



**This Poster is a full-colour
reproduction of the PERRY portrait
especially commissioned
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1/ A TIME TO LIVE, A PLACE TO DIE

Rhodan's boots left a deep imprint in the moist sand. A gentle breeze stirred the surface of the big lake and raised foamy crests. Shells and colourful stones covered the shore.

On a steep incline behind Rhodan rested the mighty *Solar System* on its landing struts. Even to the Imperium's Administrator who was accustomed to the sight, the 200 meter heavy cruiser looked like a menacing prehistoric monster in these surroundings.

Rhodan stopped and deeply inhaled the clear air. The cargo hatch of the *Solar System* opened and a loading beam swung out. The wiry figure of Lt. Chad Tuncher emerged in the opening as he gave his instructions.

For the first time Rhodan looked at the man who stood a few steps away at the shore. "Where would you like to have the house set up, Khrest?" he inquired.

There must have been a special sound in his voice that made the old Arkonide come over and put his

hand on Rhodan's shoulder. "You don't agree wholeheartedly with my wish to live the last days of my life in this place, do you, Perry?"

"It goes against my grain to leave a friend all alone," Rhodan replied quietly. His face betrayed no emotion but even a less observant man than Khrest would have noticed Rhodan's tightly clenched fists.

"I know what meaning the word 'friend' has for you," Khrest said. His voice sounded clear, belying his old body. However there was no denying that the life of the Arkonide scientist neared its end. Neither Khrest nor Thora, the late wife of Perry Rhodan, had received the cell shower on the planet Wanderer and were not granted the gift of eternal life. The skill and medical knowledge of the Arkonide physicians enabled them to prolong Khrest's life but they could not perform miracles beyond the limit of biological science. Khrest had attained a philosophic attitude in which he adequately faced reality. He felt that his death was imminent. He went to Rhodan and requested his transfer to this planet. He was already too far alienated from the world of Arkon to return to his homeworld. Neither did he wish to die on Earth. With grim irony he had explained to Rhodan that he did not want to end his life in a bed surrounded by 'mourning barbarians'.

The Arkonide told Rhodan of a small solar system, 6381 light-years from Earth and heretofore unknown to the inhabitants of Terra. Its yellow sun Soltyp was orbited by 5 planets and had been discovered many thousands of years ago by the Arkonide Ufgar after whom the system was named. The second planet was a little larger than Mars and contained an abundance of water and oxygen. Its gravity measured 0.84 G. Primeval forests and oceans covered the planet but there were no intelligent beings present.

Khrest had chosen this world on which to live out the waning days of his life and Rhodan finally acquiesced to the urgent plea of the scientist and left Terrania with him aboard the *Solar System*. Now they had arrived to select a suitable location.

"Look out down there!" Lt. Tuncher bellowed. At the same moment he recognized that it was Rhodan who was in his way. "I beg your pardon, sir," he shouted, more subdued.

The house suspended on the hook of the crane began to sway. Tuncher yelled angrily, waving his arms. "Are you guys trying to wreck the house?"

Several harassed men appeared at the hatch to see why he bawled them out and the lieutenant growled in disgust.

"Is this the right place, sir?" Tuncher inquired.

"Yes," Rhodan confirmed. "You can put it down here."

Suspended on a steel cable, the prefabricated building was slowly lowered to the beach, accompanied by a constant stream of threats and epithets by Tuncher. Finally it touched the sand in perfect condition.

"How do you like it?" Rhodan asked Khrest.

"It looks much too luxurious," Khrest observed with a smile. "I imagine you didn't try to economize."

Rhodan replied sadly. "It's a tiny house and we can never compensate you for what you have done for my people."

"Whatever I have done I did gladly and of my own free will," Khrest answered with a fleeting sparkle in

his reddish eyes. "Only few beings are fortunate enough to further the advance of a great race. The Earthlings were always like children to me who had to be protected and guided. But this phase has ended. Humanity has outgrown its infantile stage and taken its place among the stars. I am confident that a great future awaits this race if it acts as in the past and there are always men like you, Perry."

"Let's take a look at your new home," Rhodan suggested, changing the subject. "You have a modern spacejet with hyper-propulsion system and hyperradio at your disposal. You will be left here without physicians to help you in case you need medical care. So you have the possibility of returning to Earth at any time or call for help. In addition I'm going to leave 2 combat robots with you. The probability that intelligent aliens would land here is extremely slight but I don't want to neglect taking it into consideration. However, in case this should happen, you must try to keep the spacejet from falling into the wrong hands. It contains the latest propulsion system and electronic equipment which are vital to the Solar Fleet and must be kept secret from hostile alien powers at all cost."

"I promise you I will guard the flying disk with my life," Khrest assured him. "You won't have to worry about it."

They went together to the house. Khrest walked with a slight stoop, breathing rather heavily. His white hair flowed down to his shoulders. Despite his age he was still a very impressive figure.

When they reached the building, Rhodan explained with an inviting gesture: "The door opens automatically as soon as you approach it."

They entered the building and were immediately surrounded by its cozy warmth.

"Here I will sit in the evening and look out at the lake," Khrest said quietly as he stepped to the large window. "My eyes will be here but my thoughts will be elsewhere."

"Are there any thoughts on which you haven't pondered?" Rhodan asked in the same quiet tone.

Khrest put his hands on the windowsill. Although the glass of the window was non-reflective, Rhodan believed he could see the face of the Arkonide in it.

"I'm an old man," Khrest said. "At my age many things look different. One gains a certain detachment."

"You will be lonely," the Administrator took another tack. "The robots will wait on you, prepare your meals and guard the house but perhaps you would like to talk to a human being now and then."

Khrest turned around and looked into Rhodan's eyes.

"I'm looking forward to being alone," he replied unemotionally. "You still see in me the active Arkonide scientist." He shook his head and his long hair undulated on his shoulders. "You must accept me for what I am, a tired old man."

Before Rhodan could make a reply, Lt. Tuncher rushed in with a red face. "Excuse me, sir," he panted. "These clumsy bunglers didn't set the house down right—it stands cockeyed."

"It's not straight?" Khrest wondered. "I didn't notice it."

"I've just measured it," Tuncher reported excitedly. "The floor on which we stand is slanted 1° away from the shore."

"One degree?" Rhodan was astounded. "Really, Lieutenant, how could you let this happen?"

Tuncher swallowed nervously and looked questioningly at Rhodan. "What shall I do, sir?"

"Take your men and unload the spacejet and the robots," Rhodan ordered.

Tuncher snapped to attention and was about to rush out again when he was called back by the voice of the Administrator. "Tuncher!"

"Sir?"

"Watch it that the spacedisk is set down properly. I don't want you to tell me that it is 2° off."

"Yes sir," Tuncher stammered in confusion.

Khrest laughed in amusement as the lieutenant trotted off. "If he runs into a horned burrower, he will really flip his mind."

"These animals are supposed to be very dangerous," Rhodan commented with arched brows. "You'd better be careful where you walk, Khrest."

"Of course," the Arkonide agreed. "I'll also look out that none of the acidthrowers gets close to me. These beasts are much too excitable. I wouldn't care to be a target of their streams of concentrated acid. Ufgar has described these two animals very thoroughly in his report on this planet."

The tall lanky man with the almost haggard face gazed at his old friend. "We will mark this world on our stellar maps as Khrest's Planet," he declared. Before the Arkonide could protest, he continued: "The spacejet which we leave for you will be protected by an energy screen. When you want to board the little spaceship you will have to transmit the code signal to deactivate the protective screen."

"You don't take any chances with an old man like me, do you, Perry?"

"No," Rhodan replied. "Tuncher also brought a little motorboat for you which you can use to fish on the lake. Please tell me if there is anything else I can do for you."

They left Khrest's new home and watched Tuncher and his crew unload the spacejet. The disk-shaped spaceship had been constructed in secrecy and measured 35 meters in diameter. The sleek lines of its dome merged into the even surface. The bubble accommodated a small crew and the most modern equipment of the Solar Fleet. The design of the ship enabled a single pilot to operate it by himself.

Khrest, who was familiar with the gigantic battleships of the Arkonide fleet, did not conceal his admiration. After the machine had been moored on the ground, he remarked approvingly: "This is another proof that I'm no longer needed. People who can build such fine products are able to take care of themselves. The Earthlings have achieved so much in a relatively short time. Perry, regard me as a symbol of an epoch which has run its course. Youth will take my place and I will soon be forgotten."

"Mankind will never forget you," Rhodan assured him. "Your departure will leave a gap that cannot be closed for a long time. Looking at it in this light, you are only too right when you speak of the end of an epoch."

They spent the next few hours walking along the shore while the crew of the *Solar System* was busy putting the last touches on Khrest's abode. In their conversation long forgotten events were brought back to life. Rhodan continued in his attempts to make the scientist return to Earth with him but Khrest's decision remained unshakable.

Finally Lt. Tuncher appeared to report that the work was completed and the *Solar System* was ready to take off again.

"The crew wants to say goodbye to you," Rhodan said.

They were about 600 meters from the heavy cruiser. Khrest gravely shook his head. "Give the men my regards and convey my best wishes to them," he said.

Rhodan stood still. His hand touched the Arkonide's arm and Khrest, who had shared Rhodan's company for years and years, felt that the Terranian had trouble finding the right words. "Don't say anything," Khrest begged softly. "Just go."

Perry Rhodan took the hand of the old man. They looked once more into each others' eyes. For a moment the pressure of their hands intensified. "Thank you, my friend," Rhodan whispered hoarsely. Then he turned abruptly around and followed Lt. Tuncher.

Khrest stood motionless, following them with his eyes. Rhodan and Tuncher ascended the steep incline without turning around. Khrest squinted into the low sun behind the *Solar System*. Next to the mighty vessel the two men looked like ants. Then they disappeared altogether.

Minutes later the sphere lifted off, borne by its powerful engines and propelled by the thunderous forces of atomic heat. The ground began to tremble and Khrest's ears felt a pain.

At the altitude of 2000 meters the ship's crew chose its own way of saying goodbye to Khrest. A flaming beam shot from a gun turret and coloured the sky blood-red. A last salute to a great friend of mankind!

"Famal Gosner!" Khrest whispered. It was an Arkonide expression meaning "Farewell!"

Soon the *Solar System* vanished in space. Khrest slowly walked to his little house at the shore of the lake. He was in no hurry. An old man waiting for his death.

Khrest had no inkling that his solitude was destined to be disturbed with sinister intent.

2/ THE THREE FUGITIVES

Golath was seriously worried. The air purification system was on the verge of breaking down. Although there were some oxygen tanks aboard the *Kaszill*, not Golath, Liszog nor Zerft had been able to discover them.

The *Kaszill* was already no more than a wreck when they were locked up in the ship and chased out into

space. It was utterly incomprehensible to Golath why this creaking container—for which the designation ‘spaceship’ was a fatal misnomer—was not already ruptured by the first blast. Zerft was kept busy plugging constant new leaks. His work had become such a skilful routine that Golath still nourished a spark of hope for their survival.

The only machine which still functioned faultlessly aboard the *Kaszill* was the automatic trunk-cleaner. Thus the three Unithers were still able to clean their trunk regularly of the residue of food deposits. After such a rejuvenating treatment even the foul air seemed a little more bearable to Golath.

Liszog, who had been sitting in front of the rangefinder in deep thought, reached over to Golath with his trunk and gave him a little shove. "It's time for you to take your turn," he said.

Golath, who fancied himself as the captain of the ship, complied with Liszog's request with considerable displeasure. Especially since he was convinced that they could sit before the rangefinder for the next 100 years without detecting anything significant. Not that the three Unithers could expect to live that long. The life expectancy of the *Kaszill* was zero even in the most optimistic estimation.

The three Unithers were the same height as Terrans but their bodies were much more massive and bulky. In addition to arms and legs—they possessed a trunk as long as an arm which served as a tool as well as for the intake of food. Their heads were semi-spherical and had two large eyes which sat directly on their shoulders and were barely movable. A smooth tough hide of light-brown hue covered their bodies.

After Golath took Liszog's place, the latter reclined on the trunk-cleaner. Zerft, who had remained in a state of relaxation since repairing the latest leak, rose awkwardly. He stepped behind Golath and looked over his shoulder at the instruments.

"Do you think you can see more than I?" Golath asked, irritated.

Zerft took his time before he answered in a conciliatory tone: "I believe I see the same as you do—nothing."

Liszog's trunk was stuffed by the rinsing appendage which made him difficult to understand when he said: "We will have to resign ourselves to the fact that we will never be able to return to Unith. It's impossible to perform a heroic deed with this dilapidated ship which could grant us a rehabilitation. It would be better to look for a suitable planet where we can land as long as there is still time."

"Liszog is right," Zerft agreed. "Our history has never reported a case when an expelled member has met the conditions for a return home. Even if we were to detect a spaceship of another race—how could we capture it?"

Golath slid his hand across the rangefinder screen. "Are you ready to give up then?" he asked.

"Yes," Zerft replied firmly. "Right now."

Liszog gurgled his agreement from under the massaging brush.

Golath pointed to another observation screen where several glowing points were discernible. "That is the solar system closest to us," he explained. "We might be able to make it to there."

"I hope we can find a world with an oxygen atmosphere." Zerft voiced his concern. "It's possible that we

won't discover a planet on which we can live!"

Golath swivelled around in his chair. He was the tallest of the three Unithers but Zerft was much broader. Even so, Golath's trunk smacked Zerft heartily on the shoulder. Their girth made the cabin space limited.

"What kind of a life are we going to lead?" Golath said in despair. "We'll just vegetate if we are left to ourselves. Our judges know very well that each Unither craves company and recognition. We are a gregarious people and deportation is a fate worse than death!"

Liszog had finished and cleaning process. He got up and joined his two companions. He was the youngest and his body was still growing. "You should have thought of that earlier, Golath," he complained. "You were the one who dragged us into this. It was madness to attempt to steal—"

Golath slammed his trunk against Liszog's chest. The young Unither reeled from the blow.

"The plan was good," Golath snarled. "How could I know that there was a second electronic barrier around the camp?"

Liszog retorted furiously: "You are to blame that we were locked up in this living tomb and exiled from our home! Now we won't be allowed to return unless we can accomplish an extraordinary feat which will benefit all our people. Your idea of capturing an alien spaceship is just as crazy as your burglary plan!"

The *Kaszill* put a sudden end to their quarrel. A violent vibration shook the vessel from stern to stern. Golath slid away on his chair and Zerft had to hold onto the console of the rangefinder. "That was the last gasp," Zerft exclaimed after it was over.

Golath picked himself up again and returned to the rangefinder set. He avoided looking directly at Liszog. "Alright then," he decided. "We'll head for that solar system and take a look around. Perhaps we'll be lucky to find a good spot."

As if to emphasize his words, a red line flashed across the screen. Liszog, who was about to make a nasty remark, kept his trunk shut. Zerft stamped his feet. Somewhere in the ship was a metallic crash which made the Unithers break out in a cold sweat.

In a low voice, as if the slightest noise could cause the *Kaszill* to fall apart, Golath explained: "We've just experienced an ultra-dimensional energy discharge."

Liszog excitedly rolled in his trunk and Zerft quickly rubbed his hand over the screen as if he could show the phenomenon again with his gesture. "A what?" he inquired with curiosity.

When it came to questions like these they had to depend on Golath. He was the only one of the deportees who had enough education to understand the instrumentation aboard the *Kaszill* ... barely.

"An unstable condition in the space-time continuum," Liszog claimed boldly.

Golath laughed. He got up and walked to the computer, which looked similar to the Terranian electronic brains of the same size. The Unither programmed the positronicon with a sequence of data. Then he waited in front of the computer till it spit out the result on a narrow metal foil which was perforated by a pattern of holes.

"A what?" Liszog asked again.

Golath laughed haughtily as he nonchalantly discarded the metal strip, savouring the experience of the moment. Let those two morons learn how to appreciate him! Without him, he was convinced, they didn't have a ghost of a chance for survival. "It was a spaceship," he announced after an effective pause, noticing that Zerft's trunk stiffened.

"Where is it now?" Liszog inquired fearfully.

"Howbig is it?" Zerft asked, motivated by the same feeling, although he was better at concealing his fear.

Golath refrained from asserting his ego and decided after a few moments to tell the truth. "All I know is that we have registered an unknown ship during a transition. It obviously passed into hyperspace after taking precautionary measures. Fortunately we have tracking instruments aboard the *Kaszill* which enable us to monitor each disturbance of space. It means that we did not spot the unknown ship directly but only noticed a change of the spatial structure. Therefore it is impossible to determine the size or the destination of the unknown vehicle."

"In that case we have no reason to get excited about it," Liszog muttered dejectedly. "The discovery won't do anything for us."

"I wouldn't say that," Golath said. "At least I know at which point in the universe the ship started its transition."

Zerft thrust his trunk against the observation screen showing a few points of glittering light. "From there," he said.

Golath felt a bit annoyed that Zerft had stolen the climax of his presentation. "Quite right," he said tartly. "At the time the ship performed its transition it was in the solar system we have chosen as our goal."

"It probably was an Arkonide ship," Liszog added.

"As members of a rebellious colonial nation the Arkonides won't receive us with open arms, I'm afraid."

"Let's worry about it if and when we get there," Golath said.

"Arkonides!" Zerft murmured, his voice full of hate. His eyes glowered and his back stiffened.

