

THE ANTIS

It's just as certain, though, that Perry Rhodan and his men—as well as Atlan—have not paid enough attention lately to the Antis because of the turbulent events of the recent past.

Thus the Antis, the followers of the galaxy-wide Baalol cult, have been given an opportunity to start their 10-year-plan of horror without any outside interference.

The terrifying potential that this plan is intended to have humanity and other intelligent life forms in the galaxy is perceived for the first time by the agents of Division 3 now stationed on the planet Lepso, as they are advancing into

THE DESERT OF DEATH'S DOMAIN

1/ THE MYSTERIOUS LEPSO AFFAIR

Gerard Lobson was just about to say something when he noticed suddenly that the man sitting across from him was undergoing a startling change.

They had been sitting here for over an hour, separated by a narrow writing desk heaped with papers. Gerard had come to make a proposition to this man whose office was a long, narrow, airless room with a single window which fortunately was just clean enough to permit the daylight to reach the writing desk standing in the rear of the room.

All this time Gerard Lobson sat on this uncomfortable chair unable to utter more than his initial greeting: "Hello, Dr. Zuglert, I'd like to propose something to you." Then Dr. Zuglert had taken over with an incredible burst of energy and speed. He literally took Gerard Lobson's breath away expounding on his visitor's not-yet-revealed proposal, discussing it from every possible angle, then proving that Gerard was wrong to assume that his plan could be carried out, particularly not in the manner he proposed to do it. Gerard's amazement grew with the doctor's every word, particularly since he had never even had a chance to say what his proposal was all about.

Gerard Lobson simply squirmed uneasily in his hard seat, from time to time trying in vain to put in a word. And now when the doctor finally stopped his unending torrent of phrases a horrifying sequence unfolded in front of his eyes.

When he first laid eyes on Dr. Zuglert he believed him to be a man in his early 40s. He impressed him as the type person who went in for sports, especially active sports, in his spare time. His face had a healthy glow and was free of wrinkles.

But now?

It looked as if something had pumped out everything from inside Dr. Zuglert's head. The skin of his face was all wrinkled, shrinking visibly to fill the sudden vacuum. His cheekbones jutted out sharply and from one moment to the next an ugly dead man's skull was grinning at Gerard. The shrunken skin continued to deteriorate. The doctor's healthy, tanned complexion turned a disgusting, flaccid shade of yellow. The lower jaw suddenly dropped, revealing 2 uneven rows of dirty, brown teeth. Gerard remembered in a flash how barely an hour ago he had admired Dr. Zuglert's flawless dental display.

Gerard stood up quickly. Suddenly he felt afraid of this man who sat silent and motionless, fixing him with a glassy stare from across the narrow writing desk. Gerard withdrew from the table toward the front of the room. Horror stricken he observed that there was no way out to safety: just a window, and this window was on the 23d floor of an old highrise building.

Still, Gerard drew back farther and farther from the fearful sight at the desk. Maybe he could open the window and shout for help. Perhaps someone would hear him. Gerard turned around and tried to open the window. This is when Dr. Zuglert began to speak again:

"You needn't be afraid of me, young man," he said with a weak voice, wheezing like an ancient smoker in the last stages of emphysema. He was seized by a violent coughing spell. As soon as he recovered from the attack he continued: "I need your help now, Mr. Lobson. Would you kindly assist me in getting out of my seat?"

Gerard breathed a sign of relief. So the doctor was no longer able to stand up under his own power! And now he was plotting to get Gerard to help him rise, which would give him the chance to seize him by the throat and strangle his visitor!

Gerard saw the door behind Zuglert's back. If only he could manage to reach it, then he would be out of danger!

Zuglert started up again. Speaking seemed to require a tremendous effort for him. His words came haltingly, constantly interrupted by a wheezing cough. "Important for Terra, young man ..." Gerard could barely make out. "Must warn everybody ... my case proves ..."

Zuglert kept on talking but Gerard no longer listened. With a friendly smile he moved toward the writing desk as if to indicate to Zuglert he was coming over to help him.

"... alcoholic solution, quite inconspicuous ..." Gerard snatched up the phrase just as he reached the writing desk.

With one swift leap he rounded the obstacle in his path and before Zuglert realized what Gerard planned to do, the latter grasped the doorknob, turned it and the door opened without force. Gerard shot out of the office while he grasped the side of the door with his right hand and slammed it shut behind him with a loud bang.

Gerard was standing in the hallway of an old-fashioned office building. There were other doors to his right and left and on either side of the corridor. All doors were closed. Nobody had heard anything that had just taken place in Dr. Zuglert's small office. Gerard deliberated whether he should tell anyone of Zuglert's frightening metamorphosis. Suddenly he remembered that Zuglert had known in a most mysterious way what the proposition was Gerard planned to tell him about. Gerard quickly dismissed the

notion of letting others know about Zuglert's condition. He risked that Zuglert might inform whoever came to his rescue about Gerard's plan and that was the last thing he needed now.

Too bad, but he had to abandon Zuglert now to his own fate.

Gerard walked down the hallway till he reached the antigrav shaft, stepped inside to let himself be gently wafted down. He felt greatly relieved in the knowledge that he had just escaped from a dangerous situation.

He also realized that the memory of the yellow-greyish death's-head face would pursue him for a long time to come.

* * * *

The *Florida* came from the centre of the galaxy. Major Kindsom, commander of the patrol cruiser knew what was expected of him after having executed a certain number of transitions on their return to Terra: namely a short report via the directional telecom about the results of his activities in the centre of the Milky Way. Dick Kindsom had prepared his report for Terra and it had been encoded on a special foil for the broadcast. He inserted the plastic foil into the proper slot in the sender and pushed the release key. He heard a soft clicking noise. Dick Kindsom knew that practically simultaneously the receiver sets on Terra—9000 light-years distant—would start working. His entire message, which had a total length of three-thousandth of one second, would be expanded, taken apart, examined, put together again; finally the transformer would spit out a piece of microfilm which in turn could then be projected through an instrument, thus permitting the properly authorized personnel to read in clearly legible print what Dick Kindsom had said in some thousand words. It was as simple as that.

Dick's message reported that the gap torn by the united fleets of Terra and Arkon in the energy screen surrounding the mysterious Blue System of the Akons had closed again. This meant that the Akons had restored their fortress to a state of readiness against enemy attack—although they knew only too well that even a repaired "Blue Screen" would be ineffective to protect them against the linear-drive of Terra's spaceships.

Now that Dick Kindsom had dutifully carried out what was expected from him he proceeded to ready the *Florida* for the next transition. He was just about to initiate the hyper-transition which would bring his ship a few more thousand light-years closer to Terra when the telecom-receiver gave off a warning signal.

He simply depressed one button which annulled all positronic commands he had fed into the automatic guidance system of the *Florida*. A red light appeared on the receiver's screen and a mechanical voice stated: "Fering 2 calling cruiser *Florida*. We have a TTT-call from Fering 2 for cruiser *Florida*. Come in, please."

Dick acted swiftly. TTT meant top urgent. Though he couldn't imagine who on this godforsaken world of Fering 2 should want to contact him so urgently, he immediately instructed the communication robot to accept the call.

"Maj. Kindsom speaking, commander of the *Florida*," Dick announced.

The red light signal on the receiver screen disappeared, giving way to a momentary flickering bright glare, and then a face became visible, a sight which caused Dick to recoil in horror. The head resembled that of an ancient Egyptian mummy, a dead man's skull whose bones had been covered as taut as a drum by yellowish-grey, wrinkled skin.

The narrow mouth slit of the dead man's skull opened and the mummy began to speak. This seemed to be a major effort for the unfortunate creature for it barely managed to squeeze out a word at 5 second intervals. A wheezing rattling sound accompanied each painfully uttered word.

"Whoever might hear my voice," said the mummy, "this is an urgent call for help! My life is threatened ... utmost danger. My name is Dr. Armin Zuglert, residing in Zanithon on Lepso. Please help me! I implore you to come to my rescue!"

Dick stepped closer to the screen again to reply. "How can we help you, Zuglert? This is the patrol cruiser *Florida* speaking. What danger threatens your life?"

Dick's patience was sorely tried until Zuglert, obviously at the end of his tether, resumed: "12 years ago I ...". Suddenly the connection was interrupted. The screen was once again gray and empty and the busy hum of the receiver died down completely.

"Oh what a fool!" muttered Dick Kindsom under his breath. Zuglert must have been overcome by a sudden spell of weakness, right at the most critical moment when he was going to reveal the nature of the danger facing him; probably tried to steady himself and rested his hand on some vital push button and cut off the connection. Dick's thoughts turned almost resentfully against the poor mummy-head. *Served him right, he should have been more careful; after all, it was his own life that was at stake!*

Dick signalled the communications robot. The red light came on again on the screen.

"My TTT call with Fering 2 has been cut off," Dick complained. "Connect us again right away!"

"What station were you talking to?" inquired the mechanical voice.

"How should I know!" shouted Dick angrily. "My party's name was Armin Zuglert. Just look up in your register where this TTT call originated. It's not my business to keep track of such things!"

"Of course, sir. It will take just a few seconds." Dick waited. A little while later the tinny voice came on again. "The call was placed from one of the stations of the Terranian Trade Mission on Fering 2, sir. Would you like to be reconnected?"

"What a silly question," snapped Dick. "Of course!" A few moments later the serious face of a middle-aged man appeared on the vid-screen. He looked at Dick with a puzzled expression.

"Inspector Neary of the Terranian Trade Mission on Fering 2," he announced in a curt voice. "What can I do for you?"

Dick didn't bother to give his own name. "Where is Zuglert?" he asked angrily.

The inspector eyed him suspiciously. "Where is who?" "Zuglert," repeated Dick, his irritation rising steadily. "Dr. Armin Zuglert. We were talking to each other from your station up to half a minute ago."

It was obvious that Inspector Neary was none too pleased. "Now listen to me, young man," he began,

"not only do you come on without announcing your name, nor do you state the nature of your business, but you also are talking utter nonsense, claiming you spoke with someone from my own telecom. I'm afraid if I'd inform your superiors of your strange behaviour ..."

"Just cut that bit about my superiors," snarled Dick furiously. "This is Maj. Richard Kindsom, commander of the *Florida*. Just a short while ago I received a TTT call from Dr. Zuglert and I was informed by my communications robot that this call had originated from your station. Zuglert appealed for help; it was quite obvious that he was in serious trouble. Our connection was broken off. Please get Dr. Zuglert back so we can finish our talk!"

Neary gave in. After all, it was not a smart thing for an inspector to go on expressing his displeasure to a major.

But he insisted that Zuglert had not spoken from this telecom, and besides, that a man fitting the description given by the major had never been seen inside the Terranian Trade Mission.

"And I've never heard that name before, Major," he concluded his argument. "It almost looks like you've fallen victim to some hoax."

Dick realized that he couldn't get anywhere with this inspector. He called the communications robot for the second time but the metallic voice insisted again that the TTT call had been conducted from the Trade Mission. Dick knew it would be no use trying to contact Neary again. For awhile he considered the possibility that he might take it upon himself to follow up the case of the mysterious Dr. Zuglert. But then he decided that his foremost task at the moment was to return with the *Florida* to Terra to receive instructions for future missions. He contacted the nearest unit of the Terranian Fleet and gave a coded report of the incident. He asked the commander of that ship to do his utmost to see to it that someone came to Zuglert's rescue.

Then he turned his attention once more to the activity which had been interrupted by the mysterious call for help from Fering 2. He prepared for the transition and programmed the necessary data into the automated guidance system. This was practically a routine job for him, thus allowing him to concentrate his thoughts on Zuglert with his death's-head face. Poor fellow, he had been so afraid for his life. He could not banish the image of the shrunken mummy's face from his thoughts.

He worried that their talk had been cut off. There wouldn't be much he could tell them when he'd hand in his report back on Earth.

At this point in time he did not realize that even the few meagre details he could supply would be enough to set in motion a major enterprise of the Solar Empire.

* * * *

It was a general assumption that the special agents of the Intercosmic Social Developmental Aid led an enviable life. These special agents were that institution's secret reserve. They were called in if some problem no longer could be solved by the usual means. In between missions the agents occupied their time whichever way they pleased, provided, of course, their financial situation would permit.

Nobody unfamiliar with the purposes of the Intercosmic Social Developmental Aid, and especially their Division 3, which was in charge of the special agents, could appreciate that this generosity was fully justified, considering the feats accomplished by them during their tours of duty. Any normal human being, given the choice, would undoubtedly have given up their vacation time for the next 10 years rather than undertake the dangerous missions of a special agent in order to obtain a sometimes quite extended vacation.

Maj. Ron Landry knew full well he would have his hands full for the next few days, weeks or even months when he received Col. Nike Quinto's summons to appear in the colonel's office.

Ron had made it his habit to get done with unpleasant business as fast as possible. Half an hour after he had the summons he was standing in front of Nike Quinto's door. He was still trying to steel himself to face Quinto's eternal bellyaching about his miserable state of health and the deplorable ineptitude of his subalterns, when suddenly the door opened. Ron Landry saw a huge writing desk with the colonel's rosy, sweating face barely peeking over the top.

Ron entered and took a seat near the desk. Nike Quinto began to move with a lot of moaning and groaning till finally part of his shoulders began to emerge from behind the tabletop.

"You are aware of my miserable state of health," he began without further ado. "So sit quiet and listen, and above all don't contradict me. My blood pressure is sky high; any aggravation might result in a stroke."

The greeting was typical for Nike Quinto, complaining about his ill health in an unpleasantly high squeaky voice. Ron Landry couldn't be fooled, though. He knew that Quinto actually enjoyed perfect health.

"Yessir," Ron replied obediently.

"Don't yessir me!" Quinto yelped. "I haven't asked you any questions." But as quickly as his ire had been aroused, he calmed down again and continued: "Tomorrow morning you're starting out for Lepso. We've received a very strange report from there."

While part of Ron's thoughts mulled over the question where in the universe Lepso might be, he listened at the same time to Nike Quinto's tale of the peculiar TTT call Dick Kindsom had received on board the *Florida*. Ron also learned that Lepso was identical with Fering 2 and this realization excited his imagination. It was just that he couldn't understand ..."

"You are sure now what you have to do, Landry?" asked Quinto in his high voice.

"Yessir," Ron answered readily. "Zuglert must be found."

Nike Quinto sighed loudly and sank lower into his armchair.

"Oh, my poor heart, how can it stand all this strain," he whined. "I knew you wouldn't understand. Why do they insist on giving me such blonks! Don't they have any more capable officers! Do you really think I would send you off to Lepso just to End Zuglert? What a mess we would be in if we'd immediately dispatch one of our special agents to any weeping and wailing sick man in the universe. You missed the point, Landry!"

So what is the point? Ron wondered silently. Nike Quinto, however, took his time to supply the answer. He wiped his sweaty brow and then inspected his wet hand. Finally he spoke. "Lately, it seems,

quite a few of these emaciated figures have been popping up on Lepso. Armin Zuglert is not an isolated case. And apparently the same types are never seen twice. Our informants have the impression that these shrunken mummies are carted off somewhere as soon as they make their first appearance. These unfortunate people also seem to be replaced immediately by someone else. Too bad we can't figure out the reason behind all this. Part of your job is to find out this mystery. To be quite frank with you, I'm not too sure yet what we should think about this whole affair. It might have some harmless explanation; on the other hand, it might not. Somewhere high up there," and he pointed his finger toward the ceiling, "the Zuglert case seems to have made quite a stir. The order to send one of my ... ahem ... men to Lepso came right down to me without any detours from the Administrator himself."

Ron tried hard to control himself and not let out a chuckle of amusement. It was good to know that Nike Quinto had almost allowed to slip out "one of my best men". Neither did Quinto's mentioning from where he had received his orders, namely directly from Perry Rhodan the Administrator, fail to make the proper impact on Ron Landry.

"Go into that room now," said Nike Quinto and pointed to a door in one of the side walls of his office. "Get acquainted with everything we've been able to find out so far about the mysterious Lepso affair. The program in there contains a matrix mould of the awareness and information centre in Maj. Kindsom's brain. He's the commander of the *Florida* and he's the one who accepted the TTT call sent out by Dr. Armin Zuglert. After the session you'll feel as if you yourself had talked directly with Zuglert rather than Kindsom."

Ron Landry rose from his chair and turned to the side wall. A door opened. He peered into the dimly-lit room where the hypno-schooling apparatus was set up, all ready and waiting for him.

2/ CRAZY WORLD

Three days later Ron Landry left the space freighter *Ephraim*, which had brought him quite fast but not too comfortably to the spaceport Zanithon on Lepso. Almost immediately after descending from the landing ramp Ron practically jumped right into the hectic bustle of the big city.

This, he realized, was one of the peculiar things about Lepso. There was no customs shed, no passport control, no health inspection, nothing, nothing. You got off your spaceship the way elsewhere you'd get out of a taxicab and you simply went on your way. The government of this world had early recognized how advantageous the galactic position of Lepso was and had taken care that many of the ships travelling along the nearby main shipping routes would be sure to stop on Lepso and trade at least part of their commercial cargo. A most effective method of attracting traders consists in providing easy access, the least amount of difficulties they'd encounter while landing so that they could get right down to business. Therefore none of the usual formalities accompanying landing and trading procedures elsewhere in galactic ports existed in the spaceports of Lepso. Of course, Lepso's government had understood to begin with that such a policy was bound to attract not only honest traders. This caused no feelings of remorse in the hearts of the rulers of Lepso for they collected taxes and fees from both honest and dishonest business deals and money was the only thing anyhow that counted on Lepso.

Lepso was the second satellite world of a yellow-brown star resembling Terra's Sol. Nearly the same gravity as that on Earth was felt on this planet's surface; and due to the fairly narrow orbit that Lepso was

describing around its central sun, temperatures like those prevalent in Rome or Cairo during the summer months were the rule on Lepso all year round.

The liberal immigration policies of the Lepso government throughout the centuries had the result that representatives of all galactic races had settled on this world. There were Topides, the intelligent lizard creatures from the planet Topid; the small cucumber-like Swoons from Swoofon; giant 3-eyed Naats from the Arkonide solar system; and a vast number of other beings, some coming from still independent worlds, about half being humanoid, the others representing nonhuman races.

This then was the world that Ron Landry came to visit now for the first time in his life. It had been his desire to do this for a long time. Little did he dream, though, that a tour of duty would finally make this dream come true, for Lepso out of all the galactic worlds seemed to be the one least in need of an intervention from the Intercosmic Developmental Social Aid.

