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MAN AND MONSTER

by K. H. Scheer

PLANET OF PERIL...

A sinister psychic force spreads throughout the galaxy. The Mooffs have issued their ultimatum and, for Perry Rhodan, it spells deadly danger.

Meanwhile, seven hundred members of the New Power's crew are critically ill. The Aras, medical masters of the known universe, must be found.

And the answer to their whereabouts lies in an alien world of 250-million-an-hour hurricanes and seas of ammonia...

This is the stirring story of—

MAN AND MONSTER

THE ACTION AND ADVENTURE HAPPENS WITH

PERRY RHODAN—*Earth Administrator commanding the spaceship Titan*

Pucky—The plucky mischief-making mouse-beaver with mutant powers

Dr. Orson Certch—*Specialist in robots & their thinking processes*

Janus van Orgter—Biologist

Tina Sarbowna—Toxicologist

Prof. Kaerner—Surgical genius, medical chief of the *Titan*

Adm. Vetron—*It falls his lot to destroy the world of the Mooffs*

Capt. Marcus Everson—First Officer of the *Titan*

Maj. Chaney—in charge of a dangerous landing mission

Capt. Brian; Lts. Tifflor, Hathome & Tanner; Sgt. O'Keefe, Engineer Stiller—Men of the Terranian Spacefleet

Dr. Hayward—Isolator of the Hyper Euphoria poison

Trorth—A strange something

The PERRY RHODAN series and characters were
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1/ DESPERATION TITANIC

HORROR confronted the group. Medusa might have turned the men's faces to stone.

Behind the horrified humans pressed the small ferret-like robots of the Medicorps. Occasionally a clink was heard as instruments touched instruments which the automatons were programmed to use only in case of special emergency or major catastrophe. The high-precision specialized machines bore on their breast and back plates the insignia of the Medical Service. Never failing, never tiring, they were designed and constructed to help ailing humans. Their thin articulated instrument arms were poised ready for action, only awaiting the order of the physicians and scientists in charge.

The solemn men peered through a plastisteel partition into the wardroom beyond. An engineer in Air-Conditioning-Control appeared on the videoscreen. His right hand grasped a switch controlling air distribution. Over the loudspeaker of the sound system the high whine of live turbines was a constant hum.

Everything was ready for the decisive move—but one man could not bring himself to act, could not make the final—perhaps-fatal—commitment.

Perry Rhodan, First Administrator of the United Peoples of Earth and presently Arkon Expedition Commander, stretched out both hands against the partition as though to enclose all 700 of his fate-stricken crew in one all-protective embrace.

In spite of appearances, the sight he witnessed beyond the barrier was neither comical nor intended as a humorous performance. A normal sense of humour recoils when, one is aware that it is sick and helpless men who are cavorting as though in the grip of a virulent variant form of St. Vitus' Dance.

The comedic antics, the clowning, the sidesplitting slapstick was truly sick humour in its medical sense: Hyper Euphoria. A synthetic 'high' or boisterous abandon, an involuntary, unconscious descent into a vertigo of uncontrollable mental impulses where arms and legs flailed aimlessly about and gaping mouths were impelled to utter infantile babbling or shriek out in raucous song. Vaguely akin to some sort of rapturous enchantment, it was actually a dangerous plunge into the bottomless abyss of madness.

Rhodan observed the wild dancing, singing and caterwauling of his afflicted men with helpless despair. Serious men, clear-thinking galactonauts, technicians and highly qualified scientists—all reduced to incoherent lunatics. To the man, all

700 had forgotten all duties of their service or command.

There had to be a cause—*something* had turned them into what they were now: piteously helpless victims. “Do something!” Rhodan was heard to groan. “Just do *something*.”

Biologist Janus van Orgter could only bite his lips. Toxicologist Tina Sarbowna had lost all of her calloused and haughty sarcasm; now she was happily human again, a woman with feelings, a female scientist humbled by lack of specific knowledge. Her thin figure appeared to be bowed under the weight of her grey mane of hair. As though in a trance, she stared into the wardroom of madness before her.

The *Titan*'s Medical Chief, surgical genius Prof. Kaerner, considered for one brief moment the thought of brain surgery, then hastily rejected it. Operations were out.

Kaerner could not help; no one could help!

Rhodan thought: *there were his best men, dancing, raving and howling because after landing on the planet Honor they had allowed themselves to be deceived, because they had merely taken into their arms those enchanting and fascinating little animals, just to take pleasure in their funny chatter. Who would not have taken to their hearts these small creatures, less than a foot long, who had the outward appearance of dainty little bears? No one had been immune to the temptation to scratch the soft fur of the curious little nonues, otherwise known as Hono bears.*

When the little fellows would stretch out their pink paws or wrinkle their comical noses, the coldest heart of the toughest noncom would melt like butter. But the nonues had turned out to be a bit too precious. They couldn't help it, of course, that their delicate pelts exuded a microscopic secretion: no living creature is responsible for the attributes given to it by Nature.

The 700 men of the super battleship *Titan* had simply had a piece of tough luck, that's all. In a factual sense they were guilty themselves for their own poisoning or infection, because on strange worlds one shouldn't touch or for that matter consume things unless very carefully examined beforehand.

On the other hand, these considerations had forced Perry Rhodan into a self-analysis. He accused himself bitterly. He, who held the chief responsibility, had even recommended to his men that they should acquire some of the lovable bears from the natives of Honor, more or less as good luck mascots. It went without saying that a little diversion could be used on board a super-battleship that measured close to a mile in diameter and mounted ordnance consisting of the most frightful weapons of annihilation in the galaxy.

Instead of diversion, however, the advent of the small mascots had an opposite effect. The wholly blameless little bears had been put to evil use by unknown forces. Somebody had gone to very special pains in order to eliminate the *Titan*'s crew by very extraordinary means. The basic principle of destruction was Man's love of animals; the harmless creatures had been converted into weapons.

Rhodan had landed on this remote planet in Star Cluster M13 merely to wait safely out of the main spaceship routes for the arrival of the fighter ship *Ganymede*, whose commander had received the order to bring a fresh crew of men and ship's armament and equipment from Earth, 34000 light-years away. The situation in the Greater Empire, whose rule by Arkonides had recently been taken over by a giant robot brain, had in itself permitted no further delay in providing the super-giant *Titan* with adequate manpower.

So Rhodan had waited until the silent, primitive natives had appeared with their enchanting house pets. Only later did they discover, after a heavy battle on Honur, that these animals were being bred by unknown intelligences. The poison produced by them had been chemically converted into one of the most frightful drugs in the galaxy. This had been the first clue of the existence of intelligences that Khrest had called Aras. The only thing known about them previously was that this strange people had acquired a still stranger monopoly: the Aras called themselves the Medical Masters of the Galaxy. Only a few beings from this race had been found and they revealed no more than their claim to galaxy-wide medical supremacy.

Once more, Rhodan mentally reviewed the most recent events.

After Col. Freyt had delivered 800 men to the *Titan*, at least the ship was again flight- and battle-worthy, although the minimum coverage still wouldn't account for manning the 40 lifeboats of the giant spacer. Then, too, even Rhodan's most valuable co-workers had fallen ill. And even the men and women of the Mutant Corps had not been aware of just *how* dangerous the little animals could be.

Only Rhodan, the Arkonide Khrest, the furry creature named Pucky, the mutant Wuriu Sengu and Lt. Tifflor had escaped the calamity, because at the time of the general poisoning they had been out of the ship on a patrol flight. For this reason they were the last healthy members left of the original crew.

Other men who were experienced from the Vega Sector campaign, came on board. Although all had been processed through the Arkonide hypno-schooling, it had been considered necessary to acquaint them with the equipment and organization of the super-battleship. The *Titan* had been and still was the ultimate development of the Empire's spaceship technology.

Suddenly, in the large Officers' Mess, a heavy cabinet was torn out of its deck fastenings. The rugged wardrobe piece reeled up into the air, only to come down shortly afterward in a thundering crash. One man emitted a resounding yell. He had been wounded in the foot.

"That's the end!" blurted out Prof. Kaerner, deeply disturbed. "In the name of Heaven, sir, if the mutants bring their strengths to play, the greatest calamity can occur! That was Tama Yokida, the telekineticist. I saw him concentrating on that! You must give the order!"

Rhodan's face drew tight in anguish. In recent days his tall figure had taken on a slight slump. What the ship's scientists had recognized as a necessity twisted the depths of his being.

“Is it absolutely necessary?” he whispered. “Professor, I can’t just subject them all—”

Tina Sarbowna broke in with her rough, deep voice. “You can and you must!” It was a voice that commanded respect because it belonged to a woman who had achieved her position through hard work and great knowledge. “I maintain now as before that we are dealing with a poison. Which nerve centres are the most sensitive to it, we don’t know, or at least not yet. The fact is obvious, however, that they reject both food and drink. I believe that physical consumption and possible atrophy are beginning. Do you want your friends to die of starvation?”

Rhodan removed his sweat-dampened hands from the transparent partition. Two slowly fading impressions remained on the plastic surface.

“Stiller!”

The engineer on the viewscreen lifted his head.

“You may begin! But not too much—take it easy!”

The snap of a closing switch broke the stillness. From the ventilators of the large mess hall, whitish puffs of vapour emerged. In scattering and drifting shreds they were borne along on the fresh air streams until the first suffocating clouds enshrouded the trembling heads and shrieking mouths. The completely harmless but fast-working anaesthetic gas remained suspended in the room. The exhaust vents of the automatically activated ventilation security system were closed off by Stiller.

The ecstatic yowling and shouting tapered off. In increasing numbers the sick men fell into a beneficial sleep. Reginald Bell, Rhodan’s second in command, appeared to have a moment of clarity just before sinking down. It was almost as though an unfailing instinct of danger had brought the confused man to a point of angry protest. He staggered to the transparent partition, his lips parted, then sank to the deck with a look of bewilderment in his blue eyes.

Silence reigned in the mess hall of the *Titan*. It was the same in other departments and sections where the infected ones had been quarantined. The women of the crew lay in Thora’s spacious cabin. There, too, the lunatic laughter had been stilled. The exhaust vents turned on again. In a few moments the anaesthetic vapours were drawn away and fresh oxygen streamed in.

Rhodan turned away with slumped shoulders. Beyond him, technicians opened the locked security hatches. The first Med Robots scurried into the room. Men of the newly arrived crew hurried in with inflatable emergency beds. The large ship’s sick bay wasn’t extensive enough to accommodate all the patients.

The bleak and desolate landscape of the planet Honor shimmered on the monitor viewscreens. A section of the small red sun was to be seen on the upper edge of the screen. Outside, all was quiet. The great laboratory of the unknown intelligences had long since been conquered. The liberated nonues, or Hono bears, had scattered to the four winds. Of the indigents, who had reverted to a primitive state, there was also nothing more to be seen. It was as though Honor had never harboured life.

“And now?” asked Perry Rhodan tonelessly. “You’ve had your way—so what happens now?”

The Arkonide Khrest moved himself into the foreground. His old yet strangely young face was furrowed. His white hair shimmered in the diffused lighting. “Perry, make a return jump into the Arkon System,” he recommended calmly. “If there is any help to be had, it will be there. It would be senseless to fly to the Earth. Your scientists already have the medical knowledge of my race. They can’t help. So the only hope left is that Arkon will have made new discoveries in the meantime.”

Rhodan’s face revealed his inner contempt. “Arkon!” he retorted tensely. “My friend, you’re dreaming! That unfit, degenerate race of yours will have done anything else but search for new medical remedies! They lack the will to action, don’t you understand?”

Khrest’s reply was expressionless. “Nevertheless, try it.”

“In other words,” said Rhodan, “we go there so that the robot brain can retake the *Titan* that we’ve struggled so hard to win? I still have my deal with that automated Regent but—! You might say the super-battleship we took from Arkon III belongs to us because we’ve finally done something to earn it. But what do you suppose will happen if we venture smack dab into the centre of his sphere of power? Can you vouch for the actions of a machine? Are you capable of making a studied prognosis? I believe not!”

“Don’t be bitter,” answered Khrest. “The *Titan* belongs to you. I have requested some statistics about our current situation.”

“Great! Probably how hard a man had to cough to generate a thrust of—say—one three-thousandth of a gram?”

The assembled scientists exchanged silent glances. The Chief was obviously at the end of his nerves.

Suddenly Rhodan became quite calm. “So what will you do now?” he asked.

Kaerner breathed a sigh of relief and replied, “We will start intravenous feeding immediately and through a series of injections we’ll make sure the patients remain in deep sleep. This will block any acutely dangerous developments. Meanwhile we will do all in our power to identify the symptoms more closely. The chemical and biological analyses are proceeding. We are seeking to determine whether we are dealing with a normal toxicant or a poisonous metabolic product of unknown bacteria. When we know that, we may proceed more intelligently. Above all, however, we should be thankful that we’ve gotten them to sleep.”

Rhodan only nodded, because at this stage nothing else could be said. He looked once more into the mess hall. The crew and the robots were busy setting up the emergency beds.

“Sir!” rasped a voice on the loudspeaker. “Dr. Certch wishes to speak with you urgently!”

Rhodan looked up. The viewscreen revealed the thin, exhausted features of a young man. Only a few months ago, Lt. Julian Tiffloor would not have dreamed of

belonging so soon to the administrative staff of a super-battleship. In him, youth's innocence of eye had disappeared. The load of responsibility had converted a 20 year-old shave-tail into a reliable and duty-conscious officer.

"Certch?" inquired Rhodan distractedly.

"Our new robot psychologist, sir," said Tiff. "More specifically, it has to do with mathematical logistics."

"Ah! I'll be right up. Tell him to wait in Command Central."

The medical scientists had disappeared. With a sense of having been abandoned, Rhodan took one last look at his unconscious companions in the mess hall. There was probably no better way, he thought, to protect them from harm.

Wearily, he went to the nearest antigrav lift. When he left the mess, he felt suddenly alone. In this giant spaceship, 800 men were hardly noticeable. In this mile-wide sphere with its countless rooms, they could very easily get lost.

2/ ENTER: THE ULTERMAN PRINCIPLE

Everson's giant, heavily built body did not harmonize very well with the austere constructed pilot's seat. In the first place, it had been designed for an Arkonide, and as a result the contours were not in particular agreement with Capt. Everson's Herculean physique.

He looked first at his watch, then glanced routinely at the activated magniscreens in the circular gallery of monitoring devices around him—and finally at the brand new insignia of rank on his uniform.

The former Lt. Everson had only been promoted to captain several hours before, which was fair reason for an opportune and carefully inconspicuous downward glance at his badge of authority. With a slight clearing of his throat, he cast a supervisory eye over the bustling scene in the Command Central before him. The *Titan* was clear for takeoff. Far below decks could be heard the muffled rumbling of the power plant's heavy-duty converters, in standby idling mode. Only the propulsion engines were silent.

"I can't just sit here like this," Everson murmured to himself.

Lt. Tanner, of slight build, dark complexion, endowed with a lively demeanour and farcical sense of humour, permitted himself a fleeting grin. Marcus Everson was a phlegmatic monster of a man. The crew maintained seriously that the only way one could get a rise out of the Captain would perhaps be to take away his food ration.

During the latest battle, however, 'Tiny' Everson had proved this to be far from the fact. As Perry Rhodan's newly appointed First Officer, the galactonaut could, under proper circumstances, transform himself, by contrast, into a roaring tidal wave; but that was another story.

"Atten-n-n-n-*shun!*" Somebody shouted the command with harsh, long-drawn emphasis.

Men whirled around and came to a stop. Everson closed his eyes painfully and made a show of plugging his ears with his thick index fingers, while he favoured the announcer with a reproachful scowl. And then the world shook. Everson's own response came with the thundering crescendo of a rocket blastoff.

Perry Rhodan, who had just entered the Command Centre, glanced at his new First Officer. "Thank you," he said. "At ease and carry on."

Catching his breath again, Everson dropped back into his seat. "Sonny, that was

class!" he praised himself in low tones.

Tanner retorted, "The Old Man's still dusting his ears out after that one!" Then he added, "Well, I've fed in the program. Now we'll see how this overgrown hulk can get off the ground. It's hard to imagine that anything like this can actually fly!"

"I can imagine it," said Everson with modest calm. "I can at least give it a try."

"Looks like he's snapped out of his lousy mood!" Tanner whispered hastily.

Everson's eyes became brightly alert. His survey was short but penetrating. "Okay... what's been done was necessary. it took a lot out of him. What does Dr. Certch want?"

Tanner glanced searchingly across at the eccentric little man with the enormous bald head.

Dr. Orson Certch had chosen the most unusual of professions in the New Science. There had always been psychologists but such people were concerned with the inner life of Man. Certch was also a psychologist but he concerned himself with the highly speculative subject of the 'thoughts and emotional disposition' of robots.

Everson shook his ponderous head in amazement, which caused his fleshy cheeks to ripple. "Some people have a lot of nerve!" he growled.

Rhodan sidestepped the scurrying creature approaching in fall flight. With a slight double take, Dr. Certch made an about face in order to approach the Commander again with rigidly upheld cranium and pontifically outstretched finger.

"I'm very glad to see you, sir!" he shrilled in his high-pitched voice. "I must talk to you immediately, absolutely, without fail!"

His small, wizened hand jerked with spasmodic and incredible swiftness over the numerous outer pockets of his uniform. Finally Certch found his data tucked behind his broad all-purpose belt. The robot psychologist only came up to Rhodan's breastbone but if anyone could definitely predict the actions of an inhuman machine, it was this little man with the mighty, bald cranium.

"Please come now!" Certch insisted, after he had already taken a seat and gotten up 3 times.

