suppose *it* wants from us?"

*It*... such was the name they had given to the incomprehensible being on Wanderer who had given them virtual immortality by means of the biological cell shower. Embodying an entire vanished race, *It* was their conglomerate vital force and intelligence existing in an imperishable form. They had seldom seen *It*, and even then only in the form of small, shimmering globes of energy.

And now this entity who was often referred to as *It* had called to them. Across a distance of more than 30,000 light-years.

John Marshall followed up Betty's question: "Perhaps *It* has something important to tell us or show us. Anyway I'm happy that the pain has ended. It was terrible. I felt like my brain was full of molten lava. Maybe I'm overly sensitive to telepathic impulses but this was the first time I found it to be a disadvantage—especially in a cry for help."

"Help?" Rhodan looked doubtfully at Marshall and shook his head slightly. "I'm not sure whether or not that was a call for help. It sounded more like a command. In spite of that, I don't quite know what to make of it."

Pucky straightened up and turned his eyes to Rhodan "We have no other alternative than to comply with the Immortal Entity's wish. Are we taking off?"

Rhodan shrugged. "We were leaving, anyway, so the most we can do is accelerate our departure. It's too bad we have to go to Venus first but there's no other choice. It doesn't look as though *It*'s going to relay position coördinates."

He got up and went to the intercom panel. The flip of a switch connected him with Command Central. Sikerman answered. He was in the process of having the ship's course and necessary transitions calculated.

"Take off at once, Colonel. You can work out the rest of the course data after we're underway. I'll be

with you in a few moments."

Sikerman confirmed the order. The screen darkened.

Pucky sighed. "There goes our vacation again," he mumbled resignedly. "There's always something that throws a monkey wrench in the machinery. Bell is going to be real happy when he finds out about it."

Rhodan gazed beyond Pucky when he answered: "We'll soon know what happened on Wanderer."

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Reginald Bell had retired to his cabin to catch up on some sleep. As Rhodan's best friend and second-in-command, he knew that it would be several hours yet before takeoff. So he was considerably surprised when he sensed the vibration of the power machinery in the bowels of the vast ship. When he looked at his watch he saw that he had only been asleep for 10 minutes.

"What the—?!"

He was out of bed and at the intercom in a single leap. Col. Sikerman responded.

"What are we taking off for, Colonel? What's happened?"

"Departure time was advanced, sir. By orders of the Chief. Now you know as much as I do."

"Hm-m-m... I see. Thanks, Colonel."

As Bell cut the connection he felt the vibrations increasing in the deck plates under his feet. In a few more seconds the engines would fire and the *Drusus* would lift off without inertial effects and pick up velocity as it headed for outer space.

Bell had almost forgotten to put on his uniform, so concentrated were his thoughts at the moment. It was only in the last moment that he realized he was still in his pyjamas. And that would have been all Pucky needed...!

When he entered the Command Central 5 minutes later, Arkon 3 was by now only a gleaming ball. The sun of Arkon was coming into the field of vision on the screens. Sikerman only turned to look at him briefly, after which he dedicated himself again to his complex tasks at the flight console. Rhodan sat in one of the command chairs and observed the panob screens.

"What's going on, Perry?" asked Bell. "How come the early blastoff?"

Rhodan briefed him on the situation and concluded: "Unfortunately the Immortal didn't give us *It's* position coördinates, so we need the robot brain on Venus. That will cost us almost an extra day. Is it possible that an omniscient entity can be absentminded?"

Bell had no answer for that one. He was by no means omniscient. Although Rhodan's information relieved him somewhat he had a hunch that he didn't hesitate to express. "That incident indicates that the

Immortal can reach us at any time, yet *It* never knows *where* we are. Doesn't that seem paradoxical?"

"Not at all, Bell. *Its* telepathic range is unlimited, that much we know. On the other hand, *It* can only receive our thoughts when we're concentrating on *It*. When that happens, maybe *It*'s able to determine direction and distance. If so, *It* must know from our intensive thoughts about *It* that we've gotten under way."

In a firm voice, Col. Baldur Sikerman announced: "Transition in 10 minutes!"

Nobody paid much attention to him. A jump through hyperspace was commonplace. The pressure absorbers would take up all traces of inertial shock, and only the pulling pains of rematerialisation would indicate that they had put thousands of light-years behind them in a single second.

"I didn't pick up the Immortal's message myself," reflected Bell. "Nary a whisper." He sounded as though he'd been left out.

Rhodan nodded. "I've been thinking about that," he confessed. "Only the telepaths received the impulses, with quite unpleasant side effects. The Immortal must have 'broadcast' the message in such a way that only sensitives could pick it up. And, I believe, with good reason. Not everyone was *supposed* to hear it. Since *It* knows that I'm a weak telepath, and that other than myself there are only a few Terranians who can read thoughts, after we were located, I suspect nobody other than ourselves on board the *Drusus* received the balance of the message."

"From over 30,000 light-years away—I'd say that was a pretty good output!" exclaimed Bell appreciatively. "So what happens now?"

"We'll know soon enough what *It* wants from us. It appears that *It* needs our help. Hm-m-m... it's actually a bit elevating to know that an Immortal Being requires our assistance."

Sikerman's voice interrupted the conversation: "Still 8 minutes to transition."

Bell watched the viewscreen with indifference, as Arkon became considerably smaller. The *Drusus* was just gliding past the Imperium's ring of satellite fortresses at  $\frac{3}{4}$ 's the speed of light. Recognition signals were being exchanged automatically over the data link transceivers. "The Immortal needs our help, otherwise *It* wouldn't have turned to us. OK, so *It* needs our help. But now comes the question: 'Why?' I think I might have a good idea..."

Unfortunately no one ever found out Bell's suspicion. In the midst of his last sentence he turned from the screens and faced Rhodan again. He became speechless when he noted the latter's facial expression. Rhodan's eyes met his.

"What is it?" asked Bell in tense wonderment. "Wanderer...?"

Rhodan nodded but otherwise he gave no answer.

"Another 5 minutes to transition!" announced Sikerman. He had not noticed the incident because of his concentration on the flight panel.

Bell remained silent. He kept watching Rhodan who still sat in his chair but appeared to be withdrawn into himself. Almost at the same time the door opened and John Marshall came rushing into the Command Central. With the usual swirl of air, teleporter Pucky materialized and hopped over to his



couch near Rhodan's seat.

"This time it hardly affected me," stammered Marshall. He was visibly amazed that he hadn't been knocked out again. "Did you hear it also, sir?"

Rhodan shook off the trance that held him. "Yes, I sensed the new message. I also hope you picked it up so that we can compare notes. The position of Wanderer was repeated three times. Col. Sikerman—write this down: PB-ZH-97H. Do you have it?"

"That's it to a hair!" chirped Pucky, as he leaned back against the wall.

Marshall also confirmed the correctness of the data.

Sikerman was troubled. "Transition in 3 minutes, sir. Do you have new instructions?"

"Yes! Stop the transition! You have new course data now," Rhodan told him. Then he turned to Bell. "That was an order we got from Wanderer this time. It was a straight command—no doubt about it."

"Command? What kind of command?"

"We are not to fly to Venus but directly to Wanderer. The artificial planet's position was given."

"And that happened while I was talking?"

"Marshall and Pucky also picked up the message. I presume that Betty and Ishy are also aware..."

As Rhodan seemed to hesitate, Bell asked, "What's so strange, Perry? The command?"

"No, not that so much; but the way of transmitting it so that only telepaths could receive it is extraordinary. On previous occasions, everybody on board the ship was aware of the Immortal's communications."

Col. Sikerman cancelled the transition and shoved the new coördinates into the nav-computer. After a short time the tape strip containing the readout of the new transition data glided out onto the console desk. He then processed it into the course-commit programming.

Within 2 minutes he announced: "We can go into a new transition within 5 minutes. Four hyper jumps to target area. Distance—"

"OK, Colonel, spare me the details. How long will it take us including the gap times between jumps?"

"20 hours, sir."

Rhodan looked at the clock. "Wake me up in 90 minutes. I'll be in my cabin."

Bell watched him in some perplexity until he had exited. "He's mighty uptight today," he commented, nudging Marshall in the ribs. "Now, my friend, give me the lowdown on what this old Methuselah on Wanderer wants from us. Did *It* really hand out a command? Any hint at all of what the hassle is?"

Pucky gurgled out a chuckle from his couch. "Good old Bell isn't very nose-y now, is he? He might even have been a telepath himself by now if he hadn't misspent his spare time in Terrania. I don't think we

should let him in on this top-drawer stuff. Right, Marshall?"

John Marshall shrugged. "What's the big secret, Pucky? We don't know anything, ourselves—only that we are to proceed without delay to Wanderer, a mysterious synthetic world which takes millions of years to orbit around an unknown centre point. As to what is waiting there for us... maybe Rhodan knows?"

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"Nobody knows—unfortunately," muttered Pucky, and he rolled into a ball on the couch for a nap.

Somewhat peeved and distracted, Bell silently left the Command Central.

## 2/ INTO THE "GREAT BEYOND"

Prior to the 4th and last transition, Rhodan entered the Control Central. The final preparations and countdown were in process. In a few seconds the die would be cast. They all had but one thought: would it work this time? Would they reach the target and not miss it as they had that time before?

Rhodan's face was expressionless, as the universe outside vanished and then appeared to reform itself again. In this single second the *Drusus* had covered more than 5,000 light-years, The stars became visible again. They gleamed coldly and impersonally and yet each was the mother of all life on its family of planets. The constellations were strange to Rhodan but he saw Wanderer immediately.

The artificial planet was a flat disc covered by a hemispherical energy screen. It existed in another space and time. One could only detect it by means of the newly developed time-tracker equipment, with which its location was also determined. Similar to a radar operation, the search beams depicted it on the special screen.

"The coördinates check out," announced Sikerman. "Everything seems to be in order."

Rhodan nodded. "At least Wanderer still exists. Set your course for it, Colonel. Do you have the distance?"

Sikerman glanced at his instrument panel. "12 light-minutes, sir. The *Drusus* is already decelerating."

Rhodan was just turning away when Sikerman added: "The engines, sir...! They've shut off. I haven't—"

Rhodan had come to a halt. "Not unusual when you consider we're expected. The Immortal has relieved us of the landing task. OK, then shut down. I don't think we'll need any retro-propulsion from here on in. And just relax. From this point on the thinking will be done for us."

Bell entered the Command Central. Apparently he had slept through the final transition. But a single glance at the screen served to bring him up to date. "Aha!" he exclaimed in a tone that excluded all doubt. "We are there!"

"Even more so than you think," confirmed Rhodan, and he informed him that they were being remotely controlled. Then he added: "I'm wondering why *It* couldn't have fetched us directly from Arkon. Does it mean that *It* also has limitations?"

They listened involuntarily for a moment but the Immortal did not react to the question.

"Oh well now," said Bell generously, "30,000 light-years or so—that's a neat little distance. *It* wouldn't be able to handle that."

"What can't *It* handle?" somebody with a chirpy tone asked behind him.

Bell whirled around and stared at Pucky. Suddenly the mousebeaver was simply there. No one had seen his arrival. But this was no great feat for a teleporter. Pucky had just materialized in the room.

"Can't you get over the habit of frightening innocent people?" Bell shouted at him angrily. "Any half-decent teleporter should at least announce himself with a shimmer cloud."

"What can't *It* handle, I asked. Well...?"

It was so unusual for Pucky not to retort to Bell's protest that even Rhodan was startled. He turned to observe the mousebeaver carefully but he could not notice anything unusual about him.

"Cheeky little carrot-monger!" snorted Bell, incensed.

"Super belly!" came the retort, finally, but at the same time something happened that was impossible.

For within a meter or so from Pucky, *Pucky* materialized. With a slight swirl of air the mousebeaver emerged from nothingness. The sight of *two* mousebeavers, identical to a hair, was so astounding that Bell retreated in consternation until he bumped into a chair.

"What... what...?" he groaned while his face went chalk white as he stared from one Pucky to the other. Then speech failed him.

Rhodan thought swiftly and logically. The materialization of the second Pucky had been accompanied by an air disturbance as usual but this had not occurred in the case of the first mousebeaver. In addition he noted the expression of boundless amazement on the face of #2 Pucky. The real Pucky was far too shaken by the sight of his incarnate likeness to produce a single sound. With widened eyes and gaping mouth he stared at his twin brother.

"Welcome on board, old friend," said Rhodan as he made a slight bow in the direction of Pucky #1 who naturally was none other than a thought-materialization of the Immortal. "But you might have selected another form in which to appear."

"I'm sure your friend Bell would have much preferred Stella Rallas, that beautiful dream actress. But to answer your question: I am not omnipotent, Perry Rhodan. It was no easy task to find you. But now that you're here I am very much relieved. You must help me."

"I? Helpyou ?" Rhodan did not conceal his wonderment. "How am I supposed to help you, an immortal?"

It was an eerie experience for Rhodan to have to speak in this manner to the image of Pucky, who still stood in the same spot, completely unnerved, only gradually comprehending the joke that the Immortal had allowed *Itself* to play on him and Bell.

"You will find out, my friend." Pucky's double grinned, thus revealing a duplicate of the renowned incisor tooth. "As soon as your ship has landed you will come to me with this little fellow and your other mutant, Wuriu Sengu. A task lies before you, Rhodan. It will not be easy to solve the problem—but you will do it."

The real Pucky began to recover. The first thing he did was to close his gaping mouth. The incisor disappeared. Then he took a deep breath. After composing himself inwardly he said: "Even the bare spot on the tail is there!" There was admiration in his voice. "That's where I came too close to an electro-oven one time. I just can't imagine...!"

His double nodded with the exact characteristic of expression that everyone had become accustomed to with the real Pucky. "I've copied you precisely, little friend. I could have duplicated Bell just as well, naturally, but in view of his greater bulk it would have caused me greater exertion—and I have to preserve my energies."

"Preserve?" interjected Rhodan. "Are you having new difficulties?"

"No, but semispace..."

Rhodan understood. For the Immortal perhaps that other adventure had only occurred a second ago, or maybe a minute or two. But it actually lay several years in the past by now.

"What am I to do for you?"

"Later," replied the Immortal from the Pucky image. "You will find out soon enough. By your time reckoning the *Drusus* will arrive at the energy screen within 10 minutes. The ship will be anchored. Then I shall fetch you and your two companions."

"But why Sengu the Seer especially?"

"Nothing in the universe happens without a reason," replied the false mousebeaver—and from one second to the next he vanished.

Pucky stared at the spot where his twin had been standing. His high-pitched voice trembled slightly when he spoke. "That was me, no doubt about it! Every hair on him was genuine—unbelievable! Do you think *It* can copy each and every form of life? That's what I call thought materialization!" He shook his head in wonderment and turned to Bell. "But you have to admit that I'm beautiful. I could have kept looking at myself for hours. Fascinating!"

Bell cleared his throat. "It would have been a catastrophe if the Immortal had left your carbon copy behind. Then there would have been two of your kind on board the *Drusus* and I couldn't have survived such a thing."

Col. Sikerman dismissed the incident with admirable calm and saved Pucky from having to answer. "We

are approaching Wanderer. Our velocity has dropped sharply. Nothing visible ahead yet but if the instruments don't lie we ought to be contacting the energy screen at any moment."

He had hardly finished speaking before a slight shock ran through the ship. They could feel it in the deck plates. In the same second, all indicators on the panels sank to zero. The viewscreen of the special tracker darkened. On the other hand the normal viewscreens revealed the stars of the universe in every direction.

"Go get Sengu," Rhodan told Pucky. After the mousebeaver had left the Control Central, he continued: "I don't know what's going to happen now but we'll have to place our confidence in *It*. Col. Sikerman, you can rest assured that the *Drusus* will remain stationary in space, relative to Wanderer. All you have to do is wait until I get back—but when that will be is beyond my present knowledge. Unfortunately, Bell, you will have to remain behind. The Immortal wants it that way."

"He can't stand the sight of me," muttered Bell disappointedly. But there was a false ring to his voice because he wasn't quite able to conceal his sense of relief. That is, his relief over the fact that he would be allowed to remain on board the *Drusus*.

Rhodan smiled knowingly. "I don't believe *It* allows *Itself* to be guided by Its emotions—although *It* has them. Pucky happens to have a 3-ply parapsychic capability and therefore he's best suited for controlling unusual situations—not to mention protecting me from special dangers. Sengu is our seer. He can look through solid matter. That's one thing that leads me to suspect that *It* has a project in store for me that has nothing to do with Wanderer—or at least it's not located here. Because a seer like Sengu would not be necessary on Wanderer. So you see... it's all a matter of expediency, nothing more. That make you feel better, Bell?"

Bell nodded silently. He felt uneasy. But he didn't have time to dwell on his presentiments because Pucky entered the Command Central accompanied by Sengu. Wuriu Sengu was Japanese. He, too, had been preserved by the biological cell shower treatment. His rugged build revealed strength and his short stubble of hair was similar to Bell's reddish bristles. But aside from physical build that was the only similarity. Outwardly, Sengu's eyes did not reveal any particular evidence of his special faculty but deep within them glimmered a hint of that timelessness which was characteristic of all relatively immortal persons. And they were eyes that knew no physical boundaries. They could see through anything.