The dull grey asphalt surface of the spaceport was bordered by a greenish, fluorescent lacquered line. Beyond it was a road, a monstrously wide road, at least 200 meters across, which led to the city. Lined up parallel, very close to this green line, a number of gliders could be seen, whose inscriptions, mainly in Arkonide writing, announced they were for hire, including the driver.

Ron decided to take such a taxi to drive downtown. Besides, he doubted there was any other way of getting there. But first he wanted to observe for awhile the traffic rushing by on this wide road. A strange variety of all kinds of vehicles roared by in both directions, all seemingly moving at the same daredevil speed, which Ron guessed to be around 200 kilometres an hour. This was an indication that this road must be equipped with an automatic, radio-guided direction system. The vehicles travelling along the road represented all the various makes known throughout the galaxy. There were the streamlined Arkonide gliders with their wide windows, the less sleek but sturdier Fords from Earth. Ron saw some old-fashioned, tall carriages that offered a great deal of resistance to the air above the road and which trailed behind them a small tornado, and then the flat, boat-like vehicles originating from those worlds where the atmosphere's density necessitated such shapes.

Ron Landry chuckled to himself. There was really no reason for him to do so and he didn't even know what in particular he was laughing about. It was just a general impression that tickled his funnybone to see this crazy mishmash of galactic so-called intelligent beings racing hither and thither with the sole purpose of making money, making some profit. For this was the only reason anybody would come to Lepso.

The grinning face of the driver of the taxi-glider nearest to Ron leaned out of the window.

"Hey, Earthman," he called out. "What's so funny? You need a ride to town?"

Ron looked at him astonished: the man addressed him in English! Ron stepped closer to the vehicle.

"That depends on your price," he answered.

"Two solars to the centre of the city," the driver replied promptly.

Ron's eyebrows shot up, even more puzzled than before.

"Since when are they quoting prices in Terranian currency here on Lepso?"

The driver hesitated slightly. "By the sylvan gods of my forefathers! You take what you can get. And it's easiest to get whatever people have in their pockets rather than wait till they can change their money into

Lepso currency."

Ron thought this a most convincing sample of good business sense.

"So you are from Goszul's planet, aren't you?" he asked the chauffeur.

Now it was the driver's turn to be puzzled.

"Quite right! And how did you guess that?"

"The sylvan gods of your forefathers," Ron said with a broad grin. "Where else in the universe would anybody appeal to them? Congratulations, though, your English is almost perfect, practically no accent."

The driver pushed a button to open the door of the glider; he seemed quite sure now that he had picked up a fare. "That's part of the business," he explained. "People like if you talk to them in their own language ... and as fluently as possible. I speak quite a number of foreign languages and most of them like a native."

Ron was just about to get into the glaxi* when his attention suddenly was drawn to a vehicle moving toward the greenish, fluorescent lacquered stripe. The black vehicle had the shape of a cube, each side 4 meters long, with a tiny driver's cabin attached to its front end. The sides of the cube showed a hatch, locked tight with heavy bolts and several large windows. Ron could make out some viscous, greenish liquid moving sluggishly behind these windows.

"You see that mud-trampler coming up here?" said the taxi driver. "Right behind you?"

Ron turned around. A second cube, much smaller than the black-cube vehicle, was approaching. The small cube seemed to consist of some elastic material with a window in its upper surface through which Ron could make out the same greenish fluid. For a fraction of a second Ron noticed a light and dark grey mottled figure floating in the hideous oily-looking green liquid.

Now the small cube came quite close to the larger vehicle. The hatch opened by itself apparently. The new passenger rose effortlessly from the bottom of his little cube and floated through the opening. The hatch closed behind him. After awhile Ron saw once again the same mottled contour he had observed before make its appearance in the interior of the larger cube. There seemed to be something similar to an airlock inside the big vehicle where the passenger had slipped out of his own little cube. He appeared to be quite at ease now floating in the green viscous liquid which filled the interior of the box-like vehicle.

Ron Landry kept watching, quite fascinated when the large cube started to move out into the line of traffic.

"What did you say that was?" he asked his driver.

"A mud trampler," repeated the man. "Of course it sounds quite different if you hear their name coming from the transec. But it's too difficult to pronounce, that's why we have given them that name."

Ron got inside the taxi-glider. "And where do these strange creatures come from?" he inquired.

"Well, from the mud-trampers' planet. Seems to be a world lying beyond the centre of the galaxy. Nobody knows how they ever found out about Lepso. But here they are now and they're supposed to be good businessmen."

This explanation satisfied Ron's curiosity. The glider set itself in motion. Soon Ron became aware that his driver kept close to the edge of the right side road, where he could travel as slow as he pleased.

"Why aren't you driving in the middle of the road?" Ron wanted to know.

"I didn't know that you were in a hurry to get downtown," answered his driver. "You didn't impress me as one of those who are forever in a rush."

Ron assured the man from Goszul that this was not at all the case. But Ron was puzzled why anyone on Lepso would drive his taxi slowly rather than at breakneck speed. After all, this way it would take longer for him to pick up another fare and therefore make more money.

"You're right, sir," admitted the driver. "But I don't care to rush like that. I'd rather make a little less money. I can't understand what has suddenly come over all the people here."

Ron sat up and took notice. "Suddenly? Hasn't it always been this way here?"

The man from Goszul replied with bitterness in his voice. "They've always been a nuksy" crowd," he answered as if he weren't one of the inhabitants of Lepso. "It used to be one could see vehicles going at half or even a quarter speed as frequently as those travelling at top speed on the middle strip. Now everybody is driving as fast as the automated guiding line will permit. They're all in a rush. They want to get to their destination as fast as possible and then leave there again right away."

Ron pondered awhile before he asked: "When was that? I mean when has this sudden change taken place?"

The driver hesitated a moment. "Oh, this must have happened about 3 or 4 Lepso months ago. I can't recall the exact date. But it didn't take more than a few days for things to change around here."

The driver fell silent; he obviously didn't wish to volunteer any more information on the subject. And Ron felt he had heard enough interesting details to ponder over that he did not insist on continuing that conversation. The rest of the drive to the centre of town was passed in silence. Ron paid the fare and got out of the glider-taxi. He was quite certain he'd never again lay eyes on the driver.

The place where he had asked to be let off was right in the middle of the city, where he expected to find any number of convenient hotels. Still lost in thought about what the driver had told him, he entered through a wide, mirrored glass door which opened automatically on his approach. The door led into a cool, dimly-lit foyer. He looked around for the robot receptionist but couldn't find one. Over to the left he noticed a big counter with a huge sign hanging over it. Inscriptions in 10 different languages and 4 different kinds of writings informed the newcomer that this was the reception desk. A woman welcomed him with a friendly smile. Ron walked over to her.

"Hello, sir," she announced in English, tho her accent was not as completely free of any accent as that of the glaxi driver.

She was an Araukarian woman, a native from Arauka, and as far as Ron could see she definitely corresponded to the image that everyone throughout the galaxy had of the typical Araukarian beauties: blond, dark-eyed, gorgeous, wild and unpredictable.

"I'd like a nice, large room," Ron requested.

He didn't care for it if women smiled at him of their own accord. He knew he was a very goodlooking man: blond, tall, very tall even, and broad-shouldered.

The Araukarian woman did not seem to notice the rebuff. On the contrary, she smiled even friendlier than before. She was dressed in a fashion unfamiliar to Ron but which he had to admit was very refined and elaborate.

"We have nothing here but nice big rooms, sir," she replied.

Ron shrugged his shoulders; he wasn't impressed. "Alright then, give me any one you like."

Instead she reached under the counter top and brought out some kind of a catalogue which she turned around and then opened to the first page. She pushed the catalogue in front of Ron. "Please select the room you want, sir," she whispered.

Ron studied the list. The tremendous variety of offerings was confusing. The shapes of the rooms ranged from cubes, cylinders, hemispheres and spheres to pyramids. Some had atmospheres uniform throughout the room, others had a layered atmosphere. There were rooms with artificial gravity between 0.1 and 5.0 normal. The temperatures were set to be constant at minus 70° Celsius all the way up to plus 300°—and these were just a sample of all possible variations offered to the weary traveller.

Finally Ron found what he wanted. "I'd like to have this one," he said and pointed to a number in one of the columns.

The Araukarian woman nodded her head and then, without having been asked, she offered to have Ron's luggage taken up to his room as soon as it would arrive from the spaceport. After that she added something that struck Ron as being a rather strange remark, mainly because he did not understand the reason for it. "I'd like to give you some good advice, sir! If you have come here on business and wish to be successful even in the least degree, then always choose the right kind of drink!"

* * * *

Ron was still preoccupied with his own thoughts when he opened his room door with the code-key. He entered without looking around and made straight for one of the armchairs which stood immediately to the right of the entrance next to a little coffee table.

He sat down, stretched his legs. Only then did he see the box directly in the middle of his room. It had a familiar-looking cube shape and was filled with a greenish, viscous fluid in which he noticed the sluggish movements of a light gray and dark grey mottled shadow.

Ron felt dismayed. Not so much by the sight that presented itself to his eyes but by the realization that he had walked into a trap, quite carelessly and like a fool. Provided, of course, that the mud-trampler intended to harm him.

"No, you needn't be afraid," said a calming voice at this moment. "I haven't come here to inflict any harm on you."

Ron's anger rose suddenly. "How the devil did you get into my room?" he wanted to know.

The voice hesitated for an instant. "We from Machraamp ... are endowed with some extraordinary talents ... let's leave it at that."

Ron was certain that the cube-shaped spacesuit must conceal a transec somewhere inside. If such an instrument was supplied with sufficient information for its data banks it could translate a language into any other foreign tongue. This explained why Ron and the mud-trampler could carry on a conversation with each other. Still it gave no explanation how the alien creature had been able to sense Ron's fear nor how it managed to pass through an electronically-locked hotel room door.

"What do you want?" Ron inquired in an unfriendly tone.

"You might remember," answered the alien, "that both our taxis were parked next to each other at the edge of the spaceport's landing field. I passed close by your vehicle and then ... I became aware that you'd come to Lepso in search of someone who had disappeared."

Ron was dumbfounded. "Nonsense," he declared.

A derisive giggle came from the loudspeaker of the invisible transec. "Why won't you tell the truth?" asked the voice. "We aren't telepaths in the ordinary sense of the word, still we recognize quite clearly strongly-felt desires or thoughts of our fellow beings. And I'm quite sure I was reading you right."

Ron leaned back in his armchair. "Never mind whether you were right or wrong," he said. "Why don't you start at the beginning and tell me what you want from me."

"That's a splendid idea," agreed the box. "But first I have to go back a little further. You don't know my home world Machraamp; nobody knows it. So you aren't aware either that we are a rather tiny race, only 8000 as expressed in your numerical system. This doesn't mean at all, though, that we're on the road to extinction. Our population has always hovered around that number, sometimes a little more and sometimes a bit less. The fact that we are relatively so few in number led to a close relationship between the individual members of our race. When ten amongst us decided to travel to Lepso all of us felt fear and apprehension. Nevertheless we were forced to take that step, since there are certain items we can obtain in Lepso which are almost impossible to get elsewhere. That's why we let the ten go on their way but we kept in constant communication with each other.

"Recently we have learned that one of the ten has vanished. This caused a great deal of grief to us. Five more of us went out in search of our disappeared brother. We cannot simply leave him to his fate. He is in danger, we are sure, and we must come to his rescue. Do you understand?"

"Of course," replied Ron. "I still don't see, though, what this has to do with me."

"Oh, that's easy. You are also on the lookout for one of your vanished fellow beings. If ever during your search you find some trace of our brother from Machraamp, please let us know about it."

This seemed a reasonable request to Ron. "But how can I get in touch with you?"

"There's nothing to it. The very instant you discover his trace, you'll be so amazed that I'll recognize your thought impulse ... now that I know what your thought impulses are like. I'll then get in touch with you as fast as possible."

"Fine," agreed Ron. "I hope you realize that I most likely won't be able to be of any assistance to you. The fact that two beings have disappeared does not prove after all that both vanished in the same direction. Perhaps I'll find my man without ever discovering any trace of yours."

"Quite likely," admitted the Machraampian. "I'm considering just one of many possibilities. I'm happy you listened to me and declared your willingness to help us. I hope that some day I'll be able to reciprocate."

Ron was about to pose another question when suddenly the alien creature together with the greenish liquid as well as the cube-shaped box disappeared. Ron was all alone in his hotel room.

With a sigh of resignation he rose from his armchair. *Another one of these teleporters*, he thought angrily. *What a way to end a conversation! Simply vanish and leave your conversation partner with loads of unasked questions!*

Ron Landry was none too pleased with himself. Ever since he had set foot on Lepso, he felt, he was a marionette dangling on the end of a string rather than the puppet master in charge of everything.

This situation must come to an end. Ron decided to go on the offensive; it was high time he'd start his mission in earnest.

A humming sound came from the door. Ron's right hand moved automatically to the small weapon he carried in his belt, then he looked around to figure out how the door could be opened. He found a small switch-panel at the side of his nightstand which was next to the wide bed. He pushed a button which showed a tiny image of an opening door.

The door swung open and revealed the sight of the beautiful Araukarian woman holding a tray with two glasses and several small bottles.

"I'm sure you'll follow my advice, sir," she said. "I've chosen the right drink for you."

Ron saw the two glasses, so conspicuously placed at the edge of the tray nearest to him, and the glittering row of the small bottles with their violet-yellow labels. It was barely a few seconds ago that he had realized he was forced into a role on Lepso he did not cherish at all, namely, being the one who was manipulated and not the manipulator himself. And here he was again, faced by the same situation: somebody telling him what he should do.

That was more than he could take.

"Take that stuff away and drink it yourself," he barked at the girl. "If I want to have a drink I'll order one, and besides I insist on having it delivered through the automated room service tube. Is that clear?"

The smile vanished from the girl's lips. She narrowed her eyes and looked at him with undisguised fury. Then the Araukarian woman turned around and left quickly.

Ron depressed another button on the switch-panel and listened as the door closed with a dull smacking sound.

Lepso! What a crazy world!

3/ AT THE MERCY OF THE SPRINGERS

That same evening Ron Landry found out where Dr. Zuglert's office had been located. He planned to have a look around there later on during the night. In the meantime he had learned via telecom from the nearest stationed unit of the Terranian fleet that nothing more had been uncovered as to where Dr. Zuglert might be at the present.

On the other hand all the particulars regarding Dr. Zuglert's person were known, all those which he had been forced to supply to the police on Lepso in order to obtain a permanent resident's permit. According to these data he conducted research in the field of bio-medicine, in particular the development of new therapeutic drugs. He was a native of Switzerland, had a Ph.D. from the university at Bologna in Italy, was 52 years old and had lived on Lepso for the past 14 years and a half. During this period he had left Lepso only 3 or 4 times for longer than just a short while—at least as far as the police could tell. His office was located on 86th street. Everybody, of course, realized that a research scientist had to have a laboratory somewhere. But nobody knew where it was.

As for the rest, the Lepso police refused to engage in any search for the vanished man. They advanced the argument that any person living on Lepso was entitled to come and go as he pleased, to disappear and re-appear, and consequently Dr. Zuglert might regard it as interfering with his personal freedom if the police were to start looking for him.

The telecommunications officer of the Terranian Fleet who supplied Ron with this information added at this point: "That's nothing but an excuse, Maj. Landry. They simply *don't want* to get involved. Maybe they'd unearth some facts there that they'd rather keep buried."

Ron kept mulling over this remark while he set out on his way to 86th street. As he entered the hotel's foyer he noticed another Araukarian girl behind the reception desk. She was every bit as beautiful as the first one who had tried to push a drink on Ron. But the new girl did not smile at Ron; most likely she had been informed by her colleague that it was useless to approach him.

Ron walked on foot part of the way to 86th street. Darkness had fallen and light sources of all kinds and colours enveloped the city in a flood of lavish brightness. Ron walked halfway around the square which formed the centre of the city of Zanithon. During 20 minutes he managed to see so many diverse inhabitants of the galaxy as he had not been able to see in the last 3 years or so.

During his walk he had employed all kinds of tricks familiar to a well-trained special agent to make sure nobody was trailing him. Then he took a taxi, this time driven by a giant, fearsome-looking Naat. Ron asked to be let out on 84th street and he walked again for the next 2 blocks.

86th street turned out to be a typical part of an area full of office buildings. Older edifices constructed in a large variety of styles reared skyward on either side of the street. Thousands of brightly-illuminated signs actually made any further street lighting unnecessary. The traffic was very heavy but there were hardly any pedestrians to be seen.

The building housing Dr. Zuglert's office showed a few lighted windows. Somebody, Ron thought, slightly amused, is so crazy in his pursuit of the shekel that he's even working all hours of the night.

He walked up a flight of low, wide steps leading to the huge glass entrance door. Ron was not surprised that he had to open this door manually; he assumed the electronic eye-opening mechanism had been shut down after office hours.

He entered the usual large foyer with the information robot on the left side and the row of antigrav shafts to the right. Ron had no reason to address the robot for any information. He knew Zuglert's office was on the 23d floor, room 23048. He pushed the button with #23 on the panel next to the nearest shaft. He waited until a red control lamp lit up in response to his call. Then he stepped inside the shaft, sure in the knowledge he would be supported and wafted gently toward his destination by the suction exerted by the artificial field of gravity.

Instead he crashed downward! There was obviously no artificial field of gravity. Ron shared the fate of any other person who'd blithely enter a vertical shaft: he fell with increasing speed toward the bottom of that shaft. He tensed his muscles, trying to brace himself against the inevitable impact.

There was a resounding smack and Ron Landry of Division 3 was, at least temporarily, out of action.

* * * *

When he regained consciousness he looked directly into a tanned face with grey, distrustful-looking eyes topped by a fairly-low forehead surrounded by a shock of carefully-groomed dark hair.

"For heaven's sake, man, talk about luck!" said the dark-haired fellow.

Ron tried to sit up. He felt pain all over his body without being able to localize it exactly. His mind was clear, though; only his body seemed to have been run over by a steamroller.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"On the 23d floor," answered the dark-haired man. "Room number 2-3-0-4-8. I don't think you've suffered any..."

Ron sat up with a start and interrupted the man before he could finish his sentence. "How did I get here of all places?"

The dark-haired man looked at him astonished. "I happened to see you crash down that antigrav shaft, the one that was temporarily out of order. Didn't you see the warning notice? I took another shaft down into the basement and brought you up here to where I had wanted to go in the first place. I was just about to call a doctor when you came to again."

Ron straightened up but he could not manage to see the entire room. Somewhere behind him, about 1.50 meters above the floor, was a lamp whose bright light bathed him and the dark-haired chap with a blinding glow. Beyond the cone of light everything was in complete darkness. Ron felt ill at ease.