But finally Rhodan sat down on a folding seat behind the big calculator in B-Sector. With his choppy manner of speaking, Certch was capable of bringing all people around him to a state of despair. Rhodan began to feel uneasy. Certch was a type of person who interpreted the relationship between a commanding officer and his coworkers as a sort of competitive friendship.

"Khrest has submitted a calculation request," shrilled Certch. "Interesting! And also dangerous! Hear me out, sir. If you fly to Arkon as planned, we will be in for a surprise. The Robot will strike and it will be swifter and more painful than we imagine!"

Rhodan's fleeting smile disappeared. He was suddenly sharply alert, his eyes

blazing a question. Certch dropped his gaze in a moment of confusion, then suddenly jerked back his prodigious cranium again and his index finger shot forward.

“So—you would like to know why? Very well—it’s relatively simple even for a layman. We have 700 sick crewmen on board, including your Mutant Corps. In the first place, a cure for them is impossible. Considering the fact that there is also no cure to be had on Arkon, the Brain’s reaction to that situation is foreseeable with 100% certainty! The Brain knows that for the most part your successes may be attributed to your use of the mutants. The Robot himself possesses battleships in the *Titan* class. Mechanical, purely mathematical and absolute logic will tell the Automaton that you, sir, have become useless or at the least of less value to him. Without your special resources you may be regarded as any other normal power. Is that clear?”

Certch’s eyes blinked nervously. Again Rhodan did not reply.

“Alright, so it’s clear. The only plus factors you have left in the logic flow of positronic computation lie in your faculty for swift decision. As for the possibility of secret weapons, the Robot will assume you have them. However, an assumption or supposition will not register in its computations as a negotiable item. So that brings us to your energy and enterprise. That will get you a classification somewhat above that of a Naat or some other intelligent life form. A desperately small margin to permit the risk of flying into the direct sphere of power of the robot brain. That would be the end! It’s an alternative you shouldn’t touch with a 10-foot pole: I can only warn you very urgently!”

Certch hopped up with a scuttling movement from the seat. The spectacles disappeared from his large nose.

“One moment!”

The robot psychologist paused in midstep.

Everson and Tanner looked across at the two dissimilar men. Tiff stood to one side with a white face. Suddenly a tense atmosphere settled over the large Command Centre. Rhodan walked slowly over to the scientist and stopped squarely in front of him.

“Doctor—inasmuch as I am also somewhat familiar with the workings of positronic logic, I presume that your evaluation of the giant brain’s attitude rests solely on the hypothesis that no cure for the illness is available on Arkon...”

“Correct!” the little man confirmed curtly.

“What will happen if the sickness can be cured after all? And if the Robot knows about it?”

“Situation change of 180° in our favour!”

“Thank you very much, Doctor. Naturally you are quite aware of the fact that no such serum is known on Arkon. Fine, we don’t have to argue that point. Let us take the darkest side of this case for granted. You are familiar with the Ulsterman Principle concerning the rating of transactions based on cybernetic computations?”

Certch became suspicious. He appeared to be even smaller.

“I am also familiar with it, so we will proceed accordingly. Capt. Everson!”

The giant loomed up out of the pilot seat. The softness had gone from his face.

“Transmit an order to the Medical Chief. I want Thora, Bell and 6 others from the infected crew to be changed to a lighter level of sleep. I want it possible to wake these 8 people up at any moment. That is all.”

Everson turned to the ship’s intercom console.

Dr. Certch was astounded. “What are you trying to do?” he asked, hoarsely.

“To proceed in accordance with the Ulsterman Principle,” Rhodan instructed him. “We will place 8 sick people on display. The rest of them will be concealed. Pucky and Sengu will see to it that the Brain receives a demonstration of their extraordinary capabilities. The Robot does not know that we have taken over 800 new personnel. Thanks to the screening capability of the hyper-compensator, Freyt’s fast expedition to Earth has remained undetected. We owe that to the Galactic Traders, who developed this very super gadget. So—we started out with 700 men and with 700 we return. A clear case, don’t you think? We put 8 sick patients on exhibit. They would certainly be too inconsequential to be considered a factor in the overall evaluation of our worthiness as an ally. At the same time we can determine whether or not a cure is available. Dr. Certch, show me any snags that I may have overlooked.”

The scientist hesitated, then came his question: “Are you absolutely certain that the *Ganymede* was not positioned? You know, because of the resulting space warps, transitions through hyperspace can be detected and measured.”

“We’re well aware of that! The compensator absolutely prevents any detection of hyperspace jumps. Where’s the snag?”

“None there,” grumbled Certch. “Not under those suppositions. But you have to take care that the *Titan* isn’t subjected to a full inspection. The 8 sick people are not an essential factor. Alright—if I were a robot, I would not wish to have you as an enemy. I’ll run this through the calculator again.”

Rhodan stared after the little man as he hurried away from him, and he shouted, “Many thanks for the warning, Doctor!”

With a weak laugh, Certch disappeared.

“Everson, we start in 10 minutes. You lift the ship off. Tiff, message to Freyt: he will take off one minute before us.

Rhodan remained behind the First Officer’s seat to monitor Everson’s instructions. Chief Engineer Garand made a brief appearance on the viewscreen, his chubby face streaming with sweat. The ready-signals from individual stations were coming in. Freyt’s confirmation came through.

9 minutes later the *Ganymede* came to life on the screens. The space battleship, 600 feet in diameter and standing 2500 feet high on its giant tail fins, was a little under 2 miles away. The fiery hurricane that broke out of its stern tubes converted the dust-dry, rocky wasteland into a boiling crater. Freyt had not bothered with the

particle-deflection fields. On Honor there was nothing to destroy.

The infernal thundering of an Armageddon roared out of the sound-system speakers. The mighty cylindrical ship lifted upward with a deliberate slowness at first. The hot impulse-stream of the propulsion engines became bluish, then violet and finally almost invisible. Then, darting like some leaping monster, the *Ganymede* shot into the sky. Deep, rolling peals of thunder shook the desolate landscape. Glowing, strangely luminescent air masses folded and crackled with lightning into the vacuum that the *Ganymede* had created with its gargantuan liftoff. A howling hurricane was generated out of a clear sky. It swept up molten rocks with it, only to hurl them somewhere against the earth with tremendous turbulence.

The battleship had disappeared.

The takeoff of the many times larger *Titan* was but an intensification of unchained forces almost to the infinite. The 18 giant propulsion engines in the equatorial ring bulge of the mile-thick sphere converted the flat desert into a sea of lava. The men left the planet of an alien dwarf star with the storming ardour of careless gods. Their blastoff acceleration brought them to the fringe of space within 4 seconds.

In their wake were air masses in giant upheaval and below were bubbling landmasses. They also left behind them the funny little animals called nonues.

But the men had taken with them their cares and worries. Exactly 10 minutes after diving into outer space, both ships attained the relative speed of light. The programming of the hypertransition computers had been completed. Arkon, centre star of the Greater Empire, lay 47 light-years away...

Perry Rhodan had given the instruction to carry out their transition through fifth-dimensional hyperspace in the normal manner. This meant they would be generating a clearly detectable space warp.

“If only we’re not jumping from the frying pan into the fire!” mumbled Marcus Everson to himself before he was gripped by the forces of the dematerialisation field and was attenuated into material unreality.

The red dwarf star Thatrel became a glimmering disk... then disappeared.

3/ THE NEXT MOVE: TO MOOFF 6

Arkon—symbol of power, heart of the Greater Empire and home world of the anthropomorphous Arkonides. Through the unprecedented sternness and purposeful initiative of a gigantic robot brain, Arkon had become once again what it had always been before: the central ruling power of the known galaxy.

The emergence of the 2 giant ships into normal space had been a routine and matter-of-fact occurrence by Arkonide standards. Here at the hub centre from which all cosmic commerce had expanded, an incredible volume of traffic was carried on.

Nevertheless, Rhodan's ships were immediately detected and located. The 5000, space fortresses in the outer defence ring had demanded the latest recognition code through their data links. Since the instantaneous transponders on the *Titan* and *Ganymede* were only keyed for an outmoded response, an automatic communication linkage was made directly to the robot brain on Arkon III.

The first surprise had come immediately after establishing the communications link. The vast automaton, which called itself Great Cöordinator or Regent, had authorized the flight of the two battleships into the Inner System. Besides, Rhodan had learned that since 5 days ago, by corresponding standard time of Arkon II, this planet that had been intended for the galactic interchange of goods, had been declared an open port once more.

This was a piece of news that led to a burst of speculations on board the *Titan*. When Perry Rhodan penetrated the Arkon System the first time, the ruling macro-robot had jealously guarded against their flight to any of the 3 Arkonide worlds. In the meantime, it appeared that the manifestations of Arkonide decadence had been so widely hushed up that the Brain, without too much loss of prestige, could take the chance of granting the traditional landing permits to the countless space-travelling races of the Milky Way.

They passed inside the orbit of the 5th planet of the sun of Arkon. Again, a code signal was demanded. The two battleships were directed into interplanetary flight-approach channel 32-17, a precaution that was mandatory in view of the heavy spaceship traffic in the area.

“Bogies in green and 92,” came a droning announcement over the speakers. “Large spacecraft, battleships of the Empire Class, 3 units...”

Marcus Everson, functioning just now as second pilot, jerked his head around.

Apprehensively, he sought Rhodan's eye. "Empire Class!" snorted the Captain.

"Our escort cover. All hands will remain calm, no show of excitement now. Attention, all members of the new crew: don't be tricked into any premature action! During our first visit here, things were a lot worse. We were practically forced to land on the 5th planet. In the meantime, we've made a certain arrangement with the robot brain. Don't worry about the 3 units of the Arkon Fleet! No armed ship may enter here without immediate escort. Purely a self-preservation program of the Brain—okay?"

Rhodan's chuckle was heard over the speaker system. Nervous crewmen exchanged glances. Tanner, who was functioning for the moment as Chief Gunner, hesitantly withdrew his fingers from the weapons keyboard.

"Remember—no boo-boos!" Rhodan admonished.

"Ships accommodating us into escort formation," reported Tiffloor from the tracking station.

The observation computer switched connections. The 3 brilliantly lit vessels appeared on the screens of Green Sector.

"Man! Three spacers of the Empire Class!" whispered Everson. "Sir, are they robot-manned...?"

"Not exclusively any more. A few months ago, the Brain was sold on strict remote control. Which was a break for us. If at that time the Regent had been able to use capable, really thinking crews, we'd hardly have been able to get away with stealing the *Titan*."

Everson swallowed hard. A shadow of uncertainty touched the Commander's face.

Rhodan did not concern himself further with the 3 giant escort ships, which until a short while ago had been considered the largest of their kind in existence. Meanwhile, the Arkon fleet modernization program had produced the Universe Class, just short of one mile in diameter. The *Titan* belonged to this latest class.

Rhodan had a slight touch of uneasiness when he recalled his foolhardy undertaking. Equipped only with the *Ganymede*, which was a peanut, by Arkonide standards, they had flown merrily and recklessly into a star system whose inhabitants had understood faster-than-light space travel when humankind still lived in caves. Rhodan had decided on the Arkon flight in hopes of finding help against the increasingly acute threat of the Springers. And not the least of pressures in this direction were the importunities of Khrest and Thora, who after 13 years of absence desired to return home.

No one had been able to foresee that the Arkonide emperor had been dethroned 6 years before. Still further from anyone's imagining was the concept of a take-over of rulership of the Arkonide Empire by the giant robot brain.

Rhodan had been forced to land on the inhospitable planet #5, which he then had left in a scoutship against the instructions of the Brain. On Arkon I, the crystal world, he had not been able to find help. But an admiral of the deposed emperor, who still had an active mentality, had brought him together with his 50 Right

commandos to Arkon III, where he was received as an ‘auxiliary’ taskforce.

The flight with the brand new *Titan* had been a trick. The hypertransition over 3 light-years had insured escape. Then came the unintended landing on Zalit, whose dictatorial ruler was of a mind to use Perry Rhodan as an ally in a plan to overcome the powerfully rising robot brain. Rhodan had secretly switched plans when he discovered that the inhabitants of the planet Zalit were under the mental control of jellyfish-like creatures equipped with telepathic and hypnotic faculties—whom Khrest called Mooffs.

A bitter battle had broken out, which because of its favourable outcome had resulted in Rhodan’s recognition by the robot brain. The Robot had simply sought, as a direct consequence, to enlist Rhodan as one of its allies. It was a purely logical transaction, since the Machine did not have too much support from organic life forms. Rhodan had blocked off the danger from the Mooffs and had retained the *Titan* more or less as his part of the ‘loot’ out of the overall adventure.

This had been the resulting situation finally leading Rhodan to the dispatch of Col. Freyt in the *Ganymede* to Earth, in view of the fact that his newly-acquired space giant was under-manned with only 700 men. Then on the planet Honur, where they were going to wait quietly for the new men from Terra, the crew’s poisoning by the secretive beings there had ensued.

Now they were making their second flight into the Arkon System. But Rhodan was extremely uneasy over the fact that his best and most experienced people had become ill. The robot brain’s reactions could result in catastrophe from the moment it became aware that the mutants were no longer capable of service. Rhodan gambled everything on one card.

As two Arkon worlds came into view on the screens of the trans-light-speed ultra-scanners, he was reminded of the monstrous Mooffs. That was an affair that everyone had totally neglected because of the surprising events on Honur.

Just as he was thinking of this, the robot psychologist Dr. Certch flashed onto the video intercom. “This is Certch speaking!” he announced himself superfluously. “I have new data, sir. Are you clear on the fact that the Robot will classify our adventures as insignificant? Naturally he would not do so if he were informed of the existence of about 700 sick crewmen. But since you are only going to appear to be nursing 8 patients, the Brain is going to arrive at the conclusion that any top priority effort to obtain a cure for them is superfluous. It is of little consequence to him if 8 insignificant people die. Do you get my point?”

“I was just dabbling a bit in that specific area.”

“Ah, wonderful! There was, on the other hand, this thing with the Mooffs. The Brain will give a top priority classification to an elimination of this danger. Recently you have brought out a proof of the fact that the insurrection of the Zalites is attributable to the uncanny influence of the Mooffs.”

“Right—and wrong,” retorted Rhodan. “I have enlightened the Brain on this point, to the effect that the Mooffs were at no time operating under their own free will. This weird race of creatures, although intelligent, is limited in its physical

form and need for a methane atmosphere, so it couldn't effectively become a part of galactic politics. Behind the Mooffs, are concealed other intelligences, who are misusing the ugly monsters."

"Just the subject I wish to pursue. Don't you think the Robot had that figured out? We've been given entry authorization here with surprising swiftness. We've already received a landing permit. That means somebody wants something from you! Inasmuch as you are able to come up with a battle-ready crew on board the most powerful ship of all time, you—meaning we—are going to be assigned to a mission, because you have undertaken the responsibility to protect the interests of the Empire. You should be prepared for a very light dismissal of your sick patients by the Robot. He will simply write them off. Unfortunate but it can't be helped! That's the way with positronic logic, which brooks no emotional considerations whatsoever. I have arrived at the conviction that we will be sent out again like return mail, with the commission to make a conclusive disposition of the Mooff danger. Last but not least, the Brain is under the impression that you still have the Mutant Corps at your disposal. I would conjecture that we will be ordered off to the home world of the monsters. Now, you can't come here into the inner sanctum of a colossal galactic fortress with the idea that you can play around with orders. Your previous escape was a stroke of fortune. It will not succeed a second time."

"I understand, Dr. Certch!" said Rhodan. "Thanks very much. I was thinking along similar lines. Incidentally: what would you say if I told you it was my intention to fly to the home world of the Mooffs?"

"That would come as a surprise!" Dr. Certch appeared nonplussed.

"Don't you think that's logical? We don't have much of a criterion or reference point regarding the activity of these Ara entities, as Khrest calls them. It's my guess that they're behind everything—even the revolution on Zalit. What more direct route can we go, other than to visit the home planet of the Mooffs and seek to unravel the whole mystery there? But the bottom line is this: as a result of our diversionary tactic I could never sell the Brain on the justification for making the search for the Medical Masters of the universe a top priority. It wouldn't make sense—*unless* I come up with 700 patients instead of 8."

Certch answered, "In the name of Evvan (the master robot maker), don't mention anything about the 700! That would be our funeral! But if you are of a mind to find further clues on the Mooff planet, by all means carry on in good faith! I'm just trying to figure out why you've come to Arkon in the first place, if this is your point of view. What kept us from taking the shortest line between 2 points?—We could have gone there to start with!"

"Well, as chance would have it, you see, I happen to need information concerning the home of the Mooffs, my fine feathered little Answer Man," Rhodan replied.

"Forgive me," Certch grinned back. "I merely wanted to confirm my genius and so I had to put you through a few tests."

Rhodan's very impressive cusswords faded in the speakers as the connection

was severed.

* * * *

The two battleships proceeded at 10% speed (speed of light) according to regulations. Higher velocities were not permitted within the Arkon System. But it was swift enough to bring two visible planets of the united and synchronous worlds quickly into close view.

Arkon, the original home world of the Arkonides, had become too small in the course of its development. With their phenomenal technology, the very enterprising ancestors of the present Arkon inhabitants had drawn the former planets II and IV from their natural orbits in a feat of celestial mechanics which practically conjoined them to the third planet. Thus, a Tri-System within the System was established: 3 planets, 2 of them pulled in by man-made forces, had circled the star, Arkon, for 15000 years by Earth reckoning, in precisely synchronous orbits, the same axis inclinations and the same orbital velocity.

This *was* Arkon! #1, the Crystal World, served only for dwelling purposes. #2 was reserved for galactic commerce and the general industries of the stellar empire. #3 was the planet of war, home port of the most gigantic space fleet of all time, and the location of the robot brain.

