

ALMOST IMMORTAL

THE FANTASTIC FACES of the Antis are momentarily transfixed by a rapture of awe and wonderment—bu the wonderment swiftly transforms itself into greed. There before them, floating in a shell of energy, are 20 keys to Eternal Life!

Thomas Cardif speaks: "Feast your eyes on these cell activators... waiting here for you... but you will never get them unless I give the mental order... AND OF MY OWN FREE WILL!"

1/ THE UNKNOWN BRAIN

This conversation took place on the planet Wanderer. Talking were the humanoid Homunk and his master, the collective being that ruled Wanderer. Due to that particular concept of time that was shared by the collective being and Homunk, the conversation consisting only of a few phrases extended over a longer period in terms of Terra's time.

Homunk:*I notice that you are extraordinarily amused, Master. May I share your enjoyment?*

IT:*Of course, it's no secret.*

Homunk:*Thank you.*

IT:*It concerns the cell-activator which was recently given to a being who calls himself Perry Rhodan...*

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The first time Kalal heard the roaring laughter was when he alighted from the walk-belt in the small spaceport. It was so unusual that anyone dared to laugh in his presence that he whirled around in indignation.

Behind him on the grey-white synthetic landing pad stood the towering Springer spaceship on which he had just arrived and a few members of the crew who were about to disembark to follow the lone passenger, as well as a few men of the ground personnel who had come to check the hydraulic landing struts of the gigantic spaceship. A deep blue sky arched above the scene and the white sun of Utik outshone itself with a heat which, to put it mildly, made the sweat pour from his forehead.

However he could not make out who laughed. With a shrug of his shoulders he walked over to the automatic car which was waiting for him a few meters distant from the footbridge. He took 2 steps when

he heard another outburst of laughter. When he spun around again, the scene looked entirely different.

The Springers who had walked down the stairs behind him suddenly stood as rigid as pillars of stone and stared at him. The ground crew had stopped working and gazed at him in fascination. Kalal was vexed. What had happened? A Servant of Absolute Truth might be a very exciting sight to the ground personnel but why did the Springers have to stand there goggle-eyed?

Kalal heard the laughter for a 3rd time. But this time he was able to see that it did not come from those staring at him. The guffaws came from another source. But where?

The men who had been working on the hydraulic supports left their jobs. Their heretofore serious faces, which had looked slightly bored, suddenly took on a different expression. Their eyes shone and their mouths were open in expectation. The men had stretched their hands forward as if they were trying to seize something before it escaped them. What amazed Kalal most was that they all looked so much alike.

Furthermore he was the object which they tried to reach with their hands. They seemed to chase him like a famished hunter after elusive game. Kalal was deeply disturbed. Using his special gifts he tried to probe the thoughts of the men to learn why they suddenly behaved so strangely. However he tried in vain, either because he was too confused himself to concentrate enough or something else was there to hamper his efforts.

Whatever it was, he became frightened when the Springers at the foot of the escalator began to run after him together with the workers, showing the same enchanted expressions on their faces. Utterly flabbergasted and without the faintest notion of the reason for their weird behaviour he turned tail and ran to the automatic car. His garments, colourful to the point of being gaudy and pompous, were badly suited for quick motions. He stumbled and came close to falling. But, hearing the mob breathing down his neck, he was spurred to leap forward. He saved himself by reaching the open door of the car. Quickly he locked the door by pushing the button on the armrest and watched in horror as the men pursuing him so eagerly and blindly bumped against the vehicle, staggered back and then pressed their faces against its windows.

"To the Temple of Truth!" he shouted in sheer panic.

The automatic pilot, a small positronic box with a microphone on the instrument panel, responded to his instructions. The car began to hum and with a sigh of relief Kalal saw the flat smooth ground of the spaceport recede beneath him. The raving crowd was left behind.

He had managed to escape the nightmare at the last moment but had trouble feeling very happy about it. Although he was relieved for the moment, his fear returned unabated. What had happened?

* * * *

A wave of vibrating energy hit Meech Hannigan on his way to the cafeteria where he wanted to drink a cup of coffee for appearances sake. He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and paid no attention to the apologies of the 2 men who had bumped into him while absorbed in conversation. They walked around him as he tried to determine what aroused him so much and, since he was trained in such things, he recognized it very soon.

Strong emanations from an unknown brain! So strong that Meech had no trouble receiving them despite the hubbub of hundreds of brains in the heads of pedestrians who were much closer to him. He was unable to understand the emanations because he was not schooled for that but he immediately concluded that the unknown brain was one of those he had been sent to track down.

He was puzzled that the energy vibrations had manifested themselves so suddenly. He would have expected them to be more indistinct at first, coming from a great distance, and gradually more pronounced. Instead they had sprung with a surprising clarity and suddenness from not too far away. Meech contemplated it for a moment. He concluded that the owner of the remarkably strong brain had advanced in his direction with unusual speed. This meant that he had come in an extremely fast vehicle such as a spaceship.

Whoever possessed that intense brainpower must have just landed on Utik in a spaceship, Meech decided, probably in the spaceport of Massenock, the capital of the planet. Otherwise Meech could not have picked his brainwaves. This made his task very simple. Meech stood at the curb and hailed the next automatic car which was empty. The vehicle stopped and opened its door. Meech entered and made his destination known to the automatic pilot: "Central Registry!"

As the vehicle swiftly and securely dodged the heavy traffic of the inner city Meech monitored the emanations of the unknown brain. He observed that they had become even stronger a few minutes after he had first intercepted them. The thoughts which occupied the brain seemed far from pleasant. Its proprietor appeared to be in a state of panic. Then his reception became weaker from which Meech deduced that the source was moving farther away from him.

It took Meech seventeen minutes to reach the Central Registry. He put a palladium coin into the meter of the car and received some change. The door opened again and he stepped out on the sidewalk. As always, he counted his change and noted that the fare came to 2.40 Lodik. This was cheaper than in Terrania. The rate of exchange on Utik was about 11 Lodik for a Solar and a similar fare in Terrania would hardly have paid for a trip from Paschek's on 86th Street to the intersection at 3rd Avenue.

Meech rode up on the escalator to the main entrance of the Registry. He looked at his feet and noticed that the step on which he stood bent under his weight. He knew that this would betray him some day. Perhaps 'betray' was not the right word since nobody of Utik was likely to care much whether Meech was really a member of the race he pretended to be.

In the lobby of the building was an automatic information device. Meech inquired where the office to obtain information about arriving spaceships was located and was directed to the 48th floor. He used the antigravitor and took it in stride that the artificial gravitational field at first let him sink toward the basement before it became adjusted to his weight and lifted him to his desired floor.

The office to which he had been sent was not yet fully automated. There were several robot machines which dispensed the information requested by a visitor as it was available. Since Meech anticipated that the information he wanted to obtain was not readily available he formulated his question in a way that the automatons were unable to respond to adequately. This caused the robot door attendant to direct him to the supervisor of the office.

Meech opened the door he had been shown and entered a small room furnished in good taste and indicating a preference for modern comfort. He was rather surprised when he saw the supervisor of the office. He faced a young girl who studied him with curiosity and obvious kindness. Meech responded with a faint smile and a polite greeting. "I'm sorry to disturb you," he added, "but out there," he pointed

his thumb over his shoulder, "nobody was able to give me an answer."

The girl tossed back her head and made her blond hair swirl. "That happens more often than I care to admit," she said with a cheerful laugh. She spoke in Arkonese like Meech. "Those mechs out there still have a lot to learn!"

She pointed to a chair. "Have a seat she said, pausing a little after the last word and looked questioningly at Meech.

"Hannigan," Meech introduced himself quickly as he sat down.

"Hannigan," the girl repeated. "That sounds like the name of a Terran."

"That's what it is," Meech replied. "I am from Earth."

"Oh... how interesting!" Her eyes widened and she leaned forward over her desk. "You must tell me a little about Terra, Hannigan. I've never been there."

Meech noticed that she made no attempt to inquire about the purpose of his visit. She was anxious to engage him in a conversation. It was not the first time he had experienced similar situations. Whenever his job put him in touch with women, they were attracted by the good looks of his regular features. At first he enjoyed playing the game and taking a girl out for the evening. But sooner or later the moment inevitably arrived when the girls realized that he was not the man they had expected and since Meech had learned how deep their disappointment was he refrained from making more than one date.

Moreover, he was pressed for time and could not afford to dillydally on his job. He was forced to play it cool. "I'm sorry to disappoint you," he said with an apologetic smile. "Although I was born on Terra I was brought to Utik as a small child and I don't know..."

"Oh, I see," the girl interrupted him, frustrated. "You don't know Terra. Well, what can I do for you?"

"43 minutes and 20 seconds ago a spaceship landed at the spaceport of Massenock," Meech explained tersely. "I would like to know where it came from and if it brought any passengers to Utik."

The girl stared at him in amazement. "43 minutes and..." she murmured.

"And 20 seconds," Meech added.

"Wait a minute," she said, shaking her head.

Meech watched her push several buttons in a panel on her desk, selecting the desired information. He listened to the hum of the positronic databanks, from which was emitted a printed card. The girl took the card and studied it. Meech noticed that she had a quizzical look.

"You are right," she replied slowly, "to the second."

Meech regretted that he had stated the time with such precision. This could make him look suspicious. "Which ship is it?" he asked politely.

"*Loral #87*," the girl replied. "It is a cargoship but it had one passenger."

Meech knew that he was not allowed to ask more questions. She was not authorized to reveal the names of passengers. He got up. "A Springer ship," he murmured. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," the girl dismissed with a gesture of her hand and returned to the work which Meech had interrupted.

Meech felt sorry for her. It wasn't easy to be a woman on Utik for evolution had taken a strange course. The inhabitants of the planet were descendents of Arkonide immigrants. Eons had caused the men to become baldheaded passive specimens whereas the women remained more or less true to their origin.

Thus Meech could feel pity for this girl but his brain was programmed to disregard expressions of sympathy when it clearly interfered with his task.

Outside, Meech stopped an automatic taxi with the intention of returning to the spaceport, some 30 kilometres out of the city. After travelling about only 5 kilometres, his car turned into a street and came to an abrupt halt. Hundreds of people milled in the path of the unmoving vehicle, jostling each other while shouting madly. Meech was startled by the spectacle but saw no reason to believe that the commotion had anything to do with his mission. Therefore he had no objections when the automatic pilot turned around and tried its luck in a different direction.

The car managed to make some headway but after another kilometre on an adjacent street the scene was the same. The autopilot realized the futility of his efforts and inquired whether the passenger agreed to continue the trip by air. However Meech had become suspicious in the meantime. He told the pilot to stop and wait, paid his fare, and got out.

He was quickly engulfed by the crowd that blocked the street. Excited men and women started to talk to him simultaneously so that Meech could only hear part of their words.

"Did you hear already...?"

"...a beautiful, exotic plant..."

"...the fragrance is exquisite... incredible..."

Meech Hannigan's nature precluded preconceived judgments. He had no inclination to laugh just because something appeared to be senseless. Therefore he listened to the disconnected phrases and used his ability to combine them in a comprehensible picture.

The disturbance in the streets of Massenock was apparently caused by a flower that had recently arrived at Utik aboard a spaceship. The descriptions of the plant which he received from numerous men and women did not coincide in all details but they all agreed that it was a magnificent flower with a wonderful and irresistible scent. According to these tales its aroma carried in the air from the spaceport to the inner city, a distance over 30 kilometres. Meech classed this information as most remarkable and unheard of.

What impressed him most was that none of those who spoke to him had seen this mysterious flower. They had only sniffed it. Nonetheless they were unanimous in describing the colour as violet with a bright yellow centre in the blossom. There were only some differences about the shape of the leaves and the size of the plant.

Meech inquired whether the scent of the flower was still in the air. Although his question was answered

in the negative it was quite obvious that these people would walk to the end of the world if they became convinced that the flower could be found there. He tried to learn as much as he could and then returned to his taxi, ready to continue his trip to the spaceport by air. The aerocar followed a path high above the excited surging mass of people until it reached its destination after a few minutes.

It was impossible to find a parking place at the spaceport. All access was choked by enormous crowds except where an effective blockade, in the immediate surroundings of the landing and launching pads for spaceships, had been set up. Meech noticed clear signs that the personnel of the spaceport was also affected by the extraordinary turmoil. Before long he could see that the confusion of the frantic mass of people gave way to some semblance of order and that solid throngs began to move in one direction toward the east. Somebody seemed to have informed them where the miracle flower was to be found. Meech was also anxious to follow the indicated direction. He was no longer too certain that this disturbance of the peace of Massenock had nothing to do with the purpose of his mission and, methodical as he was, he decided to get to the bottom of the matter.

He instructed the autopilot to head east. As they skirted the edge of the huge landing field he studied the tall cylindrical fuselage of the Springer ship on which he surmised the individual with the strong mental aura had arrived. It showed the name Loral 87 on the tip of the vessel in an angular version of the Arkonide script. Meech reflected that it might be a good idea to pay a visit to the ship as soon as possible.

A few minutes later he came to a different conclusion. He noticed that the emanations of the strange brain became more pronounced again, indicating that he was getting closer to it. Although he was wary of jumping to conclusions he had no reason to consider it a mere accident that the direction in which the impassioned throngs advanced was the same in which he approached the mysterious brain. There had to be a connection—and it didn't take much longer before he could determine the nature of this connection.

The aerocar passed over the complex of pyramidal, conical and cubical buildings comprising the Baalol Temple of Massenock. Meech definitely perceived that his reception of the other brainwaves grew weaker the farther he left the temple behind. He ordered the autopilot to turn around to the temple and quickly observed that the throbbing masses of bodies now converged from all sides on the temple complex. The miracle flower, the possessed mob believed, must be hidden inside the temple. At the same time Meech came to the conclusion that the source of the powerful emanations he perceived was also in the confines of its walls.

Meech had fulfilled his main task. He had come to Utik to keep an eye on the activities of the Baalol sect and report to the chief agent at Terrania if anything unusual happened in connection with the Baalol cult. He regarded the appearance of the miracle flower and the unusually active brain as significant events which had to be reported at once and decided to return to his apartment in the city. He gave the autopilot his address and flew back to the house. He took the antigravitor up to the floor where he lived and carefully closed the door of his apartment behind him before sending his message to Terrania on the telecom-transmitter which was incorporated in his body.

Having done so, he began to wait, knowing that he would soon receive an answer.

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After Kalal, the High Priest of the Baalol cult, arrived at the Temple of Truth he was still haunted by infuriating outbursts of laughter without knowing where it came from. But gradually a suspicion took shape in his mind.

One of the lower priests came to inform him that an ominous seething mass of visitors had surrounded the walls of the temple, demanding to see the miracle flower.

Kalal did not have the slightest idea what miraculous flower he was talking about. But at the same time as he received the message, he heard the raucous laughter again. Enraged and frustrated, Kalal was forced to assume that the persons convulsed by the weird laughter knew something about the miracle flower that had been kept from him.

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At this moment a telecom message was sent from Terrania to a certain agent on Utik with the request to return to Terra with the first convenient ship. The message was coded. Although it contained about 50 words, the impulse signals of the code were transmitted in 132 microseconds. The receiver of the message did not require the usual deciphering device to unscramble the message. He understood its meaning as it was sent and without conversion.

Half an hour later the robot Meech Hannigan booked a nonstop flight to Terra at the spaceport of Massenock which was now cleared of the frenzied crowds that had besieged it earlier. He signed the ticket with his proper name: Mitchell Hannigan. He was called 'Meech' only because his vocal chords had a faulty timer which caused the vowel "i" to be pronounced long "e" instead of short "i". This minor speech defect was then considered an inconspicuous asset in his type of work and it was therefore decided not to go to the trouble of changing the timer.

2/ DANGEROUS OPPONENTS

IT: The activators are not exactly what the opposing side expected from them.

Homunk: This means.

IT: This means that they do not accomplish the purpose which activators are designed to fulfil.

Homunk: Do they achieve anything at all?

IT: Yes, of course...!

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Ron Landry's first thought after landing on Utik was that the old man could have done better than sending him here.