"Are you alright?" asked the man solicitously. "Do you need a doctor?"

Ron shook his head. He was certain to have suffered a few bruises as a result of his fall. But he felt less certain about other matters.

"Who are you?" he inquired.

"My name is Gerard Lobson," came the answer. "This is my office."

"2-3-0-4-8, did you say?"

"Yes."

"How long have you had your office here?"

Gerard Lobson frowned as if he didn't like this question and answered with some hesitation: "For about—4 years."

"Why are you lying to me?" countered Ron.

Lobson recoiled slightly. His eyes widened. He seemed to be seized by a sudden spell of terrible fright.

"Why am I lying ...?" he gasped. "I am not lying ... why should I?"

"This office was Dr. Zuglert's, at least until a few days ago," Ron stated with a firm voice. "I demand ..."

A sudden noise cut him off in the middle of his sentence. It was a scraping sound on the floor, coming from far beyond the blinding lamp. Before Ron could make a move, a deep, resonant voice boomed: "Stop! Turn on the light! That will do."

The lights in the ceiling flared up. Ron felt dazed for a brief moment but then he realized that the stranger's voice had spoken in Arkonese. He turned his head and noticed a writing desk to his right. On it stood the lamp whose bright glare had blinded him until a few moments ago. Behind the writing desk he perceived 3 figures, 2 robust broad-shouldered shapes and the third very thin, emaciated and quite a bit taller than the other two.

Now Ron no longer had any doubt that he had walked into a trap.

* * * *

One of the broad-shouldered persons approached from behind the writing desk. Ron could make out some object the man was holding in his hand. The stranger bent over Ron's half-reclining body on the floor and held the object close to Ron's face.

"Drink that, will you!" He was still addressing him in Arkonese. Now Ron could clearly see what the man was holding in his hand. It was a small bottle, containing a few cubic centimetres at most and with a brightly-coloured, violet-yellow label.

He was hit by the sudden realization that this was the same stuff the Araukarian woman had offered him

in the hotel. Strange, how many people should seem so anxious to make him imbibe this beverage.

He turned to Gerard Lobson, who had slid away from him but who was still kneeling on the floor. "What does he want?" Ron asked in English.

Gerard appeared to react with surprise. "He says you should drink that."

"Why?"

Now Gerard's mood changed to fear again. "For heaven's sake, drink it down, don't ask so many questions. He ..."

Ron raised up sufficiently by supporting himself on his left elbow while he pushed aside the arm of the broad-shouldered man with his right hand.

"Drink it yourself!" Ron snarled. "I'm choosing my own drinks."

He was still speaking English but he wasn't too sure whether he could convince the 3 strangers that he didn't understand the Arkonese language.

Quite obviously, two of these were Springers, members of the race of galactic traders who had their fingers in almost every pie as far as business was concerned. The third one might be an Ara. The Aras were a race closely related to that of the Springers but while the Springers were involved in commerce the Aras were exclusively concerned with science, especially bio-medicine. Both, however, were equal in their lack of scruples.

The Springer who was bending over Ron became furious. "You're going to drink that!" he yelled, but now in English.

If only I didn't ache all over, Ron thought angrily, I'd show you what I'm going to do!

He tried to stand up. To Ron's surprise the Springer did not interfere with his attempt. Ron did his best to ignore the pain and leaned with his back against the wall behind him. The Springer was still holding the tiny bottle out to Ron.

"What is it?" asked Ron.

"It's some liqueur. Drink it!"

"And drop dead in a few seconds?" Ron said sarcastically.

The Springer shook his head. "If we'd want to do away with you we have far better methods than poisoning you," he declared.

That made sense. Ron did not really believe that the little bottle contained some fatal poison. More likely it held some drug which would render Ron tractable to the Springer's wishes or make him talkative or something else.

With a trembling voice Gerard Lobson kept imploring him to drink the liquid but Ron remained resolute. "No, absolutely no!" he said, "and that's final."

The Ara behind the writing desk hissed angrily. Ron noticed something moving swiftly in the back of the room. Using his shoulder as a lever Ron pushed away from the wall and flung himself forward. But the accident in the antigrav shaft had left him weak and lessened his reaction time. Before he could hit the ground he felt a heavy, breathtaking blow. A booming bell was ringing inside his head and then he was overtaken by darkness.

* * * *

As Ron came to for the second time the scene had changed. But it was once again Gerard Lobson who bent over him. "Now they made you take the liqueur by force," he said vindictively.

Ron sat up. Whatever they might have done to him—it had left him none the worse. On the contrary, he felt wonderful. The pain had vanished and he was prepared to meet any challenge. Vigour surged through his body. Let the Springers try to get him—he would show them who was boss!

The Ara probably had hit him with a stun gun. He had lost consciousness and they had force-fed him the liqueur against his will.

"What kind of a drink is that?" he asked Gerard.

"Just a liqueur," answered Gerard. "That's all I know. It's sold everywhere on Lepso and is very popular."

That sounded strange.

"Have you ever had any?"

"Yes. But not until they got me into their clutches. I was forced to take it, just like you."

"And how did it affect you?"

Gerard hesitated for awhile before he replied. "It's pretty strong stuff. It makes you feel powerful, as if you could move mountains and conquer the world."

Ron admitted that this was exactly what he was experiencing this very moment. "And how long does this effect last?"

"I don't know," answered Gerard. "Whenever it was about to wear off, I got another sip."

Ron looked around. They were in a large, windowless room with a hard, uneven stone floor. The walls and the ceiling seemed to consist of the same material as the floor. There were 2 rows of sturdy pillars which supported the ceiling. An old gas lamp hung from the ceiling between the 2 rows of pillars and spread a sparse light. He could see a door in the wall to the front. The door was made of metal and after Ron had reached for his own gun and failed to find it any longer he knew it would be impossible to open the door even without closer inspection, for all he had left were his bare hands.

"That's a basement, isn't it?" he inquired.

"That's right," confirmed Gerard.



"Where is it located?"

"I don't know. They blindfolded me first before they brought me here."

Ron smiled. "My, how old-fashioned!"

Ron felt drawn to the door despite its appearance of being impossible to assault. He walked toward it between the 2 rows of pillars and tried to turn the old-fashioned doorknob. But as he had expected, nothing happened. The door remained locked and he couldn't budge the knob by even half a millimetre ...

"How often have you been here?" Ron asked Gerard.

"Just once before this time. That was before they came to get me in order to ..."

"In order to what?"

"Well, in order to find out from you if ..."

Suddenly Ron could clearly visualize again the scene in Dr. Zuglert's office. Gerard had deceived him and caused him to say that this was Dr. Zuglert's office they were in. And shortly after that the Springers had turned on the light and revealed their presence to him.

From this Ron concluded, now, that the Springers did not wish any inquiries as to the whereabouts of the vanished Dr. Zuglert.

But why?

It seemed to Ron that he had made an important step forward in his search since he had first landed on Lepso—even without having contributed any deliberate action on his part. Unfortunately he was now in a situation which most likely would not permit him to do something concrete with this newly-found knowledge.

For the time being, he decided, regardless of whether there was a way out soon or not, he should find out from Gerard anything the man knew. After all, Gerard had been the Springers' captive some time longer than he himself.

After some initial hesitation Gerard reported truthfully what had taken place that day in Dr. Zuglert's office. He did not conceal that he was horror stricken at Dr. Zuglert's sight and had fled the room,

leaving the poor doctor to his fate.

Ron tried to figure out what had happened next. Most likely Zuglert managed to get to his feet even without Gerard's help, then left the building and made the TTT call to the *Florida* from somewhere else. Dr. Zuglert had vanished while making this call. This still left one more problem to be cleared up: why would the communications robot assume that call to have originated from one of the transceivers at the Terranian Trade Commission? Gerard, however, was not likely to know the answer to that question.

"A few hours afterwards," continued Gerard Lobson, "my conscience began to bother me. I was anxious to find out what had become of Zuglert. So I returned to his office. When I got there I found the door wide open. I walked in. Well . . . I was met by the 3 guys that you also know by now. They wanted to know what I wanted there, my relationship with Dr. Zuglert, why I had returned and so on. They took me downstairs and once inside their car forced me to drink the liqueur, the same beverage they poured down your throat. Then they blindfolded me and brought me to this place here. I remained in this basement for about 4 hours. Finally they came back to get me again. Once more I was blindfolded. When they removed the blindfold from my eyes our car had arrived in front of the building in which Zuglert's office is located. We all went upstairs to his office and began to wait. I had no idea what this was all about. When I inquired, I got no answer. They were searching the room and particularly rummaged through his writing desk. Something they found there seemed to surprise them greatly. Then one of them left and when he returned he brought or rather dragged you along. Well, they ordered me to kneel beside you and tell you some lies when you regained consciousness, until you finally revealed that you had come to see Dr. Zuglert. You know the rest."

Yes, indeed, Ron knew the rest, but still there were some points in Gerard's report which didn't quite make sense. Had the Springers put all the antigrav shafts of the building out of order so that all late visitors would indiscriminately fall down to the basement? And if this had not been the case, how could they have known at what time he'd arrive and which of the many antigrav shafts he would use?

He asked Gerard several questions. He did not quite trust the black-haired fellow and therefore formulated his questions in such a manner that Gerard would have given himself away unless he was an exceedingly skilful liar. But Ron had no luck with these tactics; Gerard remained firm and consistent in his statements.

Finally Ron gave up any further attempts at tricking Gerard into involuntary admissions. After all, he had found out all that could be learned and it was high time now to develop a plan of action. The Springers were sure to interrogate him and in case no satisfactory answers would be forthcoming they'd resort to some trick and incapacitate his free will and dig up from his subconscious mind any information they desired, including the fact that the tall blond man they had in their power was actually a special agent of Division 3 and in particular what Division 3 represented.

Ron decided it must not come to that point. He had to find a way and escape from their clutches before it was too late.

He did not fool himself about the miserable situation he was in. The gadgets and weapons that could have helped bring about his escape were still in his luggage. Unfortunately he had left the hotel before his luggage had arrived from the spaceport. He didn't even have a tiny emergency transmitter on him to send out SOS signals. Thus he would be forced to rely completely on his own resources, his imagination and his 2 bare hands.

He had arrived this far in his assessment of the situation when the steel door swung open. Two powerfully built Springers entered the room carrying a long, narrow plastic table. The tabletop displayed

an array of gleaming instruments. The Springers did not utter a single word. The door closed automatically behind the 2 newcomers to the great disappointment of Ron, who had carefully watched for an opportunity to escape through that door. They placed the table in the middle of the room between the 2 rows of pillars. Ron's studies of extraterrestrial technology had familiarized him thoroughly with the kind of apparatus he was faced with here. He was overcome by fear and horror as he recognized the 2 encephaloceptors.

The Springers had come to this decision much sooner than Ron had thought they would. And worse still, they had brought along all the devices he had believed it would take several days for them to obtain.

The 2 Springers stood alongside the table. One of them drew a weapon and pointed it at Ron while his partner said: "We'd like to get some information from you, Earthman. But since we're afraid you won't cooperate with us, we'll help you along by releasing the blocking-off mechanism of your free will. Come over here!"

In a flash Ron evaluated his chances. What would happen if he'd refuse? How and with what would they force him to submit to the interrogation? Would they really use the weapon that the second Springer held in his hand? It was a thermo-gun! One blast and they'd lose their chance forever to obtain any information they desired from him. Still, he couldn't risk refusing to obey them. There was no way out.

Filled with this bitter realization, Ron began to approach the instrument table.

At this moment the unbelievable happened!

4/ THE MAN FROM GOSZUL'S PLANET

One of the two Springers suddenly toppled over and hit the ground. His partner, his weapon still pointing at Ron, hesitated. He looked at Ron with a mixture of distrust and fear. Then he hurried around to the other side of the table to aid his fallen friend. But he had hardly taken 2 steps when he appeared to be held back by an invisible, murderous force. Ron saw how the man strained to overcome the unseen obstacle in his path. With an angry shout he planted both feet firmly against the floor and tried to push forward. But the invisible force was too strong for him. It dragged him down, threw him to the ground and squeezed him so hard against the stone floor that he became unconscious.

Ron observed the incident dumbfounded. His gaze wandered over to the Springer who had been the first to be slammed to the floor. He too seemed to have lost consciousness. Ron stepped around to the man to make absolutely sure. He shook him but the man did not move.

This is when Ron realized that his chance had finally come. "Let's merk*!" he snapped at Gerard.

"But ... but ..." the dark-haired one stammered. He was plainly perplexed.

Ron seized him by the shoulder and pulled him along toward the door.

This time the doorknob offered no resistance. One slight turn and the door opened. Outside was a narrow, dimly-lit hallway.

He stepped outside, leaving the steel door that had barred his way to freedom now behind him. And as he held the Springer's weapon in his hand he suddenly experienced again that tremendous surge of activity which according to Gerard was caused by the peculiar liqueur. How he wished that right now several Springers would show themselves at the end of the corridor so that he could demonstrate to them what to expect if they deprived a special agent of Division 3 of his freedom!

But he had to clear his mind of such delightful speculations. Now he must concentrate his attention on 2 things: if possible he wanted to leave that building quite inconspicuously and, further, he had to keep an eye on Gerard, who was still confused by the unexpected turn of events in the basement and who might do some foolish thing or even try to run away.

But so far Gerard had cooperated. He ran along with Ron and stopped when Ron held him back so that he could peer around the corner which was some 10 meters away from the door of their basement prison. There was no sign of danger to be seen around that corner. A bit farther ahead the corridor ended in the opening of an antigrav shaft. Ron was not afraid to use it. He pushed the first floor button and shoved Gerard into the shaft before him. Then he followed directly behind.

The bright spot of light coming from the exit of the shaft into the first floor loomed above them. The suction from the gravitational field died down obediently as Gerard was level with the first floor exit. He grabbed the handle attached near the opening and swung himself out of the antigrav shaft. Ron followed him swiftly. He peered into the brightly-lit foyer of the big office building and as fast as possible hid the thermo-gun he had held until now, ready to shoot at any moment if necessary.

Gerard stood and waited for further instructions from Ron. Ron looked around for a few seconds to make sure no danger was threatening them. But all he could see was the usual crowd rushing in and out through the entrance doors of the big office building. All kinds of races came and went in a steady stream. Those nearest to Ron and Gerard gave them a suspicious or astonished glance. But this was mainly due—as Ron soon realized—to the sorry state his clothing was in after his fall down the antigrav shaft and the subsequent events.

Ron felt this was a normal reaction that people would regard them with suspicion and surprise under the circumstances. This was as good a time as any to get out of this place. They mingled among the crowd streaming out of the building and a few moments later found themselves on the sidewalk of a wide avenue.

Ron looked around. "Where are we?" he asked Gerard.

But he had to repeat his question twice before he received an answer.

"North district," Gerard answered curtly. "Five Oceans Boulevard."

There was a taxi stand in front of the building. Ron thought it would be too dangerous to hail one of the vehicles standing directly at the entrance of the house they had just escaped from. The risk was too great that he might again fall into the hands of one of the henchmen of his former captors.

He turned to the right and walked on foot for a little while. It was evening. The faint light coming from the sky was drowned out by the myriads of neon signs on the houses lining the street. Ron noticed some restaurants as they made their way up the road. He suddenly felt hungry. Better look for a restaurant where his rumpled suit would not cause any unnecessary attention.

He turned around to have a good look at the building they had just left. He wanted to make sure he would be able to recognize it again. He was so startled by what he saw that he bumped into Gerard, who had been walking alongside.

High up on the front of the huge office tower facing the avenue sparkled an enormous sign with letters at least 5 meters tall, announcing for all to see: TERRAN TRADE COMMISSION.

* * * *

This made quite an impression on Ron but still it failed to spoil his appetite. Gerard firmly declined Ron's suggestion to have something to eat. "I've no money," he growled.

"For heaven's sake," said Ron, "that makes me think maybe those guys have ..." He didn't finish his sentence but put his hand in his pocket. He found his wallet and opened the magnetic lock. None of his money was missing.

"Let me treat you," Ron said good-naturedly and slapped Gerard on the back with a friendly gesture.

Gerard's eyes flashed for an instant. Ron noticed this but it did not arouse any suspicions in his mind, rather he attributed it to the fact that Gerard suddenly had become as ravenous as he himself.

Several hundred meters away from the Terran Trade Commission they found a snack bar which didn't seem likely to object to their dishevelled appearance. The robot host at the door directed them to a table in the back of the restaurant. While Ron was busy dialling the menu selector on the top of the table after picking a hearty meal according to the instructions on the code register attached to the dial-a-meal, Gerard Lobson for the first time volunteered a question.

"What was that," he asked, his voice still trembling. "I mean ... down in the basement?"

Ron looked at him puzzled and, his finger still stuck in the automat's dial, he momentarily interrupted selecting his dinner.

"Oh that? Nothing special. A friend of mine got into the game just at the right moment."

Ron turned his head, trying to look through the window leading to the street. He wasn't quite sure but he thought he detected a cube-shaped vehicle with thick glass panels passing by outside the restaurant. He suppressed the desire to get up and walk out into the street to get a better look at the glass cube. But then he decided against it. For the time being it would be better not to let Gerard know about everything.

Gerard insisted on ordering a liqueur of the type the Springers had originally forced on him and Ron.

"I've invited you, Gerard, but this does not extend to this mysterious beverage. You should realize by now that there is something wrong with it. It contains some drug."

Gerard kept staring at him.

"You're probably right. But I like that drink, it tastes good to me."

However Ron was the one with the money so his will prevailed. Gerard did not get his liqueur. He did not seem to mind especially. Instead he drank down 5 glasses of strong Terran beer within the next half hour and was not sober when Ron had finished his meal. Ron wasn't bothered by Gerard's tipsy state. He was pleased that Gerard was sitting there brooding quietly. This provided him with the opportunity to bring some order into his own thoughts. He felt overwhelmed by the flood of new information that was hard to digest at one sitting.

So the Springers had established a foothold in the building where the Terran Trade Commission was located. The call Dr. Zuglert had made to the *Florida* shortly before he disappeared had been conducted from a number of the Trade Mission. On the other hand, inspector Neary had declared that no such person existed in their offices, had never been there and therefore could never have placed that TTT call from Neary's own instrument.

Meanwhile Ron had found out that a 50-second TTT call via telecom-line had been charged by the government communication services on Lepso to the Terran Trade Commission. This was no secret and inspector Neary had to admit in the meantime that he had wrongly accused Dick Kindsom of trying to make a fool of him.

