

1/ PRISONERS OF THE DRUUFs

THE THING looked like an organ. It consisted of metal cylinders which were rigidly connected and decreased in size from right to left. The thing stood against the wall and seemed to be there for no purpose other than to bewilder the four prisoners.

For three days it had been accomplishing this task. Then the prisoners had begun to regard it with more than mere contemplative attention. They had attempted to take it apart and had succeeded to a certain degree. Now, at this moment, Perry Rhodan was kneeling in front of one of the opened organ pipes, wondering what would happen if he were to press the little lever that protruded from the tangle of wires, glass rods, plastic bars and thumbwheels.

Not that he had any choice in regard to the lever. They had worked hard to open a few of the organ pipes and after all that work it would have been ridiculous to stop now, just because no one knew which effect it triggered.

Perry Rhodan looked around. Behind him Atlan the Arkonide, Reginald Bell and the mutant Fellmer Lloyd were sitting expectantly in bandy-legged, monstrous armchairs. None of them seemed to be frightened, they were all simply curious. For three days they had roamed through a series of subterranean rooms the Druufs had placed at the disposal of their prisoners. After ascertaining that there was no promising exit anywhere, they had finally returned to the organ which now captured their attention because of all the furnishings in the subterranean prison, it was the only piece whose function they did not know.

With pocketknives, little metal screws they had removed from the chairs and similar utensils they succeeded in removing the cover panelling of three of the organ pipes. What appeared underneath did not provide any definite conclusion about the significance of the device. All that was adjustable on the thing without breaking something was the position of the lever.

Perry Rhodan placed his finger on the small piece of metal. "Here goes," he said. "Hold your breath. We don't know what will happen!"

Rhodan increased the pressure of his finger. He felt the little lever begin to yield. For one second Perry Rhodan wondered why absolutely nothing happened. Then suddenly it felt as if someone had landed a powerful blow on his shoulders. His arm sank, his hand with it, and in the process his finger pulled the little lever all the way down.

Somebody screamed. Perry Rhodan felt like screaming himself. Something was pushing him down with overpowering might. He lunged forward and tried to brace himself with his hands but a few moments later his arms buckled under. He fell headlong to the floor. The fall took away his breath and conjured a colourful world of fiery circles before his eyes.

The pressure did not lessen. It squeezed the air out of Rhodan's lungs, making it almost impossible to breathe. Rhodan realized with painful clarity that he would have to undertake something if he were to avoid becoming unconscious.

When he had depressed the lever he had anticipated so many things that he needed a few seconds to properly evaluate the effect it had actually produced.

The organ was an antigrav generator. Pressing the lever resulted in a five or six-fold intensification of the artificial gravity field within the subterranean room.

That was disappointing, fulfilling none of the expectations Perry Rhodan had held. However, his expectations were of lesser significance at that moment. Most important of all was to return the lever to its previous position.

He knew that he could not manage to prop himself up with his arms. The weight imparted to him by the artificial gravity field was too great, so he rolled over on his side, leaned on his right shoulder and tried to raise his left arm. Finally he managed. The next problem was that this time he had to shove the lever upward, which was considerably more difficult than the reverse had been. But he managed this as well.

When his work was completed Perry Rhodan remained prone for awhile. He needed time to properly catch his breath and to banish the feeling of numbness from his body. Then he cautiously rose to his feet.

The picture that presented itself was provokingly comical. The bow-legged armchairs had been unable to withstand the greatly increased weight of their occupants and had collapsed. Atlan and Fellmer Lloyd were stretched out unconscious between the shattered pieces. Reginald Bell had been less affected by the gravity shock. He was holding tight to two pieces of plastic wood, the only parts of his armchair still erect, and staring at the organ in equal amazement and fury.

"Is that all?" he sullenly inquired. Perry Rhodan shrugged. "Seems like it," he replied. Reginald Bell stood up. The two remaining parts of his chair clattered to the ground.

"Then we could have saved ourselves the trouble," he grumbled peevishly. "For one entire day we fooled around with that thing and it does nothing more after all than regulate an artificial gravity field." He gave the smallest of the organ pipes a contemptuous kick.

"Well, now... you call that nothing?" asked Perry Rhodan. Reginald Bell and Perry Rhodan knew each other well enough to tell by the partner's tone of voice whether he had a new idea or not.

Bell looked baffled. "Right offhand I still don't see anything," he carefully answered, "but perhaps you would give me a hint?"

Rhodan smiled.

At that moment Atlan, who had regained consciousness, arose from the shambles of his chair. He seemed to have heard the last sentences of the conversation. "Temporally variable gravitation fields," he casually said as if nothing had happened. " dG after dt , the product of the gravitation emitter, simultaneously proportional to the gravity mechanical induction... doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Reginald Bell widened his eyes and gazed fixedly at the furthest corner of the room.

"It does indeed," he finally replied. "But I am afraid that the Druufs will not look kindly upon it, if we turned their antigrav into a teletype!"

Perry Rhodan placed his hand on Bell's shoulder. "The question is," he said, "will they notice it at all?"

Ten days earlier, on October 23, 2043 Earth-time, the catastrophe had its inception. The Arkonides had discovered the support base, Grautier, and attacked it immediately. The Terranian Fleet was at that time stationed far away in space, poised for an attack on Arkon. Perry Rhodan, Atlan, Reginald Bell and Fellmer Lloyd were still present on Grautier. The base had no chance against the massive attack. Within a few short hours the Arkon bombardment had transformed the entire planet into a glowing nuclear hell.

Perry Rhodan and his companions had succeeded in escaping to an island and from there had sent a distress call over minicom. A ship appeared at the last moment to rescue them. However, it was not a Terranian ship, as they had hoped, but Arkonide. They had narrowly escaped the clutches of death only to fall into the hands of the Arkonides.

A few light-minutes away from Grautier, the Arkonide ship that had picked them up transferred them to another vessel also serving the robot Brain of Arkon and apparently charged with bringing the prisoners to Arkon as quickly as possible. Perry Rhodan noticed that the commander of this second ship, an Ekhonide called Chollar, did not know his name. From this he deduced that the robot ruler's intent was to keep the capture of his most important opponent as secret as possible.

In one bold move the four prisoners succeeded in overpowering the Command Central crew of the Ekhonide ship and in sending out an emergency call. The message was worded in a manner they hoped would arouse the interest of only a Terranian ship.

Barely four hours later a spaceship appeared to rescue them. This time, however, it was neither Terranian nor Arkonide—but a ship of the Druufs. The relationship between Terranians and Druufs was, politically speaking, quite peculiar. One regarded the other as a potential ally in the struggle against Arkon but for the time being mistrust far outweighed any enthusiasm for alliance. Like the Arkonides before them, the Druufs regarded Perry Rhodan and his companions as their prisoners. They brought them on board their ship and hastened to flee the space sector controlled by the Arkonides.

Passing through the overlap front, for the present the only connection between the Einstein Universe and their own, they returned to their time-plane and confined their prisoners in a subterranean chamber on a monster of a planet.

The flight had lasted two days. Other than the visits by a Druuf robot, who brought their meals, the four prisoners were alone during that time and seemingly unobserved. Their cabins contained no viewscreens. They saw nothing of what went on about them but the trip had apparently encountered no difficulties.

Finally the ship landed. Perry Rhodan and his companions had meanwhile had time to accustom themselves somewhat to the gravitation on board of 1.95-normal, the same as the gravitation prevailing on the native planet of the Druufs.

The four prisoners became aware of the fact that they had landed when a Druuf entered their cabin. With the aid of his electronic communicator he urged them to put on the spacesuits brought along from the Ekhonide ship and to leave the Druuf vessel. The Druuf offered no further details concerning the reason or purpose of these instructions. He was a 'Mike', as Terranians had come to call the lowest-ranking Druufs, and was apparently not authorized to give out information. On the other hand it was possible that he did not know much more about it himself.

In any case the prisoners did as they were told and left the ship. The Druufs had landed their cylindrical vehicle flat on a sweeping rocky plain. From the rollramp of the Druuf ship Perry Rhodan and his companions took in a picture that seemed to have been created by a surrealist painter, someone, who

had shown few compunctions in his choice of colours.

The plain expanded into the unending distance. The muted grey-brown of its rocky ground was the only hue which corresponded to one of Earth. Here and there solitary rock-needles, monoliths, soared upwards, climbing to dizzying heights despite their thinness. Their needle-sharp peaks pointed to a brown sky and the little turquoise clouds floating beneath it. It was not possible to determine the source of the light in the sky. Probably the daystar of the planet was about to rise. Not far from the Druuf ship the rocky ground dipped downward, forming a basin several hundred meters in diameter that was filled with a ruby-red fluid. A mild wind rippled the surface of the lake and from time to time little waves spilled over the edge of the rocky basin onto the plain.

It was a fairytale landscape, wonderful to behold and as poisonous as a toadstool. Everything—the rock formations, the vast plain, the little clouds—indicated that the atmosphere consisted of ammonia and methane, as was the case with many grandiose but useless planetary giants found in almost every planetary system.

As they glided down the rollramp they were astonished by the fact that the gravity of the fairyland seemed to be the same as it had been on board ship. They did not know that the shell of an artificial gravity field widely enveloped the Druuf ship. The border lay several meters beyond the foot of the rollway.

Only upon crossing the border did they discover their error. A giant fist knocked them down and held them pinned to the ground. Panic-stricken at first, they writhed about trying to get back on their feet, but they achieved nothing more than utter exhaustion. Then they lay still and recalled the rules they had learned for coping with extreme pressure. They relaxed and forced their lungs to draw breath. Slowly they drew up their knees and leaned on their arms which threatened to give way under the massive weight. Centimetre by centimetre they drew themselves up. When they had managed to stand upright it felt as if they were strapped in a brace that was pressing them to the ground with all its might.

But they remained on their feet. Around them swarmed the Druufs, three meters tall on their Cyclops legs. Although accustomed to higher gravitation than the Terranians, they were nonetheless a bit awkward and stooped under the enormous pressure of this world.

Perry Rhodan estimated the gravitation at a bit below 3-normal. Much later they determined that the exact value was 2.60-normal. This meant a load that the human body could endure for awhile without injury but under which it would collapse upon longer exposure.

The Druufs made no attempt to ease the burden of their prisoners. They herded them in the direction of the closest monolith and the Terranians complied, dragging themselves towards it. If, while gliding down the rollramp, they had still given any thought whatsoever to seeking some opportunity to escape here in this colourful methane wasteland; such thoughts were long extinguished by the gruelling strain that sapped all their strength.

Perry Rhodan still retained some semblance of cool reflection. He knew that their situation would be completely hopeless if they weren't able to determine where this planet was situated, although he really had no clear notion of how this information could be of use. To date human knowledge about the foreign universe inhabited by the Druufs was more than scanty. The Terranians were acquainted with the Siamed System, the native system of the Druufs, and they were also acquainted with the two solitary worlds they called Solitude and Crystal Planet—without knowing, however, where the two planets stood in relation to the Siamed System. Even their knowledge of the native system of the Druufs was incomplete, in keeping with the haste and secrecy necessarily accompanying their investigations. The Siamed System

revolved about a double sun, a red giant and a star whose wavelength of maximum energy was 5,000 Angstrom, making it appear yellowish-green to the human eye. The system was composed of 62 planets and a myriad of moons. In the eyes of man it was a monstrous system containing a great number of methane giants like the one on which the Druuf ship had landed.

But this did not suffice for identification. Methane planets were present in most planetary systems and the cosmos of the Druufs certainly did not contain any less than the Einstein universe in which the Terranians and Arkonides lived.

Perry Rhodan laboriously raised his head and stared up into the brown sky. There were no stars in sight but the narrow crescent of the moon, a dark red glow, could be vaguely seen close to the tip of the monolith towards which they were plodding.

It was not the mere presence of a moon that was important but its colour. It was almost at the zenith and was nonetheless red. It could be that the atmospheric layer of the methane planet was so high that it created the same effect upon heavenly bodies at the zenith as terrestrial atmosphere did upon those sinking into the horizon. It could be that the crescent of the strange moon was red for no other reason than the disc of the Earth's sun shortly before it sets.

But it could also be that the colour of the moon was derived from the central sun that shone on it. Red would then increase the probability that the methane giant on which the Druufs had landed belonged to the Siamed System. It was of utmost importance to establish this, for only within this system lay the sole support base thus far established by the Terranian Fleet in the foreign time plane: Hades, the Mercury-like twilight world.

Perry Rhodan was still occupied with the odd colouring of the sky, wondering whether the brown could stem from the combined effect of two daystars, one red and one green, when his helmet receiver picked up a surprised outcry from Reginald Bell.

Flanked by ten Druufs, the small band had reached the foot of a lone looming crag. The cause of Reginald Bell's surprise was a gloomy hole, big as a barn door, gaping out of the rocky wall that Perry Rhodan could not recollect having been there previously.

So the monolith harboured the entrance to a cavern or a cavern system below the surface of the planet, which the Druufs had either found or built themselves. Apparently they considered this place secure enough for confinement of important prisoners.

Beyond the hole, in the interior of the monolith, some sort of moderately inclined ramp began. Its stony surface was polished smooth, probably from frequent use, and the four prisoners found it difficult to stay on their feet instead of submitting to the tug of gravity and simply rolling down the ramp.

At the same instant as the cave entrance closed—it was impossible for Perry Rhodan to determine by which mechanism—a glaring light blazed on, illuminating the ramp down to its foot-end. The ramp ended in the middle of an almost completely circular room about 20 meters in diameter that had 12 passages branching off it in star form. The walls of the room and the passageway were crudely hewn. It seemed the Druufs did not value outer beauty, still they had outfitted the passages with conveyer belts that enabled the prisoners to progress quickly and spared them the task of resisting the torturous pull of the gravitation and lifting their legs anew with every step.

The meaning and function of the cave did not become apparent to the prisoners as they moved through the passage on the conveyer strip. They were only able to make out a series of rooms with doorways in

the passage wall and that the subterranean installation was considerably larger than they had at first assumed.

The place, for example, where the Druufs indicated they were to get off the conveyer and wait at the edge of the passage until three of the ungainly doors on the right side of the passage had been opened, lay about 400 meters away from the entrance to the caverns. And in the diffuse light from invisible sources it could be seen that the passageway extended at least once again far into the depths of the rocky plains.

What Perry Rhodan had taken to be doors finally proved to be an ingenious airlock construction designed to prevent the poisonous methane atmosphere of the outside world from entering. Behind the airlocks, through which the Druufs were leading their prisoners, lay a series of rooms. To the great astonishment of the Terranians, they were furnished with all the benefits and achievements of Druuf civilization, leaving no comfort to be desired. Unlike the passageway walls, the walls had been painstakingly smoothed and covered with colourful layers of heat insulator. Thick, springy plastic sheeting, used by the Druufs in place of carpets, covered the floor, and the furniture was more than ample and varied, even though somewhat large and cumbersome by Earth standards. It was evident that the Druufs had gone to great lengths to provide a few rooms in the depths of their cavern system in which they themselves could comfortably live for weeks or even months at a time, although far from all civilization. Because it suited their purpose—for they were not motivated by feelings of friendship towards humans—they were apparently prepared to turn over this excessive comfort to their prisoners.

One of the Druufs equipped with a communicator pointed out to the Terranians that the rooms were filled with breathable air and that they thus could take off their spacesuits. Aside from that they were to wait until someone came to tend to them. He gave no indication of when this might come about.