"I think we'd better get down to the main exit lock now," said Rhodan. "That's where *It* will pick us up—or have us picked up. We'll wear our lightweight spacesuits, just in case. You, too, Pucky." He paused at the door. "If possible, we'll keep in contact. I don't know if the telecom will be functioning but don't worry if you don't hear from us. We're in good hands."

Bell and Sikerman had nothing to say as they watched them go.

The spacesuits were stored in the main airlock section. They selected the lighter suits which permitted the wearer to remain for a short period of time in the vacuum of the void but were not as cumbersome as the heavier space combat suits. A complex micro-pak took care of temperature control and replenishment of the air supply.

Pucky of course had a custom-made version of the lighter style of suit. He slipped it on and ignored the faint grin of the Japanese mutant as he struggled to find the hole in the rear of the outfit. It had been placed there to receive his often-cumbersome beaver tail. Designed on the principle of a diver's suit, it was nonetheless all in one piece. Pucky's hind part was shoved into a kind of pocket which protected it from all harmful effects. Without question the whole ensemble gave him a comical appearance and he

knew it.

*Perry Rhodan!*

All three of them 'heard' the voice that spoke to them. The word meaning simply existed momentarily in their brains. It was as though *It* were standing close beside them.

"We're standing by in the main lock. What shall we do?"

*Disembark!*

Rhodan shrugged and depressed a panel key which activated the video intercom. Sikerman's worried face appeared on the small screen.

"Sir?"

"Open the main lock and close it after we've left the ship."

"Very well, sir."

Sikerman's voice had none of its customary self-assurance. Obviously the colonel was concerned. But he asked no superfluous questions.

To the two men and the mousebeaver it seemed as if an invisible hand were closing and sealing the inner hatch of the lock. Then the air was pumped out of the chamber. By the time the outside pressure had dropped considerably their spacesuit systems started to operate. Also their helmet transceivers clicked on in order to establish communication.

When all air had been removed from the lock, the outer hatch swung open. Rhodan stepped to the outer threshold and stopped. He waited until Sengu and Pucky had joined him. Silently they stood there and waited for instructions from the Immortal.

Before them lay the universe. Across a seemingly infinite abyss, tens of thousands of stars gleamed in magnificent serenity. Almost all of them mothered a system of planets but relatively few of them were inhabited. Still, there were enough inhabited worlds out there to reduce any thought of a lifeless Cosmos to an absurdity.

Wanderer had to be somewhere in front of them. Rhodan looked in vain for a sign of the synthetic planet's presence. Directly beneath him between the stars he saw a spiral nebula. It could have been anywhere from 2 to 5 million light-years distant. An entire galaxy like his own, of which he had come to know a very tiny part. How big was the universe actually...?

*Step forward out of the lock!*

The command came suddenly without any warning. Sengu and Pucky looked at Rhodan doubtfully. Then they looked downward into the bottomless immensity.

Rhodan nodded to them and pushed away from the ship. The slight gravitational field of the *Drusus* released him immediately and he drifted away toward the maze of stars. Pucky followed him at once but he pulled Sengu with him in order to lighten the burden of decision. The seasoned little mousebeaver had made a lightning swift calculation and so directed his push-off that he was able to slowly overtake

Rhodan. At a distance of about 300 meters from the ship the three came together and gripped each other tightly. It was high time for the Immortal to do something about them.

As though perceiving their wish, *It* announced *Itself*: "I'll pick you up now. In a few seconds you'll pass through the screen and then you'll be able to see my planet." This time his mental voice was so clear that it was hard to tell it from the spoken word.

Suddenly the *Drusus* appeared to accelerate away from them, swiftly dwindling into distance. It was of course an illusion. In actuality, they themselves were moving, gripped by a new gravitational field. Once more there was a sense of 'up' and 'down'—for they were sinking downward.

And then they broke through the neutralized roof of the energy dome.

From one second to the next the entire universe changed. The sun was shining but it was no sun born of Nature. It was a synthetic star—made especially for Wanderer. Suspended exactly at the Zenith of the energy sheet that was the sky, it shone down on the undulating landscape of a world that seemed to be the materialization of an idealist's dream. Sparkling blue rivers wound, their way between hills and forests toward a distant sea.

The three of them fell slowly toward the surface of Wanderer but then the angle of their descent became sharper so that they finally flew parallel to the endless plain toward a distant horizon that was not foreshortened by any curvature.

Then the city came into view.

Rhodan knew that it was not inhabited by actual living beings but only by the materialized fantasy images of the Immortal, if at all. Or perhaps this time it might also be empty. Some of the buildings had changed. In fact it seemed to Rhodan that nothing ever remained quite the same on Wanderer. The dream world was always subject to the changing whim and imagination of its Creator.

Gliding at a low altitude they were still over the forested hills as they approached the city. Then they began to sink lower. They landed on a broad field directly before the city. At the same moment the invisible hand of the Immortal released them and their natural weight returned to them. Rhodan estimated that the gravity here represented roughly that of the Earth.

"Perry Rhodan!"

They whirled around. At first they saw no one but then Rhodan made out a small, almost transparent sphere, hardly 10-cm in diameter, which was visible against the background of the hills. It reminded him of Harno in a way. But Harno the television creature was presently on Earth with Marshal Freyt, whom he kept constantly advised as to Rhodan's whereabouts.

"I have assumed this form because it's easy to shape and maintain. My energies are limited. Follow me, Perry Rhodan. Your friends are to wait here."

Rhodan departed from Sengu and Pucky with a curt nod and followed the sphere, which hovered before him at a medium level. They moved straight toward a dome-shaped building that reminded him vaguely of the hall of the physiotron.

"I have to confess that my curiosity is growing," said Rhodan with a touch of irony but not intending to reproach. "Why so secretive?"

"Only that which a man doesn't know seems mysterious, my friend," came the answer. And Rhodan could not have detected whether it had been actually spoken or only thought. At any rate he 'heard' the voice of the incomprehensible being as though *It* were beside him in the flesh. "I shall tell you everything that I know. But if I knew everything you wouldn't have to be troubling yourself. In the universe there are things that happen which are not easily explained. You have to help me to find them."

"In the universe?" Rhodan drawled out the counter-question just as a wide door glided open before him. The sphere floated into the chamber beyond. Rhodan followed and looked around the hall he was in. "Or do you mean just the galaxy?"

The dome shimmered over him in a silvery light. The hall was empty but then he saw that in its centre was a solitary chair that was centred precisely under the source of light. The spherical embodiment of the Immortal floated over to the chair and came to a stop before it, hovering in the air.

"I mean the universe," *It* replied in his soundless yet penetrating voice. "Sit down, Perry Rhodan. I must speak to you."

Rhodan complied. The wide chair immediately assumed a shape about him that made him most comfortable. It seemed almost as if it were alive, so quickly did it react to his slightest movement.

"I guess you're making provisions so that our conference won't be too strenuous for me," said, Rhodan. "But what is your trouble? Does that spherical form have any particular advantages?"

"It has *every* advantage which it is possible to obtain, my friend. That's why I chose it." Rhodan recalled that Harno had once mentioned something of the sort. "And I must preserve my strength," the Entity continued. "I have become very weak. It was by pure chance that I learned of the terrible danger that threatens us all. Don't ask me the nature of this danger because I wouldn't be able to give you an answer. I know only one thing: the Barkonides appear to have been slain by it already."

*The Barkonides ...?*

Rhodan felt as though an electric shock had surged through him. The Barkonides!

That time when the Immortal had taken him on the excursion into Infinity, everything had been as in a dream. Travelling in a ship that flew millions of times the speed of light they had thrust into the dark void between galaxies. There they had found the Barkonides and preserved them and their planet from certain annihilation. And now...

"You say that the Barkonides have been slain by some unknown menace?" asked Rhodan, repeating the suspicion of the Immortal. "How can you know that when you don't yet know what the danger consists of?"

"Do not inquire concerning my capabilities of observation or of their nature—you would not comprehend them. The fact remains that I am not receiving any thought impulses from the Barkonides now. Therefore they are devoid of consciousness. Beings without consciousness are dead."

Rhodan stared at the faintly shimmering sphere. When he thought that it embodied the mightiest and most incredible being of all time it seemed all the more fantastic. "And their wandering planet? What has happened to Barkon?"



"I have no news of it, Rhodan. I can locate living and thinking creatures wherever they may be. But planets...?"

"So now you've lost Barkon! How shall we ever find it now that you've lost track of it? A single planet without a sun, mind you, lost in the immeasurable vastness of intergalactic space..."

"*You* shall find Barkon because I am going to give you a ship, Rhodan. A ship such as no man has ever seen before. It is capable of any velocity you desire. In its bow is a searching device that will only become activated once you have entered intergalactic space. It can locate any planets which may be wandering in that greater void. So even though I may not know where Barkon is, the ship will find it."

"And what if we go astray out there in that endlessness?" cautioned Rhodan.

The Immortal answered at once: "Did I not just impart to you that I would always be capable of locating thinking creatures? As long as you live and think, I shall always be able to find the ship. So your concern about going astray in the outer vastness is unnecessary. Only when you are dead will your thought impulses cease—but in that case it would make little difference."

"Of course," Rhodan calmly agreed. "So will this ship be under remote control?"

"Only to a limited extent, my friend. I'll bring it onto the approximate course and then I'll release it. The search apparatus will then be activated and it will so adjust the course that you will be able to fly to Barkon and land there. From that point you will be left to your own resources. When you disembark the ship will take off and return to outer space, where it will wait until you order it back. But don't misuse that command—you have only one chance to use it! Once landed again, the ship must take off within 10 minutes. Otherwise it will leave Barkon without you. Don't ever forget that, Rhodan!"

Rhodan gazed up thoughtfully at the shimmering sphere. "So... that is all that you can tell me? I am to find out by myself what has gone wrong on Barkon?"

"Yes. And if possible you must also help. I hope it is not too late for that. No more thoughts—I am worried about them. It does not seem possible that all of them can be dead."

"If they are, then any help would come too late. But permit me to ask you something. That time when we flew to Barkon and managed to save the Barkonides from destruction—even then I noted the fact that you are very sympathetic toward that race of people. Why is that? You don't seem to concern yourself over other intelligences right here in our own galaxy, so why the Barkonides in particular? Is there some special reason?"

The Immortal answered: "In every respect the Barkonides are an extraordinary race. They are worthy of our respect and sympathy on one count alone—which is their attempt to navigate an entire planet through the starless abyss."

Rhodan nodded. "That was a very diplomatic answer. I know as much now as I did before."

"That is to be expected of diplomats." Rhodan caught an impression of facetious irony which was replaced almost at once by concern again. "But now let's not lose any more time, which is a factor I have no control over in this situation. Otherwise it would be a simple matter to find the Barkonides somewhere in the past and divert them from a perhaps critical future date. Your friends are waiting for you, old friend. And also—the ship."

The small sphere appeared to be fading. It rose slowly toward the arched ceiling of the hall, becoming larger and ever more transparent. Then it vanished without a trace.

Rhodan got up from the chair and walked to the entrance door, which opened before him. He stepped outside but stopped to look back into the hall for the last time. The chair was not there any more. The place where it had been was empty. Apparently the Immortal did not waste energy. Every material object created by *Its* undying intellect *was* energy. In order to retrieve it, the matter was converted to its basic form.

The door glided shut behind him.

He continued onward. Out there on the field where Pucky and Sengu were waiting for him he saw the sunlight reflecting from a gleaming, silvery cylinder. It was about 30 feet long and 10 feet in diameter. Whereas the bow of the ship was blunt and composed of a transparent material, its stern end came to a point. A small hatch stood open and was just large enough to admit a full-grown man. Inside was a small airlock.

Rhodan made out the figures of Sengu and Pucky, who were standing close to the vessel. The two mutants appeared to be undecided as to what they should do.

When Rhodan came up to them, Pucky was the first to speak. "First of all, *It* sticks my doubleganger in front of my nose and gets a big kick out of scaring me half to death and now *It* whammies up a toy ship out of the air. At first I thought maybe a teleporter was about to show up but it turned out to be this ship. What are we supposed to do with it—keep it as a present or something?"

"If you want to consider it as such," replied Rhodan while he ran his hand testingly over the smooth cold metal of the hull. "At any rate we're going to go on board now and make an excursion. I'll explain everything to you later, once we're under way."

Pucky looked at him doubtfully. He seemed to be unaware of his thoughts. "Under way? Where to?"

"To the Barkonides, little one. They're in trouble and we are to give them some help. Well, what's wrong? Are you afraid of this magic ship?"

Pucky had followed Rhodan and Sengu's example and removed his light plastic helmet. He felt a slight shudder run through him. "Afraid...?" he squeaked reproachfully. "Who's afraid? Well maybe just the teensiest, now that you mention it..."

Sengu asked no questions. He knew that he would be safe in boarding the ship if Rhodan also went inside. So within a few moments all three of them were standing together in the airlock. Even while the outer hatch was closing they were already opening the inner door. They came through a narrow passage into the control room which was the only accessible chamber on board. It took up more than half the space within the entire hull. If the rest of the ship was occupied by the propulsion unit it would have to be something that Rhodan was not prepared to imagine.

The forward part of the room was transparent. The bow section offered a good view on all sides except in the direction of the stern. Pucky let out a pleased whistle when he saw a wide couch near the door of the control room. It had the exact specifications of all similar lounges that he had preferred in the past. He made a single leap and landed among the soft cushions, where he stretched out luxuriously.

"This is more like it!" he exclaimed as he indirectly praised the work of the Immortal. "Once again, *It* read

my mind..."

Rhodan and Sengu found two comfortable flight seats just aft of the blunt-ended bow. As they let themselves sink down into them it was as though they were sitting outside in the open air. They could not determine what the invisible material of the bow consisted of. Although it felt like glass it appeared to be both very thin and incredibly solid.

They did not feel a thing as the field and the city suddenly dropped away beneath them. It was as though the planet Wanderer were moving instead of themselves. The flat circle of the horizon receded. Then, before the whole disc of the synthetic planet could become visible, they broke through the energy dome.

The hilly terrain with its rivers and broad valleys vanished, to be replaced by the interstellar void. Just in that moment it was apparent that Wanderer was surrounded by a reflecting field of some kind which made it invisible to anyone approaching it. In place of the planet the three observers only saw the cold, alien constellations of an unknown part of the Milky Way.

To their right a bright star hurtled past them and sank into the fathomless depths where the synthetic planet had been moments before. They saw it out of the corner of an eye, more or less, but Rhodan had recognized it.

"The *Drusus*! Just a light speck—at least 20 kilometres away. We're accelerating."

The Japanese mutant, Wuriu Sengu, was noted for being the cautious type and now he ventured to make the first objection. "Sir, we're flying without star charts, without even knowing how this ship is propelled. Why, we don't even know where our destination is! We're completely dependent upon the moods of the Immortal—and we know very well from experience that It can play some pretty rough jokes!"

"This time, my dear Sengu, *It* plays no games because *It*'s not in the mood. It has entrusted us with a mission that seems to be very important to *It*. I'm convinced that we're as safe in this ship as we would be on board the *Drusus*—perhaps even safer."

"But *It* didn't think of anything to eat or drink!" exclaimed Pucky in a mixture of triumph and secret remorse. "Or do you think *It* can also materialize that stuff too?"

"Yes, I believe so. And if you take a look around I'm sure you'll find everything we need for life support—I'll take all bets on that!"

Pucky promptly slipped off the couch and began to rummage about in every corner of the ship. Rhodan let him carry on by himself and dedicated himself anew to the task of observation.

Which wasn't an easy thing to do this time. He was accustomed to determining the course and speed of his ship and to guide it toward a definite destination. But now here he sat in the bow of a tiny spacecraft where he was separated from the deadly vacuum only by a thin sheet of unknown material and he was compelled to rely on the capabilities of the Immortal who had told him that *It* was by no means infallible. In addition to this he had no idea what safety measures the Immortal had provided in order to protect his life and the lives of his companions. If he had overlooked even the slightest detail—!

There was no radio equipment on board... no controls. They sat there like prisoners in an almost completely transparent nose capsule, propelled and guided by forces which would have to remain a mystery even for Rhodan.

"Look at that!" cried Sengu suddenly and pointed ahead. "What do you make of it, sir? Those stars...!"

Laterally from the corners of his eyes, Rhodan had already become aware of the movement. The stars themselves were moving! "The speed of light—we've passed it," he said with suppressed excitement. "This is the first time I've ever experienced this in my life. The other time when I visited the Barkonides I also flew beyond the speed of light but the Immortal was with me and it was more like a dream. But this time..."

"If the stars show visible motion, we must be going many times speed of light," Sengu surmised reflectively. "Do you think there'll be side effects? Like a time displacement? Infinite mass...?"

