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HORN: GREEN

William Voltz

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IT'S ALL A MATTER OF TURNING OVER A 'NEW LEAF' FOR—

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PUCKY—The mousebeaver doesn't carrot-all for 'yellow journalism'

Reginald Bell—The Solar First Deputy learns about cosmic discretion

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Michael Freyt—Solar Marshal

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Vincent Aplied—Chief of an interstellar narcotics ring

Quartrox-Zuat—Emperor of Saastal, sister planet of Morg

... and the spaceships *Neptune, Error, Val 1/4/7* and *Cape Kennedy*

ALL SYSTEMS GREEN FOR GO-GO-GO ACTION!

PERRY RHODAN: Peacelord of the Universe

Series and characters created and directed by Karl-Herbert
Scheer and Walter Ernsting.

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PERRY RHODAN

HORN: GREEN

by William Voltz



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HORN: GREEN

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PROLOG

IN THE COURSE of the years the Earth has become a giant cargo-handling and shipping centre for interstellar trade goods and the Solar Imperium has emerged as a major commercial power.

However, for First Administrator Perry Rhodan and his colleagues the expansion of Terra's commercial relations has brought up new problems. There is strong competition from the Galactic Traders who are still fighting for their old monopolies, by fair means or foul.

The Springers conceive of a means of discrediting the Earth in galactic trade relationships, or of possibly eliminating Terra entirely as a competitor. Their plan involves the dissemination of Earthly alkaloids through the galaxy—that is, the spread of narcotics such as opium, which has a devastating effect on extraterrestrial organisms.

In spite of intensive efforts on the part of Solar Intelligence, so far it has not been possible to eliminate the interstellar narcotics ring in which unscrupulous Terrans are also active. For Rhodan's extraterrestrial politics this illegal operation is a very serious matter because after all, this poisonous commodity does have an Earthly origin!

The situation doesn't look very promising for humanity. An attack by the Akons has just been repulsed and it is feared that the inhabitants of the Blue System will undertake new action against the Earth.

At this time of high tensions an accidental caprice of fortune comes to Perry Rhodan's aid. The 'accidental' factor appears in the ungainly form of greenhorn John Edgar Pincer...

1/ A SUPER TENDERFOOT IN ERROR

WITH A SIGH, Mark Denniston sank into the thickly upholstered chair in front of Pincer's desk. Denniston was a powerful, energetic man in his mid-40s whose hands were like bear paws. However, at the moment not much of his usual vigour was in evidence.

He groaned aloud. "Chief, you can't ask me to do that! You know that I'd bring you a crate of coals from Hell, but that—no!"

Pincer regarded the slumped figure of the spaceman with a trace of appreciation. Even though his bushy brows knit together more severely, he gave Denniston a wink.

"Do you know what I like about you, Mark?" he asked. Inasmuch as Denniston didn't seem to care about pleasing anyone and maintained a stubborn silence, he continued. "You have such a nice way of criticizing my orders—and then finally accepting them."

Denniston pressed his giant hands together as though he wanted to crush something with them. "Listen, Chief," he said, making a new attempt to appeal his case, "I'm one of your freighter captains—I deliver fruit and produce to the Vega System for you or wherever else you want me to haul them. I've worked faithfully for the Intercosmic Fruit Company for a number of years, so what's my reward? You ask me to become a babysitter!"

Pincer's expression changed as though he'd just bitten into a sour pickle. "You're speaking of my son, Mark—John Edgar Pincer. That particular 'baby' happens to be the vice-president of the company."

Denniston made no comment but it could be seen from his face that he did not think much of vice-presidents, and particularly this one. He stared glumly at Pincer.

"The good lad has gotten himself married, Mark," continued Pincer, contributing further to Denniston's disturbed condition. "I've made a present of one of our smallest spaceships to him and his wife and he wants to use it for a honeymoon trip. Since our family has the habit of combining business with pleasure he's going to carry a cargo of Super Tenderleaf, which is to be delivered to the Vega planet of Ferrol."

For the first time the space veteran revealed a spark of interest. "Super Tenderleaf?" he asked. "What's that?"

Archibald Pincer, chairman of the board for IFC, gave him a disapproving look as though to say that he didn't think much of anybody who couldn't imagine what "Super Tenderleaf might be. In an appropriate tone of dignity he explained: "That happens to be our newest development of spinach seeds."

Denniston reddened. "Spinach...?" he asked incredulously. "You are expecting me to fly to Vega with a cargo of spinach and a couple of newlyweds?"

"Restrain yourself now, Mark," cautioned the elder Pincer severely. "It is not customary for members of the Firm to belittle our own products."

Denniston appeared to be somewhat helpless. "Alright, A.P.," he grumbled, "I'll eat sour apples for you. Tell your son we'll be taking off in a few days."

But Pincer had every appearance of still holding something back as a surprise for the captain. In fact it turned out to be a further shock. "As you know, Mark, my son was not accepted into the Solar Fleet. Presumably he's supposed to have some deficiency in his skeletal structure and he's colourblind. These insignificant factors were enough, however, to cause the examiners to reject him on a number of occasions. So I gave John Edgar the chance to apply for a 2nd class space pilot's license through a private space academy. Therefore he's cleared to fly the disc-ship that I've given him for a wedding present."

A flicker of something like hope appeared in Denniston's eyes. "Then by all means your son would be able to get along without me!"

The IFC president shook his head. "No, Mark. John Edgar doesn't have any space experience. Besides, his mother raised him a bit on the soft side while she was alive. He needs a firm hand. So I want you to go along with him and just make sure that I get to see him again all in one piece."

"What you're saying is, he's a great advertisement for Super Tenderleaf—a *greenhorn!*" retorted the spaceman.

Pincer raised a hand in defence. "Don't try to browbeat him or crack a whip over him, Mark. Just let him take charge of things. He doesn't know you're an old spacehound. In fact he thinks you're to go along... well, as a sort of butler..."

"Butler!" groaned Denniston. "It goes as far as that?"

"Don't throw the book at him or try to set down any rules. I want the boy to become self-sufficient. Promise me, Mark, that you'll only butt in when it's absolutely necessary."

Denniston answered somewhat stiffly. "Why not? A butler has to know his place!"

"In the meantime the global quarantine has been lifted," said Pincer. "The entire population of the Earth has been inoculated against a recurrence of the plasma plague. Ships are only restricted from takeoff in Terrania itself. I think Rhodan's order in this respect is very wise. He doesn't want to take any risks. Well, if there are no more cases of the sickness in the next week or two then everything will be clear even in Terrania. At any rate we can take off—meaning Cora, John Edgar and you, Mark."

"Not to mention Super Spinach!" added Denniston peevishly.

* * * *

The private spaceport of the Intercosmic Fruit Company was situated 100 miles from Denver, capital city of the U.S. federated state of Colorado. It was an ideal location for the centralization and further distribution of all incoming commodities which consisted chiefly of vegetable produce and fruit. Great storage houses and refrigerated reefer buildings bordered the extensive area.

Mark Denniston gazed briefly out the window of the control tower office at the runway area. A large freighter was in the process of being unloaded. Grape-picker cranes were pulling crates from the cargo locks and stacking them up on the ground. It was a familiar scene for Denniston.

Then he saw something else that wasn't as familiar but which appeared to him to be extremely amusing. A luggage-burdened man was coming straight across the landing field from the far entrance gates. Denniston grinned. The strange figure seemed to be juggling its load something like a Koala bear trying to carry her young. The man was tall and thin and his clothing flapped loosely about him. He moved with the woebegone gravity of a flamingo that was trying to hop along with one foot in the air.

Denniston laughed aloud. "Look out there," he called to one of the office men. "Who is that funny bird?"

"That's John Edgar Pincer," the official informed him with a smile from behind his dictaphone. "The son of the president"

Denniston's merriment vanished faster than a drop of water in a jet stream. The human beast of burden had come close enough now so that the captain could see his face. With that face alone Denniston would have been ready to start a mortuary business. Two large blue eyes looked into the world with an overwhelming expression of melancholy and sadness.

Capt. Mark Denniston swallowed valiantly and left the office. At the entrance he collided with Pincer Jr., whose view was partially obstructed by his packages.

"Excuse me!" he called out to Denniston in a shrill voice.

So the spaceman's first task was to help John Edgar gather the contents of several bursted packages together. Pincer was down on his knees and if Denniston hadn't seen it with his own eyes he would have believed the other's bodily contortions to be impossible joining him on the floor, the captain moved closer to him and put some of the articles into his hands.

"Good morning, sir," he said. "I'm Mark Denniston."

Then they stood up but when Pincer tried to shake hands with him his load began to sway precariously again. Denniston relieved him of half of it.

"Why? Don't you have somebody carry this stuff?" he asked wonderingly. "It's much too heavy for you alone."

Pincer blushed. "I don't want to trouble anybody," he said quickly. "And please

don't call me 'sir'. My name is Johnny."

"Alright Johnny," said Denniston with pretended cheerfulness. "What are your plans now?"

Pincer looked at him uncertainly. He did not seem to be used to being given the initiative. Apparently he would have preferred to crawl into a mouse hole if there had been one large enough. "Let's go to the *Error*," he suggested.

Startled, Denniston asked what the strange-sounding name was supposed to mean. Pincer smiled in some embarrassment but quickly explained.

"Error means 'mistake'," he said, "and that's what I've called the space-jet that papa has given me for a present. It refers to the mistake that the Solar Fleet medical examiners made when they rejected me twice."

To Denniston it all sounded like the basis for a new philosophy of some kind. Resignedly he grasped his packages and followed the long-legged Pincer whose lanky figure moved across the field with an inimitable birdlike grace.

A few minutes later they reached the space-jet. The small spaceship was equipped with every possible type of technological gadget, which Denniston noted at the first glance. It was very much in keeping with the famous disc-class ships of the Solar Fleet and probably wasn't very much behind them in capability. In the matter of comfort, of course, there was nothing left to be desired.

"The Super Tenderleaf seeds have already been loaded on board," explained Pincer. "Papa is here, too. He's up there in his office and wants to watch my takeoff."

Every time Pincer said "papa", Denniston shrank a few more centimetres into himself. He had a horrifying presentiment of the forthcoming demonstration this youngster would give with his takeoff. However, before he could brood over the subject too much a girl was seen approaching the space-jet. In every sense of the word she was what Denniston considered to be a good-looking woman—maybe even a bit more so.

"Who is that?" The question escaped him involuntarily.

Pincer gave him a pained look. "That is my wife," he informed him with a trace of agitation.

The spaceman thought to himself that it was always the dumbest clodhoppers who came up with the prize pumpkins. "Your wife?" he said aloud. "How did you ever manage that?"

Pincer blushed again. His hands fluttered nervously over his jacket and his tongue licked dry lips. "I... I married her," he replied, as though to explain the phenomenon.

It was then that Denniston caught sight of the dog. He had been so busy looking at the young woman that he hadn't noticed it sooner. She was leading it behind her on a bright yellow leash. It was just about the ugliest object Denniston had ever seen in his life, other than the vase his crew had given him in celebration of his 40th birthday. The mutt was an ochre yellow with a body of a dachshund and the head of a sheep dog. Its tail was curled in such a fashion as to leave no

question of its origin. Denniston could only stare as the unlikely pair approached.

Pincer made introductions. "Cora, this is Mark Denniston. Mark, this is my wife."

Cora Pincer had dark, warm eyes. Denniston took her proffered hand and was about to shake it when the mustard-coloured mongrel let out a menacing growl and snapped at his leg. He sprang back and the mutt watched him intently.

"My wife has included Prince with her dowry," Pincer reported proudly.

Prince was about the most repulsive dowry that Denniston had ever heard of. "The dog will have to stay here," he decided. "It would be absolutely senseless to take him along. We'd only have trouble with him."

Pincer looked disappointed and his wife gave Denniston a look of displeasure. She bent down and began to stroke the animal's fur.

"Then take him to my father," Pincer told him. "Cora and I will stow our luggage in the meantime."

Denniston was happy to get away from Pincer even if only for a few minutes. He cautiously took the leash and pulled Prince away. The dog bristled up and threatened to bite the spaceman but he remained sufficiently on his guard to avoid injury. When he entered the president's private office the elder Pincer was standing at the window looking out at the landing field. Denniston cleared his throat to attract his attention.

"Now what do you want?" asked Pincer without turning around. "I saw you coming this way with that... er... creature."

"Prince is staying here," declared Denniston. "Your son is entrusting him to your care, Chief."

He tied the leash to a chair while Prince made little growling sounds. Suddenly the room began to vibrate and the windowpanes rattled as a rumbling sound was heard.

"What's that?" asked Denniston, going to the window.

"It's the *Error*," said Pincer with a peculiar calmness.

Denniston's eyes opened wide as he stared out at the space-jet and saw it rise up from the ground.

"He out-foxed you, Mark," observed Pincer. "Me too, of course. He wanted to go to Vega alone with his wife and he managed it. The thing about the dog was a trick. He knew you wouldn't take it with you on board. No man in his right mind would take along such a mutt."

"But..." said Mark, helplessly perplexed.

The *Error* had already disappeared from view. In spite of it the president remained at the window.

"How was his takeoff, Mark?" he asked softly.

"Well... so... so..." replied Denniston.

Unexpectedly the president came to life again. He tamed away from his observation post and looked at Mark. "I have another assignment for you," he

announced.

“So?” Denniston muttered, with a note of suspicion. “And what would that be?”

Instead of saying anything, the elder Pincer lowered his gaze to the mustard-hued dog whose eyes still gleamed with rage as they glared fixedly at Denniston. When Pincer smiled wickedly, Denniston paled.

“No!” he gasped. “Chief, you can’t—!”

“But I can!” retorted Pincer. “And that’s it!”

Mark Denniston knew then that until John Edgar Pincer returned from his honeymoon voyage he would be stuck with dog-walking this hideous creature that seemed to be the personal incarnation of Cerberus.

2/ THE ERROR IS MISTAKEN

The radio loudspeaker crackled to life. John Edgar Pincer had followed all instructions necessary for taking off in a ship that did not belong to a unit of the Space Fleet—yet he was being hailed.

“Patrol ship *Neptune* to discuss spacecraft,” came the voice of the control officer from the speaker. “We are requesting your IFF and code-of-the-day.”

In trying to get to the transmitter panel, Pincer stumbled over his own gangly legs and thus arrived at his destination sooner than he expected. He fiddled nervously with the telecom switches. “Private spaceship *Error*,” he answered into the mike. “Takeoff from spaceport of IFC in Denver. Flight permission per regulation 3-slash-B-41, yellow permit.” He smiled at his wife and added: “This is the pilot speaking—John Edgar Pincer.”

Either the Fleet officer on board patrol ship *Neptune* had never heard of Pincer or he was in a bad mood. “Are you carrying a registered cargo with you?” he inquired in glacial tones.

Pincer nodded eagerly. “Oh yes, sir! 300 kilos of Super Tenderleaf.”

Judging by the startling noises the Pincer couple were hearing, a bomb seemed to have exploded in the Com Room of the *Neptune*. Pincer stared as though paralysed at the loudspeaker.

“Would you mind repeating that?” asked the communications man from the other ship.

Pincer readily complied. “It’s a special brand of spinach seeds developed in our own laboratories. Our chief biologist told me that it’s a mutation of trapajera plants from the Vega System and...”

“That’s enough,” the patrol officer broke in hastily. “All I need now is the purpose of this trip.”

“It’s my honeymoon,” murmured Pincer.

Apparently the communications man had an instinctive aversion for honeymooners because he was heard to mutter something not too complimentary. But he finally signed off with coordinate instructions. These were for the space sector in which the vice-president of IFC was to make his transition.

“It’s just beyond the orbit of Pluto,” Pincer explained to his wife after the telecom had become silent. “In the meantime I can show you the ship and the cargo.”

He stalked about in the cabin and explained everything to her—the tracking and communications consoles, engine and flight controls, life-support systems, star charts and all the necessary appurtenances of space travel.

“You see,” he told her in a whining tone, “they rejected me illegally from the Space Fleet Academy. I know as much as anybody else in the Fleet. Colour blindness—pah! That’s ridiculous! As for skeletal defects—so it’s a broken fibula from soccer ball in school. What’s a patch of cartilage in the wrong place got to do with it? That can’t hinder anybody with talent.” He became red as a turkey all of a sudden. “Of course I don’t mean to say I’m a genius or anything like that!”

His wife favoured him with a look that would have melted down any other man but it only inspired him to grin foolishly. “And now I’ll show you the spinach seeds,” he announced brightly.

With the industry of a mole in a forest fire he rummaged through the packages in the hold until he found the package he wanted and he opened the cover. “This is it,” he said with pride. “The new top line for IFC—Super Tenderleaf.”

Cora Pincer looked into the case and seemed to be disappointed. The tiny little blue capsules, in contrast to their ambitious trade name, were neither super-looking nor tender. “They look like poppy seeds,” she commented.

Pincer gurgled in satisfaction as though he had been responsible for this similarity. “That figures,” he said. “The only way to tell this apart from actual poppy seeds is by qualitative analysis.” He snapped the lid back on and shoved the case into place again. He gave his wife a fatherly pat on the shoulder. “Now we come to the transition calculations, Cora. The little ship’s computer will handle that for us. All I have to do is program the data that the officer of the *Neptune* transmitted to me.”

His wife appeared to be hesitant. “I’ve heard that there are painful effects connected with a transition,” she said.

Pincer made a deprecating gesture with his hands, which in his case was reminiscent of a giraffe lopping fruit from a treetop. “That’s your so-called dematerialisation reaction. It’s only 27 light-years to the Vega System. Although we’ll make that in a single hyperjump you’ll hardly feel it. The less the distance between transition points, the less the pain sensation.” He shoved a punched card into the ship’s positronic computer and waited. “We’ve almost reached the speed of light,” he explained.

He watched the racing parity lights of the data registers and then suddenly the output strip was in his hands. He finally got up and went over to the flight console. “It would be best for you to lie down now,” he told Cora. “It will soon be over with.”

His fingers fluttered across the colour-coded keyboard of the transition autopilot. Since he was colour-blind, instead of memorizing the colour codes he had learned the key positions by heart. In some excitement he fumbled about among the corresponding control keys. Then he pressed the green button.

The shock of dematerialisation was so tremendous that John Edgar Pincer

knew, before he lost consciousness, that they would never come out in the Vega System.

* * * *

Pincer felt as if somebody had spot-welded an iron plate to his forehead and was now landing hammer blows on it with murderous precision. When he opened his eyes a blur of colours swam before him. His vision finally cleared to reveal the keyboard of the transition autopilot's panel.

"I thought you were never going to come to," said Cora Pincer as she leaned over him. "What's the matter with you?"

Pincer looked at her dejectedly. "You mean you recovered consciousness before I did?" he asked plaintively.

His wife nodded. She helped him get to his feet. He dragged his feet painfully over to the viewscreens and the tracking console and turned them on.

"I knew all the time you could do it!" exclaimed Cora proudly. "You made the transition in a single stroke!"

Pincer rubbed his forehead and staggered back to the flight console. "You might say that, maybe..." He showed her the button key he had depressed before the jump. "What colour is that?" he asked in a low tone of voice.

"Green," said Cora in puzzlement. "Why do you ask?"