Apparently the ancient Arkonides had built for Eternity. Nothing in their interstellar settlement had changed until the advent of their recent descendants, whose cultural, intellectual and scientific supersaturation had led to a complete decadence. Indecisiveness and a deterioration of morals had finally made it necessary for a take-over of the Empire's destiny by the Giant Brain, which had been programmed to do so thousands of years earlier. Apparently the original Arkonides had suspected or foreseen that a race luxuriating in a superabundance of goods and a bon vivant level of living would ultimately be afflicted with physical atrophy. Into this galactic witch's cauldron had come Earthmen without suspecting that they had thus inadvertently brought themselves under the coldly utilitarian jurisdiction of a positronic robot brain.

Rhodan tore himself away from the breathtaking view of the two discernible worlds. From the *Titan's* present position, Arkon I could not be seen. It was hidden by the flaming sun.

A switch clicked home. Tiffleur's face appeared on the control console screen.

Rhodan issued an order: "Tiff, put a call through on the established hyper-frequency channel—to the Regent. Tag it with a top-urgent code signal. I request an audience with him before we land. When you have the connection, switch it over to the screens in Command Central. Thank you!"

Overhead, behind its transparent partition of steel-hard plastic, the powerful hypercom equipment of the super-battleship revealed a glow pattern of high-frequency activity. The Command Centre crewmen exchanged meaningful glances. The moment of truth had arrived.

“Contact ready, sir! Making transfer—” Tiffs voice came through.

Rhodan turned with slow deliberation in the high-backed pilot’s seat. On one sector of the circular video bank the incoming transmission appeared as a coalescing pattern of colour. Seconds later, the scanning lines cleared. The humped shape of the metal shield in the great hall appeared. It was only a tiny portion of the Brain but it seemed to be an important portion.

“Rhodan of Terra to the Great Cöordinator,” said Perry into the microphone. His face was inscrutable.

“I hear you!” came the indifferent, unmodulated answer. The Robot did not seem to know such a thing as curiosity. He also did not ask the purpose of the call.

“I request immediate disposition of an Arkonide medical team. I have 8 sick people on board.”

“Of what nature is the illness?”

“Unknown. Apparently poisoning. At the close of hostilities on Zalit, I landed on the planet Honor in order to train my men without interruption. Some small animals appeared. We found out too late that they exuded a poisonous substance.”

“Wait!”

The shimmering scan-lines came back suddenly. At the touch of a soft paw, Rhodan started. The furry creature, Pucky, had suddenly appeared beside his seat. The large eyes of the mouse-beaver were questioning. Hardly 3 feet high, the greatest parapsychological talent on board the ship sat on his thick hind structure, which gave Pucky a truly comical aspect.

The overgrown Mickey Mouse transmitted a telepathic question: *Troubles?*

Rhodan understood the question. He had made considerable advances in his telepathic training. At least he had graduated to the point where he could grasp the essential contents of a thought transmission from a genuine telepath and could send back messages with similar effectiveness.

Rhodan made an imperceptible gesture. Pucky’s rosy paws remained on the arm of the pilot seat. Suddenly the steel cupola of the Brain was visible again.

“Data checked. Planet Honor has been banned since 4 millennia. Skin secretion of this low form of intelligence causes destruction of organic nerve cells, in its unrefined form. Chemically processed, this poison serves as the basis of a known forbidden drug, *Kan’or*. 800 years ago, the Arkon Fleet destroyed galactic merchants handling this product. Further questions?”

Rhodan paled slightly. Far behind him, biologist Janus van Orgter burst into the Command Central. Puffing, he ran closer.

“We suspected nothing of this danger,” Rhodan answered quickly. “8 of my people have come into direct contact with the animals. The situation is very disturbing. Thora, of the Zoltral Dynasty, is also among those who were poisoned. I have retained command of the *Titan*. I am urgently requesting aid.”

The Brain did some fast switching. No superfluous questions came from the loudspeaker. Now it knew Rhodan’s alleged reason for landing on Honor.

“The symptoms are barely understood. You were careless. Land on Arkon II. I will attempt to supply medical assistance. Why did you code this call as urgent?”

Rhodan suppressed an oath. Now Dr. Certch was also at hand. He fanned his arms about imploringly. He wanted to reiterate that the Robot would never consider the search for a cure of the sickness as urgent. Rhodan understood. It seemed to be horribly complicated, this business of converting organic, emotion-oriented thinking into the ice-cold logic of a monstrous calculating machine.

“I have information concerning the real instigators of the Zalite insurrection. The Mooffs themselves were influenced by them. The poisoning of my people was a premeditated act. More complete details on this later, Regent. We discovered a camouflaged headquarters of the Medical Masters of the Galaxy, whom Khrest—from the Zoltral family—designated by the name Aras.”

“What kind of headquarters?”

“A super laboratory in which they were breeding the animals which we call nonues. The bodily secretions of the animals were processed into the forbidden drug. Because of this I am convinced that the solution to the riddle lies with these Ara people. I request precise data. Where are they to be apprehended? Our ship’s memory bank only yields the fact that the Aras possess the medical, biological and pharmaceutical monopoly in the galaxy. Where can they be found?”

The viewscreen flooded with a fluorescent swirl of light.

“Answer is negative—watch out!” said Dr. Certch.

Then the picture of the armourplated cupola returned. With fast reaction, the Brain had recognized the essentials of the request. There was refusal implied without the word ‘refusal’ being spoken.

“Everywhere and nowhere! Our agreement makes no provision for wasting valuable time. It must be considered inadvisable to put off the Mooff problem. I decline to give you questionable data concerning this race of the Aras.

“Then they are questionable?” put in Rhodan.

“Yes, my auxiliary banks yield no further elucidation. If the treatment of your patients does not succeed, the medical team will have to give up. I can suggest the following to you, Rhodan of Terra: if your suspicion is correct that the Mooffs were sent out by the Aras, there is a possibility that you may discover further information on Mooff planet #6. But you will have to hurry because a partially robot-controlled fleet under command of Adm. Vetron has been dispatched already, with the commission to destroy the 6th planet of the Mooffs. I did not see any other solution. You have neglected to make a timely report of your new discoveries.”

“Withdraw the order!” demanded Rhodan, highly agitated. “They will destroy the last existing clue!”

“The attack has not yet begun. Land at once and bring out your sick. It will be demonstrated in the shortest possible time whether or not I can help. End of discussion.”

“Rhodan shouted more questions but realized that the Machine had

disconnected. With tautened features, he turned around.

Even Certch was silent. Khrest, the Arkonide scientist, came closer, thoughtfully. On the vidscreens of the circular battery of monitors the Arkon planets glistened like golden apples.

A warning signal was received from the escort ships.

Everson announced softly: "Deceleration in two minutes, sir!"

"Go ahead and land, Perry," interrupted Khrest. "If the Brain explains that the examination has to be done in the shortest possible time, so at the most we're talking about a half hour or so. If they can't identify an antidote in the latest medical arsenal extant in that time, we can take off immediately. Any further waiting would be senseless. The Robot isn't going to put himself out especially just for a few humans."

"If that's the state of affairs," cried Certch, "we should not land at all!"

Pucky followed Rhodan's pacing figure with his gaze. A depth of melancholy glistened in the furry creature's large eyes. He sensed the crisis in his soul.

"Khrest, who is this Adm. Vetron? Do you know him?"

"Only by name. A younger space officer. He will carry out the Brain's instructions with no questions asked."

"That youngster will blast all our hopes to pieces!" said Rhodan. "Dr. Certch, what do you recommend?"

"Land, wait out the examination, load the patients on board again, and talk the Robot into giving you full authority to handle the Mooff situation. When we get to the Mooff planet, you must be in a position to break up and halt the attack."

Rhodan went to his control console. The computer was signalling red. The 3 escort ships were already in deceleration. The two planets had changed from golden apples to pumpkins.

Moments later, the propulsion engines of the *Titan* began to roar. Their high velocity was braked with a counter-thrust of 300 miles per second squared. The remote control centre on Arkon II acknowledged.

While the super-battleship was being trimmed into landing approach by the bellowing vernier tubes, Rhodan gave an explanation over the ship's P.A. "Commander to all hands! The landing will take place in approximately 15 minutes. You must take all pains necessary to prevent the sick people, under any circumstances, from being discovered. Medical personnel, please remain at emergency posts. Where necessary, apply anaesthetic gas. No cries or embarrassing shouts should be heard because it is uncertain whether or not we will be visited on board. Attention, Prof. Kaerner—bring Thora, Bell and the 6 other men into sickbay. Presumably, they should be picked up from there by robots. Remove any traces in our clinic that it has been occupied. Everything must be faultlessly clean. Get the emergency beds out of sight. Fresh linens on the beds in the clinic. We will probably take off again after a short stay. I intend to follow the suggestion of the Robot, in order to avoid any serious complications from the start. Besides, we have no other choice than to try on Mooff 6 to cast some light

on all these events. Establish preliminary battle readiness. That is all.”

Rhodan cut off the P.A. connection as the super giant thundered into the upper atmospheric strata of Arkon II.

* * * *

Arkon II—a somewhat Earth-sized celestial body with a gravitational force of 0.7 Gravs; technological, industrialized structure of the highest order—the world of the robot-operated mammoth factories, of the gigantic spaceports. In addition, here was the freight trans-shipment and forwarding centre for all intergalactic commerce.

The white, blazing Arkon sun bung in a cloudless, slightly hazy sky. This second planet of the tri-synchronized group was *the* financial and commercial Major Power of the Milky Way. Goods manufactured here were not only qualitatively of the highest grade but quantitatively sufficient to flood the markets of the entirety of colonial worlds. There was hardly anything that was not provided on Arkon II.

The spaceport of Olp’-Duor swarmed with every kind of merchant ships. Rhodan had an opportunity to observe the form and shape constructed by humanoid and alien beings. Strange structures towered up here and there. Still stranger creatures exited the airlock of their space vessels with a varying assortment and weight of protective covering or suit apparatus.

The fully automatic baggage and freight handling installations at the port worked at high speed. Khrest estimated the value of day-to-day freight forwardings and trans-shipments at Olp’-Duor to be in the neighbourhood of \$8 billion by Earth standards. But this was only one of 300 spaceports on the planet. Ponderous freighters rumbled incessantly across the skies. Others arrived in a wild swirl of noise and turmoil. The variety and types of spaceflight equipment, machines and propulsion engines accumulated in this area were impossible to estimate.

The spherical spacer construction predominated only with the Arkonides, otherwise the cylindrical or aerodynamically streamlined hull shapes were to be seen.

Here the envoys, messengers and ambassadors of alien races landed, most of them descended from former Arkon emigrants. However they had little else in common with their forebears. The passage of millennia and tens of millennia of time had drawn a line between Arkon-oriented biological development and what came after. The present day descendants of the earlier colonists had long since adapted themselves to their corresponding new environments. The variegated influences of other worlds had played a decisive role. Beginning with all-important gravitational influences of other celestial spheres and considering cosmic radiation, temperatures, atmospheric composition and biochemical factors, it was inevitable that both physical and mental ramifications of beings should

develop who hardly had an arm or a leg in common with the ancient Arkonides. The great common denominator was that they thought, lived and worked together. Rhodan had called Arkon II a cosmic anthill.

Arkonides were very seldom to be seen. Whenever they did put in an appearance, it was with the characteristic lassitude of their race. The robot brain had resorted to compulsory hypno-schooling for them, but as it turned out the ancient programming of the automaton had brought some confusion into the situation, where concepts of knowledge and physical capacities and efficiency were concerned. The tangentially motivated brains of the Arkonides could barely be aroused. The result was that the retrogressing and reversionary organism could not conform or adjust any more.

In the final analysis, Arkon was at an end. The jurisdictional initiatives emanated from the multi-laminar circuits and core memories of a robot Colossus, which thousands of technological and scientific generations had built. Rhodan knew that the giant machine, with all its power plants, switching units, memory banks, multiple CPU centres and logic stacks, not to mention entire floors, tunnels and streets of cable conduit and other whole buildings dedicated to input-output and transmission/receiving and time-share equipment, occupied a surface area of some 4000 square miles.

The super-battleship *Titan* had been brought in to a landing near the eastern edge of the spaceport, by remote control. A comparison of the might and power that was embodied in the *Titan* could only be made by approaching it from a distance. The landed super-battleship looked like a spherical mountain one mile thick, ringed round the middle by a prominent girdle bulge, in which most of the commercial spacers at Olp'-Duor could have been comfortably accommodated. Each of the *Titan's* 18 propulsion engines had a diameter which was comparable to the measurements of a small spaceship. In this structure of Arkon steel with its concentrated and daringly harnessed nuclear energies waited 800 healthy men. The 700 sick men knew nothing of the landing on Arkon II that had occurred since Honor.

Lt. Tanner had been seated at the console of the so-called 'fire organ' for about an hour. This was the crew name for the master weapons fire-control board. Pulse-beam projectors and disintegrator cannons lurked in readiness in a hum of rectifier and radiation force fields behind the closed hatches of the armourplated gun turrets. The *Titan* was in battle readiness, as was the *Ganymede*, some 3000 feet distant.

This sector was hermetically sealed off from regular traffic. Nevertheless, more and more alien-type life forms appeared in the magnified videoscreens of the automatic port monitor. They stared with curiosity and fear into the face of this giant. The Fleet advanced ship-building technology had only produced two vessels of the Universe Class. The *Titan* was one of them. Therefore there was no place where a Universe Class giant would attract more attention than on a spaceport of the second Arkon planet.

Rhodan looked at his watch. The great viewscreens of the panob gallery revealed the area in faithful detail: brimming over with all possible types of spaceships, robot contingents, and ponderous freight-handling equipment.

“You’ve deceived yourself, my friend,” Rhodan remarked to Khrest. “The medical examinations are lasting longer than 30 minutes.”

At that moment, the mouse-beaver returned from his third ‘excursion.’ The peculiar creature, endowed with the gift of teleportation, materialized in the middle of the Command Centre. As the 3-foot mouse-beaver suddenly appeared in front of him, Capt. Everson jumped back with a muttered oath. Pucky grinned with his one large incisor tooth. Then he trudged on his short hind legs across to the main control area.

“Well...?” asked Rhodan, curtly.

Pucky swung himself with a grunt into the next seat. His round mouse ears still listened to the men in the background.

“Bad news, Chief. They’re still in this clinic. Four Arkonides are making the examinations, along with some of the robots. It doesn’t look as if they’re going to do anything for them. For a few seconds there, I gave them a look at me. Maybe they’ve gone donk by now—ha!” Pucky laughed long and shrilly. The soft hair of his reddish-brown pelt bristled up at the nape of his neck.

Rhodan growled at him, “You shouldn’t pick up Bell’s bad language, Pucky. Donk—of all things!”

“Okay, so they climbed the walls!” replied Pucky. “It was a grass!”

“Khrest,” ordered Rhodan, “I want you to do something about the negligent manners of this officer!”

“*Lieutenant* Pucky!” chirped the mouse-beaver, spiritedly. “That’s what I am! So it’s only right that when I’m in service nobody should call me Pucky!”

Rhodan suppressed a smile. Suddenly, the mouse-beaver sobered. His large, satin eyes became fixed. “It’s Thora,” he said tonelessly. “I’m picking up her thoughts. She is still sick.”

Again, Rhodan consulted his watch. The 8 patients had not yet come back. A robot contingent had picked them up an hour ago.

The space intercom rang. Colonel Freyt, Commander of the battleship *Ganymede*, appeared on the videoscreen. “Sir, we have a large vehicle on the screen. The sick patients are being returned. In addition we are being approached by a giant thing with grappling arms. It looks like a loading machine. Request instructions, sir.”

“Stand by. The Brain will contact us. I have requisitioned fresh water and provisions. A replenishment of the magazines before an engagement is an absolute necessity. You need rations for 500 men. Take everything you can scrounge. The Brain promised to fill our provisioning lists. Judging by the terrific precision of this Machine, we’ll be loaded up with everything that a large crew needs.”

Freyt made a wry face. In his eyes glinted a touch of revulsion. “But—synthetic food... not exactly my meat, as you might say, sir.”

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do—even if it’s this kind of Romans. You probably don’t have any idea of what Arkonide chemistry with the help of first class photosynthesis is capable of producing. Why should anybody prefer plant-eating beef cattle if such meat can be produced directly in a better and cleaner and more humanitarian way? Don’t kid yourself that you’re going to be stuffed with objectionable-looking food products on Arkon. This is the place of high living remember? They’ve been feeding themselves for thousands of years with the help of synthetic photosynthesis. So open your hatches and take charge of the loading robots.”

Freyt saluted. The screen went blank. 10 minutes later the robot escort contingent announced itself at airlock 28. Thora, Bell and the 6 other patients were delivered without comment.

Rhodan hurried below. Soon he was bending over the pale, slightly emaciated face of the young Arkonide woman. Thora lay in a piteously helpless condition but she breathed easily and regularly.

“Deep sleep,” confirmed Prof. Kaerner. “So the examination was negative. What now?”

Wordlessly, Rhodan picked up Thora’s light body in his arms. With equal silence he deposited her on a comfortable pneumatic couch in the ship’s clinic. Like the other women, she had been assigned a private room. Nearby slept Anne Sloane, Ishy Matsu and the girl, Betty Toufry.

A permanent medical watch was posted. If the highly endowed mutants were to unleash their forces, the ship could be destroyed.

“Take care of Thora,” said Perry in low and dispirited tones.

The toxicologist Tina Sarbowna surveyed him with a penetrating glance. “A few hours of rest would do you good,” said the raw-boned woman. “Do you have to make yourself a bundle of nerves? That won’t do anybody any good!”

“You’re right,” he answered absently. “Maybe I’ll grab a couple of winks...”