"I don't think we have to worry about those factors. You see, this ship—No, that's not the proper expression. I think on the contrary that we are sitting in the materialized thought concept of the Immortal and that it is also propelled by thought. It's an unimaginable phenomenon if you try to analyse it scientifically. But instead of racking our brains over it we should be enjoying the spectacle. Only it's too bad we don't have some kind of speedometer on board. It would be interesting to see how fast we're travelling."

During their short conversation the stars had visibly increased their apparent motion. Even as they looked they could see entire constellations becoming distorted. They changed into strange new configurations of stars which no one had ever seen before. At the same time the two men noted that space ahead of them was emptying itself of stars. Sternward, on the other hand, the myriad suns seemed to move closer together, soon coalescing into a shimmering white cloud of light which was broken by a random scattering of dark spots.

"It's really beyond belief!" chirped Pucky in a shrill voice as he returned to the control room. But he was not referring to the grand spectacle that had so deeply gripped the silent watchers. "It has even thought of carrots for me!"

Rhodan turned around. Pucky stood on the threshold of the entrance. In one hand he held what appeared to be a bunch of fresh-picked carrots while in the other he held a package containing several cans. His incisor gleamed with pleasure.

"Here's meat for you—and a drink for me!"

Rhodan looked at Sengu. "Did you think of a beverage?" he asked, amused. "When?"

"Just now, sir. When we were talking about food supplies."

Rhodan nodded. "I figured as much! So that means we're not as alone as we thought we were. *It* is here, even though *It* isn't communicating."

This discovery brought Rhodan a certain sense of reassurance. He had to confess that the thought of being completely relegated to the winds of chance had not been particularly pleasant.

"Here's your drink," said Pucky as he handed the beverage to the Japanese.

With a side-glance at the couch where Pucky had tossed the other canned goods, Rhodan was able to determine that they were of Earthly origin—or seemed to be. They were the same products which were available in any store in Terrania and which were a staple stock on board Terranian spaceships.

"Wow!" gasped Pucky suddenly. He was so startled that he made a slight jump backwards, dropping the bunch of carrots in the process. "What the heck is wrong with the stars? Are we on a merry-go-round?"

The spectacle outside was indeed astonishing.

In the past few minutes their velocity must have increased to the point where even light years were of no consequence. They were probably travelling as fast as a light-year per second. In terms of normal technology this would of course have been impossible but where their present ship was concerned, normal technology had been left far behind.

To the right and left of them the stars had become mere passing streaks of light. But with each minute the streaks became more sparsely distributed. Directly ahead on their course was an irregular formation of stars that seemed to hang motionlessly in the depths of the universe. This was because they were flying directly towards it. The more laterally placed the stars were, the faster was their apparent motion, and those to their right and left were merely lines of light.

Out there in the middle of nothing was the stellar nebula. Rhodan recognized it.

"Andromeda!"

They had now come to the edge of their own galaxy. With an unimaginable velocity they were nearing that colossal abyss which separated the two neighbouring galaxies.

"We are not on a merry-go-round, Pucky," Rhodan explained to the mousebeaver. "On the contrary, we are travelling in a very straight line, something like a ray of light but much faster. In fact, *very* much faster. A light beam would be left behind us as though it were crawling. Radio waves, as well."

"Maybe the linear space-drive works like this."

"You might say that, more or less. But surrounding space and the stars are still visible to our eyes and we haven't entered hyperspace. I don't know, though, if we could go this fast even with the linear space drive. We'll only find out when the first experimental ship is ready—but that could be several decades from now."

Pucky had since forgotten all about his couch and his carrots. Small and shaken by the aspect of Eternity, he stood next to Rhodan's chair and observed the marvellous spectacle of the streaking stars.

"When I visited Barkon the first time said Rhodan, "it was almost exactly like this but then I had a small, actual ship. But this one here... it's probably some kind of energy bubble."

"Now there are hardly any more stars," murmured Pucky plaintively. "They keep getting scarcer. What happens when the last of them out there are behind us?"

"Then we will be in intergalactic space, little one. We'll be a mere dust mote in the vastness between the island universes, just a tiny drop in the cosmic ocean. There's actually nothing to compare it with."

"A universe without stars—what a sight that will be!" Wuriu Sengu did not conceal his inner fears. "We'll see a starless sky. A completely dark firmament without any light at all."

Rhodan looked into the depths ahead of them and smiled faintly. "Oh yes, Sengu, there will be light. The

light of billions of stars, all compressed into a tiny, pale fleck—a far distant gleaming spark. An alien island universe, another Milky Way. And we won't be seeing just one of them but many hundreds of galaxies. Their light will have come to us across millions of light-years of distance. The abyss separating us from them is unimaginable, even into the billions of light-years. And yet they are conglomerations of stars which are like our own galaxy and Milky Way. And there, too, must be intelligent life forms who turn their instruments toward us and only see our galaxy as a remote fleck of light, although it contains in its turn the billions of stars that we know are illuminating thousands of inhabited worlds."

"The overall universe is vast," said Sengu, deeply moved.

Rhodan nodded in agreement. "It's too bad that we only have this word. It falls far short of saying what we intend to express. A planet is also referred to as *big*, or even *vast*. It's the same with a star. And all we can say of the entire Cosmos is that it's *big*, nothing more. But what is it actually?"

They stared outside in silence. The last of the local stars were moving past ever more swiftly. They dwindled away behind the ship into the milky ocean of the galactic cloud of light. Only the distant nebula of Andromeda remained. It hung there unmoved and unchanged in the centre of the pit of blackness which now comprised more than  $\frac{3}{4}$ ths of their entire field of vision. Upon closer scrutiny, the distant island universe presented an elliptical shape which was somewhat thicker in its centre. But in spite of their incredible speed the disc of light did not increase in size.

"Glord!" whispered Sengu suddenly. He had just turned to look back. "*That* is our own galaxy!"

Rhodan also turned to look. The giant white cloud of stars was swiftly shrinking in size. It was as though the whole conglomeration of millions of suns was dropping away into a bottomless abyss. It grew smaller as they watched.

"More than one light-year per second," muttered Rhodan. His voice shook almost imperceptibly. His right hand rested on the mousebeaver's shoulder. Pucky seldom remained rooted to the spot like this, so shaken by the view that he could not speak a word. Rhodan had never seen his small friend in such a state as this.

"We must be dreaming," said Sengu, as softly as before. "This can't be reality!"

"The thing we're experiencing lies on the border between dream and reality," replied Rhodan somewhat tensely. "Later we won't be able to say just which part was the dream and which was real. But one thing's certain: we are physically here and we're flying through the Cosmos. We are seeing with our eyes what is actually happening. So what we are going through is not what you'd normally call a dream. Yet on the other hand..."

His words ended in a sigh. Then he was silent. He did not know what else there was to say.

\* \* \* \*

Three hours passed, according to their watches.

Their own galaxy had receded to the point where it seemed to be a hazy white spot with frayed edges.

Its spiral arms were clearly visible, appearing to be reaching into the blackness of empty space for support. Somewhere within it was the small sun of Terra.

Andromeda had hardly shown any change. It seemed to have come slightly closer but without apparent motion. Otherwise, with the exception of small, barely visible remote star nebulas, the outer universe was empty. It was dark, lonely and dead.

For the two men and the mousebeaver, it was like a vision in some eerie nightmare.

"Three hours!" Rhodan remarked once. "We must have increased our speed many times more than a light-year per second. I'd guess that by now we've covered a distance that would require light 100,000 years to traverse."

Nobody answered him. Although 3 hours had been sufficient to reduce the known galaxy to a nebulous spot in the emptiness it had not been long enough for Sengu and Pucky to let the shock of the experience subside within them. The minutes dragged slowly. They seemed to drop sluggishly, one by one, into the ocean of time which appeared to have lost its meaning.

Suddenly Rhodan thought he detected a slight shudder that ran through the small ship. The distant light-blob of Andromeda moved to their right and became motionless again. There was a second small shudder, then nothing more.

"The ship has changed its course," said Sengu.

Rhodan nodded without comment. Apparently the special instruments mentioned by the Immortal had just now come into action. Within the past few seconds the search instruments must have detected the location of the vagabond planet Barkon. It was a world whose central star had strayed out of the galaxy hundreds of thousands of years ago, thus taking it along with it. Its mysterious inhabitants, the Barkonides, had undertaken a daring experiment. Converting the planet into a great ark of space, they had departed from their sun in an attempt to return to the galaxy.

That had been more than 60 years ago by Earth reckoning. Since then the slowly journeying planet could not have come far 10 or 20 light-years... who could know?

And how far away was it now from their own position? Rhodan had no way of knowing even that, no more than he could determine with any exactitude how fast their small spacecraft was hurtling through the starless void.

It was remarkable that they had no sense of fatigue although they had not slept for some time. Meanwhile Sengu had finished his beverage and he and Rhodan had consumed a meal. Pucky's bundle of carrots had become noticeably smaller.

Another half-hour passed. The aspect of the void remained the same and they were unable to detect any further change of course. It was as though they were floating motionlessly in nothingness.

Then Sengu cried out suddenly: "There's something ahead...!"

Rhodan strained to see what it was.

The planet moved into their course from one side. Since it was not illuminated by a sun, it was difficult to make out. It was dark like its background—but not completely black. A faint grey twilight seemed to

make its outlines barely visible and a shock of realization came to Rhodan that this must be due to snow and ice. It was only this highly reflective surface that made Barkon visible to the human eye.

The planet approached swiftly as the spacecraft slowed its movement. It headed straight for Barkon at only a few km per second. Their eyes gradually accustomed themselves to the twilight below, which was actually the reflection of distant galaxies, and especially their own, which was still glowing brightly directly at their stern.

"We're landing!" Pucky cried out in a shrill voice as the ship described a long arc and sank toward the surface of Barkon. "It's all grey down there—what is that?"

"Snow, Pucky. The synthetic heat dispensers they use in place of their lost sun must not have been as effective as expected. The Barkonides have retreated beneath the surface. That much was planned. But the snow...?"

He fell silent. He knew that this quantity of snow and ice had not been foreseen.

The ship landed in the region of the equator which no longer had any relationship to the sun or to heat. Here the snow was the same as at the poles, and perhaps—due to rotation—even thicker. They landed gently. Nothing else happened.

Rhodan stared out at the dim white landscape that lay before him, lonely and without a sign of life. The white wasteland stretched to the horizon under a black and starless firmament. The milky flecks of the far nebulae or galaxies were somewhat less discernible now, probably due to the atmosphere.

Atmosphere...?

There were no instruments on board with which to determine the presence of an atmosphere. Barkon had possessed a breathable atmosphere, that much was certain. Rhodan peered up at the heavens again. In his opinion, Andromeda should not have appeared as clear to the eye as it actually was.

Was it possible...?

No, that was improbable. And why? The Barkonides had developed the technology necessary for taking their world out of their sun's gravitational field and starting it off on its journey back to the galaxy. Certainly they must have been able to keep their atmosphere from dwindling away. Perhaps the sheer cold outside was the deceptive factor. The air was clearer here than people would have been used to on Earth.

"I'm afraid we must go outside into the cold," said Rhodan.

Sengu shuddered at the prospect.

Pucky clapped his plastic helmet down over his head and mumbled hollowly: "Then I'm going to turn on my heater. It's a good thing we brought these spacesuits."

Sengu followed Pucky's example. Rhodan was also pleased that they could avoid the effects of the cold but he still hesitated.

"Let's pack the rest of the provisions. Here is a backpack. How did that get here in the first place?"



No one could say for sure. They placed their meagre rations inside it and Sengu put it on. Rhodan reached into the pocket of his suit and took out a small needle-beam raygun. He checked its charge magazine; Pucky and the Japanese also carried energy weapons.

"Let's go," said Rhodan, closing his helmet. The air generating system immediately went into operation. Temperature inside the suit could be regulated by hand.

They had hardly stepped into the airlock before the inner hatch closed behind them. Almost simultaneously the outer door opened. Pucky was standing closest to the exit and the suction almost pulled him outside.

Barkon did not possess an atmosphere!

It was then that Rhodan knew definitely that something terrible must have happened.

### 3/ INVISIBLE INVADERS

Sengu was the last to leave the ship and as he jumped to the surface of Barkon he sank into the snow up to his ankles. They were all immediately aware of the coldness and had to regulate the inside temperature of their suits.

Rhodan looked over the surrounding terrain very cautiously. The endless desert of snow stretched away as far as he could see. It stretched to the distant horizon without contour or change. The line where the planet's surface met the firmament was almost indiscernible.

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 also 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.

Fortunately he remembered the words of the Immortal. At any time he wished to he could call it back, but of course it could only happen just once. Then they would have to get on board and leave Barkon.

He told himself that this would not be allowed to happen, under any circumstances, until he could be certain of the fate of the Barkonides.

"Don't worry, Pucky. We can call the ship back if we need it. So besides that, do you detect anything?"

"Nothing, Perry—no thought impulses. If you ask me, nobody lives on this block of ice!"

"Not even beneath its surface?"

Pucky observed the snow at his feet. "Down there? No thoughts from there, either."

For Rhodan it went entirely against the grain to accept the idea of the whole planetary population being dead when he had not received any positive proof of it. Was it possible that the planet's crust was too thick to allow thought impulses to penetrate Pucky's sensitive brain?

"And you, Sengu? What do you see?"

The Japanese also looked at the snow but Rhodan knew that his eyes could see farther than his own. Meter by meter, his gaze penetrated snow and ice and hard rock into the interior of the planet. How far actually? Rhodan had to confess that he did not know what Sengu's limitations were. He could only wait in silence.

Finally Sengu raised his head to look at him. "Nothing, sir. I went down a thousand meters, and nothing."

That still did not mean a thing. The planet's propulsion system, he knew, lay at a depth of 5000 meters. But before he had Sengu search farther he wanted to have a better look at the surface of Barkon. Especially now that their eyes had finally adjusted themselves to the twilight.

"Pucky, let's do some jumps. Make them about 50 kilometres each as we go. Our direction is east."

Pucky sighed and took each man by the hand. The physical contact made it possible for Rhodan and Sengu to accompany him through hyperspace when he teleported. Of course it required substantially more of his parapsychic energies to do this but he was able to continue such an operation for a certain length of time.

When they materialized again they saw the landscape had not changed. The only difference they noted was that the home galaxy appeared to have lowered slightly toward the horizon.

"Here it doesn't look much better," commented Pucky, and he jumped with them again.

100 km... 1,000 km...

Nothing changed. Valleys, mountains and plains—all were covered over with a thick snow pack, which was the crystallized precipitation of Barkon's atmosphere. Sengu was able to determine that in many places this frigid layer was as much as 50 meters thick whereas in other places it was often as shallow as only 2 or 3 meters. This meant, then, that previously there had been storms here but as the planet's gaseous envelope had dwindled they had gradually subsided and finally ceased.

The snow was frozen hard except for a thin, loose layer on the surface which must have been precipitated in recent times. They had almost circumnavigated half the planet and Pucky was just getting set for another jump when Sengu cried out swiftly to them. "Energy-wave pulsations! *Themechanical*

*kind* . I can sense them!"

Rhodan had not been at all aware that Sengu could also detect radiations in the electromagnetic spectrum, other than light. When he asked him about it, Sengu explained that his mutated retinal nerves were sensitive to such sources, causing a telltale distortion of vision which enabled him to detect such impulses.

"What do you mean by the mechanical kind?"

"Machines—but they're not working any more. I'd say what I'm getting is the residual radiations from a shut-down atomic engine of some kind."

Then it could not have been long since Barkon's installations had ceased to function. Could it be possible that a few Barkonides were still alive down there in those slowly chilling subterranean chambers...?

Rhodan considered.

Here they were standing isolated and alone on a dead world whose towns and cities had been buried under the snow. Nothing else could be discovered here on top. If there was still any life it would have to be somewhere in the bowels of the planet.

Or the capital city...?

Rhodan tried to remember. "Pucky, let's change our direction and spread out the jumps. Almost direct north, I'd say—3,000 kilometres."

Still nothing. Sengu didn't even pick up any more machine radiations. Three more jumps. And then the metropolis!

Rhodan recognized it immediately by its contours, which were clearly visible under the snow. Some of the highest buildings even still towered above the white shroud, giving the last testimony of the fact that this had once been the capital city of the Barkonides.

On the whole, however, there was not as much snow here as elsewhere. Its average depth must have been about 5 meters and in some places perhaps 10. When standing in the streets it was possible to imagine that this, was one of America's goldrush settlements of 200 years before. The high drifts of snow and the individual lower types of buildings were reminiscent of old movies in the stereo films.

"Pucky?"

"Nothing. Absolutely zip! Nobody lives here any more."

If the mousebeaver was not receiving any thought impulses, then there was no one here, either. Not anyone capable of thinking. And every living creature thought, if it was halfway intelligent.

The black void stretched over the dead city. Suddenly not only this city but the entire universe seemed to be dead. Rhodan had the impression that the only ones alive anywhere were Sengu, Pucky and himself.

"Sengu?"