Pincer collapsed with a groan back into the pilot's seat. He had never presented a very athletic appearance but now he really looked bedraggled. Cora began to suspect that something had gone wrong. She was an intelligent and courageous young woman and she believed her husband to have similar qualities although thus far he had not displayed them.

"The green button," wailed Pincer, "is for making a wild hyperjump over a great distance in case of emergencies! It generates much greater transition energy. I mistook it for the red key. You know—my colour blindness. Of course I checked the location of the keys but I simply goofed in all the excitement. That's how it happened."

"What does it mean?" Cora inquired calmly.

He grasped her hands. "It means that we're somewhere else in the galaxy—but not in the area of the Vega System."

"So we can just fly back," said his wife.

Pincer shook his head. "That won't be possible. If we don't succeed in figuring out our present position there won't be any way back for us. Each additional transition would be another jump into the unknown and could lead us farther away from the Earth."

Actually their situation was even more hopeless than this. If there were no stars in the vicinity by which Pincer could orient himself, any navigational attempt would be useless. The space-jet's hyperjump had been practically at random; it

could have brought them to any point inside an imaginary sphere which in this case had the Earth at its centre. Naturally there were limitations of distance for a hypertransition but that was only a small consolation.

“What... what should we do now?” asked Cora. She strove to keep her voice level. “We can’t just sit around here and wait until... until...”

Pincer knew only too well what she meant. His masculine pride awakened in him. His lanky figure rose up with an awkward movement that was anything but inspiring. “Cora, please bring me the star catalogues. I’ll see if I can identify the nearest star. It may be registered and we can orient ourselves by it.”

John Edgar Pincer worked for 3 hours. He took stellar triangulations, range and analysis measurements and carried out numerous calculations. Then he compared the resulting data with information contained in the catalogue. The nearest star was two light-years away—a white dwarf. In the catalogue it was listed under the euphonious-sounding name of Alazee. Pincer read further and learned that it possessed two planets. Number 2 was an oxygen world and was inhabited.

This was called Alazee’s planet. For John Pincer the name was not nearly as important as the italicized sentence written beneath it: Considered to be one of the most frequented Springer bases.

Pincer snapped the catalogue shut with such a bang that it startled his wife. She looked at him frankly.

“Well, did you find out where we are?”

“Yes I did,” he said grimly. “We’ve landed in a hornets’ nest.”

Pincer knew about the treacherous methods of the Galactic Traders. He knew they were remorseless in their attacks on every Terran ship that dared to venture into any regions they claimed for themselves. The Springers wouldn’t bother to ask if the presence here of the *Error* might be due to a mistake. Before asking questions they would open fire first.

“We have to get out of here, Cora,” he told his wife.

As fast as he could he worked out a new program with the ship’s positronicon while his young bride watched him silently. However, all his haste was in vain.

The hornets had already swarmed forth from their nest.

* * * *

The first shockwave struck the *Error* with a violent impact. The small disc-shaped vessel was severely shaken. Pincer was knocked out of his seat and hurled straight across the room. He heard Cora’s terrified outcry. The space-jet trembled and gyrated. Pincer crawled back across the deck to the pilot’s seat. He managed to turn on the viewscreens. Laboriously he pulled himself back into the flight seat. The proximity detector was shrieking an alarm signal. Somewhere close outside was an alien ship. With a trembling hand he adjusted the viewscreens to pick up the area indicated by the tracking instruments.

What he saw almost curdled the blood in his veins.

A tremendously long, cylindrical spaceship was silhouetted against the blackness of the void by virtue of a glowing aura that seemed to emerge from it. Pincer presumed that the shimmering light was a defence screen. He laughed weakly. How could he possibly be a threat to this Behemoth? He realized that his own defensive precautions were futile. Nevertheless his defence screen served to slightly lessen the severity of the second shockwave. Pincer sat hunched helplessly in his seat, not daring to turn around and look at his wife.

“Turn on your seefone, you idiot!” came a rumbling voice from the loudspeaker.

Pincer fastened his horrified gaze on the radio panel. Apparently the Springers had decided to talk to him before turning the *Error* into a nuclear cloud of gas.

“What are they going to do to us, Johnny?” asked Cora anxiously.

Pincer’s throat was so dry that he couldn’t utter anything comprehensible. He turned on the phone, knowing that it would make him visible to those on board the Springer ship. Also the *Error*’s videoscreen brightened gradually. A large, coarse face with an impressive big beard appeared on the seefone panel. Pincer practically wilted at the sight of the man. He had already heard much about the Springer patriarchs but the appearance of this Galactic Trader was far more formidable than he had imagined.

“Where is Shaugnessy?” asked the stranger in thunderous tones.

Pincer made a weak attempt to smile but all he could manage was a lip quiver. He had never heard anything about a so-called Shaugnessy and couldn’t imagine why the Springer should be asking him in particular about such a person.

“Didn’t anybody ever tell you, you should send the password when you come here?” asked the Trader indignantly. “If you’re handling Shaugnessy’s stuff then act as if you had some brains. What’s all this dumb put-on about?”

Pincer stared at the screen in flabbergasted amazement. He couldn’t make any sense out of the Springer’s double-talk. However it was obvious that the *Error* had been mistaken for some other ship. Pincer decided to go along with the act because it seemed to offer the only possibility of living a little longer.

“I’m sorry,” he said cautiously. “Shaugnessy’s laid up. They sent me in his place. You shook me up a bit, so I forgot the password.”

The Springer surveyed him contemptuously. “At least do you have the stuff with you?” he asked.

“Yes,” Pincer lied valiantly. “It’s here on board.”

What did the man mean by “the stuff”? It was useless to try to figure it out at present. Meanwhile the Springer had discovered Cora who had appeared next to Pincer and had her hand on his shoulder.

“Who’s that woman?” the man asked gruffly.

Pincer shrank into his seat as far as possible. The conversation was in Intercosmo. The son of the IFC president knew that his wife was conversant with

the language. “A new addition,” he explained. “She’s to be broken in on the job.” He hoped he hadn’t said the wrong thing.

“Women,” growled the Springer scornfully. “Applied shouldn’t fool with them—they can only cause trouble.”

“You let us worry about that!” said Cora impertinently.

Pincer glanced at her imploringly but the Springer burst into a roar of laughter which shook his bearded face.

“At any rate you seem to have more spunk than that rickety bag of bones in the pilot seat.” He nodded to her appreciatively and then turned his attention to Pincer again. “What’s your name?”

Now came the critical part. “John Edgar Pincer,” was the bold reply. “Who are you?”

“Valmonze,” replied the Springer.

Involuntarily, Pincer sighed with relief. His name had not caused the patriarch to be suspicious. Now it was vitally important to find out as quickly as possible who it was they were mistaking him for. The slightest mistake might cause Valmonze to have his gunners destroy the *Error*.

“We’ve talked enough,” said Valmonze. “We’ll take you over now.”

“Very well,” agreed Pincer although he could not imagine what was meant by “taking over”.

Valmonze looked as if he were about to jump through the viewscreen. “What do you mean, ‘very well’!” he shouted in a sudden flash of anger. “Will you shut off that ridiculous shock screen of yours so that our tractor beams can pull you into the lock?”

Even as the viewscreen was darkening, Pincer carried out the order. There was no possibility of putting up a resistance. “In a few minutes we’ll be on board the Springer ship,” he told his wife. “They’ll check through our cargo and they’ll find out we don’t have anything with us except the Super Tenderleaf.”

“Which will hardly make them overjoyed,” surmised Cora. “What do you think they’ll do to us, Johnny?”

Pincer placed a finger on her lips. Why should he let his wife share his fears unnecessarily? He knew that after they found only the Super Tenderleaf the least he and Cora could expect from the Springers was to be simply thrown out of the airlock—of course without their spacesuits.

Pincer thought ironically that he had finally gotten what he had always longed for: an adventure in the Cosmos. It was for this that he had tried so hard to join the Solar Fleet. But they had rejected him.

So it was that when the *Error* was brought on board the Springer ship, *Val 1*, he was still what he had always been: John Edgar Pincer—greenhorn.

3/ A VERY SEEDY DEAL

A soft jolt indicated that the space-jet had come to rest. Pincer wiped sweat from his brow. The fact that the 35-meter hull of the *Error* had been simply taken in through a lock hatch gave him some idea of the monstrous size of the Springer ship. Apparently they were in some cargo hold of the *Val 1* that had been converted into a hangar.

“It would be best if I opened the exit lock,” said Pincer.

He opened the hatch and went with Cora through the airlock. Once outside they saw that the *Error* was located in an extensive, well-lighted hold that could have easily accommodated three more space-jets. Everywhere they could see stacks of trading goods. There were several Springers in evidence but they paid no attention to Pincer and his wife. Pincer had heard about the stringent autocratic rule among the Springer clans. Only the patriarch himself could take care of decisive matters. Without his specific order no member of his clan would dare to approach the *Error*.

Then Patriarch Valmonze appeared. There were several younger Springers with him who were probably his sons. Valmonze’s mighty figure was very impressive. Pincer came to a stop and waited. Cora was standing so close behind him that he could hear her breathing.

Valmonze was wearing a flowing, expensive-looking cloak and on his feet were pliant sandals fastened by straps. Around his neck he wore the heavy chain necklace that designated him as the eldest of the clan. He stopped directly in front of Pincer and clapped him on the shoulder in a hearty gesture of friendliness but Pincer thought for a moment that his spine had been cracked.

“Welcome on board the *Val 1*,” said Valmonze. There was a cunning gleam in his eyes. “Here’s to a good piece of business, Terran!”

Pincer was terrified when he thought of his incapability of doing any kind of “business” at the moment. Maybe there was some way of delaying an inspection of the *Error*. He reached out his hand to Valmonze. “To good business,” he repeated.

Valmonze took Pincer’s hand and nearly crushed it while he grinned like a demon. “Show me your freight,” he demanded.

At which moment Cora mixed into the conversation. “What for?” she asked. “Everything is in order. It’s ready for unloading.”

Valmonze looked at her unappreciatively. “Didn’t Aplied tell you that we’re to take everything to Alazee’s planet? There you’re to take new cargo on board and deliver it to Patriarch Zomake on your way back to Earth.”

Pincer waved a hand unconcernedly. “Sure, we know that,” he said with a mock show of confidence. “Aplied explained everything in detail. My... my cohort only meant that you could avoid the unnecessary work of checking over everything. It’s all in order—you can depend on that.”

Valmonze regarded Cora speculatively as he rubbed his beard. “Nobody doubts the genuineness of your cargo, dear lady,” he smiled. “Aplied has never deceived us; it would be senseless to do so. But—” He made an inviting gesture toward the open hatch of the *Error*. “The eyes of a trader take pleasure in beholding the things that he is going to do business with.”

Pincer was close to telling him that if he insisted on having a look his dark Springer eyes were going to be unpleasantly surprised by the sight of spinach seeds. However, all he could do was to swallow dryly and follow the patriarch into the *Error*.

As Valmonze marched heavily into the space-jet his sons followed closely behind him in silence but with their eyes and ears open. Pincer wished very much that he could have whispered a few words to Cora, telling her how sorry he was to have gotten her into this situation, but now the chance for that was gone. Valmonze soon stood in the centre of the ship with his sons forming a half-circle around him—each one of them a veritable bear of a man. Just this sight alone could have caused a fluttering in the knees of other men besides Pincer.

“Bring me a sample,” ordered the patriarch expectantly.

Somewhat like a somnambulist, Pincer groped his way instinctively to the place where the Super Tenderleaf was stored. He suddenly felt empty inside as though gutted out by fire. As soon as he handed a package of spinach seeds to the patriarch he would pronounce his own death sentence. But what else was there left to do?

With trembling hands he pulled out one of the seed cartons and went back to the control room. There stood Valmonze, waiting with his arms folded across his chest. Pincer couldn’t speak. He saw Cora in the pilot seat, her face fearfully pale. Without a word he held the package out to the Springer.

“It’s your privilege to open it,” said Valmonze politely.

Pincer reminded himself of a man who lay under the guillotine and was being forced to release the drop-knife with his own hand. He opened the carton and placed it on the deck at Valmonze’s sandalled feet. His eyes seemed ready to pop out of his head as he stared breathlessly, watching the patriarch stoop down and scoop up a handful of Super Tenderleaf.

Then suddenly the Springer was laughing thunderously as he let the seeds run through his fingers. “More valuable than gold!” he bellowed out. “A profitable business and political power, all in one!”

Pincer figured the man had lost his mind. Perhaps the shock of seeing the

spinach seeds had been too much for him.

“Here!” shouted Valmonze, addressing his sons. “Just take a look at that!”

John Edgar Pincer stared at them in wonderment as he saw the unbelievable become reality: the patriarch’s sons fell upon the carton like a pack of hungry hounds. The Super Tenderleaf seeds trickled through their hands while they clapped each other elatedly on their shoulders. And through it all, here stood the patriarch king of the long super battleship, contentedly smiling and not in the least displeased or angered.

The colour was slowly returning to Cora’s face. Pincer could only stand there in helpless disbelief while he stared at the spectacle.

“This is splendid!” boomed the Springer. “Aplied can always be counted on. Do you realize, kid, the things we can do with these poppy seeds?”

Poppy seeds! So that was it! Now Pincer knew. Valmonze thought the spinach seeds were poppy seeds.

“Opium,” said Valmonze. “Opium and other narcotics. Believe me, Pincer, this stuff represents a power that’s almost greater than a fleet of spaceships. We can make a real haul with this—in fact the profits will be terrific! But what’s more important, we can use it to make Perry Rhodan and his ridiculous Imperium politically impotent! Among all the planetary races we’ll hit with this trade, there’ll be a growing resentment over the supposed export of Earthly narcotics. They’ll hold Rhodan responsible for not doing anything to restrict the smuggling of drugs.”

Pincer lowered his gaze with a feeling of revulsion. What kind of men were these? Irresponsibly they took advantage of the effects of these dangerous drugs on various races in order to further their own purposes. Pincer knew very well that the First Administrator would spare no effort to smash such a smuggling organization. He braced himself almost instinctively. By chance he had penetrated into the criminal ranks. Now the opportunity was presented to him wherein he might unmask them all and bring some valuable information to Rhodan. He remembered Aplied, which was apparently an important name. It was necessary to find out more about this man.

“Valmonze,” he said finally, “you know Aplied is getting very edgy. He thinks the business is getting shaky. He’s afraid Rhodan might start using his mutants.”

“Mutants?” repeated Valmonze. “So far I haven’t seen any. So Vincent Aplied is getting worried, eh? Who would have figured that? What else does he want? He’s sitting fat and happy in Cape Town while he makes nothing but money!”

Vincent Aplied, Cape Town. Pincer had to struggle to keep from showing his surprise. Aplied was one of the most respected farmers in South Africa. Pincer would never have thought that Valmonze was referring to that Aplied. But now it was fact. A Terran was the chief of an interstellar narcotics ring. To Pincer it was incomprehensible. Certainly Aplied must be aware of the consequences of his criminal actions.

But how was he going to report his discovery to Rhodan? In the first place there

was no possibility of doing it now. However, maybe the same happenstance that had rescued him might serve to help him again.

Valmonze interrupted his train of thought. "When we get to Alazee's planet this stuff will be transshipped immediately. Our clients are already waiting. Did you ever see a nonhuman addict, Terran? Not a very pretty sight. The non-human races have a stronger reaction to the heavy stuff than humans."

It was only with an extreme effort that Pincer kept himself from simply tearing into the Springer with his bare hands. But that, of course, would have ruined everything. He remembered what Valmonze had said. The seeds would be transshipped immediately. Although Super Tenderleaf seeds had the appearance of poppy seeds, their effect was certainly different. That meant that the respite he and his wife had won would be cancelled out, once they had landed on Alazee's planet.

Pincer bent down and picked up the carton of spinach seeds. He took them back to their regular storage place and when he returned he saw Valmonze regarding him with a smile on his face.

"We'll soon be going into a short transition," announced the patriarch. "If you wish I can place two cabins at your disposal on board the *Val 1*. Of course you can also stay on your own ship if you want to."

"We'll stay here," Pincer decided. "It won't be long to get to our destination so it makes little difference where we stay."

"Naturally," said Valmonze. He made a slight bow in the direction of Cora, who seemed to him to be a bit more caustic than Pincer. To the Springer, women shouldn't be mixed up in business matters, anyway. Then he and his sons left the *Error*.

Looking like a small town preacher, John Edgar Pincer walked with stiff-legged forced composure to the other flight seat and sat down. It was only now that another danger occurred to him. What would happen when Shaugnessy himself appeared with the real merchandise?

The answer seemed to be a foregone conclusion. Whether Valmonze discovered the nature of Super Tenderleaf or was informed of the true situation by Shaugnessy's arrival, in either case the patriarch would react violently. Pincer knew full well that their life was as much in danger now as it was before; they had only postponed their fate. Within this stay of execution, however, he must find a way of sending a radio dispatch in order to inform Perry Rhodan concerning the machinations of one Vincent Aplied.

"They've gone," said Cora, interrupting his thoughts. "I wouldn't have believed we were going to live through that."

She looked very tired. Pincer glanced at her sympathetically. "It was just luck," he said. "It won't happen again."

She got up from the pilot's seat and came over to him. He wondered if it was her presence here that gave him the strength to hold his nerves together.

"We have to see if we can't get in radio contact with Terrania or some

Terranian ship,” he said. “Rhodan has to know who’s hiding behind this narcotics smuggling racket.”

Cora pointed to the *Error*’s radio console.

“No,” said Pincer. “Valmonze would jam my transmission immediately. He has much more powerful equipment. And it would only take him about a minute to show up with a weapon and some very embarrassing questions. We have to wait until we can send out a complete report.”

The seefone buzzer sounded. Pincer went over and switched it on. Valmonze’s bearded countenance appeared on the screen. After surveying Pincer a moment in silence he rumbled: “Get set for a short transition. It won’t be a bad one—it’s a short hop.”

“Thanks,” was Pincer’s curt reply.

A single hyperjump was to land them in the lion’s den.

4/ SPINACH IS BAD FOR THE HEALTH

Although Alazee's planet was an oxygen world, Pincer's first sight of it was a disappointment. Of course one could breathe here without wearing a protective suit but for Pincer the air was abominable when compared to that of Earth. It had a damp and musty odour like decayed vegetation.

The *Val 1* landed without difficulty at the spaceport. Two other cylindrical ships were parked there on their landing struts—the *Val 4* and *Val 7*. Valmonze explained that they were undergoing some repair work. Pincer stood with his wife and the patriarch in the personnel lock of the *Val 1*. Already rolling toward them below were the cargo-handling vehicles which were exclusively manned by Springers. Pincer couldn't make out any of the native inhabitants. Probably the Traders had this area carefully sealed off.

Valmonze was puffed up with a sense of important enterprise and shouted orders to the men below. From time to time he'd comment with a grin to Pincer. "Well unload your little ship," he said, "so's we can take out the poppy seeds. We've been waiting a long time now to be able to cultivate poppies ourselves."

He stepped onto the lift that reached from the airlock down to the ground. The wind rippled his beard and billowed his cape outward. Pincer caught a glimpse of the Springer's upper arm, which was heavier looking than his own thigh.

