

Nils Hirseland



Episode 17

D O R G O N

FAN CYCLE OF THE PERRY RHODAN ONLINE CLUB



Alien Worlds

A handful of Galaxians - they meet a Knight

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by Nils Hirseland

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FAN SERIES OF THE PERRY RHODAN ONLINE CLUB

In the year 1291 New Galactic Era (the year 4878 A.D. of the old Terranian calendar), Perry Rhodan and the other immortals are fighting in various galaxies against forces controlled by the mysterious Torr Samaho. Homer G. Adams is the only cell activator bearer remaining in the Milky Way, which becomes the site of a new threat: the terrorist organization Mordred!

Led by an entity known only as Number One and his second-in-command, Cauthon Despair, the Silver Knight, Mordred strives to destroy Camelot, the secret project launched during the 13th Century NGE by Perry Rhodan and the other immortals. Recruited by Cau Thon, the Son of Chaos, Despair himself is a former Camelotan who turned against his home and against Perry Rhodan. Out of the blue, Mordred attacks and destroys several Camelotian bases.

Adams confronts Mordred with the help of the charismatic Saggittonan Aurec as well as Joak Cascal, a veteran of the Solar Empire, Will Dean, a League of Free Terrans agent, and the Somanian ambassador, Sruel Allok Mok ("Sam"). Upon Rhodan's own return to Milky Way, Mordred is defeated. Number One is unmasked and executed by the now repentant Cauthon Despair.

But Mordred was only the beginning. Dorgon still looms behind them! No one knows exactly who or what Dorgon is, and Perry Rhodan is warned to beware of Dorgon's revenge.

As Rhodan himself has to go into battle against Materia and Torr Somaho, ten Camelotian ships, including the *Ivanhoe*, leave for M 100, the home galaxy of the Dorgonans. Aurec and Homer G. Adams are leading this expedition and are accompanied by Cauthon Despair, Joak Cascal, Sandal Tolk and Sam.

After a first attempt at peaceful contact with the Dorgonans fails, Aurec and Adams travel to the planet Cermos where they come across the term "Cathedral," although its significance remains a mystery. Is it a planet, a town, or a system? The *Ivanhoe* also investigates the important world of Mesoph and returns with more valuable new information.

At the same time, the Cosmocrat Sipustov instructs the renegade Order of the Knights of the Deep that has established itself in the distant galaxy of Shagor to venture to Dorgon to prevent a great calamity. However, the Knights are wiped out due to the betrayal of one of their own apprentices and the intervention of the diabolical Cau Thon. Only a small group of Knights led by Gal'Arn manages to escape, and they proceed with their mission.

Meanwhile, something completely different is happening on the spaceship *Thebes*...

Main characters

Jonathan Andrews – A charismatic Terran

Remus und Uthe Scorbit – The married couple wants to recover from their adventure that they had on the *London II*

The Marquis de la Siniestro – A man from ancient times

Gal'Arn – A Knight of the Deep on a cosmic mission

Jaktar, Thobenar, Irasuul und Nirisar – Gal'Arn's entourage

Yasmin Weydner, Ottilie, Karl-Alfred Brauhnauer, Yessica Brahzz und Bjorn Podahl – Passengers on board the *Tersal*

Reinhard Katschmareck, Werner Niesewitz und Eberhardt Wieber – Three relics from the 20th century

1.

The Thebes

The *Thebes* was a spacesphere two hundred and fifty meters in diameter. Owned by the StarLine company, it shuttled between Terra and Olymp as a passenger ship.

The *Thebes* had a total capacity of one thousand five hundred passengers and three hundred crew members.

But these were lean times. Only four hundred and fifty-seven passengers were on board the *Thebes* when she departed from Terra.

Captain Harold Fatzar could already imagine the ship owner's complaints. Since the Dscherro catastrophe the Terrans seemed to have less and less money for traveling.

Terrania City's inhabitants cared deeply about the reconstruction of the city, and many Terrans from Europe, America, and Africa had donated huge sums to the victims and the homeless. That meant that they had to save money in other places.

This slack period impacted the already highly indebted StarLine. There had been layoffs and decommissions. The *Thebes*, too, was on the blacklist. The head of StarLine had given Fatzar six months before the *Thebes* itself was to be decommissioned.

Fatzar was not exactly among Terra's wealthy. Some time ago he had been First Officer of the *Empress of Outer Space II*, but StarLine had tempted him with large amounts of money and the promise of a command of his own. Fatzar had accepted, but soon he had been forced to realize that much of what he had been promised would fail to materialize. However, it was too late to return to the *EOS II*. He had burned his bridges. These circumstances greatly influenced the squat, middle-aged Terran's general attitude.

Together with his First Officer, the Topider Gavron Yark, and scanner, a Gatasan named Zypülü, Fatzar was sitting in the small command center and enjoyed a cigarette.

"Let's get on with it then," he mumbled unenthusiastically and switched on the ship's intercom.

"Dear passengers, my name is Harold Fatzar, and I'm the commander of the *Thebes*. We are about to lift off and will reach Olymp after a two-day journey. These two days will be an unforgettable, yet restful experience for you. Once again I want to remind you of the extraordinary service on StarLine. Every crew member will be happy to answer any of your stupid questions. What's more, you can drink yourselves silly without having to spend too much of your money, and every cabin has its own toilet. Ain't that swell? The StarLine wishes you lots of fun!"

Fatzar stuck the cigarette back in his mouth and looked at his two crewmen, who stared back dumbfounded at their captain.

"What's wrong? We'll soon be fired anyhow. However, *if* we and StarLine are lucky, we'll end up just like the *London*. Then the company will get a nice insurance payment, and as for us, well, we'll have no more worries... !"

*

Uthe Scorbit looked at her husband in surprise when she heard the Captain's announcement. Remus himself could not resist laughing.

"I really did not expect such service. Even our own toilet! I just don't know what to say," he ironically declared.

Remus Scorbit, born on Terra on June 2, 1271 NGE, was about 1.85 meters (6' 1") tall, had brown eyes, short dark hair and a slender build. Uthe, who was born on Terra on August 15, 1273 NGE, was around 1.65 m (5' 5") tall, had blue eyes, and dark blond hair. She was petite and very attractive.

The two had wanted to fly to Olymp for a long time to visit Remus' grandparents. The couple had just been through some rough times. They had been passengers on board the *London II*, when it was hijacked by the Arkonide Mascant Prothon da Mindros. Shortly after the hijacking, the Scorbits were able to escape with the Terran scientist Timo Zoltan. They fell into a space-time fold, where they found a base of the Casaro, a serpent-like race. But that wasn't the end of it. They also discovered the *Vivier*

Bontainer and Joak Cascal and Sandal Tolk. Together with these veterans from the 35th century of the old Terran calendar, they not only fought the Casaro but also Mindros. Both Scorbis survived the experience unharmed, and the first thing they wanted was take an extended holiday.

At first, Uthe had serious objections against ever entering a spacecraft again. She feared that the same thing could happen once again, but Remus assured her that there was no chance of that.

Thoughtfully, Renus looked at his watch.

"I hope Yasmin gets here soon," his wife said, referring to her best friend, Yasmin Weydner, who also wanted to be on this trip. Overall, Remus was not too crazy about that because he would have preferred a quiet, romantic cruise alone with his wife, and he viewed Yasmin Weydner's presence to be a bit of a disruption.

"Well, if she misses the flight, it's not really our fault," he said. "Let's look for our cabins. If she shows up, she'll surely find her own way to us." And if I'm lucky, she won't, he silently added.

The reception hall did not look very appealing. Red carpets and blue walls adorned the area, which lacked any sense of splendor or luxury. The ship was an ordinary passenger vessel, barely deserving to be designated as a cruise liner. Quite a contrast to the *London II*!

But the advantage became obvious in the price. Taking the *Thebes* cost the Scorbis only about half as much for the two of them as a single passage had cost on the *London II*.

Upon checking in, the Scorbis headed for their cabin, which, of course, was not as luxurious as the one on the *London II*. But the couple did not care about that at all, as long as the *Thebes* reached Olymp in one piece.

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"Hey, be a bit careful with this beauty!"

Jonathan Andrews anxiously looked at the red Ferrazzi glider that was just being transported with an antigrav into the freight compart-

ment of the *Thebes*.

"Don't worry, we won't damage your old heap," an Ertrusan muttered. He didn't exactly arouse confidence in Andrews' eyes as he stood by the antigrav and directed the glider.

Jonathan Andrews was a nineteen year-old Terran who was traveling on the behest of a glider manufacturer. He was to bring this prototype of an XE-Thunder 1291 I—"XETY" for short—safely and without a scratch to Olymp, the customer's home planet.

Andrews regretted that he himself was not able to afford the XETY. Gliders meant a lot to him. They were not only an important part of his profession, but also his main hobby. For Jonathan, there was nothing more satisfying than working on his own glider, a Renaulty Clixo, on the weekends.

With some relief, the 1.80 meter (5' 11") tall Euroterran noted that his "beauty" had been secured for the journey with the *Thebes*. Then he went to his cabin, where a surprise awaited him. The surprise was a 1.55 m (5' 1") tall pale, but very attractive Terran girl. She had long brown hair and a beautiful body.

"Yessica, what are you doing here?" Andrews exclaimed.

"I wanted to surprise you. Actually, I was on my way to Ferrol, but then I saw you shipping this great sporty job, and so I thought that I'd accompany you to Olymp. For old times' sake..."

Andrews shook his head. He did not know whether to be happy or to cry. He had enjoyed a brief romance with Yessica, but then he had put that behind himself, just as she had.

The Terran went into the bathroom to change his outfit. Yessica snuggled up against him.

"I adore your strong body," she whispered into his ear.

Jonathan could not help but grin. He liked to receive compliments.

Andrews was a very polite man, but he could also be rather direct, a habit that some people held against him. He liked to show what he had accomplished, and he let everybody know what extraordinary exploits he had already achieved. Of course he only felt reinforced upon hearing such compliments from an attractive woman.

"Just that your beer belly has to disappear!"

Peeved, Andrews gently loosened his girlfriend's embrace and put on a new shirt.

"Well, I am a bit tired, and I would like to nap for a couple of hours. We'll see each other at dinner then, okay?"

Yessica smiled slightly embarrassed and rocked her body back and forth a bit. "There's just a small problem..."

"What problem?" Jonathan asked.

"Well, the flight to Ferrol would have been much cheaper than the *Thebes*. I was a bit short on money, so I passed myself off as your fiancée and received a half-price discount," she explained.