None of the Unithers could guess that they had spotted a Terranian vessel, the *Solar System* !

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After 72 hours terrestrial time, the blunt bow of the *Kaszill* emerged in the Ufgar system. The flight had been a nightmare of fear and terror for the three Unithers. Midway on the trip the disaster had begun to take its toll. The *Kaszill* began to disintegrate and shed parts of its hull into space. A large leak had sprung in the rear engineroom which Zerft could not control. Liszog man-aged to close the bulkhead

before it became an airless deathtrap. The life of the banished Unithers hung by the proverbial thread.

However, the Unithers were guided by fate to their goal. Liszog was certain that the vessel would fly apart at the last moment but Golath's and Zerft's elation allayed his pessimistic outlook.

"The 2nd planet contains oxygen," Golath announced after a thorough investigation with his measuring devices. "That's where we are going to land." He noticed the doubt in Liszog's eyes and emphasized: "If it's the last thing I do with this flying coffin!"

In his own mind he was far less sure of the landing since he realized only too well that precise navigation of the *Kaszill* was akin to suicide. However he was loath to show his misgivings for fear that Zerft and Liszog would retract their consent to the landing: which was their only chance for survival.

The Unithers had no clear idea of what to do after the landing if it turned out to be successful. Too many unforeseen things could happen that would have to be taken into account. Moreover, Golath had little faith in the dependability of the young inexperienced Liszog. If the situation got tough, he would have to rely more on the older Zerft—although he hated his guts. "We will have to fasten our belts," Golath ordered. "I can no longer trust the robot pilot. As soon as the *Kaszill* touches ground, we will have to get out at once because we have to expect the possibility of an explosion."

During the following hours Golath steered the vessel with extreme caution. He tried to avoid all unnecessary strain on the ship as well as he could. Zerft had taken his place at the rangefinder and Liszog squatted restlessly between them.

"On which side are we going to touch down?" Zerft asked. "I would suggest the side where it's night."

"We are bound to make such a spectacle of ourselves that it won't make a bit of difference where we land," Golath replied. "If this planet is occupied by Arkonides they are sure to detect us anyway. There's nothing we can do about that."

The energy sensor of the *Kaszill* solved their problem. As soon as they plunged into the gravitational field of the planet, the needle of the sensitive instrument deflected. "Something is going on down there," the big Unither warned.

"What?" Liszog asked, his anxiety growing steadily.

Golath let his trunk dangle in vacillation without taking his eyes off the dial. "The deflection of the needle is not very strong," he observed. "It's possible that there is a power station on this planet. Perhaps they have an automatic beam transmitter. Let's try to pinpoint where the impulse originates."

"What for?" Liszog shot his question like a pointed arrow.

"Very simple," Golath snapped, "because that's where I want to land."

Liszog looked flabbergasted. He snorted and turned to Zerft for help. "We'll run smack into the arms of the people at the power station," Liszog moaned. "They'll shoot us out of the air."

Golath's trunk lashed out at the squatting Unither, bowling him over. Golath was unable to stomach the constant complaints of the youngster. Unable to disguise his contempt he said in a trenchant tone: "This is a chance we must take. If the Arkonides are down there they are bound to spy us wherever we go. We should use our advantage of surprise! On the other hand, if it is a robot station it would be stupid to come

down somewhere in a wild forest where we will be forced to walk for miles."

Zerft decided the argument in his own direct approach. The other two saw over his broad shoulders that he pointed his trunk to the quivering needle. "There," he bellowed.

"Hold on!" Golath shouted. His voice was strident and fearful. Multiple belts held his hulking body down on the pneumatic couch but left his hands free to manipulate the controls. Liszog, lying next to him, trembled. His eyes were closed and his hands tightly clamped down on the couch frame. Only Zerft reclined leisurely. He gave the impression of imagining the enjoyment felt during the treatment of a trunk-cleaner.

Golath performed the braking manoeuvre. The *Kaszill* entered the atmosphere of the planet and the ship began to vibrate and groan tremendously under the strain. Joints were torn apart and rivets sheared off but the vessel still held together. The Unithers cowered helplessly on their couches as Golath held a firm grip on the steering controls. He thought many times that the ship would fail to react. At a slight angle, almost tangential to the surface, Golath steered the *Kaszill* in the new path. Just when he began to breathe easier, one of his engines abruptly stopped. The vessel was jerked around, whined in protest and began to spin. Grunting under the sudden change of his equilibrium, Golath tried to restore the balance of the ship. Even Zerft lost some of his impassive composure and looked apprehensively at the pilot. Only a blur swept across the panoramic picture screen. Liszog whimpered uncontrollably.

Golath decided to try a desperate manoeuvre. He cut off all remaining engines for a few seconds and the *Kaszill* kept going by its own momentum. When it was on the verge of nose-diving, he gave the three engines at the rear, which were still intact, a sudden burst of power. The acceleration caused the ship to race toward the ground. Now Golath applied the full braking power. The *Kaszill* shrieked under the excessive stress.

The ship is breaking up! Golath thought in horror. He shut his eyes. When he opened them again the ship was still hurtling through the air—a chunk of glowing metal going through hell. He screamed hoarsely and looked at the altimeter. What he saw brought the sweat to his brow. Only 4000 meters above the ground, the *Kaszill* still had such an enormous velocity that it could not stop before it was smashed to bits upon impact. Golath had only one possibility left. Somehow he had to gain more height again. There was no time to check whether he had reached the intended landing area or had overshot it already. Golath became nauseated as the ship roared and screamed. With trembling fingers he manipulated the controls and the ship finally responded sluggishly so that he was able to push it up to 5000 meters.

"How much longer?" Zerft inquired coolly. His terse tones could not have been more controlled if he merely waited for a boiling drink of Grats at the Kallasto Hotel of Unith.

The ship gradually lost its speed. Golath realized that he could not keep it up much longer at the present altitude. He had to descend for a landing! He switched on 3 additional observation screens. There were only clouds in sight. Eventually darker regions emerged which were presumably large forests. Something blue flashed across the screen. Golath had the impression that it was a lake. He attempted to fly in a spiral. Then the clouds disappeared from the screen as if swept away by a gigantic hand. The ground was a greybrown sheet. Suddenly all was quiet.

"Now!" he shrieked as everything exploded in a flash of fire, smoke and dust as the ship crashed into the alien soil.

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The first feeling Golath experienced afterwards was amazement that he was still alive and the second was an irritation that his trunk was dirty and clogged. Then he opened his eyes.

His chest was covered by the glass of the broken picture screens. But his tough Unitherian skin was unmarked. Dust and dirt settled all around him. Then he remembered his companions. The youthful Zerft stood in front of the instrument console trying to find out which were still in working condition. Irrate that nobody had bothered to help him, Golath removed the belts from his body.

Now he saw Liszog, too. The youth was stretched out under the trunk-cleaner which had weathered the crash without damage.

"There you are," Zerft said lackadaisically when Golath came over to check the instruments. Golath frowned in cold fury. His right shoulder ached and he had a burning pain in his trunk. He glanced impatiently at Liszog but said nothing because the cleaning of the trunk was considered to be something of a ritual and it would have been bad manners to interrupt another person during the procedure. It was a taboo which was observed by all Unithers. Even under these conditions. Therefore he turned to Zerft.

"It could have been much worse," Zerft commented. "We're still alive and most of our instruments are still functioning."

"We have to get out of the *Kaszill* nonetheless," Golath stated gruffly. "The danger of an explosion is not yet over."

Zerft smiled a little as he folded his arms and let his trunk hang over them. "Of course you can go outside if you like," he said.

Golath took a step back. "What do you mean?" he asked.

With his typical bland expression Zerft proclaimed, "It means that I have taken over the leadership of this group as of now. The *Kaszill* is almost completely demolished. We don't need you any more, Golath. I have already talked to Liszog. about it while you were still unconscious. It's alright with him that I make the decisions from now on."

Golath's eyes flared crimson. He felt a fierce rage well up in him. Only the brute force embodied in Zerft's powerful torso kept him from assaulting the usurper. Finally his calm reason gained the upper hand. "Very well," he said icily. "What do you propose we do?"

Zerft was taken aback by his quick victory. He kept studying the array of gadgets before he replied. "We will keep the *Kaszill* as our base of operations. We can start the necessary investigations from here. First we will go in the direction in which the power station should be located. Unfortunately our energy sensor was knocked out so we will have an intensive search. We will take our weapons with us for security. I have already spot-checked a little around the ship in the meantime. Not far from here is a big lake. It will be best if we walk along its shore."

It was a long speech for Zerft. Liszog had finished the cleaning of his trunk. Golath, who wanted to take his place, was shoved aside by Zerft. "I believe it's my turn now," he said ominously.

"I hope we keep the same order—especially when it will be our turn to die," Golath replied grimly.

It was a declaration of war no Unither could misunderstand.

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The *Kaszill* had ploughed up the ground for a length of almost 100 meters before it came to rest near the edge of a primeval forest. The vessel was split in to 2 pieces and the rear half where the engines were located was totally destroyed.

This condemned the three Unithers to a permanent exile on the planet. They could consider themselves lucky that they had landed in an atmosphere of oxygen more or less suited to their requirements.

The *Kaszill*, or what was left of it, had crashed at a spot about halfway between the forest and the lake whose shore was visible on the horizon as a dark line.

Judging from the position of the sun, Golath figured that it must be early morning. When they left the *Kaszill* their faces were caressed by a pleasant breeze of fresh air. Golath stretched his limbs in the sun and inhaled deeply. It still made him shudder when he thought of the foul air they had to breathe in the *Kaszill*.

. Now the air in the ship was good again and they could always return to it. As far as that goes, Zerft's suggestion wasn't so bad. At least they would be able to avail themselves of the trunk-cleaner apparatus at regular intervals. He was glad that they would not have to fall back on the primitive method of their ancestors which was to clean their trunks with leaves wound around a stick. This oldfashioned mode of cleaning was considered as rather distasteful by the new generation of Unithers.

"We'll climb down to the shoreline," Zerft's voice interrupted his train of thought. "It's advisable that we get back before dark." He tucked his thermo-beamer away and waved the others to proceed. Liszog raised his trunk as a sign that he was ready and Golath contented himself to grunt.

The strange group shambled off. Golath was the first to reach the steep slope at the shore of the lake. He was about to climb down when Liszog called out excitedly. The young Unither stretched out his hand and pointed to the ground. "The land is *burned up* over there," he reported excitedly.

Golath recognized the darkened area. Zerft gave his nod and they all ran to the mysterious spot. Grass and bushes were either burned up or seared in a precise circle. It seemed odd that inside the circle most of the plants were undamaged.

"Obviously this was anything but a natural fire," Zerft observed. He bent down and pulled out a half-burned clump with his trunk. "What do you think of it, Golath?"

Golath, whose sharp eyes had already discovered other clues, replied harshly: "There was a spaceship standing here. You can still see the impressions of the support legs. It was probably an Arkonide vessel."

"What makes you think so?" Liszog asked apprehensively.

"The arrangement of the support legs and the pattern of the grass fire," Golath explained eagerly. He wanted to show the youth that he was more capable than Zerft to guide them through their calamity.

Zerft, who had run to the rim of the incline, shouted something in an excited voice which was very unusual for him. "Look down there," he directed his companions.

Golath leaned forward. He heard Liszog utter a cry. "A house!" Golath exclaimed jubilantly. "And a little spaceship."

They all looked down and Liszog whispered: "There doesn't seem to be anybody around."

"Yes there is," Zerft contradicted. "There are two combat robots around the other side of the house. Come, I'll show you!" He pulled Golath and Liszog over a little distance. "You can see them from here."

"If they detect us, we'll be finished for good," Liszog lamented. He nervously paced, his great trunk swinging in wide circles around the peering pair. "That's right," Golath said. "We don't stand a chance against these machines. Apparently they are posted here as guards. Perhaps it's a station for Arkonide poachers who come here every so often to collect the animals caught in their traps."

Zerft became increasingly excited. "Here we have stumbled on a unique opportunity. We can capture an alien spaceship and use it to return to Unith. It is obviously a special model which surpasses anything our people have so far been able to construct! We will be showered with honours if we can bring back a trophy like this!"

"How can you be so sure that it really is a spaceship?" Liszog inquired. "It could also be some kind of a boat used for fishing."

Zerft trumpeted contemptuously and Golath wondered how he ever got mixed up with a peabrain pachyderm like Liszog. In front of them was what they desperately needed... if the combat robots would allow them to go near it!

"We must destroy the two robots," Zerft finally declared.

This was easier said than done and Zerft realized that they were once more dependent on Golath's knowledge. In the given circumstances he was afraid to undertake anything without his advice.

"I suppose the robots have a protective screen," Golath speculated. "They probably activate it only in case of imminent danger in order to preserve their energy. If we succeed in catching them unawares before they can activate their defence shield we'll have won the game."

"What we have done so far was just trusting our luck," Zerft remarked without looking at Golath.

"There always exist two possibilities in the life of a Unither," Golath observed philosophically. "You are lucky or out of luck. If we concentrate our firepower together on the robots and blast them with maximum force, we can knock them out."

"What if they are invulnerable to our bombardment?" Liszog asked dubiously with a quaking voice.

"They can run faster than we do," Golath said cynically. "I shall leave the rest to your imagination."

In contrast to his other talents, Liszog's imagination seemed to be very well developed. His trunk

twitched in ill-concealed terror.

Zerft showed no empathy for his young companion. "Let's get it over with," he said, drawing his gun.

Golath and Liszog followed his lead. Three unshapely arms with weapons ready to shoot protruded over the slope.

"Fire!" Zerft's clear voice broke the silence.

Three pencil-thin beams, spreading out as they travelled through the air, shot toward the robots. The machines failed to react in time and their positronic brains were destroyed in a matter of seconds by the infernal heat.

"Enough," Zerft commanded.

Liszog looked down at the molten mass of metal and sobbed faintly. His nerves had snapped under the strain. Zerft patted his shoulder, trying to calm him.

"That did it," Golath exclaimed. "Nothing can stop us now."

"Unless the owner of these goodies unexpectedly puts in an appearance," Zerft said.

Golath tapped the butt of his gun. "This—and our determination—will do the trick."

Before the sun set Golath was to learn that an Arkonide was present on the same planet and his determination matched their own.

3/ APPARATUS DIABOLICAL

At first Khrest thought that the *Solar System* had come back again. He was in the middle of the lake when the quiet around him was abruptly broken. Khrest put his paddle down and looked up. It was still early in the morning and the sky was covered by clouds.

He glimpsed a dark cigar-shaped shadow flying at tremendous speed across the lake. The spaceship—Khrest did not doubt for a second that it was one—performed a suicidal landing curve which marked the pilot as a maniac in the eyes of the Arkonide. The flying object crashed several 100 meters beyond the shore and a huge dark cloud rose from the spot.

His first reaction was to bring the quickest help to the victims of the crash. He deplored his imprudent instructions to the robots to remove the outboard motor. Khrest had no desire to race his boat and he preferred to paddle quietly out on the lake as soon as it got light. He enjoyed the calm and was happy to watch the colourful fishes playing in the clear water.

Khrest's second thought was more realistic and probably saved his life. He noted that the shape of the ship indicated it was neither a Terranian nor an Arkonide vessel. Strangers had landed and Khrest became immediately concerned, not for himself but about the spacejet Rhodan had entrusted to him. The

scientist had learned from long experience that it would be folly to consider the simultaneous arrival of strangers as a mere coincidence under the law of probability. It was much more sensible to conclude that they were raiders attracted by the radiation of the energy station serving his home.

Khrest realized that a cautious approach was warranted. His physical condition did not allow him to get involved in a dangerous adventure. He had to proceed with circumspection. Estimating the distance to his house, he figured it would take him too long to reach it even if he used the utmost speed possible for him. The strangers could be there before him. Khrest looked with dismay at the hand impulse-beamer he carried with him. In case of a serious emergency it was a rather inadequate weapon. Fortunately the spacejet was surrounded by a protective screen which could be lifted only by the code-signal transmitter strapped to his own wrist.

The Arkonide decided not to head straight for his house. It would be much too risky to expose himself to a possible attack out in the open. He intended to go ashore several hundred meters from the location of his house and work his way toward it stealthily. He picked up his paddle and steered his little boat around after selecting a convenient place to land.

When he had gone half the distance to the shore he took a short break. It bothered his conscience that he might in fact not be bothered by hostile attackers but his help would be needed by people stranded in a disaster. He had to fight off his desire to rush to the place of the crash and render aid. As strong as his compassion was, he had to put off being a Samaritan until it was safe. The races of the Galaxy treated each other with mistrust—a fact which Khrest regarded with the greatest bitterness. He considered the struggle for power between the cosmic races as a law of nature. Youthful races, such as the Terrans, who were imbued with the spirit of expansion into the outer worlds, could not be stopped in their striving for dominance. It was equally understandable to him that the older empires would resist any attempt to restrict their rule. It was due mainly to economic rivalries that made the adversaries, armed to their teeth, clash in space in their battlefleets. The ambition for political influence and military might drove the most divergent races into a competition for the most lethal armament. Those who failed to play the vicious game could expect an alien fleet to invade their planet and take it over as a new colony.

