

## 1/ THE ROBOT HUNTERS

"BOGIES!"

"Sir, we have bogies in sector K1-8-DX. Range 2.3 lisex. Standing by for instructions ..."

Col. Kermak, commander of Solar class battlecruiser *Alderamin*, did not so much as turn his head. He stared intently at the main viewscreen of the Control Central, which gave him a very natural reproduction of a section of the outer void. With a swift movement of his hand he brought in the magnification. The 2.3 light-seconds of distance seemed to telescope and the tracked objects became visible.

"Increase retropulsion," he said without taking his eyes from the screen. "Approach manoeuvre. Boarding crews stand by! Man the battle stations!"

The 1st Officer saluted and left the room in order to transmit the orders and see that they were carried out.

Col. Kermak was looking at 3 ships on the viewscreen. They were apparently drifting along through space without guidance and it was obvious that they were unmanned. They were robot units of the Arkonide Imperium's fleet which had virtually "died" when the robot Regent was destroyed. The Terrans had already succeeded in securing about 90,000 out of a total of 100,000 of them but out there in the unfathomable reaches of space there were still 10,000 heavily armed ships. In the hands of any potential enemy this could represent a force not to be underestimated.

Col. Kermak was among those who had been chosen to prevent this. With his heavy battlecruiser *Alderamin*, a spherical vessel 500 meters in diameter and carrying a normal crew of 800 men, he had been assigned to the task of tracking down the pilotless robotships of Arkon and taking them over with special prize crews.

This was no simple operation because when the robot Regent of Arkon was destroyed the units of the Arkonide Fleet were scattered all over the galaxy. Without a special circuit alteration these ships had responded exclusively to the command signals of the giant positronicon. Thus from one moment to the next they had suddenly become pilotless and they were subject to being confiscated by anyone who knew the secret of how to switch them over to manual control. Within the Milky way there were numerous races who desired to increase their military power so it was natural for them to seize the opportunity by attempting to capture Arkon's inactivated ships.

But Perry Rhodan sought to prevent this at all costs.

As Col. Kermak continued to observe the 3 drifting vessels he noted that one of them was a superbattleship of the Imperium class, a tremendous sphere measuring almost a mile in diameter whereas the 2 other smaller ships were obviously cruisers. They still flew in their original formation, which was loosely triangular, with the battleship leading and the 2 cruisers following.

The First Officer returned to the Control Central. "Ship ready for combat sir."

This time Kermak turned toward him. "Probably as superfluous as in all the other cases," he said with a reassuring smile. "Let's secure the battleship first. Who's leading the boarding team?"

"A Lt. Vitali, sir. This is his third ship capture."

"Then he knows what he has to do. Let me know as soon as all 3 ships are secured for manual flight."

"Very good, sir," answered the First Officer, who again exited the room.

Col. Kermak turned back to the viewscreen in order to follow the forthcoming procedures in every detail. But before the locks of the *Alderamin* could be opened for Lt. Vitali and his men, something unexpected occurred: a message came through from the duty officer in the tracking section. At least 20 ships ranging from large to small had materialised at a distance of just 5 lisex and were now approaching at top speed. They deployed themselves swiftly so that they quickly surrounded the *Alderamin* and the robotships.

"Energy screen!" roared Col. Kermak. This placed him in a security mode which would protect his spacesphere from eventual raybeam bombardments. And of course Vitali could no longer leave the *Alderamin*.

"Stand by!" he ordered, while watching his screen.

The alien ships were cylindrical in shape. Springers! But after all, what else? Wherever there was trouble the Springers, otherwise known as the Galactic Traders, were never far away. These merchant-pirate offshoots of the Arkonide race were as shrewd and clever as the Terrans. There could be little doubt that their technicians knew how to make the manual override connections on the robotships. The stellar traders had shown up with the intention of grabbing the spoils and dividing the heritage of Arkon between themselves.

"Radio message, sir!" announced the com officer over intercom. "An urgent warning!"

Almost imperceptibly, Kermak composed himself. With outward calm he answered: "Alright, let's have it!"

The Springers' challenge was brief and unmistakable: "Get out of here, Terrans! The 3 ships belong to us because we sighted them first. We'll give you 10 minutes, your time."

Kermak studied the viewscreen thoughtfully. The 20 longships of the fighting nomads had meanwhile firmed up their positions around the *Alderamin*. Within that circle were the 3 robot vessels which were the objective of both sides. He knew that for the moment their granted period of "grace" but on the other hand he was not in a position to drive them off. Under these circumstances he could not order Lt. Vitali to try taking the Arkon vessels. It would be a useless sacrifice. But for the same reason the Springers couldn't send out any boarding crews either, without exposing them to danger. It was a completely messed up situation.

He had the option of beaming out a call for Terran reinforcements, he thought bitterly, but they couldn't arrive before the 10 minutes were up. Probably by then the Springers would open fire in an attempt to break down the *Alderamin*'s defence screens. The gamble could turn out to be fatal. Turning the picture around, it seemed out of the question for the *Alderamin* to knock out 20 opponents simultaneously. This was aside from the fact that Kermak was not intending to be the first to fire a shot. There could be no doubt that the Springers were in superior force here. It wouldn't be easy for them to knock out the heavy battlecruiser but with a streak of luck it was possible.

"Only 8 minutes left," said the First Officer, who had returned. "That's damnably short ..."

"Long enough to make a decision," replied Kermak calmly, although he was shaking inwardly. "There's no way they can take those ships in the meantime. On the other hand we're under orders to avoid armed conflict with other races wherever possible. We are to defend ourselves if attacked—and that hasn't happened yet."

He scanned the viewscreen again. Although the 3 robotships were hurtling through space at a considerable velocity, they appeared to be standing still. The *Alderamin* and the Springer formation also seemed to hover there motionlessly. It would be quite simple to take deadly aim with all the cruiser's heavy armaments. Anyway, only 3 minutes of the allowed time had been used up.

"The 3 Arkon ships don't have their screens up," muttered Kermak as if to himself. "They could be wiped out with our first broadside."

"But sir ... !"

"Do you have a better idea for keeping them out of the Springers' hands? You'll have to do better than a shrug of your shoulders. If we can't get control of those robotships, then the Springers shouldn't be allowed to either. That would be the best solution where Terra is concerned."

The First Officer stared at his commander. "If we had a teleporter on board I'd know of another way!"

"Me too," confessed the colonel bitterly. He glanced at the chronometer. "Still 3 minutes left. Get a move on! In the meantime I'll try talking to the Springers."

Which was no particular problem. The Springers spoke Interkosmo as well as the Terrans. It didn't take the com operator more than 30 seconds to establish contact. On Kermak's screen the bearded face of a typical Galactic Trader appeared. He must have been one of the patriarchs because he was certainly more than 100 years of age by Earthly reckoning. The full, thick beard was tinted red and curiously squared, which was obviously a clan identification.

"What do you want, Terran? You have 2 minutes left."

Kermak controlled himself and kept his voice as even as possible. "These 3 Arkon ships belong to us. We have permission from Gonozal VIII ... "

"Permission, he says!" The Springer began to laugh thunderously. "Who is this Gonozal VIII, anyway? Or are you talking about that pseudo-imperator of Arkon who merely fronted for the robot? If so, then the ships don't belong to you any more than they do to us. They are ownerless—free booty for the first to find them. And we were first in this case. So?"

Kermak knew that he only had another minute to go. "Gonozal-Atlan was the rightful ruler of Arkon. Perry Rhodan is his rightful successor. Therefore the ships belong to him. If you take them it will be an act of theft. Do you want to tangle with Terra?"

"Terra!" echoed the Springer, starting to laugh again. He seemed to be genuinely amused. "What is Terra without the protection of Arkon? And the Imperium doesn't exist anymore."

The bearded swindler was in for a surprise, thought Col. Kermak heatedly while noting with a quick glance that only 40 seconds were left. His hope of convincing the Springer was fading away. The First Officer had just returned and gave him the nod. This meant that Kermak only had to depress the red firing button to bring the robotships under concentrated fire. Since they were without defence screens

they would be destroyed in a matter of seconds.

"So what you are saying is that you are willing to perform an act of piracy and risk open conflict with Terra?" he asked quietly.

"That's right!" nodded the Springer, still chuckling. "What have we got to lose?"

10 seconds to go.

"Very well," said Kermak, suddenly returning a very sarcastic smile. "I might have let myself be talked into letting you have at least one of those cruisers but since you're so greedy you won't have even one of them. Do you understand?"

"Not a word," replied the Springer, fingering his beard. "You Terrans are fond of speaking in riddles. Besides, your time is up. Get out of here or I'll open fire."

"I'll do it for you," retorted Kermak grimly. He shoved in the red button which activated all the guns that had been carefully aimed in the meantime.

"You're welcome to the scrap!"

From 3 turret positions the concentrated energy beams of the *Alderamin* shot out and found their targets. They penetrated the hulls of the robotships with ease and bored their way into the vessels' central cores—to the Arkon power piles. The resulting nuclear explosions ripped the ships asunder.

Although there were actually 3 explosions their effect was that of one gigantic detonation. One of the Springer ships had been too close to the robot super giant and was hurled away into the void by the fury of the blast. Before the remaining 19 longships could take their revenge on the *Alderamin*, Col. Kermak shoved his flight lever forward into full thrust. Immediately the warship started toward a distant nebula and accelerated wildly. It soon reached light velocity and vanished into semispace.

All they could do was attempt to rescue the smaller longship that was plunging out of control into emptiness. They paid no further attention to the glowing nuclear clouds which had been 3 proud Arkon ships. They also knew that it was useless to try pursuing the Terran cruiser with its new linear-drive propulsion.

The *Alderamin* switched course, however, and made a direct flight to the distant Earth, prepared to submit a report to the First Administrator. It was to inaugurate a new phase of the search for Arkon's missing robotships

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The *Caesar* was a superbattleship of the Imperium class, also equipped with linear space-drive and also on the hunt for the valuable Arkon robotships.

4 days had passed since the return of the *Alderamin*. Tactics had been changed. In a conference convened by Perry Rhodan it had been decided to distribute the members of the Mutant Corps among a number of the search ships so that even superior forces of Springers, Aras or Ekhonides could be outsmarted. Moreover, all had agreed that no compromise was to be countenanced and that it was preferable to risk combat, if necessary, and to destroy the robotships rather than have them be taken. From now on the search units were going to offer stiffer resistance. In the past few days the Springers

especially had demonstrated a ruthless determination to challenge the men of Earth for possession of Arkon's heritage.

Col. Sukril, commander of the *Caesar* had also been present at the conference. Outwardly he looked very much like Rhodan's second-in-command, Reginald Bell, nor was it to be denied that certain elements of his character reminded people of Bell. This is why it was perhaps not a pure coincidence that Col. Sukril had the distinction of acquiring the mutant services of Pucky the mousebeaver.

Their first meeting had not been without a certain flavour of drama.

It had been Pucky's own fault that he had not been present at the briefing. He had just come back from a strenuous mission and had decided to pass the few hours of his leave at his weekend place at Lake Goshun. Rhodan had told him that his presence at the meeting wasn't mandatory. He said that it only entailed some routine matters that concerned the Fleet commanders.

So it was that Pucky came on board the *Caesar* at the last moment, after Rhodan had given the mutants their assignments. He was of course familiar with the name of Col. Sukril but he had not yet met him personally. The *Caesar* was like any other ship and, like every one of them engaged in the search activity, it was to have a mutant on board. This was in addition to a special load of 20,000 experienced spacemen, other than regular crews, which the search ships were carrying for the purpose of taking over the robot battleships and bringing them to Earth.

A young, dark-haired officer was waiting for him in the airlock. "You're flying with us, Lt. Puck," he said. "May I welcome you most heartily on board the *Caesar*?"

"That you may," replied Pucky patronizingly, saluting rather indifferently. He wore his custom-made uniform with the heated case for his beaver tail. Being a telepath, he already knew the officer's name. "By the way, does it happen that I've been assigned to your task unit?"

"You're quite correct, Lt. Puck!"

The mousebeaver stretched out his paw and smiled. "Then you can drop the title of rank. We're buddies in this together."

"Hm-m ... ah—very well, Puck."

"Pucky!"

"What ...?"

"Pucky! that's what I'm called." He looked around. "Where is the commander? A Colonel Sukril, if I understand correctly."

"In the Control Central. We take off in 5 minutes."

"Then I've arrived at just the right time," Pucky grinned. "So up, up and away—to happy hunting!"

"Hm-m," grumbled Germa doubtfully, shrugging vaguely. "I'm not so sure it's going to be all that happy. The Springers are keeping our search commandos pretty busy."

"Pah!" Pucky watched while the heavy main lock closed and slid in place with a dull thud. "So far we've

always been able to handle those whisker-faces. We just have to be faster than they are—and smarter."

Lt. Germa smiled to himself. He seemed to be pleased with Pucky's answer. "Come on, I'll show you to your cabin. It's right next to mine."

The mousebeaver waddled after him although he would have preferred teleportation. But in the young officer's mind he had detected some very important indications. First of all he discovered that Germa liked him very much. It wasn't the usual respect for his outstanding parafaculties but a genuine feeling of fondness and friendship. And secondly Germa had thought of their forthcoming interim landing—on Mars.

Mars? What did the *Caesar* want on Mars?

Pucky realized that Germa didn't know. If anybody knew the reason for the Mars touchdown it would most likely be the commander. So he'd have to ask him, provided the thought didn't come into his head first.

The cabin reflected Pucky's extraterrestrial preferences and was provided with everything the mousebeaver would have wanted for a lengthy journey. Even the fridge with a supply of fresh vegetables had not been forgotten. And even a full-grown man would have been comfortable in the wide bed.

"Neat!" chirped Pucky appreciatively, and he reached up to pat his much larger companion on the back. "Very neat. You people must have really put yourselves out. So you live in the cabin to the left of me? Who's in the other one?"

Germa shrugged. "No idea. As far as I know, it's empty."

"That suites me." Pucky lowered his little dufflebag in which he had collected the things most important to him. "At any rate I guess I was too pessimistic. I sneaked in my own crop when I didn't have to."

He picked up the bag and shook out its contents onto the floor. Nothing but fresh carrots. Lieutenant Germa laughed until it brought tears to his eyes.

At the same time the *Caesar* took off and accelerated at a modest rate into space. Inside the ship the effects were barely noticeable since the gravity fields and inertial absorbers took up the shock. Thus the effects of small course changes were also neutralized.

"You still have to report to the Commander," said Germa somewhat concernedly. "Col. Sukril is a stickler for the rules. It's a wonder he took off without making sure you were present and accounted for."

Pucky made a wry face. "I hate regulations and formalities, Germa. I always get in trouble with people like that. But how is he otherwise?"

"A good officer, pretty daring at times, and he flares up once in awhile—otherwise he's straight and very fair. But I think in your case you'd better not—hm-m ... "

"I'd better not what ... ?"

"I mean, maybe you'd better not try a first name basis right away. If you forget rank and title he might blow up at you."

Pucky grinned, revealing his famous incisor tooth. It was a sure sign that the situation was turning into a "fun game" for him. "Alright, you know him better than I do. Why should I make things tough on myself? But watch out if our good friend Sukril plays a one-sided game! If he drops his formality with me, he could be in for a surprise! Fine—let's go. Or aren't you coming along?"

"Do you think I'd want to miss it?" retorted Germa with mock indignation, and he led the way out. "The grav is right over there."

"I could get there much faster if I wanted to but there's no need to startle Sukril too soon. Also, it's good to have a walk after eating."

The *Caesar* was a world in itself. With its 1500-meter hull it resembled a Terran submarine modular city with streets and even building-like structures which were connected by antigrav lifts. An untrained person could become irretrievably lost in this maze of ultra-modern installations and never find his way back to the point of exit. Pucky, however, was well acquainted with the interior of such superbattleships. He could still recall the many emergency drills he had gone through in the days when these "big ones" were still a novelty in the Fleet.

Germa stopped at the door to the Control Central. "It's always like entering the Inner Sanctum," he half-whispered.

Pucky could hardly suppress a giggle. "You're stretching it, Slim. I've never been afraid of any commander. If he's not a nice guy, I sail him through a couple of corridors and clamp him to the ceiling somewhere.

"You and your telekinesis," muttered Germa shakenly. He pointed to the door. "You lead the way this time."

Pucky cautiously concealed his incisor tooth and pressed the automatic release button. The door slid into its niche and gave access to the Control Central. In spite of the maze of consoles and equipment cabinets the room appeared to be semi-circular in shape. Everywhere there were gleaming viewscreens on the walls, surrounded by controls and switches of every description. At one table an officer was studying star charts. He looked up briefly and grinned at Pucky—then immersed himself again in his work.

Another man sat in the wide seat before the main control board. His back was almost broad enough for 2 men. His hair was cut short and stood up like gleaming silver-grey bristles. He still didn't seem to have noted the intrusion because he was staring intently at the viewscreen, in the middle of which was a reddish star. His vice-like hands were on the console beneath the indicators.

Two other officers turned to discover Pucky and Germa. One of them seemed to know what was on the commander's mind.

"Sir—the mutant."

Col. Sukril did not even turn his head. "You mean this Pucky creature?" he asked. He cleared his throat. "As soon as he shows up he is to come to me. I expect him to report in according to regulations like anyone else." He continued his concentration on the outer space view although he must have known that the mousebeaver stood directly behind him.

Pucky gave Germa an imploring look but the lieutenant shook his head. Knowing that the mousebeaver could read his mind he suggested mentally that he should "toe the line" just now. It was no use to start any

trouble when it wasn't necessary.

Pucky turned his gaze from Germa to contemplate Col. Sukril's broad back. There was something about his figure that was very familiar. Hm-m ... If his hair were red instead of grey, one might have thought this was Reginald Bell. But Bell was with Rhodan just now on the *Ironduke*, which was the flagship. They, too, were on a mission.