Was Neary in cahoots with the Springers? Had the Springers apprehended Zuglert? How could he have gained access to the telecom? Had the Springers' supervision of Zuglert been too lax? Ron assumed that this last thought was correct, regardless of whether his other suspicions were justified or not. The only reason Zuglert had been able to place his call to the *Florida* must have been that they had left him unguarded for a few moments. Probably they had not imagined the half-dead Zuglert capable of any activity.

So far so good, decided Ron. But from where had Zuglert conducted his conversation with the *Florida* ?

At first Ron wanted to dismiss the notion Neary might work hand in glove with the Springer bandits. Any officials working for extraterrestrial outposts were carefully screened and trained for their jobs. There were hardly ever any misfits among them.

Under normal circumstances, of course, Ron corrected himself immediately. He remembered the Ara whom he had seen in Dr. Zuglert's office. Wherever these Aras were involved, one was well-advised to be especially cautious. The Aras were masters in the preparation of modern witches' brews. If Neary really did collaborate with the Springers, then it was only as a result of someone having forced his will upon him.

Yet there was another possibility to reckon with, namely that Neary had no idea what was going on and that the Springers who had established themselves in the same building as Neary's mission had tapped his line and installed a telecom apparatus of their own from which they made calls using the code number of the Trade Mission. Ron wouldn't put it past these sneaky Springers, particularly since the tap would make it possible for them to listen in to all conversations Neary carried on from his office.

Ron made up his mind to pay a visit to Neary as soon as possible and to discuss this eventuality with him. He wondered if it would make any sense to return immediately to the Trade Mission and use this opportunity also to hand over to the Lepso police the two Springers lying unconscious down in the basement of the building. He quickly dismissed this part of the plan. The Springers were sure to tell the right lies to the police and in the end he might be accused of attacking them in the first place. Gerard Lobson would not be a witness he could rely on in this case.

No, he would not run such a risk but nevertheless he was determined to talk to Neary—the sooner the better.

He looked up. Gerard was still growling and mumbling to himself in his drunken stupor. His eyes were bloodshot and his appearance was anything but appetizing. Suddenly he raised his head and peered at a point directly behind Ron's shoulder.

Gerard's expression changed. His eyes, until now all swollen and with a glassy stare, opened wide with horror and became fixed on the spot back of Ron. Ron imagined for a moment Gerard was trying to use that old trick and distract his attention while he would do something he didn't want Ron to know about. But at the same moment he became aware that all around him people were jumping up from their chairs. Somebody shouted: "Get a doctor but fast!"

Ron turned around. Looking past 2 men who were walking to a table placed behind him, he caught a glimpse of a man who just must have risen from his chair. He probably had just finished his meal and was about to leave the restaurant.

By now he had hardly enough strength left to stand up. He gripped the edge of the table, trying to support himself as he swayed unsteadily, his mouth wide open and gasping for air. His mouth was a dark hole within a yellow-brown, horrifying, distorted face that resembled more a dead man's skull than that of a living person's head.

Suddenly Ron began to remember. The memories of the data implanted by Maj. Quinto's mysterious instruments became activated. He recalled the conversation Dick Kindsom had carried on with Dr. Zuglert and especially the way the poor doctor had looked. His appearance had been identical to that of the sick man here in the restaurant.

Ron acted with lightning speed. He grabbed Gerard's lapels and jerked him off his seat at the table. "You stay close behind me!" he commanded.

Gerard nodded his head mechanically. His eyes were still glued to the spot where the man with the dead man's skull had been standing though he was now hidden from sight by the curious and frightened crowd around his table.

Ron pushed aside the people in his path. "Let me thru," he announced. "I'm a physician!"

Out of the corner of his eyes Ron saw that Gerard followed behind him obediently. The people stepped aside to make room for him.

Nobody asked to see an identification. They were all strangers who had by coincidence been present in this eating place when one of the guests became ill. It did not occur to them to question anybody who declared himself to be a doctor.

Ron worked his way straight to the table where the skull-headed man was still swaying, trying to keep his balance. The sick man did not seem to notice him. He was a Terran, no doubt about that. Ron seized him by his arm. "Come along with me, I'm a doctor," he urged him in English. "I'll help you."

The sick man turned his head slightly in Ron's direction. "Help me ...?" he gasped.

"Yes, help you," confirmed Ron. "Can you walk or shall we carry you?"

In answer to Ron's question the man let go of the table's edge and took a step forward. Although he leaned heavily on Ron's arm for support, he managed to remain on his feet. The people around them fell back as the sick man began to shuffle unsteadily, half carried, half pushed by Ron.

With a quick glance Ron made sure Gerard was still by his side. He uttered a silent prayer that Gerard would not do anything foolish now.

But everything seemed to go fine. Slowly but surely the three of them approached the restaurant's exit, while the crowd of curious onlookers gradually returned to their tables to finish their meal.

Finally they were standing on the sidewalk. Ron looked for a taxi but there was none in sight. This surprised him. He became aware of the total absence of any pedestrians on this side of the street.

At this instant Gerard gave out a halfway stilled shout of alarm. Ron intuitively felt, though he could not actually see anything, that Gerard was about to take to his heels. He quickly seized Gerard by his sleeve. "You stay here with me!" he snarled.

He had hardly finished when a harsh voice behind him ordered: "Hand this man over to me!"

Ron spun around. Behind him a man in uniform had emerged from a dimly-lit place near the entrance. Ron recognized the uniform of the Lepso' police force.

"Why?" Ron objected. "This man is sick. He needs a doctor and not a policeman."

The man in uniform grinned sarcastically. "Are you a physician?" he asked in English with a terrible accent.

Ron thought it best not to repeat his lie. "No," he admitted. "But I want to take him to one."

"We are far better equipped to do that," asserted the man in uniform. "Just look here!" He pointed with his finger up into the air.

Ron didn't bother to look up; he could hear what was coming. A heavy gyrocar descended from the air and landed on the road, which had been cleared of all traffic. Several other policemen had suddenly joined the first one and they formed a circle around Ron and his 2 companions.

They've closed off the street, he thought. Five more policemen jumped out of the gyrocar. Ron knew then the odds were against him. This infuriated him and, worse still, he had to hide his feelings.

"You're right," he replied to the first policeman. "You're better equipped for that. Take him to get medical help!"

The policeman took the sick man by the arm and led him to the gyrocar. Ron stood and watched until the doors had closed behind them. Quickly the flood of cars again filled the part of the street that had been cordoned off. The gyrocar leapt into the evening sky, past the many bright neon signs, and disappeared beyond the colourful ocean of brightness.

Ron realized that he was still holding tightly onto Gerard's jacket sleeve. With his free arm he hailed a taxi, which came slowly rolling along the side of the street. The car stopped and the door to the passenger compartment opened. Ron pushed Gerard inside and quickly followed into the dark interior of the cab. The door closed automatically behind him.

The driver sat motionless behind the steering wheel, a dark silhouette, hardly recognizable in the very faint light.

"Did you notice the police gyro that took off just now from the road here?" Ron asked.

The driver silently nodded his head.

"Follow it, you won't regret it; I'll pay you well."

The dark head turned around and leaned toward the back of the car. "Anything for you, Mr. Earthman," said the driver.

For a fraction of a second the man's face was illuminated by the light of a neon sign nearby. It was the face of the man from Goszul's planet, the same chauffeur who had driven Ron Landry from the spaceport into town.

5/ ROOM OF IRREALITY

Ron tried to hide his surprise. "You are everywhere, aren't you?" he asked sarcastically.

The driver had started his taxiplane and lifted off into the air.

"Wherever I'm needed," he admitted in a modest tone. "At least most of the time."

They stopped their conversation. The chauffeur was busily concentrating on lifting his cab above the flow of traffic flying in the air over the road. The traffic was very heavy up to a height of 10 meters. Higher there was no more congestion, since one needed a special license from the Lepso police to go up that far—and the Lepso police department was not keen on giving out such permits.

Now the vehicle rose swiftly, passed through a gap between the office high rises, then turned into a northwesterly direction.

"Do you know which way the police gyro was flying?" asked Ron.

"Sure I do," answered the driver. "It's not the first time I've seen incidents like you just saw. The police always fly in the same direction."

Ron looked through the window. It was dark up here. The glowing haze of the big city lay like a half-dome over the countryside. He could make out a few stars—but not a trace of the police gyro.

"How do you manage to see that gyro? Are you following it by sight?" Ron inquired.

The chauffeur gave a chuckle of amusement, "By the sylvan gods of my forefathers: no! Out here you can't see your hand in front of your eyes." He leaned forward and tapped his finger on an instrument at the dashboard. "I have a license for altitude flying so I have to have a radar in my car."

Ron bent forward and saw the radar screen with a confusion of yellow, light-green and turquoise-coloured dots.

"If you'd put me on the spot to tell you which of all those dots could be the police car, you'd get a big, fat zero for an answer," Ron admitted.

"Never mind," laughed the driver. "After all, I'm the one who has to find the right way."

Ron sank back into the seat. That gyro driver puzzled him. He had come at exactly the right moment when Ron needed a taxi ... he was willing to pursue a police aircar ... hardly any other cabbie would have agreed to do that ... incidentally, he had a license for altitude flying which was indispensable for this undertaking ... on top of that he had of course the instruments for radar flight ... the only way to track down a vehicle among thousands of others and pursue it ...

Ron could not help thinking these were too many coincidences at one time. His suspicions about the aerial taxi driver were suddenly aroused. Yet he could not convince himself that the friendly man from Goszul was seriously plotting against him.

He looked over in Gerard's direction. He was reclining in his seat with eyes closed, his mouth gaping. He was drunk alright.

Once more Ron directed his attention to the front of the vehicle. He saw that the swarm of dots on the radar screen had thinned out considerably. No more than a hundred of them were left and they grew less and less by the second. The flight path the police car had taken was obviously not heavily travelled.

All of a sudden he wished he had his old pal and co-worker Larry Randall by his side. Left to his own resources he felt inadequate to deal alone with the problems he was facing on Lepso. He wondered what mission Nike Quinto might have had in mind for Larry. There was no chance back on Terra to ask this question. Whenever Nike Quinto sent you out on a mission it would be done helter-skelter and not until the agents were some thousands of light-years from Earth would they become aware that they had forgotten to ask something or take something along.

Where in the universe might Larry be right now?

"What's the fellow with you back there doing?" the driver inquired of Ron at this moment.

"He's asleep," answered Ron. "Sound asleep."

"That'll do him a lot of good. He didn't look too enterprising when he got into the car awhile back."

"That's true; he had too much to drink, I think."

The number of blips on the radar screen kept decreasing until only two were left. There was one near the middle of the screen while the other kept moving toward its edge and would totally disappear from the screen in a few seconds.

"Forgive me the question but since we have had the opportunity to get to know each other a bit better by now," the man from Goszul started up the conversation again, "why do you want to pursue that police car?"

Ron was not at a loss what to say. "I want to make sure they really bring that sick man to a doctor."

"To a doctor?"

"Yes. Back in the restaurant he was suddenly seized by an acute attack of weakness. He could hardly stand up and his head looked like a dead man's skull."

The man from Goszul mumbled first something incomprehensible. Then he reported. "I've seen such cases quite often. Somebody was walking on the street looking hale and hearty one second and the next he would suddenly begin to turn into a living ghost, with sunken, hollow cheeks, dried-out skin, a yellow-brownish complexion, full of deep wrinkles ..."

"Yes, that's it," Ron confirmed eagerly.

"... and a little while later the police would turn up, load the poor guy on their gyrocar and take him away. I've often asked myself if there really is a doctor back in the Sukkanussum Desert."

"*Wheredid* you say?"

"In the Sukkanussum Desert. That's where we're heading now and that's where the police vehicles always take the sick people they've picked up. This desert is known by lots of different names; every race living here on Lepso calls it by their own special name. But I like Sukkanussum best."

Ron pondered over the new bit of information he had just learned. Why would the sick people be taken to the desert? And Zuglert, could he be found there too?

"Tell me, what's your name?" Ron asked the cabbie.

"Rall," came the answer. "I've been living here on Lepso for the past 5½ years, am properly registered and licensed as a taxi chauffeur and I also have a high altitude traffic license and ..."

"That will do, that's enough," interrupted Ron. "I didn't mean to give you the third degree. Tell me, how big is this desert?"

"About 1800 kilometres to the northwest till the Seymour Ocean. Some 300 kilometres to both northeast and southwest from here. Our line of flight is right down the middle. Quite a chunk of land, isn't it?"

Ron nodded in reply. He hoped the police car's destination wouldn't be at the opposite end of the desert. He was doubtful Rall's taxi-gyro could carry sufficient fuel for such an extended trip and back again to Zanithon. He expressed his doubts to Rall.

"Oh, don't worry about that" the Goszul man reassured him. "We've already flown halfway across."

"Across what?" Ron was puzzled.

"Over the desert. We've flown more than 1000 kilometres across it."

Ron calculated quickly. They had lifted off Five Oceans Boulevard barely half an hour ago.

"How fast are we flying?" he wanted to know.

"Speed about 25 kilometres per hour," Rall stated in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. "Altitude roughly 15 kilometres."

These, thought Ron, were rather unusual flight data for an ordinary taxi.

* * * *

Now he was convinced there was some mystery surrounding this taxi driver. Nothing that would endanger him, on the contrary, something that might turn out to be to his benefit. Therefore he did not probe any further but left it up to Rall to choose the time when he would reveal his secret.

Several minutes after Ron had learned of the amazing performance potential of his taxi-gyro, he noticed that the blip of the police vehicle began to wander away from the centre of the radar screen.

"They're landing," announced Rall calmly.

"Are you familiar with the terrain around here?" asked Ron.

"No. Nobody knows it. This is terra incognita, as far as we are concerned. No one has ever penetrated any deeper than 20 kilometres from the desert's edge and the airline companies avoid flying directly over it. They prefer to make a wide detour around it."

Ron realized he had to come to a decision what to do next. He tried to estimate at what distance from the spot where the police gyro had landed he would obtain the most favourable combination of indicated caution and effective radius of action. He requested Rall to descend to a height of approximately 50 meters and then to continue flying a bit farther in a northwesterly direction.

Rall acted according to Ron's instructions. While he was bringing down the gyro to a lower altitude he spotted the place where the police vehicle had in the meantime touched ground. He marked the position on an empty card, placed the card in the flight recorder. After it had determined the taxi's position relative to that of the police gyro, it recorded the taxi's course on the same card.

A few minutes later the gyro landed in the desert sand. Outside the windows of the taxi, Ron could make out row upon row of yellow dunes faintly visible by the dim light from the stars in the sky. He saw the veils of sand dust playing about the crests of the dunes and when he alighted from the taxi he heard the clinking and tinkling of the tiny grains of sand in the steadily-blowing desert wind.

Meanwhile Rall had switched on the parking light and he handed Ron the card from the flight recorder. On it he could see that the police vehicle was lying straight to the north from them and not more than 1½ kilometres away.

Ron decided to act immediately. He asked Rall to watch the still-steeping Gerard but Rall refused to stay with the dark-haired fellow.

"You know, I've been with you ever since the beginning of this adventure; I'd like to continue with you to the very end. Why don't we simply lock him inside the taxi and let him sober up in there?"

"Do you know what you are suggesting, my man? The police may not like it at all that I'm spying on them. There might be shooting, real danger and ..."

"Oh, I don't mind," Rall spoke up; "I'd find that most interesting."

Ron was actually rather pleased that he would have a companion on his mission. He inquired: "Can you turn off the engine so that Gerard can't mess with it when he comes to?"

Rall laughed. "Of course! I've thought of that. But we don't need to lock him inside. He'd be the biggest fool if he'd want to run away from here. There's nothing but desert all around."

Ron suggested considering that Gerard had no idea where they had landed and that this was the middle of the Sukkansum Desert. Finally they agreed on leaving the taxi unlocked and leaving a short note for Gerard.

After Rall had safely locked the engine and pulled out the code-key, the 2 men started out. They marched north in a valley between 2 dune hills. The air was cool. The sand had long since radiated off the heat of the previous day. They walked at a fast clip to keep warm. Most of the time Rall stayed a few steps ahead of Ron, as if he knew the way. Only his silhouette was visible in the uncertain glimmer of the stars. It reminded him so much of Larry. A sense of security overcame Ron at this sight.

Then, however, he told himself not to let himself be lulled into such a feeling. Rall was hiding some secret and Ron might be quite mistaken to assume it was something pleasant or to Ron's own advantage.

Why, for instance, would he have offered so quickly to take part in such a dangerous undertaking as to creep up on the police vehicle?

* * * *

They had advanced nearly one kilometre when they heard the dull roar of a fusion engine to their left ahead of them.

Ron ran as fast as possible up the slight incline of the next dune. Sometimes he sank up to his knees in the sand. But he arrived in time to see something dark, not too far away from him, rise up from a depression between 2 dunes and climb up into the sky.

The police vehicles had lifted off the ground. There was no way for Ron to determine its course. Ignoring all rules and regulations, the policemen failed to display any aerial directional lights. The humming of the motors grew quickly fainter and finally disappeared altogether.

Ron returned to the waiting Rall.

"They've flown away, haven't they?" asked Rall.

"Yes, and I wonder what it means."

Rall scratched his head. It was a typically Terran gesture. For a moment Ron considered this.

"It can only mean that they deposited the sick man somewhere around here," stated Rall with certainty.

"No, that's not the only explanation," countered Ron. "It may also mean that they were forced to descend because of some engine failure, repaired the damage and now are taking off again to fly to their original destination."

Rall gazed at him. Then he declared with a firm voice, "No, it can't mean that."

Ron was perplexed. "How can you be so sure of that?" Rall snarled and waved his hand impatiently: "To hell with that masquerade!"

Ron was dumbfounded to see Rall stick his fingers inside his mouth, pull out something from it and throw it away. Then Rall raised his head and when he began to speak again his voice sounded totally different. "I simply know it for a fact, Ron," he declared. "There are some buildings over there. I've seen it once from a great altitude but..."

Ron recoiled one step, taken by surprise and pleasure as he recognized the voice. The same voice he had hoped all the time to be able to hear next to him.

Nike Quinto, he realized now, had played a prank on him. He had not sent him, after all, alone to Lepso. "Larry, you old scoundrel!" he exclaimed with happy excitement.

* * * *

"Just wait," Larry snarled angrily, "till I get rid of all that stuff they've plastered on my face. Just a minute and I'll look my own self again, Capt. Larry Randall".

There were all kinds of questions burning on Ron's tongue: how did you get here, why did you assume the role of a taxi driver, with what mission did Nike Quinto entrust you, why did you disguise your face?

But Ron realized all these questions would have to wait. First things first, he decided. "What about these building?" he inquired instead.