Andrews looked at her with surprise. "Since when do they have a discount for couples?"

"Since they let them share the same cabin..."

*

The Scorbits were busy getting settled in their own cabin. While Uthe was hanging their clothes in the wardrobe, Remus plopped down on the couch and watched the Trivid. They were showing an ancient rerun featuring an American cartoon family with yellow skin and eyes shaped like tennis balls, one of Remus' favorites.

The suite was quite comfortable. It consisted of two rooms, a sanitary installation plus the living and bed-room area.

To the left side, the huge double bed stood at the wall, side by side with the wardrobe. At the opposite side of the room were a large ceramic table, four chairs, a couch, and various technical equipment.

After Remus finally got his bottom off the couch to help his wife unpack their stuff, the door buzzer rang.

"Who can that be...!" the Terran murmured, and went to the door to open it. A Blue stood there with a wide grin.

"Hello, I am room service. Did you call for me? Is there anything you wish? I can bring you anything, from a simple soda to the most extraordinary Vurguzz-Whiskey mix."

For a short moment, Remus was tempted to

accept this last offer, but he pulled himself together.

"No, I did not call you. Thanks."

Before he was able to close the door, the Blue showed him his palm in an unmistakable gesture.

Remus dug in his pockets and retrieved a piece of chewing gum.

"That's good for your teeth," he said with a smile and slammed the door. Shaking his head, he went to his wife, embraced her from behind and started to caress her.

Just then the door buzzer rang again. Remus cursed and went to the door.

This time, an about 1.65 m (5' 5") tall Terran girl with red hair and a funny face smiled at him.

"Yasmin!" Remus noted with little enthusiasm. Uthe gave him a strict glance. Immediately, the writer became more effusive. "How nice to see you!"

Both women briefly looked at each other, then Yasmin gave her best friend a big hug.

"Sorry for being so late, but I had some trouble finding the spaceport, and even worse trouble finding this ship. But I finally made it, as you can see!"

The young Terran, who, like Uthe, had grown up in New Roge, a rural village near Terrania City, beamed with joy. Yasmin had an attractive figure, but she still appeared a bit naive, and sometimes she even behaved that way. Nevertheless, she had a refreshing demeanor, and even Remus Scorbit could not deny this.

"Let me go to my cabin first to unpack. We'll meet in an hour for dinner!"

As suddenly as Yasmin had appeared, she disappeared again from the Scorbits' suite. Remus took a short deep breath and turned towards Uthe.

"One hour, hmm, we should not let the time pass doing nothing," he said in a tender voice. Just then, the door buzzer rang for the third time. Furious, Remus went to the door and hit the opener. The two half doors disappeared into the wall.

"What do you still want, Yasmin?" he wanted to know, but it was not the young Terran who stood in front of him, but instead an elderly

couple. First, Remus thought that he was either hallucinating, or having a nightmare, or in a parallel reality, but then he realized that these two were quite real.

A horrified shout emanated from Remus and echoed through the cabin, startling Uthe. Concerned, she hurried to the door.

"What's going on?"

"Good afternoon, we are the Braunhauers. Could you please help us carry our suitcases? Poor old pappy can't do that anymore, he has problems with his back. He was buried alive once during the war. Since then, he can't do the things the way he wants to do, and I can't lift these heavy suitcases anymore either, ever since I have seen how Mrs. Jarnus got lumbago from that. No, I won't lift anything anymore. For that we have the young people, don't we? You two still look rather young, so could you... wait a minute, don't we know you from somewhere?"

Remus Scorbit stood thunderstruck, even after the woman with the heavy accent and halting intonation had stopped her long speech.

Uthe grimaced with discomfort. She also could not understand how they could run into that same couple again, here, of all places!

Karl-Adolf Braunhauer, a haughty, elderly, and melancholic retired man with strong opinions, who would not accept any dissension, and his wife Otilie, an irritating old woman who was always reveling in the past and complaining about her aches and pains, had also both been passengers on board the *London II*, and they hadn't made being hijacked any easier. Some rumors held that one of the brutal Casaro committed suicide after spending too much time with the imprisoned Braunhauers.

This is going to be a fun trip, Uthe sarcastically thought and looked to her husband, who was still having trouble recovering from his own shock.

"Oh, well, now I know," Mrs. Braunhauer continued. "You have been that, well... well... the... the... thing... well, the man from the... anyhow, that thing that flies through space and has been named after the capital of Italy...!"

"The capital of England, Ossi," Karl-Adolf corrected her and clutched his chest, demonstrating to everyone his never-ending pain.

"Gee, I always get these planets, or whatever, mixed up. Well, it was the *London II*. I am not stupid, am I?"

Yes, you are, Remus thought, and said: "But not at all, Mrs. Braunhauer."

"Well, in any case what a coincidence that we should meet here again. To tell you the truth, we're here to pick up my husband's cousin from the insane asylum," she started to explain.

Pick up? I would have thought you'd be joining her.

"That's our sweet Inge. She will now be brought to a nice and calm asylum near here. Oh yes, have I already told you the story of Christmas 1145? No, surely not. Well, it was Christmas, of course, and me and granny Ella wanted to cook. Then she had this idea...—by the way, granny Ella is the mother of pappy here."

The woman paused for a moment, then she continued. "What was I just saying? Oh yes, granny Ella, pappy's ma, had the idea that we could make curly kale. Curly kale for Christmas! Oh my goodness, that was something! There I was, standing in the kitchen and preparing curly kale, and for Christmas. Really! But then things got worse. Inge shows up, in suuuch a fine dress! And I stood there in my pinafore because I was supposed to be preparing curly kale for Christmas. That was a really awkward situation for me!"

"Don't talk so much, now, Ossi, I have to rest," Mr. Braunhauer interrupted. "Come on now and carry the baggage, young man, I don't have all day!" he then declared.

"Yes, Sir!" Remus exclaimed so that everybody in the corridor could hear it. Completely vexed, he grabbed three of the four suitcases and carried them to the opposite cabin. Uthe wanted to take the last suitcase, but Karl-Adolf stopped her.

"No, my sweetheart, you don't have to do that. Your husband can do that," the lecherous old geezer said very smoothly and stroked her hand several times, leaving Uthe in quite a state of revulsion.

Meanwhile, Otilie Braunhauer was vacantly staring off into space when Remus cleared his throat to get her attention.

"Where is the ID card?"

"What's that?" Otilie asked.

"The ID card for the suite."

"Oh, the thing, yes, pappy has it."

The old Terran from the State of Germany searched his bag for the card, but in vain. A lively discussion ensued between the Brauhnauers about where he might have put the ID card. Remus seemed close to a nervous breakdown. After about twenty minutes, Karl-Adolf Brauhnauer finally found the ID card. It had been in his pocket.

With the speed of a snail, the retiree slunk to the door and groped around for the slot with trembling hands. Of course, he accompanied each gesture with much moaning and groaning, stopping to clutch his chest or back every time.

After Remus had dispatched all four suitcases and the Brauhnauers had no more orders for him, he trudged back to his own cabin exhausted and fell on the bed.

"Why *them*, of all people? If it were up to me, Prothon of Mindros or the leader of the Casaro could have been on board the *Thebes*, but not *them*...!"

Uthe sat by her husband and gently stroked him.

"But we'll only see them for two days," she tried to calm him down.

"Only two days... !" he repeated slowly, emphasizing each word. "Only two days. Who knows what trouble they'll cause in that time."

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Jonathan Andrews had barely slept because Yessica simply didn't stop trying to seduce him. For the moment, Andrews was still able to successfully resist the charms of his new "wife," but gradually he started thinking whether that was really what he wanted.

What he wanted in any case, was to have a good and opulent dinner. He walked with his former girlfriend to the ship's restaurant.

Jonathan had a place at the Captain's Table and very soon had the dubious honor of meeting the Captain in person, who as always, had a cigarette butt dangling from the corner of his mouth.

At the same table were the Scorbits, the Brauhnauers and six other people. One of them was Wolfgang Shuldzahr, an important entrepreneur in the bank business. Shuldzahr was impeccably dressed and looked like an arrogant snob in Andrews' eyes.

To his right sat a portly young Terran named Björn Podahl. Next to him sat his even more imposing mother, Barbara.

To Shuldzahr's left sat the Urksman couple, two ordinary colonists from a water world. Glaus Urksman was a fisherman. He not only looked short-witted, he really was short-witted. His wife was not exactly a feast for the eyes either, although she felt irresistible herself. Finally, sitting right next to the Scorbits was Yasmin Weydner.

"Yes, folks, I heartily welcome you all aboard the noble and unique *Thebes*, a ship besides which the *Titanic*, the *EOS* and the *London* would all pale, if they still could."

Fatzar chortled with glee. However, his joke did not go over well, especially not with the Scorbits.

Jonathan Andrews picked up the conversation.

"I thank you, Harold, for this friendly welcome, and I am sure that...!"

For a moment, Jonathan was for a loss of words upon observing the Captain's cigarette butt fall into his beer glass and the Captain then emptying the glass with a single gulp.

"However, I am sure that we are in good hands here and that we will have two unforgettable days, one way or another," Andrews then hastily continued.

Two Blues served the dishes. Hungrily, Jonathan Andrews jumped at the delicacies.

"Very delicious!" he noted as he devoured the tender meat topped by baked cheese. "Tastes like lamb. What exactly is it?" he wanted to know.

"Oh, that is Okrill brain with baked cheese and a delicious mushroom sauce from Ferrol," the Blue truthfully answered.

Uthe Scorbit immediately spat out the meat and took a large gulp from her drink. Yasmin also made a face and slowly pushed the plate away from her.

"M... m... m... may, may I h... h... h.. have that?" the portly Björn Podahl stuttered, staring longingly at the plates of the two women.

"Please, help yourself," Uthe said and gestured at her plate.

Otilie Braunhauer cleared her throat.

"Well, I do like it. The main thing is that it is not too greasy, because pappy doesn't like things too greasy."

Karl-Adolf looked at his wife in agreement.

"This so gently prepared dish also tickles my palate," he pompously said, trying to feign a non-existent sophistication.

Disgusted, Yasmin watched Björn Podahl stuff the brain of the saurian animal into his mouth and smack appreciatively, then she noticed Glaus Urksman's leering in her direction.

"Baby, are you free tonight?" he asked the red-haired girl, who shook her head in terror. Instinctively, she moved her chair closer to her girl friend, who was picking at her salad as if she were searching for something. When her friend noticed the Captain's inquisitive glances, she put aside her fork and smiled embarrassed.