"Lt. Puck reporting for duty, sir," the mousebeaver finally managed to say, while more or less standing at attention.

The man in the pilot's seat folded his hands in his lap before he slowly turned around. He remained seated and it was only the chair that actually turned. His healthy, ruddy face was good-natured but revealed a trace of curiosity. He smiled faintly. "So this is Pucky, the most notorious of all the mousebeavers. Hm-m ... Why are you just reporting to me now, Lt. Puck?"

Pucky stared in utter amazement at Col. Sukril. Actually he looked almost like Bell with his hair dyed. If it were not for the completely different brainwave pattern it would be possible to imagine that this was Rhodan's second-in-command. But then upon closer inspection the other differences came to light. The mouth was smaller and more tight-lipped than Bell's, the cheeks somewhat fuller and the chin much heavier. In the grey eyes there was an expression of sternness, courage and justice.

"Well, is this too late?" was Pucky's counter-question.

Col. Sukril remained motionless. He made an effort to screen his thoughts but of course without experience in such matters he didn't quite succeed. Thus Pucky picked up a few interesting items although they didn't seem to tie together clearly. So he was going to have to rely on questions to learn the rest.

"Lt. Puck!" said Sukril sharply. "I permit no exceptions to the rule on board my ship. You are a member of my crew, with the same rights and the same duties. A lot of commendable stories have been told about you, I'll admit, but don't think that entitles you to any special privileges. Here everybody does his job and you will do yours. Is that understood?"

"No sir," replied Pucky while lowering his gaze in mock shame. "There are some people who say that my intelligence leaves something to be desired and ... "

"Military discipline has nothing to do with intelligence!" roared Col. Sukril impatiently but then he calmed himself immediately. "Anyone boarding a ship for duty must report immediately to the commander. Can you understand that?"

"That's what I just did, sir," replied, Pucky, making a weak attempt to defend himself. Inwardly the discussion began to amuse him. "Lt. Germa brought me here right away."

"So? And how do you explain the fact that you're just getting here now? Look there on the viewscreen! We're already passing the moon!"

"Nice view," commented Pucky appreciatively as he watched the cratered landscape pass by. "It always reminds me of Pericles."

Sukril caught his breath, apparently nonplussed. "Of what?"



"Aren't you familiar with Pericles? Too bad—you've missed a lot. It's the 2d moon of the 4th planet of Clara 5, a red sun just left of Cancer. Of course you must know where Cancer is located?"

Col. Sukril's face went through an interesting process of changes. It became darker, for one thing, but in contrast to Bell's face instead of becoming red it turned blue.

"Are you trying to—?"

"But—to be honest about it, I couldn't report to you any sooner than this."

Sukril appeared to have calmed himself again. "Oh? And just why was that?"

"Because I just got on board before you took off."

Sukril looked at Pucky more closely. "Your top uniform button is unfastened, Lt. Puck."

The mousebeaver nodded negligently. "Why is yours buttoned? Afraid you'll catch cold?"

Col. Sukril swallowed hard and thought of his temper. He told himself to just take it easy and not get excited. To fence with the mutant was a senseless waste of time. He abandoned the hope of getting the best of him, in contrast to all the mousebeaver's other superiors. No one had ever succeeded. Why should he be the one? And yet ... ?!

"Lieutenant," he said sharply, "you will adhere to the regulations. In your cabin you may do as you please, as far as I am concerned." He took a deep breath. "You are familiar with our orders and your own, as well?"

"We're to catch us some robots, sir."

"You might call it that." Sukril became a trifle friendlier. He leaned forward and looked into the mousebeaver's eyes. "Has Lt. Germa shown you your quarters? Do you have any complaints?"

"None, sir. Just one question: what are we going to Mars for?"

Sukril leaned forward still farther. He grinned broadly. "Aha! So you've already done some telepathic snooping? If not, why would you ask about Mars? Alright then, I'll tell you. Rhodan ordered us to pick up Miss Iltu. From now on she'll be flying on various missions, as occasion demands, and she is to be trained by you."

Pucky forgot his military schooling. Indignantly he placed his small arms akimbo. His expression was one of thunderstruck amazement. "Iltu? That babe in arms?"

Sukril nodded affirmatively. "What do you have against Iltu? She is a cute and capable mousebeaver girl. She can handle telekinesis and is also a telepath. Well, yes—where teleporting is concerned she has some shortcomings, but she'll also learn that—"

"But she's much too young!" persisted Pucky.

"Nevertheless, she's 100 years old, according to what she told us," declared Sukril soberly. "If that's supposed to be young I'd like to know just how old mousebeavers get. How old are you, Lt. Puck?"

It was a delicate question to which Sukril received no more of an answer than had Rhodan or Bell or anyone else.

"Iltu!" Pucky's voice seemed to express complete rejection but deep in his brown eyes was a glimmer of pleasure over the prospect of meeting his special friend whom he had once rescued from Vagabond along with 27 other young mousebeavers. They had all been brought to Earth but had later settled on Mars. "Does she know about this?"

"She was instructed about the mission and has agreed to go."

"She's a brave girl." Pucky nodded appreciatively but then added quickly: "But she's not ready for real work because she has no idea of how to teleport properly. And as for telekinesis she only has playful kid games in her head. Does she really have to come with me?"

"No, it's not mandatory. According to Rhodan's instructions, if you're strictly against it we'll change course and not pick her up." He turned to the officer at the chart table. "Captain, work out the new course. We'll continue to accelerate and bypass Mars."

"Hey!" chirped Pucky in a shrill tone. He waddled past Sukril to the navigator. "If you don't land on Mars I've got news for you!" Then he turned back to Sukril who had become speechless. "Well, don't lose your eyeballs, Sukril. After all, everyone has to make a start sometime."

He nodded patronizingly to Col. Sukril and strutted out of the Control Central. With a stiff salute, Lt. Germa also took his leave before the thunderstorm could break over his head.

But there was no thunder.

The commander watched Pucky go with his mouth agape but then he got hold of himself. He nodded to the navigation officer. "Steady as she goes," he ordered. "Interim landing on Mars."

The first round, he thought to himself, was undecided. But he didn't realize how wrong he was.

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The brief landing on Mars occurred according to plan. Iltu was brought on board and taken to her quarters by Lt. Germa where she was received by Pucky. Then the *Caesar* took off again and set course for its assigned sector.

This was a peripheral region of the galaxy where there were very few stars. Atlan had declared it to be a zone of operation for one of the larger fleet formations, which turned out to be the case. Almost daily the search teams of the Terran ships ran across scattered cruisers or major vessels of the Arkonide Imperium. Being cut off from the usual command signals from the robot Regent, they drifted without direction through the void, the helpless prey of anyone who found them.

Col. Sukril waited until his target star appeared on the screen. It was an unknown giant sun that didn't even have a name, merely an index number. It was to be the point of reference for all operations of the *Caesar*. The ship had long since surpassed the speed of light. Gaining velocity with each passing second it glided toward its goal between Einstein space and the 5th dimension. The target star remained visible even though part of the universe had disappeared into a zone of darkness. Rather than a blind flight as in the case of hypertransitions, it was based on visual navigation.

The *Caesar* was the first super-class spaceship to be equipped with a fully tested propulsion system based on the semispace principle. The *Alderamin* also had this new system but was not considered to be perfect because Prof. Kalup had provided the *Caesar* with certain additional safety factors which had not been applied before. Thus the *Caesar* was the safest and fastest ship in the Terran spacefleet.

Col. Sukril was fully aware of this fact. He sat in front of the screen for another half hour and monitored the flight, the course and the velocity. Then he called his First Officer to him. "Maj. Brokov, you can take over now. Call me if you think it's necessary. All incoming hypercom messages are to be recorded. I'll go through them later. Well—good night, Major."

"Good night, sir," said Brokov, saluting. He relaxed again only after Sukril had left the Control Central. He had crinkly dark hair, was stockily built, in fact almost too broad in the shoulders, but seemed otherwise to be of an easy-going nature. "The Skipper's sure a stickler for spit and polish, wouldn't you say, Henderson?"

The navigation officer, Capt. Henderson, placed his hands on the star charts and grinned. "I think he must even sleep with his fingers on his pant seams," he reflected. "But on the other hand I don't believe we could imagine a better commander."

"I'll buy that, Henderson—all the way!" Brokov sat down. "You want to give me the usual poop?"

The other nodded toward the screen. "Course is border zone BM-53-XB. Present speed is 370,000 light units. Acceleration constant at 3X factor. The target area ETA is 50 hours as she goes. So far nothing unusual has come up."

"Thanks, Henderson." Brokov removed his gaze from the screen to look at the captain. "I hear we have the mutant, Pucky, on board."

"He was assigned to us as you know but he only arrived at the last minute. The Old Man almost came apart."

"I can imagine because I know Pucky, actually. We once flew a mission together with Rhodan. As I recall, he doesn't go much for the rule book. Well, he'll have his hands full now that his little Bopeep is with him."

"Come again?"

Brokov grinned significantly. "The little mousebeaver gal we picked up on Mars. Seems as if having one of them on board isn't enough. I'm afraid on this flight the Colonel may suffer a stroke."

"He can adjust himself to a lot of things," Henderson assured him. And he went back to his work of checking out the ship's course.

At this time a quite different discussion was going on in Pucky's cabin. Pucky sat with his legs drawn under him in the farthest corner of his couch and with his back pressed against the wall. It seemed as if he would have been happy to go back farther if it had been physically possible. Sitting all neat and proper on the edge of the couch was another mousebeaver.

As seen through human eyes, at first glance there might have been no observable difference between them although Iltu only wore a pastel green combination without any rank insignia, instead of a uniform. Also Iltu was slightly smaller and of a more delicate build than Pucky but that was the only outward

difference. Even Iltu had an incisor tooth which showed when she laughed but it was not gleaming white like Pucky's. Rather it was a pale pink counterpart. She had the same brown badger eyes and the same flat beaver tail although it was somewhat smaller. Her suit pants had no special arrangement in the seat but merely a hole. The tail with its silky red-brown fur lay directly in front of Pucky.

He made a disdainful face. "Do you all run around on Mars like that?" As if to change the subject he added: "How's the settlement getting along, anyway?"

Iltu briefly flashed her pink incisor at him. "You've been long overdue for a visit to us, you know. All the children want to see their grandpa."

Pucky stiffened in sudden shock. "Grandpa!" he gasped. "Are they referring to *me* with that name?"

Pucky slumped despondently. "So that's what those dorky rascals call gratitude! I rescue them from certain death on Vagabond, bring them to Earth, settle them down on Mars and give them a new home—and then they call me grandpa! How disrespectful can you get?"

Iltu shook her delicately-shaped head. "Haven't you always pointed out what youngsters we were in comparison to you? Haven't you always said that compared to us you were old and wise? Well, then—there you have a grandpa.

"If Bell heard that he'd die laughing."

"Bell? Is that the fat fellow with the fire-red hair?"

Pucky grinned cheerfully, having forgotten the "grandpa" subject. "Yes, that's him but don't let him hear you call him fat or he'll have you for supper in spite of your pretty eyes."

Iltu moved closer. "Do I have pretty eyes?" she whispered hopefully.

Pucky's incisor vanished as he sought to press himself farther into the corner. "Uh—what I was asking you—how is the colony doing on Mars these days?"

Iltu pouted. "All day long we get schooling or sports. We hardly ever get to play anymore. They've put an energy dome over the settlement—so that nobody can rob us, they say. But I think they put it there to keep us from having some real fun."

Of course by "fun and play", Iltu referred to telekinesis. The young mousebeavers used their natural gift by way of amusement—moving every possible object—including men—from one place to another through the force of their minds. For the officers and personnel of the Martian base this type of "fun and games" often resulted in some unpleasant surprises—hence the energy dome.

"But we still play anyway," Iltu continued. "We can do it inside the dome." She sighed. "but I'm glad to be flying with you. That's a real nice vacation."

Pucky frowned sternly. "This is no vacation," he said. "You have been assigned to me as a pupil. As it is, you're far too young—I mean, too inexperienced—to be of much help to me. But I'll do what I can. How is your teleportation?"

She seemed to become a bit smaller, as if shrinking from the subject. "It's nothing special," she finally answered candidly. "My telekinesis is great—as well as telepathy. But I'm still learning teleportation

whenever they give me the chance."

"We'll have plenty of practice," Pucky promised her grimly, "before we go into any action. There's enough room here in the ship but let me tell you one thing, Iltu: there will be no 'fun and games' on board! It can cause too much grief. If you just moved one of the control levers it could be the end of all of us. We could crash into a sun or maybe even fall into a hole in time."

"Fall where?" Iltu raised her ears, which was becoming to her.

"That's a special expression," Pucky told her evasively. "Anyway, there'll be no telekinesis unless I order it. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she sighed. Then she got up and began to waddle flirtatiously about the cabin. "How do you like my jumpsuit outfit?"

Pucky shrank back again. If it hadn't been for the bulkhead he would have tumbled to the deck. "Females!" he chirped impatiently. "They're all the same everywhere and in every race or species! But I'm going to tell you this, girl: this is no summer resort—you're on board a warship! Here there is discipline—you'll find that out. I am not your grandpa—I'm your superior officer! You are to do exactly what I order you to do. Is that clear, once and for all?"

"And what do you order me to do now?" she half-whispered anxiously.

Pucky threw his small arms into the air and whistled in sheer desperation. "I order you to disappear into your cabin at once and to leave me in peace! I want to go to sleep! I'm tired! I've had enough of this children's prattle!"

Instead of pouting, Iltu smiled in submission. "Yes, grandpa," she chirped teasingly. After that she seemed to go into a brief trance while she stared at the cabin wall—and she was gone. She had teleported. Only a momentary shimmering of the air marked the place where she had been.

Pucky sighed and simply fell back on the bed where he stretched himself out and pounded the covers with his fists. "What a little monster!" he muttered angrily. "A sassy little beast, she is!"

But then he suddenly became quite motionless and listened inwardly. He was receiving Iltu's thoughts. She must also be lying on her bed and reflecting on their meeting.

She was thinking of him, Pucky.

He closed his eyes and began to smile. What Iltu was thinking about him must have been something very delightful.

## 2/ INVISIBLE INVADERS

For 2 full days Pucky put Iltu through her training exercises. He would lead her to a specific location where she was instructed to firmly memorize her surroundings. Then he would take her back and order her to teleport to the target area. At first it didn't always work out. Although she could dematerialise properly she would often land in an entirely different place. Then Pucky would have to make a long search until he found her. Even telepathy didn't help much because Iltu couldn't say where she had landed.

These drills were surprising as well as distressing to the crew of the *Caesar*. Sometimes it was even a shock to the men because it was not an everyday occurrence to suddenly be confronted with a figure that popped right out of the air. And Iltu materialized in machine rooms, gun turrets, cabins and even rest rooms.

However, at the end of the second day Pucky had to admit that she was making progress. "That's pretty good now, little one. If you keep on like that you'll be a usable teleporter. There's no doubt that you have the ability."

It was a gross understatement, to which Iltu objected.

Pucky, you're mean! In the last 2 hours I didn't make one false jump. I can teleport!

"Passable," he minimized. "But now you still have to learn how to get to a place you're not familiar with beforehand. You have to do it by using telepathy. As an example: search out the thoughts of the commander, trace his location and jump. materialise directly in front of him."

"I don't want to do that," protested Iltu. "The Colonel is very severe. I'm afraid of him."

"Hm-m. Then let's take somebody else: Lt. Germa." Pucky looked directly at Iltu. "Where is Germa now?"

Iltu understood what she was supposed to do. She concentrated and attempted to sort out the thought patterns pressing in upon her. It required almost 10 minutes before her eyes suddenly brightened. "I've got him! He's off duty and in his cabin."

"Excellent!" said Pucky with a grudging note of praise in his voice. "Then follow me now!"

He jumped almost before completing his sentence. Staring at the spot where he had been, Iltu forgot Pucky and concentrated entirely on Germa's incoming stream of thoughts. Then she jumped.

Germa was sitting in a chair, reading. Thus he had been putting out a clear and constant stream of thoughts which could easily be intercepted by a telepath. He was abruptly interrupted as Pucky materialised near him and let out a shrill whistle to make him aware of his presence.

Germa half rose out of his seat but then sank back again. He had learned not to be startled so much by Pucky anymore. But then he turned pale a second later when Iltu landed right on his stomach and her weight pushed him into the upholstery.

Is that any way to do? he protested indignantly. "I was just sitting here reading!"

"And we're training," replied Pucky. "Well done, Iltu! That was good measuring. You came right in on target. Of course it wasn't exact precision or you would have landed on top of his head. I'm presuming that's where he keeps his brain."

Germa straightened up after Iltu slipped out of the chair. "That's just about enough, Pucky! At least you could leave me in peace during the little free time I have off. You know we're getting close to the operation zone and after that we'll hardly have a chance to sleep. We're already on alert here and apparently you have nothing better to do than to spook innocent people—and even bug them. Shame on you, Iltu! I wouldn't have expected this of you."

The girl mousebeaver shyly lowered her eyes and pattered timidly closer to him. She chirped plaintively: "I didn't mean to do it that way, Germa. But we have to practice or otherwise I may fail when things are serious. I'm sorry, too, about landing on your tummy. I meant to just appear in your room. So please don't be angry ... "

Germa's indignation melted away like butter in the sun. He reached out his hand and drew Iltu toward him. "That's alright, little one. You're not to blame." He looked disapprovingly at Pucky. "But he is big enough and apparently old enough, as well, to cut out this kind of tomfoolery."

Pucky had straightened up stiffly. "I am not that old!" he retorted heatedly. He then dematerialised as if he'd been insulted.

Germa stared at the empty spot. "What's the matter with him, anyway?" he said.