Khrest resumed his effort. He stroked the paddle in a steady rhythm of his arms. He did not carry a watch. The lone old man had no need for it. Several hours elapsed before the keel of the boat finally scraped the sand of the beach. Khrest climbed out and anchored the boat where he could find it again later on. The slope was not quite as high at the place he had picked. Nevertheless the Arkonide was out of breath after climbing up. To walk along the beach would have been too dangerous as there was no place to hide at the edge of the water. Khrest gathered his cloak for his march. For a minute the sun peered out of the clouds and bathed the land in a warm yellow light. Khrest looked back again. The boat looked tiny from above as it rocked gently on the waves.

Then he checked his impulse-beamer. It had been a long time since he held a weapon in his hands—with the intention of using it if necessary. The Arkonide had seen entire planets perish. Suffering and death had filled his life and he had gained the wisdom to regard weapons as a necessary evil. Ever since life had emerged from the primeval ooze, creatures had fought and destroyed each other. The course of evolution had generated highly intelligent beings who merely perpetuated the ferocious battle with more sophisticated means and on a more horrendous scale.

Khrest concentrated his attention on his surroundings. He advanced in a manner that would allow him to take cover instantly. He had no illusions that he could manage to enter the spacejet unnoticed and operate the hyperradio transmitter. Khrest lost sight of his boat but his house would soon come into view. His pace hastened.

He reached the spot where the *Solar System* had stood. He cautiously approached the rim of the incline. He went down on his knees and crept the last few meters. His power station was 50 meters below. The ground smelled burned. Khrest's heart beat faster as he gingerly moved forward, being careful not to send rocks or loose soil down the hill.

When he had finally ventured out far enough to look down, the sight made him shudder. The two war-machines lay slumped on the ground next to the house and their metallic heads were dissolved.

But this wasn't the worst. What frightened him most were the three hefty monsters with trunks who endeavoured to get into the spacejet!

Khrest had to close his eyes for a moment. His worst fears were surpassed by the evidence before his eyes. The three aliens ran around the disk in a high state of agitation in an obvious attempt to find a way of gaining access through the protective shield of the little spacecraft. One of their visible efforts was a huge hole they had burned out of the ground with their thermo-beamers. Their attempt to get to the jet from underneath had failed but this did not dampen their frantic activities. They kept furiously attacking the invisible screen and tried every imaginable experiment to accomplish their purpose.

For a while Khrest watched them motionlessly. Then he drew his weapon. It was an automatic reflex, triggered by determination to save the spacejet at all costs. He drew a bead on the alien trespassers.

Don't be a fool! His logic asserted itself. *You'll lose the ship as well as your life!*

His tension subsided and his body trembled almost imperceptibly in a belated reaction. He lowered his weapon and retreated from his vantage point. The best he could have hoped to achieve was to knock one of them out of the battle but he would have laid himself open to their superior weapons.

You need a better weapon,
he argued categorically in his mind. *You know where you can find one.*

It was the solution. The coarse-looking beings were equipped with heavy thermo-beamers. The effect on his robots left no other conclusion. It was a reasonable guess that more weapons of this type could be found in their spaceship.

The answer to his problem was to search the spaceship of the aliens without delay. The thought occurred to him that the intruders could have left someone behind to guard their ship. Khrest looked around. The ship must have crashed not far from the forest. He strained his eyes but was unable to locate it.

It was imperative that he carried out his plan as fast as possible. He would have to disregard his physical condition. The Arkonide had promised Rhodan that he would never let the spacejet fall into the hands of others. Little did he think at the time that he would be forced to defend it with his life.

As he ran breathlessly, he turned around from time to time. The trunk people could appear any time at the ridge of the slope if they needed some technical equipment from their ship. More than once Khrest had the uncomfortable feeling that a thermo-beamer was aimed at his back. He ignored the weakening of his legs. This was not the time to play a sick man. Although he was an exhausted old man, he had to act like a young man in his prime.

Soon he discovered the spaceship of the transgressors. It was broken in two. Once again Khrest looked back over his shoulder across the open plain behind him. The fact that the ship was a total wreck

increased his concern about his spacejet. His opponents were willy-nilly forced to capture a spaceship if they did not want to get stuck on this planet. Khrest had no doubt they would leave no stone unturned to destroy the protective energy screen in order to gain possession of their only means of escape.

Khrest studied the section of the spaceship which was only partially destroyed. He would be able to enter it at several places. Through the open airlock and through the hole torn at the point of impact. At the bow gaped another crack which was wide enough to let him pass through. Khrest decided to use the entrance through the airlock. He kept his impulse-beamer at the ready but nobody was there to challenge him when he pulled himself up to the airlock. There was enough light to orient himself. His trained eyes recognized quickly that the ship had been ripe for the junk heap even before the catastrophe occurred. He saw some lettering above the airlock but was unable to decipher the instructions.

He penetrated deeper into the ship. Some of the corridors had collapsed and others were split open. The floor was littered with debris and Khrest had to climb over it. Finally he reached a larger room which was filled with a variety of equipment. The Arkonide did not take the time to examine the function of the numerous devices as he continued his feverish search for weapons.

He stepped over a low bunk behind which some flexible spiral arms were mounted on a wall. This was as far as he got! He was seized from the rear in a bear hug. His impulse-beamer clattered to the floor. When he looked around a cry choked in his throat. His attacker was a mechanical contraption!

Two of the mysterious spiral arms had reached out from the wall and wound themselves around his body like snakes! He was irresistibly pulled down on the bunk.

A trap!he thought aghast.They've set a trap for me!

He tried to free himself from his entanglement with all his strength but quickly realized that it was hopeless. The automaton held him in a firm iron grip.

After Khrest had been pushed down on the bunk he gave up his futile resistance and stretched out his limbs. Then he was strapped in by clasps emerging from the sides of his baffling trap. His body was completely immobilized until he could move only his head.

Khrest had to watch helplessly as a pad was lowered and pressed his forehead back. He cursed his carelessness but now it was too late to do anything about his lack of foresight. He was spun in like a cocoon and forced to surrender to the machine.

Before he could fully contemplate his misery another spiral dangled over his face. It had an attachment that looked like a rod with a soft covering. A light fluid dripped from its end. Khrest thought he was having a bad dream. The gadget swung around his nose and he noticed that the dripping rod slowly rotated. The apparatus accompanied the operation with a hypnotic noise which sounded like *Bzzzzzzzzzzt!*

Two flimsy wires, similar to sensors, descended on Khrest's face as if searching for something. They touched his nose, which made Khrest quiver although the metal wires felt pleasantly warm. Then the sensors were retracted again but his hope that the peculiar treatment was finished was disappointed. The rotating rod came down and aimed straight for his face again, while the machine softly whirred *Bzzzzzzzzzzt!*

* * * *

Golath extricated himself from the hole and flopped exhausted to the ground. His fury had grown so irrepressibly that his eyes flared malevolently when he stared at Zerft. He knew from the beginning that it was senseless to use this method to penetrate the screen around the ship. But Zerft had insisted on continuing the attempt.

"What's the matter?" Zerft asked, irritated.

"I'm tired," Golath replied. "We won't get anywhere this way. Perhaps we can break down that barrier with one of the energy generators aboard the *Kaszill*."

"It must be fairly simple," Zerft contended stubbornly. "The owner of this tiny craft can't penetrate the shield either. Therefore he has to deactivate the energy screen whenever he wants to board the ship. This can't take very long and he must know a method to lift the screen safely and rapidly."

"Sure," Golath agreed. "It's simple for him."

Zerft stared fiercely at the spacejet as if he could conquer it by the power of his eyes alone. "What other possibilities do we have?" he asked.

"We can take some generators out of the *Kaszill*," Golath proposed. "Perhaps it is possible to make them absorb the energy of the protective field or concentrate it in one area and create a gap."

"Sounds reasonable," Zerft admitted. "However, we should see if Liszog finds something in the house which would open the way to the ship."

Golath's groan expressed his contempt for Zerft's deficient technical knowledge as well as Liszog's talent as a sleuth. He felt an urgent desire to give his trunk a good cleaning. It was clear to him that sooner or later it would come to a showdown between himself and Zerft. He was fed up with taking orders from that big bully who was not much more intelligent than Liszog. To be blunt, he was nothing but a common thief.

They went to look for Liszog in the house. They found him hopping around and whining in a room filled with a blue haze that made Golath cough. The young Unither held his thermo-beamer in one hand and hid the other hand under his trunk. Golath saw that it was bleeding. The stench of burning made his trunk writhe.

Zerft pulled Liszog out of the smoke and asked incensed: "At whom did you shoot?"

"I shot at a machine," Liszog explained tearfully.

Golath bristled. "At a combat robot?"

"No," Liszog replied, beginning to calm down, "it was no such thing."

"Why did you shoot at it?" Zerft wanted to know.

"It hurt me," Liszog exclaimed. "It had several push buttons and I thought it might have something to do with the ship. So I pressed them."

"Then what happened?"

"There were a few openings and something began to hum inside. I put my hand in one of them and before I could pull it back it was already injured."

"But why did you shoot at it?" Golath asked.

Liszog looked at him with puzzled eyes and Golath couldn't help feeling something like pity for the exiled youth. "I don't know," Liszog said.

"He's cracking up," Zerft scoffed, exasperated. "He's like a nervous old woman and his stupid shooting will get us into trouble."

"I'll take a look," Golath said.

Zerft gave him the OK, not being anxious himself to get back into the smoke-filled room again. He left the house together with Liszog and they sat on the ground to wait for Golath, who came back after a few minutes.

"Well?" Zerft asked and got up.

Golath was pensive as he reported: "It really was a machine. A special machine."

Liszog cocked his head. Maybe he had succeeded in doing a good service to his companions after all."

Zerft asked dubiously: "A special machine? For what?"

"For chopping up food," Golath explained.

Liszog was deflated and Zerft gave him a nasty look. "We have to go back to the *Kaszill*," Golath said calmly. "We must get some equipment and Liszog's wounds have to be bandaged, too."

For a change Zerft raised no objections. He walked first without a word and Liszog followed, downcast.

* * * *

Khrest was in the unenviable position of a man who watched a strange show taking place before his eyes in which he played the main role but was unable to change the events. In the meantime the Arkonide had realized that the machine was not set as an ingenious trap for him. In his haste he had triggered the mechanism by accident but he was still baffled by the purpose of the device. The spirals and wires which dangled over his face seemed to search for something the old man apparently lacked. The robot machine would desist only after it carried out its task and Khrest had no idea what it was.

He saw only one other possibility of terminating the efforts of the machine but it could mean the termination of his life as well: the return of the men with the trunks!

Khrest expected to see one of the hulking bodies appear in the open hatch at any moment with a thermo-beamer in his hands. The scientist was unable to use physical force to free himself from his desperate situation. His strength had ebbed too much to break the metal clamps holding him down on the bench. His only hope was that the robot machine would stop its operation when it proved to be futile. There was no other way out of his dilemma that had any semblance of logic.

Bzzzzzzzzzzt continued the nerve-wracking noise emanating from the contrivance. The rod spiralled down over the nose of the Arkonide, squirted a fluid and retreated. Then it was followed by the quivering wires which probed the contours of his face and the cycle was repeated.

Khrest kept worrying about the safety of the spacejet. Perhaps the aliens had already managed to force their way into the little ship. He was burdened by a feeling of guilt when he thought of the promise he had given Perry Rhodan. How could he keep it in his frustrating situation?

Khrest was not afraid of death. He was a seasoned veteran who rationally weighed his chances and acted accordingly. He had come to this planet to live out his declining days in peace and solitude. Now he faced death even sooner than he expected but it would be far from peaceful.

Once more he strained his weak body to the utmost in a futile effort to break his bonds. The thought that he was in danger of losing the spacejet gave him extraordinary strength. He tensed the muscles of his arms and tried to raise his back. But to no avail.

Give up! he reasoned. *Save your strength!*

Khrest smiled although he was exhausted by his desperate effort. "Save my strength?" he exclaimed. "For what?"

There was only silence around him except for the buzzing of the confounded contraption which persisted in wagging its tentacles before his eyes and spraying the malodorous liquid in his face.

Soon it would be getting dark and Khrest wondered whether the trunk-men would return to their ship before nightfall. It did not require much imagination to picture the dismal consequences of their appearance.

The capacity of the machine was bound to be limited. It was likely to cease functioning when it was exhausted. Was there a possibility to increase its speed of operation and thereby end it sooner? No robot had enough energy reserves to go on forever. Khrest reviewed his knowledge of cybernetic science. The programming by an intelligent mind determined the basic principle of each machine, even the most simple one. Each robot was assigned a task which it had to perform. A working robot was no more than information converted into action.

His analysis of the unfamiliar machine had to be determined by the inevitable results of that theory. The reaction of the machine was triggered by the command of its data of information but it was unable to differentiate between a conscious and deliberate impulse or an accidental interference with its system as happened to be the case with Khrest. The robot had only two phases. It was either at rest or it did its work. There could be no middle ground between these extremes.

It was painfully obvious to Khrest at which phase the robot functioned when it attacked him. However there had to be a surefire method to escape the diabolical apparatus by simply switching it off. But how could Khrest find out what to do if he did not even know what he had done to set off this instrument of torture?

Bzzzzzzzzzzt, the machine whirred monotonously and the Arkonide began to resent it as a personal sneer. After another hour spent in discomfort, Khrest almost wished the aliens would come back. His face was sopping wet and his hair soaked. His eyes burned and the parts of his body touching the straps were sore. His feet protruding over the bench felt like lumps of lead.

You mustn't give up now! he kept admonishing himself. *You have to be mentally alert when you confront the aliens!* "Confront? My foot!" Khrest whispered sarcastically. Why didn't he give in to Rhodan when he urged him to retire in the high mountains of Terra? He could have found serenity on Arkon too. Atlan, who had wrested the power from the Robot Regent, would have seen to that. He wanted to shake his head but the pad restricting his forehead prevented him from moving. He no longer regarded Arkon as his home and he would not have felt at ease in the old world. In the course of years he had become more and more alienated from the Great Imperium. His activities were devoted to the support of the Earthlings. He felt little sympathy for the degenerated Arkonides and had lost his sense of loyalty to his people. After Thora, Rhodan's wife, had died her tragic death, he had cut the last ties to his place of birth. The negative genetic effect of the Arkonide heritage on Thomas Cardif, Thora's and Perry's son, had finally caused him to turn away from Arkon.

He was startled by a noise. When he shifted his eyes he could barely see the open hatch. Were his three opponents returning? Khrest ignored the labours of the machine. What mattered now was to detect the slightest advantage if it presented itself.

The old Arkonide fixed his gaze steadfastly in the direction from where the enemy would approach. Whatever happened he wanted to do everything in his power to save the spacejet. First he heard a rustling and shuffling sound, then stomping footsteps. Khrest maintained a cool determination despite his weakened condition. His fate was probably already sealed, yet he was not afraid. Though he was endowed with great courage it was his age that had diminished his fear of death.

The thuds came closer. The liquid dripping over Khrest's cheeks made him sneeze and close his eyes. When he opened them again, they stood before him, three stout figures with trunks, as tall as Khrest but twice as broad. They paused silently and motionlessly at the hatch and scrutinized him with big green eyes.

"Hello," Khrest rasped.

* * * *

When they passed through the airlock Golath had a strange feeling of being watched. He shook his trunk sharply. Zerft stood still and held Liszog back.

"What's the matter?" Zerft asked.

Golath didn't bother to answer. He had followed the broad-shouldered Zerft on their march and his wrath had grown steadily until it reached climactic proportions. "It's nothing," he finally said with pronounced disgust.

Zerft raised his arms and Golath saw that his trunk stiffened. Their eyes crossed in a blaze of hostility.

Liszog stepped between them, holding his injured hand. "Why don't we go on?" he complained. "My hand hurts and it must be dressed."

Zerft relented a little and Golath blunted the challenge, swaying his trunk. Zerft turned around and walked off without a word, leading the way to the control room through the main corridor. When they reached the hatch, Zerft suddenly stopped in his tracks. Golath and Liszog rushed to his side.

Golath was so perplexed he forgot to breathe. A stranger lay on the trunk cleaner! Not a Unither—an Arkonide!

The machine tried in vain to find the trunk of the short-nosed man. The three Unithers were completely stupefied until the stranger croaked something in a thin voice. It was a signal for Golath to step to the trunk-cleaner. Liszog gasped in horror. Zerft pushed Golath aside and drew his thermo-beamer out of the holster. "An Arkonide!" he shouted, his face distorted in hate, as he aimed his weapon at the defenceless man at their feet.

4/ SECOND THOUGHTS

Terrania had one of its rare rainy days. Its houses were shrouded in grey silhouettes. The parks and promenades were deserted. All people remained in their homes or visited places of amusement indoors.

Perry Rhodan gazed absentmindedly at the pattern of raindrops the wet weather had splashed on his large windows. Finally he turned away from the window and went to his desk.

Reginald Bell, relaxing in a comfortable chair, smiled at his friend. He knew the tall lanky man too well not to be aware of his emotions. "You are worried, Perry," he said. It was more an observation than a question. "There is nothing to be concerned about at the moment. Pucky is busy building a new home on Mars for his rescued breed and everybody else is taking care of daily routines more or less." Then he added glumly: "Including both of us."

"You call it routine," Rhodan corrected his friend quietly. "I call it painstaking attention to details and sifting through accumulations of papers. It won't be long before we will have to test the linear propulsion system of the Druufs in action. Then you will have more work than you like."