"Oh, I just wanted to see if there's any Okrill brain in there," Uthe explained to the round.

Fatzar shook his head. "No, only some Muuhrt worms from Gatas."

"Oh well, I guess I'll be on a diet today," Uthe said.

Immediately, Podahl greedily stared in the direction of Uthe Scorbit's plate, who simply shoved the dish over to the glutton.

"By the way, did I already tell you about my hammer toe?" Otilie Braunhauer suddenly asked.

Only Remus Scorbit knew what was in store for them. Otilie Braunhauer moved back a bit with her chair and undid her shoe. Then she proceeded to show everyone her deformed toe, whether or not they cared to see it.

By now, even Remus Scorbit and Johnny Andrews had lost their appetite. Uthe took the initiative and took Yasmin by her hand.

"We'll go for a bit of shopping. Thank you a lot, Captain, for the dinner."

Surprised, Remus watched his wife leaving and contemplated an excuse for himself. "Jonathan, what would you say to a drink at the

bar?"

"Or perhaps even two, as far as I'm concerned," Andrews answered, having tried to follow the senior citizen's stories, which she recounted with a voice that was becoming increasingly dragging with each Vurguzz that she drank.

Remus Scorbit and Jonathan Andrews quickly excused themselves and headed for the bar, where they ordered whisky from the attractive barmaid. Jonathan had immediately noticed the lovely Terran girl with the long golden hair and breathtaking figure.

The two men spent several hours at the bar and then staggered to Andrews' glider, climbed into the vehicle, and listened to loud music.

2.

The mysterious asteroid

Harold Fatzar had just gotten out of bed. Just as he did each morning, he thought it was much too early. Reluctantly, the Terran hauled himself to the command center, where he found the Blue and the Topider already at work.

"Captain, there's something," Zypülü said and pointed to the scanner. Fatzar, dressed only in an undershirt and trousers, shuffled to the Blue and gazed at the screen.

"What's that?" he wanted to know and emptied his cup of coffee.

"Well, I'd say, an asteroid. But a completely isolated asteroid that also is extremely slow," the Gatasan explained in a high-pitched voice that is typical for his species.

"So what?"

"Well, without a doubt, we can detect some technology. There's something there, on that meteorite."

Harold scratched his head and yawned loudly, once again causing his cigarette butt to fall into his morning beverage.

"Oh shit...!" he exclaimed, looking at his cup. "Well, d'you think there's something of value there, that could get us off of this miserable tub?"

"Perhaps...."

The Terran glanced at the Topider, who until now had stayed out of the discussion.

"Let's check it out," Gavron Yark said tersely.

Fatzar thought things over for a moment, then abruptly stopped all engines. He grabbed the intercom and announced to the passengers: "Ladies and Gentlemen, we're making an unscheduled stopover. There's no reason for alarm. By noon we'll be on our way again. Thank you!"

Remus Scorbit was still half asleep when he heard the announcement. He opened his heavy eyelids with some difficulty and looked around in the cabin. He couldn't find his wife anywhere. After a while he managed to lift himself out of the bed. Remus' head was throbbing very badly, and a queasy feeling was spreading out in his stomach.

"I shouldn't have had that beer chaser..." the Terran murmured to himself and went to the bathroom.

On his way, he found a note from Uthe. She had gone to the ship's recreational area to sunbathe there under the small artificial sun.

The door buzzer rang. Remus did not dare to open the door, because it most likely was the Braunhauers. However, the buzzer kept going off again and again. The visitor did not seem to let up.

"Alright, I'm coming...!" he shouted and opened the door. The visitor turned out to be Jonathan Andrews.

"Good morning, did you hear the Captain's announcement? Very strange, isn't it?" Jonathan asked brashly.

Remus was visibly surprised to see how well the young Terran was doing, considering that he had imbibed the same amount of alcohol as he had.

"Did you sleep well?" Andrews asked in a friendly voice and entered the cabin.

Remus just loudly grunted and shook his head, which only caused him further pain.

Andrews grinned. "Well, I still had a pleasant night. I let myself be seduced by Yessica. But to be honest, I regret it already. She's really not for me."

"Well, in that case..."

Remus trudged to the kitchen and searched for a refreshing drink. He rummaged in the fridge and finally found a bottle of orange juice. Then he thought again about Jonathan Andrews saying that the ship had stopped.

"How do you mean that? Maybe there's simply some problem with the ship, or it is being hijacked by a megalomaniac Arkonide admiral," Remus contemplated over his glass of juice, which he now really appreciated.

Andrews waved aside the suggestion. "No, I think it much more likely that that asteroid that's moving past us so slowly is responsible for our stopover."

"Why do you think that?"

"Since the stop, the *Thebes* has adapted her speed to the speed of that asteroid."

Remus slowly nodded his head. "What do we do now?"

"We go to Fatzar and discuss the matter with him. I'm dying to know what's so important about that piece of rock," Andrews explained and was already on his way out of the cabin.

Scorbit quickly got dressed and hastened after his friend who was dashing toward the command center.

Fatzar, Yark and Zypülü were already busy preparing the equipment for a visit to the meteorite.

"Hold on a moment, please! We know that you want to visit that asteroid. You don't have to deny it," Andrews began self-confidently.

The three crew members of the *Thebes* looked at each other in surprise.

"But you said that no one would get wind of this!" the Blue scolded, confirming Andrews's theory.

Fatzar would liked to have strangled the thin neck of his scanner. Instead, he pulled himself together and turned towards his two uninvited guests.

"What do you want?"

"We just want to come along and see what's so interesting about that piece of rock," Andrews explained.

"Well, we're taking the Space Jet. Suit up into SERUNs. We'll meet in the hangar."

3.

An ancient base

Slowly, the small space jet headed towards the asteroid. It had barely reached the surface of the cold and dark rock when the five were able to recognize buildings and technical installations underneath a transparent dome. If they were lucky, there might still be a breathable atmosphere beneath it.

Next to the dome was a large spaceport. Four strange looking pillars stood at each corner of the landing area.

Fatzar directed the jet precisely to that field and landed safely. Gavron Yark got five thermobeamers from an armory and distributed them among the members of the reconnaissance troop.

"Safety first, we don't know what to expect inside the station," the Topider explained as he released the safety-cock of the weapon.

The loading hatch opened and Fatzar disembarked first. He activated the radar locator and a floodlight on his SERUN. The micro-gravitators of the spacesuit compensated for the low gravity of the asteroid.

Gavron Yark left second, followed by Scorbit and Andrews. Zypülü, the Blue, was the last one who dared to leave the jet.

"Boss, how about we think about this one more time. This is all giving me the creeps...!"

"Shut up!" Fatzar grumbled. He went with firm steps in the direction of the dome. Gavron Yark held his weapon ready. Upon reaching the dome, they found an entrance about 500 meters away, but it was locked.

Yark aimed at the control box, but Andrews didn't let the Topider shoot. Instead, he got a few screwdrivers and magnet cards out of his pocket and opened the control box. Scorbit assisted him, and a short time later they were able to open the gate. Andrews beamed at the Topider and said: "We should use a bit more brainpower as we proceed here."

"Let's go!" Fatzar shouted and scuttled through the entrance. After the reconnaissance troop had entered the lock, the outer hatch closed automatically. Another hatch to a second

chamber opened. Apparently they were now to be disinfected. After patiently enduring the procedure, they entered a third hatch chamber. When all of them had entered that chamber, it was flooded with oxygen. But none of them dared to take off his helmet.

The picosyns of their SERUNs told the troop that the artificial atmosphere was breathable. Jonathan was the first one who had the courage to open his helmet, followed by Yark, Scorbit, and Fatzar. Only Zypülü kept his visor closed.

The station looked gloomy and old. The walls were black, the corridors appeared dark and sinister. They were covered with bare black metal, interrupted every now and then by a few hatches and grids.

Finally, the five reached a large room that probably represented the command central. Jonathan Andrews tried to familiarize himself with the instruments. He was no scientist, but he had a more than average understanding of technology. The room had a circular layout. Numerous consoles stood in the middle, apparently control boards. Directly in front of them was a huge monitor, and to its right another corridor led to a side room. A blue flickering came from that room. Slowly, Yark and Fatzar walked through the corridor and shone their lights into it.

"You have to see this," Fatzar shouted to the others, who immediately followed him. Andrews, Scorbit and Zypülü were dumbstruck. The first thing they perceived was the dark blue, glowing energy field, then the numerous skeletons on the floor that seemed to be from birdlike beings. Finally, they looked to inside the energy field.

"A Halutan!" Scorbit realized with surprise.

"More precisely, the corpse of a Halutan," Jonathan added and went closer to the energy field.

The three eyelids of the 3.5 meter black skinned giant were all closed. The four arms were spread away from the body. The red combat suit of the Halutan was burned and torn open in some parts, which could only be interpreted as signs of a fight.

"Take a more closer look around," Fatzar said and looked about the room. Traces of a

fight could also be found here. At the other end of the room was a large hole.

While Zypülü went back to the command central, the other four climbed through the hole and discovered a large chamber.

Some machines that were connected to an approximately two meter high container were still operating in the other chamber. Andrews decided to approach the containers. Most of them contained decomposed bodies.

"What the hell is that?" Jonathan murmured and looked at one container after the other. Each of them showed the same image.

"All of them decomposed," Scorbit reported, feeling depressed. He almost became sick upon seeing some cadavers that were only partially decayed.

"Look, look! Some are still intact!" Gavron shouted.

Immediately, the others hurried to the Topider, who stood in front of a chamber whose unit still seemed to work.

"But this one also looks already slightly decomposed," Jonathan Andrews said when he saw the old naked man before him.

"What should we do with them?" Gavron wanted to know now.

"Two possibilities: either we wake him up or we take the container with us," Andrews said and searched for some switches, but without success.

"That's out of question! We leave them here. What should we do with them anyway?" Fatzar was seriously mad. He had hoped for much more, maybe a fortune, but so far they had found only dead bodies and an ancient Terran.

"This man is still alive. It is impossible for us to leave him here. At some point the unit will run out of energy, then he too will die!"

Harold lit up one of his beloved cigarettes and took a long puff. Then he nodded silently. Andrews immediately got to work. He went back to the command central and tried to find a control board for the chambers.

"Hey, guys, I've found something!" Zypülü yelled. Immediately, Fatzar and Yark ran to their fellow crew member, who had entered another side room.