"No impulses, sir."

Rhodan sensed his first qualms of despair. For the time being he resisted the impulse to jump blindly with Pucky into the interior of the planet. Such a procedure held many hidden dangers. Naturally after any teleport jump they would only rematerialise where solid matter was present. But suppose they emerged out of hyperspace in a place where a yielding state of matter existed, such as in water or molten magma...?

"About 500 kilometres to the west of here is the main entrance to the lower world. I was there once. From there a tunnel leads to the central control station for the propulsion machinery and other installations. The air-generating and food-producing centres should also be there."

Pucky took a hand of each of the two men. "Let's give it a try. Here we sure haven't lost anything."

Lost... that was the word. It seemed to Rhodan that Pucky had hit the nail on the head without knowing it. Barkon appeared to be lost—and the Barkonides along with it.

The first jump brought them once more into a snowy wasteland that was devoid of any distinguishable features. It wasn't until the 4th jump that Rhodan paused. He gave his particular attention to the snow-covered peak of a nearby mountain which half obscured the home galaxy that had made a new appearance.

"I believe it was here. Get us closer to the mountain, Pucky."

They materialized at the foot of the solitary peak.

"The tunnel is sunk into the mountain at a steep angle and drops to a depth of 5,000 meters. Any thought vibes, Pucky?"

"Nope. Dead as a thorn nail!"

"No—not quite!" Sengu was looking at the ground with wide, staring eyes. It was as though he were seeing something below.

"Machine radiations?"

"Barely perceptible, sir, but they are there. Like before. Radiations that have been dampened down, dying out. If there are machines down below they must have been shut off. It takes a long time for the residual nuclear energies to die down. We know that the fuel generating process keeps going until the last moment. If the machines are shut down, what's left has to expend itself—even if only in this way. That's the kind of stuff I'm getting."

"And—other than that, what do you see?"

"I haven't gone down far enough." The mutant reminded them that he could only progress visually from layer to layer. "Now—at about 2,000 meters... Darkened passages and tunnels. I can't see much because in spite of this faculty I still need at least reflected light."

Rhodan could immediately perceive the difficulty. Without a real light source even the 'seer' would not be able to observe very much. "But couldn't you give Pucky the necessary coördinates for a teleport jump?"

Sengu nodded without permitting himself to be distracted. "That would be possible. But..." He was suddenly interrupted.

"Look out!" exclaimed Pucky. As a telepath he was the most sensitive of any of them. "Somebody's coming!"

Rhodan whirled about and looked in the direction Pucky was pointing. He saw nothing. Only the snow desert and the distant horizon. Nor could he see anything moving when he looked in any other direction.

"Where?"

Uncertainly, Pucky finally lowered his arm. "Maybe I'm getting antsy or something. It sure seemed like somebody was there! I'm sure he was, because he was thinking! Whatever he thought I couldn't figure out. But he was thinking!"

"As a telepath you're able to analyse every thought and perceive its basic meaning," said Rhodan, somewhat puzzled. "You mean you can't do it now?"

"No—just thoughts without any particular message content. But they weren't the friendly kind. I guess I picked up that much without realizing it. There—it's happening again! Stronger and nearer! It's approaching us..."

Rhodan was surprised to see the hair of Pucky's neck bristle up, which was a real signal for alarm. It was very seldom that Pucky genuinely experienced actual fear—but when it happened it was a sign of very grave danger.

Sengu had given up trying to penetrate the planet's crust. He stepped close to Rhodan and was prepared to grasp Pucky's hand at the first signal from the Chief. But for the time being this did not seem to be the strategy. Rhodan was still staring in the direction indicated by Pucky. He still couldn't see anything.

"It must be very close now," whispered Pucky somewhat hoarsely. "And it's thinking..."

Now Rhodan also sensed it.

Something was cautiously penetrating his thoughts, exerting a perceptible pressure. It was a thrust that slowly became painful. It was bearable but unpleasant because there seemed to be no way of fending it off. Somebody was trying to gain possession of his conscious mind. But who?

The spotless sheet of snow stretched out before him empty. Yet the unknown presence must be standing there only a few meters away. Someone who was invisible.

But there were no footprints. Any invisible person would have to leave footprints behind him in this white snow. Rhodan's eyes watered as he strained to see any sign of the interloper. The pain in his head increased steadily.

"Try your telekinesis!" he called to Pucky.

The mousebeaver nodded. He concentrated on the invisible matter that was close before him—and he struck home.

His mental blow went into emptiness. The pain remained.

Rhodan felt for his energy-beamer but quickly realized the senselessness of it. He could not shoot at something he couldn't see. At least not yet.

"It doesn't work!" said Pucky desperately. "But I think I can reach him—or It—telepathically. My thoughts are striking against some kind of resistance. The distance is maybe 10 meters but no more!"

At least that was something. The direction and range could be determined. Nothing more, however. At least not at present.

"Can you determine its size?"

"All I can sense is the mental resistance, otherwise nothing. It's as if this unknown thing's thoughts were the closest to anything you could call material. Its body—well, it doesn't have any in our sense of the word."

Rhodan had a sudden suspicion but he rejected it immediately. No, there was no way that this could be a Druuf. They were only invisible because they existed in another time-plane. Obviously this was not the case here.

Now he also exerted his meagre telepathic powers—and there was the resistance Pucky had mentioned. But he was unable to probe the thought impulses or to decipher them.

Suddenly the pain inside his brain subsided.

Pucky remained motionless where he was. "He's given up the mental attack. Looks like his reserves of strength are less than ours. He's flubbed his attempt to bring us under his control."

"Is he just one—I mean, alone?"

Pucky did not answer. He appeared not to have considered that there might be more than a single opponent. Although the bristling of hair at the back of his neck had smoothed out, there were still furrows of worry on his little brow.

"No, now I can sense more of them. They're approaching us from all sides."

There was still nothing to be seen, no shadowy outlines and, above all, no footprints. Rhodan nodded a signal to Sengu and grasped Pucky's hand. The Japanese took hold of the other.

"As soon as there is another attack, let's jump."

They waited. But not long.

Abruptly a pale blue beam of energy darted out of emptiness and struck at the snow directly in front of them. The frozen surface immediately began to melt and vaporize.

"Merk! (scram)" shouted Rhodan.

Pucky had calculated his jump so that they rematerialised not 2 kilometres from their previous position.

They were on a slight elevation of the gradually rising land, on the slope of the mountain, and they could clearly observe the spot where they had just been standing.

They couldn't mistake it because it was marked now by a veritable fireworks display. The deadly raybeams came from all directions and transformed the snow into a small lake that was beginning to boil and vaporize. The steam that did not immediately precipitate again spread out and attenuated in all directions.

"They've assumed that we also made ourselves invisible," guessed Rhodan. But he wasn't at all certain of his deductions. "They seem to be trying to destroy us."

Just then the attack ceased. The energy beams died out as all apparent action halted. The small lake began to freeze over rapidly. From this distance it had the appearance of a glassy eye that someone had dropped into the snow.

Pucky was 'listening' inwardly. "They're coming this way," he whispered. "I can't say definitely but I think there may be 5 or 6 of them. They're thinking again. And I'm afraid they've also picked up our own thought-waves. That's why they stopped making that useless attack."

"Then they're also probably trying to figure out how we got here so fast." There was a trace of triumph in his voice. "How fast are *they* moving?"

"They don't have much speed," replied Pucky. "A running man could overtake them."

They all stared in the direction of the small frozen lake. They would be coming from there and could possibly reach their present location in 2 or 3 minutes. Yet nothing moved on the sloping plain. No tracks, no puffs of snow disturbed their passage. The attack of their pursuers remained invisible.

Now Rhodan could sense the painful thought-impulses once more. "What kind of beings are they?" His question came like a whisper. "They are invisible and apparently disembodied. They are telepaths and yet they can't make out the meaning of our thoughts—otherwise they'd have realized by now that we made a teleport jump. They are thinking and yet we can't decipher their thoughts, either. They don't try to make contact but instead just ruthlessly attack on sight. Their objective is to kill us."

"Whoever they may be," said Pucky angrily, "they sure rub me the wrong way! I ought to catch one of them—but how can you catch somebody who doesn't exist?"

"Oh they exist alright," returned Rhodan with emphasis. "But in a form we aren't yet able to imagine. How far away are they now?"

For answer, the attack started again.

The first long-range energy shot missed them but before another one came, Pucky teleported. This time it was a full 10 km jump that landed them on top of the mountain.

They stood on a small, ice-encrusted plateau that was a good 4,000 meters above the plain. The vacuum surrounding them had one great advantage in that there was no wind to contend with. For Rhodan and his companions it made no difference whatsoever whether they stood on the plain or on the 4,000-meter peak.

The small plateau measured about 20 square meters and was quite flat. If the invisible attackers were

going to come here on foot, they had a strenuous task ahead of them. Or did they have airships and long-range weapons?

"Can you still pick up their thought-waves, Pucky?"

He did not receive an immediate answer. The mousebeaver was striving to locate the alien impulses. Finally he shook his head. "They only have a small range. How is that possible?"

Of course Rhodan had to admit that there was no answer to that question.

At the edge of the plateau were a few larger rock outcroppings which were coated with ice. Actually they formed the real peak of the mountain. One of the stones had the appearance of a wide bench. Pucky couldn't resist it. He let go of the men's hands and sat down cautiously on the improvised seat.

He sighed contentedly. "I hope the heater in my suit works just as well at the tail end of me. Well, here we are, sitting on top of a mountain and looking down at the world."

Rhodan did not relax his state of wariness. The advent of the invisible foe had served to scrap all of his previous suppositions. At first he had secretly presumed that the Barkonides had fallen victims to some kind of a technological catastrophe. Their machines could have failed them. But now this was an entirely different situation. Somebody—or*something*—had emerged from the void and taken possession of the planet.

From the void...? From where, actually?

Could there be entities who had succeeded in conquering the mighty gulf of more than 100,000 light-years? Theoretically it was possible. Hypertransitions could reach as far as 30,000 light-years but so far nobody had ventured to make a thrust outward into the intergalactic space between island universes.

So far!

So now it must have happened.

"Sengu, keep on trying to find something," Rhodan ordered.

The Japanese was looking down toward the plain. He nodded but said nothing.

Their view was unobstructed on all sides except where the rock formations towered upward to the final peak. The distant horizon was a barely perceptible shimmering line where the dimly lighted snow seemed to blend into the blackness of the outer abyss. But in between there was nothing that moved. Yet somewhere out there lurked this mysterious invisible menace.

Sengu spoke in low tones. "I see some wide corridors that lead steeply downward into the depths. They are empty, completely deserted. There's no life to be seen. There are a few transport vehicles standing around as though they'd simply been forgotten. Now I can see a large chamber with an arched ceiling. There are passages leading away from it in all directions. Which one should I follow?"

"Any of them that has rail tracks in it," replied Rhodan, recalling something from memory. "You do see one, don't you—one that has metal tracks?"

"Yes, that's true." There was a note of admiration in the voice of the Japanese mutant.



They all fell silent once more. That is, until Rhodan again sensed the pain boring into his brain. The first warning signal! The invisible ones were again making their advance.

Pucky suddenly sprang up. He pointed eastward but not downward toward the plain. Instead, he pointed at a steep angle right into the black firmament.

"They are coming—very fast!"

Sengu abandoned his seeing efforts and grasped the mousebeaver's hand. Rhodan followed his example.

"Where?"

"From up above," answered Pucky excitedly. "Are they able to fly?"

They did not learn whether the invisible enemy was able to fly by means of natural endowments or whether they were employing airships or spaceships. At least not at first. But one thing was certain: their unseen foe had seen them and was attacking.

A blinding light flashed above them in the void. A pale blue beam sliced downward and slashed through the ice on the plateau. Rhodan had enough presence of mind to watch the ray's line of destruction. It did not change its direction and the angle of incidence remained the same all the way. It travelled with amazing swiftness across the plateau and over the edge—then disappeared.

Pucky whispered: "They're getting farther away—but now they're turning. They're coming back!"

This much made it certain that the enemy sat in some kind of flying machine which was also invisible. They were curving in their flight and making ready for a new attack. And this time perhaps they would aim more carefully.

"Let's go!" cried Rhodan.

Pucky had since prepared himself. He jumped.

This time they rematerialised at a distance of almost 1,000-km in the heart of a mountainous country. It was purely by accident but at first sight of the place Rhodan realized that it was well suited to their purpose. Even if the aliens possessed flying machines they would find it difficult to operate effectively in these precipitous gorges and tortuous valleys. Perhaps now they would be safe here for awhile.

"Sengu—get to work!" Rhodan waited until the Japanese nodded a confirmation and then he turned to the mousebeaver. "And you keep your tendrils up for the invisible ones. Give the alarm at the first sign of their approach."

The two mutants knew what they had to do. It was a bit depressing to Rhodan at the moment that he was practically superfluous because he lacked the faculties of his mutants. He could do nothing other than wait for the results of their efforts.

He was aware of a kind of hopelessness. Of what use was their presence here if they would always have to be fleeing from the unknown enemy, who were superior to them, at least in numbers? How were they supposed to help the Barkonides when they had all they could do just to keep themselves alive?

He withdrew a slight distance from the other two and became lost in thought. So far, he repeated to himself, their experience on Barkon had consisted of little more than continuous flight. During this process of cogitating, he had been looking at a rock formation which was unusually symmetrical in its contours. He didn't notice this at first but finally it puzzled him.

The smooth, vertical wall was free of snow. Its only covering was a thin, transparent layer of ice. Rhodan slowly passed his hand over it. The wall was seamless and smooth. In any case it was too smooth to be a natural formation.

Rhodan looked about him. As far as he could see the canyon was completely inaccessible. It could well be that here was another entrance into the subterranean world of Barkon.

His suspicions were confirmed when Sengu spoke to him. "I'm picking up some more weak radiations, sir. Also there's a tunnel into the depths. I followed it. 1,000 meters, 2,000..."

"Watch out!" Pucky's voice was shrill and warned of critical danger.

In an instinctive reaction, Rhodan whipped the beamer from his pocket and opened the safety catch. He did not intend to continue this state of continuous flight. They had to show the attackers, once and for all, that they could also defend themselves. The time had come to take a stand.

Sengu understood at once. He also took the safety off his beamer.

"I think there's only one of them," said Pucky uncertainly.

"Grab your weapon!" Rhodan ordered.

Pucky's expression did not reveal much confidence. Nevertheless he followed Rhodan's instruction and took out his energy gun. He pointed in the direction of the canyon's natural course. "Yes, there's only one. It must have been here when we got here. Its thoughts are mostly curious—that's all I can read."

"Some kind of sentinel," guessed Rhodan as he looked in the direction Pucky was indicating. He also felt the probing into his brain, which gradually became painful again. He could see nothing, not even any tracks in the snow. And yet some entity was approaching him who was intelligent and whose race could manufacture energy weapons. "How far now?"

"20 or 30 meters. But I can't be quite sure..."

Pucky did not finish speaking because there was a sudden flash of light about 25 meters away.

The bluish beam barely missed Sengu. Even as the Japanese dove for cover, Rhodan fired. He aimed directly at the spot where the beam was coming from, even after it ceased. And he kept on firing. He noticed that the brilliant finger of energy from his weapon was glancing off an invisible barrier but the impact area seemed to take on almost human outlines.

"Let him have it!" Rhodan shouted to Pucky.

The mousebeaver read Rhodan's intention in his mind and comprehended. He also began to shoot at the invisible target. Sengu remained lying on the ground but he also opened fire.

The flaming outline of the invisible attacker became more pronounced. This meant, therefore, that its body was resistive enough to reflect the energy beams. Was it possible to destroy it? But then Rhodan saw something that gave him new hope.

The alien staggered and did not return the concentrated fire.

But only its outline could be seen, not its actual body. The cascading streams of the energy beams held the silhouette in their vision. It was like emptying a pail of water over something invisible so that its outlines were revealed by the water itself.

But then for a few seconds something incomprehensible occurred.

It might have been the combination of the three concentrated energy beams or perhaps it was due to other circumstances. Rhodan could hardly believe his eyes when he saw the snow disappear at the target spot—that is, *behind* the fiery silhouette. The unseen foe was taking form. It became visible, turning into material substance!

"Hold fire!" Rhodan yelled, even as he began to sprint forward.

It was a desperate hope that drove him forward. If the counterattack had meant nothing to the alien it should have fired back long before this. And now if it was assuming shape and form to the point where its body even made an impression in the snow, it should also be possible to take hold of it physically.

And that was exactly Rhodan's intention.

Pucky and Sengu had lowered their weapons and were staring after Rhodan in wide-eyed amazement. The mousebeaver was too disconcerted to use his telekinetic powers and try to hold the alien. He merely stood there as an onlooker. His weapon arm hung loosely at his side.

Just as Rhodan closed the remaining distance with a tremendous leap the outline of the stranger began to dissolve. The snow was already starting to show through.