Bell made a futile attempt to put his red hair bristles in shape by smoothing them with his hand. He might as well have tried to comb a cactus. "It will be at least 50 years before we can install the new system in the first spaceship. By then," he stroked an imaginary beard, "I'll probably be collecting my pension."

"Does that mean that you don't care to take the cell shower treatment next time?" Rhodan inquired in a mocking tone.

Bell gave him a sour look.

"Besides there is other work we have to do," the Administrator continued. "We must fortify our positions. Atlan is busy with his own problems and he won't be able to help us when we need him."

Bell grinned smugly. "I believe the admiral bit off more of the cosmos than he can chew."

"I appreciate your penchant for loose metaphors but I would be grateful if you could express your opinions in a manner which would enable normal men to partake of your peculiar insights." Rhodan glanced expectantly at his friend.

Grand Marshall Reginald Bell, Deputy Administrator of the Solar Imperium, rose in a rather lax manner from his chair and went to the stellar charts at the wall. He made a sweeping gesture across a map and said: "Atlan's Great Imperium! It will collapse unless he is willing to accept our active support. His race has degenerated so much that he can do nothing with his people."

"You forget the ship of sleepers," Rhodan reminded him. "Those Arkonides are not degenerated."

Bell snapped his fingers. "How much effect would they have over these tremendous distances? No, our friend will never make it without our assistance. It is only a question of time before he will appeal to us to send Terrans to the Great Imperium in order to breathe new life into his tired establishment and give it some luster."

Rhodan went back to the window. "I wonder how Khrest is getting along?" he said abruptly.

"Aha," Bell exclaimed, "that's what's been ailing you all this time. You worry about the old man."

Rhodan nodded. "We shouldn't have left him alone. It was irresponsible."

"You shouldn't think so," Bell replied. "I believe a man like Khrest is entitled to choose his way of dying and the Arkonide preferred to wait for his death alone."

"His strength was already at a low ebb," Perry Rhodan pointed out. "How can he help himself if something unforeseen happens?"

"Keep in mind that he has two robots for protection," Bell countered. "One of them has been programmed to send a radio message to Terrania if the slightest irregularity occurs. Not even Khrest knows about this precaution. Let him have his well-earned rest."

A few days later Bell would have liked to eat his words. But the two men dropped the subject for the time being.

5/ "THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY TO DEAL WITH AN ARKONIDE!"

It was believed the reflexes of Unithers were considerably slower than those of Earthlings. Due to their bulky physique their movements seemed slow and cumbersome to human eyes. But the speed with which Zerft had pulled out his beamer to shoot Khrest contradicted these assumptions.

But Golath was just as swift. He instantly lashed out Zerft's out with his trunk, curled it around Zerft's hand and pulled it aside. Zerft lost his balance and reeled back. He trumpeted his rage and tried to tear

himself away.

"You mustn't kill him!" Golath shouted.

However the rabid Zerft refused to listen. He threw the mass of his 400 pound body against Golath, who was forced to release his grip on Zerft's arm to parry the thrust. The two brown Unithers rammed each other with the force of giants. Liszog wailed and implored them to stop their fight while the prisoner watched the battle in silence.

Zerft's gun clattered to the floor and Golath managed to kick it out of range. Zerft wound his trunk around Golath's head and began to twist it, making him close his eyes and groan under the painful pressure. His hands clamped Zerft's chest in a vice. The room reverberated from the noise of their violent clash. Golath knew that the other one had terrific strength but had underestimated his brute power nevertheless. He would take his last breath in a few more seconds unless he succeeded in breaking the murderous grip. Golath hooked his leg into Zerft's knee and tried to pull him down but Zerft stood like a rock. Golath was in the throes of despair. Zerft's trunk was clamped around his neck and cut off the circulation of his blood. The lack of blood and air robbed Golath of his ability to think clearly and made him feel dizzy. He made fierce attempts to free himself from the arms Zerft held around his waist. Zerft counteracted by leaning back. Golath abruptly lunged forward, forcing Zerft to take a step back. He stumbled and Golath kept pushing instinctively. They crashed to the floor, both trumpeting furiously. The contest grew more and more savage and Zerft had all the advantages.

Liszog felt compelled to make a decision. The fear that Golath might be killed goaded him into taking action. He knew that Zerft would never be in a position to get the ship of the Arkonide started and take it back to Unith. Thus the young Unither raised the barrel of his thermo-beamer. He hesitated for a moment, staring at the ponderous opponents rolling on the floor. "Stop it!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "If you don't break it up at once, I'll start shooting."

The interlocked bodies at his feet ceased their combat and jumped up, gasping for air.

"What's this nonsense?" Zerft screamed menacingly. "Put that gun down!"

Liszog's hand trembled and he had trouble looking into the eye of the older man but he kept his weapon pointed at Zerft and Golath. "Throw your thermo-beamer over to me, Golath!" he demanded.

Golath sneered but complied and tossed his weapon at Liszog's feet. "Now we've got a new leader," he taunted Zerft.

The young exile kicked the gun away before he spoke again. His injured hand had stopped bleeding. The stranger attentively observed the scene without uttering a sound.

"I'm putting Golath back in charge again," Liszog announced.

Zerft exploded in a curse. Only the threat of the gun kept him from hurling himself at Liszog. His eyes glowered, full of hate.

"Very good," Golath exclaimed with satisfaction. "Give me my weapon, boy."

"No," replied Liszog, shaking his trunk firmly.

Golath looked at him in astonishment and new respect. "I can do nothing without a weapon," he said. "I

can't order Zerft to do anything unless I can back it up with a gun."

"I know," Liszog admitted. "I'll give it to you later. First, I have to take care of something else."

"What's that?" Golath muttered.

Liszog pointed his trunk at the Arkonide. "I'm going to kill him," he explained.

Zerft jumped on Golath's back and clutched his arms around him. Golath could feel his hot breath puffing down his neck. "Go ahead, boy!" Zerft yelled ferociously. "I won't let Golath bungle that job again."

Liszog went to the trunk-cleaner and switched it off as the prisoner followed him with his eyes without revealing the slightest emotion. The Arkonide was released.

"Shoot him and we'll never see Unith again," Golath said in a calm voice.

Zerft gave him a vicious jab. "Shut up!" he snarled.

The old man had been constrained for such a long time that he apparently was too weak to get up by himself. Liszog stared at him, pondering what to do.

"Wait a minute, Liszog!" Golath exclaimed hastily. "This Arkonide is the owner of the little spaceship. He knows how to deactivate the protective screen. If you kill him he won't be able to tell us how he does it."

Liszog looked doubtfully at the other two. Zerft growled angrily but released his grip on Golath.

"He won't volunteer the information," Liszog said sceptically. "As you can see, he's very old and old men are not afraid of death. We have no way of forcing him to tell us how we can get into his ship."

Although he had not put it in so many words it was clear that Liszog had already given up his intention of shooting the prisoner. Golath bent down to pick up his own and Zerft's weapon. "He will show us the way to enter his ship himself," Golath contended. His trunk swayed slowly and his eyes brightened happily.

"You see, Liszog, he's out of his mind," Zerft sniped.

Golath ignored his remark. "We are going to lock up the Arkonide but we will give him a chance to escape during the night," Golath proposed.

"Are you crazy?" Zerft shouted beside himself. "You want to let him get away?"

"Yes," Golath confirmed. "It must seem like a perilous flight to the prisoner but we will do nothing to prevent his escape. We won't even be aboard the *Kaszill* when it happens."

Liszog blinked his eyes in confusion. His face showed already the first sign of doubt that he was correct when he had restored Golath's leadership.

But Golath continued. "We are going to hide out near the ship of the stranger. When he comes he will be in a great hurry since he must expect to be followed. He will be anxious to get as quickly as possible into his ship and leave this planet. He won't take much time to look around before switching off the protective

screen. As soon as the screen has collapsed we'll jump out. He will be so surprised that it will be easy to overpower him. Once we are inside the ship all our other problems will be solved."

"It won't work," Zerft said glumly. "What if he lifts the screen only for a short moment?"

"All we have to do is hide close enough to the ship," Golath retorted. "Remember it will be dark and the eyes of Arkonides are not able to see in the night any more than ours are."

"The plan is simple and it makes sense," Liszog agreed. Golath looked elated. "But it will be absolutely necessary that you restrain your squabbling for the duration?" Liszog remonstrated. "If you insist on antagonizing each other you'll ruin everything."

"It won't be my fault," Golath said in a conciliatory tone. He extended his trunk toward Zerft and curled the tip in the traditional gesture of friendship.

"That's alright with me," Zerft murmured reluctantly but without moving his trunk. Golath's face grew pale. It was a severe insult.

"Why don't you give Golath your trunk?" Liszog cried accusingly.

Zerft looked at him grimly. His eyes were still full of hate and he clenched his fists, repressing his anger. Golath lowered his trunk and refrained from saying another word.

Liszog went to the trunk-cleaner and pulled the Arkonide up from the bench. The prisoner was so old and weak that he almost tumbled to the floor when Liszog let go of him.

"What a grandiose plan!" Zerft snorted. "How do you expect this ancient relic to break out of here and run to his ship? I think he'll drop dead first from feebleness."

"Don't underestimate him," Liszog warned. "He's neither young nor strong but he's no coward. He showed no fear when we confronted him. He deserves our respect because he is a brave man."

"He's an Arkonide!" Zerft replied ominously.

Liszog led the prisoner to a chair and the old man sat down, exhausted. Zerft eyed him with hostility.

Golath felt his confidence growing again. Thanks to Liszog's intervention he was back in command and Zerft was laid low. Golath was smart enough to know that Zerft was his worst enemy, not the Arkonide. However, for the time being they were pulling at the same rope together and the obstreperous Unither had no choice but to knuckle under to the demands of his companions. Golath could not have cared less about the fate of the Arkonide and he had no scruples to leave him behind on the planet as long as he did not offer resistance.

A feeling of prickly heat in his trunk brought Golath back to the present. He turned on the trunk-cleaner and stretched himself out on the bench in pleasure. The spring-loaded buckles embraced his body with gentle pressure and the soft pad floated down to hold his forehead in place. Then the rinsing spiral slid smoothly into his trunk and he relaxed with a deep breath.

He looked at Liszog, who was in a pensive mood. Zerft fidgeted impatiently with his tattered clothes. "Keep an eye on him," Golath warned. Then he closed his eyes and swooned under the soothing massage of the rinsing arm.

* * * *

It was a harrowing sensation for Khrest to hover continuously on the threshold of death. He knew that he was still alive merely due to the dissension that had arisen between the Unithers. He had already twice stared into the muzzles of the rayguns which threatened him with an inglorious death. At those moments Khrest thought of the promise he had given Perry Rhodan. He was resigned to the probability of being killed but the loss of the spacejet troubled him deeply.

Now that the worst danger was over, Khrest hoped to get another chance to safeguard the spaceship. The return of the aliens to their ship was proof that they had not yet cracked the protective shield. However they would persevere in their efforts. They had to gain possession of the spacejet if they wanted to leave the planet.

Khrest was only too well aware to what length intelligent beings could go in a desperate situation. His opponents were determined to try anything. They were strong, young and had powerful arms to boot, whereas he was alone.

The despondent Arkonide tried to figure out what an old tired man caught in a predicament such as his could do. His body was almost completely stiff from lying immobilized for so long. He was glad when Liszog led him to a chair. His blood circulation slowly returned to its normal course and his headache subsided.

What he had assumed to be a trap was no more than an apparatus for cleansing the trunks of his enemies. He watched incredulously when one of the Unithers reclined on the contraption and when he realized the purpose it brought an amused smile to his lips.

The 3 shipwrecked people took turns submitting to the treatment of the machine. Khrest watched them quietly. To think of escape was useless now. He would have to prepare his future moves very carefully. He was determined not to repeat his hasty mistake a second time. The Arkonide stroked his hair, which had begun to dry out again.

Night descended on the world which Perry Rhodan had called Khrest's Planet and the light in the room grew dim. Khrest felt the strain and was tired. For the first time he regretted that he was so old. What good was his mental prowess if his foes were physically superior? This time the eternal struggle between intelligence and brute force seemed to be decided in favour of the latter.

The tallest of his captors, the one who had saved Khrest's life twice, turned to the Arkonide. "Me Golath," he announced in halting Interkosmo.

Khrest responded politely. "My name is Khrest." He speculated apprehensively whether the shipwrecked aliens had come from a distant colony of the Arkonide empire.

"We from Unith," Golath explained, pointing to himself and his companions. Then he poked his trunk at Khrest. "You Arkonide?" he growled.

He is not very fond of my race, Khrest thought. Not that I can blame him .

Golath studied Khrest thoughtfully. Khrest wondered what went on in that round crude skull. He found it difficult to discern the emotions of the alien being.

"Give me the ship that can fly to the stars," Golath demanded without further ado.

Khrest hoped they would not search him. It worried him that they might happen to recognize the purpose of the transmitter on his wrist. "I need it myself," he replied firmly. "You can't have it."

Golath jammed the barrel of his thermo-beamer against Khrest's chest. The red eyes of the Arkonide looked at him calmly. Not a muscle in his lined face moved.

"Now you will give me your ship!" Golath grunted in anticipation.

Khrest's answer was short and clear. "No!"

The Unither put his weapon back in his holster and rolled up his trunk. His big eyes gave no sign whether he was angry or not. He slapped Khrest on the shoulder and declared: "You are prisoner now."

Khrest gave no answer. Obviously these desperate men had no intention of letting him go free. They would probably keep trying to persuade him with rougher methods but Khrest preferred not to think about it too much.

Golath motioned the others with his trunk. Khrest followed them with his eyes as they left the room and locked the hatch behind them. Now he was alone again.

The impulse-beamer! was his first thought. *They failed to see it.*

Khrest quickly jumped up. The weapon had slipped under the trunk-cleaner. He retrieved it and hid it under his tunic. Then he returned to his chair.

The room had a second exit which was also locked. The exit led to the nose of the ship where, as Khrest recalled, the hull was cracked open wide enough to allow a man to get out. Apparently the Unithers had seen the damage and had barred both exits for that reason.

Now it was completely dark. The quiet around him seemed to be deceiving. Khrest had retained a good mental picture of his surroundings and was confident that he could walk in any direction without bumping into an object again. In particular he would be sure to avoid the trunk-cleaner.

He tensely listened to the quiet but could hear nothing except his own breath. Then he got up again and walked to the second exit. Once he stepped on some glass and the crunching noise made him wince. He paused and waited a moment. He reflected that they must have expected him to investigate his surroundings since they had neglected to tie him up.

He cautiously continued on his way, taking his time to reach his goal. He touched the cold metal of the door and moved his hands over the smooth surface. He found the handle and took a deep breath. The handle moved under pressure and Khrest leaned against the hatch which—to his surprise—gave way under his weight.

Everything was silent in the ship and he hesitated no longer. This was his chance. He opened the door just wide enough to pass through. Then he groped his way along the wall of the corridor which led to the

nose of the ship.

Khrest could not help smiling a little in astonishment about his easy escape. Was it possible that his foes considered him so infirm that they felt it superfluous to guard him? However he had no time to ponder the reasons for their negligence. He had to get out as quickly as possible. Once he reached the spacejet he would be safe from his enemies.

He soon found the crack in the hull as some light penetrated the gap from outside. He drew his impulse-beamer and climbed out but there was nobody to challenge him. The Unithers seemed to be sleeping somewhere in the ship.

"Your tough luck," Khrest murmured jubilantly and ran as fast he could in the direction of the spacejet.

* * * *

Zerft parted the branches over the hole in the ground and impatiently looked out at the slope. It was much too dark to see anything, however.

"He can't be here yet," Golath said. "He's old and slow. He probably waited some time after we left him."

They crouched together in the hole which they had dug a few hours earlier. It was close enough to the little spaceship to enable them to attack the Arkonide the moment he lifted the protective screen.

"I've got a sinking feeling that something will go wrong," Zerft grumbled in disgust.

"Don't talk so loud!" Golath shushed him. "Do you want him to hear us?"

Zerft sat down again. "Why can't I have a gun?" he asked peevishly. "I gave you my promise I won't oppose you on this job."

Golath gazed at the huge shadow of his partner, twiddling the weapon in his hands, undecided.

"Give it to him," Liszog urged him. "It will be safer for us."

Golath yielded reluctantly. Zerft used his trunk to take the raygun. His unpleasant laugh made Golath cringe.

"You may shoot only after the shield is gone," Golath reminded him sharply. "If you kill him too soon, all will be in vain."

"Don't worry," Zerft replied. "It doesn't make that much difference to me if the Arkonide dies a few moments later."

The cold voice made Liszog shudder. For Golath it was another proof of his ruthlessness. The soil was damp and cool and he felt chilly. His mind began to wander and he returned in thought to his life on Unith. Before he had become a thief he had pursued a respectable occupation. But then that woman with

the lithe and well-shaped trunk had come into his life and everything had gone downhill from that point on. He was tantalized by the wildest temptations and became involved in affairs of which he had always disapproved. He began to steal in order to increase his income and shower the alluring woman with presents. He didn't care where he got the money and fell in with a gang of thieves with whom he shared the loot. It all came to a bad end with Zerft and Liszog. They were given the worst punishment a Unither could receive: they were deprived of their civil rights and expelled from the community of their people. Subsequently they were deported in the *Kaszill* with the provision that they were permitted to return only if they could render an extraordinary service to their people which would restore their honour in their home planet.