"Come on," invited Valmonze. "Let's go down."

Pincer moved uncertainly into the lift cage and grasped the handrails tightly. Valmonze had to help Cora in and he looked scornful as he did so. His fierce gaze made Pincer feel nervous.

"What's the matter with you?" Valmonze wanted to know.

"I always get air-sick in elevators," said Pincer unhappily.

Valmonze stared at him as though seeing him for the first time "And you're supposed to be a spaceman?"

The lift began to descend. Pincer's complexion alternated between white and red. Desperately he held onto the railings with both hands. Valmonze scratched his beard reflectively and Cora could see him shake his head. When the lift reached the ground, Valmonze jumped out like an athlete but Pincer clambered out behind him with wobbling knees. Several of the Galactic Traders in the vicinity took no pains to hide their merriment over Pincer's clumsy arrival.

"If you're able to at all," said Valmonze derisively, "you might take a look at

the cargo hatch.”

Pincer came to a stop. What he saw didn't exactly help his present sensitivities. The *Error* glided out of the interior of the *Val 1*. Once it was on the ground the space-jet's own cargo hatch was opened. The cargo vehicles rolled up to it. Several Springers began to unload the Super Tenderleaf crate from the *Error* and the pride of the IFC was finally placed in one of the truck beds.

I still have a few personal things on board that I'd like very much to have with me,” said Pincer. “I'll just run over there quickly.”

Valmonze merely nodded. Pincer managed to wink at Cora before he started out. The Springers had already completed their work by the time he approached the *Error*.

His pulse began to race. Now there might be a chance to send off a radio message. He ran faster. The loaded cargo car passed him on the way. They had stacked the packages of spinach seeds on the truck bed—innocent cargo intended for Ferrol. Pincer clambered into the airlock and took a look around inside. The interior of the ship was empty.

In two steps he was at the hypercom console and flipping the switches. The equipment crackled initially and when it had warmed up it hummed softly. Pincer leaned over the microphone.

But he did not have a chance to speak.

“What are you fooling around there for?” Valmonze's bass voice rang out behind him.

The shock made Pincer wince involuntarily. He turned around swiftly to see Valmonze standing there with a sullen expression and Cora still at the airlock door, her eyes shadowed by fear.

“I'd forgotten to shut off the console,” he almost stuttered. “You really gave me a start!” He smiled at Valmonze and shut off the equipment. “Besides, I wanted to get these cigarettes and take them along.” He reached for the cartons.

“Just don't fool around with the radio equipment. We keep a constant security scan on this area. What do you want to do—get our monitors in an uproar?”

“Of course not,” Pincer assured him. “And nothing's happened, anyway.”

“It's time we went to the main building,” Valmonze directed. “I'm curious to see what my friends have to say about the seeds.”

It was a curiosity that Pincer didn't share with him at all. He knew very well that the first attempt to produce poppies out of Super Tenderleaf would fail miserably. So he stood there uncertainly with the cigarette cartons held like pistols in his hands.

“What are you still waiting for?” asked Valmonze impatiently. Pincer's silly grin brought a flush of anger to his face.

“I don't want to appear impolite,” said the vice-president of IFC, “but this is the first time my companion and I have been on this planet. You can surely understand that we're interested in seeing the natives. Processing narcotics isn't

too exciting, you know, because we've been around enough in the business to have our fill of that. We'd rather wander around a little."

It was clearly evident what Valmonze thought of such tourist gawking. Nevertheless he turned to Cora. "What's *your* preference?"

"Business discussions bore me," she answered.

"I'd like to know what Aplied's system is for choosing his help," grumbled Valmonze. "It's true, of course, that Shaugnessy was always pretty spaced out with his crazy ideas but he always took part in our conferences. As far as I'm concerned you can have a look around. The nearest native village is just beyond the spaceport. Those characters just barely get by in Intercosmo. You might succeed in flushing a few of them out of the trees."

Pincer came near to asking him what the natives might be doing in the trees but then he realized that the patriarch must assume that Shaugnessy or Aplied would have informed the new accomplices concerning conditions on Alazee's planet. Any improper question might arouse the Springer's suspicion.

So instead he merely set his long thin legs into motion and exited the *Error*. Cora and Valmonze followed him.

The Trader pointed toward a building on the edge of the field. "Go in that direction but don't go too far. If we need you for anything, you'd better be close by."

Pincer only nodded and Cora locked her arm in his as they moved away toward the indicated building. Valmonze watched them for a moment, shaking his head, and then he stomped off in another direction—toward the greatest surprise of his life.

* * * *

The spaceport of Alazee's planet was very extensive. Nestled between hills in a valley it was 3 kilometres long. For the Galactic Traders the establishment of such commercial strongholds was a question of practicability and profit. A spaceport of this size was expensive and of course was not normal for the majority of their bases. Only particularly suitable worlds were equipped with such facilities.

The Springers evaluated all actions in terms of economic and commercial advantage. Since they were effectively space nomads and practically lived on board their ships, they had to have places where they could land from time to time in order to take care of repairs or other important matters. The wealth of a Springer clan was dependent upon the capability of its patriarch and the measure of such wealth was in the size of his fleet.

For generations the Springers had been accustomed to having a trade monopoly on all inhabited planets that lay within range of their long, cylindrical ships. However in recent years they had run into strong competition with the Earth. With stubborn persistence the Terran merchants and economic experts had fought against the long-established organization of the Galactic Traders which had been

in existence for thousands of years.

The Springers' traditional principle of trading had always been quite simple. They always charged whatever they could get for their wares. Goods that they had bought up at cutthroat prices, in other words "dirt-cheap", they had been in the habit of trading for other more valuable merchandise. But all that was a thing of the past now. Terran freighters were appearing on the scene and for the first time were offering alien intelligences of the galaxy a realistic price for their wares. Before the Traders actually realized what was happening, Terra had obtained a firm foothold on countless planets. From that time on, the Traders in their longships considered every means of undermining the Earth to be justifiable.

John Edgar Pincer knew no more about the Springers than any other Earthly citizen who was interested in the destiny of his race. But now apparently he was to become more educated in this regard. He had come with his wife to the edge of the spaceport, when she suddenly grasped his hand.

"Johnny," she said, "they'll soon find out what we were really carrying on board the *Error*—and then they'll drag us back there!"

Pincer's gaze swept across the nearby slopes of the mountains which were covered with gloomy-looking forests. "We have to make a run for it," he told her. "It's the only way of staying alive. Maybe there are some other Springer stations here on this planet. After awhile when the smoke settles they may relax their security a bit and then we might have a chance to send out a radio message."

Cora looked about her. The Springers didn't appear to her to be the types that could be outwitted by her Johnny. "Escape?" she said, wonderingly. "Johnny, use your head, for Heaven's sake! We're strangers here and don't even know where to turn. They'd track us down before we could even find a place to hide!"

Pincer drew her along with him as they proceeded onward. He had no clear conception of how he and Cora could save themselves. Only one thing was certain: if they stayed around here any longer, in a very short time they'd be prisoners of Valmonze.

The smooth surface of the spaceport gave way to a grey, rocky terrain that was dotted with clumps of grass. Pincer looked back. Nobody was following them. About 100 meters ahead of them were the first of the trees. Their tremendous trunks were of a dark brown colour and their foliage was so dense that it seemed to form a compact mass of vegetation. He hoped that here he might find concealment.

"You're going too fast!" Cora panted.

Conscience-stricken, Pincer slowed his pace. If he demanded too much of Cora's energies now there'd be a price to pay for it later. They had to conserve their strength.

"I really had imagined a more pleasant honeymoon than this," said Cora with sarcasm.

"It's all my fault," said Pincer remorsefully. "I pestered papa long enough for the space-jet and now I wish I hadn't. Anyway, he'll be worried because I

promised to contact him after our arrival on Ferrol. He's waiting for a radio message from me."

"Maybe he'll send out a search for us," said Cora hopefully.

"Yes, on Ferrol," admitted Pincer. "But when they don't find us there, where will they look? There's simply no possibility of locating anybody who is lost in space."

It was typical of Pincer's unique character that he was concerned about other people even when he himself was in a worse situation. The fact that his father would be searching for him in vain worried him much more than the threat of being captured by the Springers.

They reached the first trees and Pincer sighed with relief. The going was more difficult here because thickets and underbrush got in their way. Birds chirped and cried out excitedly in the branches as the two humans appeared in the area.

"Do you think it gets cold here at night?" asked Cora.

The night! Pincer shuddered. Until now he hadn't thought of that nor did he know the duration of darkness on this world. Alazee's planet did have some kind of rotational period. He remembered having read something about it in the catalogue.

"I'm sure it doesn't," he answered.

He bent down to shove a few branches out of the way and in the same moment he heard Cora cry out in terror behind him. He whirled around to see Cora suspended by a snare that hung down from the impenetrable foliage of a giant tree. He plunged toward her but her body was suddenly drawn upward. Desperately he grasped at her legs but the invisible forces above were stronger. Before his horrified eyes she disappeared among the leaves.

"Cora!" he shouted.

"Run for it, Johnny!" he heard her cry out to him.

But Pincer had no intention of running. In a rage he ran to the trunk of the tree but then he felt himself jerked from the ground. He struggled but discovered that a second sling had ensnared him. He struggled in vain against his bonds as unseen hands drew him slowly but surely upward.

* * * *

Amat-Palong was an Ara, a Galactic Medical Master. Taller than a Terran, he was very thin and not a single hair grew on his head. He poured a greyish powdery substance from a test tube into a funnel, from which it trickled into a box. He then sprinkled the remainder onto a transparent strip of glass, which he shoved under a microscope. He peered through the eyepiece for some time in silence. Finally he pulled the slide out again. He placed it in his open palm and brought it to his mouth. Cautiously he moistened his lips and drew in the grey powder with an inward puff.

Amat-Palong shook his head. He went to his desk and switched on the intercom. "Is Valmonze in the vicinity?" he asked. His voice sounded inhuman because of a lack of tone. It was completely flat, with neither low tones nor high.

"He's in the canteen," came the reply over the speaker. "He has his sons with him."

"I only need the patriarch," explained Amat-Palong quietly. "Send him up here to the laboratory immediately."

Instead of waiting for a confirmation he simply switched off when he had finished speaking. He observed his hands reflectively and then pulled a chair over to sit down. But then he heard the rumble of the elevator and directly after Valmonze stepped into the laboratory. He held a pot-bellied bottle in his hand and his eyes were bloodshot.

"You caught me while I was eating," he announced thunderously. "Maybe you can't understand that, Ara, but I consider it an important process that I don't like to be disturbed at."

Unimpressed by the Springer's anger, Amat-Palong stood up and watched Valmonze without expression as the latter took a long swig from the bottle and then belched.

"Alright," growled Valmonze, "what's so important that you had to call me?"

Amat-Palong calmly folded his arms across his narrow chest. "Put the bottle away, Trader," he requested coldly. "You'll need a clear head when you issue your next orders."

Valmonze stared at him incredulously. His eyes narrowed to slits as he slowly approached the Ara. "You've got a nerve!" he raged. "You're talking to a patriarch!"

Amat-Palong nodded. "I know," he said. "The only question is how long you'll continue to be one."

Valmonze took a step back and then slammed the bottle down on the desk. He was simultaneously enraged and confused by the Ara's amazing composure. "Talk—before I break your neck for this insult!" he roared at the Ara.

Amat-Palong shrugged his shoulders and then bent down to open the door of a cabinet. With practiced fingers he took out several plastic bags which were filled with a whitish powder. He held them up to Valmonze's face. "What is this, patriarch?" he asked.

"Heroin!" snorted Valmonze.

Amat-Palong produced other bags, the contents of which were dark brown in colour. "Opium," he said. "Extracted from the sap of unripened poppy seeds, Valmonze. It contains about 15% morphine and smaller percentages of other alkaloids. That's the way it's been so far while we've been getting prepared narcotics from the Earth."

The patriarch closed the cabinet door. He grasped the medico roughly by the shoulder. "You know very well that's too dangerous in the long run. So we made

an agreement with Aplied to send us a load of the seeds so that we could grow our own plants. Now the seeds have arrived, so what more do you want?"

"I want poppy seeds," said Amat-Palong disdainfully. "You may be a good merchant but you "Don't understand anything about this particular commodity."

Valmonze stared at him suspiciously. "What do you mean by that?"

Amat-Palong calmly picked up the box containing the grey powder. "Here, patriarch, is your supposed 'real stuff'. You can be glad you haven't transshipped it yet. I've taken the trouble to pulverize a handful of the seed kernels and to analyse the results."

Valmonze leaned heavily on the desk, so close that he was breathing into the doctor's face. "What's wrong with the seeds?" he demanded.

"There is nothing wrong with the seeds, such as they are," answered Amat-Palong. "But if you were to plant them you would only get some kind of a vegetable."

The patriarch jerked the box out of the Ara's hand. The veins in his neck stood out sharply as he stared at the pulverized dust. "You mean to say this stuff isn't poppy seeds?"

"It only looks like the real thing," confirmed the Ara. "Actually, however, it has nothing in common with poppy seeds."

Cursing heavily, Valmonze threw the box of powder aside. He raised a fist threateningly in the air. "That pig of an Aplied has pulled a fast one!" The patriarch didn't hesitate to describe his business associate with colourful expressions that applied to himself as well. "He most likely thought I'd just transship the stuff without examining it."

Amat-Palong calmly endured the Trader's raving outburst and when Valmonze simmered down a bit the Ara said: "I can't very well imagine that Aplied would fool around with childish and clumsy methods like this. I think you would do better to have a closer look at his contact man, this Shaugnassy person. Perhaps he thinks he can trick both you and Aplied."

"Shaugnassy?" Valmonze's eyes flashed with a sudden revelation. "Shaugnassy didn't make the contact this time. Aplied sent another man. His name is Pincer."

"What difference does that make? Shaugnassy or Pincer—in the end analysis you've been 'had' as the Terrans say."

"You ought to see this Pincer character!" yelled Valmonze, suddenly enraged again. "He's the most stupid ass that's ever been—seen in this system! He's even afraid of elevators and he doesn't know a damned thing about our business!" He thrust a thick index finger into the Ara's chest. "I'll just have him fetched here and then we'll find out whether or not he's tried to throw us a curve!"

Amat-Palong smiled thinly. "There's nothing easier than that. Meanwhile, I shall prepare an injection. Under its influence, this Pincer person will blab out any kind of information you want."

Valmonze leaned over the Ara's intercom and flipped it on. He growled out his

name to identify himself and then started issuing orders. “Go find that Terran and his female companion—the two who landed with us in the *Val 1*. They are to be brought here immediately. I’ll be waiting for them in the lab!”

Satisfied, he sat down in a chair. “So!” he said. “We’ll just have a look at this Pincer character and see what makes him tick!”

5/ THE GREENHORN'S GALACTIC GAMBIT

Leaves and branches brushed against his face but suddenly he felt something solid under his feet again. The sling became loose. He found himself on a platform between the branches which had been fashioned with rough-hewn planks of some kind. Cora was only a few feet from him and was just freeing herself of her rope snare. Both lines were still suspended from somewhere overhead. Pincer looked upward. Above them was a kind of tree house nestled in the heavy branches. In front of its entrance he saw the hunched figures of some very strange creatures. Their size was that of a normal man but that was just about the only thing they had in common with humans. Dark, intelligent eyes gleamed in their birdlike heads, which were framed in a crest of bluish feathers. Their faces were dominated by wide, short beaks and between their thin arms Pincer could see what appeared to be folded membranous skin. He could imagine that in this dense atmosphere the creatures should be capable of perfect flight. The bird creatures' bodies were covered with feathery garments.

Now Pincer understood what Valmonze had meant when he suggested that they should flush the natives out of the trees.

"They are the native inhabitants," he called to Cora reassuringly. "They can't be very malicious or the Springer would have warned us about them."

One of the birdmen lowered himself down to the platform. Since the thick surrounding foliage didn't permit flying, he had used the rope to descend.

He greeted Pincer in broken Intercosmo. "We have big fun—pull no-fly people up from ground."

When he talked his beak clattered. His voice croaked shrilly. Pincer had definite ideas about types of humour but being caught in snares wasn't so funny.

He winked a signal at Cora. "Lower us down again," he demanded. "We're in a hurry."

The bird creature regarded him craftily. His claw-like hand pointed at a carton of cigarettes under Pincer's arm. "Your present for Schnitz?" he asked excitedly.

When Pincer made a move toward him the platform began to sway. Schnitz didn't seem to notice it but Pincer paled as he sensed the movement of the plank flooring. Cora supported herself on an upright branch.

"Present!" repeated Schnitz impatiently.

Pincer wasn't in a gift-making mood. While they were losing time here, the

Springers might be starting their pursuit already. "I'm afraid not, my friend," he informed the native. "We don't have any presents. We'd like to go on our way."

Schnitz stared at him fixedly. Then he gabbled in some incomprehensible language to his three companions who were still crouched in front of the tree house. To Pincer's dismay and fright, the three responded by also lowering themselves to the platform, which trembled under their additional weight. With one free hand he grasped one of the dangling lines for support.

The indigenous birdman's tone of voice was now distinctly threatening. "No-fly man—now have present for Schnitz?"

"Give him a carton," said Cora. "Maybe that'll make him friendlier. And I'll take one myself."

Pincer reluctantly carried out his wife's suggestion. He handed Schnitz a carton and then dipped into the other to get a pack for Cora. Drawing out a cigarette he handed it to her and gave her a light. Meanwhile Schnitz had begun to examine his present in great excitement. His companions aided him, accompanied by an unbearable chattering.

Cora drew in deeply, then exhaled a cloud of smoke.

Schnitz looked at her with sudden interest. He sniffed at the smoke and breathed it in.

"Don't you want one too, Johnny?" asked Cora.

Pincer looked up into the treetop, vaguely embarrassed. "Cora, you know I don't smoke," he said. "My stomach can't take it."

Meanwhile Schnitz had come closer to Cora in order to breathe in the smoke more deeply. Pincer watched in revulsion. To him it was inexplicable how a reasonable being could do something like that.

"He seems to like it," observed Cora.

Suddenly Schnitz began to whirl around in circles. He opened up his arms and his wing-surfaces tautened. As though intoxicated, he reeled back and forth across the platform. The boards creaked and threatened to crack.

"With all that shaking he'll make us fall!" yelled Pincer.

Schnitz staggered over closer to Cora again. Pincer didn't dare get in his way. To do so he would have had to let go of the rope and maybe lose his balance, in which case he could fall from the platform. But now the other three creatures had also taken an interest in the cigarette smoke. They followed Schnitz and eagerly breathed in the acrid fumes.

"Throw that thing away!" shouted Pincer to his wife. "Can't you see that vapour is setting them into a frenzy?"

By this time Schnitz and his friends had cast all care and caution to the winds. They danced about on the boards so wildly that it made Pincer break out in a sweat.

"Stop it!" he yelled at Schnitz. "Knock it off, will you!"

In a rapturous state, Schnitz staggered over to him. "No-fly make good

present!" he cackled. "Him have wish, too?"

"Yes!" Pincer blurted out. "We're trying to escape from the Springers. It's important for us to find a hiding place and that we get out of here! Can you help us?"