But then Rhodan was there. His hands were free because he had dropped his weapon. He reached out and felt resistance. His fingers gripped something soft and yielding. He was struck by a stream of hate-filled thoughts which made him cringe involuntarily. The pain in his head became unbearable.

Then the alien creature dematerialised and slipped out of Rhodan's grasp. There was no further attack. The thought impulses became weaker and then faded entirely. Rhodan bent down and picked up his weapon.

He heard Pucky. "What was it? Not teleportation, not a reflective field... You were able to get hold of it but it disappeared again. It's beyond *me* ...!"

"That makes two of us," Rhodan answered him peevishly. "But at least we know now that they are not as insensitive as we feared. In our concentrated fire they become visible and material. Perhaps they even feel pain. Who knows, they may even die and then dematerialise. I only wish I knew who they are, where they come from and what they want here."

The silent landscape under the eternal starless firmament held no answer for them.

"Now about this wall over here," continued Rhodan. "It's artificial or at least it's been shaped by

intelligent beings. Sengu, maybe you can see what's behind it?"

This was no task for the Japanese. "It's only 1 meter thick," he answered, "and behind it I can see a big chamber—almost like a depot of some kind. There are lots of rails and vehicles. There are switches and spur lines. Also a main tunnel that goes steeply downward. Two rail lines there. No lights."

Rhodan indicated Sengu's backpack. "We've brought a hand lamp along. All right then—Pucky, take us behind that wall. Now let's have a look at the inside of Barkon. I don't think we're missing anything here on the surface—at the most we can lose our lives if we stick around outside. What happened there just now..." He pointed to the spot where he had felt the alien's form. "That was just pure chance."

Pucky came up and took both men by the hand.

Rhodan finished: "I'll also feel better with a ceiling over my head, where I won't have to be looking at just this empty, starless realm above us. Strange how a man can become so accustomed to the stars..."

The mousebeaver nodded. "You only notice them when they're gone." He concentrated and then made his jump.

#### **4/ INTO THE UNDERWORLD**

The jump was no more than 10 meters but it took them through the thick stone wall, a barrier which they could not have overcome in their materially stabilized state.

It was dark. At first Rhodan tried to observe his surroundings with his eyes alone but then he turned on the lamp. Its light was reflected back from smooth walls. It was also mirrored from shining tracks and revealed a number of small metal cars which were standing about in the area. It was just as Sengu had described it.

Pucky emitted an audible sigh of relief. "To tell you the truth—outside I was still able to catch a few weak thought impulses but here there's nothing. I wonder if the rock walls can hold back their impulses? In that case they wouldn't be tracing ours, either, and it would mean, we're safe in here."

"If they haven't found some easier entrance already," said Rhodan, dampening the mousebeaver's optimism. The beam of the lamp wandered through the chamber. "We'll find out when we go deeper."

"Go...?" Pucky observed his short little legs.

Rhodan indicated the rail cars. "We'll take a taxi, little one, so you won't get tired out. We could teleport farther but I want to have a closer look at what we've gotten into. Is the tunnel safe, Sengu?"

"As far as I can see—yes."

"Then down we go! Let's hope the motors on these cars are still working. I seem to remember vaguely how these things work. The controls are simple."

There were various sizes of rail cars, which were designed for as many purposes. Some of them were like personnel carriers and contained 20 or 30 seats, whereas others were smaller and offered room for anywhere from 2 to 4 people. They chose one with 3 seats in tandem. Sengu sat behind Rhodan while Pucky lolled pleasurably in the rear seat.

"There are two knobs to pull on here," said Rhodan thoughtfully. "One of them is for speed and the other is for brakes. Well, probably that's all that's needed for a descent. It gets pretty steep on the way, if I recall."

"Pretty much so," Sengu confirmed. He was not as much at his ease as Pucky.

The braking knob was in the outward position. Rhodan released it slightly by pushing it inward and soon the car began to roll into the black maw of the tunnel. The hand lamp turned out to be too weak to light much of the way ahead.

"Hold this lamp," Rhodan told Sengu while he began to fool with the control panel. Seconds later, two powerful headlights flashed to life. "Well now, that makes more sense!"

The going was much better. They could see at least 50 meters ahead and could tell whether or not the track was clear. Meanwhile the car had increased its speed and it would have been more than inconvenient to meet with an obstacle now. In spite of his special faculty, Sengu could not see much because it was too dark. His eyes could see through solid matter but in the complete absence of light they were almost powerless.

"I get definite radiation impulses," he said once, hesitantly. "But they're still far away. Just how far I can't say for sure."

They travelled onward and deeper for almost an hour. Then Sengu spoke suddenly.

"Put on the brakes, sir! I think the tunnel's coming to an end. Maybe another 500 meters."

Rhodan pulled out the brake knob. The car began to decrease its speed, whereupon Pucky gave up his idea of teleporting. Although he was comfortably seated on the last upholstered bench he did not trust riding like this very much where he couldn't see far ahead.

Five minutes later the headlights reflected from a wall that formed the end of the tunnel. The car came to a halt. Rhodan inspected the wall, which was obviously artificial. It sealed the tunnel off so tightly that even the countersunk rails vanished into it as though they had come to an end. It was precisely this fact, however, which revealed to Rhodan what was involved here.

"It's a pressure lock! Let's hope we can get through it in this car. Otherwise we'll have to search for another one on the other side. Sengu, what do you see?"

"There's a chamber just beyond and then there's a second wall like this. You could be right, sir. It may be an airlock."

Rhodan climbed out of the car but left the headlights on. "It ought to work automatically but if the power machinery is dead we can hardly hope for that. Surely though, there should be some manual controls here. If not, then Pucky will have to try it."

The mousebeaver sighed and remained seated. "If I have to do some work I might as well do it from

here."

Rhodan stepped to the wall and went over it carefully. In the lower right-hand corner he found a control wheel. Fortunately the lock mechanism was powered by an emergency source. The wall parted in the middle over the tracks and slid to the sides of the tunnel. Rhodan went into the chamber and also discovered a control wheel by the second wall. He signalled to his two companions.

"Everything's in order! Sengu, roll the car slowly into the lock but watch out that you don't let it bump the inner wall!"

The Japanese said nothing. The car rolled forward and came to a stop within a few centimetres of the far wall. Pucky grinned appreciatively but made no comment.

Before opening the second lock gate, Rhodan went back to the first control wheel and turned it back to its original position. The front lock gate began to close again. He sprang swiftly into the airlock chamber and waited until the gate had closed. Under normal circumstances he would not have done so without first determining that the second gate was functioning. But in this case he had Pucky with him.

When the second gate separated, Rhodan felt an inflow of air. It came from the continuing section of the tunnel. The lock became filled with it. Here below there was an atmosphere!

The car rolled forward a short distance and Rhodan closed the inner lock gate. He stood there motionlessly for perhaps 10 seconds before making his next decision. Then he calmly raised his hands and released the fasteners on his lightweight space helmet.

Pucky suddenly cried out in shrill tones: "Don't do it, Perry! If the air is poison...!"

"The Barkonides are oxygen breathers," Rhodan reassured him, and he took off the helmet. Although warm and a bit stuffy, the air was good otherwise. He breathed it in and out deeply without feeling any after effects. "You can take your helmets off so that we can save our own air and power supplies. Who knows how long we may have to still use these suits?"

He climbed into the car and released the brake, again travelling forward into the tunnel. After two hours, Sengu looked at the roof of the tunnel and made a comment. "I can see the surface above us. We're about 4000 meters deep by now. It can't be much farther."

"I feel like a mole down here," muttered Pucky from the rear, and he curled up on his seat to take a little snooze. All of them had shut off the heaters in their suits because their present surroundings were pleasantly warm.

Sengu opened a can of fruit preserves and they took the edge off of their hunger. But of course the sweetish syrup did nothing to quench their thirst. "I guess we can't count any more on getting our supplies replenished—at least not down here," Sengu said.

"We can get by for about one more day if we take it easy with what we have," Rhodan told him. "And if the thirst problem gets too bad, Pucky will have to take a trip to the surface and get us some snow."

"Snow...?" the mousebeaver shook himself and reached into the pocket of his spacesuit. After some effort he managed to extract a carrot from it. "I'd rather go thirsty!"

Rhodan smiled at this but made no reply. He had a feeling that the tunnel was getting warmer. He knew

they must be getting close to the actual living quarters—or at least where it had been planned to build them. This thought startled him for a moment when he considered what it might infer. But at the same time it gave him an idea. "Pucky, what about thought impulses now? Do you think you can trace any?"

The mousebeaver listened inwardly for awhile. "Nothing—not even a wandering dream! It looks like we're alone in this world except for those invisible ones—and their kind of thoughts are spooky. But if the Barkonides are like you say they are—humanoid and almost like Earthmen—then I would have to pick up at least a thought tremor somewhere on this whole planet that you call Barkon."

"No impulses? Not anything at all?"

"I'm sorry—no."

Rhodan resisted the thought that the invisible attackers might have been able to extinguish an entire race of people. The Barkonides had been in existence for a million years already and they had colonized a large part of the galaxy. Perhaps they were even the ancestral source of both the Arkonide and Terrestrial races. And now was it possible for them to die out in the course of a mere half century?

Somehow something was wrong with such a deduction. But what?

Now the tunnel had ceased its descent and was leading in a horizontal direction. Rhodan had dispensed with the brakes entirely and opened the car to full speed. The tracks led forward in a straight line and the small vehicle shot along at a hurtling pace. One hour, two. They were heading directly toward the centre that lay beneath the main entrance, where the first attack of the invisible entities had taken place.

The silence was broken only by the soft hum of the motor until Sengu suddenly spoke again. "I see light! Maybe 10 km ahead—but dim and diffused. Looks more or less like some kind of emergency lighting."

"What else do you make out?"

"Machinery and large chambers—lots of passages and main corridors with many doors. Beyond are still other rooms filled with machinery. Power rooms, motors, generators—a big room where the walls are covered with viewscreens. But the screens aren't working. Yet those radiations are coming from them that I picked up before. Do you think, sir, that we may be approaching the main control centre?"

"I'm sure of it. It's the same place where I was 60 years ago. I managed to correct a slight error which saved the Barkonides from certain destruction. But as it appears now it seems that my efforts turned out to be in vain."

The speed of the car began to drop swiftly, after which it entered a large subterranean station. Here the tracks branched out and offered a variable selection of travel routes. But Rhodan was not planning to travel farther. He brought the car to a halt.

"We have arrived. It was right here in this station that I climbed out of a similar vehicle that other time. But I wouldn't be able to say for sure what direction I had come from. Well, we can determine that later."

He got out of the car and stood there for a few moments, undecided. Then he turned to Sengu. "Those machinery rooms—are they in this direction?" he asked, pointing toward one of the exit doors. When Sengu nodded, he continued: "Good! Then I'm oriented again. Let's go."

Sengu got up swiftly and joined Rhodan but Pucky took longer. He clambered out of the rear seat with nerve-wracking fussiness and then waddled awkwardly across the passenger platform. "What do you want to do in those machine rooms?" he inquired, although as a telepath he had already guessed Rhodan's intentions. "Wake up this whole sleeping planet and tell them happy time is here?"

Rhodan had a sharp retort on the tip of his tongue but he suddenly stared at Pucky thoughtfully. A furrow appeared on his brow. "You know they say, out of the mouths of babes and fools—maybe even mousebeavers—sometimes a kernel of truth is spoken. At least we can try to reactivate the power equipment. Maybe in the process we'll find out what happened to the Barkonides."

Pucky watched him in some amazement as Rhodan went to the indicated door and opened it after searching momentarily for the latch lever. Then he grinned sheepishly and pattered after him. Sengu followed, not having caught much of the repartee because after all he was not a telepath.

The machines stood in silent rows within the main hall. They fairly gleamed in their immaculate condition as though they had only just been installed. Along the ceiling were heavy conduits and thick cables which led through the walls, connecting the various units of machinery with panels in the control central. As confirmed by Sengu, Rhodan knew that there were still more power and machine rooms beyond this one.

Their footsteps echoed hollowly from the bare walls. They came to a halt in the main control centre. Rhodan's lamp was bright enough to illuminate the big room.

The complexity of the operations and monitoring installations reflected the magnitude of their gigantic task. It was from this command station that the planet had been forced from its orbit and orphaned from its central star, after which it had been launched upon its long and lonely journey through cosmic space. That big semi-circular console over there with hundreds of meters and button switches on its polished top—was that perhaps the Master Control? Or the giant switch panel over there above the other desks and consoles? They might be the controls for life support and air recycling.

Rhodan turned slowly to take in all of the complex systems around the room, aware of a sinking feeling within him. How could he ever fathom this equipment which had been able to make an entire planet independent of the sun's light for a 200,000 year span?

He walked over to have a closer look at the hemispherical console. All of the meter scales were at zero. He listened but could not detect the slightest sound. Everything was as silent as a tomb. Even the machinery elsewhere was dead, as Sengu had confirmed.

Sengu...?

Rhodan pointed to a door at the far end of the room. "Beyond that door is another big chamber, I recall, where the power generating equipment is located. Your residual radiations will be coming from there. Can you take a look?"

Sengu went to the door and entered the adjacent hall. Rhodan and Pucky followed him. Prominent in the centre of the room was a raised circular cover shield that was perhaps 5 meters in diameter.

"The reactor is under that," said Rhodan. "It is larger and more powerful than anything we're able to imagine. Well, Sengu? Is it in operation?"

Sengu stared at the shielding and penetrated it with his special vision. "The thing isn't working, sir. The reactor was shut down. I can see lead chambers where there are still residual particles of radioactive



material."

"Try to trace out the main cable leads into the other room. Maybe we can locate the reactor controls."

The Japanese mutant turned to his task—which was a formidable assignment for a non-expert in nucleonics. But his eyes penetrated all obstacles and located the power cables, tracing them through the walls to their source. Gazing constantly at the floor, he moved through the chamber until he arrived in the control room. His eyes continued their search until finally his gaze came to rest on the hemispherical console.

"That's it, sir—the reactor control installation."

Rhodan had suspected as much but now he had the confirmation.

There were no numerical indications on the various buttons, switches and meters but they had colour designators that distinguished them one from the other. A determination of their purpose could only be made by a form of optical conjecture.

"The main cable terminates here," said Sengu, and he indicated a panel containing only three button switches. One of them was green, another yellow and the third was red. "I'd say it was a crazy coincidence if the green one just happened to be the start button."

"Or the red one for *Stop*," grinned Pucky. "What else?"

"Coincidence...?" Rhodan stressed the word significantly. "Who knows whether or not it's merely that?"

His hand slowly approached the green button and paused over it. Then—as though to forestall any other decision—he pressed it deep into its socket.

For about 10 seconds, nothing happened, but then the ceiling of the room began to glow. It gradually grew brighter until the control centre was bathed in brilliant light. The reactor was delivering power again.

Rhodan switched off his hand lamp and returned it to his pocket. Then he raised his hand testingly into the air. "Well—do you notice something?" he asked.

A warm current of air passed over them. It was not only warm but fresh. Only now did they realize how stagnant the air in the halls and passages had been.

"It looks like all the equipment's starting to work," said Sengu. "What I'd like to know is, who shut off the reactor?"

"The invisible ones?" Pucky seemed to be uncertain. "But we haven't come across anybody down here yet."

"That doesn't say by any means that they were not here," replied Rhodan. He was becoming more and more uneasy. "If you notice anything suspicious, fire at once. We know now that it can affect them." He looked about as though searching for something. "I think we should start trying to trace down the vanished Barkonides. They certainly have to be somewhere. Now that the power has been restored we'll at least have some light."

"Will we travel farther in the rail car?" asked Pucky speculatively, although he in particular possessed the

simplest means of transportation. "All there is around here is a bunch of machines, nothing else."

"The residential cities are on this same level—yes, we could try it with the rail car. Or can you see anything farther on, Sengu?"

"To be frank, sir, up till now I've only been concentrating on the installations here and not the Barkonides. But perhaps I might be able to..."

Somewhere they heard a clicking sound.

They heard it clearly. There could be no mistake. At the same time the easily detectable vibrations under their feet ceased to be felt. The ceiling dimmed gradually and then blacked out. Also the refreshing currents of air were cut off.

Somebody had shut down the reactor again.

Rhodan pulled the lamp from his pocket and swept its beam over the room. They were only 20 meters from the reactor console and could not have missed seeing anyone in its vicinity.

The room was empty.

Rhodan held the lamp in one hand and the energy gun in the other. With sudden decision he went to the power console. He couldn't believe his eyes. The green push-button had been snapped back out of its socket. Somebody must have depressed the red one. It was as though an invisible entity was facing him, yet he detected no trace of thought impulses.

"Pucky... is anybody here?"

"Nobody! We're the only ones down here, at least anybody who's thinking."

That was reassuring as far as the invisible enemy was concerned. But with respect to the Barkonides it was much more disturbing. Men who did not think were dead men, because even in sleep the brain continued to function.

He lowered his hand to the green knob again and pressed it in. Immediately the lights came on. A number of the indicators came to life, their needles trembling. Under their feet was a humming noise. The whole complex of gigantic machinery was running anew.