The eyes of the captain lit up as he saw

all that gold, howalgonium and the many diamonds. An enthusiastic whistle echoed throughout the giant room. "We won't get all that on board the space jet at once. Gavron, Zypülü, land the *Thebes* on the spaceport next to the dome. And tell the passengers that we are doing some scientific research here."

Finally, Harold Fatzar's dream had come true. Soon he would be a rich man. With this fortune, he would be able to run his own shipping company, or maybe he could even buy Shorne Industry.

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With the help of his picosyn, Andrews began to translate the language and the script. He had discovered what seemed to be a log of the base commander. Indeed, the base had been controlled by birdlike beings. The holographic log showed the commander in his full size. His yellow feathers gave him a splendid appearance.

But the Terran did not understand a single word he said. That was now the task of the translators.

Remus Scorbit informed Jonathan of the tremendous discovery that Fatzar had made. While Andrews activated the installation's lighting, the two watched through the windows as the *Thebes* landed.

"What's the secret behind this station?" Remus wanted to know, looking at Andrews. Andrews shrugged.

"I don't know that for sure myself. But it's possible that the bird beings kidnapped a lot of other beings and maybe used them for research or as nutrition, hence, the chambers. They must have, in the truest sense of the word, bitten on granite when they tried to get the Halutan. He must have done his utmost to save himself and the others, but before he succeeded, he met his fate."

"And why this energy field then?"

"Well, I'd also like to know that!"

Scorbit glanced at the body of the Halutan. Something seemed strange to him, but he did not know exactly what. It was just a bad feeling.

4.

The Marquis de la Siniestro

Two scientists, who were on board the ship by chance, and the ship's doctor were brought to the station, while Gavron and Zypülü secretly transported the discovered treasure to the *Thebes*. The less the number of people who knew about it, the better. Remus Scorbit and Jonathan Andrews had been promised a ten percent share if they remained silent.

The two had accepted immediately. Remus would be made financially secure and could fulfill all of his and Uthe's wishes, and Jonathan could finally buy the glider of his dreams.

Nevertheless, for the moment the two were busy with the translation of the alien language. In the meantime, the scientists had found a total of 27 intact chambers, four of them containing human beings.

All of the four had already aged a bit, especially the one they had discovered first. The ship's physician, Doctor Wallik, investigated the stasis chambers and ran some tests. Impatient, Jonathan asked about the current status of the investigations.

"Well, I am quite sure that we can open the chambers. With our current technology it will be no problem to save these people," the scientist explained.

"Do you know how old the station is?"

"Initial tests say that the station is between 3,000 and 4,000 years old. The energy reservoir of the generators is sufficient for about 3,500 years. As the energy levels in the tanks of the four Terrans have already dropped below half, I would say that these men have been lying here in stasis for almost 3,000 years," he added and pointed to the four chambers, which had been placed next to each other.

Andrews whistled aloud through his teeth.

"Rather old, these guys. Anyway, we have to free them. Doc, do it!"

"Sure, but I will have to go to the central control. There should be a device there to deactivate the chambers."

The three doctors immediately ran to the installations and tried to find the right switch. To

the Terran they were almost like little children, playing at the controls with bright eyes, and then discussing their results with pure enthusiasm.

Harold Fatzar approached the research team and looked curiously at Scorbit and Andrews. "Well, do you have any news?"

"No, the scientists are still trying to free the four Terrans from their stasis field. We'll try it with one of them first to see if it works. If so, we'll free the rest of them too."

"Fine, fine. We've already loaded a quarter of the treasure."

Remus shook his head. "I'm just asking myself why such a research station carried such an enormous treasure...!"

"No idea, man! But to be honest, I don't care about it, the main thing is that I am getting rich... and you too, of course."

Jonathan Andrews felt uncomfortable in Fatzar's vicinity. The captain was too slimy for his taste.

"Hadn't we better inform Terra?" he suggested.

"No! They'll just take away our gold. Maybe later, but only after I have transferred everything to a numbered account on Lepso!"

With every second, Andrews felt less sympathy for Fatzar. He would have preferred to knock him down right away and call a halt to the whole thing.

Suddenly one of the scientists cried out loudly.

"I found the switch," he cheered, and pressed like mad on the buttons, but nothing happened. All at once, the four pillars on the landing field were activated. Cranes extended and sealed an energy field around the *Thebes*.

"What's that? Switch that off!" Fatzar shouted excitedly and darted in the direction of the console. "Don't touch anything!"

It was already too late. Randomly, Fatzar pressed all the buttons, but the energy field became brighter and brighter, until it extinguished. When the whole thing was finally over, they realized to their horror that the *Thebes* had disappeared. Simply gone!

"What? Where?" Harold Fatzar stammered, baffled.

Scorbit and Andrews also could not believe what had happened.

"Where has she gone?" Andrews wanted to know and shook Wallik by the shoulders.

"I don't know. This might have been a matter transmitter that has sent her away. I'll try to determine the coordinates."

"Hurry up!"

Suddenly the stasis chambers also opened, and the energy field around the body of the Halutan broke down.

The three Terrans hurried to the chambers and looked at the four men, who slowly started to move.

The medical robots immediately moved to treat the four Terrans, giving them stabilizing medications and clothes.

"Doc, what about the *Thebes*?" Jonathan Andrews shouted through the room.

"I can't do anything. That's a one way matter transmitter. I can send, but I can't receive. That means that you have to go through the transmitter yourself...!"

"Great!"

"We have to risk it. My wife is still on the *Thebes*, maybe in danger," Scorbit said.

Andrews agreed with his friend without any reservation and started to pack up his equipment, but Harold Fatzar had a couple of objections. First of all, he wanted to load a bit more gold in the space jet, then fly to Terra and inform the government about the incident. In any case, the heavy-set Terran was not willing to risk his life.

But Doctor Wallik also advised them to be careful. He wanted to learn more about the station first. It could well be that the matter transmitter led directly into a sun or into empty space, far away from the Milky Way or any other civilized point in the universe.

One of the medical robots interrupted their debate. "Sir, the four Terrans are all conscious and want to talk to you."

"Have they already said anything?" Andrews wanted to know.

"That is the problem, we can't identify the language...!"

Startled, Andrews and Scorbit looked at each other and went to the room with the chambers.

There, four temporary beds had been installed. One of the four, the old man whom they had discovered first, was already on his feet. They had given him a coat to wear. His face was gaunt and full of wrinkles. Long white hair hung from his head as if it were dead. Jonathan told himself that an immortal might look just like that shortly before dying after loosing his cell activator.

"¿Dónde estoy?" the Terran asked in a language that was unknown to the humans of the New Galactic Era.

"I beg your pardon?"

"¿Dónde estoy? ¿Quién sois?"

"Errr... ?"

Andrews looked inquisitively from one face to the next, but the others also responded to his words with only a clueless shrug.

Remus then addressed the old man. "Don't you speak Intercosmo?"

"¿Qué es Intercosmo?" the ancient Terran croaked.

Scorbit sighed aloud and was as clueless as the others. The old man walked through the room and investigated the installations. He was visibly impressed.

"¿Qué castillo impresionante! ¿Sois ingleses, franceses o alemanes?"

Jonathan just shook his head.

"I do not understand a word of that gibberish!" Fatzar grumbled angrily and walked towards the man and patted him on his neck. "Come on, speak Intercosmo, you old bastard!"

Andrews and Scorbit tore the commander of the *Thebes* away from the old man, who touched his throat but then positioned himself angrily and without fear in front of Fatzar and looked at him madly.

"No arriesga de tocarme! No sabéis quién soy yo? Soy el marquesa Don Philippe Alfonso Jaime de la provincia española Siniestro."

"Go get the translator here, dammit!" Fatzar shouted at Doctor Wallik, who quickly ran to the other room and fetched the universal translator.

One of the medical robots repeated the words and provided sufficient information for the translator to operate. The device was immediately able to recognize the language. It was

the old Terran language Spanish.

"Don't dare touch me! Don't you know who I am? I am the Marquis Don Philippe Alfonso Jaime de la Siniestro, a Spanish province," the translator flawlessly interpreted.

Andrews and Scorbit introduced themselves, but they had to be very careful. It would surely shock the Spaniard to realize where, and especially when, he was. They determined that the Marquis de la Siniestro had been an influential lord in Spain and had been kidnapped at the age of 80 by strange beings in the year 1841 of the old Terranian calendar.

He could not remember more. He explained that a disobedient servant girl had tabbed him with something when he was trying to be friendly to her. Then everything had gone black. When he woke up again, he saw giant birds and thought he was in heaven. Then he fell asleep again and woke up here.

Carefully, Andrews and Scorbit explained to the old Spaniard from the 18th century that he was now in the year 1291 of the New Galactic Era, which would be the year 4878 of the calendar used by the Spaniard, and that a lot of things had changed. The European nobleman did not know space travel, nor extraterrestrials, not even electricity or self-propelled vehicles.

Nevertheless, he accepted everything quite calmly and collected himself quickly, much to the surprise of the Terrans of the NGE.

"What do we do with him now?" Fatzar wanted to know, and derisively glanced at the old man, who in the meantime had dressed himself in an old cloak and a cape. He almost looked like a monk, except for the black cape.

"We take him with us, what else? Let's also attend to the other three," Andrews said and walked over to the three men who meanwhile had also regained consciousness. They spoke German, which also posed no problems for the translator. The three strange fellows introduced themselves. The first one was a man of middle age; he wore a beard, had a beer belly and did not smell very good. He introduced himself as Reinhard Katschmareck from Berlin, born in the year 1932.

The next one was much smaller, almost a dwarf. This man also came from Germany and

was Reinhard's cousin, Werner Niesewitz.

The third of the bunch almost resembled the Marquis. His lachrymal sacs hung down almost to the tip of his nose, and his eyes were reddened. The German Eberhard Wieber was born in 1921 and had served his whole life in the army.

The three told a story very similar to the one that they had already heard from the Marquis de la Siniestro. All three of them had been sitting together drinking a glass of beer when they suddenly found themselves in an empty room and were narcotized soon after.

"Coulda we maybe getta beer heer?" Reinhard Katschmareck wanted to know in a horrible dialect.

"So, what do we do now with these four strange characters?" Remus Scorbit asked now, slowly becoming a bit impatient.

Gradually, Andrews had grown into the role of the leader, which he considered very strange, but somehow it also made him feel a bit proud of himself.

"I think we give those four people a hypno-training in the space jet, and then we'll decide whether we'll go through the matter transmitter. In any case we'll send a radio message. Fatzar, Gavron and Zypülü, go with the Marquis, Katschmareck, Wieber and Niesewitz to the space jet. Doctor Wallik and his two assistants continue their research here."