Iltu revealed that she was not one to use the opportunity for slandering her fellow creature or making him look ridiculous. "I don't know," she answered, taking her paw from the young officer's hands. "Excuse me—I'll go look after him. Until later ... "

Then Germa was alone again.

He picked up his book but suddenly he had no more interest in reading.

\* \* \* \*

The rest period was over on board the ship when the alarms sounded.

In the Control Central, Capt. Henderson sat before the navigation screens while he analysed the data that was coming in from the tracking centre. The forward screen's angle of vision narrowed as the view was magnified. Eleven faintly gleaming blips of light became visible.

Col. Sukril had given the alarm as a matter of precaution because he couldn't be sure if these were the sought-after robotships or fighting units of the Springers or some other race. Formations of 10 or more robotships were not unusual. They could have been in a flight group together when the robot Regent ceased functioning—in which case they would now be drifting onward without pilots or propulsion until eternity itself put an end to their course. Or perhaps the search commandos.

"Course and velocity unchanged," said Capt. Henderson after 2 minutes of calculation. "All signs indicate that we're dealing with the ships of Arkon. Your orders, sir?"

Col. Sukril did not take his eyes from the screen. He thought of Col. Kermak's bitter experience. This wasn't going to happen to him. If any Springers appeared he was going to attack them immediately but in no case was he going to destroy the robotships. But aside from the robot units nothing could be detected by the trackers in a surrounding area of 800 light-years. The nearest sun was 800 light-years sternward from the *Caesar*. It seemed that sector BM-53-XB was about the loneliest region a man could imagine.

"Decrease velocity, Captain. Hold our present course. All gun crews on standby. Lt. Germa, report to Control Central!"

Germa was only one among a number of team officers so it was merely by chance that he chose him. He might just as easily have picked out Capt. Delmarin Maj. Borovski or Lt. Steinwald but he selected Lt. Germa. It was one of those instinctive decisions that often change the course of events. Perhaps also Col.

Sukril's knowledge of the good rapport between Germa and the 2 mousebeavers had helped to influence his choice.

"We reach the formation in 10 minutes, sir. Their course is the same. Lt. Germa is on his way."

Sukril only nodded. He observed the screen intently those 11 ships out there were drifting without a crew. All radio calls had remained unanswered. There was no indication that the least robot element was functioning.

"Lt. Germa reporting, sir!"

Col. Sukril seemed to awaken as if from a dream. He swivelled around slowly. "Take a look at those ships, 'Lieutenant. What can you tell me about them?"

Germa moved closer until he was standing next to the commander. With alert eyes he studied the 11 ships. He followed their steady course and took note of their configurations. Without exception they were spherical vessels, from the smallest 60-meter type to the Imperium-class flagship which was the same size as the *Caesar*. Their relative velocity now was almost zero but actually they were still moving along at a rate of many thousands of km per second. The void beyond them was black. Only a few blurred nebulous specks bore witness to the fact that other galaxies existed across the tremendous abyss. According to present knowledge, nothing lay between but an awesome emptiness; no suns, no planets—and probably also no ships.

"No question about it, sir, they're robotships, no longer in operation."

Col. Sukril nodded. "That's also my analysis, Lieutenant. I think we can take them over. Do you have any reservations?"

"No, sir. After all, it's my job for me and my men to take over one of the ships and bring it back to Earth. Just give the order, sir, and we'll go into action."

Sukril gave him a fleeting smile. "Don't be over-confident, Lieutenant. It's true that there's no trace of enemy units in the immediate area but that can change. The Springers only have to make one long transition to make a sudden appearance." He sighed. "Take a long-range scoutship and 5 men, Lieutenant. You're the advanced guard. You can head for the flagship. The main lock can be opened manually from the outside when the electronic security system is out of operation—and that's the situation now. You will penetrate into the Control Central and from there I will expect to hear your radio report. Is everything clear? Can you get out there and overtake that formation?"

Lt. Germa sought to clear up a certain point. "Then—it's the normal boarding procedure, sir? No special precautions?"

"Not indicated—until after your team has gone on board first."

Germa hesitated.

"Something else, Lieutenant?"

"Just one question, sir. What about the teleporter, Pucky?"

"The mousebeaver?" Sukril wrinkled his forehead. "What do we need him for when everything is in



order? We only use the mutants when something unforeseen comes up—more or less like an emergency backup."

"I only thought, sir ..."

"Do you see any compulsory reason for using him already, Lieutenant?"

"No, certainly not, sir."

"Alright then! You and your men get into the hangar and take one of the Gazelles. Fly it directly into the main lock of the robotship. And now—good luck, Lieutenant."

Germa saluted and went out. He picked out 5 men from his team and hurried with them to the hangar, where the flight personnel were already waiting for them. One of the Gazelles had been made ready for the mission. The disc-shaped scoutship measured 18 meters in height and was almost 30 meters in diameter. It was equipped with a hypertransition system which allowed a jump-range of up to 5 light-years.

Germa was the last one into the airlock but as the hatch was about to be closed the mousebeaver materialized directly in front of him in the hangar. Pucky beckoned to Germa and waddled up closer.

"So it seems I'm not needed," he remarked.

"Nonsense, Pucky! The commander only wants to use you in case of danger—more or less like an emergency brake, you might say."

"I don't happen to be a brake—and besides, I over-heard your conversation. I'd like to know why it was decided at that supposedly important conference that mutants were to come along. What did I train Iltu for? So we can sit around now and twiddle our thumbs ... ?"

Germa looked worriedly at his watch. "I don't have any more time. The takeoff order can come any second now."

Pucky looked intently at the lieutenant. "Be careful, Germa. There's something that isn't right about those ships. I can feel it."

Even Col. Sukril had sensed this but he refused to react to indefinite impulses. Pucky, who had watched Sukril telepathically, could not shake off his uneasy feeling so readily. It had led him to make a quick esp-scan of the robotships. The lack of results by no means reassured him. It was evident that no intelligences were on board the ships, yet something was wrong.

"I'll call you if something happens, little buddy."

"I'll be there," Pucky promised. He had determined to get through this mission without clashing with regulations. Otherwise he would have simply teleported on board the robotships long before this in order to check them over personally. At any rate he had decided to have a serious word with Col. Sukril since he needed a broader range of authority. "You only have to think 'Help!'—nothing more."

The hatch closed. Seconds later the Gazelle glided into the void.

Col. Sukril had given the order for takeoff.

\* \* \* \*

The control room of the Gazelle was on top of the disc-shaped hull. Its "roof" was transparent. Germa could clearly observe the 11 robotships. He approached them slowly with his right hand next to the flight lever which he only needed to shove forward in order to hurtle away at tremendous speed. Actually the assumption that aliens could have boarded the ships in the meantime was purely absurd because if that had happened the aliens wouldn't be waiting around until somebody discovered them. Of course it was also possible that such strangers might not be able to operate the robot controls and this could explain why they were waiting.

But even if that were so, the ships they had arrived in would have to be somewhere in the vicinity. In that case the tracking instruments would have detected them long before this. Pucky had warned him, however, and Germa still had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. The mousebeaver would not have said anything like that without a reason.

Germa could clearly make out the outlines of the airlocks, the great ring-bulge of the engines and the gun-turret hatches. The viewscreen revealed these details with an increasing clarity but Germa preferred to examine the approaching colossus directly. An uncanny aura of menace seemed to exclude from the robotship, which had originally been assigned to guarding the outer limits of the Arkonide Imperium.

"Brado!" One of the 5 men in the control room came away from his companions and approached him. "What do you think, Sergeant? Where the devil is the main hatch to the hangar?"

From 100 meters away one might have seen that Brado was Mexican or Spanish. His black hair appeared to be glued to his head with pomade. He was nervously turning his space helmet around in his hands. They all wore the lightweight protective suits which could enable them to work in the outer vacuum. The helmet could be put on in a matter of seconds.

"I'm familiar with the Imperium class, sir," he said, "but they have such a big surface area that I don't know at first glance ..."

"Same with me," admitted Germa. But suddenly he saw the small control wheel next to the outlines of a hatch door that must have measured 50 meters in depth. "There it is!"

The problem was solved more quickly than he had first expected. He carefully manoeuvred the Gazelle closer to the ship and then brought it to a relative standstill. They were now no more than 20 meters away from the towering wall of the hull, which at this proximity hardly revealed any curvature.

Germa turned to the others. "Who's going?" he asked.

An oppressive silence answered him. No one volunteered. It was so unheard of that Germa was speechless for several moments. He could sense the uneasiness of these men whom he knew he could ordinarily depend upon. It was an unrest that seemed to be contagious, because he felt it himself. It was as if he were no longer *alone* with these 5 men in the ship.

"Sgt. Gork! Take Cadet Wilkovski with you and open that hatch. If necessary we'll cover you with the weapons—but get a move on!"

The 2 men nodded wordlessly, donned their helmets and secured them with magnetic clamps. Then they turned on their air supply and checked out their radio systems.

"Sgt. Gork ready."

Germa confirmed and gave them their signal. He remained at the controls and activated the airlock mechanism. One minute later they were visible outside the ship. They shoved away from the Gazelle and landed softly a few seconds later on the hull of the superwarship, which had enough mass attraction to work its effect on them.

It was a familiar enough scene for Germa. Two ships stood next to each other, apparently motionless, separated only by a few meters. The jump from one to another was very short but the abyss beneath extended for billions of light-years. Yet a man couldn't fall into it under such circumstances. Forces of inertia and local mass attraction prevented it. From awesome distances the other island universes sent their shimmering light, beyond human reach—or so it seemed.

Sgt. Gork found the control wheel and began to turn it.

On a robot-operated ship a control wheel was as primitive as it was indispensable. Without a mechanical provision of this nature it would be impossible for a man to enter in case the automatic system failed. The purpose of the wheel was to open a small adjacent manlock. Once inside, an operator could start the semi-automatic machinery which was energized by a power bank.

Over Germa's head a loudspeaker crackled and Col. Sukril's voice rang out: "How it is, Lieutenant? Everything alright?"

"I've sent 2 men over to the lock, sir. As soon as they raise the hatch I'll move the Gazelle inside."

"We have you on the screens. Report to me every 2 minutes."

"Very well, sir."

The ship-com speaker fell silent but then the spacecom came to life. It was Sgt. Gork. "The wheel's stuck, sir. It made only 2 turns and no more. What should I do?"

Germa cursed softly to himself before answering. "Maybe that's all that's required. Just give it a try, Sergeant!"

"Sir ... ?" This time it was Cadet Lester, who stood behind him in the control room with Brado and Hansen. "Sir ... ?"

Germa swung around. "Well, what is it? Can't you see I'm—"

"Sir—here in the ship—there's something ..."

Germa was aware of a rash of gooseflesh which only confirmed that he had sensed the same thing. He and the other 3 men were not alone in the Gazelle. More accurately stated, they were not alone right here in the control room!

The chamber was not very large and offered no concealment. Even Pucky would have found it difficult to hide here. And also Germa knew the mousebeaver's presence would not have caused the aura of fear and horror that was undeniably here now.

It was a mental current that came from somewhere and seemed to be concentrating on him. Germa was no telepath or he might have grasped more of what was happening. He could only react instinctively to the unknown presence.

"Keep your beamers ready," he ordered, not knowing any other way to calm his men. Then he turned his attention again to the other two outside.

Meanwhile Sgt. Gork had succeeded in opening the manlock. "I'm going in, sir," Gork reported.

"Wilkovski is to go with you," replied Germa hoarsely. "Both of you stay together. Give an alarm if you run into anybody."

Gork didn't answer. He and Wilkovski disappeared into the small opening.

The seconds seemed an eternity.

Germa recalled a mission he had been on long ago. Five hundred light-years from Earth they had found a derelict in the void. The design of the ship had been completely unknown, indicating that it had been built by a race that Terra had never contacted before. After the hull had been opened with cutting beams a prize crew went on board. He himself had been a member of the boarding team.

He remembered being gripped by the same feeling he was experiencing now. It had seemed to him as if someone were watching him from unseen eyes and following every move he made. But the wreck had been found to be completely empty. Its builders must have abandoned it long before then, whoever they might have been or whatever they might have looked like. Neither the Arkonides nor the Springers nor the Aras had been able to give any indication of where it had come from. Still today it remained one of the unsolved riddles that the universe seemed to be full of.

Germa came back to the present. He reasoned that he certainly couldn't compare this robotship with the derelict. Besides, he was sensing the presence of an alien not there but right here in the control room of the Gazelle—someone who could not be seen.

"Sir ... ! The controls!"

Germa tensed. The voice of his second sergeant, Brado, had been touched with horror. The flight lever was moving by itself in slow little jerks.

he suddenly saw the hull of the giant battleship recede while the *Caesar* appeared at one side of his field of vision. The Gazelle picked up speed and with ever-increasing acceleration swept away in an opposite direction. Both of the big warships dwindled rapidly in size; 10 seconds later the smaller companion ships were no longer visible to the naked eye.

It was only then that Germa overcame his momentary paralysis.

His hand gripped the flight lever. Shifting it to the reverse slot, he pulled back. The ship obediently slowed down and described a wide curve. It was on a course that would bring them back to where they had started from.

But then an invisible hand shoved it forward again, slowly but steadily. When Germa grasped it firmly again it seemed to be immovable as if it had been welded in place. It could not be budged.

The inertial forces had been absorbed automatically. Sgt. Brado had thrown himself against the door as if he feared that someone might enter the control room—perhaps somebody who might be lurking outside in the corridor. He didn't realize how useless this was because if any invisible alien were on board the *Gazelle* he would have to be right here in the room with them.

The 2 cadets Hansen and Lester leaned with blanched faces against the wall near the communications console, unable to move a muscle. They stared in wide-eyed bewilderment at the bewitched flight lever.

Germa gave up his struggles. He was faced with something for which there was simply no explanation. Because if it were merely an invisible person grasping the lever he should have been able to feel his hand. He had been struggling with it at the same time and yet had not contacted a thing. If there *was* a stranger here he would have to be not only invisible but immaterial as well.

The *Caesar* was only a dimly glimmering point of light in the immensity when Col. Sukril reacted. Altogether about 15 seconds had passed at the most.

"What's wrong with you, Germa? Have you lost your mind?"

"Sir, we've lost control of the *Gazelle*. Somebody is changing the flight settings—and they're invisible!"

5 seconds of silence ensued. During that 5 seconds the *Caesar* and the group of robotships faded completely from Germa's range of vision. The shimmering band of the Milky Way and a few isolated giant suns was all he could see.

"Try to bring the ship back under control, Germa. Keep sending us your tracking coordinates. We'll get you back. Over and out!"

No question, no amazement or surprise, nothing. Why not?

Lt. Germa stared at the flight lever, which was shoved out to the last notch. The *Gazelle* was at its top acceleration. If the present situation weren't changed they would soon be in the realm of relativistic velocities. The course had shifted again. Now if they continued straight on they would reach a dimly shining nebulous mass that was barely distinguishable from the black background of the absolute void.

An island universe? A star cluster between the galaxies? Or actually a nebula?

The *Gazelle* was racing toward it.

If one were to discount the possibility of making a transition—or more likely a thousand or a hundred thousand hyper jumps—it might take a few million years to reach it.

In sudden anger Germa grasped the flight lever again. He encountered a motionless piece of metal.

"Pucky!" he said aloud. "Help me now!"

\* \* \* \*

Sgt. Gork and Cadet Wilkovski knew nothing about what was happening outside the airlock. They had penetrated the giant launch chamber and immediately located the mechanical controls. A few manipulations of switches served to turn on the automatic sequence and they waited.

Almost a full minute went by. Within that minute Germa and the 3 men with him traversed a distance of more than 10,000 km. Under their feet a dull rumbling began. They felt the deckplates vibrating. There were unintelligible sounds in their headphones.

Then the main hatch began to open and to slide into its retainer well. The gulf of the outer darkness began to be visible. But the mighty lock door only opened half-way before it stopped. The rumbling ceased and all was still.

Sgt. Gork stepped forward to the edge of the chamber deck. He could clearly see the *Caesar* standing off at some distance where it had been previously but the *Gazelle* had disappeared. Recalling the unintelligible noises in his helmet receiver, he adjusted his transmitter and called the *Caesar*. He learned from Col. Sukril what had transpired but no explanation was given.

"Stay where you are, Sergeant—I'll send reinforcements. We'll take care of Germa later."

"But ..."

Did you hear my order? Alright then! Wait!"

Gork gritted his teeth. He was standing here uselessly while something weird was happening to Germa. Cadet Wilkovski was only a few steps away from him when he suddenly cried out. In their headphones were the same distorted and hideous sounds again.

"The hatch ... !"

Gork saw it himself. The lock door began to close, slowly but steadily. However there was no accompanying rumble or vibration of running machinery. The great launch gate was lowering as though it were being moved by invisible hands. It was closing without any help from the motor drive.

Without thinking, Gork ran forward and dove through the narrowing gap into the emptiness of space. He chose to try getting to the *Caesar* this way or take his chances on getting fished out of the void rather than remain in a haunted ship.

Cadet Wilkovski stayed where he was. He was no hero, which was why he hadn't moved. It was better here, he reasoned, than to take the risk of running out of air somewhere among the stars.

The launch hatch closed.

\* \* \* \*

A few seconds before this, Pucky had teleported to the Control Central of the *Caesar*. He had given Iltu strictest orders to remain in her cabin and keep in telepathic contact with him. It had not taken long but each moment was precious now.

Col. Sukril almost jumped when the mousebeaver made such a sudden intrusion right next to him but then he remembered and was willing to dispense with regulations for the moment. And Pucky also forgot the rule books. Sukril's rank was a side issue now.

Well, here's your backstop, buddy! I knew right away there was something wrong about those ships. Why didn't you let me go with Germa ... ?"

"Quiet!", roared Sukril, turning red in the face. But he still kept his eyes on the viewscreen. "Who's the commander here—you or me?"

Wanting to be polite, Pucky ignored the question. "Shall I make the jump?"