The suite consisted of three rooms altogether. The prisoners looked them over after they had rid themselves of their spacesuits and after the Druuf, who had thus far accompanied them, had left, taking the suits with him. The furniture was designed for the bodily dimensions of the Druufs. The bandy-legged chairs were so large that two men could comfortably sit in them side by side. Just one of the peculiar suspension frames fastened to the ceiling with thin bars that served the Druufs as beds would do to accommodate all four prisoners at once. The row of perfectly circular washbasins that lined the wall of one of the smallest of the three rooms would suffice to fulfil the sanitary needs of an entire army. One washbasin was large enough to serve as a bathtub in an emergency for a Terranian of not too husky build.

There were many things whose significance they did not immediately recognize—for example, a table. Normally there was only the tabletop to be seen resting directly on the floor. For quite awhile they speculated on the function of this disk—until Reginald Bell, hoping to gain some insight, stepped on the rounded head of the table and apparently touched off a concealed contact. The disk sprang up and with the support of four sunken legs became a table. Though the prisoners could never use it, as they could just barely peep over the top when it was in position for use, at least the puzzle had been solved.

After an hour of inspection they were clearly informed about the furnishings of their prison. The Druuf surveillance system was also clear to them. It was primitive but uncannily effective: they had taken away the spacesuits. Hence they did not even have to take the trouble to bolt the airlocks. Perry Rhodan had tried them out and the antechambers offered no resistance. Only—beyond the outermost lock lay an ammonia-methane atmosphere with a pressure of 2,500 Torr. Only a fool would choose to flee that path. The Druufs did not even need a sentry.

That clarified everything—with the exception of the organ-like instrument attached to the wall of the

centre room that defied all explanation. Even at the very moment that the almost unbearable gravitational force had sunk to the accustomed norm of 1.00—that was about two hours after they had entered—it had not occurred to them that the organ, as they called it, might have anything to do with it.

However, their curiosity was aroused, and with the thoroughness Terranians muster to satisfy their curiosity, they went about the business of dismantling and examining the organ. This met with success. They discerned the significance of the device and suddenly, quite suddenly, they got an idea how they could put it to use!

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The only creature they had gotten to see in the three days of their imprisonment was a mechanical one: a Druuf robot, a monster like his creators. The robot supplied them with provisions. He seemed neither able to speak nor to make himself understood in any other manner. He arrived unannounced but always at the same times, placed a tray laden with bowls on the table that zoomed up as he approached, then disappeared again. One hour later he regularly appeared for the second time to clear away the remainder of the meal. This he did three times within a period of 24 hours.

Perry Rhodan had directed some simple questions to him but not only did the robot fail to answer—he did not even react. So they were just as much in the dark about the most important question: how many Druufs were there in the subterranean base?

They had tried to orient themselves by sounds but there were no sounds other than the ones they made themselves. To judge by that, the cavern system could be empty—except for them and the mute robot. However, it was equally possible that the walls and antechambers were soundproofed or that the Druufs were staying in some distant section of the cavern from which no sounds could penetrate to the chambers of the prisoners.

It was clear to them that their plan would have no success if there were even one single watchful Druuf in their vicinity. He would notice the signals they intended to send with the aid of the variable gravity field and determine where they had originated. He would discern the intentions of the prisoners and make sure that they were prevented from realizing them.

The situation would be quite different if the cavern system was empty. While the Druufs might admittedly still receive the signals, so would the parties for whom they were intended. However, the question of who would fly first to the methane planet to seek the originators of the signals, a Terranian or a Druuf ship, was as yet unsettled.

Thus far only one thing was absolutely clear: they *were compelled* to send the signals. That was their only chance of establishing contact with the outer world.

So they made all their preparations. The greater the middle time variance of the artificial gravity field, the easier the signal would be to receive—which meant that the quicker the lever could be operated, the greater the interval between the two tunings. Perry Rhodan had ascertained during a preliminary test that the gravitation could be boosted to about 12-normal. The lowest value lay at around 0.3-normal to judge by the decreased weight. That meant that when they would begin to transmit, their respective weight would increase 40-fold, then reduce to 1/40th within fractions of a second. They did not know how long

they could endure this but they were ready to try.

Of course the man at the lever would have to be rotated in quick succession. He was the one doing most of the work and would be exhausted after two, or at most three, changes of the lever position.

Perry Rhodan was the first to take up that post. He squatted on the floor, leaning his back against the wall to enable him to reach the little lever without getting up each time. Reginald Bell erected a barricade of chairs in front of Rhodan's feet so that the sudden change of weight would not pull him down the wall and also to provide a steady foothold. After all preparations were completed, Bell himself and the two others stretched out flat on the floor. Sudden gravity pressure was most easily borne in this position.

Perry Rhodan stretched his hand out to the side and saw that he was easily able to reach the lever. For an entire minute he gazed intently at the little grey piece of metal. Then he exhaled, to have clear lungs when the shock came, and placed his finger on the lever. Reginald Bell, Atlan and Fellmer Lloyd watched him attentively. He nodded to them and they put their heads on the ground.

Then he pressed down.

It was worse than they had anticipated. He had not meant to let the shock reach maximum force. His intent was to yank the lever right back up but he didn't manage. The traction of the 12-fold weight caused his hand to slide away from the lever and sent his arm pounding against the wall. It cost Perry Rhodan all the power of his muscles and his will to lift it again, place his finger under the lever and push it up once more. With a jerk the murderous load disappeared but the shift from 12-fold to less than 1/3rd normal weight occurred so suddenly that Perry Rhodan felt nauseous.

The manoeuvre had lasted 20 seconds rather than 1/2 second as originally planned.

Perry Rhodan took time to catch his breath. He pumped his lungs full, then blew the air out again. Reginald Bell had raised his head and was looking over at him. Perry Rhodan nodded and forced himself to smile.

Then he grasped the lever for the second time.

2/ HADES: HISTORY IN THE WINGS?

Sgt. Peter Rayleigh was almost convinced that he was sitting at his post in vain. Nothing had happened on Hades in the past 100 hours and Peter Rayleigh was willing to bet that the coming 100 would be equally uneventful.

There was no one there, however, to take up his bet. Peter Rayleigh was posted in a small branch of the gigantic cavern that the ray cannons of the *California* had etched into the rocky mountain wall three months earlier to house the entire base—people, equipment and all. Peter Rayleigh was supervising a series of sensitive measuring instruments whose indicator scales were mounted on a plastic panel in front of him.

From time to time Rayleigh quickly scanned the group of illuminated indicators but the pointers all rested

listlessly on zero, showing no inclination to move.

Peter Rayleigh was a young man of not more than 22 years. A few months ago he and a couple of others from his regiment had been assigned to a secret mission. Neither Rayleigh nor the others had any notion of what it entailed and they still had not understood when it was finally explained to them. They had been selected to reinforce or relieve the personnel on the base of Hades. It was said of Hades that it was located in a different time plane. While Peter and his comrades had heard about time planes more than once, they had not mastered the mathematics necessary to comprehend the phenomenon.

For that reason Rayleigh occupied his time with speculating about just how far Earth might be from the point at which he was seated. The question was so intriguing and the image of a green meadow dotted with flowers so compelling that Rayleigh very nearly failed to notice that one illuminated pointer on the scaleboard had suddenly begun to move. Quiveringly it wandered a bit to the right, returned and then deflected again.

Rayleigh was startled out of his brooding. He saw that the quivering pointer belonged to a G-meter, a device that measured strengths of gravity fields. It was so unbelievable that the gravity in the vicinity of the cavern base should have changed twice in rapid succession that for a few moments Peter Rayleigh was convinced that his eyes had played a trick on him. He remained motionless and stared at the apparatus. If he had not been mistaken the pointer would deflect a third time.

Excited and in haste, Rayleigh memorized what he would have to do in that event: remove the readings from the gauge drum, compute the numerical deviation from the norm, determine the source of propagation and notify Capt. Rous, the Commander.

Rayleigh rattled it all off in his mind as he intently stared at the scale. The pointer had returned to zero and had not moved again. Peter Rayleigh waited awhile—it felt to him like five minutes—cast a mistrustful glance at the pointer and leaned back in his chair with a sigh.

Just as he did this the pointer deflected again. It was exactly as Peter Rayleigh remembered from the first time: quivering deflection, return almost to zero, renewed deflection, return to zero.

Peter Rayleigh suddenly came to life. He sprang up and with one swift step was in front of the makeshift stand value on which the opalescent cases of the recording drums were resting in rank and file. It did not take long to find the drum that belonged to the G-meter. The two steep jags the stylus had traced with red ink on the gliding paper could not be overlooked. With trembling but nonetheless skilful fingers Rayleigh opened the window flap, ripped off at top and bottom the strip on which the reading was recorded and removed it. He absentmindedly closed the window flap as he stared at the paper. The two jags were about $\frac{1}{2}$ minute apart. Between the jags the measured value, that is the red curve traced by the stylus, sank exponentially, but it did not return all the way to zero. The curve continued a short stretch horizontally, then climbed almost vertically to the second jag.

The picture was clear. The figures resulted from on-and-off switching operations. The short horizontal course of the curve marked the actual, stationary value of the gravity field which was being turned on and off. This value was so low that the G-meter could just barely register it. Whoever was switching gravity fields on and off either was very far away or his gravity generator was no good.

Peter Rayleigh could not decide offhand which of the two possibilities was correct. That would require a reading from one other instrument at least. He could merely state the direction from which the gravity influence emanated, as the actual antenna position of the G-meter was noted on the strip of paper. Rayleigh roughly converted the angle values into data that had more meaning for him and discovered that

the impulses had come from 'above'. Therefore the gravity transmitter was in all probability not to be found on Hades itself but out in space. That result was important enough, it proved that the reading was not produced by an interior disturbance within the base.

Peter Rayleigh arrived at this conclusion after short deliberation. He returned to his seat and called Capt. Rous. Just as Rous' face appeared on the small readout screen, Rayleigh saw that the illuminated pointer of the G-meter was deflecting again.

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The orderly had a bewildered look on his face. Marshall Freyt hesitantly raised his eyes from the map he and Gen. Deringhouse had been studying, still so deep in thought that he did not immediately notice the young officer's confusion.

"Yes...?" he asked absentmindedly.

"Excuse me, sir," said the orderly, "there is a... a young girl outside who wants to speak to you."

Freyt frowned. "A young girl? How do young girls get inside government headquarters?"

The orderly answered helplessly: "I... I don't know, sir. She had all the necessary papers for entry. I... uh..."

"Name?"

"Toufry, sir. Ms. Betty Toufry."

Freyt started to laugh. "You should have said that right away. Show her in!"

The young officer saluted and withdrew more confused than ever. Gen. Deringhouse looked up from the map, smiling as he watched him leave. A few moments later the 'young lady' who had so nonplussed the officer appeared in the doorway.

It was difficult to guess Betty Toufry's age. One could take her for 17 or 18 if it weren't for her eyes, which regarded the world with a wisdom far beyond that of a teenager. To judge by her eyes, Betty was at least 30.

Only very few people knew that she was really about 80 years old. The secret of the enigmatic collective entity on Wanderer that had granted Perry Rhodan and his closest associates a certain degree of immortality was well guarded.

Betty Toufry seemed quite excited as she shook hands with Marshall Freyt and Gen. Deringhouse. Freyt leaned back, offered her a chair and gazed at her intently.

"Let me guess," he began in a friendly voice. "Something important has happened but nothing so urgent that you had to call me. You have looked in because you just happened to be in our neighbourhood, right?"

Betty shook her head slightly, smiling. She knew Freyt's approach. Every time he met her he insisted upon trying to read her thoughts. It was a game they had developed when Betty Toufry was still a child and the then most talented telepathist in the Terranian Mutant Corps.

"Wrong," Betty answered, turning serious immediately. "It is a very important matter and very urgent. I took the quickest way here to give as detailed a report as possible about the matter."

Conrad Deringhouse sat at the edge of his immense desk. Marshall Freyt watched Betty inquisitively.

"Mr. Ellert has reported in!" Betty exclaimed.

Deringhouse whistled through his teeth. "What did he say?" he asked tersely.

Betty shrugged helplessly. "That's just it! I could hardly understand anything. The impulses came from the mausoleum. If I hadn't accidentally been nearby I wouldn't have noticed a thing. They were so weak, as if they came from a thousand light-years away... or even more."

The two men remained silent.

"The whole thing lasted about five minutes," Betty continued hastily, "and all I could understand was: 'Come quickly!' Where to come or why... I must have missed that."

Deringhouse and Freyt exchanged brief glances.

"Don't you worry about 'where'," Deringhouse consoled the telepathist as he slid off the desk. "You are not very informed about the events that occurred shortly before and after Mr. Rhodan's death and that is why you do not know where Ellert is. But we know about it all the more. However, we would like to know more about 'why'. Did you get the impression that Ellert was afraid of something?"

One could see that Betty was trying to remember. "Yes... and no," she answered with a slight embarrassed smile. "You know... he seemed afraid somehow, apparently not for himself but for someone else. It seemed as if he were calling for help for a third party."

Deringhouse looked up. "And he said 'Come quickly!' didn't he?"

"Yes. That was all I could understand," Betty confirmed.

Deringhouse was now standing in front of her. He turned his head and looked quizzically at Marshall Freyt.

"We do not know what that means," he said softly as if he already knew which decision Freyt had reached.

"Which is just why we shall have to look into it," Freyt declared and stood up. "Betty, would you have any objection if I interrupted your vacation?"

Betty smiled. "Not in the least, Marshall Freyt," she answered.

"Then remain close by the mausoleum for the time being," Freyt instructed. "We do not want to miss it when Ellert reports in again... By the way, where is that conceited mousebeaver keeping himself these

days?"

Deringhouse shrugged. "I am not informed about how creatures of his sort spend their vacation but surely he can be contacted at once."

Betty suddenly laughed. "I just saw him a few hours ago," she said jovially. "He called me to have a look at his garden."

"*Garden!*" Freyt and Deringhouse exclaimed in unison.

Betty nodded. "Yes. He bought himself a small plot of land and is raising carrots."

For a few seconds there was an ominous silence in Marshall Freyt's large office. Then all three simultaneously broke out in laughter.

The outburst of merriment lasted quite awhile. It only subsided when Betty suddenly stopped laughing. A disconcerted look passed over her face.

"What's wrong?" Freyt wheezed, gasping for breath.

Betty did not answer. She knit her brows, her eyes half closed. It was obvious that she was 'conversing' with someone by means that would remain barred to most people, by means of telepathy.

When Betty reopened her eyes and looked at Freyt she seemed to be on the verge of another laughing fit. "He is annoyed at us for laughing at him," she explained.

"He is? Who is?"

"Pucky, the mousebeaver."

Freyt's eyes widened. "Good grief!" he moaned. "Can he hear us *at this* distance?"

"He said it was intense enough," Betty answered. "He would like to point out that the food supply policies of the Solar Empire would be in a substantially better position if everyone did as he does: provide their own nourishment."

Conrad Deringhouse's face took on a wry expression. "On his next assignment," he said, "he will insist on being allowed to take a wagonload of homegrown carrots with him."

Marshall Freyt had become serious again. "I shall instruct him to share the vigil with you at the mausoleum, Betty," he decided. "The mausoleum must be observed constantly. We must not miss any more of Ellert's calls. Pucky will be with you in a few minutes."