Andrews' instructions were accepted by the others without any argument. Remus Scorbit was very worried about his wife Uthe. He hoped that nothing had happened to her. As the writer passed by the Halutan, he noticed for the first time the white, wormlike hump around the giant's neck.

He assumed that it had been a kind of security control of the birdmen to keep him under control. Nevertheless the Halutan had been able to attempt to defend himself and free the others, unfortunately without success.

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The Marquis was the fastest learner among the four. Second was Niesewitz. For

Katschmareck and especially for old Eberhardt Wieber, both kidnapped from the year 1984, everything was somewhat hard to grasp. They already knew of someone named Perry Rhodan, but their mental horizons seemed to be limited.

"If I may summarize, we have been in cryogenic sleep for almost 3,000 years, but this Mister Rhodan is still living?"

Andrews confirmed Reinhard Katschmareck's theory. At first, the German looked very pensively at the floor, but then he grinned broadly.

"Oh boy! That means, then, that my old Dorle has long since bitten the dust! That, I have to celebrate!"

Unnerved, Andrews shook his head. The three now demanded something to eat and drink, preferably beer. Fatzar was able to fulfill their wishes without problems.

The Marquis was more introverted. He closely observed the others and seemed to learn quickly. He stood close to Jonathan Andrews and looked out of the window of the space jet.

"Some moments ago I was still in Spain, and now I look out of the window and see a completely strange world in front of me. For almost anyone in my century this would have been a cultural shock."

"Why not for you then?"

"I am stronger than the others. I consider this kidnapping a blessing. I had achieved everything I could in Spain and I was an important ruler. Here I have many more opportunities..."

The Spaniard's voice had a strange undertone that Andrews was not quite able to interpret. Don Philippe folded his hands on his belly and seemed to enjoy the view of the asteroid. Probably he was the only one.

"You have troubles, Señor Andrews?"

Jonathan simply nodded.

"In the meantime I have understood what is going on here. Apparently you and your friends had passed by here purely by chance and discovered me and these other naïve creatures. Your ship has disappeared, through this... matter transmitter, that's the right word, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Well, as long as there were no indispensable persons on board that ship, I ask you to please take me to Earth, Señor Andrews."

The Terran clenched his teeth and shook his head. The Marquis turned up his nose, which made him appear even uglier.

"I am sorry, Marquis, but I can't bring you to Earth. We have to find the *Thebes* first. We owe it to the people on board the ship. We have to save them."

Don Philippe's face grimaced into a grin, and Andrews could not tell whether it was a heartfelt smile or a disdainful and disparaging sneer.

"With due deference to your altruism, don't you think that this noble-mindedness for these insignificant people is out of place here?"

"No!" Jonathan replied vexed. "Humanity has evolved a bit since your times. We help each other and we respect all kinds of life. Not everyone may have this attitude, but I for my part will not stop until we have found the passengers of the *Thebes*, understood?"

The Marquis appeasingly raised his hands.

"I did not want to make you angry, Señor. I owe you a great debt of gratitude, because without you I would still be in that chamber. Therefore I will support you in your search for your people as much as I can."

"Thanks, I need all help I can get."

Jonathan Andrews was no longer certain what to think of the Marquis de la Siniestro. In any case, this man had adapted very well to his new circumstances. He was highly intelligent, despite his forbidding appearance. Nevertheless, Andrews was now mainly awaiting further results from Doctor Wallik. He was hoping to hear soon from the scientist.

5.

The Awakening

Wallik sipped a cup of coffee and worked with his portable syntron at the console of the bird-people. In that time the Plophosan had discovered a couple of things. The birds called themselves Vesarides and were from a distant galaxy. They saw themselves as researchers and had collected a huge number of samples from all parts of the universe, to study and exhibit them.

Wallik found this idea to be reprehensible, but it also reminded him of the Terrans, because they had done exactly the same thing with the animals of their planet.

So far, they were only able to decipher a portion of the log. He replayed it again and again to translate the strange words.

The hologram of the bird being appeared. It was the commander of the flying meteorite, which in reality was a spaceship. His name was Pazoni.

"This is Commander Pazoni. Entry xarudkut isak cha kazul. The beast cannot be controlled. We have tried everything, but the azoki mok la kretza isu al badi ch'aa'roja.

Our losses are high, I don't know whether we'll be able to complete our mission. In my opinion it was a mistake to poratzi ertz takar da this galaxy.

Oh, no. Again it is ura ura saar. I only have one option left. If I succeed, then..."

That ended the second to last message. Slowly it began to make sense to Wallik. The beast must have been the Halutan that they had kidnapped, just as they had the ancient Terrans. The scientist could only guess the Halutan's age, but certainly he had not been in this station as long as the Marquis. Now the second message could be heard.

"The monster has killed almost everyone. He has ozz chuk chuk chak our porak zurek offer. There is only one option left. I'm seriously injured, but I can still defeat it."

After a pause of about ten minutes, during which only shouts and shots were heard in the background, the bird being stepped again in front of the camera, now covered in blood.

"I have defeated that being that calls itself zertak du duru dak. I don't know whether it is really dead, but I pray that it is. I, the only one who has survived the rage of this black beast, will die. Our mission has failed, and whoever hears this message, don't judge us wrongly, and beware of the monster. Should it still live, then only the Green One can save us and redeem our souls."

Those were the final words.

"Very theatrical. Hanz. Please bring me another cup of coffee."

His colleague passed the corridor with the dead Halutan and went into the chamber, where they had set up a small base, and got more of the black beverage for his friend. Wallik was busy translating the first sentence of the last message. He was dying to know what the Halutan had called himself.

The translator was running at full blast.

"Where is the coffee?" the scientist shouted impatiently and looked over to his other colleague, who was dissecting one of the skeletons. Wallik did not get an answer from him, but from the translator. It was now able to translate the missing words perfectly: "I have defeated that being that calls itself a Temporal Guardian!"

Wallik gasped. He double-checked the translator, but the translation was correct. Visibly startled, he beckoned Allan D. Donalds to come over. Reluctantly, Donalds tore himself away from the skeleton of the bird.

When Donalds heard the Vesaride's last sentence, he, too, was shocked. The being called itself a Temporal Guardian!

"Holy shit. That means that the Vesarides have also kidnapped a Dolan containing a Second Conditioned. But they were not able to keep the beast under control. Horrible...!"

Wallik nodded silently. He reviewed some further camera recordings, but the material was already almost 3,000 years old.

He had calculated that the station had been roaming through space as a ghost ship since the year 2015 of the old calendar. As they had found no Dolan, and with all of the radio equipment destroyed, the beast would have had no opportunity to escape from the asteroid.

Wallik studied the recordings. They showed the commander very clearly as he collapsed and died in front of the console. But a short time later another Vesaride rushed to the console and pressed some keys. It seemed as if he were being threatened by someone. It was not clear by whom. Suddenly the blue light that represented the energy field around the Second Conditioned appeared. The Vesaride seemed to set a countdown for the field, but suddenly changed it to an undetermined time period. Then he took a weapon and shot himself.

"What does that mean?" Donalds wondered.

Wallik thought hard.

"Well...!" he murmured and requested some data about the energy field. He raised his eyebrows when he realized what it was.

"That is a stasis field, my friend. Apparently it was supposed be set only for a certain time span, but the bird switched off the count-down, so that it remained activated until the energy broke down," the Plophosan explained to his colleague.

"Okay, but who forced the Vesaride to span a stasis field around the dead Temporal Guardian? That's useful only if you want to survive for a long time...!"

Donalds had answered his own question. Startled, the two scientists looked at each other. Immediately, Wallik reactivated the field. He wanted to be on the safe side.

"Hopefully that thing isn't still alive...!" he murmured with fear in his voice.

"Hanz, where is the coffee?"

Suddenly they heard loud screams, followed by the sound of breaking china, then of bones being crunched. Abruptly, the screaming stopped.

The two scientists looked at each other in alarm, but the enormous giant was already stalking towards them. The three fire-red eyes emitted not just vitality but also hatred.

"Get out of here!" Donalds shouted and ran towards the exit, but the Temporal Guardian had already reached him and threw him against a wall.

Donalds struggled to his feet, squealing like a stuck pig. The giant reared up in front of the scientist, foaming with rage. Sweat poured down Donalds's forehead. Tears flowed down the Terran's face. The Temporal Guardian yelled out and struck two fingers against the scientist's head. The man's head was torn off the body and smashed against a wall, where it literally burst.

Wallik wanted to flee now as well, but the giant stepped into his path and broke both of the Plophosan's legs. The unbearable paid barely allowed Wallik to remain conscious. The Second Conditioned grabbed him and threw him onto the console.

"Speak! What are our current coordinates?"

The translator could translate the language of the Center without any problems. Trembling, Wallik reported the current location of the station. The beast foamed even more angrily when he heard the result.

"That miserable Vesaride cheated me. He was told to adjust the stasis field so that it would deactivate shortly before the station reached the hyperspace bubble. I have to get in touch with the others!"

Wallik lifted an arm. "The others are a long time dead... two thousand years... there is no reason that we can't communicate peacefully...."

The beast hissed at Wallik and narrowed his eyes. The Plophosan knew that he was done for. The Temporal Guardian raised the scientist with his lower grip arm and pressed him against the console, which immediately cracked into pieces, as did Wallik's spine.

6.

The Beast

"What's taking him so long?" Andrews asked himself indignantly.

"Who do you mean?" Remus wanted to know.

"That scientist, Wallik! He is not supposed to be writing a thesis, just simply determine the coordinates of the *Thebes*...!"

Their agitation was palpable, in contrast to the three Germans from the 20th century, who were eating and drinking, and singing at the top of their voices.

Jonathan took the intercom and dialed the code for Wallik's picosyn, but received no answer. He tried it twice more, then he realized that something must have been wrong. Andrews looked concerned.

"Is something wrong?" Don Philippe asked.

"I don't know. You stay here while Remus and I go and look."

The Terran had barely finished speaking before he was out the door and running in the direction of the command central of the alien station. Remus followed him with the same speed and kept his thermobeamer ready.

What the two found there horrified them. What remained of the bodies of the scientists was badly torn up. Jonathan immediately summoned Fatzar, Yark, and the Blue Zypülü.

No one could explain what had happened. Even the medical robots and the remaining inactive chambers had been destroyed. The energy field was reactivated, but the Halutan was missing.

Andrews discovered the memo cube in Wallik's right hand. He carefully retrieved it and put the device on the table. The hologram of the birdman appeared and repeated all three translated messages, making everything clear.