"What are you still waiting for? Open that main hatch so a fully-manned Gazelle can fly in there. Do you know the robot controls enough to make the switch to manual?"

"I took a course in it!" Pucky muttered angrily. Without another word he dematerialised.

In his haste of course he had forgotten to put on his Arkonide combatsuit. He merely wore his normal uniform, which only allowed him to remain in a breathing environment, and it afforded him no protection against an attack of any kind.

He materialized in the launch chamber. A dim emergency lamp shone from the ceiling, which was enough to reveal Cadet Wilkovski. He was back against the wall, staring at him out of a fear-whitened face and holding a beamer in his hand.

"It's me, Pucky! Where's Gork?"

Wilkovski lowered his weapon. "He jumped out." he said shakily. "Before the hatch closed."

Pucky looked around. It wasn't hard for him to locate the controls. But no matter how much he laboured with them the launch gate failed to move. It was as if it were held fast by invisible forces.

After his telekinesis also failed him, Pucky gave it up. "You stay here, Wilkovski. I'll make a try in the Control Central. Maybe it'll work when I cut out the robot circuits. As soon as the gate opens, tell Col. Sukril to send the troops. Tell him to man all 11 ships at the same time. Did you get that?"

Wilkovski nodded. "Yes—but what about Germa?"

"I'll worry about him as soon as there's time. He's not in immediate danger. So you wait here!"

The ship was of the same model series as the *Caesar* but since it hadn't been planned for use by living crews it was devoid of every human comfort. The cabins included in the design were empty but in case of operation by organic intelligences the ship could be made livable at any time by means of the appropriate installations.

Pucky teleported directly into the Control Central. When he materialized he remained in one spot, motionless. Here, too, was a burning emergency light although it might appear superfluous to the untrained observer. Pucky recalled that such lights were always provided on robotships and that they were designed to turn on automatically in the presence of radiated heat from living beings.

The giant control board and countless meters and rows of instrument consoles were not confusing to Pucky. He knew exactly what he had to do because now his previous experience was an advantage. He had been through this in the Blue System when the Terrans had stolen a robot fleet from the Akons that Atlan had unwillingly turned over to them. All he had to do was remove the tiny capsule from the activating circuit. Once this was done the ship would respond again to manual controls.

He took only a step or two toward the controls before he suddenly froze in his tracks again. Here it was again—the strange awareness of horrible danger.

His sensitive brain registered incoming thought impulses that had no fixed pattern and certainly didn't make any sense. Basically all they transmitted were emotions and they were anything but friendly. A wave of hate flooded in upon him, apparently from nowhere. For a moment he had to struggle against a feeling of panic but his instinct of self-preservation won out. He jerked the energy gun from his belt and released the safety. The deadly weapon was ready for firing.

He looked slowly about him in every direction in search of the enemy who had to be hiding somewhere very close by. But he saw nothing although he could sense something present. The waves of hate came at him from all sides and threatened to pull him into unknown depths. Yes, that was it—it was as if he were caught in a whirlpool.

The enemy was here with him in the Control Central but he was invisible!

Pucky backed up slowly until he stood with his back to the control panels. From this position he could see the entire room. Of course there were places of concealment here if one were to crawl into the narrow recesses between the consoles and cabinets. But Pucky knew the enemy wasn't hiding. Moreover, there wasn't just one but many of them. They were all invisible and in his immediate vicinity.

Now he realized bitterly that he had forgotten his Arkonide combatsuit. With that he could have also made himself invisible by merely turning on the deflector held. Also he would have felt more secure under the protection of its defence screen. But it was too late now for such considerations nor was he thinking in terms of teleporting back to the *Caesar*. As long as Cadet Wilkovski was down in the launch lock there was simply no retreating.

For a moment he thought of Lt. Germa, who was racing at an incredible speed into the starless void. He would have to fetch him back—later when he had time.

The streams of hostile thoughts became more intense. They were still exuding hate, nothing else—or perhaps also a touch of curiosity. The thought patterns were alien yet Pucky couldn't rid himself of the notion that he had encountered them somewhere before. His memory was usually excellent but this time it failed him. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't recall when or where it had been.

At least not yet!

Close in front of him there was a sudden blue flash. The energy beam emerged from emptiness. It missed him by only a few centimetres but the thermal effect was strong enough to singe his arm. He felt a terrible pain that almost made him blank out. Without thinking he returned the fire, aiming at the exact spot that the shot had come from. At the same time he dropped to the deck in order to concentrate. He had to get out of here or he was done for.

He sensed a note of satisfaction in the hateful thoughts.

When he dropped down he had fallen on his wounded arm, which shot a wave of maddening pain through his body. *Scram out of here!*—he thought. He saw the objects around him begin to blur and disappear—only to rematerialise again.

He was in a completely empty room. The hostile thoughts were weaker here, more distant. He had escaped—but for how long?

Il tu, he thought, *can you hear me?*



Pucky! Can I help you?

Her answer came sharply and clearly to him. She must have been in constant contact with him and was probably aware of everything that had happened.

Iltu! In my cabin, in the cabinet! The combatsuits! Put yours on and bring me mine! Hurry!

No answer. Had Iltu understood him?

He straightened up and felt of his injured arm. The pain hadn't lessened but he began to suppress it mentally. Only a burn, he hoped. It wasn't anything worse but it was very painful.

While he was waiting something suddenly occurred to him that he had not thought of until now. Everything had happened too swiftly for him to fully register his observations but he recalled that he had seen something. When he had shot at the invisible nemesis he must have hit him, judging from 2 impressions he had received. The thought emanations of hate and satisfaction had changed to sudden surge of pain. Secondly he had caught a fleeting glimpse of a shadowy form.

The shadow had appeared only very briefly before disappearing again. The agent from nowhere had been visible for the fraction of a second. The outline had been somewhat humanoid but was so transparent that he had been able to see through it.

Agents from nowhere ... ?

Pucky suddenly knew where he had encountered them before. It was that time on the wandering planet of Barkon which was rushing through the starless reaches of the intergalactic gulf on its long course back to the Milky Way. There an attack had occurred. The enemy then had also been immaterial and could only be made visible or could only be destroyed under a concentrated energy fire. They seemed to be thought forms only—invisible and bodiless entities with telepathic abilities but with such alien thought forms that they could not be comprehended. They always made bold and deadly attacks.

No one had known where they came from or where they had fled later because even their ships were invisible. Only a special instrument capable of graphing energy emanations had made them visible—elongated torpedo shapes more than 100 meters in length. They had taken off and disappeared into the infinite depths of intergalactic space.

And now they had returned! Pucky knew that they were the most dangerous entities that humans had ever encountered, especially because they were unknown forms of life. It was as if they lived in a different plane of existence.

The thought patterns became stronger again. They were looking for him. They were getting closer.

Pucky knew he had to avoid teleporting back into the launch lock area where Wilkovski was waiting. It would expose the cadet unnecessarily to danger. But where was Iltu?

Iltu

The answer came at once: *I'm just about ready. Think of your surroundings so that I can find you. Where are you?*

Pucky teleported. The hostile thoughts became weaker again. He had landed precisely in the spot he had concentrated on—in the robotship's observation dome. Naturally the normal equipment was missing here for full observations of the outer void because robots were more instrumentally oriented than visually. But Pucky wasn't ready for astronomy at the moment.

I'm in the observation dome. Iltu. Same as on board the Caesar. *Teleport over here—and hurry!*

He waited. Seconds passed.

Once more the mysterious thought impressions were weaker but there was no doubt that the aliens were looking for him. He had vanished before their eyes—or did they have eyes? Even that time on Barkon he had seen that they were not capable of teleporting and that their movements actually were fairly slow. He could always manage to get away from them, again and again—but was that the answer?

Who were these beings who came out of invisible realms and attacked everything that entered the inter-galactic abyss? They apparently didn't venture into the galaxy itself. Their habitat seemed to be in the vast emptiness between the universes. They were unassailable and represented the greatest menace that the Terrans had been confronted with thus far.

The air shimmered in front of Pucky and then Iltu appeared. She wore her combatsuit and carried a second outfit with her.

"Terrific, girl!" chirped Pucky, and he immediately pulled on the suit over his uniform. Then he picked up his raygun and thrust it into his outer belt. "Turn on your defence screen so that they can't hurt you. Ow—speaking of hurt ...!"

Iltu had helped him with the suit because he could hardly move his left arm. Concernedly, she stroked his sleeve where the wound was located.

"Does it pain you a lot, Pucky?"

He nodded and smiled appreciatively, "Only when I laugh. Ps-s-t! They're coming again!"

She listened inwardly. "Yes, I'm picking up their thoughts. But how strange they are! It's just like you were thinking when I was in contact with you. Where do they come from? Who are they?"

"Nobody knows," muttered Pucky, and again he sensed the immediate presence of the sinister intruders. The fact that they had found them here indicated strongly that they were telepathic. "We'll try to make them visible. Let's hope our screens will stand up against their weapons."

Iltu nodded bravely. She took up a position next to Pucky with her back to the wall and drew out her beamer. Her normally gentle eyes gleamed venturesomely. It wasn't supposed to be in her line of duty to—

The blue energy beam flashed not 2 meters away and struck Pucky's defence screen. It divided there and glanced off of him without doing any damage.

"Fire!" shouted the mousebeaver as he activated his weapon. Iltu complied.

The 2 streams of energy intersected and glanced from an invisible obstruction. Back on Barkon, 3 such beams had been necessary to make the unseen creatures visible. But now it also succeeded with just 2.

Of course the effect was not as penetrating or lingering.

The flame-lined outline of the enemy became dimly discernible. His body was resistant enough to reflect the beams of energy. A small onslaught like this couldn't hurt him but the force of 4 or 5 simultaneous shots could kill him. This Pucky knew from his experience on Barkon.

But nothing more.

The invisible entity assumed a shape for several seconds before it ducked out of harm's way. The figure was entirely human although no face could be seen. Two arms, a torso, 2 legs—that was all. But it was enough. Judging from that it had to be a material form.

With gun in hand, Pucky sprang forward and tried to grasp the shadow phantom. He clutched at emptiness. His hands encountered no resistance. Evil thoughts streamed into his mind, so filled with hate and rage that he drew back involuntary. Never in his life had he encountered such venomous thoughts.

He sprang back next to Iltu, where his neutralizer field enabled him to join his defence screen with hers. He took her by the hand. "I'll teleport and take you with me. You don't have to do a thing."

He jumped—and landed directly in the concentrated blue fire of 6 or 7 energy weapons. Although the mousebeavers' doubly strengthened screens were able to deflect the deadly beams, their micro-generators were strained to the limit. Pucky was much too flabbergasted to react wisely. He raised his own weapon in order to return the fire.

Then it was Iltu who saved both their lives. Instead of thinking uselessly of a counter-offensive she concentrated on making a short teleport jump. A Fraction of a second before their screens could collapse, the 2 mousebeavers vanished and rematerialised in one of the peripheral corridors of the ship.

"That was close," muttered Pucky, releasing her hand. "Well done, little one!"

Iltu was about to retort something but she decided to remain silent. It was enough that Pucky praised her deed, even though he called her "little one". Perhaps that, too, was a mark of esteem.

"I have to switch over the controls, Iltu. Only then can the boarding crews operation. If the shadows are faster than we are, they'll rob the ship and we'll be in a fix. Do you want to wait here or are you coming along?"

The question was unnecessary. Iltu went along.

As far as Pucky could make out, the Control Central was empty. The invisible ones were apparently all engaged in the search for him and Iltu—which could mean that there weren't very many of them.

The main circuits were in an adjoining room. With a certainty which was surprising even to Pucky, he found the interface capsule behind the proper access panel and removed it. From that moment on the mighty ship was dependent upon the manual operations of living intelligences. Even though there were other independent automatic systems on board, as of this second they had been cut off.

Another jump brought them into the launch chamber where Cadet Wilkovski was still standing, weapon in hand, with his back to the wall.

"Call Col. Sukril!" Pucky ordered, while turning off his defence screen. "Tell him to start the takeover

operation—for this ship and the others. We'll try to divert the shadow spooks. There can't be many of them."

Cadet Wilkovski passed on this information over his helmet radio and then made a new attempt to open the outer hatch. This time he succeeded. The heavy lock gate swung into its retainer well and the *Caesar* became visible. There they could see the great hangar locks of the battleship opening up to disgorge a swarm of auxiliary craft and Gazelles which promptly headed for the various robotships.

The actual operation had begun. The die had been cast. As long as the men wore their combatsuits and kept their screens up, they would be relatively safe from the invisible enemy. Moreover, they could defend themselves with concentrated fire from multiple weapons.

But Pucky did not yet realize how greatly he had underestimated the unknown opposition. "Iltu, you stay here," he said. He was watching some of the other robotships in the distance as the boarding commandos opened their locks and entered them. Evidently his switching over this flagship put the rest of them on manual control. "I have something else I have to take care of," he added.

"I'll go with you!"

"No—you stay here. It's too dangerous. You aren't ready yet for real precision jumps. And the distance is too great."

"What are you going to do?"

Pucky looked straight at her. "Look for Germa. He's our friend."

"Then I've got to go with you!"

Pucky remained adamant. "It's not only the danger of it, Iltu. I have to know I've got somebody here I can depend on." He swallowed with difficulty. "I can depend on you, can't I, girl? Somebody had to stay here to divert the shadow people from the commando crews. It's a rough job and you'll have to keep on the jump all the time. Depend on the troops and make sure they use a concentrated fire against the spooks whenever they show up. You're the only one who can tell when they're around."

"Alright, Pucky, as you wish. But—I'll come if anything happens to you."

"I'll call if I need you," he reassured her. "But don't forget that you represent me here now. Col. Sukril is depending only on me, not you. He mustn't see that we've switched places. But I can't leave Germa in the lurch."

She pressed his paw. "You can depend on me." She smiled and revealed her pretty incisor tooth. "Until later. Grandpa."

Pucky was forced to admire her tooth for a moment. Then he raised a threatening finger to her, finally thought better of it—and vanished.

But Iltu had overcome her secret awe of Pucky in that moment. She watched the oncoming transports, which were carrying more than 2000 troops. Her task would be to protect these men.

After the *Caesar* and the 11 robotships had dropped from sight, nothing else changed. The distances were too great for that.

Lt. Germa slumped in the pilot seat and stared at the useless flight lever. During the past 20 minutes he had tried often enough to move it back. Even the navigation controls were blocked. Invisible hands had manipulated the machinery—but to whom did those hands belong?

He looked about him again but outside of himself and his 3 companions there was no one else in the control room. By now the weird presentiment of lurking menace had disappeared, which they had all sensed so clearly before. It was, as if the invisible ones had left the ship, having accomplished their objective.

Once more he attempted to make contact with the *Caesar* and this time he succeeded. The com system was still intact.

Sukril sounded somewhat impatient with him. "No, we haven't forgotten you, Lieutenant! I just haven't had time. The operation's started. The men are boarding the robotships."

"Where is Pucky?"

Sukril suppressed a bitter remark. "Also on the mission," was all he said. "Be patient, we'll pick you up soon enough. We have you on the tracking scanners and can locate you at any moment. But first I have to know that everything here is in order. We seem to be up against some very unusual opposition. The enemy is invisible and possibly even disembodied."

"Invisible!" gasped Germa as he felt his hackles rising. "How is that possible?"

"To be invisible isn't so impossible," replied Sukril. "The unusual part is that they are apparently immaterial. I've already sent a report on this to Terra so that Rhodan will know what's going on."

Germa nodded to himself. "Well then, thank you, sir. We'll wait and depend entirely upon you."

"You do just that," Sukril admonished, and he cut off.

It seemed that at the moment he had plenty to do. Germa felt better about it because he realized that he himself was not in immediate danger. Later it would be child's play for the *Caesar* to trace him and find him.

But in the meantime the *Gazelle* was racing onward into the depths of the intergalactic void. The velocity of light had been reached, which was the limit of speed in the Einstein universe. Brado, Hansen and Lester sat silently at their stations to Germa's right and left. In spite of the fright they'd been through they had become fascinated by the aspect of empty space. The white band of the Milky Way still marked the location of their home but the *Gazelle* was hurtling directly in an opposite direction. They were moving toward the distant nebula which hovered far ahead in the infinite vastness. For one horrible moment Germa had the thought that the shadow beings might stem from there but then he rejected the idea.

A race that could fly at will from universe to universe would not be lingering around the edges of a galaxy and attacking stray robotships. They wouldn't be out to conquer a planet or star but an entire galaxy.

What was keeping Pucky?

His thoughts returned to the mousebeaver. He liked him very much, that was for sure. He liked all animals—but was Pucky what one might commonly refer to as "animal"? Wasn't he actually more than that? In this cosmic age, outer differences of form and colour of skin ought to be a thing of the past. In fact when men first encountered extraterrestrial beings, the concept of racial barriers was shattered. Humanity itself melted into a single unity. People learned to judge others by character rather than by outward appearances. This was the only way they could adjust themselves to a contact with other intelligences.

Through his deeds and comportment, Pucky had contributed much to this kind of understanding. He had lost his home world and his own kind but had found a new home on Earth among humans. He loved humanity but he was immensely proud of being a mousebeaver.

"Lieutenant!"

Cadet Hansen had chanced to turn around to search again for signs of the unknown invaders in the control room. He had not yet gotten rid of the feeling of being under constant observation.

Germa forgot his philosophical contemplations and whirled around, instinctively grasping his beamer, which lay on the flight panel. But then he breathed a sigh of relief. He had just been thinking of Pucky—and here the mousebeaver was, emerging out of nowhere.

"Pucky! At last!"

"Man—that wasn't so easy!"

Pucky released the helmet of his combatsuit and shook himself. He nodded encouragingly at the 4 men and then, as far as he was able to determine by telepathy, he assured himself that the invisible foe was neither in the control room nor on board the *Gazelle*.