"We help!" replied the aborigine willingly "Schnitz send friend to landing place. Him watch Springers. Schnitz make carry seats."

The birdman went into a conference with one of his companions, who quickly clambered into the treetop. Pincer presumed that the creature would fly to the spaceport from there.

"What does he mean by 'carry seats'?" asked Cora in English. "Do you think they want to sneak us away into the forest?"

Pincer suspected that Schnitz had other intentions and just the thought of being right about it made him the more uncertain. He wondered if the friendliness of the birdmen would continue after the intoxicating effects of the cigarettes wore off.

"Why don't you smoke a cigarette now and then?" suggested Cora. "That will keep them in a good mood."

Even before she finished speaking, Pincer experienced a twinge of conscience. "It's not right to take advantage of them and misuse them for our own purposes like that!" he said emphatically. "Were getting them into something they have nothing to do with."

"Well, if you don't want to do anything for yourself," she retorted, "you could at least think about me! Or remember your plan to send word to Perry Rhodan about this smuggling business! Do you think we'll ever get to do that if you're going to stop at every chance and go into the right and wrong of it?"

Her tirade made his face redden as he looked unhappily at her. His fingers plucked at the rope as though it were the most urgent thing he had to do. In sudden remorse, Cora came toward him across the swaying platform.

"I'm sorry, Johnny," she said. "Of course it was wrong of me to reproach you. I'll do whatever you say." She caressed his face.

"It was alright," he said somewhat hoarsely. He bent down to kiss her but the swaying of the platform made him desist in a hurry. "You shouldn't have to smoke all the cigarettes by yourself," he told her. "I'll take over some of them."

He braced himself and turned again to Schnitz, who was dangling on the rope in a nonchalant fashion. "What do you intend to do with the carry seats?" he asked.

"Fly away with no-fly people," announced Schnitz laconically. "Make big flight to good hide-place."

Just the thought of being thus airborne caused Pincer's stomach to rebel. "But we're far too heavy," he objected. "One of you can't carry us."

"Us four," explained Schnitz happily. "Two carry one no-fly."

"What do you think of it?" Pincer asked his wife.

"The birdmen know this country," she reminded him. "They know exactly

where to go. Certainly it would give us a faster head start. It seems to me that going through the forest on foot would be more dangerous—and besides, that way the Springers would soon overtake us.”

“Alright then,” said Pincer. “Schnitz, let’s make two carry seats.”

Schnitz gave one of his companions an order and the latter swung up to the tree hut above them. Pincer would have liked very much to learn more about these bird creatures but he didn’t want to waste any time asking questions. This place up here in the branches seemed to be only an observation post which served to keep an eye on the Springers. And the tree hut did not have the appearance of an actual dwelling.

Cora lit up another cigarette. Schnitz looked at her agreeably and sniffed with pleasure. Pincer had a humanitarian feeling of sympathy for these native creatures and for that very reason he found it difficult to go along with this method of dealing with them.

When Schnitz’s friend came back down from the hut it was enough to make him forget his worries for a few minutes.

“Kankantz bring material for carry seats,” Schnitz explained to the Terrans. “Make much fast.”

Kankantz made an enthusiastic gurgling noise. He blinked in a friendly fashion and the feathery crown around his eyes bobbed up and down. But Pincer only had eyes for* the two thin slats and the several pieces of frayed rope that Kankantz had procured.

“You mean you’re going to make the seats out of that?” he asked weakly.

Schnitz grasped one of the slats and swept it energetically about him, apparently wishing to demonstrate the stability of the board.

“Do you really think this method of transport is trustworthy?” Pincer asked his wife. “I can’t imagine we’ll get very far with it.”

“Well, Johnny, do we have any other choice?”

Meanwhile Schnitz, Kankantz and the third birdman began to cut notches in the two slats. For this purpose they used knives that were obviously trade merchandise of the Galactic Traders. At the ends of the boards they cut indentations in both sides of the wood. Then they tied on the lines by making loops at each end of the seats and tightening them around the notches. The finished products looked like primitive swings.

Schnitz snapped his knife shut and tucked it away inside his thick covering of feathers. He regarded his work proudly, testing the ropes and checking the elasticity of the slats. Pincer watched him doubtfully.

“Make good work,” Schnitz announced while he scratched his meagre belly.

And with that he seemed to regard the matter as settled. He calmly squatted in front of Cora and breathed in the smoke from her cigarette. While he did so he rolled his eyes and clattered his beak in a sign of pleasure. Kankantz hunched down beside him and the other birdman simply hung down from a branch and

dangled his head in front of Cora.

“What are we supposed to do now?” asked Pincer. “Schnitz, we can’t just stay here forever on this platform!”

Schnitz was apparently annoyed by the interruption. “Wait for Lupatz,” was his curt reply.

A crackling of the underbrush attracted Pincer’s attention. The foliage here was so dense that he could hardly see below. But what little he could observe was enough to set his heart to thumping.

100 meters from the tree in which they were located, Pincer saw three Springers hacking a path through the thickets. They were headed straight for the hiding place.

* * * *

Inasmuch as the Morg envoy had a tail thicker than a human arm, he couldn’t be expected to sit in a regular chair. A special prop had been fashioned for him which was sufficiently adapted to the characteristics of a Morg body so as to offer a maximum of comfort.

However in this moment the Morg ambassador Stanour appeared to have no interest in making use of the special seat. In obvious agitation he had come close to where Perry Rhodan was sitting. His protruding eyes had a bluish sheen to them. All six of them were evenly spaced around his oval skull. In general the Morgs were a peaceful lot who remained aloof from the altercations between the galactic races but not very much of this pacifism was to be noted in Stanour just now.

In his strange tongue he barked and howled at Rhodan. “The bases of addiction are increasing all the time, Administrator! In Pastonar, a small town west of the Troatara country, there are only raving lunatics left. The influx of narcotics is beginning to threaten our entire people.”

The extra-terrestrial’s words were being translated by Eduard Deegan, Earth’s Trade Commissioner on Morg. Other than Rhodan, Deegan and the Morg, Solar Intelligence Chief Allan D. Mercant and Reginald Bell were present in the room. Rhodan had deliberately refrained from bringing any others into the conference. A show of staff subordinates might have given the Morg an impression that he did not consider the envoy’s problems to be important. Stanour knew Bell and Rhodan personally and it had been explained to him who Mercant was, so he was somewhat mollified by the fact that he was able to confer alone with these three powerful men.

“Morg isn’t the only planet we’ve gotten such reports from,” said Rhodan.

One could see that he had been overworked. The arduous test flight using the new linear spacedrive and his encounters with the Akons had left their mark on him. Also the additional burden placed upon him by the criminal narcotics smuggling had only served to aggravate his condition.

“This poisonous business appears to be expanding continuously,” Rhodan continued. “The suppliers seem to be located on Earth while the Galactic Traders are acting as the distributors.”

Deegan translated Rhodan’s suspicions to the Morg, whose ancestors had once lived in swamps, but he did not seem to be inclined to become any friendlier.

“The Springers say that the Terrans are the only ones to blame for the spread of these drugs,” cried the Morg. “Do not forget, Administrator, that the opium that is appearing everywhere is of Earthly origin. The Springers claim that Terran politicians want to contaminate the different races of the galaxy so that they can be more quickly subjugated and made a part of the Solar Imperium.”

It was only with hesitance that Deegan translated this complaint. While he spoke, Rhodan’s jaw muscles came into prominence. It was his only outward sign of an emotional response. Bell, however, could no longer control himself.

“Those devils!” he gasped, springing out of his chair. “They’re trying to compromise us systematically! If I only knew the miserable wretch who’s working with them from our side—I’d personally crate him off to Pluto!”

“My agents are working day and night,” reported Mercant. “We’ve interrogated each and every suspect. An entirely new organization must be involved; the old dogs in the interstellar crime channels have nothing to do with this evil business. The top man is probably living right among us behind a mask of propriety—maybe a pillar of his community. How are we supposed to find him? Should we subject every single man to a thought probe by telepaths? That not only contradicts our ethical principles; it’s also a fairly hopeless undertaking. By the time we got through with it the Springers would have already accomplished their purpose. In other words most of the races we trade with would deny us entry into their territories.”

“I’ve explained all of that to Stanour myself, more times than I can count, sir,” said Eduard Deegan dejectedly. “It’s hard to imagine what misery opium has caused these people. I mean, by comparison, a Terran addict would seem like a ray of sunshine.”

Rhodan interrupted him with a wave of the hand. “Tell him well do everything in our power to find the criminals behind this operation. We are prepared to send doctors to Morg to ease some of the worst of the suffering there. We simply can’t do any more than that.”

“We have been trading openly with Terrans,” shouted Stanour bitterly after Deegan had gloomily repeated Rhodan’s words to him. “But this is now at an end. We are no longer interested in the presence of Terran freighters on Morg. Mr. Deegan has been an exemplary friend, he bears no guilt in this. Nevertheless we will have to disenfranchise your commercial base on our planet. So within a reasonable time you will kindly recall your people from there. A more precise time limit will be announced to you by our government. I am able even now to assure you that Quartrox-Zuat, the Emperor of Saastal, will follow our precedent in this matter. So I am also speaking in the name of His Majesty. After all, Saastal

is our sister planet and we are closely allied with that race of people.”

Deegan delivered an exact translation of his message. Bell seemed ready to charge at the Morg with arms waving but a look from Rhodan held him back.

Rhodan spoke to Deegan. “Take care of our friend until he has left the Earth. Tell him that we will respect the wishes of his government and will break off our commercial relationship.” Deegan was about to get up but Rhodan hadn’t finished yet. “Wait, Deegan. Also tell him that a day will come when Terran freighters will be welcome again on Morg and Saastal—as sure as my name is Perry Rhodan.”

Only Bell, his closest friend, knew the extremity of agitation that Rhodan was going through

“Farewell, Administrator,” said Stanour, and he and Deegan left the room.

For awhile the three powerful men were silent. Each was immersed in his own thoughts.

Mercant was the first to speak. “That was putting it pretty plain,” he said dejectedly. “They actually believe that we are the ones who are distributing the narcotics.”

Rhodan nodded. Tall and lean, he sat there in his chair, an almost legendary figure in his neat and simple uniform. Only his eyes seemed to be alive in the angular face. His drawn, sensitive features could only belong to a man who bore the burden of a monstrous responsibility from minute to minute. The biological cell shower treatment on the synthetic planet Wanderer had kept Rhodan’s body young but his mind and experience had not been held in such a state of suspension.

“That was only the beginning,” he said quietly. “Other planets will follow the example of Morg and Saastal. That’s what the Springers want. If they succeed in isolating us economically we’ll no longer be able to maintain our interstellar commerce. Neither linear spacedrive nor mutants will enable us to varnish over a situation like that.”

Bell clenched his fists. “This fool of a Morg! He’ll find out soon enough what kind of cut-throats his friends the Springers are!”

Usually when Bell let loose with a statement like this he laced his words with some that were not exactly appropriate but in this case his indignation was too genuine, so for once he was beyond criticism. The Deputy Administrator knew only too well what the results of the narcotics smuggling could be.

“If we wait until then,” countered Mercant, “it’ll be too late for the Morgs and all the other afflicted races. I can’t help thinking what would happen if the Springers ever got hold of some straight poppy seeds and were able to cultivate the stuff themselves. That would be the end!”

“There’s a slight flaw in your reasoning,” Bell retorted. “Do you really believe that the Terran smugglers would give the Traders such an advantage? That would ruin their own business!”

Rhodan had listened thoughtfully to his two friends. “Nevertheless I don’t believe we should dismiss Allan’s suspicions that easily,” he said. “We don’t

know if something more than commercial motives is behind this Terran group of bandits—such as political objectives.”

“Political!” exclaimed Bell, rubbing his chin perplexed. “I don’t follow you.”

Rhodan smiled without mirth. He came out from behind his desk and went to the window. Terrania spread out before him, the city of superlatives. For Rhodan, a Native American, the Terranian metropolis was ineffably fascinating. It had become a second home to him.

“There could be a group on Earth who would like to overthrow the present government,” explained Rhodan. “What would they do in order to accomplish this? If they are completely unscrupulous they will seek to compromise us with every possible means.”

“Unfortunately that’s all too true,” Bell admitted. “I think we’d better crack down much harder on every smuggling organization.”

Rhodan turned from the window to look at Bell and the Intelligence Chief. “And that we’ll just do, my friends. In 4 hours I’m calling a meeting and I want your officers to be present, Allan. Also our liaison people connected with all stellar commercial bases will be present. And I’m even thinking of bringing in a couple of the mutants.”

The conference took place at the appointed time. It was 18:00 hours, Standard Time, when it was opened by the First Administrator.

* * * *

On this particular day the evening papers carried an interview with a certain Archibald Pincer, president of the Intercosmic Fruit Company. Mr. Pincer demanded that the Solar Fleet be committed immediately to a search for his son, John Edgar Pincer, who had apparently gone astray on a honeymoon trip to Vega. Readers who may not have found the report itself to be particularly amusing were at least forced to chuckle when they saw the picture accompanying the article. It showed a young man with a dreamy expression and ears that stuck out from his head. This was John Edgar Pincer.

The young Pincer looked like a man who could get lost in his own house, certainly not like a bold space pilot who would be likely to take off into the void on his honeymoon.

* * * *

Perry Rhodan closed his conference shortly after 20:00 hours, Standard Time. He had come to a decision with his staff concerning various measures to be taken in order to put an end to smuggling operations once and for all. On that same evening Stanour, the envoy from Morg, took off from the spaceport in Terrania.

The population of the Earth had no suspicion of the difficulties now shadowing

its immediate future. If anyone had asked an impartial observer what he thought was the most important event of the day, he might have grinned and replied: “Well, there’s that youngster who went astray on his honeymoon trip.”

And he would not have been wrong, as a matter of fact.

Because the only chance the Solar Imperium had for averting the threat of an interstellar commercial-economic boycott rested at this moment on the narrow shoulders of one John Edgar Pincer—a greenhorn.

6/ FLIGHT OF THE FLEEING NO-FLIES

The three Traders came to a stop and looked around them in apparent indecision. Pincer was watching them, hardly daring to breathe. Behind him the platform began to sway gently. The 4th birdman, Lupatz, had returned without a sound. Pincer gently nudged Schnitz in the back and drew his attention to the Springers down below. The native creature blinked at him and pointed to the carry seats.

“No-flies hide tree hut,” he said, pointing upward. “Schnitz make big trick.”

Somehow Schnitz impressed Pincer as being like a county fair magician who kept coming up every minute with a new brainstorm with which to fool the astounded public. Although Schnitz’s bag of tricks was of course less pretentious, nevertheless he exuded a certain confidence which helped Pincer to hold onto his nerves. At any rate these bird creatures had to be the most optimistic extraterrestrials he had ever heard of.

Pincer turned to his wife. “We have to hide in the tree hut. Schnitz wants to divert the Springers’ attention. Do you think you can climb up that rope?”

Cora nodded. She started to climb upwards. Schnitz watched her in complete tranquillity.

“Now ‘he’ no-fly go, too!” he challenged Pincer.

The cloistered young executive had never attempted such a rope-climb in his life. It seemed fairly easy because Cora made it without much effort. Pincer reached up and grasped the rope tightly. When he placed his weight on it, it began to swing and carried him slightly beyond the platform. While leaves and branches brushed his face, he didn’t dare risk a look below him. The rope swung back over the platform again and he felt Schnitz’s claw hand grasping his jacket.

“No-fly no can do,” was the native creature’s professional evaluation. “Schnitz must help.”

Pincer was forced to endure the shame of leaning on help from the birdman. Kankantz, Lupatz and the 4th native looked on impassively at the Terran’s struggles to climb upward. Schnitz had grasped him by the collar and was pulling him up branch by branch. Finally he stood next to Cora on the front ledge of the hut. He didn’t dare look at her directly.

“Come on in,” smiled his wife. “Our new home isn’t exactly aristocratic but it seems to offer the most security for the present. It might even be a good idea for

you to hold your nose.”

Since she didn't seem to hold his aborted rope-climb against him, Pincer followed her contentedly into the hut. Schnitz remained standing at the entrance. The walls were fashioned of a conglomeration of boards, grass, leaves and moss. Light filtered in through a number of gaps here and there.

“Take easy,” Schnitz advised. “Now me talk to Springers.”

As he simply dropped back into emptiness, Cora could not suppress an outcry. Pincer gave her a warning glance because the crackling sounds in the underbrush below indicated that the Springers had come closer to the tree.

“Hello, partisans!” croaked Schnitz from the platform below. Before Pincer had time to wonder about this expression, the birdman continued. “You bring present?”

“No, you nosy featherbrain!” came a deep voice from a Trader. “We have no presents for your flock.”

“Then you make fast scram,” Schnitz demanded with the coolness of an old brigadier general.

Cora whispered to her husband. “If his deeds can match his impudence we should be able to relax under his protection.”

“Listen to me, you chirping ninny!” the Springer shouted threateningly. “We're searching for a man and a woman. They're thinner than we are and the man has no beard. They were wearing strange clothing.”

“Good friends to Schnitz,” returned the birdman. “Make big present. Hope come back soon.”

“Which way did they go?”

“More far into woods. That way.” Pincer couldn't see what direction Schnitz was indicating to the Springers. “Already much time since here.”

A crackling of branches and rustling foliage indicated that the Springers were pushing onward in their search. Soon after that the silhouette of a birdman appeared in the entrance of the hut. And there was Schnitz leaning carelessly against the wall.

“Thanks!” sighed Pincer, much relieved. “Many thanks, my friend!”

Schnitz swept his claw-hand toward his beak as though it held a cigarette. His request was unmistakable.

“What do you say if you smoke the next one?” asked Cora.

“I'll give it a try,” mumbled Pincer without enthusiasm.

Schnitz waited in suspense until the Terran had lit up. Pincer coughed.

“You shouldn't inhale,” advised Cora.

“Yes, dear,” said Pincer chokingly while his eyes watered. He had already moistened the cigarette to such an extent that it was crumbling in his mouth and tobacco strands were getting into his teeth.

It was like everything else in his life so far. Anything he touched somehow seemed to go wrong. He was gradually beginning to doubt that he was even

capable of sending Rhodan a message.

“Now we fly from here,” suggested Schnitz, dissolving Pincer’s dark quandary. “Lupatz, Kankantz and Tonitutz all ready.”

The birdman entered the hut and removed the rear wall by merely laying it back inside on the floor. Pincer noted with amazement that the creatures had cut a flight approach channel for themselves through the crown of the tree. Kankantz appeared with the carry seats.

“Of course we can still change our minds,” said Pincer with a wry face. But Cora silently shook her head.

Suddenly they heard the typical roaring sound of a spaceship through the opening the birdmen had carved out of the treetop, Pincer caught sight of the craft as it swept past them overhead. And he knew then that he could not delay his flight any longer. The spaceship was of Terran origin!

Pincer did not doubt for a moment who this was—the man whom Valmonze had really been waiting for all this time: *Shaugnessy!*

It meant no more and no less than a sentence of death for John Edgar Pincer and his young bride.

* * * *

Toraman was Valmonze’s eldest son. He had often seen his father in moods of excitement and anger but the rage he was in now made all previous emotional outbreaks seem insignificant by comparison. The patriarch was gripping the videophone console with both hands. On the screen was the face of a Terran which also did not seem to reflect the best of dispositions.