The same thought had already occurred to him several times during the preceding 38 hours. This job simply held no attraction whatsoever for Ron. Colonel Quinto had prepared him with the aid of hypnotic machines for the task that awaited him on Utik. Although he enjoyed the privilege of having specialists assigned to his mission, he would have preferred to be sent somewhere other than Utik, which seemed to be infested with elusive individuals who commanded incomprehensible ESP powers. Moreover, Ron's task had not been succinctly outlined. He was supposed to gather information. This was rather vague and it could involve him in too many situations from which he might find it difficult to extricate himself if left to his own resources.

It was small comfort to him that Capt. Larry Randall and the new agent Lofty Patterson had already arrived on Utik to assist him in his investigation. He simply was not carried away with enthusiasm for his mission and that was that.

Sgt. Hannigan knew his way around the city. He hailed an automated taxi and took his superior to a hotel in the centre of the city. Then Ron Landry sent him out again to collect information about the Baalol Temple. Six days had elapsed since the robot sergeant had left Utik and it was necessary to check the current state of events.

Meech returned an hour later with a stack of newspapers, microfilm cassettes and newsreels. The reports revealed that the government officials of Massenock had become concerned with the strange spectacle around the Baalol Temple. None of the observers that were dispatched had been able to find his way back. They had questioned the priests of the temple about the reason for the constant commotion but they seemed to have no explanation. The enchanted masses continued to besiege the gates of the temple, which had to be locked for the first time since the temple existed. The priests had the greatest difficulties leaving the temple by air because the deluded citizens tried to reach the goal of their desires by air as well. Only a protective screen, which the priests had erected around the temple complex, prevented the buildings from being invaded in a few minutes.

The police of Massenock had been called in to disperse the crowd. But instead of following orders they had thrown away their weapons and joined the siege of the temple. The surroundings of the temple for a radius of 25 km resembled a field of fervent pilgrims. Since all regular channels of communication of Massenock had broken down, nobody knew what the insane hubbub was all about. The result was a state of helplessness and vacillation. Rumours had been heard of a miracle flower hidden in the Temple of Truth but nobody was willing to believe such gossip.

Ron's hope to use the information for devising a plan was disappointed. He became resigned to the fact that he had to conduct a personal investigation on the spot. After a thorough study of the available information he lost no more time in starting his inquiry.

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The authorities of Massenock had at last taken steps to draw a line one-kilometre behind the outer fringe of the people in the thrall of the temple's occupant. Nobody was allowed to cross the barricades without a special permit.

Although Ron Landry did not have this permit he expected to encounter little trouble. In one of the streets where curious onlookers, stood around and talked in groups, Meech Hannigan approached the police cordon. Five policemen guarded the street crossing, at a distance, from an incredible mass of people all trying to get into the temple.

Ron and Meech walked past the chattering groups. One of the policemen stepped forward from the line of guards and announced in his native Arkon dialect: "You can't go any farther. The street is blocked."

"I can pass," Ron replied tersely. "Where is your superior?"

The policeman was awed by Ron's firm attitude. "Lt. Nazdek!" he called out in a loud voice so that the officer turned around and looked questioningly at Ron.

"My name is Landry," Ron stated. "Major of the Terranian Fleet. Here is my identification!"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small shiny badge. The lieutenant had only to glance at it to know who the visitor was. Everybody in the Galaxy, whether a citizen of the Solar Imperium or Arkon, was familiar with the purple P-Badge and knew that he was asking for trouble if he refused to grant its possessor what the P stood for: Priority.

"Of course you may pass, Major," the lieutenant replied with a snappy salute.

"I trust you keep this confidential," Ron smiled.

He motioned to Meech and they crossed the intersection. Ron turned left. The idea of entering the danger zone did not appeal very much to him. The high walls of the buildings offered little cover. From what—Ron was unable to say at the moment.

In contrast to the street on the other side of the intersection, the windows of the buildings were closed and empty. The houses appeared to be deserted. The general excitement seemed to have lured everybody to the street and the temple.

Meech suddenly stopped. Ron missed the sound of his steps and turned around, puzzled.

"There is somebody—" Meech said quietly.

Ron knew that Meech didn't mean just anybody when he said there is somebody. He looked around. "Where?" he asked.

"In the next house or the one adjacent to it," Meech replied. "Between the 10th and the 15th floor."

Ron avoided looking in the indicated direction. He had to make a quick decision. He knew that there were no native mutants on Utik... persons whose paranormal abilities could manifest themselves in mental emissions which could be perceived by Meech. Whoever emitted such vibrations on Utik was not of local origin.

Arkonide mutants were rare and terrestrial mutants were not present on Utik. Thus it had to be a total

stranger or an Anti, a priest of the Baalol cult. It suddenly dawned on Ron that there was more to this mission than he had assumed so rashly.

They were waiting for him! It took him only a second to make a plan. "Let's keep walking while you watch that fellow," he decided.

The 2 men pretended to walk leisurely down the street. It would have appeared to an observer that the pair was engaged in a casual conversation. Once in awhile one or the other feigned a smile when he said something but the conversation appeared to be rather boring.

"He doesn't move," Meech said, shaking his head as if he disagreed with something.

There was some noise from the end of the street.

"I would like to know what he's up to," Ron inquired in a louder voice, raising his eyebrows.

"I can't read his thoughts," Meech grinned. "I would guess he's simply watching us."

He was about to add something but at this moment he received again the same emanations of the mysterious brain he had registered for the first time 6 days earlier when he was at the spaceport of Massenock. Meech determined that the emissions originated from the northeast direction where the Temple of Truth was situated. He wanted to point it out to Ron Landry but something interfered.

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The scent permeated the street like a cloud of indescribable sweetness and insatiable desire. Ron stood still, deeply enthralled, raising his head and sniffing the air. The fragrance evoked visions of an exquisite flower, beautiful beyond belief, which grew somewhere, almost within his reach. From the very first moment Ron was convinced that his life would never be happy unless he could behold the flower. He knew how delicate and fragile it was. It could perish at any time.

What a horrible thought! Yet the flower could be preserved and it was worth preserving. If they all joined their efforts to care for it, it could be kept from withering away.

That was what he had to do! He must see the flower and do his share to nurse and protect it!

He spun around and slapped Meech on the shoulder, full of enthusiasm. "We want to see the flower, Meech!" he exclaimed in a loud voice.

Something clicked in Meech's brain. As a robot Meech was capable of overcoming the worst shock of surprise in an infinitesimal fraction of a second. He nodded impassively and agreed. "Yes. That's a good idea. Let's go!"

Ron walked ahead. Suddenly he was in a big hurry. They soon approached the dark wall of agitated people but Meech paid little attention to it. It was easy for him to keep up with Ron and concentrate his mind at the same time on the brain of the alien who lurked in one of the buildings of the street. Now it began to move. Meech noticed clearly that it followed them.

The apartment buildings were connected by long corridors which ran from one street to the next, enabling a person inside the building to follow a man walking in the street across a whole block.

Meech had quickly adjusted himself to Ron's changed behaviour. His fleeting surprise was mainly due to the fact that Ron had fallen under the influence of the obsession so far behind the wall of people. The susceptible zone of radiation from the uncanny brain extended almost to the line of policemen at the intersection.

He had already taken into consideration the fact that Ron Landry would lose his power of reasoning like everyone else as soon as he entered the threshold of the interference zone. He was fully prepared to rescue Ron from the dangerous region, by force if necessary, if the situation called for a retreat. No human being could resist the strength of a robot.

Matters were complicated by the presence in one of the empty houses of the person under whose surveillance they had come. As far as he was concerned Meech had no prearranged program and he had to react to the best of his ability at the spur of the moment.

Ron reached the conglomeration of single-minded people who choked the streets in a solid mass by the tens of thousands so that nobody could move another step. Ron had no intention of letting this deter him. He seized the first 2 baldheaded men by the shoulders and pushed them aside. "Let me through men!" he clamoured in a loud voice. "We have to see the flower and tend it."

One of the men he had shoved out of his way was too perplexed to say anything but the other one gabbed Ron by the neck and tried to pull him back. "Hey, you!" he shouted angrily. "You can't do that! We have all been waiting here for hours to get a little closer."

Approving noises could be heard from all sides and Meech got ready to fight, fearing that Ron's brash ways would get him into trouble. Meanwhile Ron had whirled around and shaken off the hand of the hotly protesting Utik citizen. "If you can't figure out a way to get in, my friend," he grinned, "that doesn't mean that I'm that foolish."

With these words he gave the baldheaded man a hard push and sent him reeling back into the crowd that had supported his challenge in unison. Now they screamed in a general confusion and before the disturbed mass of people realized what happened Ron slipped through between the spectators with Meech closely following on his heels.

From now on Ron had hardly any trouble. The news of the incident had spread fast and everybody preferred to squeeze together just a little more to make room for him rather than provoke his ire.

In this manner Meech followed his boss till they reached the next street intersection. The block of apartments on the left ended at the intersection and whoever had followed them through its corridors would have to decide what to do next.

Meech decided to give him an opportunity. The street to the left of the intersection seemed to be less crowded than the one straight ahead. Meech took Ron by the arm. "Over there," he whispered. "It will be easier to get through."

Ron obligingly turned left and Meech guided him along the facade of the apartment block. The throngs thinned out a bit and 20 meters beyond the intersection the street was fairly empty.

Ron hastened forward in long strides but Meech knew that he wouldn't get very far. The unknown brain was now very close and judging from the intensity of its emanations it must have conceived a plan. Meech was ready to take defensive action although he did not think he would have to intervene in the imminent incident.

Ron approached the luminescent escalator steps leading from the street up to the portal of the house without diverting his eyes from his path. Only when he heard a sharp voice did he stop and turn around.

"Don't move, you two!" said the voice.

The man who stood at the open portal looked quite normal to Meech. He was dressed in the unimaginative fashion of Utik and the only thing that made him look different from the other Utik citizens was his bushy hair—and of course the short-barreled raygun he held in his hand.

Meech did not know how Ron would react. He had to watch for 2 things, namely what Ron would do and that the stranger would not get a chance to shoot. He stood so that he could see both Ron and the stranger from an angle and slowly raised his arms. To his relief he noticed that Ron followed his example after hesitating a little.

"Come up here!" the stranger ordered, waving his weapon.

Meech stepped on the escalator moving up to the portal. He did not have to look back as he felt that Ron was close behind him.

The stranger stepped aside and allowed Meech to pass through the portal. Since he had to take his eyes off Meech it was clear to the robot that somebody else was behind the portal to give him a reception. Thus he was not the least bit surprised when he was hit on the head with some kind of a club as soon as he entered the semi-dark lobby. Meech was totally impervious to such old-fashioned tactics but he knew what was expected of him. He groaned painfully, fell to his knees and slowly toppled over so that the impact of his heavy body would not shake the hall too much.

As he lay on the floor he watched through the slits of his eyes as Ron received the same treatment. There was only one difference: Ron was really knocked unconscious.

4 men appeared from the depths of the lobby. Two of them carried thin rods of plastic metal which they had used to knock out Meech and Ron. As they came closer Meech became aware that their brains also had the special power to emit frequencies to which his sensory equipment was attuned. However their emissions were considerably weaker than those of the brain of the man brandishing the raygun and Meech took it to be the reason that he had not noticed them sooner.

"Take them upstairs!" the man with the weapon instructed them.

Meech was unable to see him because he lay with his back to the portal. But he realized that the time had come to take some action. If they tried to lift him they would notice how heavy he was and probably draw the right conclusion—which would not be helpful at all.

He observed that two of the strangers picked up Ron and carried him to one of the grav-shafts in the back. Meanwhile the other two tried to tackle him. Meech felt how they seized by his head and legs and heard one of them groan and exclaim, appalled: "I swear by the Sign of Truth! This guy is as heavy as if he were made of stone!"

The other 2 men at the shaft and the man at the portal were startled and came closer out of curiosity. Ron was left behind, lying on the floor, and this was what Meech had waited for. He wanted to have Ron out of the way if it came to a fight.

Meech jumped up in a sudden move. As he flung his massive body against the 2 men who had tried to lift him up, he swept them off their feet and hurled them to the floor. Even as he leaped to his feet and whirled around, he saw that he had guessed right. The stranger with the raygun had reacted with lightning speed. He had swung his weapon around and Meech could look down the ugly black hole of the short barrel. But the 1/100th of a second which the finger of an organic being requires to pull a trigger are an eternity for a robot. Faster than anyone could perceive, Meech drew up his right hand and discharged the shock-beamer whose muzzle was under the tip of his index finger. The body of the stranger shook violently; then he uttered a cry, stiffened and slumped to the side, dropping his gun which clanged on the smooth stone floor.

Meech flung his outstretched arms back again and turned toward the last 2 fighters, who had grasped the situation and lunged toward him with their rods as he had correctly anticipated. Meech parried their blows and struck their foreheads. Without a sound they fell flat on their backs and remained motionless. Then he whacked the 2 porters who wanted to carry him away again, to make sure that they wouldn't get up too soon. Thus the quick fray was over and Meech cautiously looked around to see if any other dangerous opponent lurked in the vicinity.

The brains of the 5 unconscious adversaries were now muted and Meech received the muffled ramblings exuded by the crowd waiting outside. It was almost drowned out by the strong vibrations of the mysterious stranger which he had first picked up after his landing on Utik six days earlier. Meech was now convinced that this stranger exercised the magic attraction which enthralled the multitudes in the streets of Massenock's suburb.

There was nobody else in his immediate proximity. The 5 stunned men lying on the floor were the only force that had opposed him. It didn't take Meech long to figure out what he had to do next. He had 5 important prisoners who had to be removed to a safe place and an unconscious boss who had to be withdrawn before he awoke, from the zone of overpowering and debilitating influence where A people believed they had nothing else to do but to tend a miraculous flower and guard it against inclement weather.

All this had to be done without attracting much attention. Meech needed a large automatic vehicle but it was impossible to get it in this section of the city behind the blockade. As the apartment house where he was, extended all the way back to the intersection guarded by the policemen under Lt. Nazdek, he would have to drag Ron and the prisoners to the other exit and give Nazdek a sign to send him an automatic car.

The main corridor ran from the lobby to the other encl. Meech went to work at once. He took Ron and one of the strangers under the arms and pulled them along, letting their feet slide on the floor. Meech estimated it would take him about 5 minutes to reach the other end of the building. Since the effect of the shot from his shockgun would last at least 2 hours, it would be safe to leave the other 3 prisoners unattended in the meantime.

3/ OBJECTIVE: LIQUITIV

IT:....*they give me pleasure and entertainment.*

Homunk (after brief reflection):*May I ask in what way?*

IT:*A cell-activator works in close-conjunction with the carrier of the brain as the form of energy which is used for the continual regeneration of cells is related to the mental energy produced by the average brain. It is therefore, from a technical point of view, not difficult to consider the activator as an amplification.*

Homunk:*I understand...*

* * * *

Kalal realized that he was virtually done for.

Whatever had happened to the people outside the solid temple walls, there was no doubt that it was caused by the device implanted in his chest. Kalal had already carried the device for quite some time and did not know why it had failed to affect the crew of the spaceship during his flight but he was nevertheless certain of the matter.

The goals of the Baalol cult could not stand, especially at this time, public attention and scrutiny. Kalal knew that he would forfeit his position and perhaps even his life if the High Priest learned of his misfortune on Utik—regardless of whether he had done anything to deserve it or not.

He had tried to remove the device from his chest but neither he nor the Ara specialists in the temple succeeded. The cell-activator had penetrated the tissue of his body till it reached a place close to his heart. As if guided by diabolical intelligence it had selected a spot where surgery was unthinkable, would imperil his life. Subsequently the High Priest had urged leaving the device in place but destroying its function. The Ara physicians had conducted a thorough examination and determined that the activator had taken over a substantial part of his body blood circulation and that its destruction would lead to a fatal stagnation of his flow of blood.

As this alternative remedy had to be ruled out as well, Kalal was forced to live with the infernal gadget and suffer the indignity that everybody rushed up and sniffed at him, stroked him and poured water on him whenever it was handy.