Golath's face became distorted in distress when he thought what a fool he had been and he considered it an undeserved stroke of good luck that fate had given him the opportunity to go back to Unith with a superb new spaceship. Too bad that an old Arkonide had to die so that he could save himself. There was nothing he could do about that. The misdeeds committed by the Arkonides justified the death of the old man.

Liszog stirred restlessly and disturbed Golath's reflections.

"What's the matter?" Golath whispered. He tried to pierce the darkness with his eyes and listened for a sound in the surroundings in vain. It was as silent as a grave. Presumably they would hear the Arkonide before they could see him. This would suit him perfectly because the fugitive was not likely to detect them.

"He's taking his time," Zerft said cantankerously. "Maybe he's dismantling the *Kaszill* while we're marking time here."

"That wouldn't be a great loss," Golath said disdain-fully.

"What if he can't find his way out of the *Kaszill* or doesn't believe he could gain his freedom?" Liszog expressed his pessimistic view.

"He won't sit around twiddling his thumbs," Golath replied with great conviction, making a sweeping gesture which loosened some soil and made it fall on their feet. "I expect him to find the open exit sooner or later and he will realize that there is nothing to keep him from escaping through the broken front end of the ship."

As he spoke it began to rain. At first there were only a few drops but soon it rained harder. Zerft huddled with his clothes tightly wrapped around his body.

"It's getting cold," Liszog complained. "I hope we won't have to spend all night here in this rain."

Golath found the rain pleasant. The water ran over his burning face. Before long the rain formed rivulets of water on the surface which spilled into their hole. The three Unithers were forced to stand all night shoulder to shoulder in their hiding place. As they waited the rain collected more and more water at the bottom of the excavation. Eventually their bodies were soaked through and through. They stopped talking to each other. Once Liszog dozed off and began snoring loudly and Golath had to wake him up with a little jab to his ribs. They strained their ears and kept waiting all night for the Arkonide. Their trunks became stiff from the cold. At times Golath himself threatened to be overcome by fatigue.

Alas, the Arkonide never arrived. Golath's plan had spurred great hope in them but now it had failed. When the new day dawned Zerft climbed out of the hole. The soil was so muddy that he slid back

several times. "Come on out!" he shouted, quaking with fury. "Look at your beautiful trap from up here, Golath!"

Golath was too dejected to answer Zerft. They had failed to outsmart the old man.

Zerft brandished his thermo-beamer, swinging it around like a club. He looked vicious and screamed vituperatively: "There is only one way to deal with an Arkonide. This is it!" He pointed to his gun. Then he took off in the rain and his dark brown figure soon vanished in the distance as Golath followed him with his eyes over the rim of the ditch.

"What's he up to now?" Liszog inquired.

"He's out to kill the old man," Golath replied tiredly. "He hates all Arkonides and what they stand for."

Golath dug his hands into the slippery rim and pulled himself up while Liszog gave him a boost. He was wet and muddy.

"Help me to get out," Liszog asked, stretching out his arms.

Golath shook his trunk. "No," he refused. "One of us must stay here. It's still possible that the Arkonide will come back. You better not fall asleep."

"I'm freezing," Liszog protested meekly.

"It's better to suffer a little cold than get stuck on this planet forever," Golath retorted. "Don't forget that!"

Liszog looked miserable. However he tried to make a show of bravado under the stern gaze of Golath. "Where are you going, Golath?" he asked.

"To the *Kaszill*," Golath explained quickly. "I'll try to remove the generators. We may have to use them to get through the screen into the spaceship."

"Don't be long!" Liszog urged but Golath was already gone.

Liszog uttered a faint sigh. He was plagued by rain, mud and cold. He scanned the ground in the light of the dawn, feeling lonely and deserted. The youth curled up his trunk. Suddenly he was struck by the thought that he might die in their efforts to return to Unith. The thought wormed into his mind and he was unable to shut it out.

Who cared if he rotted on this planet? Nobody would even know about his death except Golath and Zerft and they were not activated by friendly feelings toward him. He was alone, standing in a dirty quagmire, freezing and hungry, thousands of light-years away from home.

And if he wanted to attain his wish of seeing his home again, he would have to kill a man—an old man. Who gave him the right to do that? Despite his qualms Liszog knew that he would shoot the prisoner if necessary.

They had to capture the ship one way or another.

* * * *

Khrest was under the impression that he made good time on his way to his ship. Actually he made very slow headway. He frequently paused to gasp for air. His old legs didn't have the strength to carry him without rest.

When he fell to the ground it was not because he had tripped over an obstacle, it was because his knees had weakened to the point of buckling. He took a hard fall and remained prone for some time, breathing heavily and pressing his face against the cool earth. His exhausted body was so limp that it took all his willpower to get up again. It was his greatest fear that he would die of exhaustion before he could achieve the safety of the spacejet.

He limped along, trying to ignore the throbbing pain in his ankle and wondering whether his escape had already been noticed. Perhaps they were by now in hot pursuit. Or would they furtively follow his trail till he had reached the spacecraft and pounce on him the moment he lifted the protective barrier?

*That's it!*The logic of the conclusion was inescapable.*My escape was too simple. I was supposed to lead the three Unithers to the last place I wanted them to go: right into my spaceship!*

Khrest was aghast. "How could I have been so blind?" he chided himself. If his adversaries did not walk close behind in his footsteps they must already be lying in ambush near the spacecraft and he would have fallen into their trap.

A raindrop splashed his forehead and a few minutes later the rain came down in buckets. Khrest felt miserable. He was dismayed by his waning physical condition and wondered where he would find the strength to keep up the fight against his enemies. Fight? He smiled sadly. All he had done so far was run away.

He stopped to figure out what to do next. The vicinity of the spacecraft was dangerous territory which was better avoided. There was only one alternative which, however, he did not consider very promising either. He could flee into the forest. This would not be difficult for a young man but it was a terrible hardship for him to fight the inclements of the weather and the beasts of the primeval forest. It would be torture to his frail body. If he sought refuge in the forest now, there might never be a return for him.

Nonetheless he decided to turn back. He turned his face upwards and let the rain fill his dry mouth, which helped make him feel better. He started to limp back. It was tough going but it was made a little easier for him by the gravitation which was one-sixth less than on Terra, a difference that was quite noticeable.

By the time he was back at the vessel of the Unithers his ankle was almost numb with pain. He took off his sandal and examined the injury. His ankle was badly swollen and felt very hot. Although he had abundant medical supplies at his home, he didn't dare go there anymore. He tore off a piece of his tunic and dipped it in a puddle. Then he wrapped it tightly around his foot. This was the best he could do under the circumstances.

All was quiet aboard the stranded vessel of the condemned Unithers as the rain pattered on its hull. Khrest was now firmly convinced that his tormenters were lying in wait for him with drawn weapons in the proximity of the spacejet. He was determined to make it as difficult for the Unithers as he could. He

was anxious to prove to them that an Arkonide was an opponent not to be underestimated regardless of his age.

6/ BATTLE IN THE FOREST PRIMEVAL

Khrest reached the edge of the forest. His body felt leaden. His clothes were dripping wet and clung to his skin. The pain in his foot had abated a little. The ground was so saturated with water from the prolonged rain that each step made him sink down.

He tottered to a tree and leaned against its trunk, grateful that the dense foliage shielded him from the rain. Only a few heavy drops penetrated the leaves. The bark of the tree was rough and splintered, exuding a musty smell. A rustling noise emanating from the dark forest reminded Khrest of its dangers.

The acid-squirters roamed the forests only during the day and he did not have to fear an attack from them. By contrast the horned burrowers were predators of the night. They emerged from their holes after dark to go on the prowl. The meter-long barrel-shaped beasts had short sturdy legs and were capable of developing considerable speed. Their forelegs were built like spades and the burrowers used them to dig underground. Their bodies were covered with thick horny plates. Two pairs of mighty claws grew like pincers from their skulls. They were powerful enough to kill bigger victims than Khrest.

The Arkonide recalled Ufgar's account of these beasts. Two companions of the eminent discoverer were injured by the horned burrowers and the acid-sprayers had claimed three fatalities. However, both animals were vulnerable to the impulse-beamer—if he could protect himself in time.

Khrest desperately needed some sleep. To sleep on the ground would be tantamount to committing suicide. He penetrated deeper into the forest. The underbrush became thicker and Khrest got stuck several times. Finally he found a tree whose strong branches were low enough to pull himself up. Considering his age and poor condition Khrest performed a formidable feat by climbing the tree. Up there he would be safe from the horned burrowers who were not built to get up on trees. He chose a heavy branch and sat down, leaning his back against the trunk. It was not the height of comfort but in his situation he could hardly afford to be very finicky." He listened for a while to the rustling of the leaves and the patter of the rain and then fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

* * * *

A cacophony of screeching and chirping birds woke him up in the morning. It was bright daylight and the rain had stopped. The air was pleasantly warm. Khrest rubbed his face. To his surprise he felt well-rested and the repose had been very beneficial to his wounded foot. He felt hungry. Not far from him a red bird perched on a thin twig, screaming its indignation over Khrest's intrusion into the fresh air. When Khrest moved inadvertently it flew hastily away.

When Khrest looked down a cold shudder ran along his spine. He was suddenly wide awake. His luck

had run out.

Only a few meters from his tree stood one of the trunk-people, clutching a thermo-beamer in his fist.

* * * *

Zerft's blind rage had evaporated, yielding to reason. It would be senseless to run around in the forest like a madman. That was not the way to find the Arkonide. A shadow crossed his face whenever he thought of Golath and his botched plan. They should have shown no mercy to the Arkonide from the beginning. He vehemently deplored the fact that he depended on Golath as the only one who knew how to fly the alien ship.

Zerft was certain the prisoner had fled into the forest. He probably had seen through their scheme. Zerft had thoroughly searched the *Kaszill* without finding the Arkonide. The hatch leading to the nose of the ship was wide open. The rain had washed out Khrest's tracks, leaving no clues for Zerft. As soon as it was completely light again, Zerft left the *Kaszill* and headed for the forest because it was his opinion that the Arkonide would be found there. Once he looked back and saw Golath go into the wrecked vessel. However he no longer paid any attention to the inept endeavours of his rivals.

Zerft figured that the fugitive was an old man who would be incapable of penetrating very deeply into the forest. This fact would limit his search to a fairly small area and he began to comb his surroundings systematically.

After pursuing the manhunt for some time an odd animal appeared on the scene. It was only half as big as Zerft and not nearly as broad. The first impression was quite ridiculous. It seemed to consist of two segments, a slim round rump and a thick oval head. Its body was covered by a dense black fur which extended so far down that the legs of the animal could not be seen. When it moved it looked as if it were borne on a cushion of air from which Zerft concluded that it must have innumerable feet. By contrast the head of the animal was completely bare. It was covered by scars. Several tiny eyes looked like dark holes. There were also other openings whose purpose Zerft was unable to determine at first glance.

For a moment the two stared at each other. The animal was at least as surprised as Zerft. It watched him motionlessly. Then it uttered a peculiar smacking noise which was somewhat similar to the sound of the brawlers on Unith. Zerft studied it curiously. The animal sounded off again. Then it turned around and slowly retreated.

Zerft thought the animal might lead him to the Arkonide and therefore began to follow it. When it noticed that it was being followed it paused and looked back as if annoyed.

"Shove off!" Zerft shouted.

Little impressed by the threat the beast ogled Zerft. Now it kept uttering the smacking sound unwaveringly. It was obviously provoked after showing Zerft that it did not want to be disturbed.

Motivated by a certain amount of curiosity Zerft shook his trunk to make the beast move on. He quickly learned to his sorrow the purpose of the mysterious glands on the head of the creature. A thin concentrated stream of liquid was shot at him. The liquid hit him in the shoulder and made his skin burn a

little. Zerft saw a yellow fluid run down on him. Wherever it touched his skin it became irritated. Like a mild burn. But his thick skin protected him. It apparently was a natural defence for the creature. Now Zerft was convinced that the animal was harmless. He approached it with the intention of driving it away and was amazed that he was unable to scare it. The acid-sprayer stubbornly stood its ground.

"Move on!" Zerft commanded. Then he was hit by a second acidic stream. He uttered an astonished cry and reeled back. Horrified, he looked at his arm. Within moments the liquid had eaten a deep wound and the pain was more than he was able to bear. He whipped out his thermo-beamer but his attacker had already vanished. He looked around panic-stricken, fearful of a new attack which might occur any moment. That astounding creature was apparently able to throw acid at its enemies with any strength it chose. If Zerft had heeded the first shot, which was intended as a warning, he would have been spared the serious consequences. But he had insisted on provoking the beast and was forced to pay for it. His arm was throbbing in pain and he was losing blood. He quickly tore off a strip from his clothing and tied it around his arm above the wound to constrict the circulation of his blood. He was terrified by the thought that the acid might contain a poison that could paralyse or even kill him. His mind became so confused that he connected the Arkonide with his misfortune. The old man was the cause of all his trouble. Ever since they had run into him, their luck had worsened. Zerft was seething in an all-consuming wrath. Those despised Arkonides! For centuries they had tried to enslave his people. The hate for Arkon was deeply rooted in every Unither. For Zerft, whose mentality had not reached a very high stage of development, the Arkonides equated with misery, poverty and tyranny. There was no middleground between black and white extremes for him. Compromise was a word unknown to Zerft. He was unable to practice tolerance and expected none from others. Like most bullies, it would never have occurred to him to look in himself for reasons that might be responsible for the evils he had suffered. It was always another person who had caused his troubles. This attitude had raised so much hostility in Zerft that he was unable to control it. He had become embittered and found it impossible to extend his trunk in friendship to another Unither.

He clutched his weapon in his uninjured hand. There was no trace of the weird beast and he quickly lost interest in pursuing it. He could only think of Khrest. He wanted to fake revenge on that old man for the calamity that had befallen him.

Thus the outcast Unither stood with a weapon in his hand on a strange planet, a poor misguided being whose acts were determined by the wildest rage. This made him very dangerous.

* * * *

His enemy had not yet spotted him. Slowly, without making a noise, Khrest pulled out his impulse-blaster. The man with the trunk was badly wounded. He seemed to have tangled with an acid-sprayer. Ufgar had mentioned in his report that these animals were prone to attack bigger opponents only when they felt threatened. When the Unither turned around and Khrest saw his wound, he felt terrible pity for the victim. He felt tempted to climb down from his tree and help Zerft. But he had to keep in mind it was the same Unither who had been so eager to shoot him in the wrecked vessel and there was no reason to believe that he would act differently this time.

Then Khrest saw the acid-sprayer. The animal was sneaking up on him from the back. It was too much for Khrest to witness an intelligent being stalked to death by a vicious beast. Ufgar had also described the diabolical slyness displayed by these harmless-looking creatures. Khrest was torn between two opposing feelings. If he warned the Unither, he exposed himself to the greatest peril. Yet his code demanded that

he aid an intelligent fellow being.

The acid-sprayer silently crept closer to his prey. It was only a few meters away from point-blank range. These animals were able to control the content of acid in their liquid jetstream at will. They could regulate it from causing a harmless itch to a corrosive intensity. Khrest had no trouble predicting the concentration of acid which would be launched in the attack on the unsuspecting Unither.

Humane considerations gained over reason in Khrest. When the acid-sprayer reached the critical point the Arkonide shouted a warning. Zerft spun around with a distorted face and the animal instinctively squirted its potent stream. The Unither threw himself to the side and dropped his weapon. Khrest acted without a moment's hesitation. He jumped down from his safe place and shot the acid-sprayer with his impulse-beamer, causing it to collapse instantly.

The stranger lay motionlessly on the ground and Khrest believed that he was unconscious. He cautiously walked over to him with his weapon ready to shoot. When he bent down, the supposedly unconscious figure suddenly sprang to life. His hand holding the impulse-beamer was seized by the trunk and forced back. Khrest realized too late that he had committed a horrible error. He was in no condition to resist the brute force of the trunk. A powerful arm grabbed him around the waist and pulled him irresistibly down.

In his utter helplessness Khrest became sadly aware that his efforts had all been futile.

* * * *

Liszog shook himself. He had been asleep. He raised himself up to peer anxiously out of his hole. It was bright daylight and it had stopped raining. He was relieved to see that the little ship was still there. He was loath to contemplate what Golath and Zerft would have done to him if the Arkonide had managed to gain possession of his ship because of his negligence. He climbed out of his ditch and looked around. There was nobody to be seen. He was bothered by an accumulation of dirt in his trunk and longed for the treatment of a trunk-cleaner. Liszog ran to the shore of the lake and washed off the mud. Then he slaked his thirst and flung a few pebbles into the water with his appendage.

He wished Golath would come back. He was plagued by unpleasant forebodings, feeling afraid he would never find peace unless they succeeded in returning to Unith and doubted it would ever come to that. He went back and sat down disconsolately next to the hole. His mood grew more and more apathetic.

Finally he saw Golath's lumbering figure at the top of the slope, waving to him. He carried a fiat box and several other objects. Zerft was not with him. Liszog's spirit revived and he got up to meet Golath.

Golath gave him a critical look. "You were sleeping," he stated, disgusted.

Liszog smiled in embarrassment and took over some of Golath's burden.

"Fortunately nothing seems to have happened around here in the meantime," Golath commented in a conciliatory vein. "Watch out that you don't drop anything."