"Our Fleet provided me with some aerial reconnaissance pictures," Larry explained. "There are some buildings nearby. Nobody in Zanithon has any idea what they are all about, if they are inhabited, who built them. Actually, much worse, nobody in Zanithon seems to have any idea these buildings exist here."

Ron nodded his head and grinned. "Yes, I recall my taxi flier told me this desert is unexplored territory; he called it the Sukkussum Desert."

"It's unexplored for sure," Larry confirmed quietly. "In any case, I'm positive the policemen have brought the sick man to this place, handed him over and then taken off for home again."

"That means," said Ron, "we should get busy and have a good look at that place."

Larry agreed this should be their next task. Ron again climbed back up the slight incline of the dune to look around once more. But the light coming from the stars was too weak to let him see anything of the building complex which should be in the vicinity, according to Larry's information."

Larry had climbed up to join him on the crest of the dune. "Judging by the photos these buildings seem to be quite flat," he said softly. "We might not get to see them until we're right on top of them, from the crest of the nearest dune."

But in the meantime Ron had discovered something else. The rows of dunes did not extend indefinitely toward the west. As far as he could make out in the uncertain starlight, there were no more than 2 sand dunes ahead of them. Beyond, as far as the eye could see stretched a flat expanse of land. If any buildings really existed here in the desert, this was the logical place for them to be.

They started marching again. It was difficult to make their way over the loose sand. After every step they had to drag their feet out of the powdery sand dust. Despite the cool air of the approaching morning daybreak, the exertion made them perspire heavily.

Half an hour later they had arrived. They were lying behind the protecting wall of the last dune and peered over its crest. Below was a grey wall which ran north to south, beyond which a number of large and small buildings were recognizable. Some were in the shape of cubes, others rectangular, still others had the form of pyramids or cones.

Altogether it seemed to be a quite considerable conglomeration of buildings and Ron would have been happy to know the reason that here of all places, in the middle of the desert, far from the bustle and amenities that life on Lepso offered, someone had chosen to build this little city. For a fleeting moment he was astonished by the alien construction of the houses. But then he remembered that this was nothing to be amazed about on Lepso. Lepso was, after all, a melting pot of all galactic races. Everybody would build in the style they were used to on their own home planet.

On the other hand, Ron had not known there were entire cities on Lepso which had been constructed in a uniform alien style. He carefully looked over the entire settlement. If it was inhabited by any people, they must still be asleep or inside their houses. There was not a living creature to be seen outside. If Ron had discovered this place under different circumstances, he would have been convinced it was devoid of any life.

Nevertheless, this was where the sick man had been deposited by the police. They certainly would not have brought him to a dead city. There must be some life down there.

Ron fixed his gaze on the tallest building, a pyramid, which rose in the centre of the large building complex. Suddenly he was overcome by a sensation of danger which emanated from the city.

It was not evident why the grey wall had been erected at this spot. One needed simply walk around it and enter the city.

The sky began to show some colour, the stars grew pale and the faint glimmer of a new day rose from the north. The shadows Ron and Larry had seen before them changed to silhouettes.

Ron suddenly remembered that he must have slept one whole day through while he was a prisoner of the Springers. Otherwise he could not account for the passage of time and the current date.

Cautiously they approached the first cube-shaped building that reared up before them out of the sand. It

had no windows. The walls seemed to be made of stone, and they could not detect any trace of a door leading to the building's interior.

They walked all the way around the house. On the side which pointed in the direction of the pyramid in the city's centre, they found a groove surrounding a 1:50 meter square set into the stone wall. There was no visible mechanism with which one could have opened the door— provided it actually was a door. Larry didn't expect too much from his effort as he pushed with his shoulder.

He almost lost his foothold when the stone gave way without any resistance and the big rectangle turned easily and noiselessly toward the inside into a dark, humid, hot, stinking room.

In his hand Ron held the weapon he had taken away from one of the 2 unconscious Springers back in the basement of the office building in Zanithon. Larry had jumped to the side. From inside the darkness came a hissing, wheezing noise. Ron waited. He sensed something was moving inside the dark room. Seconds passed, then he saw he had not been mistaken.

Something came crawling to the outside.

Ron first noticed an object resembling a thin white stick. But higher up this stick was a joint and then another length of white stick which was wrapped in some kind of a rag.

A man's leg!

Ron forced himself to remain calm. He waited until the miserable creature had laboured sufficiently to reach as far as the weak light of the burgeoning day. It was painful to look at the creature. A wave of such pity as he had never before experienced in his life swept over Ron and utter disgust for those who would let this wreck of a man rot here in the desert.

The man he had seen in the snack bar in Zanithon and then had had to hand over to the police had been a fine, healthy specimen compared to what was lying on the ground before them here. The poor creature was hardly able any longer to lift its head off the ground. It made several attempts but each time fell back onto the sand.

Ron bent down to the man and helped him. The dead man's skull stared at him from dulled eyes. His lips began to move and, speaking English with a faint, croaking voice, formed the words: "Forever and ever ... I'll serve ... you ... my lords!"

"Don't lose heart, my friend," he encouraged the miserable figure lying on the ground. "We'll get you out of here! Who are you? How did you get here?"

Like a ragdoll the man's head lolled forward. But Ron held on tight to him and forced him to look into his eyes.

"Forever ... and ever ..." whispered the creature. That was all he could manage to say as his strength failed him.

Ron let him gently slide back to the ground. Then he stood up. "It's useless to try any further with him," he declared in resignation. "Maybe we can find someone else who is a bit stronger and healthier."

Without a word they went on their way. Ron was pondering over the words the creature had uttered with such effort. What sense did those words make? Words the unfortunate man deemed so important

that he would still utter them with the last weak breath left in his body? *Who* was it he wanted to serve? *Who* were these lords? It almost had sounded like some kind of a religious vow.

But it did not make any sense.

They reached the second building, another cube, and opened it the same simple way as the first.

This time there was another surprise in store for them. As the door opened inward a box-like piece of material fell over and came to rest directly before their feet. Ron regarded it, greatly puzzled. It was cube-shaped, just like the building it was in until this moment, and it felt as light as if it were only an empty shell. Ron turned it over and discovered a broken window pane on one of the other sides of the cube.

He realized that he had found a trace of the vanished creature of the planet Machraamp whose fellow citizen had requested Ron to keep an eye out for him.

What a sad clue Ron had found, for fate held only one possibility for any creature from Machraamp who would leave his protective suit on Lepso: Death!

Ron's thoughts were still busy wondering about his horrible discovery when suddenly the mighty boom of a gong resounded with a deep hum, making the air tremble and throbbing painfully in Ron's ears.

Ron turned around swiftly and questioned Larry with a glance. But his pal shrugged his shoulders and declared, "I haven't any idea either what it is. It seems to come from the ground."

By accident Ron's glance wandered over in the direction of the big pyramid whose pointed top could be seen above the flat roofs and the variously-shaped tops of the other buildings. Larry heard his friend utter a shout of surprise and whirled around.

On the top of the pyramid a figure was visible, very tiny in the distance but all aglitter even in the still-feeble light of the early morning with the innumerable jewels with which it had adorned itself. The figure was moving. It looked as if it was bowing and bending over in various directions. Ron suddenly felt certain of his earlier suspicion: this mysterious city, the death's-head people in the stone huts, the figure high up on the pyramid—all were part of some religious cult. The man standing up on the pyramid seemed to be a priest. And maybe he was one of those of whom the half-dead Terran had spoken when he had promised he would forever serve him.

This thought infuriated Ron.

"Let's go, over there," Ron yelled to Larry. "We've got to catch that fellow."

They hurried around the next cube and ran through a narrow lane between the low buildings toward the pyramid. The sound of the gong did not seem to have affected in the least the lack of activity in the city. All remained as quiet and empty as before.

With one exception. As they came closer to the pyramid they could hear the voice of the glittering man at the top. He was singing in a monotonous, droning, plaintive tone. He was talking to one of his imaginary gods in whose honour he let Terrans, creatures from Machraamp and other unfortunate members of different races perish.

At least this is what Ron assumed and he grew more and more furious.

On each side of the pyramid there was a row of wide steps leading up to the top. Larry called out to Ron but he did not hear what he said. He could only see the figure wrapped in its glittering robes that had interrupted now, in amazement, its monotonous singsong.

"Get down here!" Ron screamed at him. "Get down and justify what you have done to these pitiful creatures you keep imprisoned!"

Without giving the priest a chance to obey or disobey his challenge, Ron stormed ahead. Just a few more steps till he would reach the top of the pyramid, maybe 10 or 12. He had almost made it to the top—and then...

Then—!

For a second Ron saw the face of the creature, the priest, close before him, a grimace distorted with anger and strain. Ron felt he had only to stretch out his arms and seize the man.

But at this moment a second sound boomed forth from the gong. And all of a sudden Ron was transported to an entirely different place.

* * * *

All around him there was yelling, screaming, howling, whimpering and whistling in all possible keys. Something kept spinning him around at furious speed. He felt utterly miserable.

His brain refused to function; he could not think.

He let himself be whirled around without offering any resistance. He barely managed to bear the wild pain caused by the wild noise and confusion. Then he was seized by a mild tinge of curiosity. He tried to ascertain if he could feel anything else besides the pain, such as the roaring of the wind while he was being hurled around or the choking sensation in his throat as he felt more and more nauseated.

But there was no air present. Nor was his throat! Ron attempted to move his arms but there was nothing to move: he had turned into a disembodied entity whirling inside a space without substance.

All of a sudden shreds of alien thoughts came rushing inside his brain.

'You scorned Baalol ... you'll pay for this with the most horrible of all deaths! ... You scorned Baalol ...'

Ron had no idea who or what Baalol might be. He was not interested to end out either. But if what he was experiencing now was the most horrible of all deaths, he hoped fervently death would come quickly. If only this shrieking racket would cease!

There was no indication, however, that Ron's wish would come true. On the contrary: the howling grew in intensity; suddenly other thoughts were mingling with the original ones inside his brain. *'Don't kill ... you will not kill him ... you fools ... found your match ... far more powerful ... let go ...'*

Ron listened to the voice. Surely these were nothing but thoughts and thoughts had no voice. Nevertheless Ron believed he recognized that voice. He felt he knew who was speaking there—or thinking.

Someone was lighting for his ... for his

life! And what was he doing about it? He let himself be whirled around in the void without offering any resistance! Wanting nothing but for this torture to end, even if it meant losing his life! He began to steel himself; he was afraid now to die. He started resisting the fate these strange powers, these mighty foes, had pronounced for him. He struggled to aid the unknown friend who was battling to save him.

The spinning about decreased. The noise and clamour grew less. Once again Ron received the stranger's thoughts: *'Now you know ... you are powerless ... I am the victor ... cursed be Baalol ...!'*

Suddenly all was silent. For an instant Ron had the bewildering sensation of falling, of hurling downward. But this time it was an actual physical sensation for he slammed hard and painfully into something, then rolled on the ground, fell once more until he finally arrested his fall by gripping a stone ledge.

He opened his eyes. Bright sunlight blinded him. He saw next to his face an even, narrow expanse of stone. His gaze wandered across it until it reached the edge of the rocky ledge and below he saw there was still another, similar stony expanse.

The stairway! He was lying on the stairs leading up to the top of the pyramid.

He rose to his knees and looked around. Something shiny and glittering caught his eye. It was the garment of the priest. He was stretched out at a slant on the stairs, a few steps higher than Ron. His head was leaning at a crazy angle and his eyes were wide open with a glassy stare.

He was dead. There was no doubt about it. Ron's gaze wandered on and fell upon another priest who like the first had slid down a few steps and was now lying motionless. Some steps farther down there was a third dead priest and finally a fourth one who had fallen down the entire stairway. His body lay at a crazy distorted angle, limbs broken, sprawled on the sand.

Ron could not comprehend what had taken place.

Where was Larry? Down in the shadow of one of the small cubicle buildings he saw something move. Hastily he tried to grab his weapon—but found he was no longer carrying it on him. He must have lost it.

The moving figure stepped from the shadow into the sunlight. It was Larry Randall, his slender medium-sized frame now easily recognizable. Ron painfully rose to his full height and descended the steps. His whole body ached and felt stiff. Halfway down the stairs he saw his thermobeamer resting on one of the steps. He picked it up and stuck it into his belt.

Larry looked at him questioningly. "What was *that*?" he wanted to know.

"What was *what*?" he gave back the question.

"This strange space ... the spinning around ... the voices?"

Ron's eyes grew wide with wonder. "You too?" "Yes, me too," replied Larry. "I saw you storm up the steps like a maniac. I called after you to stay down here. A few more of the glittering guys appeared on the pyramid top. They didn't impress me that they would listen quietly while you were telling them off. I

wanted to warn you but you wouldn't listen. And then ... suddenly it started. I wasn't here any longer. I was floating somewhere and couldn't see anything. All around me was a terrible racket. Somebody said they wanted to kill me because I did not show proper respect and reverence toward ... I forget the name now. Then somebody protested against killing me. The whole thing stopped abruptly and I fell down here on the sand."

Larry was still looking at Ron as if he expected an explanation from him. But Ron said simply: "Let's go back to the gyro."

He gazed up at the sun and realized that at least 2 hours must have gone by since he had first seen the priest up on the pyramid and had tried to run up to call him to account for his misdeeds. A look at his watch confirmed this assumption. The adventure of the void ... the vortex ... the voices ... had consumed quite some time.

His thoughts turned to Gerard Lobson. He had long since awakened from his drunken sleep, he was certain. Perhaps he would even try to run away, though it seemed unreasonable to expect he would do so in the middle of the desert. He would turn back alright, once he'd seen there was nothing but sand and wind—and a ghost town. But this might take quite some time until he would return. Precious time that Ron could not afford to waste.

They left the town. It was empty and quiet, just as they had first found it—except for 4 motionless figures dressed in glittering garments, stretched out on the steps and at the foot of the pyramid.

Ron wondered what all this really meant: this town in the middle of the desert or rather this conglomeration of buildings grouped around the pyramid, which evidently was a temple of some sort. The buildings probably served only to house the priests' servant slaves—those half-dead, miserable creatures that had been picked up in Zanithon and probably in other towns on Lepso.

What kind of a disease was it that would suddenly overcome healthy people on the street, in a restaurant or in the middle of a conversation and change the poor victims into walking corpses? And what kind of a sect was it that would gather up these poor sick people to make them their servants—and all this with the support of the local police?

Ron thought he could explain what had happened to him when he attempted to attack the priest. The priest had not defended himself with any physical weapon. He had fought against him with mental weapons. He and the others who had come to his assistance were probably some type of mutants. They possessed paranormal abilities, among others evidently one which permitted them to send an attacker into another dimension where he would then be whirled to death. It was strange, though, that no one in the galaxy seemed ever to have heard of these priests. Did they exist only on Lepso or were they active also elsewhere in the same secretive manner as here?

Question after question—but Ron believed he detected a clue in there somewhere. The name Baalol reminded him of something. He did not know what it was. But he recalled that this name had turned up in a rather unpleasant connection with Terra's history sometime in the past months or years. There was some danger lurking behind this name.

On the other hand as far as Ron was concerned there was no mystery connected with the strange voice that had fought with the Baalol priests for Ron's and Larry's lives and which had finally freed the 2 prisoners from the surreal room filled with clamour and unbearable noises. Ron had recognized it immediately when he first heard it.

Indeed, his friend from Machraamp had amazing, powerful means at his disposal.

* * * *

The 2 friends remained silent while they were making their way back to the air-taxi. They trudged over the rows of dunes and soon lost sight of the temple city. From time to time they looked back to make sure the priests were not pursuing them. However it appeared the priests had been left totally exhausted by their mental battle with the creature from the planet Machraamp. The desert stretched out in silence and the heat made the air shimmer above the sand.

Finally the taxi-gyro appeared ahead of them beyond the crest of a dune. Tired and perspiring they slid down the slope of the last dune. Side by side they trotted toward the vehicle.

All of a sudden Ron stopped in his tracks and grabbed Larry by the shoulder.

The car was empty; no trace of Gerard Lobson was to be seen.

"That fool!" Larry cried out angrily. "Where does he want to go here in the middle of the desert?"

They were searching for footprints. But the wind seemed to have been blowing hard in the meantime; they could barely make out some indistinct impressions in the sand which led to the north between the dunes; nobody could say for sure whether these tracks were their own from early in the morning or if they had been left by Gerard Lobson.

Larry walked all around the vehicle while Ron remained standing on one spot for a little while to ponder whether he should climb up on the next dune to look around from there. He did not have a chance to come to a decision. Coming from behind he heard a scratching, rustling sound. He whirled around.

But faster than Ron could complete his turn, Gerard Lobson rose from the hole he had dug into the ground to hide himself.

Gerard stood there, slightly leaning forward. A silly grin on his face was proof of how much he enjoyed this situation.

Worst of all for Ron and Larry: the dark-haired man held a needle-beamer, a small but deadly weapon in his right hand.

6/ A SINISTER POWER

At first glance it seemed Gerard had put himself in a rather foolish position. He was forced to divide his

attention in 2 directions and both men he had to deal with were armed the same as he was. There appeared no way he could succeed.

Upon a second, more critical evaluation of the situation the matter took on quite a different aspect. Gerard had had plenty of time to make his plans and he used this time to his advantage. He stood about 15 meters from the taxi. That was close enough not to miss his target and far enough to keep an eye on both men without having to turn his head. Yet Ron and Larry were unable to see each other. Larry had disappeared behind the gyro and had stopped there. Most likely Gerard would protest any attempt to move that Larry might undertake. That meant the 2 friends could not communicate with either gestures or glances and plot any course of action together. Neither knew what the other was doing.

Apparently Gerard had gotten his fill as he enjoyed the rare sight of having trapped these 2 men by surprise. He began to talk and, oddly enough, his voice had changed to a hoarse, grating sound.

"We'll fly back now to Zanithon," he announced. "The two of you up front and I in the back. You'll be unarmed and I'll have my needle-beamer pointed at your heads all throughout the trip home."

Larry seemed to have moved at this moment. With lightning speed, Gerard gave a slight turn to his weapon. He yelled: "Stand still! Don't move!"

Apparently Larry obeyed this command, for Gerard relaxed again.

"We planned anyhow to fly back to Zanithon. What's all this fuss about?" Ron said casually.

"You wouldn't have gone where I want to take you," said Gerard.

"Where do you want to go?"

"To my friends who'll owe me quite a few things once I've handed you over to them."

"You mean the Springers, don't you?" Ron began to needle him.

It was a stab in the dark, for Ron had no proof that Gerard was cooperating willingly with the Springers. But the stab hit home.

"How do you know that?" Gerard cried out, his eyes widening in amazement.