Furthermore he was aware that the enemies of the Baalol Cult had already heard about the riotous conditions on Utik and reliable informers had reported that two Terranian agents had arrived several hours earlier to pry into the cause of the peculiar events. On Kalal's orders a priest and a group of disciples had been sent out to meet the Terrans and to capture them as soon as they entered the influence zone of his implanted device and their normal reflexes became incapacitated. Kalal wanted to find out to what extent the hostile powers had become suspicious.

However it was already an hour since he last had heard from the priest Doosdal, and Kalal began to fear that something had gone awry with his plan. Yet there was still one ray of light left for him due to the fact

that neither his priests and their disciples nor the Aras had been subject to the hypnotic influence of the activator in these confusing circumstances due to their special mental attributes.

He was prepared to take the consequences if Doosdal failed to return in the next few minutes. Kalal faced the danger that one of his priests would jump to the conclusion that Kalal's presence endangered the goals of the Baalol Cult and that the High Priest had to be killed in order to eliminate the source of their troubles. Kalal had no illusions and assumed that before long somebody would consider that very idea.

There was only one solution for escaping his fate: *flight!*

* * * *

"Stop babbling that nonsense about a flowers!" Larry Randall bellowed angrily. "I don't want to see it. Come back!"

He was Lofty Patterson's superior. But Patterson, the little old man with the grey hair and mischievous eyes that now looked so pensively, did not move an inch. "I must see it, Captain," he insisted. "You can't forbid me to look at it."

Larry was in an unpleasant situation. Lofty stood only 2 meters away from him but somewhere in these 2 meters lay the barrier which separated the possessed from the normal people in the city. We ventured too far ahead, Larry decided. What was he to do next?

A few of the guards of the police blockade were posted far behind them. They had permitted Larry and his companion to pass without hindrance just as Ron Landry and Meech Hannigan had crossed the line at another place a few hours earlier. Larry had seen the closely huddled mass of hypnotized people more than a kilometre away from the policemen and had not believed that the border of the danger zone was that close to them.

Now he knew it, to be sure, but he would have preferred to learn it in a less drastic demonstration. Lofty turned around and was ready to go on.

"Lofty! Halt!" Larry shouted.

Patterson looked back over his shoulder but refused to stop. Larry drew his gun and pointed it at him. He had no intention of shooting but he thought it was a good opportunity to find out to what degree the hypnosis impaired sound human judgment. He called another warning to Patterson, who merely looked around at first. But this time he saw the weapon. He paused and turned around. "You are not going to shoot me, sir!" he wailed in a high-pitched voice.

"Yes I will!" Larry declared firmly. "I have given you an order and you refuse to obey me. We are on a military mission and you are subject to martial law."

This was farfetched nonsense but it seemed to impress Patterson. He took a reluctant step in the direction of Larry and it was plain to see how difficult it was for him. "Why do you forbid me to look at the beautiful flower?" he continued to grumble. "It is so gorgeous, so exquisite and fragrant..."

"What does it look like?" Larry interrupted him.

Before Patterson could answer he suddenly quivered. He seemed to have been jarred by an electric shock although he had touched nothing except the pavement on which he stood.

"How does what look?" he asked puzzled.

Larry's eyes widened. "Well, the flower you were talking about."

Patterson stared at him as if he doubted his sanity. "I? I was talking about a flower?" Then he noticed the gun in Larry's hand. "What is that, sir? Why do you...?"

Larry dismissed it with a wave of his hand. He understood what was going on. Patterson was no longer under the hypnotic spell. Something must have happened at the moment to the source from which the hypnosis originated. Larry put his weapon away and watched the crowd that had gathered farther down the street. However he was unable to detect any change.

He waited till Patterson joined him again, a baffled look on his face. The people jamming the street failed to budge. They had turned their backs to Larry and seemed to wait only for the moment when they could push ahead to reach the object of their desire. It was perfectly obvious that they were still caught in the hypnotic spell.

At first it appeared to be very confusing but Larry soon figured out what must have happened. Whatever created the mechano-hypnotic influence, its effect seemed to be limited to a circle with a certain radius. Whoever was inside the well-defined circle was held in the sway of a constant hypnotic power. At the periphery of the circle, however, the effect was nullified from one centimetre to the next.

The periphery of the circle ran across the street and Patterson had crossed its perimeter. Now the circle had shifted its position and the critical border had moved farther down the street somewhere between Patterson and the mass of people. This meant that the thing that radiated the hypnotic effect had moved.

Larry was almost convinced that this, observation was a proof of Meech Hannigan's theory that the obscure radiation emanated from a living being and that this individual presumably resided in the Temple of Truth, the branch of the Baalol sect on Utik. The person must have moved inside the temple; perhaps he merely walked from one room to another so that the borderline of the hypnotic zone shifted enough to release Patterson.

Patterson remained sceptical although Larry tried to explain his theories to him on the way back. He had no recollection of the few minutes during which he had been deprived of, his free will.

They passed without trouble the cordon of police posted at the intersection. Larry was now taciturn. He searched for a new inspiration. And as Patterson summoned an automatic car, Larry was struck by a promising idea.

* * * *

Kalal's position was as yet unchallenged and he was still able to request a vehicle without being required to state a reason that the High Priest had to leave the Temple at the moment of a crisis.

He admonished his subordinates to keep a sharp eye on the activities of foreign agents at Massennock and anywhere on Utik. Then he boarded the vehicle waiting for him in the inner courtyard of the temple. He pushed the starter button as the light signal on the panel showed that the protective screen surrounding the temple complex had been lifted for his departure.

The vehicle ascended in a steep curve. Kalal ordered maximum acceleration as dozens of automatic aero-cars were waiting beyond the protective screen for the moment when the barrier between them and the marvellous flower they sought down in the temple was finally lifted. Several of them had pressed against the boundary of the screen with throttled engines and Kalal saw their crafts plunge in a tailspin toward the ground of the temple before the pilots realized what happened and pulled their machines up, barely avoiding a crash. Kalal had hoped to take advantage of the resulting commotion to slip through the waiting squadrons but was quickly disappointed. He carried in his own body the indestructible activator, the source of the trouble in which he had been involved for days, and the people who had been waiting for hours and days to fondle the exotic flower observed that their precious idol was about to elude them.

The reception of the mechano-hypnotic radiation was very strongly directionally oriented. The hypnotized receiver knew at any time at which angle the object of their adoration was located and Kalal was unable to divert his pursuers from their goal. The ring of his enchanted adorers closed in on him with frightening rapidity and he was forced to slow down in order to avoid a collision with the raving maniacs in hot pursuit. He saw their faces behind the windows of their vehicles, goggle-eyed and open-mouthed, their noses pressed flat against the glass in their anxiety to watch every movement of the craft which contained the coveted flower.

He was 200 meters above the roofs of the temple when he realized that he had no chance for escape. They were all buzzing around him, barring his way to freedom. Only the air behind him was still free and he did not hesitate to use the only way open for his retreat. He turned his machine around as fast as he could and plummeted downward. This time he did not have to be afraid of a collision. In falling he gave the signal to open the protective screen again. He kept going without bothering to waste time assuring himself that they had responded to his signal as, in his desperation, he no longer cared whether he dived into the protective shield and smashed himself to death.

But luck had not yet completely abandoned Kalal. His craft passed the zone where the barrier would have normally been and he landed on the courtyard again. By the time his pursuers had grasped the new situation, the screen had closed again before their noses.

Kalal climbed out with trembling knees. A few priests came from the portal of the great temple pyramid to meet him. They walked up to him and bowed slightly. Not low enough, however, to show the respect due a High Priest.

Kalal sensed that his hours were numbered.

* * * *

Larry moved the figure of a flimsily clad girl from one square to the next and said with a smile: "That's

what will happen to you if you are always so careless as this. You'll get married!"

His opposing player at the game was startled. He took his hand off his chin and stared at the board. Larry saw his lights glow after the initial annoyance. He gesticulated and exclaimed: "Not yet, my friend! Not yet! This is the Men's Club, where I will be safe."

"I would like to know how you are going to do that," Larry murmured.

"There. I am making a pass at this wench with my lady-killer and she will fall for him and leave me alone." He pushed the small figure of a man forward.

Larry sneered. "That's going to cost you something. This is your last lady-killer and from now on your gentleman will have to sidestep all amorous escapades."

Kazek, his short baldheaded partner, stroked his pate. "Indeed," he admitted. "How can I get into the Men's Club from my position?"

Larry leaned back. "That's what I told you. You have to be more careful. It doesn't matter what your next move is, you will be married after the following one."

Kazek studied the board awhile and decided to take the game less seriously. He picked up the figure with which Larry had cornered him and gazed at it in amusement. "It wouldn't be such a bad idea, come to think of it. Alas, it's only a game."

He put the figure in a box on the table beside the board, gathered up all the others and filled the box. Then he folded the board and got up. "Come with me," he said to Larry. "I owe you a round of Zintschka."

"That's why I played so astutely," Larry contended. "I didn't want to pay for the Zintschka."

He glanced around Kazek's bar, which was still as empty as when he had entered it. A few sullen old men sat at one of the tables and sipped the lukewarm coloured drinks which came from bottles whose labels stated in fine print "Made from synthetic fruit". The old men ignored Larry and he was glad of it because the less Kazek was distracted the better it was for his purpose. The first time he had come to see Kazek he had bragged that since his arrival on Utik he had already learned to play "Marriage" so well that nobody could beat him at the game. Kazek had fallen for his boast and challenged him to a game for a round of Zintschka. That Larry had really won was more due to Kazek's inattention than Larry's skill. At any rate he had accomplished his purpose. In a carefully calculated conversation he had created a feeling of friendship and familiarity in Kazek as if he had known him for years. Each Terranian agent had in his repertoire dozens of such conversations whose wordings were scientifically worked out by psychologists.

The effect became apparent in the amiable manner of Kazek as he poured the Zintschka for Larry. He put the 2 glasses on the table, slapped Larry on the shoulder and said: "Enjoy it, my friend! You really are one of the best players I have ever seen."

Larry thanked him for the compliment, raised his glass and took a sip of the light blue, strong smelling drink. "Not bad," he acknowledged. Then he looked up and winked at Kazek. "To be perfectly honest I would have to say though that awhile ago I drank something that was even better than, this."

Kazek was very curious. "I suppose they have good drinks at other places too. What was it?"

"I can't remember the name," Larry replied slowly, winking an eye so unmistakably that Kazek understood clearly that he did not wish to mention the name. "It was sold in tiny bottles and the stuff was very expensive yet I was glad to pay the price."

This was the critical moment. Kazek was listed as a dealer in Liquitiv in the police reports of Massenock. Liquitiv was a type of liqueur which contained a narcotic drug. It had been recently introduced and marketed throughout the Galaxy by the priests of the Baalol Cult. All normal human beings became addicted to its use after drinking it 4 or 5 times at the most and then became physical and mental wrecks at the end of 12 more years.

Many planets had already had extremely serious difficulties in combating the Liquitiv addiction problem. On Utik, located on the border of the stellar cluster M-13, practically on the doorstep of the Arkonide motherland, the traffic had not yet reached extensive proportions. When the danger of the pernicious drink had become known, the authorities had prohibited its sale and the few addicts had been put away in institutions.

If Kazek's character fitted the description of the police report he would swallow the bait. "How much did you drink of it?" Larry heard him inquire.

"Oh, only 2 bottles. I would have liked to get more but I had to move to a place where the stuff was not available."

Kazek nodded thoughtfully. "Liquitiv, wasn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, exactly!" Larry exclaimed. "That's the name. The Baalol people were selling it, weren't they?"

"That's the rumour one hears, yes," Kazek admitted hesitantly.

Larry smacked his lips as if he relished the memory of a tasteful pleasure. Then he inquired: "I wonder if they still have some."

Now Kazek pretended to have lost interest. "Who cares? There is a law against handling that stuff here on Utik."

"Yes, I know. But sometimes you can get around such technicalities. I've earned a lot of money recently and I'm willing to pay a good chunk of it for a few drops of Liquitiv."

Kazek gazed at him dubiously. Larry studied his eyes and saw a glint of greed in them. He had not been mistaken.

"Would you take the chance?" Kazek whispered.

Larry raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"Well..." Kazek turned his hand back and forth, "...the priests are said to have a lot of the liqueur in stock and they are supposed to sell it even today to their favourites."

"And who are their favourites?"

Larry could see that Kazek struggled with himself.

"I'm one of them, for instance," his host finally replied. "I have done them many favours in the past and they are always glad to show their gratitude if it's possible. I think they would let me have some Liquitiv if I were to ask them. But I would have to go and get it myself and the price has gone up since the police enforced the prohibition."

Larry nodded, pleased. "Sounds great," he said. "Where do you pick it up? At the temple?"

"Yes."

"Do you have free access?"

"I wouldn't call it free access," Kazek replied haltingly, "but the priests have to be careful too, Although they are very powerful and the police can't do much to them. However they have to uphold their reputation and don't want it to be public knowledge that they are selling Liquitiv."

"Hm," Larry muttered, and asked after a pause: "You can take me with you, can't you?"

Kazek raised his arms and spread his fingers. "It's unthinkable," he said excitedly. "I can't do that. The priests only trust me alone."

"But I've got the money," Larry insisted.

"Yes, that's true," Kazek admitted.

"And without money they won't give you the stuff. Of course you could pay for it yourself and I can reimburse you when you hand me Liquitiv. Wouldn't it be simpler if I pay you 20% more and go with you?"

"I am willing to try it," Kazek finally consented with a sigh. "You are really putting me on the spot. I'm afraid that the priests will be annoyed with me but I'll take a chance for your sake."

"And for the sake of money," Larry added, preferring to make things clear.

At this point their conversation was interrupted. Larry felt the soft hum of the device he wore on his wrist. Somebody wanted to talk to him and that he used the microcom indicated that he was in a hurry. It could be Patterson, who stayed at the hotel, or Ron Landry. He quickly arranged another meeting with Kazek for 2 days hence. Then he left the inn, took an automatic taxi and answered the call on the way.

It was Ron Landry's voice that came from the little speaker on his wrist. "Something important has happened while you were gone," Ron explained. "We have to talk about it. Let's meet..."

They set a time and place. Larry confirmed the arrangement and decided to go to Patterson's hotel and pick him up as he had half an hour before the appointment.

He was gripped by a strange feeling of excitement, now that things began to fall in place after a long period of uncertainty.

4/ "DIE, KALAL! DIE!"

Kalal sensed their coming. He was unable to read their thoughts because they shielded them from him but he could figure out for himself what they were thinking. They did not come with friendly intentions.

They stopped outside the door and one of them asked: "May we enter, Revered Master?"

The visitor let only this one question slip through the screen of his thoughts. Kalal understood the request and tried to use the opening to probe what was hidden in his mind. But the priest was too cautious and did not betray his thoughts to Kalal.

"Come in, my friends," Kalal answered tiredly.

The door opened and 5 men entered the room, among them Argagal, the oldest of the priests of the 4th degree on Utik, who had made the request at the door. They lined up in a row and made the ceremonial bow to Kalal, who remained in his chair.

"What brings you to me, my friends?" This time he spoke the words in an impassive voice instead of thinking them.

"Revered Master," Argagal replied, "we beg you to preside over the Main Assembly, which has been convened."

Kalal was alarmed. They had already called for a session of the Main Assembly! There were only 2 regular procedures for holding the meeting. Either the High Priest or a priest of the 2nd degree could convoke the Assembly—or the entire community of lower priests living in the temple complex called for such a session. It took only one of them to decide against the meeting of the Main Assembly to keep it from being seated. But if everybody had voted for it there was no need to ask the permission of the High Priest. The Assembly had to take place with or without the consent of the Abbot of the temple.

Kalal could not remember a single time that a Main Assembly had been called by the priests. Some extremely serious matters must have caused the priests and their lower disciples to take such an unusual step. And even then he would have expected them to request his permission to convene the Assembly.