Betty extended her hand to him. "I'll see to it," she promised. "Perhaps I will understand more if I remain directly in front of the entrance."

Freyt nodded encouragingly. Betty took leave of Deringhouse and left the room.

"What have you got in mind?" Deringhouse inquired after the door had closed.

"Find out what's going on," replied Freyt. "We must know why Ellert is calling us. You will penetrate the

Grautier area with the *California* and jump by transmitter through the overlap front to Hades. You know about Ellert: his human body is over there in the mausoleum—lifeless, seemingly dead. His spirit exists in a Druuf body on another time plane. I don't know how you will get through to Ellert. On no account should you attempt to land on Druuf home territory, on Druufon. Take along a powerful telepathist who is to contact Ellert on Druufon from Hades. Other than that, do as you see fit. I'm afraid I have given you too much advice already."

Deringhouse smiled sarcastically. "I would gladly accept more," he said. "That reduces the responsibility."

Marshall Freyt did not seem to have heard his reply. He gazed out the window pensively.

"Let's hope Cardif doesn't give you any trouble in the meanwhile," Deringhouse took up again.

Freyt turned and waved his hand contemptuously. "He and his followers are under observation. Should they try to undertake anything against the government they will be arrested and imprisoned. I don't think it pays to shilly-shally for very long with a man like Cardif."

Deringhouse nodded. He knew Lt. Thomas Cardif from his own experience. Thomas Cardif was Perry Rhodan's son from his marriage to Thora the Arkonide. From his father he had inherited his outer appearance, from his mother that part of her former character that bristled with racial arrogance and profound contempt for the primitive inhabitants of the planet Terra. Cardif, as Deringhouse had come to realize, was a capable but unreliable man.

A few days earlier after the destruction of the Grautier base by an Arkonide robot fleet, when the announcement of Perry Rhodan's death had been officially disclosed, Cardif had appeared at the official seat of the government and declared that he alone was the rightful successor to his father as he alone possessed the 'right blood'.

It was *this* big moment. He was much too intelligent not to know that he could never achieve his aims in this manner. He had only intended to make a declaration and with it proclaim: I want the power. I have declared war upon you.

Since he resembled his father, it was easy for him to find followers. Perry Rhodan had been the idol of the Terranians and there were a great deal of politically naive people who, simply out of devotion to Perry Rhodan, would be responsive to Thomas Cardif, his son. Although prohibited by the police, Cardif and his supporters had tried to stage a demonstration right through town—with chants, banners and all the usual attributes. The police had dispersed the demonstrators and the 'Cardifians', as Freyt called them, operated illegally after that.

"No," Marshall Freyt declared again emphatically, "I am not worried about Cardif. There are people who are to be taken more seriously... for the time being, at least." He frowned at Deringhouse in mock anger. "Why are you still hanging around here? Kindly go about your business!"

Deringhouse saluted stiffly. "At your command, Marshall!" he replied.

Freyt shook his hand. "Make all the necessary preparations quickly but with great care," he advised. "I would hate to look for a new Fleet General. And look in on me again before you leave."

Deringhouse nodded, then turned and left.

* * * *

They needed 1½ hours to send all the signals they had, thought up. At the end of the 1½ hours they were so exhausted that they could no longer stay on their feet. They simply stretched out on the floor, gasping for air.

It was at that moment of deepest exhaustion, when they would have been incapable of warding off the attack of a small child, that the innermost airlock opened, revealing a group of five Druufs poised in the lock with weapons drawn.

Perry Rhodan raised his head. That was all he was still able to do. He saw the Druufs, their block-like, three-meter-tall gargantuan figures, and knew that his plan had failed. He lowered his head and beat his forehead hard against the floor.

A mechanical, expressionless voice made itself heard:

"It is astonishing how much enterprise you still exhibit even in futile situations. We are compelled to admire your tenacity. However, you will understand that we cannot idly stand by while you incite rebellion throughout space simply because you wish to cease being our guests."

The voice was produced by an ingenious arrangement of small and large membranes, bands, cogwheels and electronic parts. It was not capable of injecting the sarcastic ring to the voice required by the last sentence. The voice spoke English. The Druufs had already mastered the language of both peoples whom they had thus far encountered in the alien specific time of the Einstein Universe: Arkonide and Terranian. The voice spoke remarkably slowly and solemnly. This was not due to faulty mastery of the English language, it was primarily due to the fact that the specific time the prisoners had brought with them from their universe was higher than Druuf specific time by the factor of 2. A reaction requiring 10 seconds by a Druuf would take a Terranian 5 seconds. For the Druufs, the speed of light was 150,000 kms/sec, for Terranians it still had its usual value.

Perry Rhodan remembered this as he was trying to sit up after awhile and hoped that it would occur to his three companions. The Druufs had not yet noticed that the Terranians were superior to them in speed and should the Terranians ever want to use this as a weapon, they had best continue to keep it secret.

Ponderously, but to the Druufs in completely normal tempo, Perry Rhodan rose to his feet. "I am sorry that we have caused you difficulties," he said. "Of course we were not trying to withdraw from your hospitality. On the contrary, we were hoping that someone would hear our signal and come join us in being your guests."

The three Druufs in front stepped completely into the room while two remained standing in the antechamber. Perry Rhodan saw the three gigantic figures approaching him and wondered what they were up to. The Druufs were descendants of insects. Their four faceted eyes, symmetrically distributed over the upper half of their spherical heads, testified to that as did their triangular mouths in which bright rows of teeth shimmered treacherously. The actual body of the Druufs looked like a crudely hewn block. It was supported by two columnar legs that would do justice to an elephant and the body bore in turn two strong arms that ended in absurdly tapered, long fingers.

It was as hard to tell the mood of a Druuf by his facial expression as to find one's way in a foreign metropolis without a map or knowledge of the language. Perry Rhodan retreated a couple of steps but was immediately reassured by the voice issuing from the small communicator dangling around the neck of the Druuf in front:

"You have nothing to fear. We are no friends of brute force. Furthermore, we are sure that you will have no objections to our suggestions."

"To which suggestions?" Perry Rhodan drawled so languidly that no suspicions could arise about the specific time he inhabited.

"We believe," the communicator replied after awhile with equal languor, "that it might be getting too crowded for you here. You would certainly value our hospitality more highly if each of you had a room at his disposal."

Perry Rhodan's thoughts worked quickly. So they wanted to separate them to prevent any further pooling of resources for an escape.

"I think," he answered with a smile, "that offer is unacceptable to us because of the inconvenience to you it entails. However, I fear you will not pay too much attention to my opinion, right?"

"That is right," confirmed the communicator. "Give me your hand."

Rhodan obeyed in astonishment. He raised his hand and extended it toward the Druuf. The Druuf clutched it with his right hand and at that instant Rhodan spotted a little instrument in his left hand that looked like an injection needle.

"What's that for?" he asked sharply and with more haste than he had intended."

We want to save you the trouble of putting on those cumbersome suits during the move. This medication is utterly harmless. It reduces the vital functions of your body to a minimum for a few minutes only. For example, you no longer have to breathe. As a result the toxic methane air of this planet will not harm you.

Perry Rhodan tried to withdraw his hand. But it was a futile undertaking to oppose the enormous bodily might of a Druuf—even if one weren't as exhausted as Perry Rhodan was at that moment. He felt a, short painful jab in the ball of his thumb and almost instantaneously his faculties began to fade.

Before he slumped to the ground, however, a new idea came to him in a flash.

* * * *

Capt. Rous considered Peter Rayleigh's discovery interesting enough to give it his intense personal attention. That was good, as Rayleigh alone would probably never have found out what was behind the mysterious, rapidly changing gravity fields.

The readings of the G-meter had repeated themselves at more or less regular intervals in the past 1½ hours. Rous had observed the deflections of the illuminated pointer and got up after every deflection to

remove the readings from the recording drum.

During that hour and a half, the G-meter had reacted 9 times altogether. Marcel Rous had 8 readings spread out before him on the table: one that Peter Rayleigh had removed from the drum and 7 others. The readings of the very first double impulse, the one where Peter Rayleigh had still believed that his weary eyes were deceiving him, was still in the drum and had meanwhile been covered with several subsequent layers of gliding paper.

To Rayleigh's greatest astonishment, Capt. Rous insisted that this first reading be removed from the drum. Rayleigh had quite a time getting it out. They had waited almost an hour since the G-meter had last recorded and were now almost certain that the unknown gravity generator would not be heard from again. The recorder was stopped so that Peter Rayleigh could backspool it and tear off the short piece of the first reading. As he did that he wondered why Rous was so interested in it, inasmuch as all the readings were identical aside from differences in the time intervals between the jags.

The entire hour Marcel Rous had spoken only when it was utterly necessary. Peter Rayleigh did not know him well enough yet to recognize how agitated the Captain was. His hands were trembling imperceptibly as he spread out the 8 pieces of paper on the table and added the ninth which Rayleigh brought him. For a few minutes he stared at the row of readings. Then he turned to Rayleigh, who was standing behind him looking over his shoulder, and asked: "Is there something that strikes you about them, Sergeant?"

Peter Rayleigh had anticipated the question. "No," he answered candidly. "Nothing strikes me, sir."

Rous shook his head. "These young people," he murmured. "They have a minicom in their pocket and think they can just forget the venerable methods of communication used by their ancestors."

This was a somewhat specious remark since Rous was not appreciably older than Rayleigh but Rayleigh did not notice. He had an idea. Rous had talked about 'venerable methods of communication', which could have only meant...

"Compare the time intervals between the jags!" Rayleigh interrupted his stream of thought.

"I was about to do that, sir," answered Rayleigh. "In the first three lines the interval between the two jags is around 20 to 30 seconds. In signals four to six the interval is 1½ minutes, that is 90 seconds. In the last three it is 20 to 30 again.

Capt. Rous nodded his satisfaction.

"Good. So we have: short-short-short... long-long-long... short-short-short. What does that mean?"

"Why that's... that's... Rayleigh excitedly stuttered, "that's Morse code!"

"You are a clever kid, Sergeant," Rous bellowed. "Yes, this is Morse code. It is the old distress call of the Earth's air and seaways: S.O.S.!"

He stood up. "Stay at your post, Sergeant!" he ordered Rayleigh. "This station is on alert standby as of now. Call me the minute anything new develops. If I am not there, talk to one of the other officers. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir."

With unaccustomed haste the Captain strode to the door and went out, leaving Rayleigh alone, deep in thought.

It was not as yet clear to Marcel Rous himself what the strange Morse signals meant—except that someone was in danger, someone who knew the Terranian Morse alphabet and consequently was in all probability a Terranian himself. Where the signals had originated could be soon clarified. On Hades there was a series of recording centres, such as the one Peter Rayleigh was operating. Hades was an advance base deep in enemy territory and thus equipped with every imaginable means of security. It only required the reading by another G-meter that stood a few hundred meters from Rayleigh's instrument to determine the origin of the SOS signal.

Marcel Rous took the shortest route back to his office, announced a base alert over intercom and sent out a few positronic specialists to collect the automatically recorded readings of all the G-meters. In the interim he devised a basic program for the little positronic computer. Once he would have the readings from the other instruments he would only have to insert them in the blank spaces of the program and could immediately begin the calculation.

While working out the program, his thoughts were occupied with the unknown sender of the signal. A few days earlier the last connection Hades had maintained with Terra, in the form of three supply ships, had been interrupted for an indefinite period of time. The interruption was due to security reasons. The space sector in the vicinity of the overlap zone was swarming with Arkon and Druuf ships. A great risk was incurred by Terranians operating individually each time they wanted to contact Hades by matter transmitter. The main forces of the Terranian Fleet had been withdrawn to the Vega System as no one knew how the political situation on Terra would develop after Perry Rhodan's death. The three supply ships had also been pulled back to a less dangerous sector and were awaiting orders.

To Marcel Rous this meant: unless one of the three commanders had disobeyed orders, it was impossible that any of them was in distress within the Druuf Universe. Then the SOS signal must stem from someone else, someone who was apparently divested of all unusual technical means and thus had to employ an entirely unusual method to make himself heard.

Marcel Rous was still mulling this over when the first recording results arrived. A corporal of the Positronic Division brought a stack of recording paper. It bore almost the same peaked curves as Sgt. Rayleigh's recorder had drawn. The intensity was different from time to time, clearly different. This pleased Rous, as it was only with the help of intensity comparisons that the location of the peculiar transmitter could be positively established.

Rous set to work. He inserted the data into his basic program and let the computer run through the program once. The result contained two angle coördinates which Rous could not make much sense of right at that moment, and a distance. The distance amounted to one billion, 300 million kilometres. That number was so surprising that Rous had the computer repeat the calculation and only when it produced the same result the second time was he convinced. He added newly arriving data to the program in turn, increasing the amount of information and hence the accuracy of the result.

As the computer buzzed and clicked, Rous gave the waiting corporal instructions to consult the catalogue regarding the coördinates they had obtained and then see what was to be found at the designated spot. The corporal left with the material Rous had given him and returned after a few minutes.

Rous regarded him attentively.

"We are dealing with one of the 62 planets, of this system, sir," the corporal declared.

"Which one?" asked Rous.

"The 36th, sir, if one calculates by increasing middle sun distance in the usual manner. It has not been named yet."

"What else do we know about it?"

"It is the largest planet of this system, sir," replied the corporal. "Diameter more than 200,000 kilometres. Methane-ammonia atmosphere. Gravity at the surface 2.6-normal. Average yearly temperature 5 Celsius. Pretty cold all right. Uninhabited, of course."

Rous dismissed this with a wave of the hand. "Don't say 'of course'. The signals came from there."

The corporal, still unaware of the signals, looked bewildered. Marcel Rous was not bothered by it.

He was thinking hard. An idea had suddenly come to him—so amazing and improbable that he wanted to abandon it immediately but it fascinated him and he could not shake it off. He racked his brain and decided that what he had in mind was indeed improbable but not impossible. And should his idea prove to be true, then from here, from Hades, one of the greatest sensations of Earth history was about to unfold.

How did a Terranian who knew at least two letters of the old Morse alphabet get on a methane planet in the Druuf system? Certainly not voluntarily. Hence either a shipwreck or as a prisoner of the Druufs. The likelihood of a shipwreck could be eliminated almost with certainty. Ever since the base had been established on Hades it was no longer necessary for a Terranian to expose himself to the dangers of a direct flight. He could let himself be conveyed by transmitter by a ship waiting in the vicinity of the overlap zone.

Therefore he had been taken prisoner by the Druufs. Where could a Terranian spaceship ever have fallen into the hands of the Druufs? Which members of the Terranian fleet were missing?

Capt. Rous did not presume that he would have been informed if some ordinary soldier had somewhere gone astray. While that could be the case, Rous did not think that an ordinary soldier would be in the position to employ a gravity generator to send Morse signals.

There were four people, however, who had been missed by mankind for 10 days now and whom they had been convinced were dead—taken by surprise by Arkonide bombs in the attack on Grautier. Was it possible that those four had escaped from Grautier and fallen into the hands of the Druufs?

Capt. Rous examined his conscience. Had desire bred this thought? No. After all, as yet there was no proof that Perry Rhodan was really dead.