"I was tracking your brain impulses, Germa," continued Pucky as he took over the last remaining seat, "but that alone wasn't enough. The distance was so great that I couldn't zero in exactly. I simply jumped and naturally I materialized immediately in the middle of nothing." He shuddered again at the memory of the unpleasant experience. "Man, I can tell you, that was something creepy! There I was in the middle of nowhere, out of sight of the *Caesar* and the *Gazelle*. Only the thought impulses were left. I could pick out Sukril's thoughts, alright—strictly military. After all, he was running the mission. But your thoughts, Germa, were something else. They were very good ones." He produced a friendly smile, which caused his incisor tooth to gleam brightly. "That's what made it easy to find you. So here I am!"

"Where is Iltu?"

"A brave girl!" exclaimed Pucky happily, although he added immediately: "Of course she's a bit young and inexperienced but all the same ..."

Germa made no further comment, of course not knowing what had happened in the meantime. He pointed to the controls. "So now what do we do? The flight controls seem to be welded in place. I can't change the speed or the course. Can you bring us back to the *Caesar* all by yourself?"

"That could be a possibility but I don't want to have Sukril chew me out." Pucky started to laugh and then gave a pontifical imitation of the commander: "That mousebeaver! He was entrusted with a ship and left it to an uncertain fate!"

Germa had to grin, as did his 3 companions. It was really comical the way the mousebeaver imitated the colonel's speech characteristics. Of course he couldn't reproduce the Skipper's deep deep tone of voice but otherwise it was a good try.

"How can you free up the controls?" he asked.

Pucky promptly forgot Col. Sukril. "I don't have any idea, Germa. I'll have to look them over."

It wasn't actually what he meant because there wasn't much to see. There was only one way to find the probable obstructions—he had to put his telekinetic faculties to work. He carefully probed along the length of the flight lever with his psychokinetic emanations. In this way he penetrated deep into the control mechanism until he encountered a resistance.

"That's probably it," he muttered, while trying to determine the shape of the obstruction. It had an uneven shape but there was no doubt that this was what kept the lever from moving. Pucky took a deep breath and grasped it telekinetically. Now that he had found the cause, the damage should be easy to correct. It all depended upon whether or not his powers were greater than the energies which held the obstruction in place.

"Shift the level to neutral!" he said suddenly.

Germa reached out to it. The lever was quite easy to move. It clicked audibly to the intended slot. The velocity of the Gazelle did not lessen due to the force of inertia. At light-speed it made no difference whether the propulsion system was working or not.

Then Pucky got busy on the frozen nav-controls. He succeeded only after a number of trials, again encountering an unknown type of resistance. It seemed to be something that had been melted down and then hardened again but there was no explanation of how it had gotten there. Was it possible that the invisible ones could penetrate into solid matter?

"You can try it now."

Gazelle actually changed course and responded obediently to every manipulation he shook his head in amazement. "Wow—we'd all better take up telekinesis! How did you do it, Pucky?"

"To tell you the truth—I don't know exactly, myself," the mousebeaver admitted. "I'm a boob in arms compared to those aliens. They seem to be able to do anything."

"Haven't you just outsmarted them?"

"Well, not really, Germa. I had to search a long time to clear the obstructions out of the way. But they put them there in seconds. I'm afraid we're still in for some surprises with those spooks. They aren't material substance in our sense of the word. Maybe you could go so far as to say they are bodiless, even in their own dimension. I don't know, Germa, when we first ran into them that time on Barkon, we racked our brains trying to figure them out-with no results. We thought then that it was a one-time contact and we almost forgot them after that. And now ... " Pucky fell silent, having become very pensive.

Germa spoke up. "Col. Sukril should ask Rhodan for support."

"I'll recommend that to him," said Pucky, pointing to the control board. "Do you want to try locating-the

*Caesar* ?"

Germa turned on the radio and put out a call to the flagship. There was a 2-minute delay before the *Caesar* answered.

"I already told you, Lt Germa, that I would send somebody——"

Germa interrupted the angry voice. "We're already on our way back, sir. The phantoms have let go of us. I only wanted to inform you that Rhodan would be very interested in their presence here because he met them once before. May I recommend, sir, that you get into personal contact with him at once——?"

"I've had an appropriate message sent," replied Sukril in a rigid tone of voice.

"Did it describe the phenomena we've just experienced?"

"Would you care to explain that?"

"Yessir. These shadow people are not only a local menace to us here but for the entire galaxy. Pucky told me about them. It's absolutely necessary to bypass official channels on Earth and go directly to Rhodan. The red tape would take too long ... "

Sukril did not seem to realize that Germa could not have spoken to Pucky—since he wasn't aware of the mousebeaver's present location. "Alright, Germa, then you take care of getting back here on your own. I'll get into direct communication with the Administrator. Does that satisfy you?"

Germa sighed his relief and glanced briefly at Pucky. Thank you, sir. I believe you'll be doing us all a big favour. Don't worry about me, I can find my way back without help."

Sukril grumbled something unintelligible and cut off the connection. Germa also shut down the com unit and looked at Pucky.

The Old Man seems to be taking it pretty calmly. Do you think he knew about the danger already?"

"It looks like it," Pucky nodded. He stared at the Milky Way and pointed in their direction of flight. "It's my guess that you'll catch sight of the *Caesar* and the robots in about 5 minutes. Better start decelerating."

The Gazelle responded to the retropulsion controls. The ships came into view after 15 minutes. After arriving at the *Caesar*, Germa flew the Gazelle into the wide-open hangar and landed it gently. He had hardly done so before the mighty lock gate started to close.

Germa had gotten up and was about to leave the Gazelle when Pucky suddenly tensed and grasped his arm.

"Wait, Germa—something's fishy! Why are they closing the hangar hatch? The action can't be over with yet. Besides, I'm picking up the spook thoughts again." He looked about but couldn't see anything suspicious other than the fact that the hangar itself was strangely deserted-looking. "Stay in the Gazelle, Germa. Turn on the energy screen! And don't turn it off until you see me over by that wall and I give you a signal. Have you got that?"

"Yes—but what gives?"



"Don't ask me now. Just a precaution, that's all. OK, I'm making the jump. Turn on the screen in 10 seconds. See you later." He dematerialised before the eyes of the 4 men and vanished.

Germa made a reassuring sign to his men. Of course he didn't know what was on the mousebeaver's mind yet but he trusted him blindly. After the prescribed 10 seconds, he switched on the screen. Now the Gazelle lay under a protective dome of energy which isolated it completely from the outside world.

Only then did Germa note how unusually quiet it was on board the *Caesar*. There was no sign of the hangar personnel. No crews had hurried forward to receive the Gazelle.

He sat down. "Let's wait," he said.

And they waited.

#### 4/ GHOST SHIP

Iltu's hour of trial had come.

When the special troop carriers landed in the giant hangar and the commandos leapt out with ready weapons to swarm into the corridors, she was immediately spotted by Maj. Borovski who led the mission.

"Oh there you are, Pucky!" he cried out as he ran past her.

"I am Iltu!" she chirped indignantly, trying in vain to keep up with the towering major. "Wait a minute! I have something important to say to you!"

Borovski stopped. "Oh—Iltu?" he said wonderingly. "The other mousebeaver!"

"A girl mousebeaver!" she corrected him, coming to a stop beside him. "Pucky is fetching Germa. I'm here in his place."

"Fine!" retorted Borovski. "Then do it!"

He was about to take off again but Iltu furiously grasped him by the leg of his trousers.

"Wait, I said! Do you want to listen to me or don't you? Pucky has left some instructions for you. They have to do with the invisible enemies who are here on the ship.

Borovski kept a straight face and stood still. The men running passed him were seen to grin as they noted Iltu holding him by the pants of his combatsuit. Only a few of them came to a stop.

"Alright, Iltu, tell me."

She gave him a brief report on her experiences with the shadow people and how they could be combatted. She advised Borovski to keep his men in groups of at least 5 and to keep their screens turned on. As soon as anyone fired at them out of the emptiness they should set up a crossfire. They should keep it up until the enemy became visible and died. Then of course he would vanish back into the nothingness he had emerged from.

Maj. Borovski had a good faculty of perception. "And you can pick up their thoughts? I mean—you can tell when some of them are close by?"

"Yes."

"Good!" he decided. "Then you come with me. You can ride up here on my arm."

Iltu didn't hesitate long. She climbed up his lanky form and established herself in the crook of his left arm. Borovski carried his beamer in his right hand. He turned on his defence screen and then beckoned to the men who had remained with him. The search of the robotship began.

Not everyone had come equipped with combatsuits so they formed in groups around those who were so protected. They sent the protected men ahead of them to lure the phantoms out of hiding. As soon as there was any firing out of the air, the others were to close in and join in the answering fire.

Maj. Borovski's group achieved the first results although he was honest enough later to explain that it was actually due to Iltu. There were 7 men in the group. The major was leading the way with his activated defence screen. Iltu sat on his arm and searched for the enemy's thought impulses, which she knew must be able to come through their own protective screens. The other 6 men were a few steps behind and covered all sides with their weapons ready to fire.

The first impulses that came to Iltu were very weak. The aliens were approaching slowly but steadily. It seemed as if they were especially attracted by Iltu's own brainwave patterns.

The small commando group was moving along a wide passageway. To their right and left were the doors of the empty cabins. The dim emergency lights were still coming on automatically as they progressed but all they revealed were the naked deckplates of the corridor, since on such ships there was no plastic floor coating or carpeting.

Borovski came to a cross passage and stopped.

"Where to?"

"To your right," whispered Iltu and pointed into the narrower corridor. "The impulses come from there. We should be meeting them any minute."

"Let's go!" the major whispered to his men.

Iltu felt the impulses getting stronger. She wondered anxiously if she would be safe here under Borovski's defence screen. What would Pucky have felt in her place? Was he really as fearless as he always acted or could he also sense fear?

"Stop!"

Maj. Borovski complied at once. "Do you see something?"

"You can't see them," she whispered tensely. "But I sense somebody. One of them is here."

The 6 other men had come to a stop and taken cover. At the first sign of attack they would charge forward. Borovski couldn't rid himself of a very uneasy feeling. He was accustomed to facing an enemy he could see but here there was no one visible. Iltu couldn't even tell him where the phantom was

standing. She only knew that he was here—that was all.

"He's thinking—hate! Now it's still more hate! He's going to attack!"

She had hardly spoken before a blue-white energy beam flashed out directly in front of Borovski. It struck his screen and was deflected harmlessly in a spray of pyrotechnics. The major aimed his weapon and pressed the trigger. Simultaneously the other men joined him and opened a furious counterfire against the phantom. Within fractions of a second his outlines became visible under that sheet of flame but the Terrans kept on firing. As the figure sank to the floor they followed it with their beams and saturated it with energy.

During the fighting a fairly human outline had been seen. It was a colourless silhouette against the background of the wall and then the floor except that it was 3-dimensional and seemingly material since the energy beams virtually encircled it as it went down. Borovski closely observed the phenomenon while he was firing. Now the thing lay on the deck. The blue-white flashes from its weapon had ceased. The phantom offered no further resistance because it was dying. Then it faded back into invisibility.

Iltu could sense that the thought impulses also died away. At first they had been emanations of pure hate, then rage and a will to attack. Finally there had been anguish and pain—followed by the calm of death.

At any rate, the uncanny foe could be conquered. That is—on an individual basis, for the invaders as a whole were far from being beaten. Nor was it all to be as easy as this.

\* \* \* \*

Maj. Borovski learned over the radio that the enemy was not present on the other robotships. According to plan, each vessel was taken over and manned. They waited within 2 km of the *Caesar* for the further instructions of Col. Sukril.

But the colonel did not respond to any of their radio calls. The *Caesar* hovered silently and motionlessly in space. It seemed as if Sukril had withdrawn from the operation and preferred to leave everything in the hands of the commando leaders.

Maj. Borovski gave up trying to make contact with the commander; he had more important things to do. With help from Iltu he was able to track down 3 more phantoms and kill them but then there were no more impulses. It was as if the invaders had been swallowed up by the ethers of Eternity.

On the other hand, up in the Control Central the troops of Sgt. Bering ran into a well-prepared death trap.

Bering was no telepath so he was not sensitive to the thought emanations of the aliens. Unsuspectingly he came into the Control Central and occupied it with his men. There was no sign of hostiles here so they began to feel took over the radio console and reported in to the *Caesar*. He received no answer.

Bering deployed his men in groups so as to offer the required defensive pattern. The only mistake he made was to think in terms of only one attacker. It was thus a deadly surprise to see blue energy beams emerging simultaneously from 3 different directions.

Iltu had slipped out of Maj. Borovski's arm when she picked up the thoughts of the hard-pressed men. She oriented herself swiftly and cried out: "In the Control Central—it's a concentrated attack! I'll jump ahead—you follow!" And with that she vanished.

Borovski comprehended at once. He and his men stormed into the nearest antigrav lift and arrived 2 minutes later in the Control Central. What he saw there he would never forget.

3 men in the pastel green service uniforms of the Terran spacefleet were lying on the floor. There could be no doubt that they were dead. Out of sheer nothingness the blue energy beams were sweeping through the room in search of new victims. Under cover of their defence screens, Sgt. Bering and Iltu opened fire on the invisible enemy but their 2 weapons were not enough to kill them or even to drive them away. Three or 4 men had thrown themselves to the deck and crept into various niches, from which cover they fired haphazardly at the invaders.

"Get the one on the left!" yelled Borovski and he signalled his men to take cover before retaliating.

Bering caught on. He concentrated on the spot, in the middle of the air, where an energy beam was emanating from the left. Seconds later the enemy became visible under their combined attack. He sank to the floor and ceased firing.

The second one was also put out of harm's way but the third phantom disappeared without leaving a trace. Nobody knew it but at that moment all of the aliens withdrew at once. It was as if they had obeyed a silent command to retreat. It came 5 minutes too late because 3 Terrans lay dead in the Control Central of the vast robotship.

The enemy casualties were both invisible and immaterial. They could not be counted but it was certain that their losses had been greater than those of the Terrans. It was a poor consolation in spite of their victory.

"Call the *Caesar* !" shouted Borovski after the various group leaders reported that there were no further signs of attack. "Looks like the ship is ours." He signalled into the Com Room at the operator who had already turned on the equipment again. "Make contact with Col. Sukril—on the double!" After that he paced restlessly back and forth while his men took care of the fallen ones.

"Sir, the *Caesar* still doesn't answer!"

Borovski's brows shot up. "What the devil's that supposed to mean? Are they sleeping over there? Try it again!"

Iltu felt strangely alerted by this. In the past few minutes she had gained still more self-confidence and knew that she could depend on her faculties. Pucky had been an excellent task-master. She tried to establish contact with Sukril's mind but was blocked by the confusion of hundreds of other impulses. For a moment she thought she caught an emanation from Pucky but then she lost it again. It was equivalent to trying to pick out one person's voice in the shout of a thousand-man multitude—and also attempting to identify him.

The Com Man came back. "No contact, sir. They don't answer."

Iltu spoke up. "Should I have a look, Major? All I have to do is teleport."

Borovski looked about him uncertainly. "And if they show up again—the shadow people?"

"I can be back right away."

He nodded. "Alright—but hurry it up! If I only knew where Pucky was! He ought to be here."

Iltu said nothing. She was beginning to worry about her fellow mousebeaver. She concentrated and vanished without attempting to answer the major's unexpressed question. No one could say that she was a weak and uncertain teleporter. She had only to think of the *Caesar*'s Command Central—and there she materialized.

Col. Sukril was slumped motionlessly in his flight seat before the controls. The Nav Officer, Capt. Henderson, also seemed to be unconscious or dead. His head was resting on the chart table. The finger of his right hand was curled around the butt of his weapon. Three other officers were stretched out flat on the deck. The door of the Com Room was standing wide open. There was no sign of life from the chief operator.

Iltu took all this in within seconds. With a shrill whistle of alarm she pattered over to Col. Sukril. He was breathing weakly but steadily. His brain convolutions gave out an abstract pattern of dreamlike communications. At any rate he was alive.

Iltu didn't deliberate for long. For the moment there was nothing here she could do and Maj. Borovski was waiting for her. He must be informed of this at once. So she teleported back into the robotship. She briefly described what she had seen. For about 10 seconds Maj. Borovski stared at her in disconcerted amazement. Then he turned to the radio operator in Bering's detail.

"Are you familiar with the com equipment?"

"Yessir. It's the same as on the *Caesar*."

"Including the hypercom?"

"Yessir."

Borovski took a deep breath before giving his order. "Make a hypercom connection with Perry Rhodan. Straight to Terrania. But make it fast—we've no time to lose!"

He leaned back against the control panels in the Com Room and waited. In his right hand he still held his de-safetied weapon. Iltu sat on his left arm and used her *esp*. She was to warn him if the phantoms were getting ready to make another attack.

But there were no phantoms present. At least not here.

\* \* \* \*

Sgt. Gork ran into some real trouble.

When he had panicked and leapt into space he had not given any thought to how he was going to reach the *Caesar*. The main thing was to get out of the terrible ghost ship. He somersaulted slowly and some seconds went by before he could orient himself. Naturally he had missed his mark and ended up drifting past the *Caesar* just as its locks opened up.

Laboriously he drew his handgun and fired it carefully. His turning motion became slower and finally stopped. He had to fire another shot to get out of the way of the commando craft that were emerging from the *Caesar*'s launching locks.

His freefall course brought him above the *Caesar* and the formation of robotships. He could observe everything quite clearly. In his helmet phones was a confusion of orders and answering confirmations mixed with reports and conversations. The special commando details were boarding the robotships.

Gork altered his direction of flight again but just when he was about to give himself a boost of speed the energy weapon slipped from his fingers. He tried in vain to reach for the slowly drifting gun but it receded irretrievably into the void. He himself hovered motionlessly in emptiness. Beneath him the *Caesar* reminded him of a vast planet with robotships for moons.