*Click!*

Rhodan stared incredulously at the green button, which had been released again. The lights went out. The machines became silent.

This time he had seen it clearly. First the red button was depressed by an invisible finger and then the green one snapped upward, released by the relay circuit.

He turned on the reactor again and held his hand closely over the red button as a shield. Even if someone here were invisible he would not be able to operate it.

*Click!*

It was incomprehensible. Rhodan could find no explanation for the phenomenon. Maybe it was due to some remote control from the surface. Nobody knew who the invisible creatures were or what kind of technology they possessed. The little word 'impossible' was no longer in use among space-faring Terrans because experience had shown them that all riddles of the universe have an explanation.

Which included the present mystery—even though the solution was not immediately at hand.

Rhodan again depressed the green switch-button and held it in forcefully with his finger. Several times he felt that it was trying to spring back but then the action finally ceased. The equipment remained on, and continued to operate.

Rhodan removed his hand and sighed with relief. "We can't stay around here forever and keep switching this thing on. If the enemy sees he can't get at the machinery from this point he may try to interrupt the power leads. I'd just like to know what's on their minds."

"And I," said Pucky, "would like to know who they are and where they come from."

Ignoring him, Rhodan continued: "Let's stick together now and get back to the rail car. Pucky, you get your bearing on this place. In case the reactor is shut off again you have to jump back here and turn it on again. Do you understand?"

"I'm not stupid!" retorted Pucky somewhat impudently as he waddled toward the exit. "The only thing is, I think I'm going to be doing some fancy jumping back and forth. Let's hope I don't lose you guys in the process!"

Rhodan reminded him: "All you have to do is trace us by your telepathy. Of course it could well be that the reactor will continue to operate. Let's go."

In the rail car distributing station as well as in the tunnel, the ceiling illumination was also present. As they travelled onward it seemed as though the rows of evenly spaced overhead lights were converging in the distance to a single point. However, they had hardly gone more than 500 meters when the lights went out again.

"Does that mean I'm it?" asked Pucky, who had just settled himself comfortably in his seat.

"I'd say it's a fair guess," Rhodan nodded without diminishing their speed.

Pucky disappeared and in a matter of seconds the tunnel brightened once more. Then he was back with them.

"If I ever catch the one who keeps fooling with those buttons," he panted in threatening tones, "I'll toss him into next week! What am I supposed to be, for hex sake—a Springer?"

Rhodan was forced to smile at the comparison. Considering Pucky it was especially incongruous because the Springers were an offshoot race of Arkonides who were heavily built and wore full beards as a rule.

A half-hour later when the car reached a wider section of the tunnel and finally rolled into another large station centre, Pucky had already performed a dozen teleport jumps. However, for 5 minutes now he had been able to relax. The lights burned steadily without further interruption. The air-conditioning was back in operation and the reassuring vibration under their feet held steady.

The car came to a stop. Rhodan pointed to a closed metal door. "That's the entrance gate to the next living centre—or at least that's what Regoon explained to me. He was the chief physicist of Barkon. He worked out the whole master plan of this place and converted it into a reality. I wish I knew if he's still alive."

His companions made no comment. They knew too little about his previous experiences on Barkon more than a half century ago. They didn't know Regoon any more than they knew the nuclear expert Laar, or Gorat the astronomer, or Nex the nexialist. His former connections here had been with these four men. At that time they had been the leading Barkonides.

The entrance gate resisted all attempts to open it.

Rhodan sighed: "The Immortal certainly knew what he was about when he included you two in this mission. Now you can give me an example of teamwork. Sengu, how about giving us a nice description of the locking mechanism?"

The Japanese mutant looked through the metal surface of the large door and immediately perceived the electronic locking device, which was designed to open on a specific impulse or code combination. He gave such a graphic description of the technical details that Rhodan as well as Pucky could visualize its operation.

Rhodan nodded to the mousebeaver. "Now it's your turn, Pucky. Open it up!"

Pucky brought his telekinetic powers into play. Without physically touching the door, he sent his mental force currents into the mechanical portions of the lock and moved them in the proper sequence. He performed precisely what the activated power circuit would have done.

And thus the ponderous gate glided open.

Beyond it was a brilliantly illuminated area but the air that met them was anything but fresh. Of course the air flow from the ventilator shafts was in full operation but Rhodan quickly perceived that since the machinery had only been on for half an hour—and intermittently, at that—the stale air in the great hall beyond had not had a chance to be fully replaced as yet. Without renewal, the supply of air in the cavernous place might last for weeks but it would have exhausted itself eventually. And such seemed to be the case here—although now the condition was being corrected.

The broad passage ahead seemed to extend into the distance endlessly. At even spaces to their right and left were rows of identical doors on which numbers could be seen.

Rhodan looked at Pucky. "Still no mental vibes?"

The mousebeaver shook his head. He could not pick up any thoughts. If anyone was down here he had to be dead—or at least incapable of thinking.

Rhodan looked thoughtfully at the first door in the main passage. He approached it and noted the flat inset area for receiving a manual contact. It was a lock activated by body heat. He placed his hand in the declivity and waited. Seconds later the door slid laterally into the wall.

Sengu and Pucky had joined him there and they suddenly stiffened in surprise. They could not believe their eyes because what they saw was almost too fantastic to be real. The rectangular chamber,

measuring 30 meters in width and at least 300 meters in length, was filled to the ceiling with racks containing metal stretchers where the missing Barkonides were laid out, row upon row.

Dead...?

Rhodan experienced a shock of horror mixed with pain over this sudden death of a race of people whom he had come to cherish almost as much as the Immortal did. But immediately the question arose, Why had they died—especially in such a calm and orderly fashion?

It was quite obvious that they had all retired to their bunks as though to sleep. But this couldn't be an ordinary state of sleep or Pucky would have been able to pick up impulses from their ceaselessly working minds. So they had to be dead or...

Was there another alternative?

There was no way that this could be a state of suspended animation or preservation by deep-freeze as had been used by the ancient Arkonides. The Barkonides were lying in their niches fully dressed. There was no technical implementation here to indicate that they were being fed artificially or monitored by any automatic equipment.

Dead...?

Just as Rhodan decided to have a first hand look at some of them, the lights went out again. Pucky was heard to voice an expletive he had learned from Bell. Then he dematerialised. Rhodan had a fleeting impression that the air circulation had cut off all of a sudden and that the vibration in the floor had ceased. But then the lights flashed on as Pucky returned.

"Those lousy button pushers...!" he muttered bitterly.

Rhodan stepped to the nearest stretcher bed and leaned over the motionless Barkonide. This was a man in the formfitting uniform of a technician. His complexion was pale but it still seemed as though he were merely asleep. Rhodan put an ear to his chest but could not hear any heartbeats. Also, no breathing.

But the Barkonide's body was warm.

If he were actually dead, then it could only have happened but minutes before.

Rhodan straightened up and looked questioningly at Sengu. The mutant returned his gaze with an expression of helplessness. The light flickered and went out. While Pucky took care of the matter, the two men examined several of the other Barkonides. All of them were apparently dead yet their bodies had not yet lost their warmth. They were not breathing, their hearts were still but their blood had not cooled down.

And their brains were also quiescent.

This time when Pucky came back he was gesticulating wildly with his little arms. "Back in the Control Central—thought impulses! I was able to detect them clearly!"

"The invisibles!" exclaimed Rhodan tensely.

But Pucky shook his head. "No—not possible! These thoughts are completely different—desperate but

understandable. One of them was amazed that he was awake."

Rhodan narrowed his eyes. He took one last look at the long row of motionless Barkonides and then nodded to Sengu. Each of them grasped one of Pucky's hands.

"Take us to the Control Central. Let's have a closer look at these awakened ones. Maybe now we'll find out what's happened here."

They materialized directly next to the familiar power console. Pucky bowed his head and 'listened'. He closed his eyes briefly and then looked up at Rhodan.

"Over there in that direction—not very far. He's fully awake now but I can't make much out of his thought stream. Yes, he's thinking all right, completely different from the invisibles. But it's confused, like wool-gathering or something."

"Let's go to him!"

Rhodan led the way as Pucky gave him directions. They left the room and passed 3 or 4 doors, arriving in the wide corridor beyond. The passage stretched endlessly before them. The mousebeaver indicated one of the nearest doors and came to a stop.

"He's behind that one—and there's another one with him now. Here they weren't thinking at all before and now they're ticking again. That's funny..."

Funny or not, thought Rhodan, it was a breakthrough. He was filled with a wild hope. The other 'deadmen' hadn't been thinking either. But these had come back to life...

He placed his right hand in the depression of the 'body heat' lock. The door opened slowly.

It gave them a view of a moderately sized room that was nicely furnished and had nothing at all in common with either the machine rooms or the big sleeping chamber where they had seen the other Barkonides. This was a room arranged for personal comfort, with indirect lighting and comfortable furniture and pleasant warmth.

A man in a trimly fitted uniform came toward them with uncertain steps. He was tall and unusually slender. His face reflected a great intelligence. Behind him were three men who were lying in their beds. One of them raised up and stared tensely at the newcomers.

"Perry Rhodan!" said the slender man who had approached them. He stretched out his hand. "We have had to wait for you a very long time..."

## 5/ BAITING THE TRAP

Rhodan took the proffered hand. "Is it you, Nex? What's happened here?"

The nexialist smiled. It was a rather despondent smile, in fact. He politely greeted Sengu. Then he

looked doubtfully at Pucky but finally bent down and good-naturedly patted his shoulder. Evidently the mousebeaver's uniform apprised him of the fact that he was dealing with some kind of intelligent creature.

"What has happened? You will soon be informed, Rhodan. I'll tell you everything. But first please tell me how you came here and what it looks like outside—on the surface."

"What's happened to your surveillance equipment? Don't you have any contact with the surface?"

"Not for some weeks now."

Meanwhile the second man had gotten to his feet. He was of powerful stature and wore a flaming red beard. He stretched his limbs and then spoke in rumbling tones. "May the fire gods take me if that isn't the alien with the miraculous little spaceship! Do my eyes deceive me, Perry Rhodan?"

"You are not deceived, Chief Physicist Regoon. Have you been sleeping long?"

"For more than three weeks," nodded Regoon as he greeted them. But he looked at Pucky in amazement. "Well now—and who or what is that?"

"That is my friend Pucky the mousebeaver. He's an inhabitant of the planet Vagabond in the Milky Way."

"That's right," said Pucky, taking Regoon's hand. "Just to the right of the Coalsack. You should drop in sometime."

The Barkonide's beard fairly trembled. "He can speak!" he exclaimed in amazement. "And Intercosmo, at that! But certainly he is not a racial offshoot from our own strain...?"

"I'll beg off from that possibility!" protested Pucky and he waddled over to the two remaining beds where the sleepers had begun to stir.

Regoon looked at him in wonderment and shook his head. "That race we've never encountered, even a million years ago, if our traditions haven't deceived us."

But Nex had forgotten Pucky already. "You were about to tell us..." he reminded Rhodan.

In a few words Rhodan depicted what they had found on the surface of Barkon, without mentioning the assignment that had been given to them by the Immortal. But he was not reticent concerning the attacks by the invisible entities and the repeated shutdown of the main reactor by the enemy. Then he said decisively: "But now I'd like to know what has occurred here. Hasn't your planning worked out?"

Now it was Regoon's turn to reply. "Everything worked perfectly! All equipment worked just as we expected it to. We escaped the gravity field of our sun and set out on our journey—precisely toward the galaxy. Life carried on here in the underworld just as we had foreseen. A half-century passed. It was then that we experienced the first attacks of invisible intelligences. Nex, you can tell him the rest!"

The scientist nodded. "With the aid of our remote cameras we were able to observe some unusual events. The atmosphere precipitated as snow and all life outside became impossible. Our sun receded into emptiness. The galaxy approached us almost imperceptibly. Of course all of that was natural and we had expected it. But then for the first time our power machinery failed. It was simply shut off."

Rhodan nodded but made no comment. Sengu had joined Pucky in trying to wake up the two remaining sleepers.

"We were able to turn everything on again but the same process kept repeating itself. Then the cameras connected with the surface failed us and those we couldn't get back into operation at all. We did not locate the trouble but there was every indication that we had come under some kind of attack. There were no visible weapons so far—just a number of furtive happenings, almost unnoticeable at first. But once just before the viewscreens were darkened we caught a single glimpse of a powerful energy beam. It melted the snow and turned the water to steam, apparently for the purpose of examining the nature of the planet's surface. But at no time did we see anyone although rocks were shoved about as though they were looking for us beneath them. Finally they found us. That's when visual contact was broken and the machines stopped. We turned on the reactor again but minutes later it shut off by itself."

"We're familiar with that part of it," said Rhodan but Nex went on.

"We tried to determine what we should do. As a precaution we distributed the sleeper cradles. These were developed by our most advanced medical men. Their effect is amazing. When a person lies down in one of them a part of his physiology is paralysed. The intake of nourishment is no longer necessary. To all outward appearances the man is dead. So little oxygen is required that a man in that condition can survive on only a cubic meter of it for a year. It's an ideal emergency device for survival in the case of an untenable situation like this. We call it 'warm sleep' because the body remains warm in the process. Our life support and food-generating systems ceased functioning and even the air circulation was endangered. So we finally ordered our people to go into the sleeping chambers and to get into their special palettes. We ourselves remained here close to the Control Central but also took the sleep. However, we also prepared ourselves with the means of counteracting its effects. The arrangement allowed us to wake up again just as soon as the air circulation came back. We knew that would happen as soon as the invisible invaders went away."

"Or when somebody put the reactor back in operation?" suggested Rhodan.

Nex smiled. "Not quite. An automatic control turned it on every 24 hours. However, that didn't help much. The unknown enemy always turned it off immediately. But now it seems they have finally given up."

Mentally Rhodan knocked on wood. Within a few seconds, however, he was forced to realize how impractical such superstitions were. The lights went out. Somewhere they heard Pucky whisper an unmistakable cussword. Then a short time later the lights flashed on again.

When Pucky returned, he ignored the surprised reaction of the two Barkonides. "They're still at it! Can't that button be tied down some way so that it will stay in one position?"

"Then they'd find some other way to cut off the reactor, little one. Perhaps in some way that would damage it beyond repair."

"If they come down here they'll be in for a big surprise," prophesied Pucky angrily. "I know they work that button through some kind of remote control because I never pick up their thought impulses when that donkey business is going on. If we tie down that start button then they'll have to come here in person—and we can have a hot reception ready for them."

His suggestion made sense. It could well be that the invisibles were only on the surface and merely carried on their attacks by means of remote controls. But as for the start button...?



"Of course!" exclaimed Regoon. "We'll weld the start switch into position! Don't we have enough energy weapons here?"

After a decision was made to take this course of action, Pucky calmed down. With an air of having made a great discovery he said: "Perry, these two sleepyheads are awake now. You want me to toss them out of bed?"

\* \* \* \*

Rhodan, Sengu, Pucky and the four Barkonides cautiously approached the Control Central. Rhodan had exchanged his light beamer for a heavy energy pistol supplied by the Barkonides. When the lights went out Pucky suppressed his anger long enough to turn on the reactor again. Regoon had hurried after him and soon stood beside him in front of the hemispherical console.

He aimed his weapon at the depressed green knob. The needle ray of pure energy touched the edges of the switch socket and melted them inward. As the tough, sluggish mass cooled down it formed a foolproof obstruction for any movement of the button switch. No matter how often the red button was activated, the green one had no way of being released now.

Rhodan tested it. He used his thumb to press the red button with full force. It was pushed down into its socket but the green knob maintained its 'on' position. The reactor continued to operate. The lights did not go out.

Nex nodded in satisfaction. "Now I'm anxious to see what they will do."

Rhodan indicated the mousebeaver, who had stepped back a short distance. "He will tell us when they come. He can sense them."

Nex did not inquire how Pucky managed to sense the presence of the invisibles. Instead he prepared his weapon for firing. They withdrew from the vicinity of the power control console and deployed themselves around the big room. They were all briefed on what to do, which was based on a definite plan mapped out by Rhodan. What had been possible to do on the surface with only 3 concentrated energy beams should certainly be feasible now with 7 much more powerful weapons.

They waited in silence.

No one knew if the invisibles could see them or not. They might not even have normal organs of sight and perhaps they had to feel their way. There was no way of knowing.

Pucky lifted a hand and signalled that he felt something coming nearer. Rhodan concentrated mentally—and then he, too, could sense the disturbing and menacing impulses as they pressed in upon him. Their intensity was an indication of distance—and they approached swiftly. In fact, extremely fast. Rhodan wondered how they had gained entrance to the underworld and what their means of locomotion might be. Could they penetrate solid matter...?

"They're coming!" whispered Pucky, and he stared grimly at the rounded console which would be the target area for the invisibles. Or were they intent upon going directly into the reactor? It was not very

likely since they had given no indication of being immune to hard radiations.