The five now knew that they were dealing with a Second Conditioned who had gone mad. They also couldn't explain why he was still alive, but that was not important at the moment. The most important thing now was survival.

"We have to get out of here. The best choice is to go immediately through the matter transmitter," Scorbit proposed. Andrews nodded his head in agreement and set out to go there, but Gavron Yark held him back.

"What?" Andrews snapped.

"From here on we go separate ways. We need the room in the space jet for our gold. To hell with the *Thebes*, to hell with those four stone-age relics in the space jet, to hell with the beast, and especially to hell with you!"

Harold Fatzar's words oozed with disdain. The gold was more important to him than anything else, and his two comrades were no different. Greed had seized their souls.

He ordered Gavron to kill the two men while he and Zypülü would eliminate the Marquis and the three 20th century people.

The Topider positioned the thermobeamer on his elbow and aimed at Remus' head. Andrews was about to jump in between them, when the beast plunged into the room and reared up in front of all of them. The Topider stumbled backward and now aimed his weapon at the Temporal Guardian, who planted himself in front of the lizard man with a ghastly roar.

"Get off! Go away!" Yark desperately screamed, opening fire, which had no effect on the Second Conditioned, who had hardened his exterior. Andrews and Scorbit grabbed their

weapons and ran for the chamber with the containers.

The Topider did not have the slightest chance. The energy salvos ceased, the beast dropped down to its running arms and simply ran down Yark. The fate of the First Officer of the *Thebes* was sealed.

"Shit, now it's our turn," Andrews noted. His voice cracked as he saw the Temporal Guardian rush around the corner.

"Let's get out of here, now!" he shouted at Scorbit and ran off.

Both scrambled into a side room and blocked the door. Dripping with sweat, they leaned against the wall and heaved a sigh of relief. The beast broke through the opposite wall and tried to grab the two with its arms. Remus and Jonathan scampered in between its pillar-like legs, directly into the command central. When they realized that the monster was following them, they ran towards the hall, where the treasure was stored and where Fatzar and Zypülü were busy loading the next batch.

"Run! Run!" the two men yelled as they bolted past the Terran and the Blue, who only looked at them uncomprehendingly.

Fatzar tried to reach Yark, but before he could say anything, the floor started to vibrate, faster and faster, stronger and stronger. The Gatasan screamed and started to shoot at the beast, but the Temporal Guardian grabbed the Blue's arm, lifted him up, and smashed him against the wall.

Fatzar hurried to the Gatasan. He saw at once that Zypülü was no longer breathing.

As fast as his legs could carry him, he tried to escape from the monster. But the beast had already caught up to him with one giant jump, and lifted him too. With one hand he held Fatzar's arms, with the other his legs. The Temporal Guardian then bent the Terran backwards until he broke apart in the middle.

Angry, the beast then stalked through the corridors. Remus and Jonathan were successful in hiding themselves. Both of them were terrified. Neither Scorbit nor Andrews were cowards, but at the sight of that monster they literally peed in their pants.

"What... what do we do now?" Remus hesitatingly asked.

"Through the matter transmitter!"

"Good idea, but there's one problem. One of us must activate the switch in the central, and for that he has to get past the beast...!"

Andrews audibly gulped. Slowly he started to regret this adventure. He thought for a moment and then gathered all his courage.

"Fine, one of us distracts the Temporal Guardian while the other runs into the central. Which do you want to do?"

Remus laughed out and with desperation looked at the wall. He thought about Uthe. To see her again, he had to go through the matter transmitter. There was no other way. But for that they had to outwit the beast.

"Listen, Remus. I'll distract the damned beast. You have a wonderful wife waiting for you. For me, there's no one waiting," Andrews proposed.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! So come on, let's get this over with!"

Jonathan armed himself and wanted to dash off, but Remus held him back.

"Wait. I have an idea. First we have to get to the space jet. Maybe we have some acid there. I seem to remember that the beasts could be killed with stog acid. Maybe we have something similar on board."

"Good idea!"

The two Terrans ran as fast as they could to the hangar and over to the space jet. The Marquis was already waiting for them.

"I'm happy that Fatzar hasn't killed you," Andrews sincerely said and gave the old Spaniard a clap on the shoulder. "Where are the others?"

"They are lying drunk in a corner, singing strange songs about a Polish fleet that sinks off the coast of Danzig. I can make no sense of it."

Slowly Andrews understood that those three were rather nationalistic. Just one more problem to deal with. He hoped that the three relics would not cause any unnecessary danger. In the meantime, Remus Scorbit had found two acid launchers. Hastily, they strapped the launchers on their backs.

"Considering that this is a space jet of a

cruise ship, it is pretty well armed...!" Remus noted with surprise. But it suited him fine just now.

"Marquis, you wait here until we come back. As soon as the matter transmitter is activated, we have about two minutes' time to get back to the ship. We have to hurry," Johnny Andrews explained.

Remus nodded and readied the acid launcher.

"Who will drive this spaceship into the matter transmitter, Sénores?"

Perplexed, Remus and Jonathan looked at each other. Don Philippe grinned broadly.

"I will do the job. Thanks to the hypno-training I will probably be able to operate the ship. As soon as you two have left the ship, I'll bring it into position. Good luck!"

*

"Well, if I survive this, I'll ask Yessica if she wants to marry me," Jonathan said. Then he thought for a moment. "No, it's better I just sleep with her and think about the rest later."

Scorbit grinned and wished his friend good luck.

Slowly Remus tiptoed through the dark corridors and expected to run into the Temporal Guardian any second.

Jonathan Andrews made much more of a commotion as he moved. He had put on a SERUN to have at least a fighting chance against the monster. The sound of the monstrosity stomping around close by made his heart race with fear.

Jonathan activated the acid launcher. He could already see the shadow of the beast, and then the giant was striding toward him, each step causing the ground to shake. About ten meters in front of Andrews the monster stopped, listening to the Terran's uneven breathes.

For the first few seconds, Jonathan was paralyzed, then he pulled himself together. The Temporal Guardian barely moved. The eyes emitted hatred, arrogance, and superiority. Automatically regulating the internal temperature, Jonathan's SERUN tried to calm its occupant by lowering it. Jonathan gathered all his courage.

"Why do you murder?" he asked in a subdued voice.

"Because you're in my way. I need your ship. And for that I need only one of you. The rest will be annihilated."

"The Ulebs don't exist any more, don't you get it? We defeated them!"

The Temporal Guardian seemed a bit less sure of himself.

"Yeah, we really kicked your ass! You are the last of your kind. It's better you just lay down and die, or do you want me to just finish you off, you giant ape!"

Now he'll burst into a fury, Andrews thought, without realizing that the Second Conditioned wouldn't know what to make of these cuss-words.

"If it's true that I'm the last one, then I'll certainly take you with me into my grave!" the beast shouted and rushed toward Andrews.

Startled, Andrews ignited the jets of the SERUN. The space suit with the Terran shot past the 3.5 meter tall monster and entered a corridor to the left. Immediately the beast followed him.

*

In the meantime Remus had reached the command central and activated the matter transmitter. He could even enter a countdown. He chose four minutes. Suddenly he remembered the log. The Veraside had spoken about a Green One that would destroy the beast. A green button caught his eye. Without thinking, he pressed the button. An alarm sounded, and a positronic voice said something. Scorbit activated the translator. He didn't like the translation much. Apparently, he had activated the station's self-destruct mechanism. He had about five minutes. At that moment, Andrews flew into the central.

"Jonathan, I have bad news..." Remus began.

"Me too!" Jonathan shouted.

He had barely ended his words, when the beast stormed into the huge room. Both men fired their acid launchers. With a holler, the Temporal Guardian stumbled backwards and

fell on his rear. The Terrans immediately took advantage of that weakness and flew off to save themselves. The Second Conditioned leapt to its feet and ran after them. The hunt lasted about three minutes, then Andrews and Scorbit had reached the space jet that the Marquis had already brought into position.

The two men scrambled into the ship, and the air lock closed behind them. The beast broke through the station's hatch and smashed against the space jet, which immediately lifted off to safety. Remus and Jonathan high-fived each other. Then they quickly headed for the small bridge.

"Well done, grandpa! Now stay on course until we are through the matter transmitter!" Scorbit hastily said and then took a deep breath of relief.

The Temporal Guardian angrily retreated back into the station.

The cranes extended again, and the matter transmitter started up and transferred the space jet to its destination.

Left behind was the beast, who listened to the alien words coming from the speakers and realized too late that the end had come. The station exploded, tearing apart the last Second Conditioned. A moment later the whole asteroid disintegrated.

7.

An alien world

The space jet rematerialized on a planet that was only sparsely vegetated. At first, Andrews struggled with the navigation. The space jet almost crashed, but he managed to pull her out of the dive. Nevertheless, the propulsion failed. He more or less elegantly landed the ship on a sandy hill, which absorbed at least part of the crash.

The impact had also aroused the three drunks. "Reini, the Russians are coming! Everybody into the trenches! Man the 8.8 A.A. gun!" the small Werner Niesewitz murmured.

"Yes, yes... that's it!" Eberhard Wieber commented on the situation as Reinhard Katschmareck emptied his stomach.

Andrews, Scorbit, and Don Philippe de la Siniestro were all fine. First they attended to the three Germans, who also had suffered no physical damage. However, Andrews had no doubt in his mind that they had suffered mental damage a long time ago.

Remus and Jonathan checked whether the planet had a breathable atmosphere, which fortunately was the case. They armed themselves and wanted to explore their surroundings.

"I will stay with the others," the Marquis said and sat in the commander's chair, because in his own estimation of himself, commanding was his best talent.

The planet seemed quite inhospitable. It was illuminated by a blue sun that gave the planet an eerie impression. They made little progress over the sandy surface.

After they had walked about half a mile, Remus had just suggested that they return and equip themselves with SERUNs when Andrews spotted the burnt-out wreck of the *Thebes*.

*

The two Terrans ran to what was left of the *Thebes* as fast as they could. The wreck was stuck at an angle in a sand dune and still emitted dark smoke.

Desperately they searched for hatches or breaks in the hull through which they could get inside the ship. When they finally managed to enter through a hole in the hull, they found wreckage, ashes, and a few carbonized bodies.

Where once had been the cabin of the Scorbits was now just a huge heap of scrap metal. Their scanners indicated no life forms.

They discovered a total of 71 bodies, many of them badly mutilated and barely identifiable.

"What do we do now?" Remus asked and dropped down exhausted onto the sand. The hot wind blew through the short hair of the two Terrans.