However Argagal had neglected to do this. The Assembly would commence without Kalal's consent and he was only too well aware what it implied. He rose from his chair. After he had recovered from his initial shock he managed to say in a friendly tone: "Let's not waste any time. I am ready."

Argagal and his companions turned around and left the room. They led Kalal through the broad main corridor of the temple pyramid to the huge assembly hall, where Kalal went without a moment's hesitation to his seat at the centre of the table reserved for him as the presiding official. He glanced at the faces of his subordinates who stood attentively behind their chairs and looked up at him. He saw that none was absent except those who were engaged in a special mission.

"The Main Assembly has been convened," Kalal declared in a brittle voice. "I request a statement announcing the purpose of the session by those who have called for the meeting."

The priests took their seats, except Argagal, who remained standing. "I have applied for this consultation, Revered Master," he responded calmly. "The reason is the precarious situation which

threatens our temple on Utik. The menace is caused by the mysterious device you carry in your chest, Revered Master."

Now the accusation was out in the open. Kalal realized his chance at once. He was surprised that Argagal had failed to state his case more cleverly. If he continued to phrase his attack as in his first important sentences, the Assembly would end with a severe reprimand for him.

Argagal sat down. As presiding High Priest, Kalal did not have to rise from his seat as he answered: "I am keenly aware myself of the danger connected with this foreign body in my chest. But even if there were a possibility of removing it, I would not be allowed to permit it because the High Baalol himself gave it to me."

He looked around but was not very pleased with what he saw. Heretofore he had not yet revealed that he had received the activator from the hands of the High Baalol. He had been certain that this disclosure would allay all doubts in his listeners and convince them that the instrument must remain in place and its carrier should suffer no harm because of it.

However this was apparently not the case. The priests and their disciples still glowered at him and his explanation had failed to impress them.

Argagal rose from his chair and began to speak again. "If you allow me, Revered Master, I would like to submit a supposition."

Kalal nodded.

"The High Baalol, our most sacred master, has conferred this device on you for a specific purpose. Obviously it cannot accomplish this purpose for some reason such as a faulty construction. Instead it has the effect of placing our existence on Utik in grave jeopardy. I am sure that the High Baalol would immediately change his mind about the inviolability of his gift if he knew the terrible predicament it has created for us."

Kalal furrowed his brow in anger. "This is utter speculation," he rebuffed him furiously. "Nobody has the right to put thoughts into the mind of our most sacred Master or words in his mouth he has not spoken. It would be presumptuous of us to make a decision without his judgment."

For the first time Argagal displayed a scornful malicious sneer. "May I inquire, Revered Master, how the High Baalol can make a decision if he does not know the facts of our circumstances?"

"We will present the facts to him as soon as I determine that the proper time has come," was Kalal's reply.

Isn't the danger critical already?" Argagal asked.

"How dare you make rules for me?" Kalal roared.

"Far be it from me to make rules for you, Revered Master," Argagal retorted calmly. "However we have all witnessed that you violated an integral principle of our faith: you have put your personal welfare above the tenets of Absolute Truth."

Kalal jumped to his feet. He knew that he could not let him get away with this accusation unless he admitted defeat. "You will suffer the penalty for your lie, Argagal!" he shouted. "You will be deprived of

your rank and will have to start again at the bottom as a priest of the 10th degree!"

"I don't believe so," Argagal defied him. "You were the one who gave instructions to remove the device from your body or destroy it. And now you claim that it is impermissible to touch the device because the High Baalol has placed it in your personal care. How do you reconcile these contradictory attitudes of yours? Isn't it proof that my criticism is valid? You fear for your life, Revered Master."

Kalal remained speechless for a few seconds and Argagal used the opportunity to press his charges. "I did not wait for the time when you will have overcome your fear enough to make a report to our most sacred master about the ominous conditions on Utik. I have already approached the High Baalol myself and humbly requested his instructions to authorize me to take such measures as to avert the imminent peril we are facing."

Kalal turned pale. Now he understood the reason Argagal did not bother to lay the groundwork for his opening attack more carefully. He had sought the advice of the High Baalol and probably received the desired instructions. Kalal had no illusions that the High Baalol would spare his life if it appeared that the ambitious goals of the Baalol cult were in jeopardy because of him. "What... was his answer?" Kalal asked, barely able to speak for fear.

"The High Baalol," Argagal answered in a thunderous voice, "denounced your disobedience because you failed to inform him without delay and he left the decision of how to deal with your negligence to the judgment of this assembly. We all know that the diabolical device you carry in your chest can neither be removed nor destroyed in its place. It will continue to work and attract legions of ecstatic people to the temple. The denizens of the Galaxy will become suspicious and we will be forced to drop our plans, since they can only be carried out under the veil of secrecy. Your implanted device must be silenced at all costs and the only way to accomplish it is by killing you. Since there exists no alternate choice in this dilemma, I hereby submit a motion. The Revered Master Kalal, found guilty of crass disobedience by our Most Sacred Master, shall be put to death to prevent the external influence instilled in his body from disrupting our goals for the world of the future. I request the assembly to take a vote."

Kalal slumped in his chair, unable to utter a word. Since he had failed to initiate the official vote, Argagal took over the procedure. He heard merely a disagreeable din in his ears and regained his comprehension only when Argagal announced in a clear voice: "The vote is unanimous. The Revered Master Kalal shall be put to death!"

Kalal slowly rose from his seat. He knew they would not take very much time to execute his sentence. His life was at stake and he would defend it as dearly as possible. He would have to devise a quick strategy and he swore to the Absolute Truth that he would make them rue the day. The decision restored his courage. The colour returned to his face. The priests had risen from their seats for the vote and now stood at the table, staring at him. Kalal took his time scrutinizing their faces one by one as if he wanted to imprint them indelibly in his memory.

"You will never kill me!" The High Priest exploded defiantly in a voice bursting with the savage fury he had suppressed inside.

* * * *

The room was small and modestly furnished, typical for the Terranian Trade Mission on Utik. The flat widespread complex of buildings contained numerous such rooms and no outsider could have suspected that it concealed deep underground technical installations which made the Trade Mission an effective operational base of Division 3 of the Intercosmic Social Development Aid and thus a base for Nike Quinto's men.

Meech Hannigan had taken his boss and the 5 prisoners to the Trade Mission. The hazardous transport had been carried out without incident. Ron Landry soon recovered but failed to remember the strange interlude inside the blockaded zone. The persistent droning in his head made it rather plausible that Meech Hannigan's story conformed with the truth—beside the fact that it was unthinkable for a robot to lie to his superior.

Ron Landry insisted on interrogating the prisoners without delay. Since they were unwilling to part with the requested information voluntarily, they were taken to the secret subterranean premises and questioned under the influence of a mechano-hypnotic generator. Even this machine proved to be rather unsatisfactory. The leader of the group, Doosdal, resisted its influence completely and only one of his subordinates, Zaleel, was unable to shut out the suggestion of the hypnotic generator with his own mental power. Unfortunately he was not one of the most knowledgeable Antis. What he revealed was not too helpful but it was enough to enable Ron Landry to give a short report to Nike Quinto and make some necessary preparations for his next step.

After the interrogation he got in touch with Randall and Patterson and they were now in the soundproof office and engaged in an exchange of information about their experiences before discussing Ron Landry's planned measures.

"Of course Zaleel was unable to tell me what type of radiation Kalal sends out," Ron related. "But—according to his statements and our own observation it can hardly be different from the mechano-hypnotic generator we use downstairs. If it really involves the same principle of operation we should have no trouble shielding ourselves against the emanations of the High Priest by wearing a helmet designed to prevent the penetration of the hypnotic rays he is propagating. Our technicians are already working on it here at the Trade Mission. We should be able to test the helmets tomorrow. By then I also expect to have an answer to my report from Terra. I think Nike Quinto will give us further instructions instead of leaving the whole job to our own judgment," Ron grinned. "In any case, it seems to be an excellent idea to use the innkeeper Kazek, whom Larry has already persuaded to accompany him, to get into the temple and investigate what's going on in there. I feel that this should be done under any circumstances and I assume that Nike Quinto's instructions won't interfere with this approach."

Larry pondered his proposal without looking at Ron. "First we will have to test the helmets," he warned. "Unless they are effective the attempt would be futile."

"It's clear that we won't undertake this task without adequate preparations. Our situation is much too vulnerable since we have to face the dangerous paranormal powers of the Baalol Cult adherents."

Larry looked up. "What are you going to do with the prisoners?"

"We'll let Nike Quinto decide that," Larry replied, getting up. "Now let's get some sleep. The nights are very short on Utik."

* * * *

Larry was right. Things were moving fast.

On Terra, Col. Nike Quinto immediately contacted his highest superior, Solar Marshall Allan D. Mercant. Marshall Mercant advised him to avoid, as long as possible, involving the Administrator of the Solar Imperium, Perry Rhodan, in the troublesome Utik affair.

Marshall Mercant started the wheels of galactic diplomacy rolling by calling Arkon on hypercom. The August Emperor was deeply concerned about the disturbing events on Utik since the planet was only a stone's throw from the centre of his realm. He nevertheless agreed with Mercant's argument that it would be preferable to withhold the information about the strange events, on Utik from the Solar Administrator because his present mental condition would make it tantamount to launching an unpremeditated attack resulting in the instant destruction of the planet. Atlan agreed to blockade Utik with his fleet so that Perry Rhodan could be dissuaded from taking any hasty steps in case he learned accidentally about the trouble on the planet. Marshall Mercant had another reason for his request: he was firmly convinced that the Baalol priests had not intentionally caused the turmoil on Utik. They usually preferred to work clandestinely and were probably upset themselves by the baffling conditions prevailing on Utik which certainly did not fit into their scheme. Something must have gone wrong as they were unable to leave their temple. He expected them to call for help if their situation worsened and became critical but Atlan's blockade would keep all help from reaching Utik.

After his conversation with Atlan, Mercant got in touch with Nike Quinto again and informed him about the imminent arrival of the Arkonide fleet in the Utik sector. He gave Col. Quinto a free hand in issuing orders to his agents on the planet. Mercant's directions could be summarized in a few terse words: "I don't care how you do it but I want to see results!"

* * * *

They had ordered Kalal to go to his private quarters and wait for them. He had complied with their demands because he considered it dangerous to provoke their suspicions by a show of premature recalcitrance.

He hurried back to his room and laid down on the cot where he had slept since the day of his arrival. He tried to relax and concentrate his mind on the vital task he confronted but had little success. He was uncertain as how to proceed in the matter, worrying about his ability to serve as a victory against 10 strong men in a showdown. His doubts made him feel panicky and the panic prevented him from preparing himself for his defence.

Gradually he managed to regain the calm he needed. He felt his fear diminishing and when he closed his eyes he was able to see the 10 priests who had already begun to concentrate their minds on the lethal thought.

This was the method used by the followers of the Baalol cult to kill their condemned victims. Ten priests

of the 4th degree joined in a mental concentration creating such enormous power that nobody could resist it—or hardly anybody. At the moment when they reached the peak of their concentration the 10 unified brains proclaimed the command of death. They infused their thought into the brain of the condemned man, whose will would break under its force, leaving him no choice but to obey the command. His brain ceased to function and he died of a stroke.

Kalal saw clearly how they stood there with closed eyes thinking of him—and his death. He was frightened by their steadily intensifying cerebral power with Argagal in the lead. A wave of hostility and mortal peril poured into Kalal and he knew that he would have had to surrender to the hypnotic flat if he had been caught by surprise.

Argagal's mental power reached a certain magnitude at which it stopped growing. Kalal believed he could feel how Argagal silently pressed the hands of his 2 neighbours to indicate that he was ready for the climax. He perceived the quickly increasing efforts of the other brains to attain the level of Argagal's mental energy.

Kalal lay motionlessly without noticing the sweat streaming from his pores. Nor did he hear the low hum of the climate control system. But he saw the 10 priests clamouring for his death as distinctly as if the solid walls separating them from him did not exist.

He held his breath when the last of the 10 priests had gained total control of his mind and the mighty swell of co-aligned thoughts converged in his head. Now!

"Die, Kalal! Die!"

It reverberated in his head like an agonized cry and made him utter similar screams of anguish. An invisible power lifted him from his cot and hurled him to the floor, where he remained writhing and shrieking violently.

However he also could feel the pain he suffered as he hit the floor and it was proof for him that he was still alive. He had repulsed the onslaught and remained victorious—victorious over the combined awesome power of 10 mighty brains.

He opened his eyes. His head was racked by terrible pains and he had trouble recognizing his surroundings. The terrible throbbing gradually subsided and he was able to sit up after awhile. Suddenly he realized that the thoughts of the 10 priests bent on killing him had vanished.

The mental shield he had created around himself had proved effective. It had withstood the impact of the murderous command and hurled it back to its source. The brains of the 10 priests had been totally exhausted by the lethal effort. Bereft of their normal mental resistance, the rebounding mental energy had created havoc among the senders, Although it was divided among 10 recipients. The deep quiet indicated that all of them had been knocked unconscious.

The realization of the immense power with which his brain was endowed revived his spirits. He was no longer troubled by his fears and indecision. Now he knew exactly what he had to do.

This wing of the temple was empty, giving him a good chance for his escape. However, he had not yet determined where to turn. Obviously it was still too risky to venture outside and face the crowd of his admirers who would follow him wherever he went. The priests would only have to watch the hubbub to know where he was.

It would be better to stay inside the temple and find a good hiding place in the labyrinth of corridors and secluded comers of storage rooms deep down below the ground where the ritual articles and other equipment were kept without which no Baalol temple could exist. The layout was the same in all temples and Kalal figured he could easily evade any pursuers in the maze. There was also plenty of food in stock, something even a priest of the 2nd degree required if he had to wait for a few weeks.

Kalal got up and went out into the corridor, which was deserted just as he had expected. He took an antigravitor to go down to the 15th subterranean level where huge machines were humming and vibrating. He entered a narrow corridor and came to a door behind which the strong telecom-transmitters were located that were used by the Baalol priests to communicate by supra-light-speed frequencies with the other temples, the Springers and the High Baalol in the far reaches of the Galaxy.

It occurred to him that he could use the transmitter for his own benefit, too, and he decided to send a message to summon help. He lost no time in putting it to work. He prepared a message in the code used for radio communication with the friendly nation of Springers. FRIENDS! KALAL ON UTIK REQUESTS YOUR ASSISTANCE. EXTREMELY URGENT! PLEASE COME AT ONCE!

He punched the message in a plastic strip and inserted it in the transmitter. Then he hesitated a few seconds, wondering whether he had chosen the right words, before he pressed the release. Control lamps lit up, there was a click and a whir as the transmitter began to operate. Kalal made sure that it functioned properly before leaving the room. Upstairs they would know at the same moment that somebody had activated the transmitter.

Kalal had to be on his toes and keep moving to slip through their fingers.

5/ "VIOLET FLOWER: VIOLENT HOUR"

Homunk: If I understand you correctly, the activator can form a certain thought in the brain of its carrier and he never becomes aware of it. Then the activator amplifies the mental frequencies and emits them over an enormous range.

IT: That is right.

Homunk: The radiated thought has the power of dominating the brains of the receivers and conjures images that have no foundation in reality.

IT: Exactly. It can be hilarious fun. For instance, On Utik at the edge of stellar cluster M-13 a man...

* * * *

"Well, did you have any trouble?" Larry asked in such a casual tone as to express his real opinion that

such difficulties were out of the question.

"A great deal of trouble," Kazek insisted nervously. "So much in fact that the whole business hardly pays as far as I am concerned."

"Hardly," Larry grinned. "But it will show a little profit and that's why you will take me there, won't you?"

Kazek sighed in resignation. "It's only because I took a liking to you," he muttered. "I really won't make any money on it."

"Hardly any money," Larry persisted in a soothing voice. "Why don't we leave now?"

Kazek put on a cloak. The sun was setting and it had been a hot day. The streets retained much of the heat and only a citizen of Utik would worry about catching a cold at such a warm temperature. Kazek was about to hail an automatic taxi when Larry dissuaded him. "We don't need it," he advised. "I thought it would be better if we used a private car for this occasion and so I brought my own."