3/ DESPERATE SEARCH

The space sector in which the *California* emerged after a long transition through more than 6000 light-years was swarming with the traces of alien spaceships. In the little ionization chambers which were affixed to the hull of the *California* to detect smallest particles, the residue of plasma fuel was producing a virtual avalanche of impulses. The crystal detectors, set for the characteristic emission wavelengths of plasma propulsion units, registered one flash of light after the other. The flashes were between 10 and 100 million kilometres distant from the *California*. For the time being, the ships whose propulsion units were emitting the flashes posed no threat to the Terranian cruiser.

But this could change. To a space vehicle that effortlessly achieved an acceleration of 50,000-normal, 10 or even 100 million kilometres was merely a lark. However, from a distance of 1,000,000 kilometres the *California* would appear as a tiny plot of light on the viewscreen of the enemy proximity sensor. From that moment on their chances of getting away unscathed would be more than slim.

The Arkonide blockade fleet that was to prevent any Druuf ship from advancing through the overlap zone into the Einstein Universe consisted of 30,000 units. It would be no hardship for the Arkonides to deploy a few hundred of these to pursue one single Terranian cruiser. The *California* was indeed swift and manoeuvrable but, for all that, relatively lightly armed.

Conrad Deringhouse had placed command of the ship in the hands of Maj. Ostal. Clyde Ostal was what was called in fleet lingo 'an old salt'. He knew what to look out for on this mission. He had experience with the combat techniques of Arkonide robot ships and his hyperjump from Earth to the overlap zone, where two time planes meet, was a masterpiece of galactonautics.

Deringhouse's taskforce was ready for action. It was made up of three men, if one didn't take the word 'man' too literally. Deringhouse himself, the teleport Ras Tschubai and the mousebeaver Pucky, the most capable mutant of the Fleet.

The three had put on their safety suits and were waiting for the *California* to reach the point from which they could jump directly to Hades with the help of the transmitter. The *California* was equipped for this undertaking, three transmitters resembling wire cages left just enough space in the Command Room for Maj. Ostal and his three highest officers to barely move about. For lack of any other place to sit, Deringhouse and his companions were already occupying the transmitters, watching the large panorama viewscreen through the open grid doors.

The gigantic overlap front presented an awesome spectacle. From the position of the *California*, it could be viewed in its entirety. It looked like a thin cloud of glowing red gas that stretched straight across the firmament absorbing the shimmer of the stars. It seemed like a menacing monster that had set out to devour the universe.

The red glow stemmed from the circular openings of countless funnels through which the energy difference between the Einstein and the Druuf Universe was discharging—simultaneously creating a bridge for transition between the two space planes. These discharge funnels were the only avenue for a jump into the time plane of the Druufs. Maj. Ostal's hypertransition into the vicinity of the overlap zone had been masterful indeed but the *California* was still more than 15 million kilometres from the next discharge funnel and no one intended to jump straight into the unknown from a distance of that magnitude.

Those were the deliberations that came to Maj. Ostal at times like these. Concerned and pensive, he scrutinized the readings of the tracking equipment. He knew that the *California* would be attacked if he were to start the propulsion unit even once. The Arkonides had not come to picnic in that area. They had their eyes open to prevent even one Druuf ship from escaping their attention and with those same alert

eyes they would spot the propulsion glow of the Terranian cruiser. For the time being, the unpropelled *California* was moving through space parallel to the overlap front with the moderate residual speed remaining from the transition.

Clyde Ostal swivelled around in his chair and looked at Gen. Deringhouse, who was patiently sitting in a transmitter.

"We only have two alternatives, sir," he stated. "Either we accelerate with field propulsion or we bring the ship up close to the front with a short transition."

Deringhouse saw the uninterrupted flickering on the projection surface of the crystal detectors.

"Both alternatives are equally miserable," he answered disgruntled. "If we use field propulsion they will eventually position us, although it would enable us to watch what was going on around us. If we make a short transition they will not be able to position us but neither will we know what sort of hurly-burly we will get into. So as far as I am concerned we can flip a coin, Major."

Ostal frowned. "I like to decide on the basis of logical considerations," he stated, "but this time there really don't seem to be any."

Deringhouse stood up and emerged from his transmitter. He squeezed past another cage and almost had to lean on Ostal's shoulders to see what the detectors were recording. The optical recording worked on the same principle as a radar screen, the closer to the edge of the blip flashes appeared, the farther away they were from the *California*.

Deringhouse observed for a few minutes. Then he pointed to the place on the screen where he had seen the least blips. "There doesn't seem to be much going on there," he commented to Ostal. "We might be best off to jump in there."

"Unless," Ostal added, "an entire convoy of Arkonide ships is waiting there, unpropelled and motionless."

"Right." Deringhouse agreed. "But we do have to incur some sort of risk whatever we do and this seems to me the lesser."

Conscientiously Clyde Ostal began to recite the data on the projection screen. "25 million kilometres from our present position," he ascertained, "but only 80,000 from the discharge funnel front."

"That is exactly what we need," Deringhouse said eagerly. "What are we waiting for?"

Clyde Ostal hastily made all necessary preparations. The data was fed to automatic steering and the hyperpropulsion section was again made ready for takeoff. The men at the few firing positions were admonished to keep their eyes wide open during the following moments and the three advance troop participants in the grid cages of the transmitters made themselves as comfortable as possible to withstand the shock of transition without injury.

The pains of distortion were brief and bearable. The picture on the panorama screen had changed in one fell swoop. The red glow had become less brilliant and darker and the mouth of a gigantic discharge funnel gave the impression of the jaws of a monster about to devour the small *California*. Glowing and quavering, the sinister mass was drifting towards the ship, its red walls pulsating in the equalizing flow of energy. Far in the distance the mouth narrowed to a brightly gleaming dot. The light in which the dot

gleamed came from another world. The dot was the border between both universes. Whoever advanced beyond the dot would find himself in the time plane of the Druufs.

Conrad Deringhouse leaned forward, got hold of the transmitter door and closed it. Pucky and Ras Tschubai followed his lead. The click of the locks was the only sound in the tense silence of the Command Room. Deringhouse bolted the helmet of his spacesuit. His hand slid over the small control panel near his seat and with one flick of the button the signal was given that alerted the transmitter at the other end of the jump route, in the cave base on Hades, of the imminent jump. Deringhouse knew that the transmitters on Hades were under constant surveillance. It could only take a couple of seconds for the return signal to arrive and to indicate the reception readiness of the other transmitters.

Those few seconds almost sufficed to cause the failure of the venture.

Clyde Ostal's voice and the alarm sirens howled at the same moment. Across the green surface of the large tracking screen the trace of a gleaming dot that had started at the edge of the screen was heading straight towards the centre. Other dots appeared in the lower left, also moving towards the middle. The *California* was surrounded by Arkonide ships. The Arkonides had positioned the ship as soon as it appeared and were proceeding to investigate the cause of the reflex in their tracking devices. Since their devices normally had a range of 1,000,000 kilometres, the Arkonides could not have been any farther away than when he had positioned the *California*. That meant that he would be arriving in a few moments.

Clyde Ostal interrupted the screeching of the sirens to make himself understood. Tersely, precisely, he issued orders. The gunners of the *California* received the command "Ready to fire", the operating personnel was instructed to be prepared for a renewed transition.

Meanwhile, Conrad Deringhouse sat in his transmitter and waited for the green signal of the return device. His hand was on the switch that would actuate the hyperjump as soon as the way was clear. Through the grid door of the cage he saw that Ras Tschubai and Pucky were just as tensely awaiting the decisive moment as he was.

Where was that signal?

The *California* opened fire.

The antigrav promptly absorbed the shock of acceleration which resulted from the impulse of firing. A bystander would not have believed that any shots had been fired at all: the only proof was supplied by a little bright white dot that suddenly lit up in the blackness of the room. One of the Arkonide ships had been hit.

"If we don't get any signal within 10 seconds," Deringhouse shouted, "then take off!"

Clyde Ostal nodded without turning to look at Deringhouse. His eyes were trained on the green tracking screen on which the reflexes of new Arkonide ships continued to appear.

... five... six... seven...

Deringhouse took his hand away from the switch. The signal would not arrive in time, before the *California's* situation became critical. A single enemy shot glanced off the protective energy screen of the Terranian cruiser, causing it to light up.

At the same instant the green signal flashed on.

Deringhouse held his hand no farther than a few centimetres away from the switch. He let it drop forward and shouted: "We're off!"

Then he depressed it. The switch gave way with a click and instantaneously the Command Central of the *California* disappeared for Conrad Deringhouse.

* * * *

The room was pitch dark and cold. Perry Rhodan awoke with unfriendly thoughts about what the Druufs called their 'hospitality'.

He straightened up and discovered that he had managed it effortlessly. At least the medication had kept the Druufs' promise: he felt no after-effects.

Rhodan stretched out his arms and groped his way about, trying to feel the outlines of his prison. That was easy. The room proved to be almost square with a side length of about four meters. He could not reach the ceiling by jumping, which meant that it was three or more meters high.

There seemed to be a door along one of the walls. Rhodan could feel two parallel joints. Moreover, there was an artificial gravity field, for the gravity inside the room was not above the normal level on Earth. Rhodan wondered about that. Since the Druufs imprisoned him in a cold, dark cell that contained nothing but himself, it was astonishing that they took the trouble to ease his situation with an artificial gravity field.

Suddenly the idea came to mind that had originally occurred to him just as the injection had rendered him unconscious. He squatted on the ground and began to concentrate. He tried to imagine Fellmer Lloyd and after a few seconds he succeeded. Out of the darkness Lloyd's face appeared before him in a circle of pale light and smiled at him.

"Where are you?" Rhodan thought.

"In a dark cell," Lloyd promptly answered. "Four by four meters, pretty high, no furniture, cold, with a tightly shut door and a horrible stench."

"Ammonia," Rhodan explained. He spoke the word out loud, as he knew that thoughts are formulated more precisely with the spoken word. He also heard Fellmer Lloyd's words as if they were spoken aloud but that was a sensory illusion. It was Lloyd's telepathic gift which called forth some semblance of resonance in his brain cells.

Perry Rhodan was no born telepath. That is, although he had always possessed telepathic abilities, they were recessive. It had required hard training and the tutorship of an experienced telepath to awaken these abilities and to enable Perry Rhodan to put them to use. He was still a weak telepath who could receive messages only under very favourable conditions but his ability sufficed to communicate with another telepath.

"Listen to me," he said to Lloyd. "There must be a way to open the door. The Druufs have no reason to lock us in all of a sudden. They know that we would never go out into the poisonous air on our own."

Lloyd seemed to nod.

"That sounds reasonable," he admitted, "but the thing has neither a knob nor a button."

"Think of the table!" Perry Rhodan admonished. "You only had to step on a certain spot and it shot up in the air."

"Oh, you think I only need to place my hand on a certain spot... then the door would open?"

"Exactly. The Druufs probably don't even intend any secrecy about it. That is presumably their usual way of opening doors."

"It could be, though," Lloyd interposed, "that the spot is higher than we can reach. The Druufs are three meters tall!"

"We must try," Rhodan decided. "We can't sit around idly and wait for the Druufs to come up with something new. We've got to get out!"

He sensed Fellmer Lloyd's quandary following his last remark. Anticipating Lloyd's question, he himself asked: "How long can you hold your breath?"

Lloyd was startled. "I beg your pardon?"

"I mean—how long can you last without breathing?"

Lloyd got the picture. "I don't know exactly," he answered. "Maybe a minute or so."

"Don't forget that you will have work to do at the same time," Rhodan reminded. "Still, that's a lot of time. Now pay attention. I'm going to detail my plan and you repeat each sentence so I know that the transference is functioning."

* * * *

Terranians would have called the Druuf a 'Tommy'. His actual name consisted of a series of supersonic sounds which were inaudible to human ears and unpronounceable for human tongues.

That he was a high-ranking dignitary was evident by the outfit he wore, which was designed for working in, for ray protection and for space travel, all in one. The Druufs considered dark grey the most magnificent colour of all. Consequently a whole row of dark grey stripes were prominently displayed on the almost black suit of the Druuf to identify his rank.

As different as the Druufs might be from humans, their thoughts ran along almost identical lines. This Druuf, for example, sat behind a monster of a table on which he had some work or other, applying most of his attention to figuring out how long he would still have to bear the inhospitable halls of the cavern

base on the methane planet until he would be relieved.

He had taken on the office of Commander of the support base because it would net him a promotion upon his return to Druufon. To this end, it had been necessary for him to spend half a Druufon year in the caverns. Now there were just a few Druufon days left to that half-year. His successor could be counted on to arrive at any second.

The Tommy thought about how the proper confinement of the four prisoners and the prevention of an attempted escape—which was how he regarded the prisoners' efforts with the antigrav device—would favourably influence the assessment of his accomplishments as Commander of the support base.

His four faceted eyes were glistening as he returned to the work lying before him on the table. A commission of high officials had announced their impending visit. They were to arrive in the methane world within a few Druufon days and it was not definite whether they would arrive during his term of office or during his successor's. The thought of having to attend to the needs of 10 or 12 inquisitive officials in a fashion suitable to their station was repugnant to the Tommy.

But the notification also presented him with a puzzle. The officials were coming to question the prisoners. Listed among those scheduled to arrive were some names belonging to the highest aristocracy of Druufon. Why should such people go to the trouble of an uncomfortable trip to a poisonous planet—instead of having the prisoners brought to Druufon and questioning them there?

The Tommy did not know who the prisoners were he had in his charge. They were turned over to him by a spaceship with the instructions that they were Terranians—or whatever the corresponding word was in the Druuf language—and that he must on no account allow them to escape. No one else seemed to know just who they were either. And the fact that the official commission had decided to come there for questioning indicated that on Druufon they not only wanted to keep the identity of the prisoners secret but the capture as such.

The Tommy studied the list of officials for the second time. This gave him the feeling that he would have to discuss the problem with one of his subordinates. He reached for the small picture intercom standing in front of him on the table and pressed a button. The screen lit up and the com tone could be heard, a high whispering sound.

But the screen remained empty. Nobody answered at the other end of the line. The Tommy was surprised. At this hour his subordinate, an 'Oscar' as the Terranians would have called him, should be present. He had no permission to leave his office. Then why didn't he answer?

The Tommy kept the line open and turned his attention to the list again. When some time had elapsed, however, he became restless. He got up and went to the door, placing his delicate right hand on the wall halfway up the wall. The door glided to one side and opened the entry to the airlock whose opposite exit led to the main corridor of the cavern system. Inside the antechamber the Druuf pulled his helmet over his head and locked it. Then he made the inner door glide shut and waited until the pumps had removed the breathable air and pressured in the poisonous methane-ammonia mixture.

He went out. In this section of the installation provisions had been made for normal Druuf weight. Farther back in the passage, where the prisoners' cells were located, they had even installed an additional gravity field that produced gravitation of 1 G to spare the prisoners unnecessary hardship before the advent of the commission.

In the remainder of the cavern the gravitation of the methane planet prevailed unweakened. It would

have been wasting energy to outfit the entire cavern with gravity protection just to accommodate the stored raw materials and spare parts of the low-ranking workers detailed there.

The Tommy stepped on the conveyer strip and rode three doors down to the airlock of the room he had tried to contact earlier over viewcom. With no formalities he opened the airlock and stepped in. The pumping procedure repeated in reverse order. It took only a few seconds to pump out the high-pressure toxic atmosphere and let in the oxygen-nitrogen mixture. The Tommy let his helmet drop back over his shoulder and went past the inner door into the office of his subordinate.