"We return to the space jet and try to locate human or extraterrestrial life forms on the planet," he explained, helping his friend get back up.

They had barely taken their first steps when

a piercing scream stopped them in their tracks.

"Where did that come from?"

"No idea," Scorbit said and moved the ID scanner in all directions, which picked up a gathering of life forms in a northerly direction.

Without hesitating, the two started to run, hoping to find their family and friends unhurt. Eventually, they reached a large cavern, only to discover a living nightmare.

*

The Marquis walked through the Terranian ship and seemed to closely study everything in detail, while Werner Niesewitz warily observed him the whole time.

The other two apathetically crouched in a corner. "So that's how it is..." Wieber softly murmured to himself. With a broad grin on his face, Katschmareck emitted some bodily gases.

Meanwhile, the Marquis saw himself as an aristocrat, a man of honor and good manners, of high standing in his own time. In contrast, the other three were nothing but boorish commoners.

Nevertheless, Don Philippe slowly but surely had to consider what was to become of him after this adventure. His advanced age put him at risk. Thanks to the hypno-training, he knew about life-extending drugs, but they were expensive.

There was enough gold in the space jet. It was obvious to him that he would have to make a claim for that fortune, but if he managed to cleverly arouse their sympathy, they would let him have his way.

At first he thought that he would demand the return of Siniestro and erect a new principality. However, that would be difficult because the whole world was united now. Therefore, the Don wondered whether it might be better to colonize a new planet.

But first he needed a servant who would support his plans. Since there really wasn't much of a choice, he addressed Werner Niesewitz.

"Listen, Séñor. I'm a Marquis, an influential man with an enormous fortune."

This made the small Terran immediately

prick up his ears.

"But I also need attendants in this century who will assist me. Of course you'll be paid well," the Don continued to explain.

Now Reinhard Katschmareck and Eberhard Wieber began to listen as well.

"And you choose us?" Niesewitz inquired.

"Si, Sénor! Of course you'll be generously rewarded for your services. Here is an advance payment."

The Marquis pressed three gold nuggets, taken from the chamber, into Niesewitz' hand. Just to be sure, Don Philippe had taken care to seal the room, and the other three knew nothing of the find that Fatzar and his crew had made.

With eyes wide open, the three stared at the golden metal. Niesewitz beamed across his entire face. "It is a pleasure for us to accept your offer, Mister!"

Suddenly the space jet violently rocked. The Marquis hurried to the command central as fast as his old bones allowed him to and looked out of the window. Horrified he shrank back when he saw the giant spider that was trying to break through the outer hull. The monster was about as large as the space jet itself.

"Oh God, we're going to die now! It's all over!" Reini screamed as he lost control over his bowels.

The Don turned up his nose in disgust and ordered the syntron to take countermeasures. Immediately the protection shield was erected and chased off the spider. Exhausted, the Spaniard sat on the command chair.

"We're lost! This shuttle can't take off again, and this planet is a living hell," Katschmareck sobbed.

"So that's how it is... !" Wieber murmured, as usual.

However, the Spaniard knew what to do. "Syntron, send an emergency call to space. On all frequencies and in all known languages. There has to be someone out there!"

*

"My back is hurting so much, I can't stand it anymore," Otilie Brauhnauer moaned, as she

anxiously rocked back and forth on the uncomfortable stone ledge. Meanwhile, her husband was shuffling around the dark cave and muttering his own complaints.

Uthe Scorbit and Yasmin Weydner could barely stand the Brauhnauers' griping any more. After the *Thebes* had disappeared from the asteroid and made a forced landing on this planet, the old couple had been driving them crazy while contributing nothing toward a constructive solution to their predicament. No, they made the situation even worse.

Uthe reflected upon the past few hours. The *Thebes* was standing on the landing field of the asteroid, when suddenly four rays had reached the ship that proved to be a matter transmitter. In an instant they had found themselves on this planet. The *Thebes* still flew a few miles, then dropped down and thunderously crashed on the surface. Many passengers had died upon impact. Then the ship caught fire and everything went horribly fast. Uthe grabbed the unconscious Yasmin Weydner and dragged her friend out of the burning wreck.

Hundreds of Galaxians tried to save themselves in the same manner. Even the Brauhnauers found their own way out of the ship.

But the worst was yet to come. Enormous spiders poured out of the ground, measuring at least ten meters in height. These beasts stalked the Galaxians, capturing one after the other.

Only few of the passengers were able to save themselves in the cave. Uthe knew most of them. Besides Yasmin and herself, there were Karl-Adolf and Otilie Brauhnauer, Glaus and Marion Urksman, Björn and Barbara Podal, one of the barmaids, whose name was Jezzica Tazum, Jonathan Andrews' girlfriend Yessica, and the banker Wolfgang Shuldzahr. Eleven survivors in total, surrounded by giant arachnids.

The situation was catastrophic for the eleven Galaxians. They had neither food nor any weapons. They were alone on an alien world that was full of horrors.

"I have such a pain in my back...!" Otilie Brauhnauer reminded everyone. "You can't imagine how that hurts, kids! One day my back will kill me. Pappy, come and sit down now,

you're driving me crazy...!"

"Shut your mouth, you stupid cow! I have to think!" Otilie's husband hollered through the cave.

Utthe couldn't stand the whining of the two much longer. Her only hope was Remus. She prayed that he would find a way to save her.

Yasmin looked at her friend and sighed. Like the others, she was tense, but she tried to pull herself together. The temperature was almost unbearable, and deep fear spread among the Galaxians.

But even though the heat was turning more and more sweltering, Shuldzahr did not even open the uppermost button of his shirt. Even in the bowels of hell the banker sat in his suit and tie, sweat pouring down his forehead in streams.

"I have appointments to keep! We must continue our flight at once!" the businessman demanded, gesticulating with his hands.

Utthe stood up and wanted to calm the man down. "Listen, we can't leave here. We are surrounded by giant man-eating spiders. Our only chance is to wait for help," she explained, placing her hands on Shuldzahr's shoulders, but the banker pushed the young Scorbit away and slapped her face.

"Don't touch me! I am the director of an important department at my firm! I will not be touched so readily by any common person!" he shouted aloud.

Yasmin immediately attended to her friend, who was close to tears. The red-haired Terran put her arm around her friend and consoled her.

Except for Jezzica Tazum, nobody intervened. The *Thebes* crewwoman yelled at the entrepreneur to pull himself together. Jezzica was a very direct woman who could stand her own ground. Coming to blows with the banker would have been right up her alley. Much frustration and fear had built up inside her, fear of the giant arachnids and fear of never leaving this planet alive.

That fear was almost driving her crazy.

"Can't they be a bit calmer?" Karl-Adolf Braunhauer grumbled and clutched his chest.

"Mister Shmaltzman, could you perhaps calm down a bit?" Otilie asked to banker. "Pappy is very anxious...!"

The banker angrily glared at her, then checked his watch. "You may all rot here. I have to get to my appointment," he declared and climbed out of the cave.

Jezzica still wanted to keep him back, but there was no way. The banker seemed to be suffering from a heat stroke. With his briefcase in his right hand, he stalked through the stone and sand desert. But he did not get very far.

Suddenly the ground rumbled, and two giant legs dug up from the sand. Swiftly, the spider lifted itself up and stood in its full size in front of the banker, who screamed and tried to run. The spider squirted some of its sticky serum on the man, who was immediately tangled up in it. Then the arachnid dragged the banker underneath the sands, whose muffled screams could still be heard for a few horrible moments.

Momentarily, an eerie silence ruled the whole cave. No one believed in any rescue anymore.

*

What Remus Scorbit and Jonathan Andrews discovered in the gloomy cavern could barely be described in words. Around three hundred Galaxians were woven in spider webs and dangling over a deep crevice. Some of them were still alive, sobbing and crying for help.

The two humans struggled to maintain their composure. It was a scene from hell. Helplessly they watched, as four giant spiders crawled around the web. Every now and then one of the monsters snatched and devoured one of their prey from the *Thebes*.

Remus fed the ID scanner with his wife's information, but to his relief he did not find any corresponding data.

"She has to be somewhere else. We have to continue our search."

Andrews was at his wit's end. He could not stand watching his former fellow passengers being eaten alive. He searched his backpack and discovered a thermal detonator. Inquiringly he looked at his friend. The detonator would release the beings in the webs from their suffering.

Remus nodded. Apparently they had no other choice. With a heavy heart, Andrews armed the blaster and got ready to throw, but he did not complete the movement.

"I can't do it. We'll return and get our SERUNs. After that we try to free them."

"We're only two, Johnny! How can we defeat these four monsters?"

"We were able to outsmart the Temporal Guardian," Andrews interjected.

Scorbit thought for a short moment, then he agreed. The two sneaked out of the cave and ran back to the space jet.

After thirty minutes the ship came into sight. The heat gave the two Terrans a lot of trouble. Tired, they shuffled through the sand, when they suddenly felt the ground rumble. Behind the pair, a spider drilled out of the desert ground and scampered horribly fast in their direction.

"Get out of here!" Andrews shouted and ran as quickly as he could, but he knew that they would not be able to escape this monster.

All of a sudden, a V-shaped ship appeared in the air behind the space jet and fired at the arachnid, which collapsed. Nevertheless, the two Terrans continued to run to the space jet and only stopped once they had reached the spaceship.

*

The Marquis greeted the two Terrans. Completely out of breath, Andrews and Scorbit leaned against the wall and tried to breathe deeply.

"What kind of ship was that?" Andrews wanted to know.

"It was mine," answered a stranger, an impressive humanoid with long brown hair and a goatee, dressed in an ochre-colored poncho, black trousers and black boots, and wearing a golden sword on a brown belt. He introduced himself as Gal'Arn, a Knight of the Deep.

"There are only two Knights of the Deep left," Andrews retorted. "One of them is Perry Rhodan. Then there's Atlan, but he has never really accepted his knighthood. No other Knights have been around for a long time," he

declared, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

Gal'Arn smiled, emanating utmost calm and sympathy.

"I come from the galaxy of Shagor, and I can assure you that I am a Knight of the Deep. Our Order was founded beyond the Cosmocratic realm. Nevertheless, my friends and I are traveling under the orders of the Cosmocrat Sipustov. We were to fly to Dorgon to help the people of Terra."

Gesturing toward the Spanish nobleman, the stranger continued: "As this nice man has explained to me, you, in fact, belong to the race of Terrans. Maybe you can help us a bit, because unfortunately we've lost our way."