5 minutes later the loading machines arrived at the ground-level locks of the *Titan*. A hectic spurt of activity began. Tiffloor’s strident commands practically took over the P.A. system. He had been commandeered as the chief supplies officer.

Mountains of stores and goods of all kinds came on board. Spare parts, medical supplies, special spacesuits, fighting robots, ground vehicles and even antigrav fighter tanks followed. The *Titan* was stuffed full with tireless machines, as if they were being prepared to conquer a stellar empire. The ship’s chandlery and loading lasted 4 hours but meanwhile the Brain had not been heard from. Rhodan was by now impatient.

The *Ganymede* reported all clear and secure. And Freyt added: “They’ve brought me 200 uncanny gadgets on board—complete with operating instructions. Some kind of hover tanks that can float on forcefields about 3 feet off any terrain,

with build-in raygun armament. And with the set, I get 1500 fighter robots. Same things we ran into after your flight. Aside from that—all clear!”

Rhodan answered: “We’ve been promoted to full-fledged allies. I’m curious as to what the bottom line is going to look like. Stand by for further instructions. I expect to be getting some news shortly. That’s all.”

Rhodan cut off the connection just as the Robot Regent called. On the special screen of the ship-to-land intercom installation, the dizzying colour patterns returned. Shortly thereafter, the Central Computer Programmer Unit of the Brain appeared, housed beneath its transparent armourplated cupola.

Without any transition, the Automaton began to discuss the situation: “A cure for your sick crew members is not possible,” the voice droned from the loudspeakers. “The poison cannot be neutralized. Existing remedies do not work. We are not dealing with a vector-caused deterioration. Try on Mooff 6 to find further information. You will take off immediately. The hypertransition coördinates will be transmitted to you. The star, Mooff, lies at a distance of 36 light-years. Attention! Clarification:”

“I have directed that the planet should be destroyed because it is not within my power to subjugate psychically-endowed organic life to any suitable purpose. Your new data change the situation. You hereby receive full authority, whereby you may take action according to your own judgment. You may lift off—and send Adm. Ventron back, with reference to your command authority. The attack by the fleet has already begun.”

“That’s insane!” Rhodan yelled into the microphone.

“Purposeful according to previous postulates, less practical after your latest appearance. Give field reports on your progress. I require the complete subjugation of the Mooffs. Should you find that these intelligences are connected with the Aras, I leave it to your discretion what measures shall then be taken. You must hurry. That is all.”

“And my sick people!!!?” Rhodan shouted back.

“The sick crew members must be given up.”

The Brain cut off the connection. Not a word about the costly special ship’s outfitting. No word about the planetary data. Nothing had been said which would lighten Rhodan’s decision load.

“Man-oh-man” marvelled Everson, nonplussed. “That’s what I call fast reaction! Just as a rough estimate I’d say that for *me* to decide all that I’d need to hold about 20 reconnaissance and tactical briefings.!—”

“Flight program activated!” Tiff’s voice rang in the loudspeakers. He had taken over the controls of the master navigation computer.

The transition data arrived. This consisted of a datalink pulse-chain of 8 seconds duration, followed by a single bit blip. Data-line station III came through. A fully produced image of a planet appeared on a viewscreen, in full colour and 3 dimensions. It gleamed in a twinkling firmament.

“So there you have your planet data,” said Rhodan bitterly. “I’m afraid one day

that Thing is going to get to me! Everson, stand by for takeoff manoeuvre. You may lift the battle-ready status.”

Col. Freyt called again. He reported reception of the data.

Five minutes later the giant spaceport of Olp’-Duor was shaken by a hurricane-like shockwave. Although far removed, the big merchant ships began to tremble in their cradles. The *Titan* lifted off with super cautious minimum power. With exasperating slowness, the Colossus bored into the sky but the power released by its mighty propulsion engines was sufficient to invoke in the spaceport a sense of Armageddon.

Only when it had risen above 60 miles of altitude did the super-battleship open to full power and get under way.

One minute of Arkon standard time later, the *Ganymede* followed. She, too, was a monster, but in comparison to the *Titan* she seemed to be a gnome. Which did not alter the fact, however, that the sharp teeth of the *Ganymede*’s weapon system were sufficient to more than give an account of herself.

The anti-gravitation generators for neutralizing the planetary pull were shut off but internally a synthetic gravity field of 0.9 gravs was established, which was close to Earth conditions. The robot escort ships appeared again but this time held themselves at a respectful distance.

The transition data transmitted by the Brain provided for a hyperjump within the great Arkon System, which was an indication of the importance the Robot attached to this mission. Normally any commander took care not to produce a space rupture within range of the complex gravitation and force-lines of a star system.

In 10 minutes the two space giants reached the relative speed of light. The programming of the 5th-dimensional hypertransition computer was completed. When the spacers emerged from timeless hyperspace with its alien laws of nature, they were supposed to find themselves directly in front of a middle-sized, yellow sun, which had been entered into the catalogues as Mooff.

Rhodan closed his eyes against the incredible light maze of countless close-packed appearing suns. Star Cluster M-13 measured some 230 light-years in diameter yet it contained approximately 35,000 stars. Probably there were more than merely 35,000. It was an unbelievable magnificence of sparkling and shimmering orbs. The familiar star strip of the Milky Way had disappeared. Here there was no trace of the normal firmament that the seeking eye might have perceived while looking out into space from Earth. Cascades of light points flooded the viewscreens. Nowhere was galactonautical navigation more difficult than in this spherical group of stars. A clear perspective was just about impossible. Double stars, variables and others with variable occultation and other formations of the kind made constellations unrecognizable. Out here a hypertransition meant a blind plunge into the energy-primed wonderworks of Creation.

Before Rhodan gave the signal for the transition, and before the mighty hyperfield became a total screen against 4th-dimensional energies, he tried once more to

discern the target star. His eyes were painfully inadequate to the task. What would be taken for granted in the 66 open galaxy became here a sense-bewildering unreality. Against this background the Mooff star was simply not discernible. The only alternative was to rely on the complicated hypermathematics of a race whose home planet lay in the centre of Star Cluster M-13.

The two battleships disappeared into a phosphorescent pool of light. Their violent, mechanically precise entrance into hyperspace suspended the physical laws of the normal universe; but it also gave rise to a warpage of the curvature of the known dimensions.

The Robot Brain on Arkon III registered the transition. In the escort ships, their hyper-sensors rumbled. Seconds later they registered the space-rupture shock of the hyperjump manoeuvre. The two battleships had conquered a distance of 36 light-years in but a few moments.

The remote control circuits of the 3 robot ships switched over to deceleration mode. There was nothing more to escort.

4/ HELL PLANET

His Eminence, Vetron of the House of Tatstran, Admiral of the Greater Empire, Chief of Space Fleet Formation ZL-ARK-86, was among those few remaining younger Arkonides who still possessed a trace of the old energy that had once been taken for granted by the men of the Great Expansion Era. He nevertheless was fond of the simultan game and other decadent traditions, which had been customary not exclusively in the court of the Emperor. But otherwise he was by Arkonide standards an unusually severe man with sharp-cut features and a penetrating mind.

Vetron had acquired the transparent manner of undisguised self-discrimination. Of late a certain pleasure had been found in the Crystal World, in grinding one's inadequacy through the mill of ingenious irony in the most elegant and polished form.

Fleet Formation ZL-ARK-86 moved in converging orbits over the 6th planet of the star Mooff. Two hundred spaceships, ranging from small to medium-sized and a few heavy-class vessels, had materialized in the system and were prepared according to precise planning to open the attack very shortly.

The sun Mooff possessed only 7 planets. Number 6, the home of the amorphous, jellyfish-like monsters with their fair telepathic faculties and their essentially weaker traces of hypnotic suggestion, was a reddish glowing giant planet with a frightfully high-pressure methane-ammonia atmosphere. It was 90,000 miles in diameter with a gravitic field of 2.8 gravs.

It was cold on this world. Giant oceans of pure ammonia covered the surface. The sparse outcroppings of land could hardly be claimed to be mountains. Here the super-heavy gravity had worked its inevitable effect. Fierce hurricanes raged within this poisonous gas shell, in which chemical processes occurred that human beings could only duplicate in special laboratories. This was a planet of natural high-pressure chemistry, which also included super-cooling, or natural cryogenics.

The ordered attack had begun one hour ago, by Arkon standard time. To the unfeeling callous Robot on Arkon III, this giant world, of no practical use to humans anyway, served merely as an exercise and a warning.

The indigenous Mooffs, who were manifestly methane-ammonia breathers with pressure-compensating organs and a completely alien metabolism, were of no importance to the interests of the Empire. Nor was a subjugation of these intelligences, in the sense of a prolonged colonization development, suitable in

view of their parapsychic faculties. In spite of this, however, they had entered dangerously into the political affairs of the stellar empire. These were sufficient grounds for the Robot to set the destruction of this world in motion. It was hard and inhumanly conceived, absolutely unrighteous and unworthy of humanity—but the Robot Regent was not a member of humanity!

The attack, now more than an hour old, had begun with the arrival of the smaller fleet units in the upper atmospheric strata, where they opened up first with fire from their pulse-beamers. The sun-bright fingers of energy whipped with a thunder through the highly compressed gases until they fanned out over the surface areas and produced glowing seas.

First of all, Vetron intended to run a fleet manoeuvre using conventional energy-beam ordnance, whereby he had in mind testing the reaction efficiency and coordination of the individual commanders and their unit leaders at the same time.

Over the dense poisonous atmosphere of Mooff 6 hung destruction in the form of spherical spaceships, among which were 3 spacers of the 2500-foot diameter Empire Class. Vetron's non-robotic, living crews had been recruited from the Naats, who were colonial auxiliaries having 3 eyes. Their Arkonide commando hypno-schooling had been completed.

Suddenly in the midst of these manoeuvrings a tremendous hypertransition warp-wave was felt. Within dangerous proximity, 2 giant ships burst out of hyperspace and hurtled at top speed toward the slowly orbiting fleet formation. Before Vetron could recover from his surprise, there appeared on the viewscreen of his flagship the lean, hard-lined features of an alien. Least of all did Vetron like in this face the icy grey eyes under the high forehead. The stranger spoke perfect Arkonide without, a trace of accent.

"You have understood me correctly," the hard, cold tones rang from the speakers of the Empire Class battleship, "that was an order!" A deep cleft had appeared between the brows of the alien commander. "Cease firing, break orbit, assemble and disappear! Did you understand that?"

Vetron shouted, "I will order you annihilated, you barbarian! I—" Then Admiral Vetron gaped, suddenly struck dumb by the sight of the fiery tornado that broke from the broad side of the super-battleship.

Light-speed ribbons of energy, hot as a star and thick as giant propulsion jets, shot with a murderous lightning burst against the high-tension defence screens of a small robot-controlled cruiser of Vetron's fleet. The 300-foot diameter spherical ship vanished in a blinding white inferno of unleashed atomic fire. All that remained was an eddying ball of gas, which other nearby ships hastily sought to avoid.

"That was a warning, Vetron," the stranger called to him again. "Pull back at once. I have received full authority to interrupt your mission. Now take that fleet and get lost!"

10 seconds later, Vetron received confirmation from the robot brain. The

Automaton had only now made contact. The Arkonide gave the order for withdrawal—he considered himself beaten.

200 fleet units got under way and disappeared from their carefully calculated attack orbits. Vetron considered it beneath him to hail or communicate with the stranger who had appeared so suddenly in his midst.

Silently, the chief officers of both Earthships watched the departing fleet formation. The many small dots of light became a single tracking blip on the screens. Admiral Vetron adhered strictly to latest orders. Minutes later, he had submerged into the cosmic void.

Rhodan gave a slow whistle, shaking his head. “That boy shows a lot of respect for his elders,” he drawled, unamused. “Except that to him, Papa is a Machine! Something’s rotten in the Empire of the Arkonides.”

Capt. Brian signalled across to him from Com Central. All clear. The small Mooff System seemed practically deserted, as though it had never harboured in its planetary orbital paths a considerably large fleet of spacers.

Except that the surface of the red-glowing celestial orb #6 was still bubbling and boiling. The ordinary bombs that had been released, garden-variety fusion charges of 50 megatons, had been more or less wasted without much effect on this giant. The super gravity had already pulled back the earth masses torn up by the explosions. Within this canopy of high-pressured atmosphere, the mushroom clouds ordinarily produced by such spontaneous atomic reactions had been replaced by rather small cloud formations.

Glassy, congealing craters were left, whose initial glow was radiated away with exceptional rapidity. The energy weapons of the attacking spaceships had burned mighty canyons into the ground. The atmospheric analysers registered the presence of thick clouds of ammoniac gases rising from the seas where the ray-beams had struck.

“It’s a hell world!” exclaimed Everson, swallowing hard. He stared apprehensively at the super-battleship’s gallery of viewscreens.

For 8 minutes now the ship’s propulsion engines had been under full-power deceleration. In another 5 minutes the Nav Positronicon had swung them with a clinical exactness into the calculated orbit. The *Ganymede* followed at a distance of about 1200 miles. Final vernier adjustments were made in their orbital configurations before both ships settled into free-fall. The rumble of the bulging engines of the *Titan* died out. It became suddenly very quiet on board the mightiest ship that had ever crossed the galaxy.

Rhodan was observing the two para-psychically-gifted beings who were the only members of the so-called Mutant Corps, who had not fallen sick. Pucky sat motionlessly on his hindquarters and peered across at the viewscreens. The mouse-beaver’s crafty expression had changed. A trace of suppressed uneasiness was perceptible in his large brown eyes. Wuriu Sengu, powerful of physique and a bit rural in his habits, unconsciously fingered his wide weapons belt. He stared through the electronic windows of the ship, as though into some world of

uncorporeality.

All-clear signals were coming in from the various stations. The sick crewmembers were held quietly in check. Deep sleep therapy appeared to be the only sensible course at the moment.

Half an hour after locking into orbit, the mission briefings began between the leading scientists and officers of both battleships. Rhodan explained the plans in detail. Following the withdrawal of the semi-robotic Arkonide fleet the urgency had subsided, particularly since from here on no one could leave or approach the giant planet without being seen.

They were all there, the veterans of the bitterly-fought Honor engagement—all except for the oldest and most trusted ones, those with the greatest experience and the ones with the parapsychic faculties.

“No one can foresee all of the difficulties,” said Rhodan at the end of the lengthy briefing. “Freyt will remain behind in orbit with the *Ganymede*—to cover our backs.”

The tall colonel nodded a silent acknowledgement.

Dr. Hayward’s giant figure appeared in the background. Until now he had been working in the ship’s main laboratory. Heads turned around. It had been Hayward who had isolated the unknown poison. However, since then no counteracting antidote had been found.

Hayward answered the unspoken question. “Nothing! Obtaining the specifics for argono-hexylamin is a small impossibility in itself. One thing we’ve found, though, is that the sensitive nerve cells of the patients just can’t last much longer. Also, the Argonin attacks the blood-building marrow. All of our blood-slides really look bad. The latest on the hyper-euphoria situation in general is that within 3 or 4 weeks at the most we’ll be seeing symptoms of a very unusual form of leukaemia. Haggard’s serum will probably remain ineffective.”

Hayward sat down on the edge of a mess table. A deep silence prevailed in the large room.

“Nothing like a reassuring report,” said Rhodan in bitter irony. “There just has to be some way to counteract this poison or whatever it is!”

“If there is a way,” answered Tina Sarbowna, “we simply don’t know what it is. I’d estimate that it would take 3 or 4 years of research...”

Rhodan turned away in resignation; it was senseless to continue a discussion of this subject. And then he took up another topic: “I want you, in no uncertain terms, to make it perfectly clear to your people that we are going up against a form of life that has parapsychic capabilities. The Mooff race will never be able to produce an ordinary propeller, much less spaceships. But that doesn’t detract from the unquestionably obvious intelligence. These beings live in the atmospheric seas of an icy, high-pressure world. Their natural means of inter-communication is telepathy. In addition they possess suggestive powers but these are only slightly noticeable to humans. Nevertheless we have experienced that a mental union of a number of Mooffs together can go so far as to force a healthy man against his will.

So you'll have to issue general instructions to all attack commandos that there can be no venturing from the ship in groups smaller than 5 men at a time. If any member of a group is seen to be under any hypnotic control, his companions will have to take care of him and be on the alert immediately. In all cases give your people orders to shoot. Just keep in mind that we're confronted with an inhuman and apparently diabolical race. Remember the harmful effects they had during our last encounter with them. Don't hold your fire a second longer than necessary."

"You're overlooking the main point," interrupted Certch.

"And what is your version of that?" asked Rhodan.

"On two different levels. Mathematicians apparently have a different perspective. First of all we have to find these monsters before we can undertake any action. Once we have discovered them, however, the question remains, do they know anything about the Medical Masters of the galaxy, who in the final analysis are responsible for the poisoning of the crew. I'd like to advise you not to give too much weight to the Mooffs' parapsychic faculties. We will find in them a bitter enemy, a truly inhuman enemy I venture to say. They will instinctively hate anything that is not in harmony with their scheme of existence. A natural reaction! So concern yourselves from the start with these Aras people. Only they can cure our sick crew members."

"The path leads through the Mooffs!" cried Pucky shrilly and excitedly. His short little arms went into a blur of gesticulation. "Only through the Mooffs! And I'll match any hundred of them at a time!"

"There are probably millions of them," said Dr. Certch, holding to his opinion. "Leave them alone. Our computations show with great certainty that a support base of the Aras exists on this world. They are the people in the background of all this."

Rhodan declined further pursuit of the subject. The facts were known and had been considered long since. He had no thought of subjugating the jellyfish monsters, in the robot brain's sense of the word. He was indifferent to the galactic colonial policies of the Empire. On the other hand he felt that the road to a probably existing stronghold of the galactic Medical Masters could only be found through these inhuman creatures.