At first glance the room seemed to be empty, except for the numerous pieces of furniture with which it was provided. The Oscar was nowhere to be seen. Furiously the Tommy hissed his name but he received no answer. He went around the table and looked behind it.

There he saw the Oscar. Her was lying behind the table and had one of his eyes shut.

The Tommy let out a shrill cry of alarm and bent down to see what had happened to his subordinate. He felt his hand. It was cool and limp. He reached for his upper arm where, at a particular point, the blood-lymph mixture should be palpable. For a few terrible seconds he thought the Oscar was dead but then, when he tightened his grip, he felt a faint pulsating.

Shortly thereafter he saw the wound. It was located on the lower half of the hairless head sphere, not far from the place where the sphere grew out of the body. The skull was crushed. The blow that the Oscar had received must have been very severe. Or perhaps he had simply fallen.

In any case, it was obvious why he had not answered. The wound meant serious injury. A little bit deeper and it would have cost him his life. As it was, there was some hope that he would survive—but probably with permanent impairment of his intelligence. Druuf brains were very sensitive, if one knew the spot to hit.

The Tommy knew what now had to be done. He must notify the medical service to administer first aid to the Oscar. Then he must see to it that the Oscar was brought to Druufon. His condition could not be healed here on the methane planet. The Tommy considered for a moment whether this event could cast a disparaging light on his capability as Commander and decided that would not be the case. If the Oscar had fallen and was severely wounded, it was his own business.

The Tommy straightened up. It was quite a strain, as the Druufs were built to walk erectly and only to walk erectly. They rested while standing. Sitting was an uncomfortable activity, although it was unavoidable while working, and only the night was spent in a prone position. To lift his body weighing 800 pounds under normal gravity of Druufon required a great effort.

That was the reason he discovered the absurdly small creature standing on the desk much too late. He made an effort to rise quickly to his feet but the little animal was holding some glittering, oblong object bigger than itself in both hands and swinging it ominously. The Tommy tried to avoid the blow but he failed to get out of the range of the flashing cudgel in time. The powerful blow landed exactly where the Oscar had been struck: at the back of the head. The Tommy staggered one step backward, then hurtled noisily to the floor, falling on top of his subordinate.

He was no longer conscious to see the little creature cast aside the cudgel, cursing furiously, and begin to massage his arms.

* * * *

Fellmer Lloyd was in desperate need of the massage. He had knocked out two Druufs and put his entire strength behind each blow. Lloyd thought his arms would be torn out of their sockets—but he had gotten through intact after all.

Perry Rhodan's plan had worked!

Yet it was so simple. The pressure of the ammonia-methane mixture in the passages of the cave was 2000 Torr, that is around 2.7 Atmospheres. A human being could easily withstand the pressure for a few minutes if he plugged his ears and nose and did without breathing.

That was the basic idea. Since every cavern room had its own airlock and the atmospheric change in the lock took place within a few seconds, the poisonous air that filled the cavern passages no longer represented an insurmountable obstacle. They stuffed scraps of cloth into their ears and nose, pressed their hands to their mouths, ran from their airlock to the lock of the adjoining room and burst into the room. One uncertain factor had been the gravitation. Perry Rhodan had anticipated that the normal gravity of the methane planet would prevail outside their prison cells. Under those circumstances it would have been difficult to proceed at more than a slow, shuffling pace and it might have taken more than 40 seconds to get from one antechamber to the other. It was a lucky coincidence that in this very section of the cavern the gravitation had the Druufon norm of 1.95.

After everything had been prepared, Perry Rhodan and Fellmer Lloyd set out at the same time. They were in adjacent cells and one could see the other as they left the airlocks and ran on, one to the left, the other to the right.

Originally they had assumed that the Druufs had put them in some remote section of the cavern. Their human reasoning had led to this deduction: the prison cells were in the cellar, the offices on the first floor. Fellmer Lloyd soon realized that the Druufs thought differently but before that happened he had the good fortune of finding some sort of storage room. He had simply started to run when the door to his antechamber opened. He didn't take the time to select the right conveyer strip. He hurried along beside the strips to the next airlock door without undue strain. When he released the opening mechanism—he now knew that it was to the right of the door just about two meters up the wall—his ears began to buzz. He had barely enough strength to hold his breath until the airlock filled with breathable air. The rapid pressure adjustment made him a bit dizzy but he felt as strong and bold as before.

In the room behind the airlock there were a great number of racks holding countless objects, from tiny little screws to three-meter-long bits of pipe, which were probably spare parts for the pumping system. Catching sight of the objects, it occurred to Lloyd that it might be good if he had a weapon. He considered the size of the Druufs and the breadth of the rooms in which they lived and chose a piece of pipe almost two meters long. It was rather heavy but he thought he could manage to hold it and strike with it when necessary.

He heard nothing from Perry Rhodan. He received blurred thought patterns but he did not know from where or from whom they came. Only after concentrating with all his might did he determine that someone was in the adjoining room. He could make out the pattern but could not read the thought. It was the thinking of some strange brain. A Druuf brain.

That horrified him. Now he knew that this part of the cavern was by no means remote or uninhabited. He would have to warn Perry Rhodan. While Rhodan was a telepath, when confronted with the thinking of a non-human brain he would be unable to recognize any thoughts. He might only get a headache. Lloyd concentrated completely on calling Rhodan and finally he reached him. Rhodan had meanwhile made his way to the cells of Reginald Bell and Atlan and informed both of them about the change in plans. All three were now occupied with exploring the passageway on the other side of Lloyd's cell.

Fellmer Lloyd picked up the pipe and set out. This time he was more economical with his breath and had no discomfort by the time he closed the next antechamber door behind him. As soon as he could inhale, he climbed up the pipes of the pumping system and found a place where he could hook his legs behind a metal bar, thus freeing his hands. It was not particularly comfortable but he hoped that he would not have to endure it for long. He tried out his prowess with his new weapon and was satisfied with the result. Then he banged hard against the inner door a few times and realized that the Druuf in that room had noticed the noise. He banged once more. The Druuf then got up and went to find out what was happening in the airlock. Fellmer Lloyd was hanging about 3½ meters above the ground. The Druuf saw him at once but apparently was so terrified that he did not move for a few seconds. His shining faceted eyes only continued to stare at the strange creature hanging on the wall, which gave Fellmer Lloyd sufficient time to swing his cudgel widely and hit the Druuf on the skull. He had not counted on an instant success but the Druuf slumped over like a heavy sack. Lloyd climbed down and examined the wound he had inflicted on the Druuf. It did not look particularly serious. From that Lloyd concluded that this part of the head behind the chitinous skin must house some easily injured part of the body, perhaps even the brain, and made a mental note of the spot.

Since it was likely that discovery of the Druuf lying half out in the airlock would cause a commotion the moment someone entered, he made a supreme effort and dragged him through the room behind the lock over to the enormous desk. He hid the unconscious Druuf behind the desk and began to search for real weapons. He did not think that he and Rhodan and the two others would succeed in capturing the base by knocking out one Druuf after another with metal pipes.

Nonetheless he was forced to use his crude weapon once again. He had just begun his search when the viewcom called in. Of course he had not answered the call. He would not even have known how to operate the device. From then on he was cautious and a few minutes later he sensed the thought pattern of an approaching Druuf.

Grabbing his cudgel, he hid in a corner between the desk and some sort of filing cabinet to observe the course of events. Surmounting various difficulties, he succeeded in climbing onto the desk without attracting the attention of the Druuf, who was bending over the unconscious figure. When he straightened up, Lloyd struck with the same might on the same place. He also had the same success.

And now he continued to search for weapons. The room was full of various sized cabinets, the mightiest of them no smaller than a weekend cabin on Earth. The doors could be operated in the same manner as the antechamber doors, by hand pressure on the right doorframe.

After about an hour Fellmer Lloyd had looked through all the cabinets without finding anything resembling a weapon. He was familiar with the pistol-like objects used by the Druufs and had certainly not overlooked any.

Suddenly he stopped short and slapped his forehead with his palm. What a fool he had been! Where does one keep a pistol? Naturally where it was comfortably within reach at the right moment.

In order to get to the desk drawer, Fellmer Lloyd had to stand on the motionless body of the Druuf he

had last knocked out. He saw that he was still unconscious. He saw, too, the six grey stripes on the right and left shoulders of his outfit. If those were rank insignias the fellow must at least be a general. So he was a Tommy.

The drawer was no drawer as Lloyd imagined it. It consisted of two triangular parts to the right and left of the desk seat that flipped open at the touch of the hand at a certain spot. Fellmer Lloyd looked into both drawers and was holding the pistol in his hand after a few seconds. Pleased, he examined it and found that except for one trigger, it had no other movable mechanism. That seemed easy enough. He aimed at a closet door and fired.

Nothing happened. Fellmer Lloyd pulled the trigger again. There was still no effect whatsoever. Astonished, he regarded the pistol from all angles and got the idea that it might be a shock weapon. One could not shock the nerves of a cabinet door, so he needed another experimental object. But there was none. And he did not have the time to look for one. There were more important things to be done.

He climbed off the unconscious Druuf and looked at him again. There must be some way of outfoxing the ammonia, the methane and the 2.7 Atmospheres. He recalled how his eyes had burned as he ran through the passage and his desire to gain some relief had become overpowering.

He scrutinized the two unconscious Druufs and in the process the saving thought occurred to him.

* * * *

Initially things had gone more smoothly than Perry Rhodan had considered possible. He covered the distance between his airlock and the next one, about 5 meters, in less than three seconds. Getting the doors open took considerably longer. From the moment he had to hold his breath until he could exhale again, 15 seconds, had passed the first time. That was bearable. The greater nuisance was the abominable stinging of the ammonia in his eyes. Rhodan resolved to take a bit longer next time and keep his eyes shut instead. There was no missing the way. Just keep along the wall.

He had found Reginald Bell and Atlan. Reginald Bell stared at him as if he were seeing a ghost. Atlan smiled and maintained that he had just had the very same idea. Perry Rhodan readily believed him. They were always just one degree of thought behind or ahead of each other.

Together they had begun to search the passage. They learned that beyond their cells there were mainly storage rooms. There were a lot of things in sight but none that would be of any use to them. They were looking for weapons and their spacesuits. If they didn't find them, they might as well return to their cells and wait until the Druufs hit upon something new. They also discovered four rooms that looked like offices. However, they were empty and apparently had not been in use for quite a while. A fine layer of dust covered floor and furniture and, naturally, they had left no weapons behind.

What put them very much at ease was the fact that they never caught sight of a Druuf. Without any weapons an encounter would probably prove fatal.

After about two hours they reached a point at which the passage seemed to end. It was blocked off by a natural stone wall yet the conveyer strips continued on under the wall, which led Perry Rhodan to conjecture that the wall might be a disguised door. They tried to open it but the wall did not budge. Atlan

suspected that the Druufs had simply installed the reversing mechanism of the conveyer strips behind the wall to facilitate traffic in the passageway.

At any rate they could go no farther. They had unsuccessfully searched through 21 rooms and now only one remained. If they failed to find what they sought in that one, their situation would be pretty hopeless.

So they stormed into the last room. Since the atmosphere at the back of the passage was as toxic as in front, they naturally could not have someone stand guard in front of the airlock to spot any Druufs that might appear. This room again was used for storage and in the cabinets, on the racks and tables there were thousands of things, all of which were equally useless to the prisoners.

Crushed, they turned to make their way back. There was still a slight chance that they could reach their cells and behave as if nothing had happened before the Druufs reappeared or the robot brought them their food.

They had not quite reached the antechamber door when it opened. The picture that presented itself was unmistakable. Three massive Druufs stood in the cell. They held in their hands the very things the prisoners had so desperately sought for 2½ hours: weapons.

4/ AID FROM—ERNST ELLERT!

Conrad Deringhouse landed in the transmitter of the cavern base.

The bolt on the cage door clattered as someone outside began to unlock it. Through the grid Deringhouse saw 4 man in the uniform of a captain and recognized Marcel Rous, the Commander of the base.

"Welcome, sir," Rous said simply as Deringhouse stepped out of the transmitter.

Deringhouse shook hands with him. Nearby Pucky and Ras Tschubai also appeared. A quick smile crossed Rous' face as he spied the little mousebeaver in the spacesuit tailored especially for him.

Conrad Deringhouse had shaken off the tension of the last seconds on board the *California*. The first part of the venture had succeeded—not altogether smoothly but still as scheduled. There could be no doubt that the *California* had long since removed itself from danger.

"You have just arrived in time," Marcel Rous struck up the conversation. "There is something going on in the Druuf Universe."

Deringhouse gazed at him in surprise. Rous reported succinctly about the odd SOS call the base had received a few hours earlier.

"The only place that call could have originated is a methane giant, a Jupiter type planet, sir. It seems that the Druufs are holding Terranians prisoners there. We have given the planet a name. We call it Roland."

"A lovely name," Deringhouse muttered but it was obvious that his mind was elsewhere. He was

deliberating.

Was there any connection between the SOS signal and the call for help sent out by Ernst Ellert?

Deringhouse scanned the transmitter station with one glance. There were about 20 of these devices set up in a hall that was 20×30 meters large. These devices maintained contact between the base on Hades in the time plane of the Druufs and the Einstein Universe. Ever since the transmitters had been installed it was no longer necessary for Terranian ships to break through the Arkonide blockade and continue through the overlap zone to penetrate the Druuf area where the Druufs kept a sharp vigil to prevent anyone from crossing their path. The only disadvantage the transmitters entailed was the fact that they could only be used in conjunction with a return device ready for reception. Upon depression of a button, the generators of both transmitters jointly provided the energy that was necessary to convey the object to be transported from one device to the other in a kind of hyperjump.

"Let's not just stand here," Deringhouse suggested. "Our friend from Vagabond in particular is in need of a cozy room in which he will not be disturbed. You see, in the course of the next few hours a high degree of concentration will be demanded of him."

Smiling, Capt. Rous regarded the mousebeaver, who was glancing around curiously and acting as if he had not heard one word of that had been said.

Rous led them along the aisle separating the two rows of transmitters. The air in the hall was cool and fresh. One noticed nothing of the inferno of a world lurking outside the gates of the base, a world that always had the same side facing its central star and knew no moderate temperatures, only extremes. The young technology of Terra had applied all of its talents to create this base in secrecy and haste. Located in the midst of enemy territory, it was almost more of a bridgehead.

"Adjacent to the transmitter hall were the administration rooms, among them the office in which Marcel Rous spent his time when on duty. Sometimes he even stayed there longer, which is why the office contained an article of furniture that by nature did not belong there: a sofa. The sofa was just what Pucky the mousebeaver was looking for. With one leap he was on it and making himself comfortable.

Capt. Rous instructed an orderly to fetch breakfast for the guests. Deringhouse informed him that it would best be called supper, for at that moment the clocks pointed to 20 hours, Terra time. Rous laughed self-consciously and explained that they weren't so particular about those things on Hades. The sun lamps inside the base were never switched off and it was up to the individual what he considered day and what he considered night.

The snack appeared with such rapidity, it aroused the suspicion that it had been produced out of tin cans. The orderly withdrew, awaiting further orders at all times, and Gen. Deringhouse began to describe what had transpired on Terra that had prompted his flight to Hades.