Andrews could not help laughing. He told Gal'Arn their own story and explained how they had ended up on this planet. Gal'Arn understood and immediately offered his help in a search for the remaining passengers.

The Knight of the Deep spoke fluent Inter-cosmo. His vessel, the *Tersal* had picked up a radio message about an hour ago and traced it. They discovered the space jet and made contact with the Marquis. With the help of their translators they had quickly been able to learn the common language of the Milky Way galaxy.

Gal'Arn introduced his companions from the *Tersal*, who had joined him at the space jet. Among them, Andrews noticed a donkey-like being that had just stumbled and inelegantly crashed on the ground. Gal'Arn introduced it as Thobenar.

Also with him were:

Irasuul, a humanoid with a conic head that was mostly bald, except for a long plait of hair that hung from the back of his skull.

Nirisar, a female Elaran, who was of the same race as Gal'Arn.

The last one in the round was Ghanakke Jaktar, a cousin of Thobenar. He was an Orbiter, hence, Gal'Arn's permanent escort.

The two groups quickly came to trust each other. They had no other choice in this situation.

The *Tersal* took off with Gal'Arn, Jaktar, Remus Scorbit and Jonathan Andrews, in search of any survivors from the *Thebes*. A difficult venture, because the sun was already setting.

As everyone knows, spiders are most active at night.

*

In Uthe Scorbit's eyes it was just a matter of time until more people would loose it. The ground constantly trembled as hordes of spiders crawled around the desert landscape. Glaus Urksman silently crawled to Yasmin Weydner, who was trying to get some sleep.

Gently, the fisherman tapped her shoulder. "Psst!"

"What is it?" Yasmin asked, sleepily.

"Well, before it's over with us, we might as well, you know, just one last time..."

"Glaus! What are you doing there? Come back here at once!" his wife exclaimed jealously, much to Yasmin's relief

She briefly exchanged a glance with Uthe and sighed again. Things were really getting bad. Outside the cave, giant spiders waited, in search of food. Inside the cave, a lecherous ugly fisherman wanted to molest Yasmin. She couldn't decide which was more unnerving.

Cowering, the man crept back to his equally ugly wife, who was leaning against the wall underneath a crack. Urksman retrieved a flask from his pocket and placed it on the ledge before the crack. Due to his clumsiness he unintentionally shoved the bottle deeper into the crack. Cursing to himself in the dark, he started to grope for the flask that contained his last bit of alcohol.

Glaus could already feel the bottle when he suddenly sensed a sharp pain in his arm. Uttering a yelp, he pulled back and stared in horror at the bloody stump that was left of his arm. Suddenly a spider that was "only" two meters long crawled out of the crevice and attacked Urksman, followed by two more arachnids, which immediately attacked the fisherman's wife.

After the three baby spiders had slaughtered the couple, they looked around for further prey.

Hysterically screaming, Barbara Podahl tried to crawl out of the cave, but she was immediately snatched by the leg by an adult spider, which in an instant literally sucked out much of

the portly Terran's flesh. Her son managed to scramble out of the cave as well, but he, too, fell victim to one of the lurking giant spiders.

Uthe Scorbit ignited a flare and used it to try to chase away the creatures. Yasmin, Yessica, Jezzica Tazum and the Braunhauers all crouched behind her.

The remaining survivors stayed in this position for about half an hour, then the flare extinguished.

Horried, Yasmin Weydner and Uthe Scorbit tried to re-ignite the flare, but in that instant the smaller spiders started to crawl in their direction, jaws agape. The humans slowly retreated. Yasmin stumbled and fell. As she struggled to her feet, she stared into the black faceted eyes of an arachnid that was just opening its fang-filled snout.

Literally at the very last moment, two humanoids jumped into the scene and fought the spiders with golden swords.

Gal'Arn cut off both fangs of the spider that was about to attack Yasmin, then its forelegs, immobilizing the beast. With a somersault, Irasuul jumped onto the spider and stabbed his sword several times into its body until it collapsed.

"Get out of here!" the Knight of the Deep yelled, helping Yasmin Weydner to her feet. A harsh light illuminated the area in front of the cave. The *Tersal* landed and shot at the large spiders, which fled the area in a hurry.

Remus rushed out of the ship and ran to his wife. They fell into each other's arms. Remus consoled his wife, who was visibly exhausted.

Yessica was the last one to leave the cave. Suddenly she was attacked by the third spider. Irasuul tried to kill the monster, but one of its enormous leg brushed against him, and he fell to the ground.

Yessica lunged for the thermobeamer that Irasuul had lost and aimed at the arachnid. The shot only grazed the animal, while the weapon's recoil threw her against the wall.

The arachnid had recovered quickly and now crawled toward the woman, who stared in horror into the huge dark eyes of the spider.

The animal hissed, sending a cold shiver down Yessica's spine. Slowly the spider lifted

one of its hairy forelegs and seemed to be caressing the right side of Yessica's face. The Terran was trembling with fear, and the spider dropped its leg again.

For a moment, Yessica felt some relief, then the spider picked up its foreleg again, and in the very next instant the Terran's head fell on the ground with a dull thud, her uncomprehending eyes wide open. For a moment, her body remained upright, then it slackened and collapsed next to the head.

Jonathan Andrews and Irasuul quickly struck down the spider, although all help came too late for Yessica. Sorrow filled Andrews' heart. Andrews hadn't loved Yessica anymore, but her death shocked him nevertheless. He briefly stroked her body and then closed the eyes on the head.

As more and more spiders appeared, the *Tersal* took off with the remaining survivors and returned to the space jet.

"What a horror," Thobenar fearfully murmured.

"A horror created by nature," replied Gal'Arn. "Apparently, the spiders are the primitive rulers of this world, but they were just following their natural instincts. They were looking for food."

"Unfortunately, this time the Terrans were on the menu," Irasuul added.

*

The *Tersal* departed again to rescue the other captives, but Gal'Arn came back empty-handed.

The victims had either been eaten already, or had starved or suffocated in the webs. Finding no more survivors, he had blasted the cave.

"We will take you with us to Dorgon," the Knight of the Deep explained to the Galaxians. "There you will meet other Terrans."

The Marquis and his three new servants also relocated to the *Tersal*, where things were starting to get a bit cramped.

"But Master, we are no cruising enterprise. These people will hinder us more than they will be useful," Irasuul deprecatingly remarked.

Gal'Arn admonished his former pupil. "Do not dismiss other people so lightly. They need our help, and we won't refuse it to them. Yes, it will be a bit tighter here, but the Terrans could prove very helpful to us. After all, Sipustov said that we would meet Terrans, and that has already happened. I consider this a very stroke of good fortune."

The Pontanaran had to accept the truth in Gal'Arn's words, and he did so without further comment.

While the women were busy arranging the cabins, the Braunhauers were complaining as usual, and the three 20th Century Germans didn't lift a finger, as usual. Meanwhile, Gal'Arn, Irasuul, Remus Scorbit and Jonathan Andrews convened to discuss their next moves.

"The matter transmitter that you told us about does not seem to have a counterpart on this planet," the Elaran stated.

"What?"

"Well, to me that means that apparently that bird people used a fictive matter transmitter," Gal'Arn said. "We're really cut off here. After we emerged from the black hole of our galaxy Shagor, we found ourselves in empty space, almost 180 light years away from this planet."

Gal'Arn illustrated this with a provisional map that the onboard computer had produced.

"And how do we proceed now?" Andrews wanted to know.

"First we try to find out where we are. About 7,000 light years from here are the outskirts of a spiral galaxy. We should fly there," the Knight of the Deep proposed.

No one had any objections. The *Tersal* left the hostile planet and immediately went to translight speed.

Gal'Arn retired to his cabin and thought about his newly found friends. To him, the Terrans seemed to be a strange people, very distinct and with many quirks. The Elaran had to chuckle when he thought about the odd elderly couple.

Then he became sober again, as the memories of Goshkans' betrayal returned, the destruction of the Dome, the murder of Arib'Dar, and the eradication of the Order.

The casualties were high, including among

the Terrans whom he had met here.

Whether he liked it or not, he now was thrust in the midst of a cosmic war, but he was not alone. His compatriots from Shagor and the

Terrans from the alien Milky Way galaxy were all facing the same challenge. He hoped that they were all up to the task.

T H E E N D

In the next episode, we will turn over to completely different happenings. Frightened up of the discoveries in Dorgon, the Somer Sam went to Estartu in order to look assistance up there.

ALTERNATIVE ESTARTU

is also the title of the episode 18 that was written by Alexander Nofftz.

D O R G O N COMMENTARY

Evil... ?

Well, having reviewed the Cosmocrats and their concept of "good" in my previous commentary, I will now turn to the Chaotarchs and, respectively, the term "evil." In his report, Knight of the Deep Jedar Balar has something to say about this as well: "The only thing I'm sure about is that [the Chaotarchs] represent very little that is positive."

"Positive"... interesting that he uses that term, rather than "good." In dealing with the Cosmocrats and Chaotarchs, the value-free terms "positive" and "negative" are probably much more appropriate—no!—much more applicable!—than "good" and "evil," as "good" and "evil" always imply a subjective moral ideal, while the former are as objective as a chemical periodical table.

But just to stay for a moment with the vague term "evil" ... - what is "evil," after all?

Using the (admittedly, very unsatisfactory) definition of "good" that I previously provided, and based on the hypothesis that "bad" simply denotes the opposite, then I can conclude that "evil" relates to actions that any arbitrary person would not consider "good". And here the cat bites its own tail, because considering the conclusion in my previous commentary—good is what any arbitrary person would consider an

absence of "bad"—then, in the end, there really is NO workable definition. It's as if you defined "rain" as "the absence of sunshine" and, by the same token, "sunshine" only as "the absence of rain."

But before this all results in complete confusion, I'll let Jedar Balar speak again: "As there are also bad Cosmocrats, we may assume that there are also good Chaotarchs..."

Once again, Jedar makes the mistake of applying his own - human and subjective - scale. Who's to say that a "bad" Chaotarch isn't good by Chaotarch standards, and that a "good" Chaotarch isn't really bad? Like so many other things in the universe, morality is a relative concept and depends on your own point of view.

Different notions of morality can already be found among humans. How much greater might the differences be between galactic and extragalactic races, not to mention Cosmocrats and Chaotarchs? In any event, the difference between what Cosmocrats and Chaotarchs, on the one hand, and what "completely ordinary" beings, on the other, might consider "moral" are probably so incredibly huge that it could easily drive any mere mortal completely insane...

In this sense: Have a "good" time!

Martin Schuster