He finally broke up the meeting.

Col. Freyt returned in a commuter craft to his *Ganymede*. On board the giant *Titan* the hectic activity began for the attack preparations. Robot commandos were preprogrammed. The new hover tanks from the manufacturing centres of Arkon II were serviced for operation. They were to replace the regulation 'shift-craft' because these powerful vehicles offered much better possibilities. Their robotic equipment was easily adaptable to the present heavy gravity of 2.8 gravs and their armaments would have been capable of wiping out a conventional army of the Earth.

700 highly specialized crewmen, including those who were not to leave the ship, were equipped with Arkonide combat spacesuits. Rescue units in high-

pressure armourplated spacesuits stood by with antigrav flight equipment.

8 hours after the arrival in the Mooff System, a brilliant glow of light flashed from the super-battleship's navigation forcefield tubes. In a fast-dropping course it followed the swiftly increasing tug of gravitation. With a muffled roaring of the repulsion field projectors, the *Titan* hurtled into the upper regions of an atmosphere whose poisonous gases alone could kill a man instantly.

Then came the extreme high pressures at the bottom of this ocean of super-dense suffocating vapours. It was a hell world—too big, too heavy and too alien to ever serve as an effective base for an oxygen-breathing race.

On this basis it seemed to be almost a foregone conclusion that the robot brain decided on a total destruction of Mooff 6. But only *almost...!* For here, lived creatures whose outward repulsive appearance could not detract from the fact that they were endowed with a mind and intelligence.

Commanders with the stature of a Perry Rhodan could not avoid a certain bout with conscience, whenever they were forced to land on such worlds as this. The absolutely inhuman and alien nature of the enemy swayed one's very reason, which by a logical consequence seemed to dictate that no human sentiment should be allowed to enter. In the depths of this anxiety, Rhodan recognized that the problem had to remain practically without a solution. He had seen too often how insuperable the purely mental weapons could be. His counter-weapons against the parapsychic characteristics of the Mooffs, practically all of the mutants, had been knocked out. For the first time in the history of the New Power, humans were almost defenceless before supernaturally endowed intelligent-beings who had already demonstrated, on the planet of Zalit, how cruel and alien-thinking they were by nature.

So Rhodan was obliged to go a step further and remove the concept of cruelty from this particular chain of reasoning. Probably no word in the human vocabulary could be found that would fully assess the situation.

Pucky, the one remaining creature who was possessed of outstanding telepathic abilities, listened with his eyes closed. The jellyfish-like Mooffs had been able to develop their intelligence but the available backup data concerning this race had indicated unequivocally that buildings and other evidences of a highly developed technology were not to be expected. These entities had never been capable of manufacturing or fabricating a single item since they lacked the necessary physical requirements for this. The human hand, the most beautiful and practical tool of Nature, had never evolved among the Mooffs.

Increasingly bright-glowing gases built up compactly against the hurtling *Titan's* bow screens. Molecular compression was quickly developed here because of the natural air density. The automatic gravity neutralizers counteracted all traces of the increasing pull of weight on the *Titan*. The idling propulsion engines were required only for balancing and controlling the mass of the ship's hull. Overcoming the air-resistance was a task which only one of the 18 engines was able to handle.

“Triangulation negative,” reported Capt. Brian from the Com Central. “No technical tracking traceable, sir. No radio traffic. Nothing, The qualitative scanners also drew a blank. Only naturally evolved elements, no synthetics, no alloys...”

No muscle moved in Rhodan’s face. He gazed silently at the giant screens of the panoramic video gallery. Just now the super-battleship passed through a storm front of frightening turbulence. In the upper air strata of Mooff 6, demonic forces seemed to combat those traces of actual life forms which had slowly developed at the bottom of the atmospheric oceans.

“Sector P-3 explored, flying task course over search zone P-4,” babbled the computer confidently.

The *Titan* began its second circumnavigation of the planet but this time closer to the equatorial zone. Any recognizable surface areas were rendered in infra-red and electronic scan-tracings into relief maps, programmed accordingly, and were fed in the form of millions of impulses into a pressure die caster. Wide plastic strips glided from the steaming extruder of the high-precision cartographic automat. The 3-dimensional renderings of surface areas represented a tolerance of plus-or-minus 0.001%.

After the 12th trip around, the relief map of the Northern Hemisphere was completed.

10 minutes later, the first telepathic impulses were felt. It happened with such surprising swiftness, without warning or transition, that the mouse-beaver was badly shaken.

“It’s here...!” shrilled Pucky. His large eyes gleamed as though with an inner flame.

Rhodan hurried over to the furry creature, who was obviously disturbed. Small, rose-tinted hands grasped Rhodan’s arm.

“What is it?” queried the ‘seer’, Wuriu Sengu, excitedly. Tensely, he bent over the trembling mouse-beaver.

“Little one, speak!” whispered Rhodan imploringly. “What’s the matter?”

Behind them, Everson’s mighty figure went into a whirlwind of activity. His fingers shot across the console keys of the manual command computer. There was a muffled roaring in both forward engines in the ring-bulge, a deep thunder in the inertial-neutralizer chambers. In the fraction of a second, the *Titan* paused in its rapid flight. Rumbings resounded in the power sectors of the lower decks. Fine fingered filament bundles of highly concentrated quantum rays held the ship in a hovering mode. Humming auxiliary gyros reacted to the signals of the automatic stabilization circuits.

The men at the fire command centre of the great fighting ship started suddenly, finally concentrating their gaze on the small vidscreens of their target trackers. Nothing could be seen. Nowhere was there to be observed any circumstance or condition that could be construed as threatening or disturbing.

Maj. Chaney, commander of the ground force commandos, uttered a heavy

oath—in the same moment that Perry Rhodan went into a seeming trance.

Perry's telepathic training was being put to practical use for the first time. He opened all of his mental gates. The fallow centres of his brain became sensitive organs and scanners, which submitted willingly to the pulsing stream of, superimposed impulses. Pucky must be receiving it much more intensely. The *Titan* stood hovering in the turbulent wind. The impressions became stronger, until Rhodan could read in them a clear meaning.

Someone was calling! He cried out in utter distress and profound alarm, so penetrating and with such an intensity that the mouse-beaver began to whimper.

Don't land—stay where you are—don't land! Danger—don't land! They are waiting for you. Go back to where you came from! Danger—don't land!

Rhodan mumbled softly to himself. Dr. Certch cowered before the bent figure of the Commander. It was an unreal, thought-crushing situation. Always the same pattern of thoughts came through from the unknown senders. Suddenly the impulses were so strong that Rhodan swiftly threw in a mental shield of the will. Plagued by a piercing headache, he straightened up.

Only then did the shrill screaming register. Pucky lay on the deck in an agony of torture.

"Hayward, quick... somebody shouted sharply. The doctor was already there. Under the sharp hiss of the pressurized needle, Pucky's tissue absorbed the narcotic. Within a minute or so, the furry creature calmed down. Then he lay still after being placed in the pilot's seat.

Rhodan's face twisted in pain as he stared at Hayward's hands, his sorrowful eyes on the hypodermic. "Not for me—I'll stick it out. Get hold of Kaerner fast. Put a double watch on the Corps telepaths. If they wake up out of a deep sleep—" He interrupted himself, placing his face in both his hands.

Things quieted down in the giant Command Central of the super-battleship. Only the men at weapons consoles whispered hastily to each other. But there was nothing outside that one might have considered worth firing at.

"So there you have it," said Dr. Certch. "A surprise psychic attack, which by its overstrike would indicate that there's nothing down there but a bunch of nice, good friends. They're supposed to be warning us?"

"It sounded genuine. You could not hear it."

"As genuine as a politician's promise," said Certch. "But if we assume that the warning was given in all good faith, who transmitted it?"

"Certch, you may have a point. Well-meaning friends would not have blasted their parapsychic message at us with such a brutal mental intensity as to make a sensitive receiver like Pucky break under it. The well-intentioned telepath can recognize immediately when he has overloaded the receiver. So why didn't they stop after Pucky began to whimper?"

"Your argument is fairly convincing, Rhodan. But do you seriously believe that there are other telepathic beings down there besides those monsters? If so, why should they warn us? In case the unknown entities live in bitter enmity with the

Mooffs, then a warning to us would be probable. But that would leave the question as to how they acquired their knowledge of space-flight terminology. They did say we should not land, didn't they? Let's just stay with the concept, 'to land', for a moment. What would methane-ammonia breathers, without any technology, know about a spaceship landing? Isn't it much more probable that they haven't the slightest concept of it? So who sent out the telepathic message? Actual unknown friends?"

"And your deduction?" asked Rhodan.

"A trick, what else?! Somebody is afraid. There is only one conclusion. Land and nip this in the bud faster than the opposition can move!"

Moments later the program-input keys of the small computer calculator began to click. The robot psychologist also seemed to know something about natural psychology. Possibly the actions of inhuman creatures were fairly similar to those of a machine.

"Dr. Certch is right. What else could it be but a miserable trick?" asked Rhodan, agreeing with the diminutive doctor. Then he issued orders: "Everson, all weapon systems on standby—ready to fire! Chaney commandos, ready for launch! Brian, open data link to *Ganymede*. The cartographic work on the Southern Hemisphere should be continued from space. Start it at once. Freyt will send out remote-controlled atmospheric-analysis probes—only initiate matter-tracing stage A. I want to know if anything of an unnatural nature has been produced. There is still one little catch, Dr. Certch?"

This time, Rhodan grinned sarcastically. Dr. Certch shoved his giant spectacles back onto his nose. His outstretched index finger paused in midair.

"You have overlooked the fact that we are looking for the Aras. The message could have come from them. Or can you prove that these fellows are not telepathically endowed?"

Certch began to whistle in a high, false pitch. His bright little eyes twinkled. In that moment, the landing manoeuvre of the *Titan* began.

The Arkon steel monster pressed down through the thickening atmosphere. Far below the super giant waited other monsters. They were not as big but they were strong physically as well as in numbers!

In the scorching breath of the propulsion engines' exhaust streams, an entire mountain of ammonia salt began to vaporize. A raging storm tore at the extended weapon turrets of the heavy fighter ship. Landing pads of alarming dimensions sank into the yielding ground. The super-battleship was cloaked in gloom. The sun of Mooff revealed itself only as a pale disc behind the thick cloud layers.

Salts and pools of ammonia reacted under the resulting temperatures and prevailing outside pressures in a startling way. The available traces of nitrogen and hydrogen seemed to regard the *Titan* as a catalyst. In the enormous heat of the propulsion engines and under the prevailing air pressure they also began to react. Here were chemical processes which normally could not have been demonstrated in a laboratory.

The bell-shaped exhaust fires blasting from the *Titan* kindled a raging tornado. It was as though they had landed in the centre of the Nether Regions. Free and open space seemed infinitely removed. Freyt's radio communications fought their way through heavy static. They had arrived but did not quite know why they had thus tread upon the first doorstep to Hell.

700 men looked at each other in relative calm. The engineers in the power-control sector thanked their lucky stars that they had not been sent out into this high-pressure poison kitchen. The men of the ground force commandos checked and rechecked the flawlessly functioning microgenerators of the Arkonide suits. The scientists speculated what might happen to a man if these body protective screens should fail to work. Actually the speculation wasn't needed: they knew full well what this pressure, heavy gravity and poisonous gas could do.

In the interests of an unrestricted freedom of movement it was impossible to wear clumsy space armour for special operations under the Arkonide attack suits. The unwieldy additional gear could only have provided protection against poison gas and the pressure. With a gravitational pull of 2.8 gravs, it could be of little service.

Outside raged a hurricane. The wind velocity registered 280 miles per hour.

5/ A PARAPSYCHIC PHANTOM STRIKES

“How are they holding up?” asked Khrest.

By ‘they’ he meant the monsters, who had made their appearance after the landing. By the thousands, and perhaps by the tens of thousands, they made a stand, at a respectful distance, around the landed battleship.

They were much larger than remembered. About 7½ feet in height and 4½ feet wide, they sat ponderously, in their bell-shaped jellyfish forms on the ground. On top where one could assume the bodies ended, rounded heads with protruding knobby eyes emerged from the colourless sponge bodies, whose incredible elasticity was capable of absorbing abnormal hurricane winds by means of extreme deformation and flattening of form and face. They were so constituted by nature that they could present a narrow profile to the powerful winds, regardless which way they were cowering close to the ground.

It did not seem to be more than just cowering and yet certain unbelievably fast and scurried movements had been seen. Countless stubby appendages of locomotion projected from under the edges of the arched jellyfish bodies. The Mooffs did not appear to have a natural mechanism for grasping things. At least no one had been able to observe any yet.

Shortly after the landing, Pucky had awakened from his brief drugged sleep. Now the mouse-beaver hunched down in front of the viewscreens and lay in wait for the mental impulses of the non-human creatures.

They were natural telepaths, as Pucky had been able to determine once again. Normal human-like speech would have been impossible in the sound inferno of the eternal hurricanes. Nature had found a splendid solution.

For 10 minutes now, every man of the crew wore an Arkonide attack suit; but Rhodan had not yet given the order for launching out of the airlocks. He was waiting for something that he felt must happen as a matter of course.

When anybody came into the Command Central, he never came alone. After the telepathic attack, Rhodan had strengthened the individual commando units to at least 10 men. Each was to watch the other to see if he was acting normal.

Thus stood the *Titan* on its towering landing struts in the midst of a canyon-gutted plain. In the distance a low mountain emerged into the overcast sky. Whipped by the hurricane, a continuous rain of ammonia crystals beat against the high-tension defence screens of the ship. It looked as though some invisible

presence were creating a mighty firework display. On the windward side, they glimmered and lighteninged. The crystals then faded like dying embers while generating highly poisonous steam.

“Why don’t they attack?” asked Rhodan, speaking aloud to himself. His questioning gaze passed over the leading officers of the giant ship.

Everson sat at the magnifying controls of the infrared tracker. The bodies of the Mooffs developed a prominent heat echo, although in this super cooled cryogenic atmosphere they were practically living refrigerators. Nevertheless, they did possess bodily warmth. The infra-detectors were better than the purely optical ones, which were always getting clouded up by steaming vapours outside.

“Tactics, sir,” offered Everson restlessly. “They’ll need some time to assemble enough of their kind together. After all, they don’t have any airplanes.”

“Which wouldn’t have a chance in this hurricane,” said Tanner. He sat beside Julian Tiffloor at the master weapons firing console of the super-battleship. “When will we receive permission to open fire?” he added.

Rhodan turned around to glare at him. “There will be no firing here except in a clear case of self-defence,” he shouted. “Dammit, how many times do I have to tell you that?! Gentlemen, your space academy training does not provide for killing alien intelligences without any provocation! Just imagine that you have come here as uninvited guests. The right still lies on their side.”

“But only morally,” interjected Khrest. “My friend, how will you ever conquer an empire? How do you believe my forefathers ever founded a stellar empire?”

“That’s your history to justify,” Rhodan retorted. “I am a man of Terra. Now I’m going to say this just once more: Anybody shooting without cause will be standing in front of a ship’s court martial, facing me, within 10 minutes!”

The biologist, Jansuvan Orgter, interposed, “It’s life but it still isn’t human life!”

“It’s intelligent life,” insisted Rhodan sharply. “Only if, in spite of their high intelligence, they let themselves get carried away with a serious attack—then I’ll be justified before men and my own conscience if I strike back in self-defence. True intelligence should realize that unusual haste can also have unusual consequences. So just wait it out. Major Chaney!”

The commander of the ground force appeared on the telecom screen. Heavily armed men of the commando attack force crowded near him in the *Titan*’s large groundlock.

“Chaney,” if nothing has happened within exactly 15 minutes, move out in a fast foray. Take hover tanks and make use of the tractor beams. Capture at least 10 of these fantastically huge Mooffs. Aside from that, there’s hardly anything we can do. Only from them can we find out where the Aras stronghold is located. So, in 15 minutes—the countdown’s begun...”

Chaney confirmed quickly. In the backpacks of the Arkonide attack suits the micro-reactors hummed. Brief checks indicated the operational readiness of the field generators. In order to hold the effective gravity at a constant Earth-gravity

equivalent of one grav, 1.8 gravs of the prevailing planetary 2.8 gravs had to be neutralized. This meant a considerable drain of the energy reserves, which were needed for the protective screening against the high atmospheric pressure. Nevertheless, the reactor output was sufficient to maintain both the antigrav-neutralizers—and the defence screen projectors at high-level operation. But if one should be under heavy fire, the safety circuits would automatically switch all power into the defence screen generation. So it could easily happen that a man might suddenly feel the full weight of the local natural gravity. The mere thought of having to lie helplessly on the ground under an almost tripled body weight occasioned almost a physical pain.

Chaney looked at his watch: 5 minutes had passed already. The Mooffs still did not attack, although the infallible tracking computer was indicating thousands of them out there. They held themselves at a distance of a little over a mile beyond the energy screen limits.

Just then Pucky emitted a loud cry of warning. But the monsters had no intention of taking a single step closer to the ship in order to effect their attack.

“The thought impulses are growing quieter—they seem to flow into one another,” cried Pucky. “Watch out, they’re making a total bodily contact! If they think now, it will be 10,000 of them all in one direction! They are becoming one entity. Look out!”

“Tifflor—Tanner, stand by” shouted Rhodan to the officers at the fire console. “Dr. Garand, beef up the defence screens! I—”

Rhodan interrupted himself. An alien force, registered only in the consciousness, made itself felt. It began with a gentle tugging sensation at the back of the neck, then with a suddenly shooting pain along the scalp it struck the brain. Rhodan fought it with all the will power his parapsychic schooling had given him. Other men did the same, for there was no one on board the ship who had not had similar training.