Kazek had no objections. They rode up to the roof of the tall building where Larry had parked his car. They got in and before Larry started the motor he inquired: "Did the priests give you permission to let me go with you?"

Kazek looked at him, astonished. "Of course. I wouldn't take you if they didn't."

Larry skipped a remark, asking: "Did you go to the temple to obtain the permission?"

Kazek shook his head. "They have a telecom in the temple. It's not listed in the public directory but I know how to call them. Why do you ask?"

Larry started the car. "You heard about the shenanigans going on for days in the northeast section of the city where the temple is. The police blocked off the entire area. I wondered how you got through. But, as you say, you didn't even have to go there."

Kazek grinned slyly. "Don't worry about the police," he replied disdainfully. "I'll take care of everything. The police are men too... and a man will always be a man."

It was a common saying on Utik. "A man is a man!" implied that if one paid enough money to a man he could do anything.

Larry nodded and drove the car down to the street.

"Turn southeast," Kazek said, "to the Avenue of Ancient Heroes!"

Larry looked at him, surprised. "Southeast?" he questioned. "The temple is north of here!"

Kazek nodded, unperturbed. "Did you believe I would simply drive up to the temple and knock at the door? It's one of those things that make the police a little too suspicious.

Larry did as he was told. After making 2 right turns he entered the flow of traffic on the Avenue of Great Kings, leading south to the centre of town.

Kazek did not notice that Larry pushed a button underneath the instrument panel, which activated a signal beamer.

* * * *

Meech and the sensor instrument received the signal simultaneously. "There they go," Meech announced, pointing in the direction indicated by the mechanical rangefinder of his artificial brain.

Ron Landry had observed the short impulse as the peak of a green flash on the oscillograph. Almost instantly the integrated computer ejected a slip locating the position of the signal emitter. Ron started the car and entered the traffic line. Patterson sat next to him, watching alertly.

They received the signal at intervals of 20 seconds. The points of emission formed a line stretching along the Avenue of Great Kings in the northeast of the city toward the Avenue of Ancient Heroes. Ron was baffled. "Where in blazes is he going?" he muttered. "The temple is in the opposite direction."

Patterson shrugged. "The shortest way isn't always necessarily the best."

A few minutes later the string of signals had reached the Avenue of Ancient Heroes where it turned east. Ron steered his car into a faster lane, endeavouring to shorten the distance to the car he followed as quickly as possible.

* * * *

Larry saw the big car pass him on the left, turn to the right side of the street and stop. He followed it and parked behind it. Half a kilometre farther down the street all traffic had come to a standstill. The police were stationed at the next crossing beyond which the hypnotized mass of people besieged the Temple of Truth.

"Why do you stop?" Kazek asked, astonished.

"I was afraid they might follow us," Larry replied. "I got a second car so we can change cars. If somebody followed us, we can throw them off the track."

It sounded reasonable to Kazek. "You shouldn't have bothered," he murmured, although he was quite impressed. "Life must be quite exciting in your country if you go to such fantastic lengths to protect yourself from imaginary pursuers. I'm sure there isn't a man in Massenock who shows enough interest or energy to snoop about our business unless a policeman finds out we want to get some Liquitiv. In that case he would be required to intervene."

Larry laughed but Kazek failed to notice the derision in his laugh. Kazek had paid no attention to the big car as it passed and stopped at the side of the street a few seconds earlier. Now he looked at it and saw how large it was. It seemed to be empty and Kazek had no reason to be suspicious. "You must be flush,"

he said appreciatively, "if you can afford a second car that big."

Larry shrugged his shoulders. They left the car and Larry stayed close behind Kazek. When the door of the other car automatically opened, Kazek jumped back, uttering a startled cry. Larry caught him in his outstretched arms.

"Wha... what...?" Kazek stuttered.

"Get in!" Larry encouraged him calmly. "The positronic lock is attuned to my individual radiation and it opens automatically as soon as I get near the car."

Kazek was not completely convinced but entered the car since Larry pushed him from behind and left him no choice. That was the moment when he realized with great distress that the vehicle was not as empty as he had believed. He flinched for the second time as he saw 3 strangers getting up from the floor of the car but Larry Randall kept shoving him forward with irresistible force.

"Come right in, Kazek!" Patterson called out cheerily. "We've been waiting for you."

Without further resistance Kazek slumped into the soft rear seat. It took quite awhile before he recovered from his shock. Then he realized that one of the strangers knew his name and that the man who wanted to buy the Liquitiv had betrayed him. He looked utterly disgusted as he turned to Larry, who sat down next to him. "You didn't keep your promise," he reproached him angrily. "You ought to..."

"Take it easy!" Larry interrupted him. "Don't jump to conclusions. These 3 gentlemen are only interested in buying a few doses of Liquitiv just like myself. You can do 4 times as much business with us."

Kazek was far from persuaded. "You don't seriously believe," he contradicted him, "that I can simply walk into the Temple of Truth with 4 customers?"

"Why not?" Ron replied instead of Larry. "The priests are not giving the Liquitiv away. It's a business with them. So they should be glad to get 4 customers at the same time."

Kazek reflected a little and came to the conclusion that the business was too risky. "Let me get out and go home," he demanded, "or..."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll call the policemen up front."

Ron laughed in his face. "First of all I would like to know how you can leave this car without our consent and, secondly, it would be interesting to see what you want to tell the police. Are you going to report that you wanted to sell us some Liquitiv?"

Kazek realized that his situation didn't leave him much an alternative.

"We don't want to cause you trouble," Ron explained. "You can make your deal when you get us into the temple."

"The priests are going to wring my neck," Kazek murmured. His tone sounded sincerely worried.

"Don't let the priests scare you," Ron advised him. "We will tell them what really happened: that we've

forced you into this."

Kazek's face brightened. "In that case," he agreed, "let's go on!"

Ron nodded, satisfied, and started the car.

* * * *

Half an hour later they arrived at a complex of one-story office buildings and old sheds. They were the premises of the Massenathik Transport Co. which Kazek said was their destination. Massenathik was the abbreviated contraction of 2 names, Massenock and Rallathik, the 2 most important cities on Utik between which the Transport Company operated. Behind the buildings was a small landing field where a few wide-bellied cargo rockets were stationed.

The buildings seemed to be deserted. The complex was dimly lit by several lamps but all windows were dark.

Meech Hannigan had meanwhile figured out that the Transport Company was located exactly 26.4 kilometres southeast of the Baalol temple. Therefore they had no reason to be afraid that they could be caught by surprise in the hypnotic influence zone.

Meech carried the helmets. Ron and Patterson had tried them out the previous day. There was no doubt in their minds that they were extremely effective and that they absorbed virtually all of the bewildering radiation driving the people crazy.

"Where do we go from here?" Ron asked.

Kazek pointed to the rocket. "Over there," he replied.

"Ye Gods!" Patterson cried out in amazement. "He wants to fly to the temple!"

Kazek shook his head and gave Patterson a sad look. "No, of course not. Come with me, I'll show you what I mean."

They crossed the yard formed by the buildings and entered the landing field. In the dim light of the lamps they saw several scorched areas on the ground which had been left by the engines of the starting or landing rockets. The rocket pointed out by Kazek also stood in the middle of such a scorched spot.

4 triangular stabilizing fins extended from the potbellied body of the vehicle ending in hydraulic landing struts on the ground. Judging from the way the movable parts were extended from their cylinders, the rockets were not loaded. Ron bent down and noticed some traces of corrosion on the plastic metal surface. Obviously the supports had not been moved for a long time. The rocket had not been flown for several years, he surmised.

Ron further noticed that the rear end of the rocket's body touched the ground and reflected that the particle stream of the rocket's engine could have no lift effect unless an exhaust channel was built into the ground underneath. All in all, it looked like a peculiar vehicle and Ron was ready to believe that the

rocket served some unconventional purpose.

Kazek stopped at one of the stabilizing fins and opened a well-concealed lid. Ron saw 2 buttons behind it and Kazek pushed one of them, causing the hatch at the bottom of the rocket to open silently.

"Go in!" Kazek directed them.

Meech was the first to enter. Larry and Patterson followed him. Ron insisted on following Kazek since he still entertained some doubt about the honesty of his intentions.

As the rocket stood on safe ground, Meech was able to open the inner hatch while the outer hatch was still open. The passage behind it was illuminated by several weakly shining lamps. The corridor led to an elevator shaft and Kazek told them that they had to use it to get to the temple.

They watched that the 2 hatch doors closed properly behind them. Then they entered the grav-shaft and descended deeper into the ground. Ron was not surprised that the shaft extended far below the body of the rocket, as he had already guessed from the shape of the vehicle that it probably camouflaged the entrance to a subterranean corridor.

However he was quite amazed by the corridor itself. He had already assumed with regret that they would have to walk 26 miles to the temple. Instead he found that the lower exit of the grav-shaft opened into a fairly bright tunnel equipped with 6 conveyor belts half of which were running in opposite directions. The outer ones were hardly moving faster than the speed of walking whereas the inner belts moved about 3 times as fast. Between the 2 triple rows as well as along both walls were strips of solid ground.

Ron looked down the tunnel, shaking his head and murmuring to Larry Randall, who stood at his side: "I would like to know what kind of merchandise has been flowing over these conveyors."

Without further hesitation they stepped on the belt. Meech Hannigan took the lead again. He quickly changed to the adjacent belt and his companions followed him. Moving along at the speed of about 129 kilometres per hour on the belt, which seemed to follow a straight direction to the temple, they expected to arrive in the vicinity of the temple in about 2 hours.

Meech passed out the helmets. They put them over their heads, ignoring Kazek's astonished glances. Ron had decided not to give Kazek a helmet and to let him cross the threshold of the hypnotic zone without providing him with this protection.

After a few minutes they reached the borderline. Kazek couldn't help the feeling that something was going on that escaped his understanding. He didn't know why everybody except Hannigan stared so curiously at him. To his questions he received nothing but evasive answers.

Ron Landry had already spread out his arms when Kazek suddenly jerked and threatened to fall off the moving band. Ron caught and held him tight. But Kazek wriggled and kicked. He started to scream: "Let me go! I must see the miracle flower!"

"What flower?" Ron asked innocently.

"The miraculous violet flower! Haven't you heard about it?"

"No," Ron replied. "Where is it?"

"Up ahead," Kazek exclaimed, pointing into the tunnel.

"Then what's all the fuss about? That's where we are going."

"But it's not fast enough. If we run on the belt we'll get there faster."

Ron motioned to Larry, who held the 4th helmet. Before Kazek could resist, Larry had pulled the round capsule over his head. Ron pushed it down and locked it tight. Then he released Kazek.

At first Kazek acted as if he wanted to dash around Larry, Patterson and Hannigan and run away. But he suddenly changed his mind. It was amusing to see the expression of utter confusion on his face. Finally he looked helplessly at Ron. "I... I wanted to go somewhere just now. But where...?" he stuttered.

Patterson chortled gleefully.

"You wanted to go and see a violet flower," Ron explained.

"A violet flower? Where? I don't know anything about a violet flower!"

Ron waved his hand. "Forget it. I didn't understand you either."

Kazek kept asking a few more questions without getting a satisfactory answer. Then he turned again in the direction they were going. He was bothered by an uncanny and oppressive feeling.

For Ron and his companions the interlude had been very instructive. It proved that the extraordinary radiation emanating from the priest was also effective below the ground. This raised the question for Ron of whether the hypnotic power which penetrated the massive layer of earth would be so strong in the proximity of its origin that even their helmets would be unable to absorb it.

In that case their situation would be fraught with peril, as it was doubtful that the robot Meech Hannigan could bring 4 frenetic people to their senses without applying excessive force.

6/ SHOCKING SURPRISE

IT:...is believed by many people to be a fabulous, beautiful, fragile, fragrant flower which has to be treated with extreme care so it can be preserved.

Homunk:This is indeed a very amusing comedy. Does he know what causes this weird result?

IT:I guess he is smart enough to figure it out sooner or later.

Homunk:Then he will try to get rid of the activator and destroy it.

IT:That he cannot do. Removal of the activator would mean his death. Moreover, I believe he is beginning to realize that the activator also endows him with an advantage not to be

underestimated.

* * * *

For the first time since they tried to kill him Kalal found time to ponder his predicament. He knew that his operation of the telecom had put them on his track and the search for him was probably already underway. But most of his pursuers would be lower priests of the 7th, 8th, 9th, and even 10th grade who had not yet learned to shield their thoughts properly. Kalal would have no trouble noticing their approach and acting accordingly.

At first he had accepted as a matter of course that he was able to read the thoughts of the lower priests from a certain distance. Now that he had gained a few minutes for quiet reflection, he began to question the phenomenon. He recalled other occasions when he had tried to probe the thoughts of some priests without the slightest success. His attempts were frustrated even by a priest of the 10th degree. All of a sudden it presented no difficulties whatsoever. What was the reason for the change?

Also the method he had used to save his life from his executioners took on a strange significance. Where did he get the courage to hope that he could resist the hypnotic command of 10 priests of the 4th grade? A hypnotic command issued in unison by 10 well-trained brains normally shattered the resistance of priests of the 2nd or even 1st grade. The only one who was impervious to the power of other brains was the High Baalol himself.

But he was not the High Baalol. What had made him think he could exercise such tremendous power and live to enjoy his success?

Kalal was a man devoted to logical analysis. He contemplated the facts in the order they had taken place and recognized that the presentation of the cell-activator by the High Baalol was the crucial point of his life which had triggered a chain reaction as soon as he had set foot on Utik. It was responsible for the ensuing terrifying experiences, his condemnation as well as his lucky escape. It was no accident that the turmoil on Utik followed immediately his acquisition of the cell-activator. There was a casual connection. The activator created the confusion. But what about his new mental achievements? Were they also due to the activator?

Kalal knew nothing about the principle and the mechanics of the activator but he had observed the effect it accomplished and he had studied enough of the science of mechano-hypnosis to conclude that the activator was somehow integrated in the activities of his brain. He was astounded that he had given it so little thought before and blamed it on the excitement which had taken possession of him after his arrival on Utik.

The more he considered his experiences the more certain he became that the activator was also responsible for the heightened capacities of his mind. This realization took his breath away. The activator had raised his talents beyond the capabilities of the first-degree priesthood. Now he was more powerful than the High Priests in charge of the major great temples who numbered no more than 20 and were regularly called in by the High Baalol for all important consultations.

Perhaps his gifts exceeded at this moment already the might of the High Baalol himself! The thought seemed to be sacrilegious for no more than a second. Then he began to cherish it and soon conceived a

plan.

As soon as he succeeded in escaping from his hiding place he would go to meet the High Baalol and test his true mettle. The High Baalol had given Argagal a free hand when he complained about the danger the presence of Kalal inflicted on Utik. He could not be considered his friend. The ingrained attitude of all Baalol servants made it unthinkable to refuse obeisance to the High Baalol but the knowledge that he conspired in the killing of Kalal tore away the last shred of his unquestioned loyalty.

Kalal became intoxicated by his plotting. He imagined himself as the victor and taking the place of the High Baalol. He would punish all those who had turned against him and inaugurate a strict regime which would attain the political goals pursued by the Cult of Absolute Truth much earlier than the present High Baalol was capable.

He was so fascinated by his scheme that it took him considerable time to realize the tremendous obstacles he would have to overcome in order to gratify his desires. Even where the High Baalol sided there were not only priests but a multitude of ordinary citizens who would be attracted by his appearance and chase him, sniff and pour water or fertilizer over his head as soon as he got close to them. The High Baalol was already alerted and he would know his opponent could be found at the centre of the riots when he returned after escaping the death sentence on Utik which had been imposed on him with the accusation of breaking the laws of their cult.

Under such circumstances the High Baalol would not find it very difficult to eliminate his foe before he had a chance to determine whose mental powers dominated the other.

Kalal's enthusiasm sank from exhilarating height to the depth of depression from one moment to the next. With all his ambitious plans he had forgotten that the activator not only enhanced his mental powers but also produced highly detrimental complications.