Pucky's head turned slowly. His eyes were fixed on something that the others could not see. But even though they were not telepaths like the mousebeaver they could nevertheless feel the pressure of alien thought in their brains. And Pucky was staring precisely at the source of this pressure.

At present he was looking straight at the console but he did not fire.

The red knob was seen to sink inward.

An invisible hand was pressing it into its base. However, the green knob remained where it was. The light continued as it had been. The reactor still operated.

Pucky looked at Rhodan. The latter nodded. It was a command signal for all of them.

Lightnings of energy flashed from the 7 heavy weapons. They all converged on the spot where a man would have to be standing in order to operate the power panel. The concentration of the terrible energies cascaded from something that took on the form of an invisible body. The outlines became humanoid and gradually materialized.

The unseen foe became visible.

It was human-like, as they had already observed on the first occasion. And it turned about as though in pain and sought to flee. But the fingers of energy held it fast. It continued to become more and more apparent under the brilliance of the beams. There was even a blurred impression of a face now, yet it remained featureless. Rhodan could just barely make out two eyes and a narrow, twisted mouth—nothing else.

He gave the signal.

The 7 energy beams were extinguished. The alien remained where it was. It had fallen to the floor, however, where it seemed to be writhing about in twitching convulsions.

Rhodan could sense that the thought impulses and their accompanying pains were subsiding inside his head. He leapt forward and ran to the fallen figure. The others followed hesitantly. Pucky remained where he was in order to stand guard. He would notice it immediately if another alien was approaching and thus he'd be able to warn them.

Rhodan took hold of the invisible one who had now become semi-visible. He felt some kind of material and flesh. With all his strength he jerked his opponent to a standing position. But the alien must have been so hard hit by the concentrated fire that it was at least stunned out. Incapacitated, it slumped down again.

Rhodan bent down with it, not letting go. He sought to study the face—using one free hand to rub in the place where the eyes were. The alien's face was seen as though through a veil.

"It's becoming invisible!" came Pucky's shrill voice. "And its thoughts—it's dying!"

Rhodan tried to get a firmer grip but he no longer felt any resistance. His hand went through the material of the strange suit and even into the body of the uncanny entity. The dying man or humanoid could still be seen but it swiftly became transparent. Rhodan could already see the smooth metal floor through its body.

Fear, anguish and pain—these were the chief characteristics of the surge of thought impulses that came into Rhodan's brain, only to diminish rapidly and die out.

In the same moment the alien disappeared. It had not only become invisible but also devoid of substance. It had died and simultaneously disintegrated into nothingness.

\* \* \* \*

They were sitting in the Barkonides' quarters near the Control Central. For hours now the reactor had continued to function without interruption. No one had made any further attempt to turn it off again. Pucky had remained in the Control Central as a lookout but had not been able to pick up any more impulses. To all appearances the invisibles had given up their attacks.

But they knew that the peace and quiet could be deceiving.

"Who could they be?" thought Rhodan aloud, hoping at least that Nex could explain some of the mystery.

But the scientist only shrugged. "They have come out of the great void between the island universes. Perhaps they have no home planet of their own and they were wandering about aimlessly. Then they found us, an apparently uninhabited world coursing through the universe. They probably thought they had discovered a dead planet. And then they learned the truth—and made their attack. But they are invisible and have no bodies. Yet one of them became visible, Rhodan, before it died."

"Yes, and when it died it again lost physical substance. It looks as if that's their natural state. They live in the same dimension as we do. They don't know the art of teleportation and yet they achieve a similar effect. They are not only invisible in the normal sense of the word but effectively nonexistent. However, their brains are some part of our reality. There's no explanation for it."

"We shall find one!" affirmed the nexialist. He represented all sciences without being a specialist in any of them. "One day we shall find out where they come from and who they are."

Rhodan regarded this as a poor consolation. As long as this unknown race restricted themselves to attacking the Barkonides and did not transfer their sphere of activity to the galaxy itself, he wasn't directly concerned about them. But who could be sure? Other than accidental hits against them with energy beams, there were no weapons that seemed to be effective.

Regoon came into the room. His bushy red beard fairly bristled with enterprise. In his wake came the heavy-set astronomer Gorat. They glanced in amusement at the dignified nuclear scientist Laar, who sat on his bed wearing what looked like a silk top hat.

"Why the formality?" asked Regoon with irony. "Surely there's no business of state going on yet—or is there?"

Laar did not answer him. Regoon dismissed the subject and tamed to Rhodan.

"All sections are running at full capacity. The forcefield generator is working and building up a defence screen. Of course we had only planned to use it when we got near the galaxy but now we've followed your advice. So you really think the invisibles don't like energy beams and forcefields?"

"I'm convinced of it," nodded Rhodan. "As soon as the screen spans the entire planet and has built up enough field strength, we'll see whether or not I was right. Is the atmosphere returning?"

"It's forming again," Regoon confirmed briskly. "In a few weeks we'll have a new air envelope around Barkon. Admittedly it will still be cold but men will be able to live on the surface again."

"At least it will enable you to establish permanent bases there which will serve as observation stations. What's happened here must never be allowed to recur. I happened to come here by chance but next time I might be too late. Are you going to awaken the rest of your people now?"

"Not yet," said Nex. "Only when we're sure that the invisibles are no longer placing us under attack."

"And what if you can be sure that their attack is going to continue?"

In a typically human gesture, Nex raised his hands to reveal his helplessness in the matter. "I really can't say."

Sengu spoke up. "We ought to go to the surface with Pucky and take a look around. If the invisibles attack us then we'll know that they still haven't given up their plan."

"Later," said Rhodan after some hesitation. He could not shake off the thought of what a terrible threat the invisible entities might become to the inhabited galaxy. There'd have to be a better defence against them than random shooting in the dark. Maybe energy curtains...

Regoon interrupted his train of thought. "It might be a good idea though to wake up a few of our technicians. We can't carry out this task alone. The machines require constant care and monitoring."

"Only the top personnel," said Nex conservatively, and he gave the necessary permission for the awakenings. "What about the life support and food-generating equipment?"

"Also in operation," Regoon informed him.

Rhodan got up. "I'd be grateful if you could place one of your living quarters at our disposal. One of us will keep a watch on the reactor but we also need some sleep. We've come a long way."

"Right next door," said Nex, also getting up. "Come on, I'll take you there."

Later when Rhodan and Sengu were lying on the freshlymade beds, the sleep they desired did not come to them. Suddenly Rhodan realized he was not fatigued any more. It seemed to him he had just awakened from a deep and refreshing nap. Was it that he had only imagined his fatigue before?

He began to suspect that the Immortal had reached across the incredible distances to them and that it was with them now to help them. He was giving them new strength so that they could accelerate the rescue activities for the Barkonides.

With his eyes still closed, Rhodan asked: "Sengu, are you able to see Pucky?"

"He's standing there daydreaming in front of the console. Ah, now he's looking up—in our direction. Do you think he's—"

"Of course, he's caught your thoughts, Sengu. Pucky, do you read me?"

"He's nodding!" said Sengu, obviously enthused over this simple method of communication. "He reads us!"

"Excellent, Pucky. Any more signs of the invisibles?"

Pucky shook his head negatively, according to Sengu.

"Good, then come here!"

The mousebeaver materialized in the room. "I think they've got their snoots full," he announced. "That is, if they have snoots. No impulses, no more button-pushers. Are we taking off?"

"Not so fast, little chum! The four Barkonides believe that we're asleep. They won't be aware of your absence yet. Sengu can stay here to keep watch. You and I are going on a little tour."

"Up above?" squeaked Pucky excitedly.

Rhodan nodded. "Sengu, now and then go in and check the Control Central. If the Barkonides ask about us you can tell them where we've gone. Is that clear?"

The Japanese nodded.

Pucky took hold of Rhodan's hand.

The spirals of mental energy were hardly noticeable in the air as the two vanished before Sengu's eyes.

## **6/ FAREWELL TO BARKON**

Three days later the aspect of the surface world had changed considerably. In contrast to their private excursion then, Rhodan and Pucky were not alone now. They were accompanied by a group of Barkonide specialists who were equipped with highly sensitive energy detectors and other instruments. With no particular attempt at furtiveness the personnel vehicle had glided up the long ramp to the exit gate and arrived at the surface. Rhodan had deliberately chosen the location where the first attack by the invisibles had occurred and now the sight of the glittering lake of ice reminded him of it.

All of them were wearing extra-warm clothing. The air they breathed into their lungs was cold but no longer as thin as it had been when Rhodan had come up here with Pucky alone. Now he looked up at the blackness of the starless firmament. It was the same as before except that now Barkon possessed an atmosphere again. It was only a few hundred meters thick but it was held in by an energy screen that surrounded the planet. The special forcefield also radiated warmth. On the mountaintops the glacial masses of frozen atmosphere were already melting and thus added further breathable air to the

environment. Other oxygen chemically combined with the ground snow was being released gradually in the rising temperature. If one looked closely at the heavens for a while, it was possible to detect the faint shimmering of the energy field.

Nex, who was in charge of the specialists, looked about him and finally commented: "It's getting there. Within another week the major portion of the atmosphere will be gaseous again. Then we can start setting up the stations."

Pucky had been standing at some distance from them but now he came up to them with an announcement. "More impulses out there! Still a ways off but they're slowly coming toward us."

Rhodan gave the other men a signal. Half of them placed various instrumental apparatuses in the snow and drew their weapons. Everyone was deployed according to plan. There was a rustle of safety catches clicking to open position.

"Well?" asked Rhodan of the mousebeaver. He had also begun to detect weak impulses but they seemed not to be getting any stronger. "What's happening?"

Pucky shrugged. "They came to a halt. Probably afraid of us."

The other half of the specialist crew was busy with their equipment. Nex was calmly issuing instructions to them. He had complete confidence in Rhodan and his two assistants. He had especially taken to the mousebeaver. During the past three days the two dissimilar beings had had some long conversations in private and Rhodan had noticed that the mousebeaver had become quite pensive since then. He had resolved to determine later what the subject of those conversations happened to be.

"Ready!" said Nex finally.

Rhodan detected a further attenuation of the alien thought impulses. They were like a cautious probing which finally withdrew entirely.

Pucky looked at him in astonishment. "Gone! It seems they've just turned off their thinking. Mighty strange!"

Two small viewscreens lighted up on the equipment panels. As on oscilloscope screens, greenish wave spikes were flickering. The two Barkonide operators were sweeping the lens of some kind of camera across the landscape. As the waveforms altered their shape, Nex revealed a certain excitement.

Rhodan remained calm. "What do you make out, Nex?"

"Directly ahead of us, only about 2 kilometres away, we have an obstacle in some form of energy. It's reflecting our beams. There are 3 more of them at 7 kilometres. Same kind of reflection."

"Any shape to them?"

"One moment!"

A brief consultation with the technicians ensued, after which Nex turned to Rhodan again.

"The form is elongated—torpedo-like. Maybe 20 meters diameter by 100 in length. Do you think...?"

Rhodan nodded. "Yes—they're spaceships. The ships of the invisibles, and also invisible. Only detectable by instruments."

"What should we do?"

"Wait," Rhodan advised.

He had a hunch but wanted to see it confirmed. He looked at Pucky, who was gazing off in the direction of the ship in question.

Then the mousebeaver received his silent inquiry and he mumbled an answer. "No more impulses. The ship's hull must be screening them off."

The greenish waveforms on the viewscreens began to agitate wildly. Nex leaned down to one of the technicians and spoke to him in low tones.

Then he straightened up and raised his voice slightly. "The nearest ship has taken off. It's hurtling through the defence screen and making a thrust into the outer void." He paused a few moments without taking his eyes from the screen. "Now it's vanished. Out of range. According to your terms of measurement, that's about 10 light-seconds of distance."

10 light-seconds in 10 seconds! Rhodan let out a low whistle. A considerable feat when considering that this was just during takeoff. What kind of velocity could these spaceships develop out in open space?

"The other 3 ships have also taken off!" announced Nex. "They tore open our shield but its reforming. Very little of the atmosphere escaped." He came over to Rhodan. "What's the meaning of all that? Do you think they've made a retreat and left us?"

"It looks that way," replied Rhodan, though he had some doubts. "They must have realized that their plan has failed here. Like any creatures with intelligence they've extrapolated the consequences. I believe that you may now continue your journey and you can wake up the rest of the inhabitants."

"And you mean that there were only these 4 ships?"

"I think so. It was probably just an exploring expedition. They landed here at the spot where the strongest radiations are. The reactor is directly beneath us. In the future you'll be safe from them if your surface stations keep a constant lookout and are able to detect any object that approaches your planet—invisible or otherwise."

"Objects?" asked Nex dubiously. "Those 4 ships weren't objects—they were nothing but energy."

"You know what I mean," smiled Rhodan as he turned to leave. As far as he was concerned he had accomplished the task that the Immortal on the planet Wanderer had assigned to him.

\* \* \* \*

They waited another two days until the Barkonides had been awakened. The revivifying gases had been

added to the air supply and conducted into the sleeping chambers. The Barkonides woke up, their memories returned to them and their interrupted lives continued again as though nothing had happened in the meantime. New orders and safety measures were established and Rhodan was certain that the invisibles would have little success with a second attack.

He suddenly detected a searching and probing of distant thought in his mind. A question formed there.

"Perry Rhodan...? The Barkonides. Are they alive?"

The Immortal! *It* was probably picking up the thought impulses of the awakened race although they were too attenuated as yet for *It* to make out any specific meanings. The fact had never been impressed upon Rhodan more than at this moment that distances seemed to make no difference to telepaths. For *real* telepaths! Not even Pucky would have been able to bridge this gap of 100,000 light-years. Perhaps nobody could—except the Immortal on Wanderer.

"They have been awakened," said Rhodan aloud. He stood alone on a small elevation. He had come again to the surface to satisfy himself that the construction of the observation stations was in progress. The wide entrance gate in the valley was standing wide open. Not far from it, several technicians were at work. Under a small plastic-metal dome they were installing their observation instruments. "Barkon was attacked by unknown aliens and almost conquered. The Barkonides went into a state of deepsleep in order to avoid asphyxiation and starvation. Their brains were also quiescent."

"That explains the cessation of their thought-waves," came the soundless reply. "Who were the aliens?"

A good question! Rhodan would have given much to know this and to be able to give the Immortal a useful answer.

"They came from the deeper void and were invisible. It could only have been an expedition of exploration because with special instruments we could only detect 4 ships when they left Barkon. And yet they almost succeeded in capturing Barkon. Their state of technology..."

"Invisible entities...?" The Immortal's question interrupted him. There was a slight pause. Then the question: "Do they have no bodies at all? No substance to them? Did you notice if they only became visible and materialized when under the influence of a powerful energy field?"

Rhodan suppressed his astonishment. Did the Immortal actually know of these aliens...?

"Those are the characteristics exactly! They only materialize at the focal point of concentrated energy beams but they attenuate again when the energy subsides—or when they die."

There was no answer for some minutes.

Rhodan stood alone under the unchanging blackness of the outer firmament that was the sky of Barkon. He gazed at the pale fleck of light that was his home galaxy, now partially obscured by the horizon. The snow and ice on the mountain peaks had disappeared by now. It was also melting on the plains. Gushing rivers were finding their courses to lower lying terrain. Lakes began to form. The surface of Barkon was in the process of being transformed.

Then the soundless voice of the Immortal returned and it was as though *It* spoke to *Itself* instead of to Rhodan. "Barkon will become a guide to them, making a trail that leads to our galaxy and they will follow this trail..."



"*They?*" asked Rhodan, attempting to remain calm. "Who are *they?* "

But he was disappointed. The Immortal did not respond to the question. "Your mission has been accomplished, Perry Rhodan. In the future I shall watch over the Barkonides. Soon I'll again be strong enough to see that justice is done—in case any recurrences should make it necessary. Come back now—I am waiting for you."

Rhodan knew that any objection would be useless. The Immortal was mightier than he and he was compelled to follow *Its* orders and wishes. In fact, unconditionally.

"I shall return," he promised. "Today..."

"Your ship will land in 2 hours at the place where you are standing now. Don't forget that if you do not wish to remain on Barkon! You have little time to spare."

"I know," replied Rhodan, aware that each second was allotted according to schedule and plan. Already the mysterious ship's pilot device would have received its instructions and the swift vessel would be responding accordingly. Neither takeoff time, velocity or course could be changed. No one other than the Immortal had any influence over it. "You can expect me."

Rhodan looked down into the plain. The station there would soon be ready. They would be able to detect the approach of even invisible and immaterial ships so that the information could be relayed to the watchers below. Meanwhile the energy screen over Barkon had strengthened itself to the point where such ships could be made visible. The automatic energy weapons would aim at them and fire automatically.

Barkon was prepared.

Rhodan looked at his watch. He still had 1 hour and 50 minutes. It was very little time. Without Pucky he'd hardly be able to make it. Even as he thought of the mousebeaver, he called to him mentally.

Pucky materialized close to him. "You've been talking to the Immortal—I was tuned in on it." He confessed to his telepathic espionage without embarrassment. "So *It* won't come across with who the invisibles are, even though *It* seems to remember them very well. That's what I call unfair."