Liszog glanced dubiously at the articles Golath had brought. He knew nothing about technical matters

and normally shied away from such things. "What are you going to do with this stuff?" he inquired.

"I was unable to carry all I need for my purpose. I collected a few more pieces at the *Kaszill* and want you to pick them up for me." They had reached the shore and Golath continued. "Perhaps I can build a generator to create a field which will neutralize the energy screen surrounding the spaceship. If it works we can set up a tunnel through which we can pass into the ship."

Liszog sent a vexed look in the direction of the well-protected flying disk. "What are your chances of making it work?"

"It all depends on the magnitude of the energy which is required to maintain the shield. The critical difference lies in what can produce more powerful energy—my generator or the hidden source of power supplying the defensive field."

Liszog dangled his trunk in thought. "I wonder what method the Arkonide uses if he wants to enter his ship," he mused. "Would he do that from his house?"

"Hardly," Golath speculated. "I should assume that he carries a device that enables him to board his ship at any time." He tapped his forehead with a look as if he saw Liszog for the first time. "What a moron I am!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of searching the Arkonide? We could have saved ourselves all this trouble."

"Zerft will capture him again," Liszog said hopefully. "Then we'll have another opportunity to check if he carries the gadget you're talking about."

"If Zerft gets his hands on him, he'll eliminate our chance of searching him," Golath replied, distressed.

Liszog shuddered in silence. They had reached the disk and put down their equipment. Golath looked for a dry place while Liszog watched him idly. He felt a vague sympathy for his bulky partner in crime. At least Golath endeavoured to solve their dilemma by using his brains whereas Zerft always acted in blind fury.

"You better leave now to pick up the rest of the load," Golath urged him. "I've assembled all the stuff in the control room."

Liszog nodded. He pictured himself lying on the trunk-cleaner and was convinced Golath had also taken advantage of the opportunity to enjoy the same luxury.

"Don't dawdle unnecessarily," Golath admonished him, "and be very careful. Don't listen to Zerft if you see him there."

"I won't," Liszog agreed. "I'll do as you say." He ascended the slope. When he looked down from the top he saw Golath already hard at work.

* * * *

As desperately as Khrest tried to free himself, he was unable to break Zerft's iron grip. Coloured spots

danced before his eyes and his throat was choked so tightly that he could breathe only with the greatest pain. His wounded opponent had no intention of relenting the torture or showing any gratitude for saving his life. Khrest's hands clutching the Unither were much too weak to change the inevitable outcome. He had been unable to hold on to his impulse-beamer and all his last-ditch efforts could accomplish was to prolong the agony of certain death.

Using his brute strength, Zerft rolled his massive body around till he lay on top of the old man. Khrest thought that all his bones must break under this load. He closed his eyes in utter exhaustion and his resistance diminished perilously.

Suddenly he received help from unexpected quarters. The acid-sprayer who had been mortally wounded by his impulse-beamer, reared up once more. Gathering its last ounce of strength it got back on its feet. Swaying around, it caught sight of its two enemies thrashing on the ground nearby. It let go an aimless stream of acid and dropped dead. It was its last automatic reflex but it had found its mark in Zerft's back. He screamed and lost his grip on Khrest. The stupefied Arkonide needed several seconds to understand what had happened. He flung himself to the side and seized the weapon of the Unither, who vainly tried to reach his hurt back with his hands. He saw Khrest reach for his weapon and hurled himself against him with a hoarse trumpeting.

Khrest saw his attacker only as a blurred shadow. His hands trembled as disaster was about to strike him again. He shot at the lunging silhouette before his eyes. He barely noticed the recoil of the weapon but it was enough to show him that it reacted properly to his operation of the unfamiliar trigger. A hot beam flashed from the muzzle of the gun and the menacing figure disappeared abruptly. Khrest tried to get up to see what had happened but he was hampered by an attack of nausea and all he could see at the moment were points and circles in colour. Finally he managed to get up on his knees. However there was something in his way, something warm and resilient to his touch. It stunned him to realize that it was the body of the Unither whose life he had taken.

He attacked you, he tried to reason. You have the right to defend your life.

His life? But he had come here to die. Why should he defend his life when he was already resigned to that loss? No, the spacejet was a much more valid justification! Rhodan had trusted him to keep it out of the hands of marauders in space. Mankind was under the strictest obligation to preserve each hard-won advantage at the peril of retrogression. *It seems to be my fate to fight for mankind*, Khrest reflected and his eyes regained their look of determination as he contemplated the lifeless figure of his enemy.

Khrest's frail and ravaged body still contained enough reserves to rise up with renewed willpower. Now he had a weapon which was as devastating as that of his two remaining foes and he no longer hesitated to go back to his ship and face the other Unithers. The thought that they might be able to destroy the protective shield drove him on.

If some outsider could see me,
he mused, *he would quickly change his mind about the decadence of the Arkonides.* Considering his age he exhibited remarkable fortitude as he unconsciously tautened his stooped body.

He was born an Arkonide but during a long and decisive phase of his life his race had become a source of dissatisfaction to him. For all practical purposes he had almost become an Earthling in word and in deed.

He had lived like a Terran but he would die as an Arkonide and he felt very proud of it.

7/ ATTACK OF THE HORNED BURROWERS

The moment Liszog was about to enter the airlock of the *Kaszill* the idea suddenly occurred to him that the Arkonide might be aboard the shipwreck. He was accustomed to letting other Unithers make decisions for him and obeyed them in most cases. But nobody was here to give him advice.

Golath had only mentioned that he been in the control centre of the vessel and it was possible that the prisoner hid somewhere else in the ship till Golath left.

Exercising due caution he pulled out his weapon. He decided it would be safer to enter the ship through the split hull at the forward end. He jumped out again and scanned the trees of the forest in the hope of seeing Zerft but all was quiet around him.

Liszog squeezed himself through the crack torn in the hull by the crash of the *Kaszill*. The light in the corridor leading to the control centre was very dim and the young Unither felt awkward. He tightened his grip on his thermo- beamer as he walked on.

The hatch to the control room was ajar and he tried to make as little noise as possible. However his caution proved to be unnecessary. The room was empty. He saw the equipment Golath had put together in a pile at the other entrance. Everything was in good order.

He sighed in relief and turned to the trunk-cleaner. He checked if the machine was still functioning properly and reclined with delight on the couch. The machine performed its pleasurable treatment and he was still in a state of euphoria on the couch when the unsuspecting Khrest entered the *Kaszill* through the airlock.

* * * *

Khrest's tormented body had become a mass of pain and involuntary reflexes. The strain had left its mark on his thin face, lined by age. The effect of utter fatigue and exhaustion had deepened its traces. His eyes looked hollow and his hair, which was always neatly combed, was dishevelled. His haggard figure was poorly concealed by his torn tunic.

The Arkonide was sustained by pure willpower. It gave him the energy to persevere and drove him into action. The weapon of the alien seemed to weigh a ton but he could not leave it behind as he considered it a crucial factor in the battle for the spacejet.

When he emerged from the trees the plain between the forest and the lake looked like a vast desolate land to him, punctuated only by the dark wreck of the aliens' craft, which lay like an oasis in the desert.

"You must keep going," Khrest told himself but the words passed his sore lips only with great difficulty. His voice sounded strange and he listened in astonishment to its tone.

But it would be wise to go to the wreck and take a rest, he carried on the debate in his mind.

And he heard another voice in his mind which was so firm and clear that it sounded real. "No alien must be allowed to take over the spacejet!"

And once again he heard Perry Rhodan's voice but this time it was soft and warm. "Thank you, my friend!"

Khrest moved on again. He had lost the bandage he had wrapped around his ankle and it would be futile to put on another one. Therefore he kept shifting the weight of his body to his healthy leg as best he could.

He made better headway than he presumed and covered the distance to the ship in fairly short time but was tired when he reached the *Kaszill*. Of course he did not know the name of the ship and could have cared less about it. His body was wracked by fever. He had caught a severe cold in the rainy night on the tree. Khrest could not remember when he had eaten last.

The black hull of the Unithers' spaceship looked already strangely familiar to him. As far as Khrest could tell from the demolished remnants the ship had been designed for vertical take-off. He wondered what could have induced these desperados to land on this planet with such a disastrous result. Such losses were the inevitable price space travellers had to pay—particularly in the early stages of astronautic science. Compared to the *Solar System* the ship looked like a toy.

Khrest pulled himself into the airlock. The chamber was very spacious since it was designed for the huge dimensions of the Unithers. The dilapidated state of the vessel indicated that the ship was quite old and probably represented an obsolete type of the Unithers' spacefleet. It had to be assumed that the occupants were forced to make a crashlanding because of the defective equipment. Khrest could easily understand why they were vitally interested in his spacejet. Apparently they had not even a radio available to call for help from Unith. Perhaps it had been destroyed by the crash.

The scientist walked through the corridor, supporting himself with his hand on the wall. The fact that he saw Liszog first by a fraction of a second saved his life.

Liszog shot from his couch but the fiery stream hit only the hatch behind which Khrest had already taken cover. The Arkonide crawled back to the airlock. He was certain no more than one of his adversaries was present in the control room. If he left the ship he would expose himself to the Unither, as the flat terrain offered no protection from the fire of a thermo-beamer.

What would his enemy do next? It was a matter of life or death for Khrest to anticipate Liszog's reaction. He could not afford to wait because then it would be too late. Khrest put himself in the position of the Unither who must have believed that Khrest watched the hatch and would fire at any move that looked suspicious. An attack from the control room was hardly to be expected. Liszog would probably climb out through the crack in the hull and try to ambush him from the rear.

The old man crept to the exit of the airlock, peered cautiously out of the opening and spotted the Unither cowering under the nose of the ship.

Khrest fired instantly. Liszog hit the ground and the flaming ray whizzed over him through the air. Khrest muttered an oath. He would not get such an opportunity again.

When he looked out for the second time the Unither had already retreated through the crack into the *Kaszill*. Khrest knew only too well that the other had the advantage of more agility and endurance.

The airlock had become a trap which he had to leave quickly. His enemy was probably back in the control room getting ready to launch his next attack. Khrest slipped out of the airlock and hobbled quickly to the burned-out stern of the vessel where he sought cover behind a warped plate. It wouldn't take Lizzog very long to find out that the airlock was empty and he was smart enough to guess where the Arkonide was hiding. However the stern of the *Kaszill* was big and its jumble of torn metal offered numerous places for concealment.

Khrest was dismayed that he could see only the airlock but not the gash at the front end from his hiding place. This gave his opponent a chance to approach him from the other side by running around the ship.

A blinding flash zipped past close to his eyes. He almost fired back but remembered in time that the shot was only an attempt to reveal his position, as yet unknown to his assailant.

Khrest endeavoured to find out from where the shot had come. He leaned around the corner but detected no trace of Lizzog. The front end of the *Kaszill* looked deserted.

Lizzog's next shot ploughed through the ground and turned it black. The grass caught fire and raised a dense smoke. The stench irritated Khrest's nose and he pressed his hands against his face to keep from sneezing. The furrow dug by the formidable weapon was hardly more than one meter away from Khrest.

But now Khrest knew where Lizzog was hidden. A piece of debris had been hurled from the wreck when it blew up. It had dug a ditch in the ground and finally buried itself deeply in the soil. Lizzog was at an angle of 30° from Khrest and the axis of the *Kaszill* and the hole gave him a good cover. It was difficult for Khrest to fire in his direction because it would have compelled him to raise himself up, which was tantamount to committing suicide when facing a weapon like the thermo-beamer.

However there were two reasons Khrest had to finish the duel quickly—one way or another. First there was the danger that the other Unither would appear on the scene and join the fracas which would have decided the battle against him. The other reason was even more important—his miserable physical condition, which was bound to prevent him from staving off defeat in an extended fight.

Khrest was a scientist, not a trained soldier. He had devoted his profession to the programming of electronic brains and the research of physical phenomena left to be explored. Although he had a good knowledge of cosmic strategy and was able to lead a spacefleet to victory, it was far different from what he had to contend with in this situation. He stood alone and was compelled to wield a weapon in his own hand against a superior challenger.

It's a miracle that I'm still alive, Khrest observed quietly.

* * * *

He's lurking somewhere in that pile of junk and playing dead, Lizzog reasoned. *Does he think he can lure me out like that? I know very well he can't be dead.*

He was only an old man but he gave Liszog more trouble than he would have thought possible. He could not expect help from Golath, who waited at Khrest's ship for him. Golath would not risk leaving his place to find out why he failed to come back. And as far as Zerft was concerned it was better to forget him. The fact that the Arkonide had returned from the forest revealed the worst about his fate. Liszog writhed his trunk in anger. Where did the lone man get the strength to put up such a stubborn defence of his ship?

The young Unither dared lift his head above his cover to take a peek at the surroundings. He spotted his foe drawing a bead at him from behind a heavy metal plate and instinctively ducked back into his hole. The blast of fire streaked over the ditch and the heatwave singed Liszog's back. Sand and rocks poured down on him but he remained unhurt.

He crawled several meters along the bottom of the ditch. Now he knew the position of his rival but when he cautiously looked over the edge again the Arkonide had already disappeared behind the plate.

Liszog roared savagely. He raised his thermo-beamer and sprayed the plate protecting Khrest with murderous fire. The metal began to glow and quickly boiled down in a white hot stream. Still shooting, Liszog jumped out of the ditch and ran toward the stern of the shattered *Kaszill*. The plate had a huge hole and the heat was enough to suffocate any living being.

Liszog trumpeted triumphantly as he darted to his goal. He rushed behind the molten plate with his drawn weapon ready to finish off his prey—but nobody was there!

* * * *

The moment Khrest had pulled the trigger he realized that the Unither was back behind his cover in time. The shot zinged across the ditch without scoring a hit. But Khrest was certain that he had been seen by Liszog. The Arkonide crawled farther into the damaged ship. Behind him the Unither began a furious bombardment but Khrest did not take the time to look back. It was more important to find another place to hide.

Twisted metal braces forced him to get up. He wondered whether he exposed himself to dangerous radioactivity which might have contaminated the ship if its engine was powered by an atomic reactor. However the Unithers moved freely around the ship, leading him to the conclusion that any radiation could not be of very high intensity.

Khrest squeezed himself between the struts and then looked back. The Unither stood near the demolished plate and looked puzzled. Khrest wanted to raise his gun but his sleeve caught in the strut and by the time he freed his arm his target was gone.

The excitement had made Khrest forget his weakness. Now it overcame him again and he had to lean back and look for some support.

Suddenly he became aware of another menace. At first Khrest heard only a scraping noise. When he looked anxiously around he saw the barrel-shaped animals a few meters away crawling out of the ship's interior.

Horned burrowers! They raised their ugly heads, sniffing the air. By day they were almost blind. They

must have sought a quiet place for the night and were disturbed by the noise of the altercation with Liszog. They were irritated and wild, crunching their mighty claws. There were over a dozen of them. The horned plates enclosing their bodies rubbed against the floor and against each other, producing the scraping noise.

Khrest remained stockstill and avoided the slightest noise. To shoot would draw the attention of the Unither to him and he was in no position to defend himself against two enemies.

The animals moved slowly in the unaccustomed brightness of daylight. They furiously snapped at any object barring their way. Now that Khrest saw these monsters with his own eyes he understood why Ufgar had held them in such awe. The gruesome column snaked past the Arkonide and out into the open.

No Earthling or Arkonide could stand up indefinitely under such punishing nervous and physical strains. Sooner or later they were bound to collapse from its effects and Khrest felt that he had reached that point.

* * * *

Liszog stood stunned for a moment. He realized that he had been outwitted and the disappointment was so great that it almost paralysed him. But then his natural reflexes started to function again. He jumped back behind cover and was safe again. The Arkonide had retreated deeper into that mass of crushed debris. If he wanted to get out there was only one way—past Liszog. The outcast Unither watched intently for any suspicious movements or sounds.

Dark clouds had appeared and the sky looked overcast, threatening to rain. Liszog was used to wet weather because there was plenty of water on Unith. But these clouds looked ominous. A wind began to blow, raising squalls on the lake. Soon it howled through the ruins of the *Kaszill* in a dissonant song. A *song of death*, Liszog thought with a shudder.

He was not superstitious, having abandoned all religion at an early age. A faint smile appeared on his face but it was no more than a habitual reaction that had nothing to do with his real feelings.

The first raindrops fell on the wreck. They bounced like silvery pearls from the hull before they burst, clung for a moment to the metal and ran down like tears. Before long the entire surface glistened in the rain.

A weird noise roused him from his contemplations. His hand, which ended in 5 stubby fingers, clamped tightly around his thermo-beamer. Let his rival try to break out!

But it was not the Arkonide he beheld with widened eyes, it was a ghastly procession of round bodies creeping toward him. They were the ugliest creatures he had ever seen. Seized by panic he spewed fire from his thermo-beamer.

* * * *

Khrest saw cascades of light pour over the floor and he was showered by sparks. The smell of seared flesh permeated the air. But the fireworks soon ceased. Khrest heard a wild, agonized scream. Dense smoke wafted through the ship, causing him to cough painfully. He tried in vain to see through the veil. Suddenly the skies opened up in a cloudburst and a smouldering fire gave off a charred odour.

Khrest suspected that the Unither had fired at the horned burrowers and, judging from the scream he had heard, the raging beasts had retaliated with a vengeance. It was a death the Arkonide would not wish on his most depraved enemy.