“Shaugnessy!” raved Valmonze. “I demand an immediate explanation!”

“You have to be kidding,” replied the smuggler. “You should tell me what’s going on! You weren’t at the rendezvous point to take me on board the Val 1. When I finally got you on the phone you gave me some gobbledygook about fake poppy seeds. I don’t go along with that at all—and now to top it off you want an explanation!”

Valmonze realized that this would get him nowhere. Either Shaugnessy was a terrific actor or he really didn’t know what the patriarch was talking about. “Alright, come into the port,” he growled. “We can talk about it then.”

“That sounds a little better,” nodded the man on the screen. “I hope by that time you’ve cooled down a little.”

Valmonze snorted angrily and shut off the instrument. As he turned he collided with Toraman, who had been standing close behind him. The latter drew back respectfully at once. The Springers who were present in the room watched their leader expectantly. In the background, only Amat-Palong had a derisive smile on his face.

But for Valmonze, his aggravations were not yet at an end. The three Springers

he had sent after Pincer entered the room and the patriarch could tell by looking at them that they hadn't found their quarry.

"We weren't able to overtake the Terran and the woman, Patriarch," reported their spokesman. "They had too big a head start. It's obvious that they're on the run."

"What a lousy break for us that we have far-sighted idiots like you around here!" Valmonze shouted at him. "Well, I'll flush those Terrans out if I have to burn down the whole forest!"

For a brief moment there was a flash of rebellion in the eyes of the younger man he was speaking to but then the conventional dictates of tradition won out. It was impossible to contradict a patriarch. The Springer lowered his gaze and said, "We ran into some of the bird men, Patriarch. They told us the fugitives were on their way to the Great Basin. If we take a glider we can get there ahead of them."

Valmonze's eyes gleamed angrily under his bushy brows. As the clan leader he preferred to give all the orders himself and yet he expected his clansman at the same time to develop a strength of self-reliance. He wasn't aware of the other's momentary thought of rebellion. His power was of a totalitarian nature and thus far such ideas had not yet occurred to any of his followers.

"So what are you still waiting for?" he bellowed, waving his fists in the air. "Razmon will fly with you in the glider to the Great Basin."

"Are you really so childish?" asked a cold voice in the back of the room.

Valmonze stiffened. The chamber became abnormally silent. Then all Springers present turned to the person who had dared to insult their patriarch so brazenly. They stared into the emotionless features of Amat-Palong, the Ara. Tall but thin compared to the Springers, he was standing there leaning against a file cabinet. As Valmonze looked across at him, a faint smile touched his lips.

Certainly among the Springers there were a few who took a malicious delight in his challenge. But if they had expected Valmonze to turn upon Amat-Palong like a cyclone they were disappointed. At the moment the patriarch revealed that he was quite capable of controlling his feelings whenever it was important to do so.

"Your criticism indicates that you have a better idea, Ara," said Valmonze tonelessly. "We're anxious to hear it."

Amat-Palong shoved himself away from the cabinet with a shoulder and looked at the Springers with an air of weary boredom. "Place a glider at my disposal," he challenged Valmonze. "I'll bring you this Pincer person."

If the patriarch had ever revealed an insidious smile on his face it was certainly now. Amat-Palong was placing his reputation on the line. If he did not keep his promise he would lose face. "Do you perchance wish to fly to the Great Basin also?" he asked the Ara.

"No," replied the other curtly. It was obvious that he preferred to keep his destination a secret.

"You may have a glider," said Valmonze. "Nevertheless, Razmon will fly to the Basin."

Amat-Palong nodded indifferently and leisurely left the room. With a gesture of the head Valmonze also sent the Springers out who were to go with Razmon and renew their search for Pincer.

The loudspeaker crackled on the intercom panel. “Shaugnessy has just landed, Patriarch. What are your instructions?”

“I’ll be in the main office,” Valmonze called back. “Have the Terran brought to me.”

Less than 15 minutes later, Clifton Shaugnessy walked into the patriarch’s office. He was a short but broad-shouldered man with a round face and a narrow hooked nose that was rather repugnant. The smuggler wore a short jacket with fancy embroidery and in his belt he carried an older model thermo weapon. When he spoke his lips revealed his teeth as though he were snarling and it gave a hollow sound to his voice.

“Perry Rhodan had Terra locked in with a quarantine,” he said by way of greeting. “That’s why I couldn’t make it on time. I don’t have anything with me—neither poppy seeds nor the regular stuff. Aplied thinks it’s too dangerous right now to pick up the business again. The patrol ships are making real sharp inspections. No freighters can take off without special permits. Even in Terrania itself no takeoffs or landings are allowed. The reason for it was a strange kind of epidemic. There’s a rumour that Rhodan himself was afflicted by it. They say he became infected during an experiment. And there are a lot of speculations—particularly about that experiment—that are causing plenty of people to worry. The grapevine has it that Rhodan made a successful test flight with a new kind of spacedrive and it brought him into contact with an alien race that’s supposed to be much more powerful than Arkon, Terra and the Springer clans all put together.”

“So you bring me rumours,” said Valmonze angrily. “We are waiting for merchandise and Aplied sends you here with rumours that sound improbable and have no value for us.”

Shaugnessy shrugged. He looked like a man who seldom worried about anything—certainly not about the problems of the Galactic Traders.

“Do you know a man named Pincer who works for Aplied?” asked Valmonze.

“Pincer?” Shaugnessy repeated the name and fingered the zipper of his jacket as though to help him think. “No,” he said finally. “Never heard of the name.”

“He showed up here claiming he represented you. He brought us a load of poppy seeds that turned out to be an imitation of the real stuff,” Valmonze reported.

Shaugnessy nodded as though wryly amused. “The guy must be wild,” he said with a matter-of-factness that was incomprehensible to Valmonze. “Where is he now?”

“On the lam. But we’ll soon have him back again. Can you figure who this man might be? He has a woman with him.”

“Maybe one of Rhodan’s agents,” said Shaugnessy, who didn’t seem to be disturbed by his own suspicions. “Sooner or later they’ll pick up our trail.”

Valmonze refrained from explaining to the smuggler why Rhodan must not uncover the people behind the narcotics ring at this early stage of the game, under any circumstances. It would be purposeless to educate this small-fry bandit concerning galactic politics. Shaugnessy merely transported opium for Aplied and Valmonze. In addition he supplied 6 other patriarchs. There were 8 other such contact men under Aplied who “took care of” various Springer clans. This made exactly 63 Traders who were receiving the hard stuff in order to undermine the interstellar commerce of the Solar Imperium. Probably Shaugnessy wasn’t even aware that the main reason the Traders were dealing in narcotics was in the hope of weakening Terra. From an economical standpoint they were not profiting any more from the opium trade than they were from their usual businesses. The chief profiteer of them all was Vincent Aplied in Cape Town.

“Whoever this Pincer may be,” said Valmonze, “we have to find him. He can’t leave the planet so we’ll grab him sooner or later.”

“If you’re really dealing with an agent of Solar Intelligence,” warned Shaugnessy, “you may run into some difficulties with him. But if he’s just somebody pulling a fast one for a buck, at least you have to admire his guts.”

Valmonze made a deprecating gesture. The patriarch’s chief emotion relating to the fugitive Terran was the hatred of the deceived. But in such a state Valmonze was dangerous. His wrath would descend upon the youngster—hard and without mercy.

* * * *

At this particular moment, however, the vice-president of the Intercosmic Fruit Company presented a sorry spectacle. If Valmonze could have seen him he would have quickly abandoned his suspicions that John Edgar Pincer was an agent of any kind or description.

At first glance it appeared that he was in a medium that offered no support. Soaring at a dizzying height above the forest, Pincer had nothing under him other than a narrow slat, 10 inches wide, from the ends of which were ropes leading up to Schnitz and Lupatz, who were sailing along with outstretched wings. Since his stomach wasn’t built to take even the sensations of an ordinary elevator, Pincer was going through the worst hour of his life. In fact his stomach felt as though it had collapsed entirely. The lack of blood in his brain blurred his vision, which was just as well, perhaps, because for Pincer the view of what lay below him might have been devastating.

About 20 meters ahead of him, Cora was being transported by Kankantz and Tonitutz. Pincer secretly congratulated himself that he had let his wife go ahead of him. In this way she was spared the sight of his pitiable condition and the embarrassing inferences that might be drawn from it. The wings of the birdmen had a considerable span and their movements created a constant wind blast that caused Pincer to cringe with fright.

His hands grasping the support lines were practically paralysed. He did not dare to make the slightest movement. The thin slat beneath him shook and swayed. His state of mind allowed him no concept of the speed of their flight. Although every moment carried him farther away from the Springer base he would have been happy to exchange his airborne roost for a seat in Valmonze's spaceship.

But then he reminded himself that this was purely a selfish consideration. He must not think that way. His valiant little wife had to face the same perils as he did. If he were to weaken, he would throw away his chances of informing Rhodan of what was going on. And so he continued to bear up under his suffering, a cramped and frightened figure on a little narrow board in the sky.

He could not have estimated how long the flight lasted. Just when he thought he couldn't hold on any longer, Schnitz and Lupatz began to glide downward. But the landing was the worst part of all. Pincer broke into a cold sweat. Shadows and blotches appeared before his eyes and there were brightly-coloured rings that in his colour-blindness he had never suspected existed. He gasped for air. Suddenly he felt a rough jolt and was rolling over solid ground.

"Flight ended," he heard Schnitz announce indifferently. "No-fly now can stand up."

However, Pincer had to recover from a delayed nervous reaction. He managed to crawl a slight distance on trembling knees. His first attempt to get up failed miserably. Finally when he did regain his feet his legs were wobbling and his head was roaring. When his vision cleared he saw that he was in a meadow surrounded by the forest. Cora had landed about 100 meters away. She was approaching him in the company of Kankantz and Tonitutz. Pincer struggled to somehow give a vigorous impression. He took long strides with his skinny legs as he went to meet his wife.

"Wasn't that a terrific flight, Johnny?" Cora called to him. "It really refreshed me!"

Pincer blushed to his hair roots. His momentary veneer of manliness vanished and once more he became the same stiff and clumsy John Edgar Pincer that he had always been. "Yeah, sure, sweetheart," he said. His faint smile disappeared when she threw her arms around him. "But this is no picnic," he admonished her sternly. "Don't forget that Valmonze mentioned a number of control stations when I tried to send a radio message from the *Error*."

"That's not necessarily so," she corrected him. "He only mentioned that the whole area was kept under a constant radio surveillance."

Pincer raised a thin pontifical finger toward her. "It's therefore quite possible that there are a number of radio stations on Alazee's planet. And it's our task to find one of them."

He turned to Schnitz and went back to using Intercosmo. "Aside from the spaceport, do the Springers have other stations here?" he inquired. "Do you know where we could find one of them?"

Schnitz's blue crown of feathers whipped up and down in his struggle to

comprehend. “Schnitz no savvy no-fly man,” he said. “First want go away—then go Springers again.”

Pincer glanced imploringly at his wife but made an attempt to explain. “It’s a bit complicated, Schnitz. We wish to make contact with friends on another planet so that they can come here and rescue us. For that we need certain instruments that we do not have. The Springers have such equipment. That’s why we have to find one of their other bases.

Schnitz rattled his beak in new comprehension. Was Pincer imagining things or did he see in that birdman face the actual traces of a cunning grin?

“No-fly want make big-speak far away?” asked the aborigine with a new show of instinct for the problem. “Schnitz savvy plenty-know heap stations. Many far fly-away place—too much fly. Only one much close. All station work by birdman people—learn black-box magic from Springers,” he explained.

Pincer gave his wife a signal of his relief. If Schnitz could lead them to a radio monitor station they would only be dealing with aborigines, not with the Springers themselves.

“My friend, lead us to this place,” he requested of Schnitz.

For the first time since he had come to know the birdmen he detected a trace of uncertainty in them. Schnitz spread out his flying membranes.

“No go!” he said, somewhat louder than was necessary. “Place of other breed—not friends of Schnitz.” He talked the matter over with his companions in their own language. The responsive gestures from Kankantz, Lupatz and Tonitutz needed no translation for Pincer. They were decidedly against going into the territory of an enemy offshoot of their race.

“My wife and I will go it alone,” Pincer announced. “Just show us the way.”

“Much better not,” contradicted Schnitz emphatically. “No-fly people die in this land.”

“We’ll die in any case,” said Pincer. “Why shouldn’t we try for the slightest chance we can find? Schnitz, we’re asking you to help us just this one more time. Tell us where we can find the station.”

Suddenly, Schnitz became very grave. He stretched out a claw and pointed across the meadow. “No-flies go that way. Still before dark-fall, they come station.”

“Good,” muttered Pincer. “In that case, well get started.”

“Wait yet,” said Schnitz softly. He produced the cigarette carton that Pincer had given him. There was a glitter of remorse in his dark eyes. “Schnitz no take present from dead no-flies,” he crowed mournfully.

Without protestation, Pincer took the package back. Cora came silently to his side. He nodded farewell to the birdmen and took his wife by the hand. Together they traversed the meadow in the direction of the forest.

The feathered aborigines waited for a few more seconds; then they spread out their flying membranes and lifted off from the ground. Pincer heard the swish of

their wings but when he glanced around the meadow was empty.

“They’ve gone,” he said to Cora. “Now we’re on our own book again. We’d better hurry so we can get to that station before it starts to get dark.”

But he came to realize sooner than he expected that his plan wasn’t feasible, in fact Schnitz had been right. They had no sooner penetrated the forest than they ran into an ambush. About 30 birdmen broke from the cover of the trees, brandishing primitive lances. Their leader stood directly in front of Cora and John and raised his weapon.

“We have presents for you,” said Pincer in a friendly manner. “In exchange all you have to do is let us continue onward. We still have a long way ahead of us.”

Once again, John Edgar Pincer had to revise his notion that the universe was populated by peace-loving entities like himself. The native creature showed him quite drastically what he thought of presents. He swung his lance and rammed it into the ground at Pincer’s feet

“He looks awfully mad,” Cora whispered anxiously.

Pincer pressed her hand reassuringly. Then with a disarming nonchalance he pulled the spear out of the ground and examined it curiously. He figured that this was the best psychological procedure but he was wrong again. Half the birdman group fell upon them and tied them with ropes.

In his laced-up condition he looked thinner than usual as he called out words of encouragement to his wife. Secretly he had to confess that the distance they had gained from the spaceport was now all to no avail. They had eluded the Springers at the cost of being captured by primitive aborigines who seemed to be as pitiless and remorseless as the Galactic Traders themselves. The birdmen picked them up bodily and carried them on into the forest.

Pincer’s long-sought cosmic adventure had become a reality. However, now that he was physically aware of how dangerous this could be, his youthful dreams of the past appeared to him as rather stupid. Every man should just do what he was cut out for, he thought dejectedly. However true this might be, the question remained: what was John Edgar Pincer cut out for when nothing but hard luck dogged his footsteps? If the son of the great Archibald Pincer had been a philosopher he might, perchance, have found an answer, but he was just a helpless young man who had been caught awry in some highly involved machinations.

His train of thought was roughly shattered as the birdmen simply dropped him on the ground. Between the trees was a large area that had been cleared of foliage and underbrush. In the surrounding trees Pincer could make out numerous tree butts where the native creatures squatted or stood and greeted the arrivals with a murderous screeching outcry. Cora and John were carried into the centre of the clearing and were dropped again onto the bare ground where the village inhabitants crowded around them.

“Can you imagine what they will do to us, Johnny?” asked Cora. She struggled in her bonds to roll over so that she was facing him.

Pincer’s imagination was vivid enough to envision many things that might

happen to them in the next few hours but they were not the kinds of things one should tell a woman in a situation like this—certainly not the woman he loved. So all he said was that he didn't know.

A one-legged birdman limped over to them, supported by a crutch. He was obviously older than the others and his Intercosmo was perfect. "Where do you come from?" he wanted to know.

"*Urt*," said Pincer. "From the Earth."

The old birdman stood on his one leg and pointed his primitive crutch at the sky. The crowd behind him was respectfully silent. "From there?" he asked.

"Yes," said Pincer. "From there."

"Then do you have the white powder with you?" the oldster inquired, and for the first time Pincer noted signs of a craving intentness in his manner.

He realized then to his horror that the poor creature was a narcotics addict. His pity for this practically helpless being overcame his distrust. He was sure there was some way to help the old birdman and other addicts who might be present.

"The powder is harmful!" he called out to the crowd. Although most likely no one but the old one could understand him. "You must not take it. It will make you sick and you will die from it!"

The old birdman struck him on the chest with his stick. He was so old and feeble that the blow hardly had any force behind it. Pincer was shocked more by the creature's mental attitude than he was by the attack on his person. Here was evil and the worst part about it was that it had been created by poisonous imports from the Earth. He felt deeply ashamed.

What could have motivated the Springers to distribute such drugs on Alazee's planet? The birdmen knew nothing about the Earth and therefore they could not hold Terrans responsible. Schnitz had mentioned that some members of his race performed services for the Springers in the monitoring stations. It was possible that the Traders had supplied the bird people with opium in order to make them dependent upon them.

"Do you have white powder with you?" shouted the one-legged creature again. There was a panicky fear in the voice—a desperate fear of being disappointed.

"No," he answered. "We have no powder."

He thought the oldster would attack him in a senseless rage but instead the birdman bent down and snatched the cigarette packages from his jacket. He tore one of them open. Taking out a cigarette, he tried chewing it but then threw it away in disgust.

"We should show him how to do it," said Cora. "The smoke will have the same effect on him as it did on Schnitz and his friends. Then we can talk him into letting us go."

"I'm no Houdini," Pincer answered grimly. "How can I light up a cigarette in this condition?"

"By tomorrow's dawn we shall prove whether or not you are friends or

enemies,” croaked the one-legged birdman. “Until then you will remain where you are.”

He limped away before Pincer could ask him what kind of proof he was talking about.

* * * *

Alazee’s planet was without a moon and the dense atmosphere all but screened out the light of the stars. This night that Pincer and his wife experienced was not to be compared to anything on Earth. The darkness was impenetrable. It seemed to cover the land like black ink. The natives had all crept back into their tree huts. Pincer and his wife conversed for a long time before they finally dropped into fitful sleep.

Pincer did not know how long he had been asleep, during which time he had been plagued by wild nightmares. He was awakened by a feeling that someone was close to him. He didn’t dare awaken Cora. They were both lying on the ground, helpless in their bonds. What could he do if some carnivorous animal came sniffing around in search of prey? No matter how hard he strained to see, he could not even make out the shadows of the nearest trees.

A twig snapped under the weight of a body. The sound caused Pincer to shudder. He held his breath and listened. Now it was still again. From the trees came the faint chirping of nocturnal insects.

Pincer recalled his childhood when he had often awakened in the night and felt that the weirdest creatures of his imagination were in his room. He used to crawl under the covers then and go fearfully to sleep again and in the morning everything had always turned out to be harmless.

Whatever was moving about there in the darkness was slowly coming closer. In wild desperation Pincer began to tug at his bonds but the natives appeared to be masters at the art of knot-tying. The more he struggled with his binding cords the more tightly they cut into him. He gave up in exhaustion.