But this was a Titanic storm flood that broke in upon every living and thinking being here. The thought-inundation happened in seconds. With each passing moment it increased many times over until the suggestive character of this force could not be denied. It was a grinding and shattering in the foundation of reason.

Marcus Everson was already groping his way toward the master controls. Tifflor and Tanner rose up abruptly from their swivel seats in front of the fire control board. Rhodan was only aware of the horrible pulling at his brain. The Mooffs were about to cripple the entire crew at one blow.

“Pucky!” he rasped despairingly. He staggered forward with all his forces of will concentrated on the fire control board. He tried to screen his mind, to neutralize the mental influence, to see this psychic power as something ineffective and superfluous.

Only the mouse-beaver, who this time was prepared, did not seem to be suffering. Rhodan saw something rush past him. He saw the furry creature suddenly pop up at the fire control board. The fire computer had long since been

programmed for the most variegated target areas. Until now, no weapons had been fired, but now it must be done or all would be lost. Everson reached for the master switch for the individual controls, which could deactivate all auxiliary stations.

“Fire, Pucky, fire!” shouted Rhodan. Every step became torture. Something alien sought to hinder them. “Fire!”

Pucky’s soft little paws became the extension of Perry’s will. Tiny fingers played with forces which lay beyond the powers of comprehension. The green, blue and red buttons were depressed into their slots and then hell exploded.

The light calibre impulse cannons of the *Titan* opened fire. Heavy to heaviest units followed. Thin energy beams a foot in diameter up to the mammoth atomic streams from the polarizers roared through the defence screens of the weapon tubes.

Two seconds after opening fire from all batteries, the parapsychic phantom was gone. Then came the unexpected shock of mental relief. Everson jerked back from the controls. Tifflor and Tanner threw themselves across the fire control board. Rhodan was plagued again with a painful headache.

“Abnormal attack on unprotected nerve channels, which were too quickly activated,” said the psychologists.

The *Titan*’s gun turrets had spewed calamity and destruction forth for only two seconds. Now they were silent again. There was merely an afterglow in the field muzzles of the thermally operated impulse cannons. Outside, beyond the bell-shaped defence screen, a circular volcano had been formed. The circle was about one mile across, sheltering in its centre the undamaged *Titan*. No more Mooffs were detected. Their presence could not be traced. Their faint heat radiations had been damped out.

“Out of here!” shouted Rhodan. Red pinwheels of fire whirled before his eyes. “Lift off and set down about a dozen miles away—in front of the mountain. Do it!” His head sank down against the instrument panel.

Pucky sent out reassuring and pain-relieving impulses. The crewmen operated swiftly and confidently now. All that was left of their pain was a slight skull pressure.

The mile-thick mountain of Arkon steel roared upward from the ground. At only 300 feet of altitude the ship moved at minimum speed and left the zone of destruction behind.

“This is Prof. Kaerner,” came a call over the ship’s wireless P.A. “The patients are restless. They seem to sense the enemy’s presence in their unconscious minds. Are you going to continue the attack on Mooff 6?”

“Yes, why do you ask?” said Rhodan.

“Then I’ll be forced to strap them in; and as for the mutants, I’m going to have to put them in deep anaesthesia, and I’m talking about total incapacitation, along the lines of curare. Otherwise I can guarantee nothing. Do you agree? The highly sensitive nerve centres of the mutants showed reaction during the attack, in spite of deep sleep. It has to be.”

“You’re the doctor. Put it into effect.”

The *Titan* set out again immediately, this time close to the front of the mile-high mountain, whose highest crest was still towered over by the giant ship.

Capt. Brian appeared on the video-com. He was looking in helpless astonishment into his optical tracker. “They’re out there again!” he cried. “Sir, the monsters were waiting for us!”

6/ THE MUSICAL MONSTERS

“If those are Mooffs,” said Marcus Everson, “I’ll cat my helmet!”

A man in Engineering Station 3 began to scream. The muffled roar of a portable impulse beamer tortured the microphone and speaker of the communicator installation. The man became visible on the automatically focussing videoscreen. He wore an Arkonide protection suit but was not able to turn on his body defence screen. Something writhingly alive, grey, colourless and apparently remorseless, had embraced the engineer. It appeared that the unknown Thing’s chief aim in life was to suck the body of its victim into itself. It carried no weapons but made use of something that could pass for one. Its strengths, both physical and mental, were inhuman. The prehensile arms quivering forth out of the body were wrapped around the helpless man with breathtaking power. At the same time something happened that caused Pucky to react with a lightning swiftness and attack.

The furry fellow, who was gifted with the ability of teleportation, disappeared from the Command Central in a fluorescent shimmering of light. Almost in the same moment, Pucky materialized in the engineering control station. Wavering flickers of heat generated from indiscriminate ray-gunning by a panicked technician, attacked his soft fur. Pucky’s shrill cry was lost in the rising thunder of other ray weapons. Suddenly, Hell broke loose in the ship.

Panic calls emerged from more than 20 stations. Monsters of the same description were appearing but these were no Mooffs. Never before had human eyes beheld such creatures. They had appeared so suddenly that the 3-foot thick walls of the battleship might as well have been veils of mist through which one could pass in a single step.

Pucky still saw the pulsating Thing in front of him. Drawing hastily back into a protected corner, the mouse-beaver gathered all of his telekinetic forces together and put them to use.

The unconscious engineer was torn from the cloying tentacles by an invisible force. The sightless Thing turned around. Growing pseudo pods reached out toward the mouse-beaver, who in this decisive moment discovered how the monsters could appear so suddenly. It had become quiet in the control station. Pucky realized, to his surprise, that it required no great effort to subdue the creature. With a cry, it glided up from the deck until it slammed against the vaulted steel ceiling bulkhead.

Behind Pucky, a hatch slid open. Two men of the attack commandos stormed in with activated defence screens. Again and again, Pucky's powers succeeded in throwing the strange-sounding creature against the ceiling. When he finally let go, it fell to the deck.

"Careful!" cried Pucky in his high-pitched voice.

The strange creature, flattened out like a cookie tin, suddenly swelled itself into a globular shape, out of which two thin, extremely elastic tentacles extended. It had not even been injured yet.

Sgt. O'Keefe held his ground. He took a wide-legged stand in the middle of the control station. The thumb wheel adjustment on his gun muzzle stood at intensity level 6. He did not pull the trigger until the incomprehensible monster was within 6 feet of him.

A wide-fanning ray of energy streamed from the barrel. The inflated ball was encompassed by it. O'Keefe still stood on the same spot as the globe, now 18 feet in diameter, which began to distort to the accompaniment of high, melodic tones. In the midst of the raygun discharge, the Thing attempted to depart in the same way it had arrived. O'Keefe shot a second time. Only a small part of the Thing disappeared. The rest of it remained. Nothing else happened to it.

The automatic air-conditioning system began to sound its alarm. The heat in Engineering Control Station 3 had exceeded the allowable tolerance level. O'Keefe quickly withdrew toward the hatch under protection of his energy shield. Smouldering vapours arose from the destroyed Something that lay on the deck. The attacked engineer saw himself suddenly surrounded by a shimmering forcefield, which held off the deadly heat. At the last moment, Pucky had managed to turn on the suit's projector.

"Beat it!" yelled O'Keefe to the furry mutant.

In the same moment, Pucky sensed Rhodan's mental call. He was in an emergency. A swift teleport jump brought Pucky out of the fiery breath of the super-heated air.

When he materialized in the *Titan's* giant Command Centre, the defence screen of his small custom suit began operating. Two monsters similar to the first one had thrown themselves on Everson and Janus van Orgter. The biologist's forcefield was on. Everson was not yet protected. The physical powers of the man failed miserably in the grip of the monstrosity.

Pucky heard Rhodan's bellowing. Cursed by helplessness, the men stood with ready weapons before the swirling masses of colourless bodies, among which only here and there the limbs of their victims projected.

Bright lightning flashed from Van Orgter's shield. The monster came into repeated contact with it and yet was not killed by it. Everson was essentially worse off. His breathing had become almost inaudible. As Pucky appeared, Rhodan was dropping his ray gun to attack the sponge-like mountain of flesh with his commando knife.

"Get back!" screamed Pucky.

Rhodan was barely able to dodge away before the weird creature was yanked upward by telekinetic forces. The half-conscious Everson fell from 6 feet of height and lay crumpled on the deck. Glowing ray beams destroyed the Thing that clung to the ceiling.

That was the moment in which Van Orgter became invisible! They heard his despairing cry in the radio communications speakers. There, where he had been in the grip of the monster, a bright nebulous form was seen, which suddenly attenuated. The biologist had vanished from the Command Central.

In the same moment, the *Titan's* guns began to go into action. Tiffloor and Tanner had come to realize what was going on. Pucky's short cries of warning had been understood.

These rubbery monsters must be teleporters; creatures that could transport their physical bodies a certain distance by means of psychic forces. Only in this light could their sudden appearances and disappearances be explained.

Above in the tracking centre, Brian began to yell. Rhodan understood. With a side blow of his hand he disconnected the automatic fire control. The muffled roaring in the *Titan's* weapon turrets was silenced.

"Sir!" cried Tiffloor, horrified, as he saw his panel lights fade. "Sir!"

"Cease fire! Van Ortger has landed outside. The beast took him with it," shouted Rhodan over the ship's P.A. "Chaney, launch a robot commando unit. Van Ortger is just 1500 feet away from the ship. Let the robots rescue him. I want all fighting machines turned out. Let them put everything under fire that doesn't look like a man. These monsters are very weak teleporters. They have to be close to the ship before they can risk a jump. Don't let the dumb things get through our energy screens."

"They don't react to it!" came a voice from the ship's energy control. "They teleport through the screen, then materialize inside the bell zone. From there they make a second jump."

"So get them inside the zone. Individual firing mode—every one take a target. Tiffloor, switch over to manual. Get off the heavy ordnance or we'll all be killed!"

Ready fighting robots began to march. Janus van Ortger, who felt as though he were in the centre of Hell, noticed the opening groundlocks. Silvery glistening Giants with mighty weapon arms and insensitive mechanical bodies Boated effortlessly to the ground. They were still far away, much too far, from Van Orgter's point of view.

The hurricane howled all around him. As the pain of rematerialising began to subside and he started to stir, a waking movement occurred also in the rubbery mass of the monster, which had spread out over him like a pancake. Janus struck it with his knees but the Thing hardly moved. He pressed his fists upward and broke out in sweat as the automatic control of his suit switched all available energy reserves into the defence screen. With a muffled groan, the biologist gave up. The full weight of 2.8 gravs leapt at him like a beast of prey.

The lightning from his screen continued heavier. His microreactor worked at

capacity to eliminate the contact-seeking obstacle. The monster, however, showed little reaction to the normally deadly energies of the defence screen. Weakly pulsing, apparently utterly exhausted, it covered the man's body with a thin, unbelievably tough membrane. Then Janus van Orgter perceived that the fighting robots would arrive too late.

The thick atmosphere of the planet Mooff 6 seemed to be a good sound conductor. He heard the howling of the storm and noticed also a melodic singing note inside the convulsive body of the monster. It was as though it were struggling to gather new reserves of power. Janus felt that he was smothering. By this time the heavy gravity was pulling him so heavily to the ground that his oxygen-starved lungs were about to cease functioning.

"I'm gone!" he rattled over the radio com. Rhodan's calls only reached his ear but not his consciousness. The Thing on top of him had ceased to move.

Janus was considering that it would have been better to shoot when something happened in the strange substance of the creature. Suddenly the flat pancake of a Thing pulled itself together. It was as though some invisible force were attacking it. With a cry, the Thing rose up and contorted itself into a ball, which immediately exploded in a blinding flash of light. The heavy pressure disappeared from Orgter's lungs. All of a sudden he could breathe again, freely and unencumbered. His angrily humming energy reactor returned to its normal sound of operation.

Other monsters, which had just newly appeared, also exploded. It seemed as though an unknown ally had come into the fray. Van Ortger staggered up, only to be thrown about and whirled across the ground by the next hurricane blast. The mighty defence screen of the *Titan* came threateningly near. Ortger shouted. Released from the anchorage provided by the monster, he became like a limp leaf in the midst of the storm.

He heard the *Titan* re-open its firing. Thundering energy beams fanned out above him and away. In the distance, glowing craters came into being. For a moment, Ortger found an anchorage behind a drifting dune of coagulated ammonia crystals. But as the crystals came in contact with his flashing protection screen, they began to react immediately. Poisonous steam was generated directly before his eyes. After a few seconds he was whirled through the dune and hurled closer to the great bell of energy surrounding the *Titan*.

Far behind the screen, shadowy figures raced over the rough ground. The robots kept getting delayed because new monsters continued to appear inside the energy bell. They followed their programming, which commanded them first of all to fire upon any non-human targets.

Janus van Ortger saw the end coming near. Before him the glowing wall of fire reached to the sky...

* * * *

Maj. Chaney was letting it rip! After 'The Turtle', a mighty hover tank from the war arsenals of the planet Arkon, had glided out of the groundlock to the ground, he had gotten under way without any thought to his surroundings.

The broad caterpillar treads of the vehicle were idle. The 'Turtle' hung suspended in the energetic repulsion shock field, which held it continuously one and a half to two-feet off the ground. In this manner, enormous velocities were attainable.

Chaney also did not concern himself with the monsters that were popping up everywhere, because the massed fighter robots from the groundlocks were now bringing their fire to bear on them. Only very few of the creatures now were succeeding in taking a second teleport jump, after crossing over the main energy barrier. They had a range of about half a mile, which the men of the Mutant Corps would have considered to be an extremely limited capacity.

For the able-bodied crewmen on board the battleship, however, it was plenty. But from here on, since they were prepared for the abrupt appearance of the rubbery creatures, there were no more abductions. There was always somebody there to notice the shimmering of a materialization in time. Then the rayguns would roar before the uninvited interlopers had a chance to operate. A hard, defensive battle raged in all rooms of the fighting ship.

Within the past few minutes the Things had been called the 'Opera Singers'. Somebody had expressed the name just once and already it had become a part of the men's hard-bitten vocabulary. The musical sound effects associated with the creatures had given rise to this designation.

The people on board ship had organized themselves into 10-man troops. As long as Orgter hadn't been rescued yet, there could be no thought of a takeoff. Therefore it was necessary to wait out the success or lack of success of the ground force commandos.

Chaney and his 10 men knew that they actually should not have risked leaving the protection of the ship's screens. If a monster were to jump directly into their vehicle, they were as good as lost. It would not be possible to use the thermal ray weapons in such a restricted space. It would mean certain destruction of the tank.

The creatures showed no reaction whatsoever to the usually unfailing disintegrators. The tissue structure of their bodies had to have an extremely unusual molecular arrangement. Until now they had responded only to the heaviest and most dangerous of weapons, the heat concentration of the thermo-weapons. These seemed to be too much even for these alien organisms—if they were organisms in that sense of the word!

So the men of the tank crew lay in wait for every shadow. If anything stirred in the terrain, the revolving weapon turret jerked around. They shot at everything that moved out there in the semi-darkness. Two fighter robots fell victim to nervous firing.

Chaney swore in every key because Orgter's body absolutely could not be discerned with the optical tracer. Only the infrared tracer invoked a magic heat-

echo on the screen. Accordingly, Chaney drove the tank through the terrain. His eyes were filled with sweat. Everyone on board the vehicle had been forced to avoid using their protection screens because the close contact between them would have resulted in self-destruction.

“He’s drifting off!” yelled the Major into his microphone. “Could you spread the screen forward 5 or 6 hundred feet?”

Rhodan’s face bung suspended in a small vid-screen. He only nodded. Seconds later, engineers in the power control centre operated their switches. The giant defence screen began to wander.

Outside, far ahead, shapeless creatures took flight. Naturally the Mooffs were out there too, although they had avoided a direct attack this time. So they had sent other creatures ahead of them, beings which certainly were under their hypnotic control.

“Hold up two seconds!” Rhodan’s voice roared in the speaker.

Chaney pulled back the step-up switch of the small radiation propulsion unit. As a result of the heavy atmospheric resistance, the vehicle stopped on the spot.

One of the crewmen groaned as fire burst from the giant curved hull of the battleship.

A monstrous cyclone of fire blasted over and beyond ‘The Turtle’. A glaring explosion of light struck the men’s eyes from the view screens. Never before had they experienced how a single shot from the giant ship appeared from the outside.

Chaney got under way immediately thereafter. Orgter’s body clung at the time to the foot of a phosphorescent crystal pillar, which had not been there moments before. Liquefied matter had congealed into strange phantoms at these super-low temperatures. They approached with the hover tank, just as Orgter was whirled away again, but this time a tractor beam leapt from the projector muzzle. The biologist was plucked up and held in the midst of the storm. Only 150 feet away, the energy screen arched into the sky.

“Pull him in easy!” shouted Chaney through the turmoil. “What the devil! Who’s that shooting?! I—”

The roar of their own pulse-ray cannons took the words out of his mouth as 20 or more monsters appeared out of the swirling dusk. Blazing fingers of light shot out of nowhere. The marching robots fired so closely past the motionless tank that its defence screen spewed out crackling energy discharges.

Chaney saw 4 of the monsters get through the tank’s field. When they began to shimmer, he knew it was the beginning of a short teleport jump, which would bring them inside the tank. “Fire, O’Keefe!” he yelled, horrified.

In the next moment the 4 phantom creatures burst into glowing balls of fire. Chaney still stared with widened eyes as his men pulled the biologist into the airlock. The Major still remained silent as the hover tank raced at high speed toward the waiting *Titan*. They were raised up in the strong antigrav field of the groundlock. A last salvo of giant fire broke from the weapon turrets of the huge ship.