Wind drove the smoke into his eyes and filled them with tears. A stinging pain seemed to burst his lungs. It was impossible for him to hold out any longer in the ship. Although he would run the risk of being assaulted by a pack of belligerent horned burrowers, it looked like the lesser evil at the moment. Puffing and coughing, Khrest worked his way out of the unbearable spot into the open air.

He stumbled over the cadavers of several burned animals but failed to see any that were still alive. He inhaled the fresh air and began to breathe easier. His torn tunic fluttered in the wind and he was drenched by the cold rain. His surroundings were shrouded in a dim grey light.

Then he noticed the Unither. He lay prone on the rubble of the *Kaszill's* engines less than 15 meters from Khrest. He was hardly recognizable.

The Arkonide stared in consternation. The Unither moved. It was alive. He had lost his weapon and his big green eyes stared at Khrest with an expression of dull resignation.

Khrest kept standing in the rain, an emaciated old man with a heavy weapon in his hand that almost suggested a caricature.

Liszog began to slip down from the engine ring, leaving a dark trail of blood on the wet surface.

"Stay where you are!" Khrest warned in Interkosmo.

The Unither crawled toward him. There was a quiet obstinacy in his movements, as if he could go on forever. His round eyes stared wide open.

"Stop!" Khrest repeated his call, strengthening his order with the unmistakable gesture of raising his raygun.

His opponent seemed to be dazed and refused to listen. He kept advancing toward Khrest like a sleepwalker. The rain ran over his face and greyish skin. His eyes had a mad, feverish gleam.

The weapon in Khrest's hand seemed to weigh a ton. The old man took one step back and thought: *I can't simply shoot him down. Why doesn't that thing stop?*

The wind grew to a storm. It howled and whistled through the shambles of the spaceship and rattled eerily through loose metal plates.

Liszog persisted in a steady pace and almost touched Khrest. He flexed his trunk and the thermo-beamer in Khrest's hand trembled.

The Arkonide could not bring himself to open fire. His foe moved against him like a helpless zombie. It would require but a mere touch of the trigger to repulse him but Khrest felt incapable of shooting a defenceless man.

He lowered his weapon, although Liszog stood only two steps away. He had finally paused in his advance. Khrest was still fearful that he would close the last gap to overpower him. The old man could hear his own rasping breath. Then he noticed a sad look in Liszog's eyes, which expressed to him lost hope of a goal ardently aspired.

Suddenly Liszog's broad robust figure doubled up and crashed to the ground, where it remained motionless.

Only then Khrest saw the grisly wounds the horned burrower had inflicted on his enemy. His retreat to the engine ring had come too late. Liszog was horribly dead.

* * * *

Ufgar had mentioned in his report that it would frequently rain for days on the second planet of the yellow sun. He had made his observation in one concise sentence. There was nothing further in it to prepare an old man with waning strength for the hardship and toil he had to cope with in his struggle for possession of a spaceship. Ufgar was a young and bold discoverer, not a degenerate Arkonide of the presentime. He had leaped from his spaceship, unfurled the flag of Arkon and let it flutter in the wind before he set out to explore the planet with his men.

Khrest had no flag. He would not have known which emblem it ought to show, that of the Great Imperium or of the tiny system comprising 10 planets which was proudly called Solar Imperium by the Earthlings.

There was nothing left in Khrest of the Arkonide ruling race's arrogance as he limped away from Liszog. But he had retained his personal pride. He was glad that he had survived the battle without resorting to force. He was determined to fight hard and without yielding for the spacejet but had no desire to employ means distasteful to him.

The windstorm had become so fierce that Khrest had to lean heavily against it to make headway. As long as the storm raged, it was senseless to attempt reaching his ship. He was much too weak to withstand the strain. He would be much safer now in the ship of the Unithers.

He was too tired to think clearly and he staggered like a spastic into the *Kaszill*. Outside the storm mounted in fury and the rain poured down on the vessel in sheets. Khrest hardly heard it. He collapsed on the floor.

Now there were only two intelligent beings on Khrest's Planet, both striving for the same goal, resolved not to relent. They were the same in this regard but there was a big difference between them. One was an ancient Arkonide and the other a Unither in the prime of his life. In their desperate fight to the finish everything else paled into insignificance. It was of little importance in this contest that Khrest was a scientist and Golath a thief. The stronger one was destined to win—or the smarter.

The vortex of Khrest's thoughts ebbed away in obscure emotions and his nerves began to lose their tension. Then he lost track of his environment. The old man had fallen asleep.

8/ NOT ALL ALIENS ARE NECESSARILY ENEMIES

On the 24th of January, Khrest had again become the subject of a discussion at Terrania.

Reginald Bell, Rhodan's tubby deputy who was called Fatso by his friends, came barrelling down the corridor. His stocky figure didn't slow down when it reached the door of Rhodan's private office. He pushed the door open and barged into the room, sputtering in disgust.

"I knew it could only be you," Rhodan received him calmly.

For a moment Bell was taken aback, then he said with a grin: "Since when can you keep track of me by telepathy?"

"Nonsense," Rhodan rejected the question of his friend. "To keep tabs on you is the last thing I want to do and you know it. But there's only one person who would dare to make such an entrance without even bothering to knock first."

Bell's face flushed, less from embarrassment than indignation. He was an extremely intelligent man, but with a stormy temper of the highest magnitude, who loved to play tricks on his friends. "That crazy Mangelmann has been pestering me out there for a full hour. Do you know what that nut wants?" Bell blurted.

"He came to talk about Khrest's monument," Rhodan replied. "I asked him to come."

"You did what?" Bell asked flabbergasted. "That skondola! from the rest home for the deranged couldn't carve a garden decoration—let alone create a monument for the old scientist."

Rhodan gave him a disapproving look. "Mangelmann is the most gifted sculptor of our time. You should know that. And if we ever have any need for a garden decoration I won't have any trouble finding a model." The administrator left no doubt whom he meant.

Bell became serious. "How do we know that Khrest would agree to have a monument?" he asked. "He is an unpretentious man who does everything strictly as a matter of course. I can hardly believe that it would be in keeping with the ideas of the old Arkonide if we were to assign such a task to Mangelmann."

Perry Rhodan nodded. His grey eyes seemed to reflect his true age, not the age his body represented. "I'm sure Khrest would object," he agreed. "However we don't erect a memorial for him but for us. It is important to perpetually remind mankind that extraterrestrial beings can be our friends and that not all alien beings must be regarded as enemies.

"I share your opinion," Bell said. "Shall I tell the man to come in?"

"Of course," Rhodan replied.

Mangelmann entered: a small, crumpled-looking man who seemed lost in his shapeless jacket. His face had a grey colour and it was difficult to guess his age. He was polite and calm and his voice had a resonant ring.

Rhodan showed him two large pictures. "Can you work from these?" he inquired.

Mangelmann studied the pictures and looked up in confusion. "But this is..." he began hesitantly.

"Yes, it's him," Bell interjected from the sidelines.

Rhodan rose from his chair and walked around the desk and looked at the pictures over the shoulder of the sculptor. "I regret that Khrest is unable to sit for you," Rhodan explained. "Certain circumstances have prevented it."

"I understand," Mangelmann answered softly.

"No, he isn't dead," the administrator assured.

The artist shifted the pictures between his hands, trying to make up his mind. "Well, sir," he finally consented, "I'm honoured and I accept the assignment."

"We won't require you to finish it at a particular date but we expect you to do your best. We want you to set everything else aside and create a statue of Khrest in stone. You can consult with Bell about the dimensions. Your reward will be determined by our satisfaction with your work."

Mangelmann got up. His movements seemed nervous and jerky. They shook hands and Bell showed him to the door.

"A good man," Rhodan said after he was gone.

"You rank everybody on a fixed scale," Bell muttered glumly. "You rate people as good, bad, intelligent and so on. Every man is neatly put into his place."

"But I have trouble finding a spot for you," Rhodan shot back. "You don't seem to fit into *human* categories."

"That's because I'm something special," Bell answered with deep conviction.

Khrest's name was not mentioned again that day. But the following day they talked about nothing else except the fate of the ancient Arkonide.

9/ KHREST'S DESPERATE SACRIFICE

Almost all oxygen breathers in the Galaxy require regular periods of rest and Golath was no exception. It had become a problem for him to overcome his fatigue. His life could depend on being awake or asleep.

He had built a shield against the rain but the storm had swept it away and he was exposed to the rain all night.

Neither Liszog nor Zerft had returned and it would have been unwise to look for them. Whatever happened, he could not abandon his place. Perhaps the Arkonide was already waiting up on the slope, hoping that Golath would leave the vicinity of the ship for a moment.

The Unither did not really believe that the old man could have succeeded in defeating Zerft and Liszog. He was more apt to assume that the latter two had killed each other by their deadly rivalry. On the other hand Zerft might have persuaded the youth to join him in his search for Khrest in the forest. Liszog had failed to come back with the missing parts Golath needed for the completion of his force-field generator.

Golath leaned his back against the last branch left of his rainroof. His body was stiff from the cold. From time to time he ran around the ship to keep his blood circulating. He had been forced to clean his trunk already once in the old primitive manner and he almost died of shame although nobody was there to watch him. He had wrapped leaves around a stick like an uncivilized barbarian and suffered agonies as he compared it with the luxurious automatic cleaning apparatus he was used to.

The wind battered and howled in his ears while torrents of water nearly drowned him. The soil was so muddy and soft that his feet sank in. The wet ground gave little support to his 300 lb. body.

The gale created mountainous waves on the lake. Golath was unable to see them because he was in total darkness. However he could hear them roll in and crash thunderously against the shore. Once the wind blew in a small, monkey-like animal. It was thrown against Golath and clutched his chest, screeching helplessly. Golath pulled it off with his trunk and tossed it away but the cries of the creature still jarred his ears.

Then he fell asleep but was plagued by violent dreams. A piercing noise woke him up and caused him to tremble in fear. It was the branch which had broken under his weight.

The night seemed endless. Several times Golath thought the Arkonide had arrived, only to realize that he had been fooled by the roar of the storm. Although he considered it highly unlikely that the old man could brave such a hurricane, the possibility that his foe could suddenly appear on the scene robbed him of his sleep.

That night Golath cursed the tribunal of his judges. He was driven to thoughts of revenge. If he succeeded in gaining control of the Arkonide ship he would return triumphantly to Unith and retaliate mercilessly against all those who were responsible for his punishment.

As the hours dragged on, Golath became more and more embittered. At first he felt merely sorry for himself. But the conviction that he was the victim of a gross injustice grew stronger all the time till it left no room for rational conclusions. He was filled with hate and blind fury against any threat that could prevent him from extricating himself from his critical situation. But he had no possibility of venting his wrath and it accumulated inside him like water rising in a basin and overflowing. His animal instincts came to the fore and his emotions gained the upperhand in his mental state. He no longer felt the effects of the rain and the wind, nor his wretched tiredness. He waited for Khrest with the intensity of a beast of prey, feeling in his bones that a fatal decision was nearing a climax.

Dawn came only very slowly and there was not a patch of sky devoid of dark clouds.

Golath shook himself. He was ready for the fight with the Arkonide. Let the old man dare show his face

* * * *

When Khrest awoke he dragged himself out of the *Kaszill's* airlock and got on his way. The storm had slackened but the rain persisted, drenching the land, and big puddles formed everywhere.

Khrest bent down and massaged his swollen ankle. After waking up at daybreak it had taken him some time to pull himself together. His weakened body rebelled. Khrest knew that he was sick. During the night he had been disturbed by many feverish dreams. He lacked the strength to fight off his cold. Strangely enough his feeble state failed to discourage him. He had mustered more self-assurance than he would have thought possible under the bleak circumstances.

He mobilized his scant resources by sheer willpower, challenging death itself. Not once did the idea occur to him that he was making a sacrifice. He simply felt duty bound to save the spacejet.

He departed from the ship of the Unithers and sloshed through the desolate expanse of mud and water. A strange fire glinted in his reddish eyes. He never became aware that he could fall victim to his strenuous exertions. Was it his fever that prevented the voice of reason from reaching the level of consciousness?

Time and again he gathered his strength and walked on in his limping gait, splashing water with every step. Within minutes he was soaking wet again.

On days like these he had planned to sit in the comfortable warmth of his house by the window and watch the raindrops splatter on the glass and run down in glistening strings. He would have been contented to look out on the lake and enjoy the rest while a robot quietly served him a steaming hot drink.

Khrest swallowed hard. It was better not to think of the idyll.

He looked back. The *Kaszill* had become a black blot which he would probably never see again. He wondered why he had not regretted his choice of this planet earlier. He knew that Perry Rhodan would accuse himself with bitter feelings of self-reproach. His friend had implored him often enough to select a peaceful retreat on Earth.

Khrest paused a moment to catch his breath and contemplate what was in store for him. He tried to surmise what shape the Unither was in. The Unither must have spent two harrowing nights out in the storm and he probably suffered some ill effects. Was he already at work to penetrate the protective shield? The thought made Khrest shudder. Perhaps he had already managed to enter the spacejet and he imagined him testing the controls with his trunk, trying to determine how they operated and what purpose they served.

The thought instilled new determination and strength in Khrest. He had to get there in time. Contrary to all expectations he had already eliminated two of his adversaries but the last of his enemies could prove to be his downfall. His mouth formed a thin line in his pale face. He approached the imminent last decision with fear but the fear was not for himself.

For a fleeting moment Khrest recalled his first meeting with Perry Rhodan at the time when the

Administrator was still an unknown major in the Spaceforce who had made his first landing on the Moon in the rocket Stardust. Since then Khrest had dedicated most of his endeavours to the benefit of Terra. Now he was at the end of his strength.

He checked the operation of his thermo-beamer with numb fingers. It was remarkable how similar the weapons of the spaceroving races were in principle. Of course, Khrest reflected grimly, they all were made to spread death and havoc. With this identical purpose in mind the inhabitants of most planets had inevitably developed the most practical form of handguns—provided they had hands, not tentacles or flippers.

The Arkonide glanced at the lake. He was unable to see the shore since it was below the angle of his view. By the time he reached the landing place of the Solar System the rain had washed away all tracks. Neglecting to take special precautions, Khrest stumbled on to the rim of the slope and was pleased to find the spacejet still at the same place. Then he noticed with alarm a conglomeration of unrecognizable machines which seemed to indicate that the Unither was already busy with attempts to break through the protective screen.

Khrest hastened his steps.

* * * *

Golath jumped back into his hole with a mighty leap, sending the water up in a big spray.

The Arkonide had finally arrived. For an instant he had seen his shadow up there on the slope, a fragile figure that seemed to be swept away by the wind. Before Golath could reach for his weapon his opponent had disappeared again. The Unither strained his ears to listen in the rain. From where would he spring the attack? If his eyes had not deceived him, the Arkonide carried one of their own thermo-beamers in his hand.

This meant that either Zerft or Liszog were dead. Or both. Golath peered tensely out from behind his cover. He had a good view of the slope, which was a great advantage. If the Arkonide descended—which he would be compelled to do if he wanted to get to his ship—he would have no place to hide on the bare sandy incline, whereas Golath was concealed in a safe place.

The old man would not be so careless as to climb down to the shore in the immediate vicinity of the spaceship. Golath assumed that Khrest would risk a descent only at a safe distance. However this would not help him very much. The beach was flat and the Arkonide could not conceal his approach. There was only one thing for the Arkonide to do—he would have to face him in an open duel.

Golath laughed jubilantly. He would deceive the other one by leaving his pit, only to jump back the moment he got his chance at a good shot. However the old man seemed to have lost his nerve. Despite his keenest surveillance the slim silhouette failed to appear again.

He thinks he can accomplish more by a tactic of wearing me down, Golath speculated, but he won't get anywhere with that strategy. He was firmly convinced that he would be the final victor. He was ready for any trick his rival might have up his sleeve. In the final analysis there was only one way leading to the ship—a path down the slope.

* * * *

Nonetheless there was another way. Khrest forged ahead along the plateau till he rounded a bend and moved out of the Unither's sight. Hugging the ground he lowered himself down the bank and crossed the morass at the shore. His idea paid off. His boat was still there!

The success of his plan depended on his correct belief that the Unither watched only the slope. None of them had known anything about the existence of the boat. It was his intention to launch his foray across the lake.

But first he encountered some disappointment: the boat was brimful of water. The storm had swamped it with its waves during the night. Khrest was too weak to turn the boat over to let the water run out. The hull was made of thin but tough plastic. He picked up a sharp stone and smashed it against the part of the boat farthest out of the water, without making a dent. There had to be a better way. He took out his weapon although he was unable to determine whether its firepower could be adjusted, hoping the plastic material of the boat was incombustible.

His shot melted an irregular hole and the dripping plastic gave off a nauseating stench before it dropped into the water with a sharp hiss. The water squirted out of the boat and Khrest tilted the boat up by wedging stones under its bottom in order to empty it more.

The procedure took less time than he expected. He tore off another strip of his tunic, leaving little of the garment remaining. He wrapped a stone in the cloth and plugged up the hole to make it as watertight as possible again. The pressure of the water was not sufficient to expel the plug. Although the rain continued to pour some water into the boat, it was not enough to be of critical importance.

A coughing spell interrupted his work. He hunched his back and pressed his arms against his chest. It burned like fire. He gasped for air amid jabbing pains.