"*It* no doubt has *Its* reasons," said Rhodan in the Immortal's defence. "Now take me down below. It's time to say goodbye."

They located Sengu in the Control Central together with Nex and Regoon. They had taken a strong liking to him and all three were in a lengthy discussion of the advantages of nexialism.

"So it's quite obvious," Nex was just saying, "that specialization leads to an impersonalized approach and actually suppresses the individuality. It's only possible to achieve effective results when you have specialists work together. Yet if the input of even one of them fails, the work of the others becomes useless. It's like a highly sensitive instrument: if one part fails you can throw the whole thing away—in case there is no replacement for the part that broke down."

"I can see that," agreed Sengu. "But a nexialist could never entirely replace a team of specialists because even he wouldn't have all the knowledge that the specialists represent as a whole."

"However, the risk would be much less," countered Nex with conviction. "Besides—in every circumstance a nexialist would know where to be of assistance. The specialist wouldn't. At least not unless the problem lay within his own field of knowledge. And even that is a rare occurrence."

"Isn't it an impossibility to study every special area of science and to be competent in each of them, merely to have an overview of all of them?"

"It's easier to obtain a general comprehension of sciences than to know every detail in any particular specialization. I'd find it too boring."

Rhodan and Pucky made themselves noticeable. They joined the two men.

"Nexialism is certainly an interesting theory," admitted Rhodan. "Every spaceship travelling the space routes and dependent upon its own resources should have a nexialist on board so that in case of difficulties he could coordinate the work of the specialists." He smiled. "Perhaps we can discuss it later, Nex, but unfortunately there's no time, for it now. We have to say goodbye."

"You're going to leave us?" Nex was startled.

Regoon had only been a silent listener to the conversation until now but now he stepped forward. On his face was an expression of dismay. "So soon? We still don't know if the invisibles..."

"They won't come back—or if they do you're armed for it this time. You know the weapons you have to use on them. Keep the reactor locked into operation. Continue your observations at the surface. Pursue your journey. You are never alone—don't forget that."

Regoon nodded slowly. He realized that he could not change Rhodan's mind. Perhaps he also guessed that Rhodan was not the master of his own decisions in this matter but had to answer to a higher authority.

"Then it is time to thank you and your friends. What might have happened if you had not come here?"

"Nobody knows, Regoon. Not even we."

"Because nobody knows what the attackers intended," interjected Nex. "And because nobody knows where they come from or where they go. We've never run across them before—and our history is a million years old!"

Regoon had stepped out but now he returned with Gorat and Laar. Rhodan knew that these 4 men represented the people of Barkon. Whenever he thought of Barkonides he would also have to associate these men with them.

As the leading nuclear scientist of his race, Laar was also the head of the government. It was proof of the fact that science and politics could harmonize, after all, and that a scientist involved in politics did not always comprise a threat to a world's survival.

Again he wore his formal headpiece which was so similar to a silk top hat and which he apparently always brought out for special occasions. Rhodan wondered about it for the second time since his arrival but did not ask any questions about it. A time would come, perhaps, when the relationships between Barkonides, Arkonides and Terrestrials would be explained.

"We are in your eternal debt," said Laar, shaking hands with Rhodan, Sengu and finally Pucky. "Perhaps we may have an opportunity to repay you some day when your own people need help—after we have come closer to the galaxy. Then you may always count on us."

"If anyone here should be grateful," returned Rhodan, "it should be us. What would all of us be without you?"

He said this in order to bolster the self-confidence of the Barkonides. They considered themselves to be the ancestors of all intelligences in the galaxy, much of which they had colonized a million years before. They would need all the self-confidence they could muster in order to ride out the long journey before them.

Regoon and Gorat also said goodbye but asked no questions. They knew that a small ship would be waiting on the surface for the Terranians—as had happened many years ago.

When Nex offered to accompany them to the surface, Rhodan looked at his watch. "We have only just one hour. Do you think we could make it in a rail car? It's along way..."

Nex smiled. "We'll take the elevator. With that we'll be up there within 10 minutes..."

\* \* \* \*

The doors of the airlock closed at the precise second of the scheduled moment of departure. The lone figure of the Barkonide and the hill he was standing on receded into distance. Nex was waving farewell with both arms raised upward toward them. In the ship's transparent nose bubble, Rhodan returned his signal until the nexialist's figure became a tiny dot in the snow-flecked wasteland—and finally was gone.

The spacecraft pushed through the energy screen, out into the void. As its velocity increased, Barkon sank away into the fathomless abyss and became a small sphere. It was difficult to see it because of the reduced reflective capacity of its altered surface.

And then Barkon disappeared entirely.

The bow of the miracle ship turned toward the distant galaxy, which now stood out against the firmament of the starless realm like a gleaming cloud of light.

The return flight had begun.

## **7/ FAREWELL TO BARKON**

The *Drusus* had landed on Wanderer.

In the hall of the Physiotron stood Rhodan and all of his mutants who had received the life-prolonging, cell-shower treatment less than 60 years before. They had taken advantage of the opportunity to request a new treatment from the Immortal and it had been granted. Also the most important and capable men of his staff, whether mutants or not, were to receive the rejuvenation.

Once the process had started, Rhodan left them and retired to the adjacent hall where the Immortal awaited him. The latter had once more assumed *its* spherical shape and was hovering near the domed ceiling. Rhodan sat down in the contour chair and waited. The small sphere lowered down to him until *it* was on a level with his eyes.

"I have learned everything from your thoughts, Perry Rhodan. You need not report anything to me; I merely wish to tell you something."

"And my questions...?"

"I cannot and must not answer them. Too much knowledge has an effect on the future. For you the future must yet remain obscure because the brilliant light of knowledge around you would only serve to blind you. Yet you shall come to see these things—even if what you think you see is still obscure and dark. The Barkonides have been saved. They are on their way to us and one day they will arrive. Perhaps more swiftly than you believe at present. Even sooner than what might seem possible..."

"Do you know the future?"

"It is fixed but there are many paths to it. Only that alone is its secret—the paths to the future."

"So although the paths are varied, you're saying that the end point is fixed and can't be changed."

"When I speak of the future I mean the end of all time. It has a beginning which lies billions of years in the past. So you see that time also must end. All roads to the future converge there. However variegated the planes of existence and probability paths, all of them lead to one goal: the end of all time."

"The end of time," muttered Rhodan, aware of a shudder down his spine. "Then what is the whole meaning of the past or even the present, if the future only means the end?"

"Other than you or myself—who knows of this ending?" came the counter-question. "Would you venture to reveal such a secret?"

Rhodan shook his head. He already knew that he could tell this to no one. He only had one more question, now that he had gotten this far. So he stated it: "What is the nature of this ending, friend? Is it a return to void and nothingness? Is it the eternal peace of Nirvana or a night of Chaos? What comes after the end? Something *must* come after. Or is it nothingness?"

The shimmering sphere was the embodiment of a vanished race and the remaining focal point of its total wisdom. Now it rose to a higher level and appeared to grow larger. It seemed to Rhodan that this might be a sign of agitation.

"You ask more than you would ever be able to comprehend. Can you not ever be satisfied? You know more now than any intelligence in the universe. You know that there are many parallel paths to the future and that every thinking, self-conscious being chooses his own. Naturally each one does not know what his path looks like but he knows very well that it leads inexorably into the future. You, too, will travel one of these paths but you have someone who leads you there. Your way is not the easiest one but it borders

upon the greatest riches to be wrested from existence. Before you have passed away you will learn the lesson of humility from time to time. The end of time...? No, my friend. Even you will not discover its nature or what comes after—perhaps the beginning of another time cycle, or perhaps nothing. I am the only living entity who could answer your question but I will not. Of course along the paths to the future attempts will be made to break beyond the barriers of time—some with a certain amount of success. But to what avail? A time machine can only choose *one* path and if it should thrust through to the end of time it would cease then to exist. For what else could become of a time machine without time? It could never return. And to swim laterally through the streams of time is not possible. At least not in a material form."

Rhodan could perceive the limitations. He would never lose sight of these facts. His muscles relaxed their tension. He felt a peace come over him that he had never known before. For the fraction of a second he envisioned his path before him. It reached out brightly and clearly through the darkness of Infinity, finally dwindling somewhere into the sea of time toward some indefinable goal.

Then the vision disappeared.

He sat there in the special chair. Before him hovered the sphere, incomprehensible in *its* omnipotence and wisdom, immortal, cognizant of the beginning and end of time. If this entity existed, then the future must still hold significance. Otherwise would *It* not have made an end of its existence by now? Would *It* continue to lead him—Rhodan—into that future?

"I thank you," said Rhodan in a low tone of voice, conscious of his comparative weakness and insignificance. Was he not a mere human, even though relatively immortal? Were there not many others like him? Had he not become what he was, only through their help and loyalty? What would he be without his friends—and without *the* Immortal...?

"I am also grateful to you," answered the Immortal. "You have helped me in a situation where I was unable to render aid myself. And if we had not helped the Barkonides..."

He left the rest unsaid but Rhodan suddenly realized that the moment had come for a final question.

"What about the Barkonides? Who are they, actually? And why is their destiny so important to you?"

"Do you believe that I am showing them a special preference? That is not the case."

"Why was it necessary for me to rescue them?"

"They are important! Without them the end of time might have a different structure—I don't know."

"I thought that was fixed and unchangeable."

"That I believe but can I truly know?"

Rhodan realized that he wasn't going to find out much more. "And the invisibles? Who are they? Have you ever encountered them yourself?"

There was a slight pause. Rhodan knew that meanwhile his people were still in the biological cell-shower. He was not wasting time.

Then came the answer: "I have them to thank for what I am today. I can tell you no more."

"You are indebted to them? I don't understand. You mean they are not hostile? If so, why have they attacked the Barkonides?"

There was another pause before the answer was given: "If an opponent kills you, Perry Rhodan, then you have him to thank for your death. Have I expressed myself clearly enough?"

Was this merely becoming a play on words...?

The shimmering sphere floated up toward the ceiling. Rhodan got to his feet. The chair disappeared as though it had never been there. But that was not as intriguing to Rhodan as the fact that while he had been almost a week on Barkon only 4 hours of real time had elapsed for the *Drusus*.

"Goodbye, my friend," said the Immortal in its voiceless way. "You will be hearing from me. I am able to reach you anywhere and at any time."

"In any time?" smiled Rhodan, and he bowed slightly in the direction of the sphere, which gradually attenuated and at last disappeared.

He received no answer...

\* \* \* \*

The synthetic planet Wanderer had long since submerged into its nameless state or realm of invisibility. Col. Sikerman had announced the approach of the first transition.

They were sitting in Rhodan's cabin—Bell, John Marshall, Sengu, Pucky and several other mutants. Dr. Manoli stood near the door.

"Then it was even crazier," said Bell casually, obviously referring to Rhodan's first excursion to Barkon. "You were there for 3 weeks but in our own time-plane you only lost one second. This time you were there a week and actually lost 4 hours. Looks as though the Immortal's able to make variations."

"That would be a handy thing for a lot of men," said Pucky. "A fellow could say goodbye to his wife in the morning and tell her he was going to the office. But what he really does is to go with a... with a... well, anyway, *not* with his wife... and do a 4-week vacation in the South Seas somewhere. Then after a month he comes and reports back home, just in time for lunch!"

Manoli grinned rather smugly. "I for one am not married," he commented.

Betty Toufry stroked Pucky's fur. "You don't have a very good opinion of our men," she said, chiding him for his somewhat ribald fantasies. "Now how could the incredible powers of the Immortal ever inspire you with such naughty imaginings?"

John Marshall, however, was not to be diverted from more important considerations. After hearing Rhodan's report he had been interested in just one problem. He asked his questions again. "Who could those invisible people have been? Do they come from our galaxy? How come we never encountered them before?"

Rhodan seemed to be looking through and beyond him as he smiled and said: "You're asking three questions all at once—none of which I can answer. But one thing is certain: the Immortal on Wanderer knows these aliens! He must have had something to do with them in the past. I don't know more than that myself, and I wouldn't venture to really express my speculations on the subject. But I'm afraid that someday we're going to meet those invisibles again. And I don't think we'll be able to compare the encounter with anything like the one we've had with the Druufs. The difference is too tremendous."

"Do you think they'll ever be able to find us?"

Rhodan did not reply.

Pucky stood up. "I think I'll grab a little shut-eye. You coming along, Bell? I have a new joke to tell you. One of the girls in Com Central told it to a friend of hers. Of course I just happened to overhear them by accident—uh, maybe it's better to say I stumbled across their thoughts. Not my intention, of course! But all the same it's a good one. Well...?"

Bell hardly even looked at him. "Thanks—not in the mood. Besides, I've heard it already."

Pucky was speechless for a moment. "You've heard it? But—I've never even told it to *you!*"

"That's right," answered Bell with a bored yawn. "I heard it from Liana Pepsy. You know, the girl in Com Central..."

Pucky raised his brows, pretending to be shocked. He waddled to the door. He opened it and then paused to turn and look back. "How indecent!" he chirped indignantly. "And I had always thought she was a nice girl! Can you imagine...!" With that, he went out and closed the door after him.

Bell leaned back in his chair in some satisfaction and closed his eyes. But if he thought he was going to be left in peace he was mistaken. Dr. Manoli came over and tapped him on the shoulder. "OK, Bell—let's have it. After that buildup, don't leave us in suspense!"

Bell's eyes snapped open. He looked askance at the female mutants about him. "It wouldn't do, Doc. There are ladies present."

Betty stood up and signalled to Ishy Matsu. At the door she turned to Bell. "Sorry, Bell, but we are telepaths. That joke has barnacles on it. Have fun!"

The two women departed, leaving only Doc Manoli and Rhodan as possible victims. Because John Marshall had also heard it—from Pucky.

"It seems there was this country yokel who had just arrived in town," Bell started to say but he stopped as Rhodan got up and went to the door. "Hey, you mean you've heard it, too?" he asked, somewhat crestfallen.

Rhodan shook his head as he opened the door. "Not the joke, old chum—but I've heard you!"

Manoli grinned. "You old star-chaser, you disappoint me!" After Rhodan had gone, he turned to Bell. "But at least there's nobody to disturb us now. Let's have it!"

Bell overcame his sense of being deserted. "Well, OK. So this country bumpkin comes into town

and..."

"Transition in 10 seconds!" The announcement blared from the loudspeaker. Col. Sikerman's voice sounded cold and indifferent.

The look of expectancy froze on Manoli's face. Now he would never get to hear the joke. At least not from Bell, who seemed to suddenly deflate like a punctured balloon. Three interruptions in a row had been too much for him. But Manoli consoled himself. He would just have to hear it directly from Liana Pepsy herself. At least she didn't have Bell's prima donna temperament—not that one!

"Transition!"

There was silence during the hyperjump.

Then Bell: "So this hick came into town and he asked a police officer how to get to the next main intersection..."

"Stop!" cried Manoli in sudden rebellion. He held his hands over his ears. "That's the story about the dog that was being taken for a walk! I heard that one a hundred years ago! And besides, it isn't juicy at all—you call that a joke? Pah...!"

In the neutral colour motif of Rhodan's cabin there was only one bright red spot which seemed to be out of harmony with the milieu.

Upon closer inspection, this round red spot turned out to be Bell's face...

## **ORDER OF THE ACTION**

[1/ A "VOICE" FROM THE VOID](#)

[2/ INTO THE "GREAT BEYOND"](#)

[3/ INVISIBLE INVADERS](#)

[4/ INTO THE UNDERWORLD](#)



[5/ BAITING THE TRAP](#)

[6/ FAREWELL TO BARKON](#)

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[THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME](#)

THE STARLESS REALM

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

"DEATH," the high priest said to me. "You are close to death. I knew that you did not have a second device. So my information was valid. I demand full freedom and the right to participate in programming the robot Regent."

"You're a little late with that idea," remarked Rhodan. "Without the activator, Atlan will die. If that

happens because of you, Kaata, I'll come after you personally! You'll not get inside the ship. If Atlan is put out of action you will still have me and my mutants to face. We'll chase you all over this moon if we have to. I am familiar with the spacesuit you are wearing. It only gives you 10 hours of oxygen. Our Terranian suits have a superior regeneration system. We can breathe for 24 hours! What use is it to resist? What could you gain by Atlan's death? Use your reason! I'm offering you complete freedom—what more do you want? You're beaten, anyway."

The Anti was silent for a few moments, during which we allowed our weapons to cool off. Otherwise we would not have been able to use them.

Then came Kaata's answer: "I can't rely either on your promise or on that of a dying man. I prefer to gamble on what's real. My prospects of conquering you are better than anything you can guarantee me. I have no faith in the pledges of a barbarian or in the promises of an Emperor who has gained power through deception. You will have to die, Atlan!"

\* \* \* \*

This dramatic sequence takes place in the next episode of PERRY RHODAN—

## THE MYSTERY OF THE ANTI

By K. H. Scheer