Chaney listened with half-deafened ears to the roaring and thundering. Rhodan appeared in the big materiel hangar. The fighter robots came floating up one after another. Outside a storm wind developed such as no one had ever experienced. Somewhere in the ship a thermo-beam gun roared. It must be still another monster that had penetrated inside.

As things quieted slightly and the propulsion engines began to rumble to takeoff power, Maj. Chaney asked tonelessly: "Always when it was at the worst out there and the situation seemed hopeless, some of those beasts would blow to smithereens. Why? Why precisely at the exact moment? Who took a hand in it? Pucky?" Chaney's vacant gaze found the face of the Commander.

"No!" retorted Rhodan. "Not Pucky. He had his hands full here pulling people out of those clinging messes!"

Chaney was startled. "No? But then—who actually did it? Those Things didn't explode by themselves! They were just about to knock us out completely."

"Now don't start mentioning the warning we got when we were landing here," retorted Rhodan, exhausted. "Just lay off, or the crew will put us through a wringer. Keep your mouth shut!"

Rhodan turned about abruptly. The *Titan* was already aloft in the turbulent air. The 'Opera Singers' were left behind.

With a vacant stare they looked up to the giant battleship which had now become unreachable.

On the other side of the weird mountain another plain extended itself. An ammoniac lake of considerable dimensions shimmered on the viewscreens.

Then a signal came from the *Ganymede*, still waiting in outer space. In the Southern Hemisphere of the planet, more than 50,000 miles removed from the present location of the *Titan*, something had been discovered that was not compatible with this poison kitchen.

At least it appeared improbable that the planet Mooff 6 could have produced first-class light steel with a molecular film surface.

The *Titan* leapt forward at a furious new pace. Behind the controls sat a man with burning, deeply sunken eyes.

In the sickbays of the ship the sick ones lay in moribund somnolence.

7/ THE LAST WARNING

One thing was certain: a complicated structure on Mooff 6 could neither have been built by the Mooffs themselves nor by the so-called 'Opera Singers'.

It was equally certain that these two dissimilar life forms lived in a form of symbiosis. The Mooffs ruled the phantom creatures. On the other hand, the Aras controlled the jellyfish beings. It was a ghastly triple team, a psychic deformity on an inhuman yet intellectually towering level.

Medics, chemists and biologists on board the *Titan* had been at work for some time. Remnants of the destroyed monsters that had been found were examined. They had no brains! They possessed absolutely nothing that could have given them the faculty of independent thought.

Nevertheless, they lived; nevertheless they could attack with astonishing consistency of purpose. It was only explainable in terms of a certain remote control, which was indisputably linked to the telepathic-hypnotic faculties of the highly intelligent Mooffs. The 'Opera Singers' themselves posed mystery upon mystery. Their tissue seemed not to be organic. Orgter could only shake his head. The chemists muttered something about 'animated synthetic matter or plastic substance related to alien and unknown valence bondage in a methane-ammonia high-pressure environment.'

On the *Titan's* viewscreens gleamed a giant blue-shimmering dome. It was broad and only slightly arched. With a diameter of almost two miles, it lay on a storm-whipped ocean of liquid ammonia. For 10 minutes now the *Titan* had been tracking it with its own equipment, after the *Ganymede*, lurking in orbit, had served as a relay station and transferred the data.

The spherical spacer pushed nearer at low speed. The energies of all power plants were channelled into the triple-stacked defence screens. Only 0.3% of available power was demanded by the operating gravity absorbers.

New messages came through. Colonel Freyt informed that all planetary space around the sun of Mooff was as if dead. Nowhere was there the slightest echo from any alien living form.

"Calculate a new orbit," Rhodan ordered. "You will remain stationary over the target area and be on the alert for radio messages."

Freyt confirmed. The *Titan's* outer space-tracking system soon indicated that the fighter ship moved out of its previous orbit with a minimum of propulsion

power.

“With that, those others down below have lost,” said Everson. Involuntarily he rubbed his black and blue marks and bruises that he had acquired from the monster’s ‘embrace.’

On board the ship reigned an unreal tension. It was abrasive and nerve crushing. This mighty steel dome below them could only be identified with a construction of the galactic Medical Masters. Pucky, whose extrasensory senses were wide open, announced the presence of countless ‘Opera Singers’, whose strange bodily impulses he was receiving quite flawlessly.

“They should have waited for the right moment,” said Dr. Certch. “If you make somebody aware of special faculties too soon, then in an emergency you can’t surprise them.”

Close under the slowly flying *Titan*, a mountain crest began to steam. It had come in contact with the triple-laminated defence screen. Tifflor and Tanner sat again at the fire command board. The reports from the sickbay sounded satisfactory. Since the ship had gotten under way, the restlessness of the patients had subsided. However, Prof. Kaerner had advised that the symptoms of physical deterioration could no longer be overlooked. Rhodan knew that it was high time.

The shores of the great ammoniac ocean were coming near. The distant horizon of the giant planet was not discernible. Long before the point of junction between land and sky, the dark impenetrability of seething poisonous gas clouds began. The night hemisphere of Mooff 6 was being approached. The yellow star of this world was blotted out by storm-shattered cloud banks. Here it was only unusually seldom that a ray of sunshine ever touched the surface.

“Distance from the dome is 150 miles,” announced Capt. Brian from the tracking station. “Careful, sir. The energy sensors indicate atomic power plants of high capacity. They could be well equipped with weapons down there and the diameter of that dome isn’t so small. All things being equal, I’d say their overall installation and equipment is a match for the *Titan*.”

These were the same thoughts and considerations, which Rhodan had harboured for about a half an hour. If there were a stronghold of the technologically highly advanced Aras on this inhospitable world, then it was also heavily armed.

Beyond the coast at a distance of about 30 miles from the dome, the super-battleship came to a halt. With humming antigravitators, it hung motionless in the air, in spite of an upcoming storm. The mathematical and geological departments were called upon to make studies of this phenomenon. For Rhodan it was inconceivable that the relatively flat steel disc should be buoyant and seaworthy in an ocean of ammonia. The mathematical and geographical departments were called upon to make studies of this phenomenon. The weight of the dome under the dominating gravity of the planet must be so considerable that in spite of its breadth it could hardly be buoyant. Naturally one could be deceived by the amount of buoyancy created by the unquestionably available hollow space inside.

But still, Rhodan couldn't accept the idea of a fortress dependent upon a fluid base.

In accordance with Arkonide equipment and furnishings planning, the *Titan* had at its disposal a complete research laboratory. Here was equipment that enabled one to determine at great distances what a specific land area consisted of. The analytical sensors revealed clearly that the mighty structure was surrounded by solid rock. Accordingly, it had been erected on an island and was surrounded by the corrosive ammoniac tides. Unquestionably the stronghold could not be conquered by land.

Again it was Dr. Certch whose calculations led to significant information. He stormed into the Command Centre. "Have you heard that swimming Mooffs have been detected?" he inquired, then dismissed his own question with a gesture of the hand. Naturally the Commander would have been advised via Pucky's super-ESP-tracking ability. "I'd be careful, sir—something doesn't look right. It gets me to thinking of the fact that these monsters suddenly withdrew from the action, right after they almost made a successful hypnotic attack on us. It's improbably that they're of a mind not to take any further advantage of their prodigious powers. If their employment of the half-synthetic creatures in this action completely misfires, we may be in for a catastrophic surprise!"

Rhodan confirmed his statement with a nod. Naturally it was strange that the jellyfish-creatures had become so quiet. On the other hand, they swam in tremendous numbers in the ammoniac ocean. Everson hunched his shoulders with a shudder when he thought of having to dive into this poisonous broth.

Janus van Orgter had also transferred his headquarters to the Command Centre. He appeared pale and weak but in his eyes lived a suppressed anger. He belonged to those men on board the *Titan* who regarded Rhodan's considerateness as very hazardous. At least 80% of the men were in favour of shooting every detectable Mooff as quickly as possible and with every means at their disposal.

"Energy pick-up," droned the tracking station over the speaker. "Echo signal at strength 12, now 14 jumping to 20 high. Very powerful machines and equipment starting up. Caution! Impulse echo damped out. We are being tracked, sensed and analysed. Super light-velocity technology, obviously with hyper-sensors. Over and out."

These words, spoken through the speaker into the Command Central, were audible in all sections of the ship. Personnel thumbs were never far removed from their protection screen switches. They were watching for another appearance of the 'Opera Singers', although the Medics had claimed that at this 6-mile altitude of the battleship they were beyond their attack range.

Rhodan's eyes sought the indicators of the forcefield generators. All power plants pumped their outputs at full capacity into the defence screens. It was unthinkable that they should be pierced by any possible, known type of energy beam. The magnifying circuits of the optical system brought the target object still closer. Individual sections of the steel dome appeared on the screens.

“They haven’t erected any protective energy dome yet,” said Rhodan to himself. “Why not? They have the technical knowledge, so maybe we have before us a different kind of people than we expected.”

Dr. Certch reacted suddenly. With a new suspicion, he looked at the Commander. “Sir, they are the galactic Medical Masters!”

“What makes you so sure of that?”

“That’s who they are,” said Pucky, joining in tonelessly. “I sense their thoughts from the dome. I know them well, from Honor. Chief, I don’t think I feel so good. Something disastrous is happening. Countless Mooffs are in front of the island. ‘Opera Singers’, too. If we land there—”

The mouse-beaver interrupted himself. Rhodan looked directly into his large eyes. Instinctively he stroked the little fellow’s soft fur at the nape of his neck.

“They are holding off,” declared Khrest. “They think they’ve got us where they want us!” His tall figure today was somewhat bowed. The deepest sorrow revealed itself in his old yet young-seeming face. “They know that we have come here because of them. Undoubtedly they have learned that we are the ones who destroyed the Mooffs that they sent to the planet Zalit and thus hindered an uprising against the Empire. They recognize us alone by the mighty *Titan*. Besides, they ought to know by now about our patients. The galaxy has ears, Perry! You can’t imagine just how big and sharp those ears are! News travels fast from star to star. These fellows know that we can’t just simply open fire on them if we ever want to obtain a cure for our sick people.”

“If this were an ordinary armoured fortress, it wouldn’t be in existence by now,” retorted Rhodan humourlessly. “So—here we hang in the air; we’ve found the enemy but we can’t attack. A fine situation, don’t you think?”

Certch was excited. “Possibly the Mooffs’ lack of activity can be attributed to this consideration. I may have an idea. Excuse me!” He rushed toward the bulkhead door of the Central.

At the same moment an agitated shout came from Brian in the tracking centre. His words were drowned out by a general shout that went up, as a gigantic soap bubble suddenly seemed to rise out of the ammoniac sea, above the dome structure below. At first it flared blue-white before it regulated itself to a mild shimmering. Then it held constant, as though it had always been there.

“So—an energy screen,” said Rhodan, little impressed. “You’d think a miracle had happened. Tiffloor put a trial shot into it, from 17. Give us a reading on the field strength.”

Weapons turret 17 mounted a medium-calibre thermo-beamer. The target coördinates had long since been fed in. Seconds after Rhodan’s order, a bellowing was heard from the outer curved shell of the *Titan*. Suddenly glowing atmospheric gas masses were ripped aside. The 15-foot diameter impulse stream was faster than the eye could follow.

The countless rooms of the super-battleship were visited by a muffled thundering. A light flamed ahead on the enemy’s energy screen. Titanic

discharges leapt into the sky. The bell-shaped defence canopy appeared suddenly to be striated with blinding cracks and fissures of light. In spite of this, the impinging thermo-energies were deflected at an angle, thundering in a cascading fountain, leaping into the clouds whose blood-red reflections cast a baleful glow across the dark sea.

“No effect,” said Brian laconically. “That thing can take more. The screen is probably as strong as ours. We’ll never get in by the normal route.”

Rhodan studied the viewscreens a few moments before commenting. “They want to just sit back and let us starve here in the air... Aha—they’re sending us greetings, also!”

The shot was faster than thought, a bulls-eye hit, which Rhodan calmly allowed to rage against his outer screens. Also in this case there was a deflection of the impacting forces. Residual energies were absorbed and fed to the countering defence-screening. The mighty *Titan* shook briefly.

“They don’t seem to have much at that,” muttered Perry in a monologue. “And I don’t want to throw in our super-calibre stuff. Naturally an armoured fortress of that size would have advantages over a spaceship because it doesn’t need any propulsion engines. And there’s always room for a reserve power plant or two on the ground. But I still think they’re not going to stand up against our big bumblebee... Pucky!”

The mouse-beaver collected himself, then hurried over to the pilot seat.

“Little one, do you think you’d dare go into the wasp’s nets? Maybe play a little game?”

Pucky’s stature grew visibly a half inch or so. His greatest passion was dangerous games. “Lead me to it, Chief! What will it be?”

“You are my only available teleporter. Our weapons master will give you a nice, shiny black ball. After you set the timer switch, down below, you will place it where the main generators are. Then we will see what that will do for our friends and their beautiful defence screen.”

Pucky revealed his incisor tooth. It would have made a hilarious impression if there hadn’t been such a strange glitter in his large brown eyes.

Minutes later, detailed orders were issued. The robot commandos, ready for action, marched into the awaiting antigrav elevators. Mammoth armoured tanks with frightful ray weapons started up. The men of the attack troop forces assembled.

In the Command Central, Rhodan turned to the mutant, Wuriu Sengu, who listened carefully to him. “I’m going to fly over the dome so that you can take a look inside. You will advise Pucky where he must materialize after making his teleport jump. I’d estimate that there’s a central reactor chamber down there that’s bigger than five *Titan* power plants. That’s where the little guy has to land.”

The ‘seer’ of the Mutant Corps nodded. His special gift was being able to optically penetrate solid objects and walls. Moments later the great fighter ship got under way.

It was then that Rhodan received his second warning but this time the impulses were not as strong as they had been prior to the first landing.

Remain there where you are. Danger! We cannot help you any more... Fly no further... turn around!

The sense of the message came clearly and unmistakably into Rhodan's brain. Pucky grasped it even better.

"Who are you?" returned the furry one quickly. "Answer, friend. Are you with us or—?"

We are of good intent, returned the answer. This is my last warning. You are incalcitrant against your own good! Fly away. You cannot overcome the fortress of the aliens.

"Who are you?"

"I call myself Trorth but that is unimportant. Go away! *Don't fly any closer. This is my last warning.*

Pucky asked more questions but no further telepathic answers came back.

"So we do have friends!" said Rhodan excitedly. "Pucky, what did it look like in the stranger's brain?"

The mouse-beaver waved his little arms helplessly. "No idea, Chief. Must be a real funny Something, that. But I didn't trace any hidden hate in the vibrations."

Rhodan gave it up. Whoever or whatever the unknown informant might be, there was nothing more he could do to change the situation.

The *Titan* glided along dangerously slow over the energy screen. The defence shields almost touched each other. The enemy took no action.

"The power station is deep down in the rock," reported Sengu. "Apparently a giant cave burned out with raybeams."

Rhodan needed to know no more. 30 minutes later, the mouse-beaver reported himself ready. He was wearing his custom-made attack suit. From its belt hung a metal ball the size of a man's head...

8/ ASSEMBLY FACTORY OF SYNTHETIC LIFE

Pucky took one more look around the hall-like room before he depressed the fuse ignition. Other than himself, no one was there. The mammoth machines functioned automatically.

Shortly thereafter, Pucky materialized on board the *Titan*. Exactly 20 seconds after the successful flight, the bomb began to make itself felt. A regulation atom bomb could not be employed for fear of destroying the entire dome installation. It would be sufficient if only the forcefield collapsed.

Within the fort's power and machinery installations, a 5th-dimensional gravity vortex field developed whose volume of energy increased in proportion to the amount of reaction-ready hyper-elements it was able to consume. In the impulse converters of the giant power station, a sufficiency of hyper-elements was at hand.

The alarm inside the dome came too late. It would have been too late even if Pucky had been observed during the fuse ignition. A muffled howling roar emerged from the rocky depths of the island. Fluorescing light spirals shot out of ventilating shafts and other openings. One reactor after the other automatically went out of service as the hyper-catalyzers of the impulse converters succumbed to the new excitation. There was no destruction in that sense of the word. As soon as the protected energy field, once generated, ran out of sustenance, it would die down by itself.

A mysterious rustling and whispering remained behind in the oxygen-bearing air of the dome. Also, heavy-duty thermal equipment was shutting down because of failing rotary converters. In the entire galaxy there was no atomic power machine that would not shut off automatically if its current demand dropped to zero. And the dome's defence screen represented 99% of the load.

"It was easy," declared Pucky disappointedly when after a weak flare-up the invulnerable seeming walls of the forcefield collapsed.

Rhodan did not wait a second longer than necessary. The super-battleship moved forward. In hardly a second it closed the distance between the coast and the island fortress. Now everything still depended on knocking out the vast structure's heavy weapons fast enough so that the landing personnel would not be caught in any concentrated fire. The defence screen of an Arkonide battle suit could probably neutralize the fire of a hand-held weapon but never the powerful death beams of heavier guns.

With roaring propulsion engines and a complaining growl of inertial absorbers, the *Titan* came to a stop directly over the fortress. The gun emplacements of the southern side had long been located by the energy trackers and were programmed into the target computer.

Rhodan nodded wordlessly toward the fire control centre. Tiffleur and Tanner pressed all 10 fingers on the green keys of the disintegrators.

Only the muffled whine of the hyper-converter was heard. This was not the deafening thunder of the impulse cannons, whose sun-hot ray-bundles of death were not being employed in this action. Soundless, hardly discernible in the misty, turbulent atmosphere, the wave-bundles shot from the synchronized defence screens.