The same moment he became conscious again of this drawback he heard once more the roaring laughter that seemed to come from nowhere. It was as if an invisible being found pleasure in his desperation.

Kalal hated the unknown being and cursed it viciously.

* * * *

A few minutes after they had put the helmet on Kazek, Meech reported that he received a profusion of various mental radiations. He asserted that he clearly distinguished one coming from a certain priest who was responsible for the mass-hypnosis spreading out in the streets of Massenock. It stood out as the strongest of them all.

In the meantime Ron Landry had learned from Kazek how he gained admission to the temple itself. Kazek reported that the tunnel was closed by a portal where the temple area began and that only those who knew the password were allowed to enter the portal. Kazek claimed that he had made frequent visits and that he was always received by one of the priests. "No, I never saw anyone except the one priest," he replied to Ron's question.

Ron was satisfied. Unless there were other security installations which Kazek had failed to notice, a

single priest presented not much of a danger even if he had the advantage of the special paranormal gifts of the Antis.

Moreover, Ron's previous apprehension about the growing magnitude in the proximity of the hypnotic source dissipated as they approached. The helmets repulsed any noticeable infiltration. In the course of 2 hours there had been no increase and Ron was confident that he had no more reason to fear its debilitating interference.

Soon they were able to discern in the dim light of the tunnel the portal barring the entrance to the temple zone. Meech changed over to the slower outside belt and then stepped on the firm ground. Landry and Patterson followed him and stopped at the wall on the right. Larry and Kazek jumped on the centre strip as planned. The portal consisted of 2 panels which opened at the centre. Thus the priest would first see only Kazek and Larry, whom he expected after Kazek's announcement. Only after the doors had opened far enough would he be able to notice the other three.

A luminous button in the right half of the portal served as a doorbell. Kazek pressed it—1 short, 2 long and 3 short—causing a gong to resound in the tunnel in the same sequence.

After a few tense moments of waiting the portal began to hum and a small slit appeared in the middle. It grew quickly and bright light poured out from the opening.

Landry, Patterson and Meech held their weapons ready to shoot when the robe of a priest became visible.

* * * *

Kalal was suddenly startled. They were here! A whole bunch of them and not very far away. It was foolish to let his mind get so absorbed with the future. He should have noticed his detractors sooner.

He jumped up and listened, receiving thought patterns from numerous directions.

"He must be somewhere around here. We have searched almost all the other places."

Kalal realized he had made a mistake remaining too long at the same spot. Constant moving was his best chance. He should have gone where they had already searched and he decided to do just that if it wasn't already too late.

Cautiously he opened the door of the small room where he was hiding. The corridor was empty. There was no sound except the steady hum of the energy conductors which ran along the ceiling like old-fashioned heat pipes. However the corridor turned around 2 corners a few meters away from the door and Kalal was afraid he could not run away without being seen by his pursuers. He felt their thoughts from a short distance and shuddered to think that one of the higher priests lurked somewhere, shielding his thoughts so effectively that Kalal could not pick them up despite his activator.

He was in a trap. He retreated to the small room again, hoping they would fail to inspect it.

It was merely wishful thinking. No more than a minute passed since he had locked the door when he

received a flood of thoughts from the corridor that were inquisitive and persistent. Their brains were filled with amazement about the feat he had accomplished in the temple when Argagal and the others tried to kill him. It was the first time he heard the reaction to his counterattack and he was as astonished as the men whose thoughts he registered.

"His prowess is enormous! He killed 3 people at one fell swoop and none of the others will ever be able to become more than a priest of the 4th degree."

"Perhaps they won't remain priests at all," another one thought. "Paolol babbled incoherently after he recovered from the first shock and the physicians believe he has suffered permanent damage."

"It's too bad about Argagal," the first man thought "He was such an ardent priest."

The other priest remained silent. Kalal noted to his surprise that only 2 members of the search team were outside his door, which raised his hope again.

"Let's take a look in here," one of them suggested. "I'll open the door. Be careful when you look in!"

"It seems like an unlikely place to hide," the other priest replied mindlessly.

Kalal took up his position 2 meters behind the door so that both of them could see him when the door opened. He counted on the element of surprise when they suddenly confronted him and he relied on his advantage, as they were only priests of the 9th or 10th degree.

The door creaked open. One of the subaltern priests leaned forward to look into the room. When he saw himself standing face to face with Kalal he uttered a terrified scream and jumped back. His companion remained outside in the corridor but Kalal noticed with satisfaction that he turned pale as death.

This was the moment Kalal had waited for. The horrendous power of his transformed mind assaulted the stunned victims like a ferocious beast at the moment of deepest panic. The 2 priests were never a match for a priest of the 2nd degree. However this battle was already decided the instant it began.

Moaning painfully the 2 young priests collapsed on the floor in convulsions. Kalal watched as they struggled to the last moment against his attack, their weakening minds fighting to retain their own will and their thoughts vainly trying to repel his thrust.

Suddenly they gave up and Kalal's fierce mental force broke through the gap in their defence, raising havoc in their minds till the storm had flooded the dam protecting the control centre of their lives.

Only after Kalal became aware that he was wasting his power on dead brains, he let up his concentration. The High Priest relaxed with a sigh in the knowledge that his cranium contained plentiful reserves of power to subdue more of his adversaries.

However none were in sight. The thoughts he perceived came from a distance which was too far to present any imminent danger.

Kalal cast a last look at the 2 corpses. Then he turned left and walked down the corridor. He paused for a few seconds at the corner, probed for any thoughts in the vicinity and cautiously peeked around the bend. His way was free. He walked a few more meters and came to a wider corridor which was also quiet and deserted. Kalal recalled that he had felt a torrent of thoughts from this direction half an hour

earlier. He took it as an indication that this part of the basement had already been searched so that it was relatively safe at this time.

Now he began to wonder why the Springers whom he had called for help before he went into hiding in the subterranean maze of installations had failed to respond to his plea. Maybe they had landed already some time ago and the priests in the temple had managed to persuade them that Kalal was not worthy of their assistance in his rescue.

This was not only possible, Kalal concluded in retrospect, but much more probable. It was more reasonable to assume that their story had convinced the Springers and that they were sent home by the priests with an apology instead of being permitted to find Kalal down below and free him without their interference.

He had to find another way and he hit upon a new idea the moment he saw that luminous red arrow on the wall of the corridor. At first the idea seemed horrendous but the more he thought about it the more useful it appeared to be, especially because Kalal was now secure in his knowledge that the activator endowed him with awesome mental powers.

He resolved that it was the way to his freedom and became determined to follow it.

* * * *

Before the priest was able to see them, Ron and Meech jumped together in a high leap across the slow moving belt to the high velocity conveyor near the centre of the tunnel which carried them the last meter to the stupefied priest.

Randall and Patterson acted in concert, following previous orders. They rushed behind Ron and the robot to the bright side of the portal. Larry gave Kazek a strong push that carried him along through the portal.

Ron had figured correctly. The portal seemed to have a cerebrally conditioned servomechanism which the priest either consciously activated or triggered by the terrified shock he experienced in his brain. In any case the portal closed much faster than it had opened before.

Now Ron took time to study the priest and his environment a little closer. The man standing before him with a pale, frightened face was dressed in a fine robe. He looked young and inexperienced. Nevertheless Ron was not inclined to underestimate him. He was an Anti and Antis were dangerous.

The section of the passage they had entered seemed to hold no further surprises. The transport belts disappeared in the smooth floor at the right side of the portal and emerged again on the left side in the opposite direction. They ran through a narrow slot underneath the portal back into the tunnel through which they had just travelled.

The young priest finally recovered from his shock. He turned to Kazek and tried to make his voice sound furious. "How dare you bring more people in than we allowed you? You intruded by force and you must be taken to the High Priest with your companions. He will mete out your punishment."

Ron seized the trembling Kazek by the shoulder and pushed him aside. Holding the gun in his hand he declared with a chuckle: "I'm the man to whom you must talk, my boy. Our friend Kazek is totally innocent of our little caper. We forced him to lead us to this place."

The priest waved his hand in a disdainful gesture. "That doesn't change the facts," he stated in a firmer voice. "You forced your way into the Temple of Truth and for this you will have to answer to the High Priest."

Ron shook his head. "We couldn't care less about appearing before your High Priest, young man," he replied. "But we would like you to show us the catacombs of your temple."

He knew only too well that the priest would turn down his request with a sarcastic, haughty smirk. The Anti scrutinized each of the Terrans and finally the still-quivering Kazek before he said: "I regret that I cannot comply with your wish. We are not set up for conducted tours of visitors." He was obviously determined to put an end to the useless conversation and continued in a sharp tone: "Instead I'm going to take you now to the Abbot of the temple. It's up to him to make a decision. Follow me!"

Without waiting for their reaction he turned around and started to walk along the corridor. Ron didn't budge. He knew the priest had superior mental capabilities but because he looked so young he probably had a low rank, still a long way to go before he learned to master the full panoply of paranormal tricks. Ron believed he knew how far he could go in opposing the young man.

He felt the painful, pulling sensation in his head as the priest walked away without looking back and he realized that the Anti tried to force his will on him and the others. He gave them the hypnotic order to follow him without resistance and forget the thought of flight. Although Ron estimated that it would take the priest quite some time before he succeeded in imposing his will on them, he decided that the time to act had come. "Stay where you are!" he shouted to the priest. "We have 2 guns pointed at you."

The priest kept walking but his steps became slower and hesitant. Finally he stopped and turned around. Challenging Ron with his eyes, his face expressed supreme confidence. "So what?" he asked defiantly.

"You should understand this language," Ron said sternly. "Stop trying to take over our brains. We don't want to be hypnotized by you."

The young Anti remained unshaken. "I'm not trying to take over your brains. I gave you a hypnotic order and you must obey me. That is all."

At the same time Ron felt the tug in his brain growing irresistibly. He glanced at Larry and saw his face beginning to twitch. Kazek began to whimper.

"Alright!" Ron countered. The word crackled like a pistol shot in the corridor. "You refuse to understand me but I'll explain to you what's going to happen in a minute. We have trained 2 weapons on you. One is an ordinary energy gun and the other is an old-fashioned revolver which shoots solid bullets. You've got 10 seconds to drop your hypnotic controls. Otherwise you get both weapons at once."

The body of Parudal, the young priest, suddenly sagged. His total collapse was in sharp contrast to the arrogant behaviour he had exhibited. He was shaken by fear. The strangers, whoever they were, knew his secret. He was vulnerable as all other Baalol priests were with the possible exception of the High Baalol himself. Each priest had the paranormal ability to surround himself with 2 types of protective screens, one shielding him from the effects of energy rays and the other from material projectiles. These shields made them virtually invulnerable since no weapons of other descriptions were used in the Galaxy.

There was only one circumstance which could prove fatal to a Baalol priest. He was not in a position to surround himself with both screens at the same time. It would have caused the overloading of his brain's para-mental appendix and led to a complete breakdown. He was either able to protect himself from the rays of a contemporary energy weapon or against the bullets of outdated relics. Though he was capable of alternating between the 2 shields within 1/100th of a second, the one feat he could not accomplish was warding off the coordinated concentrated firing of 2 different guns.

It was the most cruel of the surprises Parudal had to experience since he began doing business with these strangers. He had been convinced that Kazek and his unknown friends would never reach the temple in a normal state because the entire region was pervaded by the hypnotic radiation emitted by Kalal's cell-activator. Only because they had been so certain that midway Kazek and his customers would start chasing the violet miracle flower instead of Liquitiv, had they been given permission to enter the temple. It was strictly against their rules to admit strangers.

Now Kazek and his companion had not only intruded in the temple but they had also brought 3 other men with them, one of whom seemed to know exactly what he was after. He was apparently oblivious to the radiation from Kalal's activator and the shining helmets they all wore destroyed his hypnotic power.

So far Parudal had been able to cope with his setbacks and managed to conceal his surprise. Now he realized that the strangers knew other secrets too, one of the most important among them the vulnerability of the presumably almighty Baalol priests.

His equilibrium was shattered. "Who... who are you?" he stammered incredulously.

7/ SUBTERRANEAN DISCOVERIES

Homunk: It must be due to the interaction between the activator and his brain, is it?

IT: Quite right. His thought processes are magnified in consonance with the mechano-hypnotic impulse generated by the activator. In his present state this man can perform superhuman feats. However he is bound to use his gifts the way I have predetermined and he will suffer the consequences.

Homunk: Is a person with his character not capable of applying his special gifts for a noble purpose?

IT: No. He is ambitious and unscrupulous. Such a man is ruined most quickly by the temptation to abuse dominant powers.

* * * *

Kalal could feel the extraneous power pulsing rhythmically in his brain, a sign that he was getting close to

the place of danger.

Ahead of him, at a distance of about 30 to 40 meters, was the Hall of Protecting Thoughts. He knew that he would be safe if he succeeded in reaching it and gaining admission. The place he approached was the inner sanctum of the temple. What happened inside made the Temple of Truth the safest place on Utik as it did, by the same token: all the other Baalol temples on the surface of whatever planet they were located. There was no other generator that intertwined mechanically and mentally produced energy in such an effective combination as was done in the Hall of Protective Thoughts.

Naturally the room in which the protective shield was generated was ringed by a scatter field and Kalal had to fight his way through the perilous zone. He had to strain his brain continuously and concentrate his thoughts on his goal with increasing intensity. Disregarding anything else, he closed his eyes to keep from being distracted by the sight of his surroundings.

His freedom was at stake and the goal was worth the most strenuous effort of every fibre in his body. Once he saw the whites of the Protectors' eyes he would have won the game.

* * * *

Meech Hannigan carefully took his bearings.

His mechanical brain registered amazement when he noticed the disturbance occurring somewhere ahead and farther down from him. The preponderant vibrations from the priest, whom he suspected to be responsible for the hypnotic frenzy of the people outside the walls of the temple, had grown much stronger. At the same time certain other effects that had earlier remained on the periphery became more pronounced. They seemed to swell at the same rate as the radiation from the priest. Meech had the impression that the thoughts of the priest acted in resonance with other frequencies which did not appear to emanate from an organic brain. However Meech could do no more than speculate about the nature of the phenomenon because he knew as little about the matter as Terra's scientists who had created him. He reported his observation as well as his speculations to Ron Landry.

"Where is it located?" Ron asked tersely.

"At a forward inclination of about 60°," Meech replied.

Ron spun around and shot the question at the young priest: "Who's down there?"

Parudal shook his head and bit his lips. Ron pointed the barrel of his weapon at the priest and Meech, who watched every move of his boss, did the same.

Parudal shook his head a second time. "You can prevent me by force from hauling you before the High Priest," he replied, "but you can't compel me to commit treachery."

Ron lowered his weapon. "Your fanaticism would be worthy of a better cause," he responded coolly. Then he turned to Patterson. "You know the direction. See if you can find the way."

They resumed their advance along the corridor which continued to run in a straight direction and was

lined with doors on both sides. They were easy to open but showed only storage rooms with shelves full of various supplies. It was probably the place where they kept the Liquitiv drug which Kazek would have received if matters had not taken a different turn.

Scratching his head, Patterson muttered: "This won't lead us anywhere. We must look elsewhere."

Meech gave them a running report regarding the direction from which he received the mental vibrations. It seemed that the unknown priest hardly moved from his spot and that each step brought them closer—at least in the horizontal plane. The angle Meech quoted kept getting steeper and steeper till they finally found themselves on a spot vertically above the origin of the radiation.

Patterson's eyes scanned the environment. Ron observed that he frequently cast guarded glances at Parudal, who failed to notice them. Patterson had a special ability of reading thoughts in other people's faces which was tantamount to the functioning of a telepathic mind. He convinced himself by a final look at the priest and exclaimed: "If the entrance to the lower levels is not within 10 meters of here, I'll walk in space all the way to Terra!"

Since Patterson was so certain, they began to scour the walls minutely. Ron noticed Parudal's face looked more 'and more worried. The young priest had been exceedingly troubled by his harrowing experience and was no longer able to conceal his apprehension.