It took him 10 minutes to realize that the warship's artificial gravity had caught him in its field and that he was sinking toward it with exasperating slowness. Another half hour passed before his feet touched the hull. He moved carefully in order not to launch himself into space again. After a few steps to the nearest open hatch, he entered the hangar inside.

It was empty.

Which in itself wasn't so extraordinary. The commando units had left the *Caesar* and gone to man the robotships. Everything appeared to have operated according to plan and schedule. He, however, had more or less deserted his post.

The thought struck him for the first time that he could only have fled from a phantom. In one sense it was a relief to know this but in its final consequences the possibilities were not so pleasant. An explanation would be demanded of him. Well, maybe the disappearance of the *Gazelle* with Lt. Germa would help to explain it—or the launch gate of the robot battleship.

But where the devil were the usual hangar personnel?

Gork looked around. He was alone. No other crewmen were in evidence. Some of the doors leading into the corridors were standing wide open. The air must have escaped from the pressure-equalizing chambers. That was completely against regulations and was unexplainable.

He stirred himself and, choosing the nearest door, closed it behind him and turned on the air supply. When the pressure was equalized he took off his space helmet. Of course he no longer carried a weapon but he didn't see any reason why he should need one now. He still didn't realize what had happened.

Out in the main corridor he ran across the first unconscious crewmen. They were men from the hangar who must have been called from their regular posts by the alarm because they had even forgotten to close the outer launch gate. Some of them had only partially put on their spacesuits before they had fallen unconscious.

Gork sniffed the air testily but could smell nothing suspicious. Had they all been knocked out with some kind of gas?

He bent down to look at several of the men but then gave it up. There were too many of them and he couldn't help them right now anyway. It soon became clear to him that no one was left on board the *Caesar* who was still in an able-bodied condition. They were all unconscious—if that was what one might call a condition that left them still breathing with their eyes staring wide open. Their limbs were stiff and unmovable. Some of them were beginning to stir but they seemed not to hear when they were spoken to.

Gork scolded himself for his frantic desertion of the robotship. He had to get to Col. Sukril, to the Commander! He had to reach the Control Central!

He found his way through the passages and corridors and lifts but it was some minutes before he finally stood before the door of the Inner Sanctum. He knew that entry here was forbidden. Only the Commander himself could authorize it.

But—was Sukril still the commander of the *Caesar* ... ?

Gork pressed his palm against the heat-sensing release. The door slid to one side into its niche. The hatchway was open.

When he entered he saw several figures lying apparently dead on the floor. Two officers sat slumped motionlessly before their control consoles.

Over at the chart table something moved. The captain there slowly raised his head. He stared at the instruments with unseeing eyes. His hands moved laboriously as he uttered a broken sentence ... "Course BJ-97-UK ... build up the screens ... increase velocity ... "

Gork clenched his teeth together. He intuited rather than cognized the fact that he was not facing a whole man. What sat there at the chart table was Capt. Henderson or at least that was who he looked like. Yet it couldn't be he. Just his eyes alone betrayed him! They stared vacantly, just slightly past him. They were empty of any spark of life. Or else this was the look of a madman.

Gork pulled himself together and acted almost as quickly as he had when the lock gate had started closing on the robotship. He came to attention and saluted "Yessir. Increase velocity! Shall I wake up the Commander?"

He received no answer but Col. Sukril began to move. His right hand picked up his weapon from where it had been lying and shoved it into his holster. He straightened up. His eyes were exactly as empty and dead as Henderson's.

Ignoring Gork he turned to the controls and prepared for a flight—which had been ordered by whom? Certainly not by Capt. Henderson?! Gork began to grasp the whole truth of the situation and he had a prickly sensation of the scalp. The Commander and the Navigation Officer were being guided by alien powers and this was the only reason they had been roused from their states of unconsciousness. The aliens needed them in order to manoeuvre the *Caesar* .

And what about himself? Wasn't he within this uncanny sphere of influence? Wasn't it only due to his belated return that he was still in command of his senses? Perhaps he was even the only man on board who was now able to think normally.

He had to do something! But in no case must Col. Sukril—or that which Sukril was now—become aware of his intentions. He had to play along in order not to appear suspicious.

"Your orders, sir?" he asked, coming to attention again.

Col. Sukril turned around slowly and looked at him through dead eyes. He spoke slowly and tonelessly. "Take over the defence screens and turn them all on as soon as the *Caesar* gets underway."

Gork nodded. "Very well, sir. Screens on after we get underway."

He went to the designated control console not far from Sukril, who had already ceased to be concerned with him. As Gork seated himself the activating levers protruded at him from the cabinet panel. Once he moved them forward, the *Caesar* would be hermetically shut off from its outer environment. None of the commando teams would be able to return. The men presently on board would be lost if this unknown power were to steal them away under protection of the screens.

He must not turn them on, or at least he'd have to hold off as long as possible.

Sukril waited until Henderson told him that the co?rdinates had been calculated and fed to the computer.

Then he turned on the ship's mighty engines and started to accelerate. On the viewscreens the robotships fell from view.

Gork saw to his horror that the *Caesar* was being guided into the gulf of intergalactic space. Where was this sector BJ-97-UK ... ?

Col. Sukril looked over at him. Although his eyes still remained expressionless his physical attitude seemed to be menacing. His right hand moved slowly toward his gun holster. Gork tensed. Had Sukril's invisible controllers gotten suspicious? Were they about to eliminate him? Would it be better to dash to safety somewhere while he still had a chance or should he continue his present role so that at least one normal man would be in the Control Central? Maybe if he betrayed himself they would knock him unconscious like the others.

He took a deep breath and placed his hands on the levers.

Sukril remained motionless in his seat. He made no further move to draw his weapon. Sgt Gork dragged it out another 10 seconds but when he saw Sukril's hand start moving again he finally activated the screens of the *Caesar* .

Now inclosed in an impenetrable shell of energy the great warship hurtled away into the absolute vacuum between the galaxies, increasing its distance from the robotships and in a direction which was exactly opposed to that in which Terra lay.

Sgt. Gork stared with widened eyes at the viewscreen where a dim nebula had moved into the cross-hairs of the automatic target sighter.

Was *that* sector BJ-97-UK ... ?

## 5/ LOST IN THE ABYSS

Pucky sprang first into a number of the smaller robotships but could detect no trace of the phantoms there, he decided quickly to go to Iltu. He had picked up her thought trace and was able to teleport directly to her. The fight with the shadow people on the main robotship had just ended.

"They're all gone now, Pucky," chirped Iltu wearily. She was still perched on Borovski's arm. "We drove some of them away and killed the rest."

The Major briefed Pucky also and didn't forget to point out that without Iltu's courageous help it might not have gone so well. He repeatedly praised the "young" mousebeaver girl and petted her silky fur. Which of course was very pleasing to Iltu. She cuddled comfortably in the crook of Borovski's arm and



winked contentedly at Pucky.

"We had 3 casualties," the major concluded. "They've already been taken to the launch lock. As Iltu says, the ship has been cleared of the enemy. She can't detect any more of their impulses."

"Neither can I," Pucky confirmed. He then reported how he had helped Lt. Germa to bring back the Gazelle. "They're over on board the *Caesar* ." He paused, apparently recalling something else. "Incidentally, something isn't right over there—on the ship itself."

Borovski nodded. "Iltu found the crew in the Control Central unconscious. Were you there too?"

"Yes but I didn't stay there long." Pucky pointed to the flight consoles. "Couldn't we get this crate into action? The viewscreens and so forth ... ?"

Borovski beckoned several officers to him. "Man the stations. Turn-on the defence screens and test-run the engines. Please hurry it up!"

Within 2 minutes the viewscreens flashed to life. Seep inside the vast warship the main equipment began to vibrate, finally responding to human commands instead of being dependent upon lifeless data pulses from the robot Regent.

Someone called out from the Com Room . "We have contact with the *Ironduke* , sir. The Administrator!"

Borovski moved so quickly that Iltu might have fallen if she had not clung desperately to his sleeve. Pucky waddled slowly after him, thought better of it and turned back to the main room.

The mousebeaver tensely watched the viewscreens. A premonition of disaster had seized him. The *Caesar* remained unchanged in the same position. The movements of the other robotships indicated to him that they had been properly taken over and were now under control of the special commando teams.

The *Caesar* was his main interest at the moment.

Suddenly Pucky was startled to see a tiny figure land on the hull of the mighty ship. It was a man in a spacesuit. Concentrating on the weak thought impulses from that direction, he discovered that it was Gork. So he, too, had gotten to safety. But then he saw him enter one of the empty hangars, which was ironical. He would have saved time if he had gone to the one where Germa was.

He ignored Gork for the time being and sought to pick up other thought streams from that direction. But nobody appeared to be thinking on board the *Caesar* , the operation there were too many thought streams impinging on his consciousness—more than 20,000 at least.

He could hear Borovski's calm voice in the adjacent room as he reported to Rhodan. There were pauses while the Major also listened to the orders coming through.

Pucky looked at the screens again and stiffened in alarm. The *Caesar* was moving! It picked up speed, suddenly hurtling past the robot formation and receding. As he watched, it dwindled away into the starless abyss beyond. Seconds later it was a tiny speck of light in the distance and then it was gone.

Pucky made a short teleport jump into the Com Room—and there was Rhodan looking down at him from the hypercom screen. Without bothering about Borovski he interrupted with a shrill cry.

"Perry—they've stolen the *Caesar*. I'll try to overtake them—but we need you fast!"

He swiftly closed his space helmet and then vanished, leaving Borovski, Rhodan and everybody else in considerable confusion.

When he materialized he was in the empty void. Once more he experienced the lonely feeling of being in an infinite gulf without any point of reference, struggling to orient himself. He could only do that if he could pick up thought impulses from the *Caesar*—but the only one there who could think was Sgt. Gork. Lt. Germa and his 3 men sat under the energy screen of their Gazelle and were isolated. Pucky desperately applied his *esp*, faculties to locate Gork but in vain.

Then, not 10 meters from him, a figure appeared out of nowhere. It happened with no warning shimmer because here there was no air.

Iltu!

"Are you out of your mind!" he yelled instinctively although it wasn't necessary. Iltu could understand him without the need for words.

"I followed you. Maybe you can use my help."

Pucky gasped, beside himself. "Help?! When I myself don't know what I should do?"

Iltu flailed her arms but didn't come any closer. "Let's get out of here—why not jump to the *Caesar*?"

Pucky answered her heatedly. "Where are you going to jump to when you can't locate it? I've been trying all this time to find Gork but the donk is blanked out mentally or something. He has to be on the ship! Wherever he is, that's where the *Caesar* is."

Through her faceplate he could see her faint smile.

"Gork is in the Control Central—been there for quite awhile. He keeps talking to Col. Sukril but Sukril has no thought patterns just now. When he answers, I can't pick up his words."

Pucky gasped again in his irritation. "You say you have Gork? Wait—I'm coming over there to you. Then you make the jump and take me with you."

He knew there was no more time to attempt his own tracking. If Iltu had contact that was enough. This little mousebeaver gal was not to be underestimated.

With a short transition he was next to her. He grasped her hand tightly in both of his. "Jump!" he said quickly.

She jumped.

Meanwhile the *Caesar* had travelled more than 100,000 km but with Pucky's reinforcement Iltu made it. In the fraction of a single second the 2 mousebeavers covered the incredible gap and materialized exactly at the source of Gork's mental emanations.

In the Control Central.

In a glance Pucky grasped the situation. It wasn't the first time that men had been taken over by extraterrestrial influences and forced to obey an alien will although the methods varied. What was going on here was certainly new but the result was the same.

It was in that moment that Gork activated the energy screens. He was not yet aware of the mousebeavers but they knew that he did it consciously if against his will. He had to do it if he didn't want to betray the fact that his will was still his own. He had delayed the action—fortunately just long enough.

Pucky had not let go of Iltu's hand. He teleported into the hangar, where he knew Germa was located. Iltu came with him. He only let go of her after they had both arrived safely.

The Gazelle was still in the same place. Meanwhile the hangar had automatically filled up with air again and the small scoutship's energy dome shimmered strangely in the dim illumination.

Pucky signalled with both arms and the screen disappeared. Moments later he and Iltu were on board and were received by Germa and his friends with great relief.

"I was really afraid!" admitted the lieutenant unabashedly. "What the devil's going on? Where's the crew? When the *Caesar* got underway again I was on the verge of leaving the Gazelle and reporting back to the Commander. I assumed that everything was OK. But then I got this funny feeling again—like a warning."

"It's a good thing you listened to your instincts," said Pucky. "It would have gone badly for you if you had left the Gazelle. The *Caesar* has been taken over by the spooks!"

Lt. Germa stared at Pucky in horrified alarm. "What are you saying! The shadow people? Here—on board the *Caesar*?"

"Yes but they're being extra careful. So far I haven't been able to trace their thoughts. Maybe they can shield their minds."

"And the crew? Is it ...?"

"No, not dead, merely unconscious. Of course some of the officers and the Commander are conscious in a way but they are under the influence of the phantoms. They were used so that the ship could take off and be captured."

"How is it possible?" Germa was not to be pacified. Brado, Hansen and Lester stood facing the mousebeavers in helpless perplexity. On their faces were expressions of incipient panic. "What are we going to do?"

Meanwhile Pucky had taken off his helmet, following Iltu's example. "Just now I can't answer either of those questions," he said. "The robotships are alright—they've been taken over. Rhodan has been alerted. He'll come and get us. If I only knew how to stop the *Caesar* in the meantime! Pretty soon she's going to reach light-speed and more. If we can't get to the communications gear, nobody will be able to track us or find us."

"What's wrong with the com equipment here on the Gazelle?"

Pucky looked surprised for the moment. "That's right—I didn't think of that. But we need a good outside antenna. Without that there can be no signal tracking."

Here, too, Germa had a solution. "We'll tie the equipment to the outer hull of the *Caesar*. That will make an excellent antenna. Now what about Col. Sukril? We can't just leave him in the power of the aliens. Who knows how long he can stand it?"

"Pucky!" It was Iltu, who had not taken part in the conversation. Instead she had been listening inwardly. "I'm getting Gork's thoughts. He's trying to figure how he can overcome Sukril and Henderson without harming them. I hope he doesn't try anything foolish!"

"That youngster isn't so dumb," muttered Pucky grimly but then added: "How is he planning to do it?"

He followed Iltu's example and concentrated for awhile on Gork's thoughts. Then he explained what was happening to Germa. "He wants to knock out Sukril—also Henderson—and then he hopes to bring the *Caesar* back to its starting point. I still think he's about to make a mistake. Those phantoms are here on board. Hm-m ... One other thing, Germa: do you have any weapons, like hand beamers?"

"Sure, I've got a whole cabinet full of them. But you're not saying you're going to—?"

"What else? How else can you bushwhack those spooks? Iltu and I can tell they're here even though they've been trying to conceal themselves. But first let's connect that antenna: Who's the radio tech?"

"Lt. Hansen knows enough about it—Lester and Brado, too."

While the 3 men worked, Pucky stood guard, but no matter how hard he tried he couldn't actually detect any of the enemy nearby. On her part, Iltu kept in contact with Gork, who was still desperately seeking a way to overcome the hypnotized officers in the Control Central. It seemed that the hidden ones still thought that he was under their general influence.

"I wonder if the propulsion system can be knocked out," said Germa suddenly. "Even if we make contact with Rhodan he won't be able to help us if the *Caesar* is inside the Kalup absorption field—and that's where she'll be if she goes into linear drive."

"The absorption held, hm-m ... " thought Pucky aloud. "If it collapsed the *Caesar* would automatically come back under the speed of light. Also if the defence screens broke down. Yup, that would be one way. Just cripple the absorption held and everything would be kosh. But it won't do to just shut it off. We'd have to damage the generating equipment so that it couldn't be fixed so easily. Those spooks mustn't have any chance to escape. I'm half convinced they want the secret of linear spacedrive—otherwise they wouldn't have swiped the *Caesar*."

Sgt. Brado came into the Gazelle's control room. "Antenna's ready, sir," he told Lt. Germa. "let's hope it works. We've shot another one outside the defence screens."

"OK, get going! Hypercom the *Ironduke* —non-directional. Maybe they'll hear us!"

Pucky left this task to Germa and his men. He took Iltu to one side. "Listen, Iltu, we have to do something about Gork. The poor guy is in a heck of a fix. He still doesn't know how close we are to him and he might do something stupid. We'll take the paralysis beamer with us and try to put Sukril and the other officers out of the action. We'll take the energy guns with us, too, in case we come up against the spooks."

Dispensing with teleportation they went on foot toward the Control Central. It wasn't until they were in

the main corridor that they picked up their first weak thought patterns from the aliens. They were coming closer at a steady and menacing pace.

"Watch out!" whispered Iltu, raising her weapon. "They're waiting for us." The fur on the back of her neck bristled as she pointed ahead into the curved passage. "They are there—but why don't they fire at us?"

Pucky had also raised his weapon. "I don't know—they may have something else in mind. Remember the other crewmen. Maybe they want to take the *Caesar* together with its entire crew. They're not killing anybody anymore."

"What are we waiting for? Come on—let's fire at them! If we don't they'll also try to bring us under control!"

Their 2 energy beams crossed at a point 5 meters ahead. Immediately it became unbearably hot in the corridor but a vague shadow appeared where the beams were intersecting. Seconds later it vanished.

"2 weapons aren't enough," grumbled Pucky. "But at least we can hold them off. Let's keep going—to the Control Central. Now we know anyway that they're aware of us."

They did not have far to go. Almost soundlessly the hatch door slid to one side. Sgt. Gork was still sitting before the controls of the defence screens. He was not yet aware of the 2 mousebeavers. His brain was too busy with a number of wild plans which he was rejecting as fast as they occurred to him.