There was a movement of air across his face and in the same instant he felt the sharp, cold blade of a knife at his unprotected throat.

* * * *

With a piece of chalk Valmonze drew a circle on the board and in its centre he made a dot. The chalk stick broke in two.

“That’s us,” said the patriarch, pointing to the dot. “What I mean is, it’s the spaceport. The circle indicates the maximum distance that Pincer and the woman can be from us. There’s no way they could have gotten any farther. It’s hard going on foot through the forest. So they could only be...” He ran his finger along the circular line. “Here, on the outer edge of this area. Razmon didn’t find them at the

Great Basin. So far Amat-Palong hasn't even answered our radio signals, so it's likely he hasn't had any success either." This thought caused him to chuckle with grim satisfaction. "It's night now. In the early morning hours I'll personally lead a search party. All available gliders have been reserved for the search. So it's only a matter of time until we overtake these Terrans."

Shaughnessy, who was near the board, regarded Valmonze's chalk sketch as though it were a work of art. "How can it do any good for your gliders to fly above the forest?" he asked Valmonze. "With all that thick foliage the pilots won't be able to see the ground."

"We'll be using infrared search instruments," explained the patriarch. "They can detect a body's heat radiations and indicate the presence of a person on the meters."

"But every birdman down there will trigger a response on your instruments," Shaughnessy reminded him.

"That's correct," Valmonze conceded. "But don't forget that the instruments also pro-rate the heat pickup in terms of average numbers of bodies detected. So all we have to do is land only when we have a reading for just two people. Of course there's a chance that there might be just 2 or 3 natives in a particular place but as a rule those feather-heads are gregarious—they normally gather in large groups."

The Springers who were present murmured their approval. The door opened and Valmonze's eldest son, Toraman, came in. There were a number of documents in his hand. He came to his father and made a slight bow.

"Speak, my son," the patriarch urged him. Without such permission Toraman would have not dared, in his father's presence, to address a meeting.

"Like all of us here," Toraman began, "I've been wondering who this Pincer person could be. My first thought was to make a thorough search of his ship."

"You were right!" his father interrupted. "Why didn't I think of that myself? What have you found?"

Toraman handed the papers to his father. "I have no command of the Terran language," he said. "But we have Shaughnessy here. He can translate these documents for us."

"Very good!" said the patriarch approvingly. He handed the sheets over to Shaughnessy. "Can you get anything out of these?"

The smuggler carefully read each document through. The more he studied the information they contained the broader he smiled.

Valmonze was anxious to share his knowledge with him so he finally grumbled impatiently at him. "Alright, so what do they say?"

Shaughnessy waved the papers around. "If these documents are valid, and there can be no doubt about it, our friend is completely harmless!" He raised the first paper in the air. "This," he said to the gathering, "is a wedding license for a John Edgar Pincer and his wife Cora, maiden name Hatfield. They were married in Denver—25th of July 2102 Earth time. We're just now at the middle of August.

So it can be presumed that the fugitive couple are on their honeymoon!" He laughed so hard that tears came to his eyes. Since Valmonze had no sense of humour for such things, he visibly took a very dim view of the whole affair. After Shaugnessy regained control of himself he presented the next document. "This is a flight permit for a discus ship registered under the name of *Error*," he explained. "It gives the right to the vessel's owner, John Edgar Pincer, to make a takeoff into space from the private spaceport of the Intercosmic Fruit Company."

He continued: "Then we also have a freight permit and bill of lading. It's made out by the IFC and validated by the Solar Ministry of Commerce. The manifest describes a cargo of Super Tenderleaf destined for Ferrol in the Vega System." He gave the papers back to Valmonze. "So your supposed poppy seeds are nothing more than a new development of spinach seeds."

Valmonze suspected that the Terrans amusement was based mostly on the fact that he, the patriarch, had been fooled. He snapped at him angrily: "If you can get hold of yourself we might be able to continue like reasonable men!" When the smuggler suppressed another burst of laughter and wiped the tears from his eyes, Valmonze asked, "What is spinach?"

It's a vegetable which every mother on Earth claims to be especially nourishing," Shaugnessy explained. "They prime their kids with it until the juice runs out of their ears."

Valmonze frowned. "So you take this whole thing to be a great big joke, do you? Then can you explain how Pincer came here when he should actually be in the Vega System?"

"He probably wanted to make his honeymoon trip interesting, so he decided to take a little side excursion," Shaugnessy grinned.

The patriarch lost his patience. "Spare me your foolishness!" he raged. "I've had enough of your idiotic laughter! I still say something's rotten behind all this. To get to the bottom of it we have to find this Pincer freak—and by Tolomon we're going to get him!"

Shaugnessy sat back leisurely in his chair. He said nothing but his whole attitude came near to expressing his thoughts: *You forget one thing, old man—he's a Terran...*

* * * *

A warm rough hand that was not a hand closed Pincer's mouth and prevented his outcry.

"No-fly shut mouth," came a familiar whisper close to Pincer's ear. "Heap sound bring enemies."

Pincer almost fainted in his relief. "Schnitz!" he nevertheless blurted out. "Schnitz, you old rascal!"

The birdman cut through his bonds with deft, experienced skill. Pincer

immediately began to massage his limbs to restore his circulation. Meanwhile Schnitz began to work on Cora and he freed her as quickly as he had Pincer.

The birdman explained in low tones: "Schnitz see no-flies he make prisoners. Wait night come. Now here."

Pincer shook the native creature's claw-hand in gratitude. Schnitz had been moved to help them without being influenced by cigarette smoke. He knew the birdman had placed his own life in the gamble. This hostile band of aborigines would not hesitate to bind him also if they could get their hands on him.

Now Pincer stared into the darkness. How were they to proceed in this complete absence of light? It made him wonder to himself how Schnitz had managed to locate them. It was possible that these natives' eyes were adapted to such nights as this and that they might have a special sense of perception.

"Give hand," ordered Schnitz softly. "Schnitz lead way."

Pincer guided his wife to where she could find the birdman's extended claw, which she grasped. He brought up the rear as they moved forward with a surprising swiftness. There was nothing the two humans could do but to rely on Schnitz entirely. Unaided, they would have bumped into every obstacle without seeing it. Once they had crossed the clearing their progress became more difficult as they came into the forest again.

In that moment a tremendous commotion occurred at the far end of the village of tree huts. It caused Pincer to pause in alarm. Back there across the clearing it seemed that an entire army had broken loose all at once. He heard Schnitz giggle softly.

"That Kankantz, Lupatz and Tonitutz," he explained. "Make heap trick. Enemy flock run wrong way. Give no-flies time for escape."

There was a great stir in the tree huts as evidenced by loud cawing and shrill cries and the sound of flying birdmen in the darkness. The entire village was in an uproar. Inasmuch as the din and clamour drowned out local noises, Schnitz increased the pace of their flight, now unconcerned about maintaining silence. In the far distance, Schnitz's cohorts were cawing and screeching their lungs out. Schnitz found his way dim the forest with the certainty of a sleepwalker. The howling of the tree dwellers receded in another direction and finally could hardly be heard.

"Please, Johnny," Cora panted, "we have to take a little rest!"

"You make pleasure smoke?" asked Schnitz hopefully.

Neither one of them made an answer. Everything was very quiet for awhile and then Pincer heard the birdman ask again, this time more timorously: "No-fly make smoke for Schnitz?"

"You tell him, Johnny," Cora pleaded.

*He'll leave us—*thought Pincer—*he'll simply fly away.* Nevertheless he told him. "We can't make any smoke. They took the cigarettes away from us."

In the complete darkness Pincer couldn't see the reaction of the other. Schnitz

was silent but he did not fly away. Cora leaned against her husband and he gently stroked her hair, inwardly marvelling at her exemplary behaviour under the circumstances.

After a few minutes they heard Schnitz speak again. “We go,” the birdman announced curtly.

Pincer could sense that their feathery guide was disappointed and once more he was assailed by a feeling of guilt. Even though it had been unintentional, Cora had started something with her cigarettes. Nonetheless they had exploited the weakness of these creatures for their own purposes. “If you want to,” he said, “you can go back to your friends.”

“No-flies also friends,” Schnitz declared categorically.

By dawn they arrived at the Springers’ radio station. It was an angular building at the edge of a clearing. Next to it was a small landing field which was large enough to accommodate a glider but no Springer craft were in sight. Everything seemed to be calm and quiet.

Schnitz came to a stop. They were at the opposite end of the clearing. Cora leaned against her husband in exhaustion.

“There doesn’t seem to be anybody there,” said Pincer in a low voice.

“Three birdman inside station,” Schnitz told him. “No have weapons. No-fly overcome quick.”

Pincer wasn’t so sure. He observed the building indecisively. If he were to find a hypercom there he could contact Earth or a Terran ship and tell them what he had discovered. He wavered between conviction and fear. All this time he had been wanting to get to this station but now that he was here he could not find the strength to transform his plan into action.

One thing he was sure of was that in the long run he would not be able to elude the Traders. Sooner or later they would be taking him and Cora prisoner. If he were to get off a radio message now it would be only a matter of hours before they would fall into the hands of the enemy.

“I’ll sneak around to the building,” he said finally. “Schnitz, I’d like to have you stay with my wife. If you see any threat of danger, escape with her—and don’t think about me.”

“Schnitz stay watch no-fly woman,” promised the birdman.

Cora pushed past Schnitz. “I think I have something to say about that,” she interjected. “I’m going with you.”

Pincer looked at her sadly. It was hard for him to contradict anybody, much less a beautiful woman who in addition happened to be his wife. He raised his hands imploringly.

“Don’t try to explain anything,” said Cora swiftly. “I’ve come this far with you—so why stop now?”

Schnitz twittered in an expression of birdlike mirth. “Think not heap much good make talk to female, no-fly,” he confided.

“That’s what I think, too,” grumbled Pincer. “Alright, then we’ll both go. I thank you for your help, Schnitz.”

Schnitz watched him for a moment in silence and then suddenly announced: “Schnitz go too. Maybe try heap trick.”

The birdman’s self-confidence and his faith in his “trick” strategies appeared to be unshakable. In some strange way, Schnitz always seemed to be filled with a sprite-like cheerfulness. It was as though he was endowed with a picaresque philosophy of life which enabled him to understand and endure everything with an almost mischievous smile. Pincer felt an inner attachment to this alien creature such as he had never experienced with his friends back on Earth.

He could only nod his acquiescence and start toward the building. Schnitz and Cora followed him. No one seemed to be concerned about their arrival on the scene. The station had no windows, only a skylight and a door, which was closed. They managed to come close to the entrance, where Pincer paused.

“Nothing’s stirring,” he said softly. “Do you think anybody’s here? Maybe they’ve abandoned the station and taken all the equipment with them.”

“Look see,” suggested Schnitz matter-of-factly.

Pincer came closer to the door. His pulse began to race again. It could be that only a thin plastic wall separated him from death. Nevertheless, as he reached for the latch handle his hand did not falter.

He turned the lever around and pushed the door open. It swung inward while making a grating sound. Nothing happened. The building was evidently divided into two main rooms. Pincer could easily make out the contents of the first room. There was no one in sight. Enough illumination came through the skylight so that he could recognize the equipment—a full array of monitoring and tracking consoles. Apparently the radio communication gear was in the other room.

Decisively then, he entered the place while Schnitz and Cora followed closely in silence. “Seems to be nobody here,” he muttered in relief. “Not even any natives.”

He took one more step and then stopped as a man appeared from the adjacent room. He was tall and very thin without a hair on his head. The expression on his face was as cold as death itself as he silently surveyed the three intruders. Pincer was incapable of moving a muscle.

Then the stranger slowly produced a weapon from under his coat and aimed it at Pincer’s chest, his thin lips curving in a mirthless smile. “No matter how cunning anyone may be,” he said, “there comes a time when someone outsmarts him.”

In this case the cunning one was Amat-Palong, the Ara.

7/ THE CARROT EATER'S LAMENT

The measures which Perry Rhodan and his administrative staff had taken proved to be as futile as they were unpopular. Although every cargo leaving Terra was inspected and controlled, it had not resulted in a single arrest. The smugglers had evidently become suspicious and had shut down their supply lines.

The policing and red tape were costing the big commercial companies too much in terms of time and precious fuel. Once more it was demonstrated that the egotism of certain people took precedence over reason. The Solar Ministry of Commerce was receiving angry calls. Freighter captains were making warning threats against customs officials. Since the man in the street hadn't yet heard of the narcotics rings, the dangers involved were derided as negligible. People reproached Rhodan for being a doomsday prophet or calamity howler and accused him of making exaggerated concessions to protect his extraterrestrial friends.

Once more the majority of daily Press releases criticized the actions of the First Administrator. Some even suspected the existence of financial machinations behind Rhodan's orders, all of which the feature writers were able to embellish with colourful words and much imagination—yet no one came up with suggestions for any reasonable alternative. Such was the situation even after only the first day of putting the new measures into effect. Public opinion was a factor that Perry Rhodan could not ignore. It was true that tradition had often proved mass opinion to be not always infallible, yet this did not remove the political pressures which resulted from such attitudes.

In the midst of all this, Reginald Bell came to Perry with a thick stack of newspapers and placed them on his desk with a gloomy expression. "It won't be long before they'll be crying for your head again," he predicted glumly. "They're starting to think of you as a monkey wrench in the machinery of finance."

Rhodan didn't bother about the newspapers. As always in such situations he radiated an aura of calm and self-assurance. "Allan has already given me the rundown," he said. "What it boils down to now is who can hold his breath the longest; we with our control tactics or they." He pointed to the newspapers. "In time the shipping companies will get used to more stringent controls."

"Free men don't like to put up with such restrictions for very long," reflected Bell.

Rhodan smiled. "Are you telling *me*, Chubby? Anyway, as soon as we get a lead that will put this smuggling ring into our hands we'll cut back on the

measures we've taken and then everything will be back to normal."

"Oh sure, sure!" grumbled his stocky companion. "But meanwhile those crooks will lay low and refuse to make waves—they won't leave any trails to follow."

"Don't forget we've put an army of agents to work on this and they're following up every clue, no matter how insignificant. In the long run there's no one who can pull the wool over our eyes," said Rhodan emphatically.

Before Bell could answer him the air in front of them shimmered and out of it emerged an overgrown mixture of beaver and mouse. It was Pucky the mousebeaver. Angrily he clutched in his delicate hands an issue of the *Terrania Observer*.

"Lt. Puck," said Rhodan scoldingly, "this is a private chamber. You don't just waltz in here without knocking."

"I didn't waltz in here, Perry," said Pucky defensively. "I teleported—and when you do that, how do you knock? Anyway, what's so private in here..." He paused for effect. "... when *this* character is, present?" And he glanced significantly at Bell.

"The opposite of private is public," Bell explained to him. "So what difference does it make if I wring your neck privately or openly? In any case the result will be the same: we'll be rid of you."

Pucky's incisor tooth raised up indignantly. He waved the paper in front of his friends. "You're almost as insensitive as these hack writers," he remarked in a tone of outrage. "This feature article here is the limit! And I quote: 'There's a possibility that Rhodan's friends will feel the effect of his precautions as well as the trading companies. One result of a slowdown in the supply lines could be a shortage of carrots, which Rhodan would not be able to vindicate in terms of friendship for extra-terrestrials.'"

Pucky waddled over to Rhodan's desk although with his wild talents he might have moved much more swiftly. But at present he wished to give an impression of being weak and helpless.

"It's ridicule from the idiot fringe," said Rhodan. "A greater mind would have simply bypassed such things."

Pucky continued to air his complaints. "I didn't mean to say this represents an illustrious circle of literary-financial virtuosos. But that double-talk about carrots is a snide reference to my friends on Mars."

"It's actually a snide remark directed at me," Rhodan argued. "But it's no particular tragedy. The reporter has a right to write whatever he thinks is justified. Of course he and I do not share the same opinion but that's no reason to get excited. We all tend to expound our own points of view."

Then the mousebeaver let the cat out of the bag. "It's time somebody lowered the broom on this dope ring. They're to blame for everything. Since summer vacation was more or less delayed this year, I thought that I might suggest—well you know, a capable mutant like me—"

"That's enough," Rhodan interrupted him. "A capable mutant like you, Pucky,

does what he's told. I have no intention of sending you into an assignment that would practically force you to subject innocent people to your special talents."

The 3-foot mousebeaver supported himself on his wide tail and patted his custom-tailored uniform complacently. "You know very well, Perry," he chirped, "that in the final analysis you won't have any other choice. While the heat's on the smugglers are going to keep under cover. They have time to think up new ways to get around your control measures. Customs officials can't take every freighter apart when they check them over. Sure they have detection instruments but these bandits aren't exactly stupid—they'll simply hide the stuff where it can't be found."

Of course Rhodan knew that the little mutant's arguments weren't just something he had grabbed out of the air. Behind Pucky's proposal was not just a thirst for adventure, the little devil was truly concerned about the friends he had made among the human race. But if mutants were to be used they would have to be of the human variety, like Fellmer Lloyd or André Noir. They would be less conspicuous than Pucky.

"I understand you're probably fidgeting with boredom," said Rhodan, "but there's enough work around here to keep you busy."

Pucky grinned ruefully. "Routine garbage," he complained. "These brain sessions with half-crazy psychologists drive me up the wall. They just can't see that my method of teleportation is slightly different than Ras Tschubai's system. Now we're experimenting with—!"

"Lt. Puck!" Rhodan interrupted again.

The mousebeaver started as though he'd been jolted by an electric shock. Whenever Rhodan addressed him as Lt. Puck he knew it was time to dispense with any further levity. "OK, Perry," he murmured, crestfallen, "I'll get back to the laboratory. But I'm telling you—" His voice struck a new high pitch. "If I ever catch up with this tripe scribbler for the *Observer* I'll turn him into a musical top—upside down on the ceiling!" And with this parting threat the mousebeaver dematerialised.

Bell smiled. "The little rascal's getting rambunctious again."

"But he's not very far wrong," said Rhodan pensively. "It's just not possible to inspect every freighter and say with certainty that there are no narcotics on board. It would take days to make such a thorough search of each ship. We know that such a thing isn't practicable."

"So that makes every inspection completely senseless," said Bell.

"Let's say that they make sense psychologically. At least for the moment the criminals are blocked from keeping the Springers supplied. It'll take time for them to relax their caution and to try new tricks. In the interim we have to keep the screws on them."

"Too bad there's nothing to hang our hats on."

"Yes," agreed Rhodan, "that I would like to have."

8/ A PINCER MANEUVER

Firearms were always an argument which could not be overlooked in any altercation. At the moment when the stranger aimed the raygun at him, John Edgar Pincer knew that his opponent held the trump card. So near and yet so far, he thought. Between him and the radio console in the adjacent room stood this armed man.

“You will do everything that I order you to do,” said Amat-Palong in razor-edged tones. “It’s up to you whether or not I shoot you and your companions.”

Pincer recovered from his momentary paralysis. “What do you want?” he asked.

“Not far from here there is a clearing among the trees. I chose to land the glider there so that it would not be seen from the field. That is where we shall go now. I have no interest in the birdman—he may go. It will of course be a surprise to Valmonze when I return there with you two but it will also water down some of his self-confidence, I’m sure.” He spoke as indifferently as though he were reading a very boring travel schedule.