"You are of the opinion, sir," asked Marcel Rous when he had concluded, "that Ellert's emergency call and our SOS signal have the same cause?"

"Wrong," answered Deringhouse. "I am not of that opinion. I only contend it could be possible, which is why there is nothing more urgent to do than to get in touch with Ellert. We must know what prompted his call."

Marcel Rous had a vacant stare. It was obvious that he still had something on his mind.

"Do you have any other suggestions, Captain?" asked Deringhouse.

Rous nodded. His words came hesitantly. "We have received transmitter shipments of parts of various scoutships, Gazelles, sir. The vessels are assembled and ready for action. I don't think the risk would be too great if we sent one of the Gazelles to Roland to do some scouting."

Deringhouse nodded. "I believe that is a good suggestion," he agreed, "but the vessel is not to start before we have heard from Ellert."

At that moment Pucky made himself heard in the background, "Just a wee bit of patience... I will warine him!"

Nobody knew what "warine" meant. However, Pucky's telepathic signals did seem to be underway to Druufon, to Ernst Ellert.

In a few moments Ellert would send his report and—hopefully—solve the mystery surrounding his emergency call to Earth.

* * * *

The base was on its toes. Gen. Deringhouse had taken over the command. It seemed that after long days of leisure something big was brewing.

A Gazelle was ready for action in the big hangar-lock. Who was to fly it—and above all, where it was bound—was not known. Rumour had it that Deringhouse himself would be the pilot.

Deringhouse himself? What was it all about? Was Druufon to be attacked? Was Terra now preparing to seize power in the time plane of the Druufs? Now, of all times, just a few days after Perry Rhodan's death?

Speculation was rampant. But those who knew anything let nothing slip.

Marcel Rous was satisfied with things. He remembered the hunch he had had while seeking the origin of the SOS signal. If there were really such important people involved as Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bell and Atlan the Arkonide, then it was better that someone else bore the responsibility. He had not yet spoken to anyone about his hunch, not even Gen. Deringhouse.

Quite apart from that, Pucky's efforts to establish contact with Ernst Ellert had been completely abortive. The distance between Hades and Druufon was too great. It looked as if there was no progress to be made in that respect. Pucky received telepathic signals but they were incomprehensible. He could not grasp one single thought. Ellert's human body, which had functioned as a telepathic relay station in his transmission to Earth, was missing here on Hades. Although the distance from Druufon to Hades was vastly smaller than from Druufon to Terra, not a fraction of what Betty Toufry had understood in front of the mausoleum in Terrania could be understood here.

It was absolutely clear to Conrad Deringhouse that he could not afford to lose any more time. Whatever Ernst Ellert had to say, Pucky felt that it was very important and that Ellert's thoughts were urgent. That

was all he could understand.

20 hours after his arrival on Hades, Deringhouse decided that the Gazelle would have to start without Ellert's information. Its destination was Roland. Deringhouse himself would be on board. Ras Tschubai would attempt to reach the surface of the planet via teleportation, should a landing turn out to be too dangerous. In addition, Pucky was part of the crew of the scoutship. If there were any Terranians on Roland, he would be able to recognize that by the waves radiated by their brains.

The last briefing took place in Marcel Rous' office.

"You know that we are taking a risk," Deringhouse declared to the Captain. "Not just the crew of the Gazelle but all of us... including the personnel of the base. As yet the Druufs do not know about the odd bird that Terra has roosting right in the middle of their own system. It is possible that they discover this because of our flight and then attack the base. So stay vigilant. Should it come to the worst, hang on until the transmitter of the *California* beams the green signal and then attempt to rescue as many people as possible. Is that clear?"

Rous nodded. Of course that was clear. The base had been in constant danger from the very first moment on. It always had to be vigilant. The takeoff of the Gazelle would not worsen the situation radically.

Marcel Rous tried to imagine what might happen when the Druufs were first confronted with a spaceship that disappeared from the spot when the situation became dangerous—without leaving behind even the slightest trace of a transition. Everything that had come from the Einstein Universe over here into Druuf Space retained its own specific time. That meant that a Gazelle could achieve speeds impossible in the Druuf Universe, because they lay above the threshold speed of light valid here. An object that moved faster than light no longer belonged to the space in which it had previously been present. To a Druuf it would appear as if the Gazelle had simply vanished.

The thought amused Marcel Rous. He would like to see the Druuf who experienced that.

Rous realized that Deringhouse was still talking. He tried to put aside his own train of thoughts and concentrate on Deringhouse's words but he did not succeed.

How was that with the Druuf? From the Command Console of his spaceship he would see the Gazelle disappearing on the spot. It would surprise him beyond measure. But not one Druuf. Ernst Ellert. He knew all about differences between specific times and could imagine which effects this phenomenon could produce. But Ernst Ellert lived on Druufon, was an acclaimed scientist and would surely never enter a warship.

Someone said: "I have the feeling, Captain, that you are not devoting your entire attention to this matter!"

Rous heard these words but he could not cease thinking, about his problem. It is quite funny, he thought without being too amazed. It's as if someone has a hold on my mind.

He thought about Ernst Ellert. Ellert would never board a warship... no, of course not. Or would he? The matter that had led him to call Earth—was it possibly so important that he would do things for its sake he wouldn't otherwise do? Just why had he actually called? What was going on?

Marcel Rous suddenly saw a Druuf before him, black-skinned, spherical head and gigantic. He seemed to be approaching him and Rous was absolutely certain this Druuf was Ernst Ellert. It was the Druuf in

whose body Ellert's mind lived while his human body lay seemingly dead in the mausoleum of Terra.

What did he want?

Marcel Rous wanted to duck but something held him tight. The Druuf drew nearer, as if he wanted to run him over. But when he touched him, they, melted into each other and became one. Suddenly he knew what the Druuf was thinking and when he opened his mouth to speak, it occurred at the wish and with the thoughts of the Druuf in whose body Ernst Ellert lived.

For the bystanders the event was more astonishing than frightening. Conrad Deringhouse had been the first to notice that Capt. Rous was submerged in his own thought rather than listening. He let it ride awhile, then made his comment. Rous had not seemed to hear him. He continued to stare blankly and seemed to be engrossed by a very important problem.

Suddenly his eyes widened. He seemed to see something the others could not see. Deringhouse wanted to grab him, grip his shoulders and shake him awake. But something warned him against it. For some reason, unknown even to himself, he was convinced that something important was about to happen and that he was best advised to keep himself and the others perfectly still.

Then he stopped talking and signalled the others to be quiet as well. Marcel Rous attempted to move. It looked as if he wanted to step back and to one side. Deringhouse had the impression he was trying to avoid someone. But he remained where he was. Something seemed to lame him. His face took on an expression of amazement, then fear and finally horror. At the height of his dismay, Rous suddenly relaxed and took a deep breath.

Then he began to speak. The words came out awkwardly and in a voice that did not seem to belong to Rous.

"Don't be frightened," the voice said. "I am not drunk. I merely have to become accustomed to the larynx construction of this man."

That sounded monstrous. *Who* was the man speaking out of Rous?

"I am Ernst Ellert," said Rous. "I choose this way to make myself understood because all others have failed. I beg you not to spend too much time thinking about how I succeeded in taking possession of Marcel Rous' body. Listen to me instead. It is an important enough matter. Understood?"

"Understood," Deringhouse answered without knowing what he was saying.

"Good. Then we can begin," said Rous. Ellert seemed to be getting used to the strange speech apparatus. The words came more fluently but still with a strange intonation.

"One of our ships—I mean: a short while ago a Druuf ship succeeded in breaking through the Arkonide blockade and penetrating the Arkon Universe. Far beyond the overlap zone it came across a cruising enemy ship manned by allies of the Arkonides that had four prisoners on board. Terranians. The Druufs left the allies of the Arkonides where they were but took the prisoners on board their own ship.

Now here's the important part: I was unable to find out *who* the prisoners are. The whole thing is top secret. The prisoners were brought to the 36th planet of that system, a methane world similar to Jupiter, and within one of the next few days a commission of high officials will set off to question the prisoners.

This allows only one conclusion: the four prisoners must be extremely important people. And if they are important to us, to the Druufs, then I think they should be to you Terranians too.

That was the reason for my call. I thought you might be missing four people and that I could help you find them.

He was silent and his audience was silent because no one was able to find the words for an answer. The number *four* had stricken them dumb. Since the loss of Grautier in the Arkonide surprise attack, *four* Terranians were missing and Ellert was absolutely right in thinking that important people were involved. *The most important of all in the Solar Empire.*

Gen. Deringhouse's mind was working feverishly. He tried to fathom what had happened on Grautier at that time—two weeks ago when he had circled the dying planet with the *Drusus* at neck-breaking speed to search for the survivors of the catastrophe who had sent an emergency call via telecom. There had been no further sign of life on Grautier. Deringhouse had been convinced then that the people who had called for help had long since ceased to live when the *Drusus* appeared. But Ellert's report presented a completely new aspect. Another ship had been quicker than the *Drusus*—one which, as Ellert put it, was manned by Arkonide allies. It made no difference who that might have been. The only thing that mattered was that the confederates of the Arkonides had not gotten very far with the prisoners. Something must have happened to their ship. The Druufs found it drifting in space. Why they found it altogether was unclear. Perhaps the Arkonide ship had sent out an emergency call and the Druufs intercepted it. Or any number of things might have happened.

Deringhouse was about to drop that thought when something occurred to him: 11 or 12 days earlier, Terranian patrol ships had picked up a telecom transmission. Its text was composed in the Arkonide language and read as follows:

LAMIRA 12 CALLING YNLISS.

STATION GOSHUN.

The commanders had taken special notice of this. It seemed like a routine message sent by a spaceship by the name of *Lamira 12*—probably a ship of the Springer fleet—to a place or a man by the name of Ynliss. The only strange thing was the name of the Station of *Lamira 12*: Goshun. Goshun happened to be the name of the lake at whose shores the capital of Earth, Terrania was situated. It was highly improbable that somewhere in the Galaxy there was a second place with the exact same name, particularly in another language. So Terranian patrol ships set out to find the transmitter that had sent that peculiar message.

The tracker had revealed that the Terranian ship nearest to the transmitter was still over 5,000 light-years away from it. Since it had only reported one more time after the sensational message, and with a coded Arkonide message at that, it was difficult for the Terranians, almost impossible, to trace the ship. They abandoned the search after several days and returned to their stations. The incident was eventually forgotten.

Now, after Ellert's report, it regained significance. Deringhouse was almost positive that it had been one of the four prisoners who had sent the Goshun dispatch. He had to phrase it that way, since he had to

take into account that any less casual sounding message would immediately attract a host of Arkonide ships anxious to get a closer look.

Hence the prisoners must have managed to take over a telecom transmitter on board the Arkonide ship. What a disappointment it must have been for the prisoners when, instead of the anticipated Terranian ship, a Druuf ship appeared and they went from the frying pan into the fire!

So the Druufs brought them to Roland. Ellert had learned of this, even though he had not discovered who was involved, and the prisoners themselves had actuated a gravity generator, trying by this clumsy means to inform the Hades base of their situation.

The fact itself that they had made such an attempt proved that they knew of the existence of the Hades support base. For no one could possibly assume that signals sent by a generator would traverse the overlap front, reach the Einstein Universe and somewhere there be received by a Terranian ship. The very knowledge of the existence of the support base on Hades considerably narrowed the circle of people who might be identified as the four prisoners. Hades was a project of the highest category of secrecy.

Conrad Deringhouse was convinced that the prisoners were the four men who had stayed on Grautier until the very last. It was known that they were to join the fleet standing by for a prepared attack on Arkon: Fellmer Lloyd, Atlan, Reginald Bell and—Perry Rhodan!

It took a great effort on Deringhouse's part to retain his composure. Ernst Ellert knew that the prisoners were being held on Roland. Did he also know the exact location of their prison?

He asked Rous about that. Ellert promptly answered through the mouth of Marcel Rous: "On the methane planet there is a subterranean base that is primarily used for dangerous experiments which cannot be carried out elsewhere. Of course I can tell you where it is. I have often been there myself.

He paused. "I have to think in your terms first, though," he continued. "Druuf measurements are different than yours. Wait—let's define the north pole! The north pole is that end of the axis standing above which you would see the planet turning to the left, just like Earth. Is that clear?"

Deringhouse tried to imagine it. "Yes, that's clear," he answered.

"Good. The base lies in the northern hemisphere. About at half latitude, that is about the 45° Latitude North, as you would say. Is that clear too?"

"Naturally."

"Then to continue. The longitude is of course difficult to determine as the point of reference is arbitrarily chosen. But you will not be able to overlook a horseshoe-shaped lake situated almost exactly at the equator. It is quite large, half an ocean by Earth standards. The two legs of the horseshoe are each 2,000 kilometres long and at its widest point it is just as far across. The 0 meridian passes through the vertex of the horseshoe. Now take into account that the Druufs divide the circle into 512 degrees. They use an octal system. $5.12 = 83$. Then the cavern base lies at 120 Druuf degrees Longitude East. You can convert that, can't you?"

"Yes, if someone has meanwhile jotted it down," Deringhouse responded unfazed.

"I have, sir!" Ras Tschubai called out of the background.

"There is nothing further I can tell you," Ellert continued, "except perhaps that you must naturally be on guard. The Druufs consider the cavern base quite important. That is why it has a permanent force of 2,000. Aid from Druufon or from one of the other fleet support bases can be summoned within a few minutes. If something happened on the methane planet, it certainly wouldn't take longer than an hour until the fleet appeared. Yes, and... the gravitation of the methane planet is 1.34 times that of Druufon. You can convert that yourself, too. It is quite a lot."

"Thank you. We knew that already," Deringhouse answered.

"Then my mission is completed," Ellert declared through Rous' mouth.

"We all owe you our gratitude," Deringhouse said. "By now we are pretty deeply indebted to you. Tell us what we can do for you when the occasion arises."

Rous' face remained motionless but Ellert's voice sounded as if he were smiling when he said: "I'll gladly do that. And if I am ever really in trouble, I will certainly call on you!"

At that moment a tremor went through Marcel Rous. He took a clumsy step forward, tripped, caught himself, looked around in bewilderment and drew his hand across his forehead. "Where... how?"

It was Rous' own voice again: Ernst Ellert had left.

For one amazed moment Deringhouse wondered what Ellert had done with his Druuf body while he had been there on Hades.

Rous began to remember. "Ellert was here, wasn't he?" he asked uncertainly.

Deringhouse nodded. "He was inside of you," he declared emphatically.

Rous did not seem astonished. "I had a feeling like that..." he answered absentmindedly, almost dreamily.

And that seemed to end the discussion for him. Deringhouse and Ras Tschubai also seemed to consider Ellert's report as such fundamentally more important than the manner of his presence.

Marcel Rous needed no further information. After reflecting briefly he recalled everything that Ernst Ellert had said.

The final order was issued for the takeoff of the Gazelle.

5/ PASSAGEWAYS OF PERIL

This second attempt seemed to have soured the Druufs' taste for sarcasm. One of the three declared with the help of his communicator: "You will be given no further opportunities. This time we are going to tie you up!"

None of the three Terranians answered. By necessity they had reckoned with the failure of their enterprise. All that interested them at the moment was: what had become of Fellmer Lloyd?

"Come with us!" the Druuf ordered. "And I promise you one thing: at the least suspicious movement you will be shot!"