Col. Sukril turned around slowly. A chill ran through Pucky when he looked into his empty and lifeless-seeming eyes. They were the eyes of a zombie or a corpse. Without any sign of recognition, Sukril raised his weapon and aimed at him. His finger tightened on the trigger.

Pucky exerted his telekinetic powers. Cautiously his mental force stream grasped the raygun and removed it from the Commander's fingers. After floating away from him, Pucky released the weapon and it dropped to the floor. Capt. Henderson was not armed.

The sound of the falling weapon caused Gork to turn around. He was nonplussed when he saw Pucky and Iltu. It was as if he could not believe his eyes.

"Relax, Gork, it's us alright. Stay seated there and turn off the defence screens. Hey, Sukril—can you hear me?"

The Commander stared at Pucky, still giving no sign of recognition. Then his head sank suddenly and he slumped in his seat, completely unconscious. The phantoms had simply "turned off". Also in that moment, Capt. Henderson slumped into the same state.

"Pucky!" called Gork. "The defence screens! They can't be turned off!"

Pucky spun around to look at him but finally nodded. "I thought as much! They're blocked. Same as in Germa's *Gazelle*. Well, then maybe the only way out is to disable the absorption field setup. Iltu, you stay here with Gork. If the spooks come in here—shoot! I'll be back as soon as possible."

There was hardly any ship-type better known to Pucky than a superbattleship. Once on *Zalit* he had spent days with one of the crews in operations drills. On board the *Caesar*, while training Iltu, he had also gone through every room via teleportation. So he naturally knew where the main power and machine

rooms were. He didn't know too much about the technical aspects but what he knew was enough. This wasn't the first time he'd been called upon to cripple a large propulsion system.

Meanwhile the *Caesar* had been racing toward its unknown destination at many times the speed of light. Second by second its velocity increased. In the time it would take to breathe in and out, the ship covered many millions of kilometres. Soon that would increase to billions of kilometres—perhaps light years.

While Pucky was cautiously approaching the machinery section of the giant ship, with his parafaculties sharply tuned to weak thought emanations from the invisible enemy, Iltu and Sgt. Gork did not remain idle.

"Do you believe," said Gork, "that they can just take over an unconscious person and make them move as they will them to? Wouldn't they have to slip themselves into such a person's body?"

"We don't know, Gork," answered Iltu. She was constantly on the alert and was doing 2 things at once. She was mentally following Pucky and was also keeping her senses open to any signs of the shadow people. "But one thing I do know: we have to find a way of bringing the men out of their state of unconsciousness.

Gork nodded eagerly. "Maybe we should try bringing a medico around first. The ship's clinic! I knew something about that kind of thing because we all had to go through a course on the subject. Shall I go and see what I can do?"

Iltu shook her head. "We have to stay together because one weapon isn't enough to handle those phantoms. Take my hand. I know where the hospital section is. Maybe we'll find something." She telepathed to Pucky to brief him on what they were intending to do.

It took her 3 jumps to find her objective. The hospital personnel were still lying or sitting where they had been at the moment of the attack. One of the doctors had collapsed in front of a medicine cabinet. He had evidently softened his fall by supporting himself against the cabinet, which stood wide open. Hundreds of hypodermic ampoules, medicine packets and bottles were standing there, row upon row.

Gork let loose of Iltu's hand and approached the cabinet. "If I only knew what to use," he mumbled as he carefully inspected the supplies. "Something to increase the circulation maybe?"

"Don't ask me about it," chirped Iltu in a shrill voice, looking about her searchingly. "I don't understand anything about this kind of thing."

"But you can surely make an injection?"

"I think so," she nodded uncertainly. "If you show me how."

He didn't answer her but kept on rummaging through the cabinet. Finally he held one of the bottles in his hand to study it more closely.

Gork read the label carefully. "I think this is it. Adrenalin serum KHS-stimulant. We always used this for fainting cases. Let's try it. Where the heck are the hypodermics? Ah, here ... !" He extracted a flat case from a lower shelf. "It's quite simple. You only have to hold the point against a vein and press the button here. I'll fill this one. The medicine is transferred through the skin under pressure and it goes right into the blood stream. That's all there is to it. One filling is enough for 20 injections. Do you think you can do it?"

Iltu nodded silently. Gork filled one of the transparent high-pressure hypo-guns. "Let's check it out first. Here—this attendant. I'll do it to show you. Now watch . . ."

Iltu watched tensely as the sergeant placed the instrument and pressed the release. There was nothing to see except that the colourless liquid in the glass tube went down a notch on the scale.

Gork straightened up with a sigh. "If it works we won't know for at the most 5 minutes or so. We have to wait before we do any more."

Iltu used the waiting period to get in touch with Pucky. *"How far along are you, Pucky?"*

*"Don't bother me now, Iltu. I think I've located the machinery I'm looking for. Its controls are blocked like everything else. The Kalup just keeps on working. If I can't get rid of the obstruction, nothing's going to stop it. How is it with you?"*

*"Nothing's happened so far."*

Pucky did not continue the telepathic conversation. Iltu still kept a loose contact with him while giving her major attention to the dim and distant thought impulses of the shadow people. They had not tried to make any further attacks. Perhaps they assumed that these 3 conscious beings on board were not a threat to them.

Gork suddenly leaned over the attendant again. "He's moving—just look at that!" He seemed to be surprised at the success of his medical experiment but he was still more pleased when the man sat up and looked at him questioningly.

"What happened? I—I felt so lousy all of a sudden."

"How do you feel now?"

"Thanks—OK now I guess." He looked around then at the other unconscious men. "Glord—what hit us!"

"They all got the same," said Gork, avoiding the details. "I have to know if you're back in shape again. Get on your feet. Do you know your medicine? I mean, could you take the place of a doctor—at least in theory?"

Sure! Why would I be stationed here if I couldn't? Why do you ask?"

Gork showed the attendant the adrenalin bottle. "You familiar with this? That's what I injected you with. Was I right?"

The attendant read the label. "Exactly right. Why?"

Gork turned and filled 2 more hypo-guns, one for Iltu and one for the attendant. "OK, get to work! Wake everybody up—and then let those phantoms try attacking us again! They'll be in for a surprise."

Within half an hour the entire staff of the clinic was equipped with hypo-guns and energy weapons. They deployed out through the ship in groups so that they could defend themselves against any ambush by the aliens. But no ambush came. Thus they were able to continue undisturbed while they resuscitated the entire crew of the *Caesar*.

Iltu went with Gork to the Control Central and woke up Col. Sukril as well as Henderson and the other officers. Two minutes later, 1st Officer Maj. Brokov rushed into the room. It seemed that the rescue work had succeeded and that the *Caesar* was saved. However it was quickly discovered that such was not the case.

"When Col. Sukril ordered the course changed, the ship did not respond. It seemed as if all the controls were blocked. With ever-increasing acceleration the *Caesar* continued to race through the intergalactic gulf toward the distant nebula. One glance at the instruments revealed that they were already travelling at 10,000 times the speed of light. With each passing second, this velocity was increasing. One light-year in less than an hour! Soon it would be a lyr every 30 minutes—then one every minute.

The great milky Way behind them didn't change visibly because they were too close to it and still relatively too slow.

Col. Sukril turned and saw Iltu. "Now listen, Lt. Puck ... !"

"I am Iltu, Commander!"

For a moment Sukril was confused but then recovered irritably. "We ought to be able to tell you two apart. Alright, then where is your friend Pucky?"

"Oh he's trying to knock out the propulsion system."

Sukril turned blue. "He's doing what?! Knock out the—has he lost his mind?"

Now Iltu revealed that she had absorbed some of Pucky's personality. Her self-confidence had grown considerably and she also knew that without her and Pucky the situation here might be much worse. "For your information, sir, Pucky has not lost his mind! Do you happen to have a better idea? How is Rhodan ever going to catch up to us if we keep on shooting away from the galaxy at top speed?"

Sukril's normal colour gradually returned. Maj. Brokov grinned, not envying his superior for this unanswerable rebuff.

Sukril gasped. "Rhodan?"

Iltu nodded triumphantly. "that's right—who else?" Didn't you inform him about the aliens?"

Sukril turned back to stare at his useless instruments and controls. "I contacted him, yes, but he doesn't know our present position. You in the Com Room—what about the transmitter?"

"Forget that," said Iltu. "How are you going to transmit anything when you can't shut off the screens? Anyway, Lt Germa is already trying to contact Rhodan or at least to send out a tracer signal. We've shot an antenna line through the outer defence screen so that the transmission wouldn't be blocked. If that doesn't work ... "

Sukril regarded Iltu with a more kindly expression. "Don't be angry if I've underestimated you, Iltu. But is Pucky really doing the right thing, trying to knock out the Kalup? Without the absorption field and the screens we'd be defenceless ... "

"The aliens aren't threatening us from outside—only here on the inside. Wait—I think Pucky has located



the obstruction. Yes, he has! It won't take long now!"

But it took 2 full hours while the wandering resuscitation crews were attacked three times by the aliens, of whom two were killed. At least they assumed that the phantoms were killed because as they faded from view they went through all the symptoms of dying.

Then without any warning the *Caesar* suddenly dropped back into the normal Einstein universe. The tremendous shock of slowing down was not too great because the inertial absorbers hadn't been cut off. Nevertheless a sensible jolt ran through the ship as if it had suffered an explosion somewhere in its depths.

At the same time Pucky appeared in the Control Central. He looked exhausted. Without paying any attention to those present in the room he waddled directly to the nearest cushioned seat and jump into it. With a satisfied sigh he closed his eyes and comfortably stretched his limbs.

For a moment Col. Sukril was transfixed by astonishment and disbelief but the shameless grin of his First Officer reminded him of the regulation discipline that was expected on board every ship of the Terran spacefleet. "Lt. Puck! Might we be informed of where you've been all this time? What happened to the propulsion system?"

Pucky didn't so much as raise an eyelid. "Ask Iltu—she's got all the latest poop. Good night!"

Sukril gave a masterful demonstration of self-control. His hands trembled slightly but otherwise he suppressed his agitation. "I want the report from *you*, Lt. Puck!"

Pucky finally opened his eyes and looked at the commander. Then he slipped out of the chair obediently. With dignified gravity he strutted straight across the room, drew himself up before Sukril and even attempted to keep his bowed little legs straighter than usual. With his right hand he almost executed a perfect salute. "Propulsion put out of commission, sir! Absorption field and screens down, sir! And now if you don't watch out and let me do my *esp* in peace, you and your whole crew will soon be sleeping again as you were before. Good night, sir!" Having said his speech, he marched right back to his chair. He sprang into it and promptly closed his eyes again.

Col. Sukril didn't move. Finally, after almost 10 seconds of tense expectancy, he spoke. "Major, see to it that Pucky is not disturbed. Keep all weapons ready. Iltu, you warn us if the aliens try another attack. We can't do anything else except wait for Rhodan or the robotships. Is the crew alerted and in shape?"

"They're briefed and ready, sir," said Brokov.

In his chair, Pucky still had his eyes closed but he suddenly called out: "Watch out—! I've picked them up! They're trying another attack! Two of them are entering now. Even if you wreck the place—fire! Get going—what are you waiting for? *Shoot!*"

## 6/ FAR NEBULA, LONG SHADOWS

What do you say, Brado? Any contact yet?"

"I'm sorry, sir—none at all. But it's possible that the tracer signal got through which may help them to track the *Caesar*. The antenna is too small, though, to receive any possible return transmissions."

"But could they pick up our distress call?"

"That's quite possible, sir."

Lt. Germa sighed with relief. "We can't ask for anything more. But maybe it'll work better now that the *Caesar*'s screen is gone. Keep trying, Brado."

Meanwhile the hangar personnel had returned. They reported that some hours before an order from the commander had called them all into the main corridor and that was where they had lost consciousness. They had no explanation for it.

They deployed themselves strategically with ready weapons and waited for the enemy. But the enemy didn't come.

The enemy was attacking the Control Central.

\* \* \* \*

Pucky had leapt from his chair. "There—near the entrance!"

7 or 8 energy beams concentrated on the indicated area. The shadowy outlines of the alien became visible so that they could see him sink to the floor. He almost completely materialized before fading away.

"Iltu, you stay here!" said Pucky. "I'll cover the defences of the rest of the ship. In any case they'll try to get the Control Central back in their hands."

He dematerialised before Sukril had a chance to give his permission. The colonel was gradually getting used to the idea that Pucky operated independently—and operated correctly.

Iltu took over the task of detecting the approach of the aliens and warning the defenders of it. The system of concentrated fire proved effective as usual. During the ensuing hour they were able to eliminate more than 7 of the uncanny invaders. At any rate the previous catastrophe was not repeated. Nobody fell unconscious or came under control of the aliens.

In the Control Central the viewscreen was still operating. It was apparently the only thing that did work. All other equipment had ceased to function or to respond to controls. The *Caesar* was moving in freefall toward the distant nebula but only at the normal speed of light. If anyone were to track them now from the direction of the galaxy, they would be easy to overtake.

"Turn on the communications equipment!" ordered Sukril. "Now we should be able to make contact!"

While the Com Room crew was trying to put out a call to the fleet of robotships, the shadow people attacked again. They had changed their tactics and came in groups of 4 or 5 at a time. And this time they used a new type of weapon. The energy beams that suddenly shot at the officers out of emptiness were now orange instead of blue.

Capt. Henderson was the first victim. He had followed Iltu's warning and gone for cover with his weapon ready to fire but he couldn't know where the scattered phantoms were located. Before he could make a defensive move an orange beam struck him squarely. He remained standing where he was. He neither collapsed nor turned to smoking cinders, he simply became rigid and didn't move a muscle. His eyes stared fixedly but there was life in them. Henderson was not dead but only immobilized.

Sukril let out a shout of surprise which was cut off abruptly when he too was enveloped by the weird energy and rendered motionless.

Iltu screamed a warning and jumped forward with a gun in either hand. She knew exactly where the nearest alien was standing. Both of her weapons fired simultaneously at maximum intensity. She hit the phantom, who immediately withdrew. Without stopping she continued her fire, turning slightly to hit the next one. But the third one was faster.

He got her.

\* \* \* \*

Somewhere in the ship, Pucky was frightened nearly to death when Iltu's thought stream suddenly faded out. He had been aware of events in the Control Central but had hoped that the officers and his little friend would be able to handle the aliens. But now Iltu wasn't in contact with him any more.

Without any further deliberation, he teleported into the Control Central, immediately traced the presence of a phantom, tore a weapon away from an officer and opened fire against the enemy. Even while he was noting with satisfaction that the nemesis had disappeared, a human figure materialized in the room. He was wearing a rather cumbersome combat suit—an old SHK model—and in his hands he carried an oversized energy gun which he lowered as soon as he saw the officers and Pucky.

It was Ras Tschubai, the African teleporter.

Pucky yelled out in astonishment: "Ras! Is it really you? I thought you were on the *Ironduke* . . . "

"You thought right," replied Ras, and he looked about him searchingly. His gaze rested momentarily on Iltu, then wandered on to Col. Sukril, who had also not moved from his position. "What's wrong with them?"

Pucky ascertained that the Control Central was free of enemies. It seemed that the phantoms had decided to leave the scene without further resistance. "You mean you've come for us?" he asked.

Ras nodded. "The *Ironduke*'s alongside. We tracked you on that tracer signal. It was very weak but we picked it up. I made a jump over here as soon as we arrived but Rhodan and his men will be coming on board any second now. They're at the outer locks."

Pucky sank into the nearest chair. "Not a minute too soon! I still don't know how we're going to handle the spooks." On second thought he jumped up again and ran to Iltu. He carefully touched her and looked at her closely. "She's warm—normal temperature! She's alive. Look! She's starting to move again!" He heaved a great sigh of relief and even began to laugh. "It was only a temporary paralysis. There—even Sukril is moving and so is Henderson!"

It was like a miracle. The officers and Iltu appeared to be waking up from a deep sleep. Their brains and their memory had been turned off when the paralysis beams had struck them but now they were turned on again simultaneously. What had occurred between must have been a blank for them.

Iltu finally lowered both of her weapons. Their charges had been exhausted in this spirited battle. Sukril looked around for further signs of the enemy but couldn't discover any.

Then the door of the Control Central slid to one side and Perry Rhodan entered.

In one sweeping glance he took in the scene, nodded curtly to Pucky and then looked questioningly at Col. Sukril. Several other men pressed past him into the room carrying some strange-looking equipment, which they deposited on the deck with obvious relief.

Rhodan smiled faintly. "It seems we got here in the nick of time," he said. "Pucky, were those aliens really the same phantoms of Barkon?"

The mousebeaver had taken Iltu by the hand and led her to a chair. He carefully helped her into it before turning around to Rhodan. "They're the ones, Perry. All the same phenomena and reactions."

"So they've found us again," muttered Rhodan gravely. "I've been afraid this would happen, for a long time." He nodded to the men who were standing by the mysterious instruments. "Might as well get to work. First, here in the Control Central. We have to know what's happened."

Meanwhile Col. Sukril had regained his presence of mind. "Sir, if you wish my report . . . "

"Thank you, Colonel—I've been briefed on the situation. You were not to blame. You and your men have handled yourselves very well. The robot fleet is on its way to Terra. You had already accomplished your assigned mission. A confrontation with the invisible invaders was not foreseen."

Capt. Henderson had finally overcome his sense of awe at being in the presence of the highest Commander-in-Chief. He had returned to his station and was trying to pick up the *Ironduke* on the viewscreen. To his surprise the tracking system responded immediately. The instruments functioned without any difficulty. The 800-meter hull of the battleship moved laterally into the field of vision. Small units were streaming in a steady stream from the great launch-lock hatches, bringing extra crewmen to the *Caesar* .

But the tracking equipment picked up something else as well.