Pincer had never encountered such a cold-blooded type in his life—or one more dangerous. “We have to do what he says,” grumbled Pincer, completely defeated. His fear for Cora was increasing to an unbearable degree.

Amat-Palong motioned with his weapon. “Let’s go,” he said in a low tone.

A shadowy form swished past Pincer toward the Ara. Everything happened so swiftly that he didn’t have time to react. Schnitz fell upon the Ara as though shot from a bow.

“Schnitz!” Pincer cried out.

Amat-Palong jumped out of the way and fired. Schnitz was knocked back by the impact. He staggered and then collapsed. The Ara immediately aimed his gun at Pincer again but the latter only had eyes for the feathered creature who had fallen.

Together with Cora he ran to the birdman’s side. Schnitz was still alive. The blue crown of feathers around his eyes was jerking spasmodically. Pincer stroked his head.

“Schnitz try heap trick,” stammered the birdman strenuously.

“That’s right,” said Pincer hoarsely. “A big heap trick, my friend.”

The wide, blunt beak appeared to express the trace of a smile—or was it a

grimace of pain? A claw hand clutched at Pincer's coat. "No-fly... make smoke?" Schnitz asked weakly.

"Yes," Pincer told him. "Don't you smell it now?"

The native creature lacked the strength to answer. Pincer saw him struggle to sniff the air. Schnitz nodded in imagined satisfaction and then sank back.

"Schnitz!" Pincer called to him in despair.

But Schnitz did not answer. He would never speak again. He was dead.

It was the moment in which a transformation came over John Edgar Pincer. When he got up he was no longer the comical, clumsy-looking youngster of old; he looked like a grave and self-composed Terran. He stood tall and straight beside the body of his native friend, his eyes fixed steadily upon Amat-Palong.

"You've murdered him," he said evenly.

The Galactic Medico took an involuntary step back. Something in Pincer's appearance seemed to warn him. "Don't try anything!" he called out in a suddenly shrill tone. As Pincer merely shook his head he added: "It wasn't murder. He attacked me—and after all he was only an aborigine." He realized that he was attempting to justify himself to his prisoners and he waved his weapon angrily. "Alright, Pincer, let's go."

Pincer silently gripped Cora's hand and led the way. Amat-Palong followed at a safe distance. After they came out of the building he directed them.

"Head toward that big tree there on the edge of the landing field."

Pincer followed these instructions without contradiction.

"Faster!" commanded the Ara.

Pincer hastened his steps and pulled Cora with him.

"Oh Johnny, what shall we do now?" she asked him in English.

"No talking!" warned their captor. "Quiet up there."

"Be still, honey," Pincer told her gently.

They arrived at the forest and pressed onward. From time to time the man behind them gave orders, telling them what direction to take. Ten minutes must have gone by before Pincer saw the clearing between the trees. The stranger's glider was standing there ready for takeoff. Pincer decided to go into action when they entered the small ship's airlock. He knew he would probably lose his life in the attempt but he owed it to humanity, to Schnitz and especially to Cora not to submit to his fate without a struggle.

But it didn't come to that because they never reached the glider. Pincer suddenly heard noises behind him and a clash of physical bodies. There was a choked cry and then the concentrated flame of a raygun hissed upward into the dense foliage of the trees. When Pincer turned around, Amat-Palong was already lying on the ground. Bending over him were Kankantz, Lupatz and Tonitutz, preparing to kill him. They had undoubtedly found Schnitz. Unexpectedly they had followed Amat-Palong and jumped on him from the trees.

"Get back!" Pincer called out to them. "Don't kill him."

He tried to pull the raging birdmen back but by the time he finally calmed them down it was too late. One glance at Schnitz's murderer revealed that he had suffered the same fate. Pincer drew Cora away. But Kankantz came after them and Pincer was shaken by his appearance. The deep sorrow in his dark eyes was unmistakable.

"Path of no-flies and Schnitz friends now go two ways," said Kankantz bitterly. "No-flies bring only trouble."

It would have been useless to contradict the birdman. In fact from his point of view he was quite correct.

"It is well, Kankantz," said Pincer. "Go in peace."

Kankantz turned away and rejoined Tonitutz and Lupatz. The three birdmen swung up into the branches together and disappeared.

Cora glanced at the Ara who lay on the ground nearby. "What happens to him?" she asked.

"The Springers will find him," Pincer answered her without much conviction. He placed his arm around her shoulders. "We have to get back to that station. There's nobody there now so that should give us a chance to send off a message."

By the time they got back to the building and entered it, Schnitz's body had disappeared. "They've come for their friend," said Pincer. "I'd have buried him otherwise—it's the least we might have done for him."

They moved on into the adjacent room where Pincer's searching eyes discovered a hypercom console, or at least something that looked like a Springer version of such equipment.

"We'll have to accept the fact that the Springers will trace our transmission," he told his wife. "They'll show up here within an hour but I still think we should try it."

Cora merely nodded silently. Pincer drew a chair up in front of the console and sat down. He looked at his hands as though success depended upon them. He glanced over the controls. Before manipulating them it was important for him to know what each one was for. Every moment of senseless experimenting would be lost time.

"I think I can operate the hypercom," he told Cora. "This is for turning on the viewscreen—I can tell by its position."

His fingers moved hesitantly over the various keys. "OK," he muttered, "I'll give it a try."

Now with more decision he pressed a few buttons. The equipment hummed softly. Control lights glowed on the panel. The hypercom began to transmit energy but energy could be traced to its source.

The only thing that mattered now was for Pincer to make contact with Terrans before the Springers arrived.

* * * *

Maj. James Woodworth was of the opinion that an unkindly fate had condemned him, causing him to always be stationed far from the focal point of cosmic events. Whenever something was going on, Woodworth always found himself far removed from the firing line. He had often glumly indicated to his friends that he'd probably have to earn his laurels in theory only, since he'd never been called upon for a practical demonstration of his training. Woodworth was a temperamental man who didn't care much for routine assignments.

At the moment he was in the Control Central of the heavy cruiser, *Cape Kennedy*. Maj. Woodworth was of medium build with sparse hair and an expressive face. His chin had such a deep cleft that it seemed almost split in two.

"What do you feel about this assignment?" he asked Jens Poulson, who was serving as pilot. That is, Poulson actually didn't have anything to do other than glance occasionally at the indicators, because the ship was in free fall and the autopilot was completely capable of keeping it on its specific course.

Poulson yawned wearily, which expressed his opinion quite plainly, but since Woodworth was his superior officer he added: "Frankly speaking, sir—not much."

Woodworth nodded and looked at his watch. "The next transition is due in two hours. Then we'll be 6 light-years away, sneaking through space in search of ghosts."

"Gen. Deringhouse receives his commands from the Chief, sir," Poulson remarked. "If both of them suspect that it's important to fly these patrols, they certainly must have a reason for it."

"You have nothing to do but keep a lookout for alien spaceships," Woodworth quoted while making a hopeless attempt to imitate the voice of Gen. Deringhouse. "Jens, do you think maybe our assignment has something to do with this mysterious race of people that everybody in the Fleet is whispering about?"

"I don't know, sir."

The other men in the Control Central had looked up from their work when the alien race was mentioned but the major didn't say anything more about it. Instead he reverted to his favourite topic.

"Jens, you know it's gotten to the point where men in the Fleet don't want to pull duty under my command. They think I'm a sure guarantee of just an extended furlough. So what spacer with any blood in his veins wants duty like that?"

Since nobody commented, Woodworth seemed to regard their silence as a sign of agreement. He paced back and forth in the room with short swift steps.

"Sir!" The sudden call came from Chief Com Officer Oliver Durban.

Woodworth whirled around. Durban had leaned back in his seat and was staring incredulously at his console. However, when Woodworth rushed toward him the Com man came to life again. He manipulated several switches and the hypercom's viewscreen flickered on. Jens Poulson left his flight station and came hurriedly over to Durban.

“What does that mean?” asked Woodworth as he pointed to some panel lamps that were coming to life. Naturally he knew very well what it meant but he liked to have crewmembers explain every welcome change in the routine so that he could make the most of it while it lasted.

“It’s a message coming over the hypercom, sir,” replied Durban.

“From Earth?” asked the major.

“No, I “Don’t think so.”

It was apparent that Woodworth could have hugged the Chief Communications Officer but since that wouldn’t have seemed appropriate he contented himself with slapping Durban on the shoulder. Durban worked the venire knob on the viewscreen and a blurry image focussed, finally revealing a face. In the same instant the speaker crackled and a voice became audible.

“... advise Perry Rhodan immediately! Attention! I will repeat the message. Whoever hears this must advise Perry Rhodan immediately.”

“If he keeps it up, half the galaxy will hear him muttered Durban grimly. Woodworth signalled him to be quiet.

“This is John Edgar Pincer of the Intercosmic Fruit Company. My wife and I are located on the Springer planet Alazee. This is the centre of the narcotics operation. On Earth the business is run by Vincent Aplied in Cape Town. If any Terranian station can hear me, please advise Perry Rhodan immediately. Attention! I will repeat the message...”

“I’m going out of my mind!” yelled Woodworth. In his enthusiasm he felt like jumping into the air. “Durban!” he ordered. “Get in touch with Terrania at once and put me in contact with Rhodan!”

“With the Chief?” queried the Com Officer.

“Do I have to threaten you with a firing squad to get you to follow my instructions?” inquired Woodworth loudly. “Now something’s finally happening in our sector and the Com man is asleep!”

“May I remind you, sir, that Alazee’s planet is more than 1,000 light-years from us and that it is not in our sector?” But while he spoke he was already busy making the desired connection, which saved him from Woodworth’s righteous wrath.

“Try to determine just where this Pincer is on the planet,” said the major. “We’re going to haul him out of there!”

Durban was unable to counter this enthusiastic statement with anything more than a few comments concerning service regulations but he was drowned out by the shout of joy that broke loose in the Control Central The *Cape Kennedy* fairly seemed to tremble with the crew’s howl of triumph.

“The legend of James Woodworth in Nothingsville is ended,” growled the major. “Now a new epoch begins for me and my men.”

Durban would have preferred giving everyone a gentle reminder that nothing had happened so far, other than a hypercom message, and that it was more than

possible that nothing more would happen. However, all he could do was shake his head. By that time he had completed his connection with the Communications Centre of the Solar Fleet in Terrania. The face of a young officer appeared on the screen and it was plain to see that he was not exactly pleased by the unexpected disturbance of his routine.

Woodworth leaned over Durban's shoulder. "This is Maj. Woodworth speaking," he said. "Connect me immediately with the First Administrator."

"For that you'd better have a damned good reason," retorted the Com Officer in Terrania. "Every time somebody gets a twitch in his—"

"I am not twitching!" shouted the major angrily. "But you'll be twitching spasmodically if you don't make that connection—on the double, soldier!"

The Com Officer's cold-blooded stubbornness matched his sour disposition. "Give me the justification for this request, Major."

Woodworth realized that he could get nowhere without compliance. "We've found the narcotics ring," he said. Of course this was reaching rather far out but in his excitement Woodworth didn't care about preciseness of expression at the moment.

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?" asked the man in Terrania. "I'll try to make contact immediately. Of course I can't promise to reach the Chief personally. Would you be satisfied with Reg—er, that is, would his Deputy, Mr. Bell, suit you, or Solar Marshal Freyt?"

Woodworth glared in anguish at the screen. "I implore you, sonny—just get me anybody with the power of making decisions or I'll go out of my mind!"

More swiftly than he had expected, he saw Rhodan's impressive face looking at him from the viewscreen.

"You have found the smugglers, Major? As I recall, you're in command of the heavy cruiser *Cape Kennedy* which belongs to the task force of patrol ships. Your assignment is to be on the alert for any approach of alien ships."

"That's right, sir," confirmed Woodworth. He was amazed that Rhodan knew immediately what his cruiser's assignment was. Briefly he relayed to the First Administrator what they had picked up in the hypercom message.

Rhodan's decision followed at once. "It would be foolish to deploy a major Fleet force around Alazee's planet" he said. "We'd only stir up a bigger conflict with the Galactic Traders. At the moment, that's the last thing we should wish upon ourselves. However, I'd like to have you rescue this Pincer fellow. No doubt he could be of further help to us."

"Sir!" exclaimed Woodworth enthusiastically. "You may count on me and my men. We'll pull Pincer out of there!"

Rhodan smiled. "Cool it, Major. Any precipitate action would be out of place here. Take the *Cape Kennedy* in as close as possible to the planet and then use a 3-man destroyer. The only way you can help Pincer is by using a highly manoeuvrable ship like that in a purely blitz action. Meanwhile we'll get busy here with the estimable Mr. Vincent Applied. If this whole thing is valid and not a

tip from a crackpot, we'll have cured ourselves of a few headaches.”

“We'll do our best, sir! Woodworth promised.

Rhodan gave him a friendly nod. “One more thing, Major. If your rescue attempt should fail, “Don't try it a second time. Also, you are not to land the *Cape Kennedy* under any circumstances. That would only bring the Springers to the boiling point. I don't want any kind of military demonstration. You will restrict yourself to *one mission* only, using the small-class destroyer.”

“Yessir!” said Woodworth. “And thank you, sir!

Rhodan looked at him in surprise. “What for, Major?”

“For the mission, sir. I have to overcome a bad reputation.”

“No commanding officer of the Solar Fleet has a bad reputation,” replied Rhodan earnestly. His image faded. The Terrania Com Officer appeared again and Durban signed off.

“Poulson!” yelled Woodworth. “What are you standing around here for? Get us up to light-speed at once! Felton—let's have the transition coördinated Make it a single jump—to within two light-years of Alazee's planet.”

Durban interrupted with another precaution. “Sir, you know the crew isn't used to this kind of pressure.” But he was grinning.

Woodworth looked at him for a moment and then the deep cleft in his chin began to tremble with anticipation. “You guys haven't seen anything yet!” he retorted.

In another half-hour the *Cape Kennedy* went into transition. The mysterious darkness of hyperspace swallowed it up, only to disgorge the cruiser again in a new location—not even two light-years away from Alazee's planet.

9/ THE KAMIKAZE CAPERS

Valmonze knew that his order for planet-wide jamming to provide a radio curtain had come too late. The Terranian had sent his distress call at least 8 times through hyperspace. All the patriarch could still hope for was that no ship from Earth had picked up the message. It was pointless to brood about it now. If Pincer had actually succeeded in making a contact, the ones on the receiving end would be smart enough not to betray his position by sending him an answer. Valmonze knew his way around in events of a cosmo-political nature so he was sure that Rhodan would never take any action that would involve a direct attack on Alazee's planet."

But what would the Administrator undertake in order to rescue the two Terranians?

The longer Valmonze deliberated on the matter the more convinced he became that Rhodan would try to obtain their release by diplomatic means. In fact Valmonze foresaw a kind of business deal. An exchange of Pincer and his wife for the release of a few smugglers. Indeed, Rhodan's only alternative was to negotiate. The famous Terranian was far too great a logician to risk a war with the Springers over a situation like this.

Provided of course that Pincer's radio call had reached a receiver in the first place.

At present Valmonze was in the Communications Central of the headquarters building next to the spaceport. He had sent out word to all gliders engaged in the search operation. Within minutes the first of them would be arriving at the auxiliary station and Pincer and his female companion would be taken into custody. With that the search would be at an end.

Shaugnessy came into the room. His usual nonchalant attitude had changed to one of concern. "I took the liberty of listening in on your instructions," he said. "If that crazy devil managed to get through to somebody, the smuggling business has had it! Rhodan's agents will close in on Aplied and take him. And "Aplied will sing because he'll have to save his own skin. Being exiled would be the safest route for him, anyway."

Valmonze regarded him mockingly. "How lucky it is for you to be safe with us, eh?"

Shaugnessy mumbled disconcertedly. "You wouldn't send me back, would

you? The whole Solar Fleet would be on my neck!”

“One thing I don’t understand,” said the patriarch, without answering Shaugnessy’s question. “Surely Pincer must have known that he’d give away his location when he sent out that message. He knows that he can’t get away from us now. Yet in spite of this he didn’t hesitate to make use of that station.”

“You’re thinking like a Springer,” said Shaugnessy. “A Terran thinks differently. That kid’s first thought was of how he might be able to help his own kind. His own safety came second. If he’s lucked in on that signal, then thanks to his courage the Earth will be saved from a possible economic collapse. So what were the tradeoffs, Valmonze? Maybe the only price tag will be two human lives. How’s your arithmetic, Patriarch? You know very well how many humans there are. Almost all of them would have gone the same route as Pincer. That’s why our race can’t be stopped in its progress, Springer. A Galactic Trader thinks first of his clan and his hide and his race as a whole takes second place. You can see the answer for yourself. I’ll bet you—”

“Silence!” Valmonze commanded sullenly. “I am not interested in your opinions. Besides, why have you collaborated with us if you are so certain that your race will triumph in the long run?”

“Because I’m a lousy human,” muttered Shaugnessy gloomily. “And anyway, I don’t count.”

“You’re a fool. The shock of what’s happened has confused you. After all, one little setback is far from being a defeat.”

Valmonze turned his attention to the operating consoles again. The smuggler stood silently behind him. The latter’s face revealed no trace of emotion.

The patriarch switched on the radio voice-com system. He waited a moment and then asked, “Razmon, how are you doing?”

“We’re almost there, Patriarch,” came the answer. “You will soon have your prisoners.”

Valmonze burst out with a triumphant roar of laughter. He tugged at his beard and glanced over his shoulder at Shaugnessy, who still said nothing. The Springer didn’t seem to consider the possibility of a Terran intervention to be too serious.

“Pull yourself together, Shaugnessy. Quit your moping! We’ll straighten this thing out yet!”

Shaugnessy met his gaze without facial expression as he replied: “Oh, I’ll pull out of it, Valmonze that’s for sure.

The Springer shrugged and went back to manipulating the panel controls. But Shaugnessy tapped him on the shoulder and took a step back. He drew the antiquated thermo-gun from his belt. “You didn’t get the message, Patriarch,” he said calmly. “There’s been a slight change.”

Valmonze turned slowly and stared at the weapon. Then he raised his eyes and stared at Clifton Shaugnessy wonderingly. “What will that get you?” he asked. “Do you plan to shoot me?”

“Let Pincer go free,” the smuggler demanded.

Valmonze may have had many weaknesses of character but cowardice was not one of them. He ignored the threatening weapon and leaned back against the console with folded arms. He was still the mighty figure, a man who was accustomed to having his orders obeyed. “You overestimate the influence of that gadget there,” he said, indicating the raygun. “Razmon is on his way to the radio station with all available gliders. They’ll capture Pincer and that woman of his.”

“Call Razmon back,” demanded the smaller Terran.

“No,” answered Valmonze. But he reestablished contact with the gliders while Shaugnessy stood there motionlessly and listened. “Razmon, this is the Patriarch speaking. Shaugnessy has pulled a gun on me. He demands that I call off your operation and have you come back. But what I want you to do is to take Pincer prisoner in any case, regardless of what happens here.”

“Patriarch!” It was all Razmon could say in his confusion and alarm.