There was no one present who doubted that. They entered the storeroom. The inner airlock closed behind them. With drawn weapons the Druufs drove the prisoners into one corner of the room. The one with the communicator explained: "You will be given an injection, like last time. We are waiting for the medication."

Perry Rhodan did not think it prudent to protest. He leaned against the wall and glanced at the shelves in apparent boredom. He still had a faint hope that something would come to mind by which he could outwit the Druufs. He tried to contact Fellmer Lloyd telepathically but that was a miserable flop. Either Lloyd was too far away or he had switched off. This could just as well mean that the Druufs had already captured him and given him an injection.

A few minutes passed. Then there was the sound of the outer airlock opening. Probably the Druuf with the infusion, Perry Rhodan thought, and did not even turn in that direction to look.

The outer antechamber rumbled shut and moments later the inner door opened. Rhodan did not turn his head. His glance slid along the racks and remained fixed on one of the Druufs who stood facing him, his weapon ready to fire, his eyes trained on Rhodan. Perry Rhodan tried to let feelings of mockery and contempt show in his face but he was not sure that the Druuf was able to comprehend human grimaces.

His scornful look seemed to have baffling success after all. The Druuf took a small step forward, then fell over. The racket was horrible as his 800 pounds crashed to the floor.

That was not the only racket. Twice more the crash sounded as the other two Druufs collapsed. Perry Rhodan was utterly astonished. It was nonsense to think he had knocked over the Druuf with the force of his glance.

He looked up and spied an absurd creature under the chamber door. It seemed to be clad in a Druuf spacesuit but the suit was twice its size. It had tried to remedy this by gathering up the middle part of the suit with either rope or wire, exactly which, could not be discerned. The legs and arms were gathered in the same manner. Two heads such as the one belonging to the absurd creature would have fit into the pressure helmet. The top of its head did not even reach halfway into the helmet.

But one thing in the picture was not absurd: the weapon the gnome was holding in his right hand and the thoroughness and accuracy with which he used it to overpower the three Druufs.

Full of admiration, Perry Rhodan regarded the grinning face of the gnome through the view panel of his helmet and said: "You must tell me how you did it, Lloyd!"

* * * *

Fellmer Lloyd opened the helmet and flipped it back. He did so adroitly, as if he had worn a Druuf spacesuit all his life. Before he began to speak he surveyed the unconscious Druufs with a long and thoughtful glance, then heaved a deep sigh. "That was sort of touch and go," he admitted with an embarrassed smile. "I didn't even know if the pistol would function."

"It *did* function alright," Reginald Bell responded, as he gradually recovered from his surprise. "It seems to be a shock weapon."

Perry Rhodan climbed over the body of one of the Druufs and scrutinized Fellmer Lloyd's outfit up close. "That is a solution, of course," he murmured. "How do you manage in the suit?"

"Not as comfortably as in my own," Lloyd admitted, "but incomparably better than without a suit."

Rhodan nodded. "How does it look outside? Is the passage still free?"

"It was when I came in here," Lloyd answered. "But that could change any second. It looks like the Druufs discovered our breakout."

"You are a clever child," Bell muttered in the background. He had bent over the unconscious Druuf and begun to undo his suit.

"Have you found anything of significance to us?" Perry Rhodan continued to inquire.

Fellmer Lloyd shook his head. "Nothing but the pistol. No trace of a transmitter, if that's what you mean, sir."

"But there *must* be a transmitter!" Rhodan maintained. "Nobody can convince me that the Druufs have no way of contacting Druufon."

Atlan stepped over to him. "The cavern has at least 1,000 rooms," he pointed out. "We know just about 30 of those right now. The transmitter could be in any one of the 970 others."

Reginald Bell had meanwhile opened the suit. He made his first attempt to get it off the enormous body of the Druuf but the massive bulk of the unconscious figure foiled all efforts.

Fellmer Lloyd watched him. "You have to turn him, sir," he suggested. "After you have rolled him once around the longitudinal axis he will have unwrapped himself out of the suit."

Reginald Bell realized that Lloyd was right. The fastening of the suit was designed to allow the wearer to shed it by turning once on his own axis with the fastening open. The suit naturally had to be held still in the process.

"I see that," Bell grumbled peevishly, "but how can I turn the monster?"

"I used a length of pipe," Lloyd eagerly explained. "As a lever, get it?"

Bell stood up and found a piece of pipe. He shoved the end halfway under the Druuf's body and applied pressure at the other end. Gradually the body raised, toppled to one side and rolled over. The spacesuit remained behind, empty, on the floor.

Perry Rhodan had meanwhile assessed their new situation.

"Each of us has a suit," he stated, "and each a weapon. We have achieved what we wanted on that score. The only thing that was not part of our plan is that the Druufs are aware of our escape. We can't change that now. We just have to accept it. And we shall continue to look for the transmitter. *We must* get word to the base on Hades. There is no other means of getting away from here. So we will drape ourselves in the suits like Lloyd did," he continued, "and try our luck again. We'll have to go back the way we came but since we are no longer dependent on the airlocks we can make much better progress. We do have one great problem, of course: the weapons those three Druufs were carrying looked just like the one Lloyd got, which makes them shock weapons. That means that we are not equipped to defend ourselves against robots. The Druufs will soon figure that out and send robots. That is when things will get precarious."

Reginald Bell had meanwhile slipped into the suit. He looked as if he had wrapped himself in 50 square meters of plastic sheeting. Atlan helped him out of his predicament by tugging at the suit until Bell's head appeared in the helmet, as it should. The excess width of the suit slipped down around his feet, so that when Bell tried to walk he got entangled and stumbled.

"You look like his majesty the emperor in person," Atlan said appreciatively. "No one could deny you due respect."

Reginald Bell threw him a dirty look. "Utility is one thing," he answered, "and beauty another. Just wait. I want to see whom you resemble after you have worked yourself into the thing!"

Perry Rhodan laughed. "Let's not lose time on witty remarks," he admonished.

Following Fellmer Lloyd's method he freed one of the unconscious Druufs from his suit and slipped it on. There was plenty of wire around to gather together the excess folds of material. It only took a few minutes after seeing how someone else had done it.

They took the Druuf weapons and left the storeroom. The passage outside was quiet and deserted, only the monotonous murmuring of the conveyer strips could be heard.

They stepped on the slow strip and changed to the faster after they had become accustomed to the speed. Fellmer Lloyd led the way. The other three followed several meters behind him. The purpose of this was to allow Lloyd to concentrate on what lay ahead with his telepathic 'feelers' without being too disturbed by the thoughts of the people behind him.

They rode about 200 meters, passing the antechamber doors to their prison cells. The silence in the passageway made them suspicious and grated on their nerves. There was a sense of danger in the air, in the stinking, poisonous methane and ammonia air that filled the passage.

With no advance warning Fellmer Lloyd suddenly jumped over to the slow strip and, after a few meters, from there to the passageway floor. This happened so suddenly that the other three rode a bit past him on the strip before jumping off as he had done. They had the sending and receiving devices in the helmets switched on and heard Lloyd say: "There's something up there in front of us!"

None of them had any idea how long the passage still might be. The light that filled it came from all sides, throwing no shadows and blurring all contours beyond a certain point, so that they were unable to discern anything.

They waited and relied on Lloyd. "They are coming nearer!" he whispered.

"How about the rooms around us?" Rhodan asked. "Are they all empty?"

Lloyd nodded. "I didn't feel anything as we passed them," he answered.

There was one option left. As soon as they had determined that the Druufs had robots with them, they would just have to duck into one of the neighbouring rooms and hide until the Druufs passed. There was nothing simpler than that.

Lloyd had been standing next to the wall, his back leaned comfortably against it. Now he suddenly stepped forward and turned his head to peer down the passageway. He could see nothing, of course. It was more of a reflex action. "It feels like they have suddenly become very agitated," he stated. "They seem to have discovered something new."

He meant the Druufs. Rhodan knew that Fellmer Lloyd could not perceive Druuf thought. It was not their mentality that was so alien to him but the structure of their brains. His telepathic gifts failed in that respect. Lloyd could still perceive thought patterns, however, which was enough to determine whether someone was in a normal state of mind or in a state of agitation.

Perry Rhodan reflected on what the Druufs might have discovered. They were up front in the passageway. Therefore, whatever had sparked their excitement could not have anything to do with them, the prisoners. They had never been up front.

However, the Druufs were wearing spacesuits. They themselves had switched off the receivers in their helmets. Had one of the unconscious Druufs regained consciousness and sent a signal? The three in the rearmost rooms of the passage no longer had their helmets. They could not have attracted attention. But Lloyd had knocked out two Druufs, as he had reported, and had left one of the suits behind. Had that Druuf alerted the others?

He was still deliberating when all at once a heavy blow struck his shoulder. He heard someone scream in pain. The blow had knocked him off balance. He stumbled and fell. The tug of the twofold gravity made him hit the ground hard. The painful twinge that shot through his ankle somewhat eased the numbness in his body caused by the blow.

Suddenly he knew what had happened. His thoughts had been on the wrong track all along. Nobody had sounded an alarm. Nobody had regained consciousness and warned the Druufs. The Druufs themselves had discovered them!

They had robots with them and the robots were not dependent on the lighting in the passage in order to see who was there. They had different organs of sight. For them the visible spectrum was broader by a few powers of 10 than for the human eye. They could see in the dark and the ultra-violet portion of lamplight served for them as an entire battery of spotlights. The robots had seen the fugitives! And the blow that Perry Rhodan received was nothing more than the direct hit of a shock weapon which had been fired prematurely and from too great a distance.

"Go back!" Rhodan cried. "They've seen us!"

He turned and discovered that Reginald Bell was lying on the ground behind him, writhing in pain. The greatest part of the shock charge had struck him. The distance from the gunman was too great to have totally thrown Bell's nervous system off balance but it was sufficient to enable the pain to develop in entirety.

With the help of Atlan the Arkonide, Perry Rhodan got his groaning, gnashing friend back on his feet. Fellmer Lloyd stood poised, ready to spring on the conveyer strip and seek shelter. There was no point in fighting against an invisible opponent. Safety was to be sought where enemy weapons could not strike, farther back in the passage.

They shoved Reginald Bell onto the belt. He did not have the strength to stay on his feet. He fell but remained on the strip and it carried him along. Fellmer Lloyd, Atlan and Perry Rhodan were right behind him. They hurtled themselves to the ground so as to offer the robots no target. They were not hit again. The enemy had stopped shooting—or he had shot over their heads.

The developments were anything but encouraging, thought Perry Rhodan. Now that the robots had spotted them it was senseless to hide in some room. Even the smallest closet would be searched by the Druufs as they went through the passage. All that remained was to continue down the passage but somewhere at the back, not even 100 meters away, it ended in front of a stone wall that could not be moved. There would be no other alternative than to position themselves there and wait until the Druufs were close enough to put them out of action with the shock weapons.

At last they were not out to kill the prisoners. That, however, was the only consolation.

As Perry Rhodan's mind worked feverishly the image of the conveyer strip, the way it disappeared under the crude stone wall, appeared before his inner eye. He recalled how they had explained this: the Druufs had not wanted to place the reversing mechanism in the passage itself and block traffic. Suddenly he realized how perfunctory this explanation was. In fact, since the strip went beyond the wall, anyone who wanted to ride from the back to the front of the passage was compelled to take a few highly troublesome steps. He could not walk around the strip, as was the case in the passages of the Terranian spaceships, and get on the other side to ride back in the other direction. Instead he had to walk back the passage, get on the opposite strip and switch over from it to the slow middle strip and then over again to the strip running forward. In other words, the contrary was true from what they had assumed: the fact that the reversing mechanism was behind the wall impeded traffic rather than facilitating it.

There must be a reason for it—and the reason was plain enough: the wall was a cleverly disguised door. Behind the door there was no reversing mechanism. Instead, the conveyer continued through a secret passage.

This meant renewed hope for the fugitives. If they could discover the mechanism that moved the wall they still had a chance.

The question was—could they manage this in time?

* * * *

In this room there seemed to be more ships than there were stars to be seen in the sky. The position trackers of the Gazelle were continually occupied with tracing foreign vessels and conveying the results to the positioner.

Conrad Deringhouse, who was commanding the Gazelle, had accelerated at top capacity from the start

and brought the scoutship to a velocity of 180,000 km/sec within minutes. He had thereby exceeded the speed of light valid in the Druuf Universe and hence no longer existed for the Druufs. On the other hand, a velocity of 180,000 km/sec still did not present serious manoeuvring difficulties, even in the relatively high material density of a planetary system. The Gazelle was safe until it reached the vicinity of the methane planet, Roland, where retardation would be necessary.

Two transmitters had been brought on board during the last hour before takeoff. Deringhouse had also ordered two additional transmitters to be held in readiness on Hades for the duration of the Gazelle's absence. They had to be prepared for discovery of their Terranian ship by the Druufs in the course of their venture. Then the situation would determine whether a quick flight would be possible or whether the crew would have to escape from the impending attack with the help of the transmitters.

No further word had been received from Ernst Ellert. That seemed to indicate that nothing substantial had changed in the situation on Roland.

After a flight of 2½ hours the Gazelle had neared within 35 million kilometres of its destination. Conrad Deringhouse had started the braking manoeuvre and was conducting it in a way most sensible for his situation: he braked with the maximum power the propulsion section could muster. Within a few minutes the distance to Roland reduced to a few 100,000 kilometres and the speed sank to that required for stationary orbiting.

Not that Conrad Deringhouse was planning to circumnavigate Roland. That would have been the likeliest way to be discovered by the Druufs. The Gazelle flew a short stretch in orbit for orientation following the specifications received from Ernst Ellert and then plummeted vertically into the dense methane-ammonia atmosphere. Before the plunge the speed had been further reduced. It had to be prevented that the air molecules, when rebounding from the Gazelle's protective energy field, become ionized and thus stimulated to glow—an effect so distinct in atmospheres of some density at velocities over 15 Mach that it could be seen over vast distances.

The men on board the Gazelle—or rather, the two men and the mousebeaver—squandered no attention on the peculiar surface configurations of the planet and its surrealistic combination of colours. They knew all too well what they were participating in and curiously enough, even Pucky was completely aware of the seriousness of the situation. Earth, mankind and the Solar Empire stood and fell with Perry Rhodan. For a few days Perry Rhodan had been considered dead. A few days had been enough to plunge the Earth into discord and confusion. A few weeks would suffice to place it at the mercy of the thrust of the Arkonide Empire.

But Perry Rhodan was still alive—at least that was what Conrad Deringhouse believed—and no greater service could be rendered mankind than to find him, liberate him from imprisonment and bring him back to Earth.

Deringhouse had sunk the Gazelle to a ground altitude of less than 100 meters and was approaching the site of the Druuf base from what must be the east as defined by Ernst Ellert. Deringhouse did not intend to land the spaceship directly in front of the entrance to the base. He thought it advisable to conceal the Gazelle somewhere and send out Ras Tschubai, the teleporter, to reconnoitre the subterranean installation. Pucky's assignment would be to establish telepathic contact with the mutant, Fellmer Lloyd—whereby it was still no more than a plausible assumption that the four prisoners of the Druufs were really the four men who had remained on the dying base of Grautier.

If Ernst Ellert's directions were correct, then the entrance to the base was located on an endless expanse of rocky plain armed with scattered monolithic rock-needles. Near the place that Deringhouse took to be

their destination, he could make out a small lake, its water glistening red. Ellert had not mentioned this lake. Deringhouse became doubtful that Ellert's specifications had been accurate enough.