Ron chuckled sarcastically. "You've told me so many lies, Lobson, that I had to figure out this story on my own. You say you were sitting with the two Springers and the Ara in Dr. Zuglert's office, didn't you? Suddenly one of the Springers jumped up and left the room—that's what you told me, didn't you? And when he returned he carried me in his arms? For crying out loud, next time try to tell a more believable story! You were standing down in the lobby as the lookout man, that's the truth of the matter. The Springers suspected me ever since I arrived on Lepso with the *Ephraim*. The simplest way to find out if their suspicions were justified was simply to wait and see if I really would come to Zuglert's office. There wasn't even any necessity to put me under surveillance. All they needed to do was to place a lookout in front of the building on 86th street ... and of course to make a few additional preparations of a technical nature. You were standing guard there, Lobson, and the preparations consisted of making sure they could switch off and on as needed at any given time the antigrav field of any of the many elevator shafts. All that was required of you was to report: watch out, he's coming! And don't try and tell me one of the Springers could carry me upstairs on his own! You have to have 2 persons for that. After all, it had to be done quickly: there were other people inside the building whose suspicions might otherwise be aroused.

You helped that Springer, didn't you, Lobson?"

For awhile it looked as if Gerard had lost his composure. But he quickly pulled himself together again and grinned impertinently at Ron. "So what? Why should it bother you?"

Ron shook his head. "It doesn't," he replied seriously. "Mainly because I realize that you are not really responsible for your actions."

Gerard was startled and frightened once more. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Ron brushed off the question with a slight disdainful gesture. "You'll find out later. Now you are holding the trump cards in your hand, so to speak. Do you mind answering a few questions for me?"

Ron had sized up Gerard correctly. Now during his moment of triumph he was most willing to brag about what he knew. He nodded with a patronizing air and requested: "Go ahead! Ask me!"

"Your friends, the Springers, have placed a tap on the telecom line of the Terran Trade Mission. Is that correct?"

Gerard nodded affirmation.

* * * *

"And Zuglert made a call from this tapped line?"

"Yes, as far as I know. But not from the building where the Mission is located. To make matters more convenient for the Springers they had the tap extended all the way to their own Trade Commission. Zuglert made his call from their offices when he was left unguarded for a few minutes."

"How did he get there?"

"After I ran out of Dr. Zuglert's office, he must have gathered up the rest of his strength and left his office to get some help."

"Just a moment," interrupted Ron. "Didn't he have a seephone in his office? Why didn't he make his call for help from there?"

Gerard hesitated. "Maybe he thought the affair was so important that he didn't want to take into his confidence any of the persons he could have reached by vidphone. Later on, when he was at the Springers' Trade Commission, he didn't call just anybody. He requested the telecom operator to connect him with the nearest Terran war ship. He probably was on his way to find a telecom line when he left his office."

Gerard smiled sarcastically. "But he had underestimated the ever-watchful Springers. There is hardly any building downtown that is not kept under their surveillance. They discovered him in time and took him along with them. That's when unfortunately this mishap occurred and when he managed to speak with the *Florida* ... though fortunately on the other hand without being able to reveal too much."

Now it was Ron's turn to smile sarcastically. "You took care of that for me, Lobson; you told me all I needed to know."

"I! Impossible!"

"Sure enough. Didn't you repeat to me word for word what Zuglert had said after he was overcome by exhaustion? 'Important for Earth! ... all must be warned ... alcoholic solution, quite inconspicuous.' Don't you think I can put 2 & 2 together?"

Gerard shook his head quite mechanically. "No," he said rejecting Ron's suggestion. "I think ..."

Ron interrupted. "Tell me another thing. Why are all the sick people brought here to this desert? What are the Baalol priests doing with them?"

Gerard gave a nervous start and grew noticeably pale. "I don't know the answer," he shouted excitedly. "Don't mention that name again! Baalol is a sinister power!"

Ron recalled what had happened to Larry and himself and was inclined to agree completely with Gerard on that point.

"Well, then," he said coldly, "you don't seem to know it."

He looked Gerard in his eyes. "But I know something," he added. "You have become an addict ... that's the thing you need doesn't cost very much but you had no money at all. That's why you went to see Dr. Zuglert: you needed his help for some dirty trick by which you wanted to get some money. But Zuglert knew your bad reputation and knew in advance what you wanted. He wished to help you—judging by all you have told me—but apparently help you only in an honest way. When Zuglert became ill, you took to your heels. Maybe it's true the Springers caught you when you later returned to Zuglert's office ... maybe you went to them also out of your own free will. In any case, you got from the Springers as much of the dope as you needed. That's why you became a slave to them. All for a few sips of a liqueur-like substance that's sold in tiny bottles with violet-yellow labels."

Gerard stared at him dumbfounded. As in a dream he stepped back one step. His mouth moved. He tried to form some words but they would not pass over his lips.

Ron tried hard not to look to the side. He had to keep eyes locked with Gerard. Most of what Ron had said had been mere conjectures on his part. But Gerard's reaction had clearly shown that he had guessed right. Ron had spoken to Gerard in a very insistent manner. Gerard had been frightened to death because he saw his secret laid bare to Ron. *Now* was the time for Larry to come to his aid!

A fraction of a second later he realized that his friend had not disappointed him in his expectations. Gerard's attention was suddenly attracted by something outside Ron's range of vision. He tried to jump aside, stumbled and fell headlong into the sand.

In the same moment Larry's bright-glowing shot came hissing from behind the vehicle. Ron ducked, ready to jump in order to divert Gerard's attention in case Larry's shot missed.

But Larry's aim was perfect. He hit Gerard's right arm, and Gerard howled in pain.

Ron walked slowly over to him. He seized him by the shoulders, pulled him up to a standing position.

"Now we'll fly back to Zanithon," he said in a soothing tone to the addict. "And you'll get your liqueur—even without the Springers' help.

* * * *

Their return flight passed without any further incidents. Gerard Lobson got what he craved and Ron found on this occasion that the drug was known by the name of Liquitiv and was everywhere obtainable on Lepso. It was sold as a liqueur and nobody seemed to have the slightest inkling what danger it harboured.

Gerard was a changed man. He was no longer interested in returning to the Springers ever since Ron had purchased a sufficient quantity of Liquitiv to keep him supplied for a long time. Ron also wanted to have some of the drug on hand to send back home to Earth so that the experts could make a thorough chemical analysis of it. Gerard had even agreed that he too would be taken back to Earth at the next opportunity. Maybe the experts might also find a cure for his addiction.

Meanwhile Ron sent a comprehensive coded report to Nike Quinto. While he was waiting for his reply he finally had his long-planned conversation with inspector Neary of the Terran Trade Commission.

Neary was quite surprised to learn about the wiretap on one of his lines. The place where his wire had been tapped was quickly located and the line leading away from it was followed within the office building. It ended in a relay station established 4 floors below in a small office belonging to the Transall Import-Export Co. The tenants were not present while the discovery was made—nor were they ever seen there again. From that time on the Springers were no longer able to listen in illegally to the conversations made by the Terran Mission.

As a result of further inquiries Neary discovered that it was a mystery where this drug was originally produced. Some 12 years ago it had made its first appearance on Lepso, where it was traded freely. Neary disposed of special methods and means to obtain such information—the purchasing lists of the liquor dealers, customers of the big restaurants in the city and several Lepso policemen. However, not until a few months before had Liquitiv become available for planet-wide consumption. Overnight its sales had increased one hundredfold. This was also the observation Larry had made to Ron when he pretended to be a Zanithon taxi driver—although Larry had in turn learned about this second hand only: some months back Lepso had suddenly gone "crazy". The inhabitants were seized by a feverish activity; everybody started rushing around, driving at breakneck speed, imbued with a sense of sudden strength as if all had turned into Supermen.

Neary also discovered that 48 Terran citizens of all those registered with the Terran Trade Commission on the planet Lepso had vanished. All evidence pointed to the likelihood that they had been taken to the temple city of the Baalol priests. But as Ron estimated, there was enough space for several thousand inhabitants, assuming that each of the little houses contained at least 3 occupants. This led to the conclusion that not only Terrans but also members of other galactic races had fallen victim to the dangerous liqueur.

Neary was still carrying on his investigations when Ron was ordered back immediately to Earth together with Larry Randall. Ron informed his friend of their impending departure and arranged for them to meet in his hotel.

Then Ron took leave of Neary. During the past days he had been able to see and talk with several employees of the Trade Mission. He left the Mission with the peculiar feeling that even its employees gave evidence of excessive activity and restlessness. But he made no mention of this fact to Neary.

However, Ron realized by now that the drug Liquitiv had found a wider circle of customers than he had believed before.

* * * *

When he arrived in his hotel's lobby he saw again the blond Araukarian girl standing behind the reception desk. Ron knew now he had wronged her in those first days when he suspected her of collaborating with the Springers. Liquitiv was nothing but one of many available popular drinks. At that moment it was in great demand on Lepso; besides, it was known for its invigorating effect. Nobody had the slightest idea that its users would become addicted to it—at least nobody seemed to be aware of it. It was just courtesy on the part of the hotel management to offer their newly-arrived guests a little glass of the liqueur—for cash, of course; nothing came free of charge even here on Lepso.

Anyway, Ron grinned, the second glass on the tray the girl had brought up to his room that first day had certainly not been put there because of the usual service regulations!

He smiled at the girl as he was passing by her desk.

Upstairs in his room he was met by Larry Randall and Gerard Lobson. Gerard was as usual full of eagerness and impatience. He did not calm down at all even when Ron assured him they would have to leave Lepso this very day.

While Ron had been busy dealing with inspector Neary, Larry and Gerard had undertaken some investigations of their own. According to their findings, Neary's data seemed to be correct on the whole. Liquitiv had appeared on the market here some 12 years ago. Nobody knew its point of origin. The small restaurant owner had purchased it from a retailer, who in turn had been supplied by a wholesale merchant, who again in turn received the merchandise from the general distributor who had imported the liqueur from Zinema in the Lorraine system. And it was safe to assume that the people on Zinema were not the actual producers of the drug. The product passed through so many hands, and when all was said and done it was astonishing that its price was still reasonable enough so the eventual consumer could afford to buy it.

"That means," concluded Ron, "that Liquitiv results in various or rather in 2 different effects."

Larry looked up. "You lost me there," he said with a smile. "Please explain this to me."

"Look—Armin Zuglert was a robust, sports type. Nobody would have guessed by looking at him that he was addicted to Liquitiv. Suddenly he collapses and changes into a walking corpse. Why would that be?"

"Withdrawal symptoms. He could no longer get any Liquitiv," Larry answered quickly.

Ron pointed his finger at him. "Wrong! You can buy Liquitiv anywhere you please. Zuglert had money. He also was aware of his addiction to the drug and knew one could not simply stop taking it. So why shouldn't he just go out and buy a few bottles if he had run out of his own supply? No, that was not the reason for his sudden deterioration. In addition to the addictive qualities of the drug it has still another effect on the consumer who has taken it regularly for a certain length of time: it turns them into zombies. And how long does this process take from the beginning to the end? All we can say at this point is not more than 12 years and a few months. For this is how long Zuglert has been able to obtain the poison on Lepso, not any earlier."

Larry thought awhile. Then he declared, "I believe we could find out a great deal more if we could get a closer and more thorough look at those poor guys in the Baalol temple city."

He got up and walked over to the window. He sighed. "I also believe that Nike Quinto is calling us back home for the same reason. You want to bet we won't enjoy any well-deserved vacation after this trip home?"

"I can't take your bet," Larry called from his chair. "How could I bet against you if I share your opinion?"

Gerard thought it a splendid idea to return to Lepso and make a thorough search of the temple city. He was just about to air his views at greater length when something peculiar took place.

Ron had just turned away from the window when he noticed a sudden gentle, hazy vibration in the air. Puzzled, he took one step closer to inspect this strange phenomenon, when the shimmering atmosphere changed abruptly into a cube-shaped box. It descended leisurely to the floor and settled on the carpet. The front of the box had a thick glass window. Behind it moved a viscous, green liquid and inside swam a light-and-dark grey mottled shadowy figure with elegant movements.

Ron quickly recovered from his initial surprise. "I'm so pleased to see you again," he said.

"Yes, my friend," came the reply, "I've come to say goodbye to you."

"Are you returning to Machraamp?"

"Yes. And I want to thank you for having tracked down our vanished brother."

"It was a sad discovery."

"It can't be changed any more. At the time I asked you to help us in our search for our brother I was already quite certain he could not be saved."

"How is that possible?" Ron inquired in astonishment.

"Otherwise I would have been able to establish contact with him," came the answer and the transec seemed to impart a hint of amusement to the voice. "I've been able to establish and maintain contact with you regardless of the distance between us. I managed to intervene just in time when you were about to be interrogated in one of the office buildings here in town as well as way out in the desert when you were threatened by great danger. It should have been all the more easy for me to be in contact with our brother . . . unless something had happened to him. But from the start when I landed here on Lepso all I could receive from him was a dull, incomprehensible mumbling. This led me to assume that he was beyond help. But I wanted to be sure about it."

There was a lull of a few seconds. Then the alien added in a mournful voice, "Now I'll return to Machraamp and we'll have to strike out our poor brother's name from our list."

"In any case," said Ron, "let me express my gratitude for your welcome help. Without your assistance I would probably not have gotten very far."

"Oh, don't say that," objected the creature from Machraamp. "You have a very strong spirit; you can cope with many an adversary."

Ron thought for a moment what he could add. "With your permission I would like to visit your people on your home planet some day," he stated.

"You will always be a welcome guest in our midst," came the answer. "You and also your friends."

Then everything happened again as on the first day of his stay on Lepso: the spot where the cube-shaped box had been was suddenly empty. The creature from Machraamp had taken its leave.

Ron stepped over to the window which faced the street. Far below, in front of the hotel entrance, he saw a strange-looking vehicle with a cube-shaped superstructure. It began to move and glide over into the middle of the street. It was soon gone from his sight. Ron consulted his watch. "Time to go," he said in a tired voice. "We're flying with a courier ship of the Trade Mission. Get ready, friends!"

7/ MISSION: LEPSO LIBERATION

Ron would have won his bet if a certain person had been willing to accept the challenge. Colonel Quinto was waiting at the edge of the landing field when the courier ship touched down. After a brief welcome he explained to Ron Landry and Larry Randall that they could have all of 5 hours to get rested up after their flight home. He brought them to their hotel and ordered them to appear in his office at the indicated hour.

The colonel immediately seized upon Gerard Lobson. Shortly before their arrival the addict had taken a dose of Liquitiv and was now in a state of great excitement. He would probably have thought it a splendid idea if Nike Quinto had hinted at driving downtown to rob the main branch of the General Cosmic Bank. He didn't care at all what Nike Quinto had in mind for him—as long as there was some action.

On this occasion an incident occurred which Ron and Larry would probably remember for the rest of their lives. It all came about because Nike Quinto felt bothered by Gerard's hyperactivity. He tried to put a damper on it with his usual tactics and started to complain about his high blood pressure, blaming Gerard for his rapidly-aggravated state of health which was bound to end up in a heart attack before the hour was out.

Gerard listened to his diatribe a few times, then burst out: "Why don't you stop your bellyaching! If your blood pressure really bothers you so much you should retire from your job and let somebody better qualified handle it. I'm eager for action, and high blood pressure or not, I won't be held back!"

Nike Quinto swallowed hard several times; his face grew even redder than before—but he kept his mouth shut. As long as Gerard was around he never mentioned his high blood pressure again.

* * * *

5 hours later Nike Quinto announced very seriously, while trying in vain to make his high, squeaky voice sound full of importance, "The affair we are dealing with is of such significance that I've received instructions directly from the Administrator himself. I want to point this out to you right from the beginning so that you won't have any illusions about bringing up any arguments against the course of action I'm going to propose to you. Just take note of it and act accordingly."

Then he added in a more moderate vein: "The reason for this is in no way due to the fact that the Administrator has personally worked out these instructions. As you all know, he has no illusions about being a superman who can do everything better than the rest of humanity or any other race. These plans were calculated with the help of the entire positronic potential at our disposal here in our capital. We have been unable to detect any mistakes in it—our brains are too puny compared to the intellectual capacity of these computers. Is that dear?"

Ron nodded briefly to indicate his approval of the situation. Larry, as usual, refrained from making any comment by either word or gesture. Ron silently admitted to himself how impressed he was so far with Quinto's opening words. As a rule, Perry Rhodan, the Administrator, was a man talked about with the same awe and admiration with which a child would regard the feats of the great sorcerer in a fairy tale. The Administrator was far removed from the hustle and bustle of this world. He was sitting on a throne high up above the clouds somewhere in a nebulous, faraway land. He never mixed in any ordinary affairs. His activity was limited exclusively to the highest plane of interstellar politics.

This was the picture most people had formed of Perry Rhodan. So it was very exciting to hear that he was inserting himself in the Lepso affair.

"Why *isthat* so?" Ron asked.

"Why *iswhat* so?" Quinto countered, all jittery now. "Make yourself clearer, Major. Vague questions upset me and make my blood pressure shoot up. So what is it you want to know?"

Ron smiled. "What is so important in this affair that the Administrator considers it necessary to intervene?"

"That's simple to explain," answered Quinto. "The priests of the Baalol cult are involved in this Lepso affair. The Baalol cult has once before played a role in Terran history. That was some 60 years ago. The Emperor of the Arkonide realm fell victim to a devilish plot. He was robbed of a vital device, thus attempting to force him to abdicate. This plot was hatched by Baalol priests. And the stolen device was recovered from a Baalol priest's possession after a long pursuit leading all the way to the Gela System and a violent battle. The Baalol priests are powerful mutants with an incredible diversity of psi-faculties. None of our Terran mutants can match forces with them. These priests can easily absorb the psi-powers of other mutants and turn them around against the original carrier of this particular faculty—to the latter's disadvantage, of course. Because they can turn an effect into the exact opposite of its original intent, they

are known as the 'Antis'.

"It has become known to us that the Antis have erected a wide network of places of worship all over the galaxy. We have no knowledge, however, of the aims and purposes of this cult. The only thing we have been able to ascertain is that we are not dealing here with one single, well-defined deity or several of them. The cult proclaims a mystical belief of bringing ultimate wisdom to its true believers and being capable of freeing them from all spiritual and physical suffering.

"In addition to that we have found the Antis to be clever traders. No wonder then that they have dealings with the Springers ... since they evidently are in a position to provide the Springers with valuable merchandise. Also the Aras, the bio-medical geniuses, have often been seen in the company of these Baalol priests. Since these 2 races, the Aras as well as the Springers, are in no way favourably inclined toward our home planet, the Earth, it's only logical to assume that we have nothing but evil to expect from these Antis.