Parudal apparently believed that he could not prevent the detection of the secret entrance by normal means since Ron felt the coercive tension in his brain again. It was so strong that Parudal must have put all he had in a last ditch effort to keep the intruders from carrying out their illicit plans.

With slow deliberation Ron turned to the priest and pointed the barrel of his revolver at Parudal's chest. Meech followed Ron's movement with his thermobeamer like his shadow.

Ron warned in a low menacing tone: "If you try this once more you will be a dead man. I have no intention of putting up with your interference."

The intense pain instantly ceased its pull, on Ron's brain. Parudal realized that his opposition was futile. He looked so depressed, so pitiful, that Ron was certain he would no longer cause any trouble.

Patterson had not taken part in the incident but continued his search. Suddenly he uttered a jubilant cry, diverting Ron's attention from the priest. Patterson waved to his companions and pointed to the wall. here! he exclaimed. "There is a line as thin as a hair running up and down the wall. It doesn't look like much. Wait, I found a second crack. It must be a door!"

Ron glimpsed the expression on Parudal's face, confirming that Patterson was correct. They tried to open the door, which was easier than they had expected. The perfect fit of the door, rendering the seam virtually invisible, had obviously been considered sufficient camouflage by the Baalol priests. The mechanical lock of the door was no different from all the others.

Larry was the first to go into the room behind the door. He took one step and threw his body back, shouting an angry curse. He managed to gain his balance again after spinning violently around. Then he stared in disgust at the dimly lit hole gaping behind the door.

Without a word, Ron took a bullet out of his pocket and threw it into the opening. As he had guessed, the bullet floated slowly down as if it had to pass through molasses. "An antigrav shaft," he explained. "Let's go down! We don't have any time to lose."

Meech was the first to enter the shaft. Ron followed, dragging the priest along. Behind the priest came Patterson, then Kazek, who was still scared out of his wits, and finally Larry. The door to the corridor closed as soon as Larry passed its threshold into the antigravitor.

After floating down 50 meters Meech observed that the emission came from a horizontal level. "It's getting incredibly strong," he added, alarmed.

Ron and Meech probed the wall of the shaft and quickly found a seam framing a door which presumably lead to a lower level of the underground installations. Ron opened the door and saw a corridor which resembled the one they had left.

They told the priest to leave the shaft. Kazek, Patterson and Randall followed and Meech took his bearings once again. Then he pointed to a row of doors in the opposite wall of the corridor. Ron felt certain that the way to their goal lay behind one of them.

He was about to open the first door when Parudal, the young priest, uttered a half-choked cry behind him. He whirled around and before he understood what had happened he saw Parudal lying motionlessly on the floor and staring with wide-open eyes at the ceiling. Ron rushed to his side and detected the almost imperceptible breathing of the priest. Parudal was still alive. A brain concussion caused a severe spasm and the horrified look in his lifeless eyes, he surmised.

Ron was at a loss for an explanation of the accident. He suspected that Parudal's collapse was connected with the overpowering radiation which Meech registered uninterruptedly but he had no proof of such a link.

He decided to let Parudal lie where he had fallen and continue his way without him. He turned back to the door and tried to open it. However at this moment a thunderous clap reverberated from the walls. Ron felt the floor shake under his feet and had trouble maintaining his balance. Dust and stones poured down from the ceiling.

Patterson was hurled against the wall and clung to it for support. His face looked stunned with surprise. Kazek bawled like a baby. Larry ducked and peered anxiously into the corridor. Only Meech had maintained his composure. "The transmission is gaining in intensity," he stated calmly. Then he added as if obliged to make a personal remark: "I don't know what will happen if it gets worse. There is a tremendous buildup of energy going on."

Ron dismissed it with a wave of his hand. "It doesn't matter," he decided. "We must push on. The guy we want to catch can't be very far."

He managed to open the door on his 3rd attempt. A bright hall extended deep inside and Ron believed he could see shadowy movements in the background. Tightening his grip on his weapon, he shouted: "He's up front. Let's go, men!"

At the same moment a 2nd explosion ripped through the foundations of the building. Ron and his men leaped into the open hall and when the thunder diminished they could hear the walls of the corridor collapse, bringing with it an avalanche of dirt and rocks.

They faced the possibility of being cut off from the outside world, Ron realized with concern.

* * * *

The free flow of their protective thoughts suddenly encountered an obstacle which prevented the normal unhindered propagation to which they were accustomed.

Somewhere another vibration caused an interference. At that particular spot the protective thoughts were wiped out and rendered ineffective.

The brains that were the source of the telepathic waves were not unaware of the disturbance. They had no explanation for the interference and were unable to counteract it. In conjunction with the machines surrounding them in the Hall of Protective Thoughts they were responsible for the inviolability of the sacrosanct temple and the slightest detraction diminished the necessary degree of their concentration.

Disseminating their steady flow of protective thoughts as always, they tolerated the fact that they were eliminated at one spot, knowing that their effectiveness was not reduced above ground.

What they failed to comprehend was that their thoughts were intercepted by a hostile intelligence.

* * * *

For Kalal, the whole world was nothing but a red-hot fireball. He had closed his eyes but the image formed behind his lids and consumed Kalal's mind with the heat of its glow.

He thirsted for a pause and fought the urge of stretching out on the floor to rest. But in the farthest recess of his brain, where still a tiny spark of his analytical mind flickered, an inner voice whispered that he would seal his fate the moment he relented his drive.

He had no choice but to go forward if he wanted to attain his freedom. He strained his thoughts to project a picture of the conditions inside the Hall of Protective Thoughts. He forced his brainwaves through the solid walls to obtain a glimpse of the huge generators which produced the protective field and the transformer which modulated the thoughts of the keepers of the guard so that they became immersed and amplified by the strength of the field.

Kalal had to assimilate the whole picture before his mental eye. He endeavoured to see it through the blazing sphere behind his eyelids as he strained to infuse his thoughts into the transformer. If he proved to be strong enough he would eventually be able to shut down the operation of the machine and deflect the thoughts of the protectors back to their own brains.

Kalal felt his whole world changing into a state of flux and he sensed the awesome power of the opposing forces which would collide in a physical explosion when they reached the climax of the battle, bringing down the walls and ceiling of the temple. He was not deterred by fear. If he did not win the struggle it mattered little how he died.

Kalal paused for a second in order to save his brain the colossal extra burden of moving his legs while he

concentrated on his goal. It brought an instant result. The fireball before his eyes lost its blinding glow and he was able to see the machines in the Hall of Protective Thoughts. He saw not only the machines but also the faces of 5 priests sitting in front of the transformer, transmitting their brainwaves to the machine thereby converting them in a formidable shield which made the temple virtually impregnable.

* * * *

Only the oldest of the 5 sentinels could later remember anything at all about the catastrophe during the rare moments when his mental derangement improved a little.

He had some recollection of the interfering frequencies which all of them had noticed but disregarded because they considered their task of protecting the temple of paramount importance which could not be neglected for whatever reason. They even remained unperturbed when the extraneous thought became so powerful that it obliterated the metal power of the protectors, making them totally useless in their proximity.

This had been their mistake. They should have interrupted the flow of their thoughts and investigated the cause of the disturbance. Had they done so, the transformer probably would not have suddenly terminated its operation. Instead its control passed from one thought to another. The others never knew what happened. They were either instantly killed or fell into a coma. Only Okarol, the oldest one, possessed a mind that was strong enough to resist the murderous onslaught for a few seconds. He recognized the thoughts which struck his brain. They were the same he and the others had thought all the time but were suddenly rejected by the transformer: "We strengthen the shield! We protect the Temple of Truth!"

They had put so much fervour in their thoughts that their energy, after the process of conversion by the transformer magnified the effect of the machine a thousand times, far beyond the mechanical capacity of the whole apparatus.

Now their own thoughts were flung back at their brains. They had contained so much mental power that they could throw back the strongest enemy from the walls of the temple. The same power was now reversed and easily erased the minds from which the thoughts had originated.

Okarol's final thought before everything went dark around him was the vague realization of the cataclysm that had occurred.

* * * *

Ron jumped out of the way when the wall next to him broke apart and crashed with an earsplitting noise to the floor. Gasping for air, he stopped at the edge of the debris and helped up Meech, who had been knocked off his feet by the falling rubble.

The dirt slid down from behind the wall and filled the hall.

"Larry! Lofty!" Ron called the names of his 2 friends, but he heard nothing except the rumbling of the sliding soil. Randall, Patterson and Kazek were either trapped behind the wall or buried under the debris.

It would have been hard for Ron to decide what to do next had it not been for Meech Hannigan who was intent on carrying out his mission as quickly as possible.

"Look ahead, sir!" Meech called out. "That must be him! A single man!"

Ron spun around. The light in the hall was glaring, blocking out more of the view than it revealed. However he glimpsed the dark shadowy figure of a man who staggered in the brightness as if he were drunk.

"The intensity of the radiation has passed its climax, sir," Ron reported. "All other sources of radiation have apparently been eliminated and only that of the man over there is still active."

Ron reasoned that Randall and Patterson were either safe or in a spot where he could not help them with his bare hands even with the assistance of Meech.

Meech was already on his way. With long strides he advanced through the undamaged part of the hall with Ron following as fast as he could.

They came to a rotunda where 5 men in the ornate vestments of the Baalol cult were grotesquely sprawled on the floor. The walls were lined with machines whose purpose was not immediately apparent to Ron.

He studied the frozen faces of the priests and their dilated eyes. Then he glanced questioningly at Meech.

Meech shook his head. "No sir, he's not among them. I think this is his handiwork. His brainwaves are now coming from out there." He pointed to the opposite wall

"We'll stay on his track," Ron decided.

Ron was vexed by the abstruse aspects of the conditions surrounding him that caused walls to collapse and the earth to slide down. He had no idea why and how these men were killed or paralysed. He could only speculate that supernatural forces were at work that eluded the grasp of ordinary minds and felt irritated by the frustration. He lacked Hannigan's dispassionate ability of relegating inexplicable phenomena to a memory bank where they could remain until somebody offered a valid explanation.

Now he had a man to hunt. This was a tangible job which he found much more to his liking. He rose to his task and ran to the door. He wanted to get out away from the crumpled bodies with the lifeless faces and, blank eyes.

He rolled the door to the side. Ron was unable to see what was behind it. He was bodily lifted up in a burst of radiance that hurt his eyes and made him scream in anguish.

* * * *

Kalal had observed that he was being followed. At first he believed it was only one man because he received only the thoughts of one person. When he discovered that 2 people were in hot pursuit, his complacency was momentarily shaken. He realized he had to get rid of them by hook or crook. The sudden appearance of a man whose thoughts he failed to register confounded him. After his fight to the finish with the 5 protectors he had little of his power to concentrate left intact.

Nevertheless he had taken a stand. He hid behind the door at the other side of the rotunda and waited till his pursuers opened it. The imminent danger had a salutary effect on him, arousing his will and power to concentrate again to the degree necessary to combat 2 such tenacious opponents.

The door slid open and he brought his power into play. He felt a jab of pain in his head, which made him realize how much he needed a rest. He resolved to seek it as soon as he was free.

Kalal registered with satisfaction that his fierce attack had overwhelmed the spirit of the man opening the door and put him to flight but when he realized that the other one failed to react to his brain power he was thrown into a panic.

Instead of responding to Kalal's attack as he had hoped, the other man acted in a manner that made the situation untenable for Kalal.

* * * *

Meech Hannigan had grasped the situation much quicker than an organic brain could have done. He heard Ron scream and saw him stagger. He also observed the motionless figure in the semi-dark of the corridor and knew what he had to do.

Ron fell to the floor, dropping his revolver. Meech instantly leaped to pick it up, holding his own weapon, the heavy thermobeamer, ready to shoot as before. From the moment that Kalal sprang to his mental attack—to the first shot of Meech—less than a second elapsed.

He fired 3 quick shots from the revolver. The sharp cracks were accompanied by the zing of the searing white beam of the thermogun. Meech heard a wild scream and let up the pressure on the button of his beamer. His mechanical eyes were not blinded by the glare of the energy discharge. He saw the fleeting shadow of Kalal running away from the corridor and heard the distant sound of his feet.

Meech turned his attention to Ron, who had already raised himself up on an elbow. Puzzled, he stared at the robot. "What... what happened?" he rasped.

"He was waiting for us," Meech replied. "He probably wanted to knock us out but I chased him away."

The functioning of Ron's cool mind was not very long impaired by the incident. He gritted his teeth and jumped up. "Let's go after him or he'll get away!" he urged.

Meech sprinted into the corridor. The nimble speed with which he moved his metallic frame, containing several times the mass of a human body, was amazing. Ron had trouble staying on his heels.

There was no sign of the priest they pursued. Although Meech believed that he had wounded him, he seemed to have moved faster than it was possible for a robot.

The long corridor was uncannily quiet. It finally aroused Ron's suspicion and he remembered the gravshaft which Patterson had detected on the other side of the rotunda. He wondered whether they had run past a well-concealed door in their headlong rush after the fugitive.

He pointed it out to Meech, who immediately suggested they turn back and search the walls of the corridor.

It took them 10 precious minutes to find the door to the antigravitor. They pushed it open and floated up as fast as they could. Ron was keenly aware of the fact that they were on their way to the far more dangerous areas of the temple above ground.

They soon discerned a spot of light at the upper end of the shaft and Meech recognized from a considerable distance that the shaft terminated out in the open and that bright spot was caused by the rays of Utik's sun which in the meantime had begun to shine again. But Meech had no way of knowing what to expect in one of the courts of the temple where the shaft probably ended.

Many things had happened on the surface of Utik since they had ventured into the subterranean regions of the temple.

8/ DEATH OF AN ANTI

Homunk: Do you follow the events on Utik constantly?

IT: Of course. It amuses me too much to break off even temporarily. The activator is an excellent communication device.

Pause.

IT: As I look at it, however, the events do not exclusively serve my pleasure.

Homunk: You are making me curious.

IT: It confirms my theory again that the Terrans will inherit the Arkonide Imperium. It won't be long till they rule the Galaxy. It is a unique spectacle to watch the determination of four Terrans in their successful struggle to conquer a congregation of mentogenetic Baalol priests.

Loud laughter.

IT: Do you see the trouble their leader is having now?

Homunk: No. It takes me a little longer to perceive the picture. Would you...

IT: He is trying to free himself from the arms of a woman beseeching him to tell her the secret of

where she can find the blue miracle flower after it disappeared.

* * * *

The large courtyard was jammed with people, rending the air with cries and wailing. There was not a Baalol priest in sight. The men and women in the jostling crowd were all citizens of Utik.

Meech and Ron had trouble leaving the grav-shaft. Some of the noisy mob saw them climb out of the antigravitor and descended on them with a slew of questions. They tried to out-shout each other but all Ron could get was that they were anxious to follow their miracle flower, which had vanished somehow for some reason.

"The protective screen must have collapsed," Ron said to the robot "They got in but the priest beat them by a nose."

Meech raised his head and searched the sky. Ron knew what he was looking for. The priest could not simply have run away on foot because the mob would have caught him. The temple had a fleet of automatic cars and probably some high-speed aircraft. In the confusion the priest must have been able to take one of them and flee.

"I can see several specks in the air," Meech finally said to Ron, who was jostled by the inquisitive crowd. "They are heading north at great speed. He could be one of them. The others are probably flown by his admirers from Utik who are trying to save the flower."

Ron pushed hard against the screaming swarm around him. "We can't let him get away," he shouted. "There must be another machine somewhere in this temple which we can use to go after him."

Meech nodded eagerly. "I hope I won't lose sight of him," he replied in a loud voice. "I can now barely receive his radiation."

He stepped in front of Ron and began to force their way through the agitated mass of people, across the courtyard. A hysterically weeping woman besieged Ron, pleading with him to tell her where the miracle flower had been taken. She clung tightly to Ron and he lost valuable time in gently extricating himself from her grip because he was afraid to hurt her.

They passed through a narrow walkway between 2 windowless rectangular buildings and entered another courtyard which presented the same picture. It was filled with a milling crowd of possessed souls. There was no sign of the Baalol priests who seemed to have retreated to safety inside the temple buildings.