Shaugnessy shouted swiftly toward the microphone. “If you want to see your head swindler again you’ll let the Terrans go free! Turn around, Razmon!”

Then Valmonze lost control of himself. Heedless of the thermo-weapon, he hurled himself at Shaugnessy.

* * * *

John Edgar Pincer made one last adjustment on the hypercom panel. “Of course I don’t think it’ll do any good,” he told his wife, “but I’ve set up an automatic directional beam so that our friends can locate this place if they show up.”

Cora’s eyes lighted up with hope. “Do you think they will be able to rescue us?”

“They’re bound to give it a try,” Pincer lied. And he also lied when added: “I’m sure that somebody picked up our distress call. The Fleet won’t stop at anything to get us out of here.”

Cora smiled. She had sensed the change that had come over her husband in the meantime. He had lost his attitude of insecurity and uncertainty. His actions were systematic and sure. He no longer doubted his own capabilities.

“So,” he announced, “we can go outside now and wait for our friends.”

“Or the Springers,” interjected Cora.

How right she was became apparent a few minutes later. Above the small landing field the sky virtually darkened with the flitting shapes of numerous gliders.

“The Springers,” muttered Pincer. “They got here first.”

But the small fliers began to mill about over the field as though their crews were not in agreement as to their next move. Still, Pincer knew that any attempt to run for it now would be futile. No doubt they had already been spotted from above.

* * * *

Maj. James Woodworth had taken personal command of the rescue mission. He sat crouched in the pilot compartment of the 3-man destroyer-interceptor that the crew had launched from the *Cape Kennedy's* hangar. Besides himself, Buster Felton and Adam Spahn were on board.

Shortly after making an entry into the atmosphere of Alazee's planet they had picked up the tracer beam.

"If he had to use a direction beam," said Felton, "it means the Springers have blocked all radio traffic to the outside." It was obvious that by "outside" he meant outer space.

Spahn did not seem very enthused as he watched his tracking indicator. "The place is swarming with alien ships down there—all of them small glider types, judging by their blips."

He and Felton conversed in low tones while Woodworth guided the small destroyer into a landing approach course.

"Sir," said Felton finally, "that tracer beam is coming from the same direction—I mean, where Spahn detected the Springer ships. It would be pure suicide to land there. We may be faster than they are but they have the advantage of numbers. Besides, it's home territory for them and they're more familiar with the terrain. We'd hardly touch the ground before they'd have us converted into a glowing gas cloud. That wouldn't help Pincer very much—not to mention ourselves."

Woodworth tamed around. "Since when have you been so talkative, Felton? We have to at least give it a try. The fact that Pincer could get out a distress call indicates that at the time he hadn't yet fallen into the hands of the Springers."

"The situation could have changed in the meantime," interjected Spahn.

With apparent unconcern, the major guided the tiny craft into a steeper angle of descent toward the surface of Alazee's planet. Woodworth knew that if the Springers weren't asleep or too occupied with other matters they must have certainly detected the presence of the destroyer by now. At any moment he expected the viewscreen to show him the long cylindrical shape of a Springer ship, ready to give them a broadside. Yet everything appeared to be going smoothly.

The major was realistic enough not to underestimate the magnitude of the danger. Their momentary security would be blasted when they landed among the Springer ships that Spahn had detected. For understandable reasons he hadn't admitted to his two comrades that he actually intended to give it a try, because there was no other choice.

He knew that no man could be very happy about flying into the face of death with his eyes wide open.

* * * *

Whether Terran or Springer, if a man has followed someone else's orders all his life it becomes difficult to act on his own volition.

When pilot Razmon heard the scuffling sounds of the two men in conflict coming over his loudspeaker, his confusion was complete. He knew that the patriarch was in mortal danger. In the headquarters building it seemed that a virtual battle was raging between Valmonze and Shaugnessy. In spite of the Terran's small size, since he was armed it was not difficult for Razmon to weigh the odds on the outcome of the struggle.

The patriarch had commanded that Pincer must be captured in any case, so Razmon was torn between two alternatives. Five gliders were circling over the small landing field in the centre of the forest. He could see two small dots at the edge of the smooth landing runway: Pincer and his wife. There was only one way to balance out the dilemma and satisfy both of his instincts, Razmon reasoned. He had to take care of both duties simultaneously. On the one hand the patriarch must be rescued and on the other hand Pincer had to be captured. It meant that the glider task force had to be divided.

Razmon made radio contact with the other aircraft. He ordered three of the pilots to turn back at once to the spaceport and bring help to Valmonze. He himself and the crew of the second glider would land and see to it that Pincer was taken care of.

The two remaining gliders plunged swiftly downward toward the landing field—but then someone cried out sharply.

“Razmon—an alien Ship!”

The pilot glanced over at the tracking indicator but all he could see on the screen was a small blip. He growled out a curse. Of all times, now that his forces had been divided, the Terrans had to show up to rescue their man. He tried quickly to make radio contact with Valmonze but on that end nothing was stirring. Silence.

The blip on the sweep screen became larger. With an unsteady voice he ordered his crew to man the energy guns. Both gliders turned on their defence screens.

Once a very old Springer warrior had told Razmon: “The Terrans always come when you least expect them. They do exactly what you would consider to be the most unlikely or impossible. That is the whole secret of their success.”

Razmon did not know if such a theory were valid but he was soon going to have the chance to find out.

* * * *

In the history of the progress of humanity, the name of Clifton Shaugnessy is

not mentioned. In fact it's most likely that we only know about him at all because of his intervention at a strategic moment. Shaugnessy was one of many unknown soldiers of fortune whose deeds were known to few men or were forgotten with the passage of time.

No one will ever know if Shaugnessy intended to shoot Valmonze or if he merely intended to intimidate him. The smuggler may have hesitated too long.

The impact of Valmonze's charge knocked him backward. The weapon flew out of his hand and clattered out of reach. Shaugnessy raised his arms to defend himself against the other's raging attack. The patriarch weighed twice as much as Shaugnessy and simply knocked him around at will. With a choking cry the small Terran staggered and fell. Valmonze made a dive for him but the smuggler rolled quickly to one side and searched about for his fallen weapon. As he got up the patriarch came at him with his tremendous fists, his hate-filled eyes narrowed to slits.

It developed into a conflict where Shaugnessy was continuously on the run from his opponent. Since the room wasn't very large it was only a question of time before he'd feel the weight of Valmonze's powerful arms. Shaugnessy ducked and reached the door, managing to slip out quickly. Valmonze roared out in a rage of frustration and came thundering after him. Shaugnessy was well acquainted with the building so he ran with a purpose down the long corridor, at the end of which was a lift that would take him below.

He could hear Valmonze panting after him but he didn't dare look back. When he reached the elevator he sighed with relief. In that brief moment he thought he was saved. But his relief was swiftly replaced by the bitter realization that his flight was at an end when he saw the cage open and two Springers emerged.

"Grab him!" yelled the patriarch.

Shaugnessy didn't have the slightest chance. He was lost. He turned around slowly to gaze expressionlessly into Valmonze's triumph-twisted face.

But history tells nothing of Clifton Shaugnessy. Its voice is silent concerning the fate of a man whose wasted life was not untouched with a purpose, after all, because of one heroic deed.

* * * *

By nature, Buster Felton was a gentle and harmless type who harboured no warlike ambitions. But when he saw the two Springer ships forming for an attack his face hardened and he readied the destroyer's bow cannon—for battle.

"There's our reception committee, sir! Spahn called to Woodworth. "They've split up. I hope the others aren't hanging around in the background somewhere to form an ambush!"

"We'll know that soon enough if you'll keep an eye on that tracking screen," the major reminded him. "OK—get set for a landing!"

“Sir!” exclaimed Felton incredulously.

Woodworth knew what was bothering his gunner. In the air they might have matched the Springers but on the ground they’d be goners. “Don’t sweat it,” he growled. “We’re going to give them a little exhibition!”

James Woodworth, an officer without battle experience, dependent alone upon his theoretical knowledge, suddenly revealed himself to be a natural fighter and tactician. As he dropped down under the Springer ships the enemy gunners thought their precious chance had come and opened fire. The destroyer’s defence screens wavered under the blast of the heavy enemy weapons as the Springers hovered over the small Terran ship like angry hawks. Then Woodworth pulled back on his controls and the destroyer glided upward like a darting phantom, swerving as it went.

Felton was almost thrown from his seat by this manoeuvre but he still managed to open fire on the Springer ships looming before him so suddenly. While he did so he yelled to drown his fear. The words he shouted were meaningless and seemed to have no effect on either Spahn or the major. The energy screens of the Springers were not designed to take the heavy fire that met them. The uncanny Terran ship had transformed itself into a death-flaming fortress.

Heavily damaged, the two gliders spun downward out of control and crashed into the treetops.

“Now everything depends on speed!” cried Woodworth as he finally brought the pursuitship down on the landing field. Felton opened the airlock. The major got out of his flight seat.

When he reached the open hatchway he saw a man and a woman coming across the runway toward him. The man was tall and thin and moved with the grave dignity of a stork. The woman seemed to be exhausted but she was still attractive enough to unsettle a man of Maj. Woodworth’s temperament. When this unlikely pair reached the airlock entrance the man’s casual greeting was something that Woodworth would never forget.

“My name is John Edgar Pincer—this is my wife.” He smiled. “Actually, we hadn’t expected you so soon, Major.”

It made Felton groan audibly as he helped Woodworth pull the two fugitives on board.

“Snap it up!” they heard Spahn call out. “Were going to have visitors soon!”

Woodworth turned the two rescued people over to Felton and dashed for his flight seat. He wasn’t about to wait around for the arrival of more Springer ships. He made a crash takeoff which resulted in only one injury.

John Edgar Pincer broke his nose—in two places.

10/ EVERY DOG HAS HIS DAY

The apprehension and arrest of Vincent Applied resulted in a minor drop in exchange rates here and there but within a few days everything was stabilized again. Applied was subjected to an intensive interrogation during which he babbled out everything that Solar Intelligence wanted to know. A wave of other arrests followed the hearing and although a few criminals managed to elude the dragnet this did not affect the success of the overall operation. The world Press swung back unanimously into the camp of top leadership and celebrated Rhodan for having handled the affair so discreetly.

Pincer's deeds had been publicized prior to his arrival on Earth and on the announced day of his landing thousands of Terranians streamed to the spaceport to pay the young man homage. The TV networks were represented in strength for a full coverage of the event.

Perry Rhodan ordinarily shied away from all such flurry and hullabaloo but under urging from his friends he had reluctantly consented to officiate. He sat with Bell and Solar Marshal Freyt on the platform which had been especially erected for the affair.

"Don't make such a long face," muttered Bell. It's entirely possible that you're on 'candid camera' right now."

Rhodan looked at him disapprovingly. "So that's why you've been wearing such a silly grin. I was wondering about that."

"Say now, listen here," retorted Bell. "After all, this is an official occasion and I owe it to my many friends all over the world to give them a proper impression."

Even Rhodan's ready wit was unable to counter such a forthright declaration. The First Administrator's gaze swept over the throng of spectators. It was a beautiful afternoon in late summer of the year 2102.

The P.A. speakers blared forth with an announcement. "Ladies and gentlemen, in a few minutes John Edgar Pincer will be standing before you."

Freyt raised his head. He was a taciturn man who was noted for the terseness of his comments. "The *Cape Kennedy*," he said. "She's coming in."

Aware of the cameras, Bell straightened up while holding his smile in a frozen mask, thus making an impression on the remotest of his acquaintances. It was what he called his 'photogenic look'.

* * * *

The swiftness of the 3-man destroyer's departure from the system had not given Valmonze time to strike. In teeth-gnashing frustration he was forced to let the fugitives get away. The *Cape Kennedy* had promptly swallowed the tiny spaceship into its hangar and returned to the Sol System in two transitions.

Outside of his broken nose, Pincer's greatest sense of pain was over the loss of the space-jet. The *Error* had been a cherished possession and to know that it was now in the hands of the Springers was a bitter pill to swallow. However, since his great desire for space travel had been overly satisfied by now he bore the loss with some composure. The most important thing was that their lives had been saved.

After the second transition, Maj. Woodworth stepped into their cabin and glanced sympathetically at Pincer's nose. "How are you doing?" he asked.

"Excellently," Pincer lied. He knew Woodworth saw through the lie but it made little difference to him.

Woodworth smiled. "You're going to be doing much better right now when I tell you that a great reception has been prepared for you."

Pincer turned to look at his wife, who was resting in a comfortable chair. She only raised her brows in questioning perplexity.

"Can you give me that again, Major? What do you mean?"

"I'll be glad to explain. At the spaceport a large crowd of spectators is waiting for you, along with Perry Rhodan and a lot of other VIPs as well as the TV cameras."

Pincer felt of his bandaged nose and Woodworth could hardly suppress his amusement over the ordeal the young man was facing.

"How can I get out of all that?" Pincer wanted to know.

"No way!" Woodworth assured him. "I'd even prevent that myself. You're too good an advertisement for my ship. Now maybe there'll be a lot of cadets who won't mind being transferred to James Woodworth's command."

"I—don't understand."

Woodworth smiled mysteriously. "Get yourself ready, young man," he said. "You'd better spruce up a bit so that your public will be carried away by their enthusiasm."

Pincer looked down at himself. His clothing had taken a serious beating during his adventures on Alazee's planet. And Cora had not fared any better.

Woodworth understood their speechless consternation. "I'll bring you and your wife what's necessary," he promised. He turned to go but Pincer grabbed his sleeve.

"I want to thank you, Major. You gambled your life to save us."

"You know something, Pincer?" muttered Woodworth. "In comparison to what you and your wife have done for the Earth, the *Cape Kennedy's* action was insignificant." With this he left the cabin.

“I feel like crawling into a corner somewhere,” Pincer confessed to Cora. “Lees hope they don’t drag out that reception.” He stretched his arms wearily. “All I want now is a good shower and a regular bed to sleep in.”

He did not yet suspect that a certain acquaintance of his was going to seriously scuttle any such plans.

* * * *

The Solar Hymn of the Imperium rang out as John Edgar Pincer and his wife left the *Cape Kennedy’s* airlock and were lowered in the passenger lift. The spectators in the grandstands were standing at attention with bared heads. Once on the ground, Pincer half-panicked and came to a stop. As the music died out, someone whispered behind him. It was Woodworth.

“Keep going, Pincer—right up to the grandstand.”

Meanwhile, Bell had taken his seat again and he nudged Rhodan gently. “I had pictured this Pincer fellow differently somehow,” he said.

As Pincer climbed the steps of the VIP platform in front of the stands, along with his wife and Maj. Woodworth, Rhodan, Bell and Solar Marshal Freyt rose to greet them. At first Pincer’s face came into view with a big bandage on his nose. Above the bandage was a pair of clear blue eyes that looked at Rhodan with fathomless melancholy. Pincer negotiated the remaining steps but stumbled at the top, which caused him to turn crimson clear up to his protruding ears.

Rhodan left his place and went to meet him. He spoke to him in low tones that could not be picked up by the microphones. “Unofficially I want to thank you personally and I’d like to say that I think you’re quite a tremendous fellow.”

Pincer’s reply revealed that he was by no means as inept as one might judge him to be from outward appearances. “Unofficially, sir,” he whispered to Rhodan, “I’d like to return the same compliment to you!”

They shook hands and smiled at each other. The TV cameras picked up the scene in close-up while in Denver Archibald Pincer came close to crawling right into his receiving set.

Rhodan gently guided the youngster before the microphones. A roar of applause came from the grandstand. Pincer swallowed hard while feeling of his wounded nose but then he strove to assume a posture that was appropriate for the occasion.

The First Administrator’s speech was very short. “We salute this young man and also welcome his pretty young wife. Both of them have performed a very great service for the Earth. And for that we are very grateful.” He spoke in a low voice to Pincer. “Come—they want to hear from you.”

Pincer frowned at the microphones in a way that would have done credit even to Valmonze. Rhodan laughed encouragingly and Pincer took a step forward.

“On Alazee’s planet,” he began, “there was a native birdman. His name was

Schnitz. He's dead now. Certainly it is he who deserves our respect and our thanks. Without him and his friends I'd never have been able to send the distress call. In addition I'd like to mention Maj. James Woodworth, whom you see here beside me. He and his men have defied death to save us." Pincer nodded as though to confirm his statement and then a smile came to his dreamy face. "And last but not least I have to thank someone else for standing by my side—my brave and beautiful wife, Cora Pincer."

With that he turned and shook hands again with Perry Rhodan. Bell and Freyt greeted him in silence. Then Pincer took his wife by the arm and went back down the steps.

"And to think," said Rhodan wonderingly, "that the medicos always rejected him from the Solar Fleet. We ought to see what can be done to find a spot for him."

"I believe he would turn down the offer," said Bell thoughtfully.

The more Rhodan thought about it, the more he felt that Bell's appraisal might be right.

* * * *

With a sigh, John Edgar Pincer sank down into the luxurious bed. "Peace at last!" he said thankfully. He was watching his wife, who was sorting out the clothing that had been sent up to them by the hotel management. "Have you given any thought to where we might go to finish out our honeymoon?" he asked her.

"One thing for sure," said Cora emphatically, "it won't be on another space jaunt!"

"No," agreed Pincer. "Well pick out someplace that's very safe and peaceful."

Somebody knocked at the door and Pincer impatiently pulled his long legs out of the bed. "Come in!" he said.

The bellhop came in and stared at Pincer as though at a rare specimen in the zoo. "Somebody has sent you something," stammered the youngster.

"Flowers!" Cora exclaimed. "I'll bet it's flowers."

The young man shook his head. He gave them to understand that he would have to go fetch the object which had been sent and he left the room momentarily. A short time later his knock was heard again at the door and Pincer merely grunted in reply. The door opened just slightly and the bellhop called through from the hall. "With best wishes from a Mr. Denniston of Denver!"

There was a hoarse barking sound and into the room dashed a mustard-yellow creature with an ugly snout.

"Prince!" exclaimed Cora joyously.

The dog jumped up on her and wagged its tail excitedly. Then it left her and began to sniff around. When it saw Pincer its tail seemed to stiffen.

"Prince doesn't seem to know you anymore," commented Cora uncertainly.

But Pincer only had loving eyes for his wife. He felt that the time had finally arrived when he could take her in his arms. As he approached her, however, the dog began to growl in a hideous manner. The beast stood between Pincer and his wife, which caused Pincer to hesitate uncertainly.

“Listen, old boy,” he said in a friendly tone, “this is my wife, do you understand? You can’t stop me from kissing her.”

A threatening rumble emerged from the beast. Its little green eyes glared maliciously at John Edgar Pincer. And then the mongrel mutt made its charge.

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

“WE STILL have some hope,” Perry Rhodan said.

“But slim at best,” Atlan replied.

“Hope is hope!” the Peacelord declared adamantly. “Don’t forget that we have always mastered the worst situations.”

“But nothing as dreadful as this,” the Crystal Prince muttered glumly.

And Perry Rhodan knew in his heart of hearts that his immortal friend, the Emperor of Arkon who had survived from the time of Atlantis, was right.

The existence of the Imperium was at stake.

A tale of the Blue System, the Akons and a ghostly group of spaceships known as—

THE PHANTOM FLEET

By

Clark Darlton