"Now they have started up some new enterprise on Lepso. The Springers are most Likely their source of supply of raw materials for the production of Ligitiv. The Aras concoct from that their devilish brew and the Antis get the use—whatever that might be—of the half-dead addicts the Lepso police deliver to them in their temple city. The Lepso police force participates in this affair probably only because of financial advantages it derives from bringing these addicts to the Baalol priests.

"These facts should help clear up a little what this Lepso affair is all about. It is our task now to prevent any further spread of this drug throughout the galaxy and especially to stop it from penetrating Terra's sphere of influence. Meanwhile we have had chemical analyses made of the samples you have brought back with you from Lepso. Our researchers, however, have come to the conclusion that on the basis of these samples alone no real progress can be made in our fight against this menace. They must also study the victims of this addiction. Therefore you will now return to Lepso and liberate as many of the prisoners kept in the temple city as you can. Are you ready for this mission?"

A shudder ran down Ron's spine. He remembered what had befallen him as he attempted for the first time to penetrate into the temple of the Baalol priests. And judging by what Nike Quinto had just told him they would not send along any mutants to help him in his task. They would be just as helpless as he himself. So he and Larry would have to rely on their own resources and their wits. All alone to face a group of Antis endowed with paranormal faculties!

He broke out in a cold sweat. Finally he said, "It's not that I'm especially keen on it, Colonel. But I believe in finishing what you have started."

Nike Quinto greeted this statement with a smile of satisfaction.

"There is one more question I'd like you to answer me, Colonel," continued Ron. "I realize this whole affair is a most horrible problem for us. Several thousand people of various races have vanished so far on Lepso and among them 48 Terrans—and the consumption of that devilish beverage increases at a rapid rate. But why would the Administrator be personally so concerned about this affair so far removed from us?"

Quinto was toying with a pencil on his desk. He seemed to concentrate on formulating as brief an answer to Ron's question as possible. "It's quite simple," he finally said. "We've found signs of suspicious activity also here on Earth. It looks as if Ligitiv has already made its way to our own shores."

* * * *

Several passer-by observed the man as he was staggering from the entrance of a small office building. He started moving along the sidewalk all the while trying to steady himself against the wall of the house. He seemed to be afraid of falling to the ground. Indeed, he looked as if he would collapse the moment he'd let go of his support.

Nevertheless, whatever might be wrong with this man, his body build was that of a powerful giant, with broad shoulders and strong hands. But something seemed to have drained him of his strength. His knees were trembling and his hands kept fidgeting. His cheeks were all hollow. Yellow-grey skin was stretched taut over his cheekbones yet still looked wrinkled and flaccid.

It was not clear which direction the man wanted to go. Of course it would have made most sense for him to go straight to a hospital but the nearest one lay in exactly the opposite direction. Finally one of the passer-by took heart and approached the sick man. He intended to explain to him which way he should take in order to get some help. But he had hardly taken a few steps when the piercing howl of a police siren could be heard coming from the air. He stopped in amazement and looked up. He saw a gyrocar descend slowly near the wall of the office building and land a few meters away from the sick man. Before he could properly comprehend what was going on, some policemen had jumped out of their car and surrounded the sick man. He seemed to offer no resistance—since he obviously lacked the strength to do so—when he was seized by the policemen and dragged inside their vehicle. A few seconds later the gyrocar lifted off the road and disappeared amid the heavy traffic above the roofs of the city.

The good Samaritan began to doubt whether all this had taken place, all had happened so fast. Then he thought better of it and went on his way.

* * * *

An hour later the policemen unloaded the sick man in a desolate desert. He was not fully aware what was happening to him. Somebody—he could not properly see who it was—picked him up and carried him swiftly toward a group of buildings which rose out of the desert sand. He did not notice any door opening but suddenly he was inside one of the small houses. It was dark. He lay quietly for awhile, waiting for his eyes to get adjusted to the tiny beam of light that entered the room through a fist-sized hole in the ceiling. Then he looked around and saw that 4 other people rested on the floor. They were obviously in the same predicament as he himself, very sick people. They did not move and showed no interest whatsoever in the newcomer.

They evidently expected he would behave the same way they did. But the newcomer got to his feet and walked to each of the motionlessly-resting figures on the floor. For the first time he noticed some reaction to his strange behaviour. They followed his movements with their eyes, incredulous that someone who looked as ill as they themselves was capable of standing on his feet so shortly after his arrival and could even walk around the interior of the hut.

Two of the reclining men shoved themselves with feeble, limp movements as far as the back wall and

tried to raise themselves up while holding onto it for support. After several vain attempts they finally succeeded. They were coughing and panting after their tremendous exertion. But they finally sat upright and could clearly see the man who stood before them.

He nodded toward them as a sign of encouragement and satisfaction. With a rather energetically-sounding voice he said: "You seem to have enough strength left to show some curiosity. That's good—we'll need some men who can move around within a few days. You are all Terrans, aren't you?"

The pair sitting at the wall nodded affirmation. And the other two still lying on the floor made feeble signs to express their confirmation.

"They always ..." croaked one of them, "bring together ... people of the ... same race."

"Save your strength!" said the tall, erect man. "Don't talk unless absolutely necessary."

Then he introduced himself. "I've come here directly from Earth to help you. I'm a major of the Terran Spacefleet. My name is Ron Landry."

* * * *

His plan had succeeded so far, thought Landry. Still back on Earth they had injected him with some drug which caused a peculiar change in his appearance without harming him in any way. After he had landed on Lepso he went directly to a building where the Springers were known to have an office. He had stayed there just long enough to make sure he was seen by the Springers—who had phoned the police to come and pick him up.

Now he was inside the temple city, inside one of its small buildings, together with 4 sick persons who until a short time ago had been so apathetic that they hadn't even known each other's names. Ron Landry's appearance had awakened their curiosity and activated the last remnant of their physical strength. Still, it was questionable whether this tiny amount of energy would be sufficient for them to cooperate in their rescue.

From the 4 inhabitants of the miserable hut Ron learned that one had to imbibe Liquitiv at least 4 to 5 times in order to become addicted. He had been eager to obtain some information on this point for, after all, he had been forced once to drink the stuff. He wanted to know how close he had come to becoming a victim of this dangerous drug.

He further found out that the majority of the prisoners in the temple city were members of humanoid races but that there were also several hundred non-human victims. This was proof enough that this dangerous beverage affected intelligent beings regardless of their origin and metabolic system. This heightened the potential peril of the liqueur. Ron realized how, with the help of Liquitiv, the Antis with their allies the Springers and the Aras might possibly spread addiction throughout the entire galaxy and enslave its inhabitants. For there was nobody, so it seemed, who was capable of resisting the effect of this devilish brew.

The captive sick men had no idea why they had been brought to the temple city. It had been hammered

into their heads that from now on they should be the devoted servants of the Baalol priests. Lack of devotion was severely punished—by solitary confinement in a completely dark room and reduced food rations. But no one knew what purpose this devotion served. The sick prisoners never had to do anything, fulfil any tasks, except lie and rot in their huts, spend their days in a state of lethargic debility.

They told Ron that this lesson of devotion was learned in the so-called instruction sessions. Ron could not find out what such an instruction session was like, for their descriptions contradicted each other. He consoled himself with the fact that sooner or later he too would be taken for such a lesson.

He did not know yet what danger this instruction represented in his case—but he was soon to find out.

8/ DISEMBODIED

He slept for a few hours, when suddenly he was awakened by the booming sound of a gong. He turned over on his side, wondering what this might be. For a fraction of a second he saw the pale face of one of the 4 sick fellows lying next to him but then he vanished. This sight was now replaced by another image: a wide, spacious hall, dimly-lit and quite empty except for 3 priests clad in flowing, shimmering robes. They stood in a row at the far end of the big room and fixed Ron with their stare.

Oddly enough, Ron did not have the impression of being in this hall in person. He was convinced that he was still lying in the stone hut and that the hall with the priests was nothing but an illusion. It felt as if someone had conjured up a colourful, realistic image of the hall with the priests before his eyes. Ron felt he had no part in all of this.

Suddenly the priests began to speak. Their mouths did not move but Ron heard their voices and understood their words. "Rejoice! You have been chosen to become the servant of the Eternal Truth and its guardians."

Ron knew these words were directed toward him and that he understood them in the same manner as on that day when he was being whirled around while he caught snatches of thoughts promising him a painful death.

Ron refrained from making any reaction to what was going on. He merely gazed in astonishment at the image before his eyes.

"But belief in the truth demands obedience," announced one of the priests. "There is no revelation of the truth without obedience. You'll obey us from now on or ..."

He stopped speaking. Ron felt a burning, stabbing pain spreading throughout his entire body. He wanted to scream but since he was only present in a disembodied form, he lacked a mouth to utter the scream.

He understood the meaning of this demonstration. Whenever he showed a lack of devotion he would experience the same pain perhaps even stronger than this sample.

He thought to himself, 'Under these circumstances I too would be obedient to their wishes.'

The 3 priests seemed to receive this thought. "No reservations are permitted in your devotion to the truth," replied one of the priests, and Ron felt how the pain grew more intense. "We demand unconditional faith and obedience! You'll serve Truth and us, the guardians of the True Faith!"

Ron cringed with pain. He did not know what they were doing to him but it was terrible. He could not localize the pain. It felt as if his entire body had been thrust into a room filled with nothing but pain and torture.

Yes, I'll obey, thought Ron.

The pain subsided. Once again Ron could hear the voices of the priests. "On the subject of humility! The truth will be revealed only to those who are meek and submissive! Now return to your place!"

Ron opened his eyes. He expected to see the face of the sick man lying next to him as before but his place on the stone floor was empty. Ron turned on his back and saw one of his companions-in-misery kneel before him.

"That took ... a very ... long time," the man whispered, horrified.

Ron raised his arm and looked at his watch. He had no idea when he was awakened by the gong but he thought it could have been hardly later than 5 o'clock. It was a little after 8 now. He had spent at least 3 hours with the priests in the hall.

The others assured him that this was quite unusual. None of them had ever "stayed away", as they called it, longer than one and a half hours. This worried Ron. Maybe the priests had noticed something in him that was different than in the usual type of person the policemen would deliver to them?

This was a risk he had to take into account. The Baalol priests were endowed with powerful psi-faculties. It was certainly within the realm of probability that they could distinguish the mind of a healthy man from that of a sick one. According to the descriptions of his co-prisoners, Ron learned that his body had thrashed about restlessly on several occasions while the priests had him under their control. This, too, was unheard of and had never before been witnessed by them. Ron resolved to conform his behaviour from now on closer to that of a really sick person. So he let the entire day go by without undertaking any further ventures.

During the course of the day 5 dishes appeared in the hut on 3 occasions, brought there by some invisible hand. These dishes contained some grey mush. Ron's fellow prisoners greedily fell upon this meal. Ron was not very hungry and had to force himself to eat. But he nevertheless cleaned his dish just as thoroughly as his companions to avoid arousing any suspicions. The mush assuaged both hunger and thirst. The empty dishes all vanished again at the same time, approximately 45 minutes after they had mysteriously appeared.

Ron felt reassured by this for it seemed now a certainty that the priests did not keep the hut's interior under constant surveillance. Otherwise they would have seen when each of the prisoners was through with his meal and they should have removed the empty dishes in this exact order.

This observation encouraged Ron to leave the hut after night had fallen in order to have a thorough look at the temple city. He followed a certain purpose there. He wanted to know who had arrived during the past day—and he also wanted to search for Dr. Zuglert.

He examined the interior of several stone huts whose inhabitants were without exception all of

non-Terran origin. There were mainly representatives of Arkonide colonial side branches but also a few Swoons and other non-humanoid races.

It took almost one hour until Ron discovered another hut inhabited by Terrans. Meanwhile his eyes had become adjusted to the weak light of the stars. So if he'd leave the door ajar he could fairly well recognize the captive lying closest to it.

He knelt down and whispered into the dark room: "Nike Quinto has a fat belly ..."

And a few seconds later the answer came: "... and only 17 hairs on his head!"

Somebody moved inside. Ron saw a head emerge from the darkness. He recognized one of the 5 men Nike Quinto had sent to Lepso together with him.

"Everything okay, sir," reported the man.

"What can you tell me about the rest of the men?" Ron asked.

"Lester and Harrings arrived as scheduled. That's all I know."

"Fine. Is Zuglert in your hut?"

"Yessir. He's quite active comparatively."

"Good—I have to talk to him."

He crept inside the hut. One of the inmates had listened in to their conversation. He sat up and looked at Ron. "Are you Maj. Landry?" he inquired in a weak voice.

"Yes, I am," said Ron.

"My name is Armin Zuglert," began the prisoner. "I have heard of your plan and am in full agreement with it. It's most important for me to get back to Earth."

"I didn't hatch out that plan," Ron said in reply. "And there is definitely a chance it might not succeed. So to be quite safe will you please tell me immediately what you know. One of us at least will get through all this and return home."

Zuglert welcomed this suggestion. He formed a strange contrast to the other sick people. He seemed to draw new strength from some well-hidden reserve. He was able to speak without constant pausing nor did he cough after every couple of words. He explained the reason for this. He was a medical man and had developed a method to husband the meagre energy his sick body still would produce so that he'd have a small reserve left for whatever purposes he might need.

Zuglert reported that he had collaborated about 12 years ago with a Terran by the name of Edmond Hugher. Hugher was a bio-medical specialist just like Zuglert and it was Hugher who had introduced him for the first time to the liqueur Liquitiv. Hugher was involved in research into the composition and effect of Liquitiv. He seemed to believe that the beverage contained certain active agents derived from plants which had a regenerative and rejuvenating effect on man's mind and tissues. Both Zuglert and Hugher had drunk the liqueur. Zuglert became addicted. Hugher had vanished a short while afterwards without a trace. Zuglert did not know whether Hugher had been affected by the drink in the same manner but he

didn't doubt it—nobody had ever taken Liquitiv more than 4 times without becoming addicted to it.

Zuglert then had proceeded to make a thorough study of the symptoms and history of his addiction from its beginning to his eventual collapse. He made careful and systematic notes which he sent back home to Terra at regular interval to have them placed in his bank safe for security. Only the report about the last days before his collapse had still been in his office where it probably had been found and confiscated by the Springers.

According to Zuglert's findings, 12 years and 4 months elapsed from the onset of the addiction to the eventual collapse. Once Zuglert had even interrupted his regular intake of the drug for a longer period of time. This was done to observe the withdrawal symptoms. This lead him to the conclusion that no one could bear being without the drug for any longer than 6 Earth days at most. Severe exhaustion would be the immediate and inevitable result. This was particularly conspicuous since it differed so radically from the usual hyper-activity characteristic of the addicts. Mental deterioration followed swiftly afterwards.

Zuglert spoke also of his collaborator Edmond Hugher. He described him as being a quiet, good-humoured but insidiously-smiling man who seemed to know a great deal more than he would admit. At least, Zuglert stated, he was amazed at the diversity, extent and depth of his knowledge.

And then Zuglert made a rather startling revelation. "I've still got a photo of him on me," he said. "I've always carried it in my pocket—he was such a valuable colleague of mine. I fondly remember him to this day."

Ron stretched out his hand. "Give me that picture," he demanded. "I've a strong suspicion this man isn't quite as innocent as he might seem to you."

Zuglert obeyed without any objections. He reached inside the pocket of his jacket and with a trembling hand pulled out the requested photo. Ron threw a quick glance at it and put it in his own pocket.

Then he left the hut. He continued on his round and found that 5 more of his agents had arrived in the temple city according to plan—all disguised as sick drug addicts.

* * * *

Back in the command centre of the *Florida*, Capt. Larry Randall looked once again at the big clock on the wall. This time his impatience was rewarded, both hands on the luminous dial stood in the right position. He breathed a sigh of relief and rose from his chair. Dick Kindsom, the officer on duty in the command centre, looked at him questioningly. "It's time?"

Larry nodded. "Yes, time to get going."

Dick Kindsom regarded with utter distrust the Arkonide ship which could be seen as a dark hole amid the ocean of stars as depicted on the *Florida's* vidscreens.

"If only I didn't have such misgivings," he said.

"Don't worry," countered Larry. "As long as you keep the machine in constant readiness for reception,

Dick, nothing can really happen. The worst might be that not quite as many people will arrive as expected."

Dick Kindsom's face still expressed doubt. "In any case, I'll keep my fingers crossed for you."

Larry thanked him. Then he walked over to the intercom and called the men who were to transfer together with him to the Arkonide robotship.

There was no delay; everything went as planned. Half an hour after Dick Kindsom had promised he would keep his fingers crossed the robot crew had been replaced by a new, live team. The ship detached itself from the *Florida* and proceeded at high speed toward Lepso.

* * * *

The following morning Ron received another session of indoctrination.

Once again he found himself in the huge hall with the 3 priests. This time they explained the nature of the obedience required from their faithful servants: he must never attempt to leave the temple city.

This lesson was impressed on him with a powerful hypnotic command. Ron was convinced that the greatly weakened mind of the sick people made defenceless victims of them in the face of such overpowering influence. At the end of such a session the poor victims were bound never to consider again any desire to leave the city.

This meant, Ron thought to himself, the Antis were interested to see to it that the results of their misdeeds should never reach the outside world. The half-dead must never go beyond the confines of this city, the temple of the Baalol cult. On the other hand, the temple should look like a temple and not like a prison. Besides, the priests were in the minority, too few in number to be able to guard thousands of prisoners themselves. Thus they erected an effective barrier with the help of their paranormal faculties which none of the sick men could breach.

This realization infuriated Ron anew—and it was this anger which finally gave him away. For none of the other sick people still possessed enough strength to break out in a rage. The priests registered the strong, hostile emanations from the supposedly sick mind. From then on they observed him much closer.

That same day Ron was taken to a second session of instruction. This time the priests set a trap for him. They revealed to him the true meaning of the Baalol cult. They explained how the ultimate truth was considered to be the final goal of the cult's endeavours and that this truth would be accessible only to a chosen few till the end of time.

One of the priests said: "One day all the races throughout the universe will recognize and appreciate our role. And the overlords of the planets, the rulers of the star realms, will bow before us, honoured to be permitted to kiss the dust at our feet."

At this point Ron Landry committed a vital mistake. He could not keep on listening to such rubbish—even with the utmost effort of self-control—without having some thoughts of his own. And he expressed those thoughts in no uncertain terms:

"In reality they'll grind *you* into the dust!"

This threw the priests into such confusion that they remained temporarily silent. When eventually one of them took voice again he shouted: "This man is a traitor! Kill him!"