However there was one welcome difference: several automatic transporters could be seen above the heads of the crowd. They were empty and seemed only to wait for the taking by the Terrans to continue their chase.

Meech had to apply his superior strength only till they reached the centre of the courtyard. At the midway line a radical change occurred. The din suddenly abated and all became quiet. The people stopped shoving each other and stood still with astounded expressions.

It didn't take long for Ron to realize what had happened. The hypnotic zone emanating from the strange priest had the range of a 25-kilometre radius. The moment the fleeing priest had surpassed the critical distance, his victims ceased their yearnings and cries. They were free again but the inhabitants of the zone to the north would feel the influence now.

Ron and Meech took advantage of the opportunity. They were able to cross the yard more quickly. When they reached the row of vehicles they climbed into the nearest one. Ron felt relieved to see that it was apparently a vehicle the Antis had bought on Utik with whose operation he was familiar. He started the machine and went, straight up above the roofs of the temple buildings, scanning the view to the north.

He recognized the foothills of a mountain stretching beyond the northern horizon of the city. He had studied the geography of Utik before he had left Terra and knew that a vast desert covered the northern land of Utik to the far coast of the continent. It was an immense territory of sand and bleak hills, with dry riverbeds.

The priest could not have picked a worse place to hide.

* * * *

Kalal found it impossible to breathe easier.

The wound he had suffered at the hands of the mysterious stranger was more painful than dangerous. It hampered him very little but he was deeply disturbed by the thought that the stranger obviously knew that the Baalol priests were vulnerable to the simultaneous shooting of projectiles and energy rayguns.

The 2 men were apparently Terrans and he feared that the secrets of the Baalol cult were already known on Terra. He tried to put the dreaded thought out of his mind because he didn't know the answer to his question. He had to look ahead. He was on his way to the desert after he managed to get rid of the mad flock of natives who had tried to waylay him in their aircraft hovering over the temple.

He approached the steep mountains at the rim of the desert where he hoped to find refuge in one of the inaccessible gorges. After a few days the excitement would, have died down at Massenock and he would have time to find a safe way to make good his final escape.

Kalal, who now steered his craft manually, started to climb in order to survey the terrain a little better. Suddenly a flash caught his eye. He was terrified when he recognized that the tiny shimmering point was a craft suspended in air in his own course.

Knowing he was in a defenceless state, he was gripped by panic. His brain no longer generated the necessary power to create an impregnable protective shield and his flying machine did not have the mechanical equipment to produce the protective field which he could have reinforced with his own mental power.

Kalal had no alternative but to flee. He steered his machine in a precipitous downward curve. The mountains rushed at him with a horrendous speed. A dark gorge opened before him and Kalal chose it as the best place to hide.

As he plunged into the black gap, holding the controls in a tight grip, he cast an upward glance. His heart almost stopped when he saw that the other machine was already so close to him that he could see the heads of the 2 occupants in the window. The aircraft was hurtling down at a faster rate than his own and was about to enter the gorge farther to the north.

Kalal estimated the distance and believed at first that he had a chance to reach a hiding place before his opponents caught up with him. But he realized that his pursuer manoeuvred more skilfully and swifter than he anticipated. The machine suddenly veered and dived toward him at a steep angle so that Kalal realized that it was their intention to ram him.

Kalal's cool reasoning began to prevail again over his panic. He kept his craft on the same course till the last moment. But 2 or 3 seconds before the threatened collision he pulled his control stick back as hard as he could. His craft was severely shaken by the sharp jolt. The fuselage groaned as if it were about to be shattered but the nose obediently lifted and Kalal shot high up and away over the strangers' machine.

However he had failed to judge his enemy's strategy correctly. By concentrating his attention solely on the approaching vehicle he had failed to see the overhang jutting out from the stonewall at his right. His enemy had expected him to perform his manoeuvre. His machine ascended on its evasive course for a couple of seconds, when Kalal saw a black shadow looming over his head. He made a desperate effort to steer his craft away but it was too late and he slammed into the overhang with a thunderous crash.

He had pushed his craft to extreme velocity and the impact smashed the cabin of his machine. He was thrown out as the wreck bounced down the slop of the mountain.

Kalal was knocked unconscious yet he was lucky. He rolled down the steep slope but before he was flung out into the abyss he was caught by a narrow ledge at the rim of the gorge.

Although the 2nd impact was quite severe it was not fatal to Katal.

* * * *

Half an hour later Meech reported that the signals he received from the priest became stronger again. Ron wanted to say something in reply but before he could open his mouth he heard a buzz from the receiver he wore behind his ear. He listened, electrified. Raising his left arm, he spoke into the mike. "Grasshopper. Who's speaking?"

"Grasshopper," he heard Larry Randall's voice. "We can see you."

"Larry—!" Ron shouted with cracking voice. "How did you get out of that mess? Where is Lofty?"

"We're all here! Larry replied cheerfully. "Lofty is sitting next to me and Kazek is lying on the floor, still shaking in his boots. I'll tell you everything else later. Right now we have more important things to do. We almost caught up with the guy and he must see us any minute."

"Which guy?"

"The Anti!"

"Get him and hold him for us! We'll be there as fast as we can."

"OK. That's what I wanted to do anyway but we'd better keep radio silence now. It might be possible for the Anti to intercept our calls."

"Right."

Meech had already searched the sky and discovered Larry's aircraft on the blue horizon. Then he also noticed the dark spot of the priest's machine against the background of the mountain. He was able to observe the initial manoeuvre which Larry executed to intercept the fugitive but he and Ron learned what really happened only after Larry broke the radio silence and gave them his next report which he concluded with the words: "We are now exactly over the spot where he crashed. He must have made a pact with the devil... he is still moving!"

* * * *

A short distance above the spot where Kalal's vehicle smashed against the overhang was a place where Ron could land his machine. During his approach he had already noticed a crevice forming a chimney in the mountain wall which would give him fairly easy access to the rim of the gorge. Ron was determined to save the priest in order to get the information he wanted about the weird events that had taken place on Utik the last few days. Therefore he decided to go down through the crevice to reach him.

Randall remained up in the air, circling over the gorge where he could keep a close watch over Ron—and the priest. Ron let Meech climb out first to make sure that the vehicle stood firmly on the narrow ledge. Then he followed the robot and they climbed over the precipice and down through the crevice leading to the rim of the gorge. Meech went first and waited at the bottom of the crevice till Ron joined him.

Meanwhile the sun stood high in the sky. The bare stone reflected its scorching rays and the air shimmered in the unbearable heat. Ron shaded his eyes with his hand in order to see better. Below him, no more than 15 meters away, lay the Anti in a little trough that had broken his fall. His expensive robe was torn and dusty. His face was smeared with blood and he seemed to have broken an arm, to judge from the awkward, unnatural angle it stuck out from his body.

However the man was still alive. Ron saw him rise up on his knees and peer up the wall. Ron reached for his weapon. He didn't know how the Anti would react. Maybe the fall had not robbed him of all his courage. Ron wanted to call out that he had come to help him but it was in vain.

A force was thrust against him. It was invisible but he felt its formidable power. He was thrown back and lost his balance. His feet slid from under his body and his back hit the wall. He began to slide down the steep slope and realized in helpless horror that nothing was between him and the abyss that could stop his deadly plunge. He saw himself slide past the Anti and sail through the air after going over the edge.

* * * *

Kalal no longer was able to think rationally. He didn't know whether there was still some hope for him or not. Yet he was furious. He saw the 2 strangers, whom he had already encountered at the temple, emerge from the crevice. When he noticed the shining helmets on their heads he realized how they had protected themselves against the hypnotic influence of his activator.

Kalal hated them. It had been his burning desire to vanquish the High Baalol so that he might rule in his place. These two spoiled his ambitious plans. He had to kill them—even if he perished in the attempt.

He concentrated for the last time in his life, then struck his final blow.

* * * *

Reacting instantaneously, Meech leaped. His desperate jump took him over the edge of the abyss and he dropped almost the full length of the wall. Through split-second thinking he was able to throw himself in Ron's path and catch him in his arms—only 2 meters from the brink of the yawning chasm.

But Meech had to do more to save the life of his boss. He was aware that the Anti was still a danger to be reckoned with and he acted to eliminate it. With Ron's revolver in one hand and his own thermobeamer in the other he blasted the enemy with both barrels.

This time he was not content with firing 3 shots. He emptied the drum of the ancient weapon and saw that the priest slumped down again. Although he stopped moving, Meech had the impression that he was still alive.

Ron recovered from his sudden brush with death. "Blast him!" he cursed, gnashing his teeth. "He almost made me break my neck!"

He got up and they both went over to the Anti lying in the trough. One of the bullets from the revolver had hit Kalal in the chest.

However they noticed something beside the wound, a slight welt between his ribs as if some operation had been performed beneath his skin. Ron touched the spot with his hand but desisted when Kalal began to moan in pain.

The Anti opened his eyes. They looked vacant. His vision seemed to be blurred. He tried to raise himself up but reclined again and was quiet for awhile. Then he gasped: "Curse the High Baalol at Trakarar!"

They were Kalal's last words. His body shuddered and he died.

* * * *

Col. Nike Quinto took his time to review the Utik mission with his men—now that the case was solved. "The interrogation of the 5 prisoners captured by Sgt. Hannigan on his first foray into the hypnotic influence zone," Nike Quinto stated, "and the examination of the dead priest established beyond a doubt that one of the cell-activators of the kind the Solar Administrator has recently received from the planet Wanderer was the cause of the tumult. It was only 1 out of 20. These cell-activators, as the name implies, activate the body cells of the person who carries it and his life becomes virtually indestructible. Why this one has performed in such a different manner remains a matter of conjecture. It could have something to do with the peculiar sense of humour the being on Wanderer possesses or it might be due to a faulty construction. We will learn more about it when we find out how the other 19 men fared who recently obtained the activators."

He paused and studied the notes lying on the desk before him. He breathed audibly as if he had trouble making sense out of them and his rosy face was covered with pearls of sweat. He mumbled something about his high blood pressure and that he regarded all long lectures as an imposition. He finally resumed his conclusions in a high but calm voice. "The weird case of the comatose priests and the corpses in the subterranean rotunda has been elucidated by the induced willingness of our prisoners to confess. The Baalol priests have erected a protective fence around their temple by electronic generators. However this shield was not sufficient for their purposes and they reinforced it by using the well-known mentogenetic powers of their brains. They keep a constant guard in each of their temples, who has only one assignment: he must project his protective thoughts, as they are called, on the defence screen to augment its impregnability. You probably can deduce from my awkward choice of technical expressions how little I understand of the subject. Anyway, Kalal who was finally hunted to death was obviously trying to escape from his own brethren. Why, we don't know for certain. Perhaps they wanted to do away with him because he imperilled the temple—and he objected to sacrificing his life. This is one guess. Whatever it was, he fled into the catacombs of the temple and then knocked out the 5 priests guarding it with their uniform thoughts. It must have been a telepathic struggle of colossal magnitude. Gentlemen, you too have felt the mechanical effects of the devastating clash of their mental energies. Kalal also managed to escape the frenzied mob that stormed the courtyards of the temple after the collapse of the protective screen but you eventually sealed his fate."

Quinto wiped the sweat from his brow, trying to remember something else. "Well... the case might have become even more complicated. Apparently one of the Baalol priests summoned help from the fleet of the Springers. They responded to his call shortly after Kalal's flight and 30 Springer ships arrived at Utik. However the Arkonide fleet had already formed a blockade around the planet and the Springers were turned back in a fruitless intervention. Now the Utik affair is finished as far as we are concerned and I don't expect it to have any diplomatic sequels. So far it has not even come to the attention of the Administrator and we have no reason to concern ourselves further with the Baalol temple on Utik. Those people will be too busy repairing the damage they have incurred to think up more trouble for us. The 5 prisoners will be released. They have all responded well to our mental therapy and will be sent back after the administration of a memory block. Any questions, gentlemen?"

"Yessir," Ron Landry spoke up. "I would still like to know how Capt. Randall managed to get out of the ruins where he was buried in the temple. Things have been too hectic till now to hear the full story."

Nike Quinto raised his finger. "Well, Capt. Randall, would you tell us about it?"

"There isn't much to report," Larry began. "The walls collapsed all around us but we were never in serious danger. At first I didn't quite know what to do. Then Patterson had an idea." He glanced

appreciatively at the grey-bearded veteran. "He assumed correctly that the man we were chasing would try to reach the surface in his effort to escape us and that instead of following Ron and Meech, which was made too difficult by the mass of rubble that cut us off from them, he suggested we turn back and see if we could use the grav-shaft to go up and intercept the fleeing man. It took us a few minutes to break through to the antigravitor. The shaft ended in a courtyard and we came just in time to witness the flood of enthusiastic people bursting into the yard. We had to pull back to a safe place in order to keep from being swept away by the avalanche. The surging bodies quickly concentrated in a circle and when we ventured closer again we saw that the priest was at the vortex of their movements. They sprinkled him with water, fondled him and acted silly to their hearts' content. However the priest could not be deterred from his goal. Soaking wet, he elbowed his way through the people caressing him, determined to reach the row of vehicles parked in the background. We got there before he did and without being noticed by him. There were a lot of other transporters in the air above the courtyard and his eyes were probably too full of water to see us. We took off in one of the aircraft... and you know the rest."

Nike Quinto nodded in assent. "What happened to Kazek?" he inquired.

"We dropped him off at his restaurant on our way back," Larry laughed. "He's been cured of Liquitiv as well as dealing with Terrans for the rest of his life."

Quinto chuckled. "Very good. Any more questions?" He studied the faces of the 4 men. "Well then, I recommend that you go home and take a good rest. It will do wonders for your blood pressure even though it doesn't bother you as much as me. Don't laugh, Sgt. Hannigan, take my advice, it will do the plasma in your generators good!"

He dismissed his listeners with a wave of his hand. Ron Landry and his men got up, saluted and went to the door. But their boss wouldn't have been Nike Quinto if he had not called them back at the last moment and hinted at their future assignment. "By the way, one question has not yet been solved and some day we may be called upon to answer it: who is the High Baalol... and where is Trakarar?"

* * * *

Homunk:*Have you now lost further interest in Utik?*

IT:*Only in the events on Utik. However we have given out 21 cell-activators.*

Homunk:*Do you expect to get great fun out of them?*

IT:*Of course. Now take a look at Veevee, for instance... where a High Priest of the Baalol cult feels called upon to preach working together with Terra in brotherly love. I can picture with delight how this is going to rattle the brains of his flock of faithful!*

ORDER OF THE ACTION

1/ THE UNKNOWN BRAIN

2/ DANGEROUS OPPONENTS

3/ OBJECTIVE: LIQUITIV

4/ "DIE, KALAL! DIE!"

5/ "VIOLET FLOWER: VIOLENT HOUR"

6/ SHOCKING SURPRISE

7/ SUBTERRANEAN DISCOVERIES

8/ DEATH OF AN ANTI

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

WONDERFLOWER OF UTIK

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

AURIS OF LAS-TOOR would not be interrupted and she continued in Perry Rhodan's defence:

"The situation can't be what Gonozal VIII represents it to be in his Imperium. It can't be true that Rhodan has betrayed his friend the Emperor! There must be misunderstandings here or circumstances must be involved which we are not able to judge at this distance. From my own position I must warn you: do not grant Emperor Gonozal VIII this assistance immediately! Use diplomatic subterfuge if you have to! It is the duty of the Ruling Council to find out the cause of this terrible misunderstanding between the Arkon Imperium and Perry Rhodan!

"I'd like to say personally, right here and now, that Perry Rhodan is not capable of the treason which the Arkonide accuses him of! A man like this Terran who places such high value on each individual human life must also know what it means to have friends! Honourable Ruling Council, may the wisdom of the gods and the insight of the great ones among our people be with us today and lead us to a correct decision!"

Will Auris' impassioned appeal succeed or fall on deaf ears?

The answer will be learned next time in—

CALLER FROM ETERNITY

by

Kurt Brand