Was this the end? Was he condemned to fail in his mission so near to the goal? He suppressed his cough with a superhuman effort and was able to function once more. His moist eyes cleared up again.

Panting fitfully he pushed the boat out into the lake. This took him several minutes. Then he climbed in but nearly plunged backwards into the water again. He was so worn out by the effort that he lay motionlessly in the boat for some time before he was able to pull himself together to get up.

Khrest regarded his mission neither as tragic nor heroic. He did simply what had to be done in order to keep a promise.

He put down his weapon in the bow and picked up the paddle. Then he stuck the paddle into the soft bottom of the lake and slowly pushed the boat away, breaking out in a sweat. In doing so he lost his hold on the slippery surface and had to let go of the paddle. The boat floated out into the lake before he could retrieve the paddle buried in the sand. Yet this was no time to give up. Khrest used his hands to paddle himself back toward the land until he was able to pull out the oar.

He had nearly failed in the execution of the first part of his manoeuvre and the second part was bound to

be even more hazardous.

* * * *

The surface of the lake presented a fascinating show. The bottom of the lake radiated a pale yellow light of mysterious origin. Thousands of raindrops created a pattern of intermingling circles at whose centres little squirts of water bubbled up, producing an image of a huge, living mosaic. The Arkonide was enchanted by the spectacle despite his wretched condition. The light emitted from the water made the air above the surface luminescent, too. There seemed to be some radiant substance at the bottom of the lake. Ufgar had failed to write anything about the existence of this phenomenon. But then he probably never went rowing on the lake in a downpour either.

The boat moved around the curving shore and Khrest pulled in his paddle when he saw the spacejet in the distance. He was unable to detect the Unither. He probably was too well hidden.

Khrest paddled farther out into the lake. He considered it preferable not to approach his opponent from his flank, which would have involved the danger of being discovered prematurely. If he came in from the middle of the lake he might succeed in landing unseen at the back of the Unither. Fortunately the water had calmed down and the boat responded well to his steering.

As the distance to his goal slowly dwindled, tension built up in him to the breaking point. He kept reminding himself that he was engaged in a momentous task. It was an enormous plus for the human race to maintain exclusive possession of these little versatile spaceships which were capable of performing hyperspace flights. Swift and nimble, they were hard to detect and provided invaluable service for reconnaissance and secret agents' missions. It was very understandable that Perry Rhodan was loath to hand over such an important advantage without a struggle.

Now the duty of safeguarding this advantage had fallen on Khrest's frail shoulders. This awareness strengthened his spirit and he was prepared to do everything in his power to preserve the embattled spaceship.

Khrest cautiously entered the danger zone. Nothing happened. The rain kept falling monotonously from the cloudy sky and the water dripped softly from his paddle. The old man anxiously scanned the shore. It would be useless to throw himself down flat in the boat when the Unither started shooting. The plastic hull would melt like wax. He realized he had entered a regular mousetrap from which there was no escape.

Then he saw the enemy. He was still in the hole he had burned into the earth near the spacejet. His face was turned toward the slope. From time to time he shook his trunk impatiently. Khrest held his breath in suspense. A shot fired from his rocking boat at this distance could have hit the target only by sheer luck. Moreover he knew only too well that he was incapable of shooting anyone in the back. He stopped paddling and let his boat drift as he held his thermo-beamer in his hands ready to open fire. He did not want to miss his chance should the Unither turn around. He could barely see his head and his twitching trunk and wondered what went on behind that semi-spheric skull.

The scientist wiped his wet brow. The slight touch was enough to hurt him. The spacejet lay almost within his grasp but death waited between the ship and Khrest.

The boat ran ashore with barely a sound. Khrest's tension abated. *He is liable to hear me, he thought; I need both hands to climb out. It will prevent me from aiming at him in case he turns around.*

Fate is apt to produce many a quirk. At this moment the life of a man depended on the flip of a head.

* * * *

Golath whirled around.

The almost imperceptible crunching of sand hit him like an electric shock. He was shattered by abysmal disappointment. All had been in vain. The Arkonide had outwitted him. He had not come down the hill. A little boat was beached at the edge of the water.

The old man stood his ground a mere 10 meters from him, pointing a thermo-beamer straight at him. Nobody had to tell Golath about the murderous devastation these guns unleashed.

The Arkonide had a wan smile on his lips. His thin ragged figure retained enough grandeur to stand proudly—an Arkonide of the ruling caste. This was the same posture generations of Arkonides had adopted as they landed on Unith.

"Drop your weapon and come slowly out of your pit!" Khrest ordered in Interkosmo.

Golath ducked down into his mudhole, splashing water in his face. The old man could not react quickly enough. Golath heard him running away across the slippery ground. He jumped up again, looked over the rim of his pit and roared in delight.

The Arkonide had shut down the protective shield and was running toward the ship. Golath raised his thermo-beamer and took careful aim. Just then his opponent looked back and threw himself to the ground. Golath fired and ducked again. A hissing stream of fire shot over his cover. When he peered out of his hole again he saw that his shot had missed Khrest. He saw the old man disappearing behind the spacejet and it was useless to resume his fire.

He scrambled out of his hole and crawled toward the vessel, hugging the ground. He had by all means to prevent Khrest from entering the spaceship from the opposite side.

When the Unither finally touched the cold metal of the ship he felt his spine tingle as he stood on the verge of a unique accomplishment. He would be the first outcast to return triumphantly to Unith. The community would receive him with open arms and shower him with honours. He was certain to bask in the gratitude of his people forever.

Then Khrest's shot rang out. The support leg next to Golath collapsed and liquid metal spurted into the morass.

He's out to demolish his own ship! The thought made Golath shudder in horror. In order to thwart the attempt, Golath pulled himself up over the periphery of the disk. The hull was polished and slippery wet. Golath crept on all fours toward the rotund cockpit until he was close enough to touch it. His weapons made scraping noises on the glistening surface.

"Sssssssppp!"

Golath jumped to his feet. It was the typical sound of an opening airlock. He darted around the cockpit and came face to face with the Arkonide, who stood in his torn clothes with raised weapon at the entrance, squinting his reddish eyes.

They fired simultaneously. Before Golath realized that his foot had slipped while he fired, he was thrown back by a shattering blow and fell with a hollow thud. "He hit me," he murmured in astonishment.

Golath tried to get up again but his legs buckled under his weight. Although he felt no pain he was afraid to look down at his body. He used his arms to drag himself around the cockpit again. The Arkonide had toppled into the airlock. He was still alive but his shoulder was injured.

We Unithers are tough, Golath thought grimly, too tough for you, old man .

Golath shifted his weight onto his left shoulder. It was all over for him. He would never see Unith again. His wound was fatal.

"Arkonide!" Golath called fiercely.

* * * *

Khrest opened his eyes. The Unither had wounded him and he did not think he could survive the injury. Yet this was no tragedy. He had saved the spacejet. *It was an unbelievable victory*, he reflected. "I've kept my promise to you, Perry," he whispered. "I've guarded your ship with my life."

He wanted to smile but the pain twisted his face into a grimace.

Then the Unither emerged once more from behind the cockpit.

I must be delirious,
Khrest thought in wonder. *These are the hallucinations of final agony.*

"Arkonide!"

Khrest was startled. This mud-smeared monster was reality. His enemy stared triumphantly at his mortally wounded victim.

"Arkonide!" The voice was filled with the fanatic hate of a man who knew no mercy. The rain beat rhythmically against the hull of the spacejet. The banished Unither watched Khrest's attempt to raise his weapon again. His trunk jutted out from a face distorted in fury.

He detests me, Khrest thought in sorrow, *not as an individual but because I am an Arkonide.*

Khrest drew a bead on his assailant. The move surprised the Unither and his shot went wild. But Khrest's aim was accurate. This time there could be no doubt: his persecutor was dead.

"The Arkonides have plundered your planet and enslaved your race," Khrest murmured. "And you, too, were doomed to die by the hand of an Arkonide."

Gazing silently at the body of his antagonist, Khrest remained motionless for a while. The first thing he did when he was able to move again was to throw his weapon away.

It was imperative to get in touch with Terrania. He had to let Perry Rhodan know to secure the spacejet before it attracted the attention of other intruders. The hypercom was only 10 meters away but in Khrest's hopeless condition it seemed more like 10 kilometres. But nothing could deter the mortally wounded man from dragging himself along the floor.

The moment one thinks the worst is over, the minor difficulties loom larger, Khrest philosophized as he made heroic efforts for every inch of progress. He advanced more by sliding than crawling. By the time he had covered half the distance his eyesight faded and everything became a shadowy blur except for a bright square—the hyper-transmitter.

With a sense of astonishment he suddenly realized that for the past few moments the pain had completely subsided in his mortally injured body. And he felt as though he were inside a great and comforting cocoon that shut out all the sound and light of the outside world. In a long life filled with Arkonide, human and cosmic emotions, he had never before experienced such a feeling. It was strange but not frightening.

The realization that rose from his subconscious expressed itself as a whisper barely emanating from his withered lips. Three simple words, inevitable for most sentient beings: "I am dying."

It came to him then that, after pausing to let the realization sink in, he had not continued moving. Summoning every ounce of his last strength, he resumed his death crawl. Slowly. Laboriously.

It occurred to him that he had neglected to close the airlock.

The bright spot came closer but it grew dimmer as it gained in size.

The wind came in through the open airlock. He felt the breeze on his face and it gave him more strength to persevere in his final endeavour.

* * * *

Lt. Bowler lazily twirled his mechanical pencil between his manicured fingers. He was on duty at the Radio Communication Centre of the Solar Defence at Terrania. A panel of various hypercom screens was at his eye level above the corresponding transceivers in front of him.

Bowler was a young officer who was as yet rather inexperienced and he knew he had been put in charge of the Communication Centre only because it happened to be a quiet time. He kept an eye on the radio technicians who were in contact with several of the distant planets.

When he heard the familiar buzz of the hypercom his relaxed attitude changed and he leaned forward to listen with utmost concentration to the message coming in on the channel reserved for urgent

communications. There were only a few men who knew the secret code to use that channel.

Bowler switched on the picture screen whose signal lamp had begun to flicker. When the screen became clear Bowler saw the interior of a ship and recognized it as one of the newest and most advanced models. There was no one in sight.

Then he noticed a hand, moving in a jerky manner into the corner of the screen. Bowler was unable to suppress a sensation of terror. The hand kept moving as if trying to reach something.

Finally he heard the voice whose agonized sound touched Bowler so deeply that he would never be able to forget it.

"Khrest... speaking..." the amplifier rasped.

Bowler jumped up from his seat. His excitement was shared by the other men in the room, who left their places to join him wordlessly.

"Sir!" Bowler shouted anxiously. "For heaven's sake, sir! What happened?"

The hand slowly slipped down. Bowler clamped his hands so tightly around the hypercom set that his knuckles went white.

"Tell... Rhodan... to get... the spaceship!"

The voice trailed away in a whisper. Bowler was white as a sheet and perspiring profusely. "Sir!" he called softly.

But Khrest failed to answer.

Bowler took the message from the recording machine with trembling hands and knocked over his chair as he turned around. The men stepped aside. Lt. Bowler, a man who always concealed his emotions by impeccable manners, was visibly shaken. "I must inform Rhodan at once," he gasped.

He took a last look at the picture screen and, biting his lip, ordered tersely: "Shut it off!"

One of the technicians silently carried out the order.

All was quiet in the large room except for a slight hum of a transceiver and the soft ticking of an instrument.

* * * *

Now nothing remained to be done. It was peaceful to lie quiescent and quietly succumb to that ineffable lassitude, that moribund matrix of body and mind and emotion as the life force burned lower and lower toward total extinction of the human spirit.

Khrest lay supine, his embering eyes barely aware of the alien skies above him.

Danata kyor khaval dra kha. Vahlk. The words drifted through his clouding mind in the tongue to which he was born. *This is not a bad way to die: older than most, a life fuller than most.*

And a montage of friendly ghosts melded mistily together on the darkling screen of his dying mind... foremost Thora... then Perry... here Pucky... there Atlan... again Thora... now Perry... his revered Mother and Father... the beloved grandparents, both maternal and paternal, who tutored and spoiled him in his youth.

And then, at the penultimate moment of life's parting, as though seen through the enamoured eyes of an 18-year-old youth in the thrall of first love, a young maid of Arkon appeared to Khrest, a sylph with skin so fair and hair so lustrous and lips so luscious and eyes so luminous that one might wonder were she but a poet or a painter's idyll of perfection, a bright illusion, or had she truly ever lived...

Khrest had kept his promise. The spacejet remained in the hands of the Earthlings. In the capable strong hands of men of a young and daring race.

Thank you, my friend! a familiar voice seemed to say inside Khrest's head, momentarily disturbing the vision of supernal feminine loveliness as a stone cast in a pool might vibrate a beautiful girl's reflection.

"Goodbye, Perry," Khrest said almost inaudibly. Only the Universe heard his dying breath.

Still one last sound silently echoed in his soul, the beautiful name that named the fair lost vision of his youth, the secret sorrow which even his most intimate friends had never suspicioned in the later years of his life. His image: ever the solitary, dedicated savant. But once there had been... *Lurvanii* .

And the Universe was diminished as Khrest, the wise old Arkonide scientist, expired; dying as he had lived—serenely and with a gentle smile upon his lips—as the dearest desire of his ardent manhood reappeared, released with his final heartbeat from the recesses of irreality, to welcome her eternal love home to infinite peace.

* * * *

For the first time in his life Lt. Davis Bowler stood face to face with the Administrator. But he was far from elated, seeing the sorrow in those pain-filled eyes.

Rhodan looked up, turning the message between his fingers. "You may leave, Lt. Bowler," he said with outward calm.

Bowler saluted and left the room as quickly as discipline permitted.

Rhodan flipped on the mike. "Rhodan speaking. Please find Reginald Bell and send him to me at once."

He waited for the confirmation and leaned back in his chair. Something unforeseen had happened on Khrest's Planet: the Arkonide had apparently been able to save the spacejet but had sacrificed his life for it.

Bell came without delay. He knew Perry Rhodan well enough to realize that this was no time for levity.

The Administrator rose from his seat and gazed into the eyes of his old friend—one of the last he still could cherish. "Come, Reggie," he said softly. "We want to take our friend home."

ORDER OF THE ACTION

FOREWORD

1/ A TIME TO LIVE, A PLACE TO DIE

2/ THE THREE FUGITIVES

3/ APPARATUS DIABOLICAL

4/ SECOND THOUGHTS

5/ "THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY TO DEAL WITH AN ARKONIDE!"

6/ BATTLE IN THE FOREST PRIMEVAL

7/ ATTACK OF THE HORNED BURROWERS

8/ NOT ALL ALIENS ARE NECESSARILY ENEMIES

9/ KHREST'S DESPERATE SACRIFICE

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

FRIEND TO MANKIND

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FOREWORD

A man reached the end of Orion Avenue where a wide lawn began to stretch out behind a border of blooming bushes and flowers. Mildly astonished, he looked back down the magnificent street. Only a few minutes earlier the heavy traffic of a sprawling metropolis had flowed around him.

Terrania, hub of the Solar Imperium, was an immense city full of contrasts. Supermodern stratoscrapers flowed into the quiet and relaxation of beautiful parks. For those who sought leisure and recreation, the parks spread lazily in all directions.

The man walked along the edge of one such park. In the shadow of three trees stood a statue which had been erected as a memorial only a short while ago. It was none too conspicuous and a person in a hurry could have passed it by without noticing it. But the man paused. He gazed at the pedestal hewn from a pale natural stone. On the pedestal stood the figure of a man sculptured by a gifted artist. A sunbeam penetrated the foliage of the trees and touched the chiselled face. The spectator unconsciously took a step back, for the statue almost looked alive. It represented a tall slim man of advanced age whose body was cloaked in a cape. His right arm was stretched out in a protective gesture.

The man in front of the memorial smiled a gentle, sad smile at the face of stone that exuded frankness and intelligence on the rigid features.

Four simple words were cut into the pedestal and the man read them slowly and repeated them several times: A FRIEND TO MANKIND

That was all. There was no name, no date and no record of heroic deeds. Only the one sentence. Everybody knew the name of the man to whom the monument was dedicated and what he had done for Earth.

The quiet witness turned slowly away. He walked across the lawn, paying no attention to the taxi circling overhead. His thoughts dwelled on the man of stone and his lips formed his name as if he wanted to engrave it indelibly in his mind for all times.

Khrest!

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE DAWN of a new era is depicted starting next issue! 57 years have passed. On Earth it is now 2102 AD.

Conditions and relationships have been consolidated. Atlan's position as Emperor Gonozal has been established with the help of his Terranian friends. Terrans have also occupied important positions on Arkon itself in order to keep the Greater Imperium operable.

The Solar Empire has become the greatest commercial power in the known Milky Way as well as in Star Cluster M-13 beyond the galactic rim. Great transports carry a continuous stream of emigrants to far worlds of the interstellar frontier and contacts with numerous intelligent alien races are being cultivated.

It is at this time that a top-secret new spacedrive is put to the test—a propulsion system that will bring the science of space travel to an undreamed of new era of development.

In our next account of the life and times of the Peacelord we learn what happens during the far journey of the *Fantasy* to its unexpected

TARGET STAR

By

K.-H. Scheer