Ron recoiled. For a moment he forgot he was floating disembodied in this hall.

The walls of the huge room began sliding past him. He seemed to move although he had no feet upon which he could have walked. The priests diminished in size as he swiftly drew away from them. While he was slipping from their mental grip and putting distance between him and them, the priests up front became very agitated. They gesticulated, flourished their arms in the air and he heard them shout:

"Hold onto him! He mustn't escape from us! He's a traitor—he must die!"

For an instant Ron wondered why it was made so easy for him to escape from their influence. He did not realize before that it was sufficient to feel the strong desire not to die which made it possible for him to overcome the priests' mighty will.

Neither did he know that the priests had dealt for many months exclusively with sick people who could not offer any resistance to them. Therefore the priests' minds had become adjusted to the weak constitution of the addicts. Therefore it would take awhile for them to get used to the new situation in order to engage in battle with a strong healthy mind.

9/ THE FIRE OF TRUTH . . . AND A FLAMING REVELATION

Ron left the hall through a wide gate. There was a circular space in front of the hall. Passageways led from this place in all directions.

The priests' voices were no longer as loud as before. Ron felt triumphant. This meant that the priests were losing their influence over his mind. As soon as the voices could not be heard at all he would have made good his escape from danger. The only threat left hanging over him now was perhaps his inability to find his body again.

He chose one of the corridors leading off at a right angle from the hall's axis. His wish alone sufficed to cause the floor of the square to glide away from beneath him. He saw the exit at the far end of the corridor approaching.

The corridor was filled with a peculiar darkness which did not permit him to recognize any details. All he could see was a bright yellow light—daylight, he thought—way ahead at the exit. He moved toward it, driven by the intense desire to reach it as fast as possible.

He estimated he had reached about the halfway mark when he felt somebody behind him. During the excitement of the last few minutes he had no longer paid any attention to the priests' voices.

"Up ahead in that corridor," someone shouted. "He'll get away from us if we don't hurry!"

"He won't escape," another voice stated calmly. "As a last resort we can always conjure up the Fire of Truth."

"Yes, but all our forces will be completely ..." "Silence, you fool! Lest you reveal everything to him!"

From then on there was absolute silence but Ron knew only too well that he was still being pursued by the priests.

* * * *

According to plan the engines of the Arkonide robotship exploded 50 kilometres above the planet Lepso. A fiery glow, visible from a great distance, filled the skies.

Inside the command centre, the only part of the ship to have remained undamaged, Larry Randall and his team prepared for an emergency landing. Their tracking system confirmed that they were at the exact spot where they were scheduled to be.

* * * *

Ron recognized his mistake as soon as he had left the passageway and emerged in the bright yellow light beyond.

There was no exit there nor any sun-bathed sand with rows of small buildings. There was only an ocean of yellow light which seemed to have taken on physical substance, making it possible for him to swim around as tho in the water of a lake. He shot upwards, then plunged again into the depth, turned right and left but whichever direction he chose he encountered nothing but the same yellow light. He even failed to find again the end of the corridor from which he had emerged just a few seconds earlier.

All he was capable of perceiving was a sudden diminishing of the light's brightness. It assumed a reddish tinge. He felt heat flowing toward him from all sides. He looked around and recognized bizarre, distorted faces grinning at him from the constantly weakening light.

They had conjured up the Fire of Truth—whatever that might be!

Ron exerted an iron-willed discipline. It made no sense for him to continue swimming about in the light and exhaust his strength for no discernible purpose.

The heat increased. Ron began to perspire. How strange! He had no body—so how could he perspire?

The distorted faces surrounding him would not disappear. They hung motionless in the ocean of light, nothing but devilishly-grinning faces staring at him intently.

Ron heard some faraway voices mocking him: "Behold how he's squirming and writhing! He's caught in the Fire! The Ultimate Truth will punish he who dares scoff at it!"

And another voice screamed: "The same fate will befall any who dare deride Baalol!"

Gradually the heat became unbearable. The surrounding light turned a fiery red. Ron felt as though trapped inside a blast-furnace but he realized the torture was far from over.

Now he started moving again. He slowly drifted upwards, then reversed his direction; but wherever he went the heat was always the same and the temperature kept rising steadily.

Ron saw the priests' grinning faces come closer and their voices grow louder. He knew what this meant: they had recaptured him.

His thoughts became confused. He no longer knew where he was. The impression of suffering all these pains in a physical way grew more intense. His skin was itching, the sweat running into his eyes. He squirmed like a worm. Only one desire was left in him: to have hands and to be able to scratch and scratch his itching body all over. . .

He began to scream.

* * * *

Larry Randall concentrated the ship's shock-absorbing protective screen onto the command centre. Then he removed his hands from the console and waited patiently for whatever might follow.

Inside the command centre they felt only a sudden jerk but on the outside the ship's hull tore apart, causing a huge cloud of sand and dust to whirl up into the air which enveloped their landing place in a cloak of invisibility.

Larry felt certain the ship's impact had sent sufficiently strong shockwaves through the desert floor to alert his people inside the temple city that the time for action had come.

* * * *

Nike Quinto's agents had been trained to act on their own. They heard the howling of the crashing ship. Almost simultaneously came the thundering roar when the ship touched the ground and soon afterwards they could feel the jolt that rocked the earth like a minor quake.

Each agent grabbed 2 of the weakest sick people by their arms and dragged them out of the huts into the desert to where the huge dust cloud could be seen above the scene of the crash-landed robotship. The other sick men had to rely on the remainder of their own strength to struggle painfully as they followed behind. It was as if the hope for deliverance and rescue had infused some new force into their

weakened bodies—for otherwise they could not have taken more than a couple of steps unaided.

All went according to plan. The dust cloud was still hovering around the crash-landed ship when the last of the 48 rescued sick Terrans passed through the last undamaged airlock to enter the command centre. From there Larry directed them immediately toward a wire fence in the back of the room. A door stood open in the middle of the fence. Eagerly-helping hands shoved the arriving Terrans through this gate and closed it behind them.

And almost instantaneously each new arrival vanished. The place behind the door was empty again.

Larry kept an eye on the panoramic screens and watched how the dust cloud on the outside gradually settled to the ground. The top of the temple pyramid appeared again above the haze.

And Ron Landry was still missing.

* * * *

It took awhile for Landry to comprehend that the grinning faces had disappeared and that he could think clearly

He was puzzled. Something must have happened that caused the priests to lose interest in him. Was he no longer important to them? Had their attention been diverted by something?

He did not know the reason for the turn of events but he felt greatly relieved that the light grew brighter again. With quick movements he swam through the ocean of brightness. Now that he had survived the greatest danger he remembered anew the missions he had to fulfil. And his foremost task was to locate his body and return inside it.

As if this realization alone had sufficed to accomplish the miracle, the world around him suddenly began to change. To his amazement Ron saw the light vanish toward one side. Then the outlines of the small cubes, cones and pyramids housing the sick captives loomed up before him.

Then once more all grew dark around him but now he had a hand with which he could grope around to orient himself in the darkness. He had legs and feet he could push against an invisible wall, and an elbow on which he could raise himself up to a sitting position. Up above he saw the small, bright hole in the ceiling. Now he knew where he was! Back again in the stone hut from where the priests had come to get him for another session of instruction.

He had returned to his body! He swiftly jumped to his feet. He felt that his body was bathed in perspiration. For a moment this puzzled him but then he comprehended that his mind had exerted a remote control over his body's reactions.

Ron allowed himself only a brief moment to shudder in recalling a strange and unreal world where body and mind existed separately from each other.

The fact that his 4 co-prisoners had disappeared proved to him that they must have already entered into the second, decisive phase of their enterprise. He ran out of the hut and saw the rest of the dust cloud which the robotship had caused to rise into the air. Through the haze that still remained he could barely make out the silhouette of the grey, spherical ship itself.

He ran toward it. How marvellous it felt to be able to run again on his own legs and not to have to rely any longer on the strength and dependability solely of his mind.

It took him 5 minutes to reach the ship. He flung himself through the open airlock and, arms raised high, greeted Larry Randall, who had been anxiously waiting for him.

"Get in there!" Larry urged him on. "You look a sight!"

Ron grinned in reply. Then he entered through the latticed gate inside the fenced-off area of the transmitter. Somebody pushed down a lever outside the transmitter. Ron felt the brief, gripping pain of dematerialization. Everything grew hazy before his eyes. When he could see clearly again he was on board the cruiser *Florida*. Dick Kindsom personally opened the door of the transmitter-receiver. He held his hand stretched out to him in welcome.

"Glad to have you back on board with us! I'm mighty relieved everything turned out alright in the end."

* * * *

As Ron Landry was disappearing through the transmitter, loud booming sounds from a gong reverberated over the temple city. The priests were alarmed and confused by the crashing ship. They immediately abandoned their efforts to destroy the "mocker of Baalol" with the Fire of Truth and they set out to explore the danger approaching their sanctum. Some of them left the confines of their temple city, wishing to inspect the crash-landed craft at close range.

They noticed that part of their prisoners had vanished. They suspected that the strange ship might be connected with their prisoners' escape. Perhaps their servants might be found on board the craft. They deemed it an easy task to recapture the escapees—regardless of whether the ship's commander would give his consent or not.

They were wrong in that assumption, however. When they reached the ship and entered inside they found the commander and his skeleton crew busy trying to repair the emergency drive. There was no trace of the fugitives. Although the commander confessed apparent initial surprise when the priests asked permission to search the ship, he eventually acceded to their request without any objections. The priests made a thorough search of the entire ship—also those parts severely damaged by the impact on the desert floor. They had to admit that this ship obviously did not serve as a refuge for their escaped prisoners. They were quite positive about this. For even if their servants had hidden themselves in the farthest, most inaccessible corner, the priests would easily have sensed their presence, not their bodily presence but their minds. For the Baalol priests were paranormals and the emanations of creatures'

spirits were unmistakable evidence of their whereabouts.

No, there was no doubt: the escapees were not inside this ship. The Antis withdrew after they obtained reassurance from the ship's commander that within 2 hours he would have progressed sufficiently with the repair job of the emergency drive to be able to take off and at least be able to fly as far as the spaceport in Zanithon.

* * * *

"No," declared Nike Quinto firmly. "For the time being we have no explanation for what happened to you."

Ron Landry and Larry Randall sat facing Nike Quinto. His answer was directed at Ron, who had regained his former appearance after his return to Earth.

"There are many things," added Nike Quinto, "our scientists have not been able to investigate to their satisfaction. You might remember in this context that we have failed so far to provide any satisfactory scientific explanation for our own mutants' special gifts. Well, these Baalol priests are to be placed into the same category as our own mutants, although Antis possess a much larger variety of paranormal faculties than members of our own Mutant Corps." He looked up. "You'll have to wait for awhile to obtain an acceptable theory for this phenomenon. I'd say another 3 to 400 years at least."

Ron reacted with a slight smile to Quinto's remark. "Well," he declared unperturbed, "even without a scientific explanation it was worthwhile to experience this adventure! Mind and body separated from each other!"

Nike Quinto wagged his finger. "Don't pretend any false enthusiasm," he reprimanded his agent in a high-pitched voice. "I can well imagine you didn't feel too comfortable in or out of your skin when they let you roast in their 'Fire of Truth' ".

Of course Ron had to admit to himself that Nike was right.

Quinto continued: "I've been instructed by the highest authority to extend the Administrator's gratitude to you. It turns out we fell into an affair just by accident which has far-reaching effects, much farther than any of us realized. It looks as if we are dealing here with a plot on a super scale against the Solar Empire. As I said before—it*looks* this way. We have no definite proof of it at this point. But we're certain of one thing: you saved 48 Terrans doomed to death from the clutches of the Baalol priests. And you also uncovered an important clue. This is why the Administrator has expressed his appreciation to you."

"I feel greatly honoured," answered Ron. "However, I'd like..."

"You'd like*what*?" yapped Nike Quinto. "Remember my high blood pressure; don't upset me. Make yourself clear!"

Ron leaned back in his chair. "I fully realize we have saved 48 Terran citizens. But I know nothing of an important clue we are supposed to have uncovered. Would you please explain that?"

Nike Quinto broke into a wide grin. "So you know nothing about it yet?" he said, highly amused. "Don't you remember the photo you obtained from Armin Zuglert?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"It was a picture of the man who had introduced Zuglert to the drug Liquitiv, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And that man pretended to be a bio-medical research scientist by the name of Edmond Hugher?"

"Yes, that's true," answered Ron Landry, impatient to finally hear what Nike Quinto really had to say.

"Well, that's the trail you uncovered," declared Nike. "The photo has been examined by the proper authorities. Don't you have any idea who this really is?"

Landry was honestly in the dark. "No, sir, I haven't the faintest idea."

Nike Quinto was notorious for relishing the agonizing suspense his deliberately cultivated drawn-out manner engendered in those anxious to obtain information from him. For this occasion he rose to a new height of studied obtuseness which had Landry sweating on tenterhooks.

"Well, Landry, you'll no doubt be interested to know then what the team of experts has uncovered. By holographic projections and photographic comparisons augmented by painstaking artistic reconstructions they have been able to determine beyond the shadow of a doubt the surprising identity of the individual who was masquerading as a bio-medical research scientist. You haven't guessed his name? You haven't observed any resemblance to a prominent personage in interplanetary, in fact interstellar, intergalactic affairs? Well, I'll give you a helpful hint—"

Landry, having recently been outside his body, was now once again practically beside himself with suspense coupled with aggravation.

"His initials," Quinto continued with infuriating slowness, "are . . . T.C."

"The so-called scientist by the name of Edmond Hugher is in actuality the defected son of our Administrator—"

"Thomas Cardiff!"

HERE'S HOW IT HAPPENS

[Stardust Editorial](#)

1/ THE MYSTERIOUS LEPSO AFFAIR

2/ CRAZY WORLD

3/ AT THE MERCY OF THE SPRINGERS

4/ THE MAN FROM GOSZUL'S PLANET

5/ ROOM OF IRREALITY

6/ SINISTER POWER

7/ MISSION: LEPSO LIBERATION

8/ DISEMBODIED

9/ THE FIRE OF TRUTH ... AND
A FLAMING REVELATION

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

DESERT OF DEATHS DOMAIN

Copyright © 1977 by Ace Books

An Ace Book by arrangement with
Arthur Moewig Verlag

All Rights Reserved



STARDUST EDITORIAL
"Magic Milestone"
Forrest J Ackerman

ONE HUNDRED.

There is something magic about the figure.

If we humans had only 9 fingers, I suppose 9×9 or 81 would be a magic figure.

124 if we had 12.

In my lifetime of 60 years (come 24 November) I have only known one 100-year-old person: I celebrated his centennial birthday with the late *Weird Tales* author Dr. Adolphe de Castro.

I had one relative in the last century who made it to within 3 weeks-of her 108th birthday and my own Mother's birthday will be Nov. 20th, at which time she will be a venerable 93.

As I celebrate my 50th Anniversary in the field of scientifiction this October, I've made it to 100 twice so far.

Once, with 100 issues of *FAMOUS MONSTERS OF FILMLAND*, now more than a quarter of its way toward its second hundredth issue. (It has been calculated that I'll be editing it in ... 1984!)

Once, with 100 numbers of *PERRY RHODAN*.

Actually, considering the first 5 numbers of PR contained 2 novels each, in that parallel world where we were a bookazine from the beginning we're already up to #105.

But I'll settle for 100.

As I write these words it is only February and the New Year has barely begun. If you read these words when freshly printed, the year will be half over and certain things which are unsettled now will presumably have been settled by then—although their results will not be apparent for sometime yet to come.

I refer to the Perry Poll which netted 5000 of you an exclusive Peacelord Poster.

Your "votes", so to speak, may have spelled the death-knell of the *Shock Shorts* and we soon may be phasing them out. On the other hand, you may have indicated they lend spice to the magabook and you like to see new talent encouraged and we'll go on entertaining you with further discoveries, the Utleys & Akers & Dellingers of tomorrow.

Will Serials be In or Out when all the votes have been counted? I personally am champing at the bit to bring you hit after hit: OUT OF THE SILENCE, MORGO THE MIGHTY, KING OF THE DEAD, ARK OF FIRE ... but these classics will languish in the Realm of Unwrought Things if by now we know you said "nay" to books broken up into installments.

Scientifilm World—has it been hurled out of orbit by a negative majority or do most of you positively want to read reviews of THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND, FORBIDDEN PLANET, THIS ISLAND EARTH, etc.?

I'd be very much surprised if, judging from the volume of affirmative fanmail, you wouldn't want me to continue as archaeologist of the Archives and bring back to the light of day more sparkling gems from the *Time Vault*. However the voting went, I feel confident that if you are reading these words you will want to be reading, in months to come, SPOOR OF THE ANTIS, FALSE FRONT, THE MAN WITH TWO FACES, WONDER FLOWER OF UTIK, CALLER FROM ETERNITY, THE EMPEROR & THE MONSTER, DUEL UNDER THE DOUBLE SUN, THE STOLEN SPACEFLEET, SGT. ROBOT, SEEDS OF RUIN, PLANET MECHANICA, HERITAGE OF THE LIZARD PEOPLE and DEATH'S DEMAND.

That will take you up to issue #114.

What then?

Why then Wendayne, Sig Wahrman, Pat LoBrutto, Stu Byrne, Gray Morrow & I will get busy on—#115!

The beat goes on.

The beat that can't be beat.

The best in space opera.

Begun abroad in 1961, a 30-million-word space-time odyssey of approximately 800 adventures, published not only in Germany (country of its origin) and America (land of its envied success & unsuccessful emulation) but in France, England, Holland, Japan, Turkey, Italy & Finland as well!

For the Time of your Lifesign on! sign on! indefinitely and Ride with Rhodan on the Road to the Stars.

FORREST J
ACHILLES

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THOMAS CARDIF declared:

"I want the Flaming Sword back, priest! With the help of Baalol, I want to wield it so mightily against the Solar Imperium that it will be turned into nothing but raving madmen! Rhodan must have pulled all his fleet units into action so that leaves his colonial worlds defenceless."

Having been released from his synthetic personality, Cardif's real self was revealing the heritage of his genius father. He had almost been equal to Rhodan in terms of planning and strategy. More than once he had thrown the Solar Imperium into its gravest crisis. Almost always his shrewd manipulations had served to block Rhodan's countermeasures.

Now, with frantic Arkonidean passion, he was determined to wreck the worlds of his father's domain, clean across the solar system from molten Mercury past the great gas planets clear out to the frozen wastes of the transPlutonian planet.

The machinery for Rhodan's destruction was—

THE LEPSO BLOCKADE

by

Kurt Brand