Down below, nothing seemed to happen.

“Look out!” shouted somebody over the intercom. Which was superfluous. Before anyone might have reacted to the warning, the blinding white heat-rays were there. The fortress had opened fire before the emplacements could be destroyed. Blazing atomic fire enveloped the motionlessly poised *Titan*. It was a strong, highly concentrated fire. It confirmed Rhodan’s theory concerning the tremendous firepower of a stationary fort.

A roaring sound pervaded the cabins of the giant ship. The compartments seemed to become swinging bells and for seconds it appeared that the defence screens were going to become unstable and collapse.

Rhodan’s thumbs depressed the plainly marked emergency power button. Even the reserve stations buried deep in the body of the great ship were being called into use in order to meet the abruptly skyrocketing energy demands of the defence screens. The defensive armament of the *Titan* had never before been challenged to this degree.

Rhodan saw his first officer Everson get thrown forward so hard by the ship’s wild gyrations that he was jerked by his carefully buckled safety straps.

Then it hit down below. It had only taken a fraction of a second. The last energy discharges crackled off the tri-laminated defence mantle of the *Titan*, just as precisely 22 emplacements in the fortress dome revealed yawning openings. They appeared in ghostly silence. First, the edges began to crumble, then they flattened, until the openings widened swiftly to clearly marked holes. No heat occurred nor was there any resultant glow. But something did occur that could only happen in this way on an exceptionally high-pressure planet.

In empty space, by now all kinds of articles would have been propelled out of those gaping holes. In this instance, however, there was no decompression explosion but a no-less-violent implosion caused by the high-pressured inflow of the poisonous atmosphere. Then came the brilliant flashes that the physicists on the *Titan* had expected. The oxygen in the 22 ruptured turrets had made an explosive mixture with the methane gas, which found good ignition on the still glowing elements of the heat-ray guns. Giant tongues of fire shot out of the gaping openings. This time, fragments did come flying out, which indicated that a

pressure balance had occurred. It also indicated, however, that the designers had not neglected to install heavy safety bulkheads and security locks. The gun emplacements might be completely destroyed—but not the other installations of the great dome.

Rhodan did not hesitate this time, either. Directly after the successful hits by the disintegrators, the thermal weapons of the battleship began to roar. The sea in front of the island was sprayed with a fanning fire of heat rays. The effective fire to secure the area for a personnel landing against the danger of the approaching Mooffs in the water developed into a continuous thunder. From here on, the *Titan* struck with all her terrible fangs.

The ship sank lower. At 3600 feet over the boiling and steaming ammoniac ocean, the spacer again remained stationary. This left it still out of range of teleportation by the uncanny creatures that had been given the grimly humorous name of ‘Opera Singers’.

Out of strategic planning developed the tactical basis for the attack. To some extent the classical straight-line tactics were followed, but in this case different and far more powerful weapons were employed. Rhodan was telepathically aware of Mooffs furtively retreating. They would never get through this wall of fire.

“Launch robots-security formation,” droned Rhodan’s voice over all speakers.

3000 fighting robots, self-thinking, self-guiding, floated in the protection of their antigrav fields out of the extended ship-locks. The robot-controlled tanks followed. They began to fire while still descending. The already programmed gun emplacement openings served as the immediate target areas, from which it was the first order of the day to clear out any ‘Opera Singers’.

Two minutes after setting down the 4-armed weapon robots, the men of the commando units followed, under Maj. Chaney’s command. Rhodan had reserved for himself an unrestricted mode of attack ‘at opportunity’. Out of the super battleship’s locks moved 400 men. They glided swiftly below, where the robots had already cleaned out the gun openings in a swift assault. Nothing was left there that the men could have considered dangerous.

“Everson, keep the ship at a safe altitude,” was Rhodan’s last command before he jumped from the lock.

The orders of individual officers rang in the crew’s earphones. The gun emplacement openings were stormed by various troops. Rhodan pushed ahead with Pucky to Lt. Tifflor. The 35 men of his command were in the act of disappearing headlong into the 150-foot wide emplacement hole. Special robots followed but so far there was no sign of resistance.

“Chief, I’ll have a look around,” said the mouse-beaver over the radio-com.

Rhodan signalled him with his hand. Pucky disappeared on his second teleporting foray.

It was a large, wide room, in which the weapons installations had all been destroyed. Two shots from the portable D-guns of the robots were sufficient to burst open the rear airlock bulkhead.

“Hold it!” was the only warning Rhodan could shout before a wild hurricane struck...

The high-pressure atmosphere of the giant planet shrieked into the rooms behind the gun emplacement. Anything not welded down went with it. Rhodan felt his grip loosen. His aching fingers uncurled and then he was gone. He was whirled across the floor with the other men. The tobogganing only slowed down when the pressure became equalized.

“Don’t use any heat weapons!” yelled Tifflor shrilly in the radio-com. “Explosion danger! We have a bad gas mixture here!”

Rhodan remained in the extensive chamber. The furnishings and equipment, obviously belonging to a large laboratory, had all been heavily demolished. Again there was no living form to be found. He sought a quiet corner from which to control the individual sorties. A deep roaring and thundering came near. The men of the special commando unit were taking the lead.

“No counter-fire, no resistance here,” reported Maj. Chaney. Rhodan could see his taut features in his portable vidcom set. “Push ahead in your sector. Keep contact with me and your neighbour units.”

The attack continued. It could not be stopped any more. If there were any Aras here, they must be hopelessly outclassed by human drive and vitality. Rhodan thought of an observation that Khrest had made. According to him, Man was the only creature in the galaxy who resembled in every detail the Arkonide conquerors of the old days.

“Singers!” came a shout into the earphones. “Lt. Hathome, Troop 16 here! We’ve broken into a large chamber that’s swarming with the plastic monsters. They’re attacking!”

“Pull back—bolt off the nearest passage. Garand, how are you doing with the ventilation?”

“The blowers are operating. Air analysis satisfactory. The methane-oxygen mixture in all contaminated chambers has been reduced to safety level,” reported the ship’s chief engineer.

Rhodan listened to the shrill whine of the racing turbo-blowers. These special pieces of apparatus could even handle the gas density of Mooff 6. The air analysis had been taken over by special robots.

Lt. Hathome, a veteran of the Honor engagement, ordered the senseless firing with the hand-held disintegrators to be stopped. The monsters showed no effects from it anyhow. As his men were at the point of a swift retreat, Rhodan set through the deciding command:

“All ground force commando units are clear to fire with thermo-weapons. Danger of explosion has been eliminated. We’re pumping in new air and are drawing off the dangerous mix. So let loose!”

Hathome threw himself behind a portable impulse-projector at the last moment, just in time to fire at an approaching monstrosity. It vaporized in the weapon’s flaming breath. Somewhere behind it, a man screamed, caught in the cloying grip

of one of the Singers. Scant moments later, Pucky appeared. From then on, the Thing had no further chance.

Through the general bellowing and shouting, the mouse-beaver's voice was heard. "Call me on the radio if anybody gets grabbed!" It was hellish turmoil. Every unit was on its own. The fighter robots standing outside found themselves engaged in a bitter defence battle against teleporting monsters, which the enemy had brought in by the thousands in anticipation of the landing.

This strategy took its toll. They didn't get into the fortress any more because first they faced the blockade of the fighting machines, and secondly they had to get through the fire curtain of the *Titan*.

Rhodan waited it out...

* * * *

It had been two hours by ship time since they had penetrated into the inner premises. Outwardly, the dome with all of its chambers and halls and circular corridors appeared to be intact. Inwardly, however, it was a heap of rubble.

Within the past minute, the first enemy contact had been made. A thin, humanoid creature had been discovered with a whitish complexion and a fragile physical structure. It was dead.

Rhodan bent over the grey, silent face with its staring eyes. "An Ara," he announced over his radio-com. "Like we found on Honor. Where are the others?"

"Behind that door," said Tifflor, who was exhausted. Behind the faintly shimmering protective screen of his suit, his face was a ghostly mask. "Sir, it's horrible! To your left there, that big gate-like door opens into a kind of big laboratory. A bunch of pieces of those monsters are lying around!"

"Pieces?" repeated Rhodan.

"Yes sir! The biologists are in there already. They say this must have been a major station for the production of synthetic life. Those kettles are still roiling and boiling!"

Rhodan hurried wordlessly into the other room. Horrified, he stopped in his tracks. The fully automatic installation was still operating. It was something like an automobile factory where separate parts are assembled at the end of a line. But here the parts had to do with pulsating, mysteriously synthetic life, which came out of a steaming machine at the end of the hall like living rubber hoses. That which came off the end of the conveyor belts lived—but it did not think.

The biologist, Janus van Orgter, was able to determine that undoubtedly these monstrosities could function only when guided by a strong will. Probably the galactic Medical Masters had been selling them as some sort of auxiliary power.

Rhodan handed out an order: "Tifflor, demolish the machines and conveyor belts. Everybody out of here, scientists included."

At the same moment they heard Pucky's cry for help. Everybody heard his

high-pitched voice in their earphones.

“I’m in the living quarters. Quick! Hurry! The Aras are getting away in a spaceship. It’s close to me. I—I can’t do anymore. I’m bushed. Please come!”

The noise of weapons and ventilating turbines was drowned in an ominous thunder. The new sound rose to a shrieking howl which, after reaching a powerful crescendo point, swiftly faded away. Rhodan was already in contact with the *Ganymede*. Freyt appeared on the portable screen.

“Alright, sir, I have them in the trackers. They won’t get far,” he said calmly. “Have you caught any of them down there?”

“I’m holding three Aras,” groaned Pucky. “They’re struggling. So come on!”

Rhodan broke off the connection with Freyt. While in free space a small ship appeared and a broadside from the *Ganymede* hurtled after the stupendously swift fugitive, Tifflor’s troop pressed forward again. The last partition was dissolved by disintegrators.

In a small room, Pucky stood in front of three long, thin entities. They hung from the supporting wall of the room as though they had been glued there. They wore sturdy spacesuits, which probably protected them from the heavy atmospheric pressure of the planet. Grasping human hands tore the helpless victims from the telekinetic constraint. A little later, Wuriu Sengu reported that no more Aras were to be seen anywhere.

It took another 5 hours for robot and human teams to complete a search through the dome. Meanwhile, the 3 captured Aras found themselves on board the *Titan* and in a hypno-hearing. Dr. Hayward led the examination.

When Rhodan came up, the conclusions were revealed. Doctors Hayward and Kaerner wore benumbed expressions on their faces. Rhodan paused in mid-stride. Slowly he groped for an Arkonide contour chair, which immediately accommodated itself to his body.

“Hopefully you’re not going to tell me that this hearing has been conducted with no results?” he inquired.

Prof. Kaerner cleared his throat. Small beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead. “It was a success, sir, but one that is negative for us, if I may say so. These beings have little capacity for psychic resistance. With the hypnotic probe we have dug into every last corner of their minds.”

“And—?”

“Negative for us, as I have said. This station was used to produce synthetic life. The fabricated monsters were being picked up regularly by the ships of the galactic Medical Masters. The local Aras hadn’t the slightest thing to do with the events on the planet Honor. They even don’t have the slightest suspicion that we have sick men on board. The testimony is completely trustworthy, when you consider that the Aras also have been split into a number of separate groups.”

Rhodan had buried his face in his hands. *In vain*—the thought hammered in his brain. *We’ve done it all in vain!*

Kaerner continued with concern in his voice. "Sir the undertaking here was a wrong step. We were working under false premises. The Aras living here knew us well but not as a result of the poisoning—it was only through the events on Zalit. They were the ones who brought the Mooffs there and ordered them to bring about a revolt through hypnotic influences of the Zalite ruling classes. Here there is no antidote available for our sick people."

Rhodan's hands sank loosely to his sides. His gaze drafted into far distances. "And now...?"

"One piece of testimony we have is of, significance, nonetheless, sir," put in Hayward with an angry glance at Kaerner. "The Aras possess so-called Control Worlds, from which commerce is carried on with other races. If we are ever to find the antidote, then it will be on a certain planet that the prisoners call Aralon. There is more or less a medical-pharmaceutical wholesale centre where all possible drugs and cures are in stock. In addition, a number of the Aras leaders are there. The prisoners are certain that we will find help... Just how is naturally another question."

"If I have to I'll get it out of them, you can depend on it!" said Rhodan hoarsely. "Lock the prisoners up and see that they're cared for. The dome station will be destroyed."

"The Mooffs?" queried Everson.

"Let them live as they are. How can it do any harm if the puppet masters have finally disappeared?"

"These monsters constitute a danger," growled Dr. Certch. "The plant deserves to be destroyed!"

Rhodan's face looked worn and haggard. "Leave the Mooffs their world. They are harmless. They will never emerge from their ammonia sump unless they are brought to it by criminal elements. Let them be as they wish. Dr. Certch, you should concern yourself, please, with the possible deliberations of the Robot Brain."

"You will go back to Arkon?" asked Dr. Certch, startled.

"Do you know, perhaps, where we may find this Ara-planet called Aralon?" Rhodan got up wearily as Pucky appeared in the Command Centre.

"Our friend called," he explained. "That fellow, Trorth. He wants to talk to us before we take off. We'll have to go down there, Chief, because he can't live in our atmosphere."

"Trorth...? Oh yes, I remember, Tifflor, Dr. Orgter, I'd like you to go along. Tiff, 10 men as guards—have them at the lock. I don't want to be surprised by any Mooffs."

"The devil take the beasts!" exclaimed Everson through his teeth. "Just keep an eye open, sir...!"

* * * *

They had floated down in their antigrav suits and then they almost panicked, pointing their guns swiftly ahead of them. The thermo-guns were about to fire. Only Pucky's shrill outcry prevented a catastrophe.

Trorth had come alone. Lonely and forsaken he rested on his multiple pseudopod feet on the crystalline ground. His jellyfish body rocked in the wind and the large knobby eyes in the middle of the rounded head were wide open.

7 feet high, 5 feet wide—so he stood before the men.

He had no weapons, even as it had always been.

Pucky uttered whimpering sounds. Under his energy shield his pink paws pressed against his big ears.

The weak, telepathic impulses came into Rhodan's brain: *Don't shoot again. You have shot enough and killed enough of us already. And why? My brothers cry. Did we not try to influence you to take off in your ship, using our total faculty, after you had landed in spite of our warning? But you went ahead and fired on us. It was terrifying. After that we did no more. Only once more I tried to call to you but you had already turned to the attack.*

We helped you where we could. Your friends were in peril. And so we destroyed the Unliving Ones with our unified faculty. They disappeared in bright fireballs.

"But your underhanded activity on Zalit. How am I supposed to understand that...?" asked Rhodan. "That was the main reason why we considered you Mooffs to be bitter enemies of the Empire"

The men's weapons had been lowered by now. Pucky translated the telepathic exchange for everyone. "Yes, I know," the Mooff answered.

The storm increased. Orgter was reminded of his experience after the landing, when he was blown across the ground.

We are ashamed, Trorth explained. "We can only ask for your understanding, because children do not have wisdom. I don't know if you have children; such as do not have wills of their own yet."

"Children?" asked Rhodan. "The Mooffs on Zalit—they were your children?"

They were misused by the Aras, who kidnapped them from us. They did not know what they were doing. I know there is no excuse for it. We have no aspirations to political power. When you came, we knew that you had a false impression of us. We have long since forgiven you. We are happy to be able to talk to beings from other stars. Yes, we know that there is an Empire, although we have never seen the stars. Many aliens have already landed here, until one day the Aras came and started breeding those creatures. They were our bitterest enemies. —So do you still wish to kill me?

The alien perceived the mental emanations of shock and self-reproach, which churned within the men's minds.

"I regret what happened," whispered Rhodan, "from the bottom of my heart."

The Mooff was graciously forgiving. *Forget it—forget everything that*

happened here. We all made mistakes—it was not possible for me to contact you sooner because you didn't believe me. We decided to continue to give you signs of our support until you grasped a correct understanding of our intentions. You still have need of help for I see in your unhappy minds that many of your brothers are ill. —Can we help you?

* * * *

Man and 'the Monster' separated two hours later, Rhodan and his companions inwardly crestfallen and pained by self-recriminations, the Mooffs filled with joyous expectations. 50 of the xenomorphs wanted to come on board the *Titan* in order to lend support to the Terrans in their search for a cure for the Hyper Euphoria. The telepathic and hypnotic faculties of the alien entities could be of incalculable help.

As soon as Rhodan came on board he gave an order to Dr. Garand. "Doctor, I want you to fit out some rooms in the ship. Convert them to high-pressure chambers with life-support conditions suitable for the Mooffs. Don't be so startled, I'm serious: please take care of the pressure rooms."

Outside the hurricane howled. Close by the ship the pliable bodies of the Mooffs swayed in rhythm to the sudden gusts of the turbulent storm.

Dr. Garand and his assistants watched the Peacelord stride away from them, his last words ringing in their ears: "Our friends are coming aboard as soon as conditions are ready for them. Do you understand? Our *friends*."

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE 'COSMIC DECOY' returns!

Julian Tifflor, chosen for a dangerous interstellar mission in #21, takes the stage front & centre in #37 as Perry picks him for a role in which he must pretend to turn traitor to Terrania and the principles of the New Power in order to attempt to save the lives of 700 of Rhodan's euphoria-afflicted men... and the life, which it is becoming increasingly clear, is most dear to him. Thora!

Prominently figuring in the events is the mighty mouse-beaver, Pucky.

While the Medical Masters of the Galaxy reveal they are not above Hitlerian tactics of experimenting on human beings to discover what makes them tick.

Action & reaction abound next time around in the alarm episode known as—

EPIDEMIC CENTER: ARALON

by

Clark Darlton