Vaguely discernible in silhouette, another spaceship was hovering nearby. The instruments gave a distance of 3km. Rather than spherical in shape, the ship was reminiscent of a missile or torpedo. It was more than 100 meters in length but this was relatively small by comparison.

"Sir . . . we're tracking an alien ship! The indicators must not be working because it's not showing up very clearly . . . "

In 2 long strides, Rhodan was beside him, staring at the screen. "There's nothing wrong with your equipment," he said grimly. "It's the ship of the phantom people. That configuration is the same we saw on Barkon." He turned to Col. Sukril. "Colonel—get the *Caesar* ready for combat—but fast! Don't lose a second!"

Sukril raced to his commander seat. He switched on the intercom and gave the necessary orders. He didn't even have time to be surprised that the intercom was working.

Rhodan turned to Pucky. "Did you knock out the Kalup absorption generator?"

"Yes—there was no other choice."

"Alright, so we'll repair it. I've brought the whole tech team along. I assume all we have to do is replace the generator itself. Hm-m . . . How did Iltu work out? I was afraid she wouldn't match up to the

assignment. She's so young. Actually, I should have let her stay on Mars ... "

"Knockitoff!" muttered Pucky, so softly that only Rhodan could hear him. Without Iltu I wouldn't have made it, to be honest with you. And—well—she's not such a child, you know she's quite a young lady, if you ask me."

Rhodan smiled and bent down close to the mousebeaver's ear. "Tell me now, are you maybe in love with her?"

Pucky drew back as if a snake had bitten him. "In love?!" he gasped indignantly. "That's too much! I could never fall in love with such a stupid little moose—pah!" But he suddenly fell silent for a moment while he cocked his head and looked at Rhodan confidentially. "You won't tell on me, will you?"

Rhodan shook his head. "Why should I? They'll be able to guess the truth, the same as I did." He grinned and added: "Especially Bell!"

Pucky stamped his foot and grimaced. "Did you bring him along by any chance?"

"At the moment he's commanding the *Ironduke* , along with Claudrin of course."

"So I even have to put up with that now!" moaned Pucky as he waddled away.

The Gunners of the *Caesar* reported battle readiness. Meanwhile Pucky and Iltu announced that there were evidently no more shadow people on board the giant warship.

Rhodan concluded swiftly: "They've given up and are trying to escape in that ship out there. We have to stop them! Col. Sukril, open fire! Give your crews the co?rdinates from here because I don't think their target scopes can see the ship anymore. Hurry—before they get away!"

After the *Ironduke* had withdrawn from the danger zone the *Caesar* opened fire from all gun positions. The attack could only be directed from the Control Central because the opposing vessel's outlines could only be detected on the special tracking equipment. The normal screens revealed nothing but the distant light patch of the unknown stellar nebula.

The energy lightnings darted into emptiness—and struck the unseen objective. While the beams sprayed off it in all directions, they brought the outlines of the enemy ship into 3-D clarity for all to see. Whether or not the aliens had a defence screen couldn't quite be determined because of the rapidity of events. Or if they had one it was very weak. Five beams struck in one spot and that was the end.

As the concentrated fire penetrated the armourplate hull, a blinding explosion forced the Terrans to close their eyes. when everybody looked again there was an expanding gas cloud where the invisible ship had been. The glowing mass was attenuating in all directions.

Pucky was next to Rhodan. He whispered: "Their thought patterns—they've dropped off. I'm not getting a trace of them." He turned around. "How about you, Iltu?"

"No—nothing more. Do you think—they're all dead?"

"They must be if your *esp* doesn't pick them up. Did you hear that, Perry? They've been wiped out. We did it!"

Rhodan didn't take his eyes from the viewscreen. There was a deep cleft between his brows as he gazed pensively at the spreading atom cloud which was still glowing and even obscured the distant stellar nebula.

Pucky had followed his thoughts and suddenly spoke up again: "Yes, I think they come from there, too, but how will we ever really find out? Could it be that that whole island universe is subject to other laws of nature? Maybe the spooks simply live in a different dimension than ours. Maybe in the 6th or 7th—but then what would I know about that?"

Rhodan gave him a quick nod. "Precisely! What would you know about it? But at least we'll find out what they were after here and what they planned to do with the *Caesar*? He turned to the men who were working with the new equipment. "How far along are we?"

"Just about ready, sir. All that's left is to determine the wavelength of the heat radiations so that we won't make any mistakes."

Col. Sukril was standing nearby in helpless perplexity as he watched the experts manipulate the equipment, making meter adjustments and turning little dials under miniature screens. A movie camera was coupled to the largest screen on the control panel.

Pucky had joined Ras Tschubai to watch. "What is that?" he asked.

The African shrugged. "New-fangled gadgets, little one. Unfortunately I haven't the slightest idea of what it is. We were going to test it while underway but then came your call for help. As it seems, we can also check out the invention here."

Rhodan joined them. "The infra-red delayed tracking process isn't all that new," he said with a faint smile. "All we did on Earth was to make some advanced developments on the basic principle. Ordinarily the equipment is large and terribly cumbersome—difficult to transport. What you see here used to take up a small assembly room. Now it only takes 4 men to carry the whole thing."

"Infra-red relayed trucking process?" Pucky struggled with the long name, not understanding a word of it. "What the heck is that?"

On the larger viewscreen a blur of shadows flitted briefly and was gone.

One of the technicians said almost apologetically: "They're human types, after all—have to adjust it finer."

"What?" said Pucky, flabbergasted. "Human types?"

Rhodan put a finger to his lips, ordering silence. He motioned Col. Sukril and Capt. Henderson to get out of the line of sight between the infra-red tracer and the ship's flight controls. Everyone waited breathlessly while the main viewscreen continued to reveal the spectacle of the glowing cloud of molecular residue from the annihilated ship. It was dispersing more and more and growing dimmer.

Pucky watched the tech team for a while as they worked with their new equipment. Then he took Iltu's hand. "Let's go—this is too way out for me. I'm hungry."

They teleported into his cabin and for the next few minutes dismissed the fortunate outcome of the adventure from their minds. Pucky scabbled around in his luggage and finally produced a plastic bag

containing some carrots. He gallantly offered to share them with Iltu and sat down next to her on the bed.

"Terrific, aren't they? From my own garden by Lake Goshun."

Iltu nibbled a carrot reluctantly. "But I don't find it as good as all that."

Pucky stared in amazement. "What—! Not good? I must not have heard you right!"

Iltu shook her little head and revealed her incisor tooth. "Yes, you heard me. Whenever I get the chance I'm going to cultivate a field of cabbage turnips."

Pucky's eyes widened as if they were going to come out of his head. "Cabbage turnips?!"

Iltu licked her lips with gourmet appreciation. "the old carrots couldn't come anywhere near them, Old Boy."

"What did you say?"

Iltu nodded for emphasis. "That your carrots couldn't compare with——"

"No, I don't mean that! Did you say 'Old Boy?' "

She nodded again, this time in mock surprise. "Yes—so?"

Pucky slipped off the couch and placed his arms on his hips, striking an almost threatening pose. He took a deep breath and was about to launch a tirade when Iltu burst out laughing. Her pink incisor came into full play as she held her stomach in mirth.

"How can anyone be so conceited, Pucky? You don't see me get insulted when you call me 'little' or 'too young', as you just did in front of Rhodan. On the contrary, I'm pleased to know——"

Pucky appeared to shrink about a centimetre as he stared at Iltu in consternation. "You listened when I was talking to Rhodan?" He fumed angrily. "That was mean and nasty of you—besides being low-down shameless imprudence!"

She stopped laughing. "Now why do you say that, Pucky? After all, you were telling him such *nice* things ... Or did you forget?"

Pucky closed his eyes. He grabbed one of the carrots and began to gnaw at it desperately. "anyway, *you* are too young!" he confirmed in the midst of his chewing.

She nodded while also resuming her meal. "But you are not too old," she retorted with equal conviction.

If possible, Pucky shrank a tiny bit more.

\* \* \* \*

the officers who were present in the Control Central stood in the background and spoke now and then to Col. Sukril. He also received Lt. Germa's report which helped to round out the picture.

"Now we've got it!" cried one of the technicians excitedly. He looked at one of the meters. "Two hours

back, sir."

On the main screen of the tracer console could be seen shadowy figures which moved swiftly about in the room. The camera began to hum as it captured these events from the recent past. What the men were looking at had happened 2 hours before. The invisible invaders had emitted heat rays from their bodies, which were now rendered visible. Each of the movements they had made 2 hours ago could now be observed and carefully studied. Earth scientists had developed this astounding equipment for the purpose of obtaining evidence in criminal cases.

"They're looking over the controls," muttered Col. Sukril. He stared in utter amazement at the visible heat imprints of the now dead intelligences. "Those look like human silhouettes. They seem to be interested in the engines."

"You mean our linear propulsion," said Rhodan. "Look! They're also taking pictures! You can't see the camera but their movements are unmistakable. I just hope the photographs were destroyed with their ship because now we know what they were after." He turned to one of the specialists. "That's fine, Professor. Now will you be so good as to repeat the process down in the Machine Centre? We have to know what they were doing there."

The tech team packed up their gear and left the Control Central. Their films would be evaluated later. Once the intentions of the aliens were known, conclusions might be drawn with regard to their character, their mode of living and possibly their origin.

The absorption field assembly was replaced and a test run indicated that the *Caesar* was able to return under its own power back to Earth, where it was to have a general overhaul.

Rhodan said goodbye to Col. Sukril, wished him a safe journey home and returned with his men to the *Ironduke*. He took the 2 mousebeavers with him. They waited until the *Caesar* started off. It quickly accelerated and was finally only a tiny star against the silvery band of the Milky Way. Then it vanished entirely.

Col. Jefe Claudrin, Flight Commander of the *Ironduke*, also gave orders to get underway. Rhodan's flagship followed the *Caesar*.

Rhodan and Bell sat at a small conference table at a slight distance to one side of the viewscreens. Pucky squatted in a chair beside them and repeated his report in detail. Both men listened intently, frequently interrupting with questions and attempting to dig out every possible clue concerning the aliens.

"It would be almost impossible to tell they were present without telepathy," Pucky emphasized again. "Of course they finally tried to screen their thoughts but it didn't work entirely. If they're really telepaths they're pretty poor ones. A good telepath can isolate his thoughts. And there's another thing I noticed: under a heavy attack they back off pretty fast. They're not too keen about fighting. As soon as the *Ironduke* showed up they ditched their plans and simply gave up the *Caesar* when it was just about in their hands. They escaped—even though it was only to go up in smoke right afterwards. Then all the blocked controls suddenly came free. Is it possible that they locked the controls by telekinesis?"

Rhodan shook his head negatively. "no, they don't use psychokinesis or we would have noticed that during our combats with them. I'm more in favour of your first idea. They penetrate matter, which offers them no resistance. On the other hand it can be assumed that there are obstacles for them which offer no resistance to us. We know for sure, though, that they can cover short distances in space without a ship. All in all they're quite amazing—a very dangerous race. I'm afraid they're still going to make trouble for



us."

Pucky looked up at the viewscreen. "That stellar nebula there—do you think it's where they come from?"

Rhodan and Bell looked over at the stern screen. The blurred nebulous spot appeared to be small and insignificant. The unknown galaxy looked harmless—and very, very distant. But that dim blob happened to be the Andromeda Nebula in sector BJ-97-UK—the target zone that Capt. Henderson, the *Caesar*'s Navigation Officer, had been ordered to steer his course for. If the shadow people were intent upon stealing the *Caesar* it could be assumed that they were planning to take it to their homeworld.

Bell had been silent for some time but he suddenly spoke up. "Wasn't that little Iltu a pain in the neck for you?"

Pucky was caught off guard. "A pain? How come?"

Bell grinned. "Well, I seem to remember how badly you complained about her once when we made a visit to the colony on Mars. Isn't that the fresh little guy who was always so impudent—the one who tossed the camp commander through the air?"

"Iltu isn't a 'guy', Fatso—she's a girl!"

"A mousebeaver's a mousebeaver," retorted Bell somewhat disdainfully. "Anyway, you were really sore at her. That's why we assigned her to you without giving you any previous warning. It was to be a surprise so that you wouldn't have time to complain . . . "

"She was a surprise alright!"

"Oh?"

Pucky nodded. "Yes, a pleasant one. Without her help I wouldn't have been able to handle those spooks. Iltu is a first-class teleporter."

"Well, so what?" said Bell in mock disparagement. "She's still a young child—you said so yourself."

"She's no child now!" fumed Pucky angrily, and he bared his incisor tooth. This time it was not a sign of pleasure. "She's a grownup young lady mousebeaver! Anybody who insults her is also insulting me. Just get that into your head, once and for all, or something could happen to you!"

Bell caught a warning look from Rhodan. he had almost failed to realize that the situation had changed. Previously he had always had Pucky's support whenever he had complained about Iltu—or any of the other mousebeavers of the colony—but today such an approach produced the opposite effect. Strange.

OK, little buddy. I didn't mean it like that."

"Well that's what it sounded like," grumbled Pucky, although he was already half-consoled, "I will admit, though, that I underestimated Iltu . . . "

"Who?"

Pucky's mouse ears twitched in a sign of embarrassment. "Oh I often call her that. It fits her better than

Iltu."

"My, my!" said Bell, grinning broadly. "You already have a pet name for her?" He winked at Rhodan. "When will congratulations be in order?"

Pucky seemed to be exceptionally slow on the uptake today. "Congratulations? What for?"

"Don't hand me that! You know very well what I mean. You've gone off the deep end for Iltu—or haven't you?"

"You dare call her Iltu?" chirped Pucky in new irritation.

"Don't dodge the subject. Do you love her or don't you?"

Pucky gasped under the shock of the other's merciless suspicion. "For that—she's too young. She's only just a child . . . "

Bell burst out laughing. "You know you change your opinion like I change my shirt! Only now you were just saying . . . !" He broke off suddenly.

The air was shimmering in the middle of the table. Then Iltu materialized from nowhere. She stood there and looked about at everyone triumphantly until her gaze rested on Pucky.

"So!" she chirped menacingly. "After all, now I'm such a youngster again, am I?"

Pucky was noticeably cowed. Rhodan and Bell couldn't remember ever having seen him so humbled. "Well now . . . I mean . . . !" He pointed to Bell. "Fatso's talking out of his head, Iltu—Iltu. I was only defending you, that's all."

Iltu came closer to him. "So I'm so young, am I? Then you know what you are!"

Pucky cast an imploring glance at Rhodan. He was caught squarely on the horns of an awful dilemma. If he insisted that Iltu was young, then it was a guaranteed certainty that here in front of Bell she'd give him the title of "Grandpa". And if he should admit that after all she was not "*tooyoung*", then the other trap would close!

Women!—he thought bitterly. One shouldn't get mixed up with them. Men always came out on the short end of things because they were dumber!

But it wasn't all quite that bad. "Listen, Iltu, do we have to discuss this right out in public, for the ears of this nosey Fatso? Just look at his ears bending forward! What business is it of his what the two of us . . . I mean, the way we two . . . " He became hopelessly confused and slumped disconsolately. "Take it any way you want to!"

Iltu went over to Rhodan and slipped into his lap looked at him guilelessly and took his hands in hers. "Don't you agree, Perry—when I'm grown up I get to marry Pucky?"

A choking sound came from where Pucky had been sitting. The mousebeaver had lost his balance and fallen under the table. On all fours he came scrabbling out again, trembling in all his limbs.

"No! I will not get married! I'm too . . . no, not now anymore! I won't!"

"You don't mean to say, perhaps, that you're too old?" said Rhodan as he stroked Iltu's silky hair reassuringly. "But Pucky, who would want to admit a thing like that?"

"I didn't admit it ... but all the same ... "

"Grandpa!" whispered Iltu all the same ... "

Pucky went rigid.

Rhodan tensed.

Bell began to laugh uncontrollably. "Grandpa!" he exclaimed, at the same time groaning with mirth. "That's a good one! Grandpa!" And he kept on as if he would never stop.

"When Iltu saw what she had wrought by her remark, she got quickly out of Rhodan's lap, pattered over to Pucky and took his hand. "You know I didn't mean it like that ... !"

Pucky remembered his manhood. "Leave me alone!" he snapped, and shook her hand away. "You ... you infant! You babe in diapers! You ... you ... you ... " Words failed him.

Iltu stared at him and then drew herself up until she was almost taller than Pucky. She shouted at him in a shrill voice: "Oh, so now you're getting smart, are you? Well, I'll fix that, you just wait!" She took him by the hand again. "You come now, right now. The two of us alone! Are you in for a surprise! Pah! Too old! Too young! That's an excuse! Now will you *please* come along?"

They dematerialised.

The last thing Rhodan and Bell saw of Pucky was his sorrowful look of reproach.

Rhodan spoke first. "You can stop laughing now, Bell. You should have respect for the feelings of our little friend. He's fallen in love."

Bell ceased laughing abruptly. He stared at Rhodan in astonishment. "You don't mean it's for real, do you?"

"Of course I do. Haven't you ever been in love?"

Bell turned red and shifted uncomfortably. "But Iltu is only ... "

"A mousebeaver? So? For Pucky I'm sure she's the most beautiful and attractive maiden in the universe. What would you say, for example, if one day Pucky were to become—not a grandpa, that's still too far away—but let's say a proud father? The father of 3 or 4 tiny, cute little mousebeavers? When I think of it——"

"No thank you!" groaned Bell, horrified. "That I couldn't take! All I have to remember is my visit to the mousebeaver colony on Mars. The little rascals sat around on my head and my stomach and my legs, scratching me and making a big game out of it where I was ticklish. No! Pucky's pups will be the death of me!"

Rhodan looked thoughtfully at the dwindling blob of light in the middle of the viewscreen. "Maybe it will

be just the opposite—for the Earth." He was still watching the spiral nebula, which was many millions of light-years distant and was perhaps the home of the invisible foe. "Maybe one day Pucky's children will determine the fate of the human race."