Skimming the plain and skilfully skirting the monoliths, the Gazelle approached the red lake. Deringhouse had reduced flight altitude to five meters. He was almost certain that none of the usual tracking devices could register them at that depth.

About 10 kilometres away from the lake Deringhouse finally stopped the ship. Manoeuvring it into the partial shade of one rock-needle he sank the Gazelle to the ground and let the propulsion idle as it was conceivable that he would suddenly need it in the course of the coming hours.

Now that they were at their destination, or at least in its proximity, and no longer had to watch for any trace of the Druufs, they began to take in the strange sight of the methane world. They stared at the panorama screen and slowly the sensation of the passage of time began to fade. The tension that had filled them gave way to a dreamlike tranquillity.

Conrad Deringhouse felt the dangerous weariness that was spreading through his body. Startled and amazed he tore his gaze away from the screen and looked around at Ras Tschubai. "Hey, Ras," he called. "Don't fall asleep!"

The African shuddered. Deringhouse could see that Tschubai had undergone the same experience he had. It seemed evident that the sight of the colourful rocky plain engendered a drowsy, hypnotic state. Was it natural? Did the colour and form combination have that effect on human beings? Or had the Druufs installed a hypnotic weapon and were they lulling their opponents to sleep?

"Get going, Ras!" Deringhouse ordered. "Just take a chance and jump. You know that nothing can harm you if you land on a spot where there's solid or fluid matter. Look straight down. Should you by chance emerge in a passage or cavern chamber, take note of the location and report back to us. Understand?"

Ras Tschubai nodded. He stood up from his cushioned chair, took a few sideward steps and shut his eyes. One could not see how difficult it was for him to prepare himself for a teleportation jump to a place he had never seen before and could not envision.

Deringhouse watched the teleporter. He saw the outline of his body suddenly begin to vanish. But before it had completely disappeared, it reappeared and solidified to its usual clarity.

Large beads of perspiration were gleaming on Tschubai's forehead. He opened his eyes. "Nothing," he softly said in a tired voice. "Apparently I landed in the middle of some rocks. But close nearby there must be a hollow. I could feel it."

Deringhouse nodded patiently. "Good. Try it again when you feel up to it!"

Tschubai rested for awhile then made a second attempt. He shut his eyes and tried to see the place he wanted to reach through the darkness behind his eyelids. Of course it was a purely imaginary picture, as he did not know the place. But even this imaginary picture served to activate the extra section of his mutated brain at the desired moment and to trigger the teleportation.

Ras Tschubai jumped.

The first thing he experienced was a baffling feeling, as if several hundred pounds were resting on him. He had to press against this weight in order to even get on his feet, which took a great effort. He realized

that it was nothing more than the high Roland gravitation that created that feeling and proceeded to turn on the antigrav generator of his suit. All in all he needed five seconds to recover from the gravitation shock, to determine that he had arrived in a subterranean passage fitted with conveyer strips and to reach out his hand towards the generator switch.

What followed happened fast, too. Ras Tschubai was delivered a heavy blow on the back. He whirled, staggered and felt a scorching, biting pain rip through his body. He collapsed and lost consciousness. The last thing he saw was the nightmarish figure of a Druuf looming three meters tall farther back in the passageway, his weapon aimed at Tschubai.

* * * *

"They are less than 50 meters away," Fellmer Lloyd gasped. "The robots could be even closer than that!"

It seemed as if the lead the fugitives had gained because of the slow specific time of the Druufs would not suffice to reveal the mechanism of the door. Their hands had probed the wall thoroughly from top to bottom, right to left and twice diagonally. They had pressed the coarse synthetic gloves on every conceivable point of the rock but it did not budge.

50 meters—that was barely more than the accurate range of a shock raygun. Perry Rhodan hunched over and tensed his muscles in order to resist the hard blow that would have to come any second.

In his helmet receiver he heard the mutant panting. It was a tremendous strain for Lloyd to hold the alien thought patterns under constant surveillance.

"40 meters to go," he gasped. "My God... they'll start shooting any time now. The robots must be getting closer."

Nothing could be seen. The uniform lighting turned the back of the passage into a bright, contourless spot of light. From time to time a spark flickered bright in the midst of the light, a reflection off one of the metal bodies of the robots.

Six hands groped across the stones unceasingly, as Fellmer Lloyd stood to one side and concentrated on the Druufs. Six hands gliding aimlessly from place to place, seeking the secret location of the opening mechanism. Two of the six hands suddenly sank in discouragement. Somebody uttered a hoarse curse and kicked the wall with all his might.

And the door opened!

All at once a new passageway lay before them. Under the door the conveyer strips gently inclined and continued upward.

The passageway was on a slope. It was not hard to imagine that somewhere towards the front it would lead back to the surface of the planet.

Perry Rhodan hesitated. That was not what they had planned! They had intended to find a transmitter

and contact Hades. It was completely nonsensical to think that the Druufs might have erected the transmitter up above on the rocky plain.

But they had no choice. They were compelled to follow the passage! At any second a Druuf or their robots might open fire, and if Reginald Bell, who had just barely recovered from the first shock, were to receive a second, he would never again stay on his feet.

"Go!" rasped Perry Rhodan. One word only, yet it contained more rage and determination than others could have expressed with an entire sentence.

They stepped on the conveyer, Reginald Bell in the lead, and rode into the newly discovered passage section. Fellmer Lloyd was at the end. He had hardly passed the stony doorway when it moved for the second time and closed, although none of the four had touched it.

The same gravitation prevailed in the passageway as it had farther back: Druufon gravity of 1.95-normal. The passage was illuminated in the same manner as the others they had been in. They could not see any farther than 20 or 30 meters.

Perry Rhodan's thoughts raced wildly. He found the latest development disquieting. The Druufs only had to open the rock door and resume their pursuit. Thus far they had achieved nothing more than more headway by walking on the moving conveyer. The faster they moved, the sooner they would reach the end of the passage and the exit to the upper world. Outside, however, the gravitation was 2.6-normal, which would make them even more vulnerable to the pursuing Druufs than down here below.

Was there any point to it? Wouldn't it be better to remain here and wait until the Druufs approached?

There was only one glimmer of hope remaining: the door to the exit passage had been disguised. Why? Who was to have no knowledge of this passage? Certainly the Druufs had not reckoned with foreign visitors. If the passage was to be kept secret, then surely from the lower ranking members of the base personnel. What purpose this served could only be answered by the Druufs.

But that was not important, at least not at the moment. What was important was whether the Druufs pursuing them were aware of the existence of the passage. If not—there was still hope. They would reach the wall and not find the fugitives. That would surprise them and they would begin to search through the adjoining rooms, for they could no more have observed the opening of the concealed door than the prisoners could see them.

The only uncertain factor was the robots. With their all-frequency eyes they *must* have seen the prisoners fleeing past the hidden door. The question was whether their program allowed them to reveal this to the Druufs accompanying them.

Perry Rhodan interrupted his thoughts as the passage and the strips dipped into a gentle curve. The passage became even less easy to scan than it already had been due to the uniform. If there were some Druufs waiting up above at the end of the conveyer, they would almost run into their arms before spotting them.

But no one was waiting. The passage ended in a fairly spacious, empty rock chamber. The strips vanished through a crack in the floor, discharging their passengers. There seemed to be some sort of portal opposite the passage mouthway. Without hesitating, Perry Rhodan strode over to it, placed his hand on the spot where the Druufs generally hid the opening mechanism, and waited in suspense.

The two wings of the portal began to creak open. It sounded as if this exit had not been used for several years. With a distinct crack the two halves of the portal slid farther apart, providing a view of a broad expanse of gently dipping rocky ground. Light from one red and one green sun was spilling over the rocks.

Perry Rhodan stepped outside. Instantly the treacherous weight descended on him like a steam hammer. He buckled at the knees, hit the ground hard and remained there. He waited until the others were beside him and said: "From now on it's best to move on all fours. That's easiest."

Then he turned, tossing over onto his back to see the place at which they had emerged. The door to the rock chamber had meanwhile closed behind them but the door was no longer visible. It fitted jointlessly into the wall of a vertical rock-needle that climbed to dizzying heights and hid its peak between an entire drove of small, red-brown clouds.

The Druufs seemed to have a preference for concealing the entrances to their cavern bases in the walls of monoliths. This was not the place where they had first gone into the cavern after the Druuf ship had landed.

Rhodan turned around again. He looked down the sloping rock expanse and discovered a narrow, red stripe below. The stripe sparkled and glistened as if it were in constant motion. Rhodan remembered the red lake they had seen while leaving the Druuf ship. What he was looking at was part of the surface of that lake. It was about 800 meters in front of them. This gave them an opportunity to get their bearings.

The Druuf ship was no longer in sight. It had probably just settled here to unload the prisoners and immediately left. That was a relief. From the ship that would have long since been sighted.

Perry Rhodan tried to conceive a plan. This was a difficult task as he had almost no criteria by which to select the next sensible move. One thing was clear: they had to get as far away as possible from the portal of the rock chamber, as fast as possible. The Druufs could appear at any moment.

They would have to head down for the sea. The shores would offer some shelter. From there they could keep the chamber exit under observation and decide on additional moves after the Druufs had lost track of them.

He told his companions what he had devised. "There isn't much we can do right now," he added, "but maybe one of you has a better idea."

Atlan's voice answered with a ring of irony: "The way things look, Administrator, we should be glad to have one single idea. You are right. We must creep down to the lake and wait to see what happens."

Reginald Bell grumbled his agreement. "Let's go. What are we waiting for? By the way... Does anyone have any idea how long the oxygen supply in the tanks will last?"

Nobody knew. They were unable to read the instruments that indicated the air reserve. Their only hope was that the supply would last a few hours, since the Druufs had larger lungs than humans and accordingly would need more air.

Fellmer Lloyd nodded. He had nothing to say.

Laboriously they crept down the slope. Each time they hoisted themselves on their arms to gain another half meter, a gnawing pain shot through their limbs. They barely had enough strength to push off with their

feet against the smooth stones. Their legs were dragging on the ground and when the men had covered half the distance, they discovered that the knees of their suits had worn dangerously thin.

They crawled on, now more cautious. From time to time one of them looked back to check whether the Druufs had already appeared out of the rock chamber. But all was quiet. Their pursuers seemed to have lost their trail.

They had gone about 600 of the 800 meters when Reginald Bell, whose turn it was, looked back to check on the Druufs. He did it with groans and moans. Then he suddenly realized that it had been worthwhile this time. Now he could see past one of the monoliths that had been blocking the view of the plain. He saw two things at once.

He saw a group of Druuf robots surfacing far behind the monolith which contained the rock chamber. And he saw, off to the right, the thin, flat contours of a Terranian Gazelle scouting craft.

He let out a cry of surprise and continued to lie there with his head raised, although it took a great effort.

6/ IN THE GRIP OF THE STORM—AND AFTER

Conrad Deringhouse knew that something had befallen Ras Tschubai when he failed to return. Tschubai was not the man to disregard orders. If he had not returned it meant that he was unable to return.

Deringhouse became nervous. Out of the nervousness he committed the decisive error that brought the entire Roland venture within a hairsbreadth of failure: he ordered Pucky to look for the African. The mousebeaver had telepathically determined the place that Tschubai had concentrated on shortly before his jump. It was not difficult for him to recreate Tschubai's thoughts. He thought nothing of jumping right after the African and having a look around. His teleportation abilities were stronger and better developed than Tschubai's. He needed only close his eyes for a few seconds, read Tschubai's thoughts once again—and jump.

He jumped straight into disaster. The staggering blow dealt him by the intense gravitation almost drove him out of his mind. It was true that he had become accustomed to the gravity of the Earth, which was much too high for him, but he was and remained a native of the planet Vagabond, on which normal gravity was 0.53. He fell flat on the hard ground and sensed simultaneously the thoughts of an unspeakably alien being. He opened his eyes in confusion and saw looming large before him a pair of boots that unmistakably belonged to a Terranian spacesuit. Ras Tschubai! Plucky did not get around to contemplating Tschubai's fate. A fierce blow struck him from behind. He sensed the vehement and triumphant thought-impulses of the alien and then submerged into the deep blackness of unconsciousness.

When Pucky failed to return, Deringhouse realized what a mistake he had made. Now he was on his own. He had no parapsychological or telekinetic abilities that would in any way give him the edge on the enemy. If he left the Gazelle himself to do any scouting, he would be dead or captured within minutes. He had nothing more than the built-in weapons of the Gazelle, a few hand-firing weapons and his fists.

Instantly he realized what he should do. He only had one alternative: to wait. If Pucky and Ras Tschubai were only unconscious but not dead, they would revive and return to the Gazelle by teleportation. He

needed information before he could undertake anything and one of the two mutants would bring it to him.

Only it was dangerous to wait on Roland. Since Pucky and the African had not reported back Deringhouse could by no means be certain that the Druufs had not discovered him. It seemed as if they had been prepared for the arrival of the Gazelle and the teleport jumps of the two mutants. Under those circumstances it was only a matter of minutes before they would open fire on the Gazelle. For Deringhouse himself the danger was not acute. The first shot would be intercepted by the protective energy screen and before the second could reach its target, the Gazelle would be in the air and beyond the range of enemy gunners. But when the two mutants were able to jump back, they would only find a vacant place and fall into the hands of the enemy all over again.

And even if the situation was not all that serious—it was difficult enough to spend hour after hour on a hostile planet wilderness, waiting for something to happen.

It soon became obvious that Deringhouse had miscalculated the situation. Barely a half-hour had gone by after Pucky had jumped when the monotonous picture of the plain with its steeply projecting monoliths suddenly began to change. Out of a crevice that Deringhouse had taken to be a natural ground fissure, hordes of glistening, oddly shaped Druuf robots burst forth. His first impulse was to start the Gazelle and get out of there as quickly as possible. Then he saw that the robots were not a bit concerned with the Gazelle. They had a different target. They headed in a direction where, in Deringhouse's opinion, there was nothing more to be found than a few rock needles and, at best, the red lake. What actually commanded their attention Deringhouse was unable to see. After a few minutes of indecision he decided to continue waiting. It was dangerous to undertake anything haphazard in his position. The robots were paying no heed to the Gazelle, although they must have spotted it long ago. They had a specific goal to pursue and he thus had nothing to fear from them. The question was how would the situation change when, in addition to the robots, an organic Druuf would appear out of the crevice.

Quite some time elapsed as Deringhouse thought it all over. He stared raptly at the robots as they vanished behind a rock needle and then reappeared beyond it, still heading towards the lake.

Deringhouse raised his eyes and surveyed the surroundings. Something had subconsciously drawn his attention. When he regarded the other part of the panorama screen he saw what it was.

Something was approaching from the south that looked like a brown wall. At first Deringhouse was baffled. Whatever it might be in reality, it looked compact and massive, as if a mighty giant were shoving an immense mud wall with considerable speed. Only after some time did it become clear that the upper half of the wall was made up of dense clouds and the lower half of whirling dust. It extended to the peaks of the rock needles. Deringhouse watched in horror as a few monoliths were swallowed up by the brown wall and disappeared.

There could be no doubt about it: a monstrous storm was moving in from the south! Deringhouse saw the column of robots vanish in the brown dust. The picture on the panorama screen darkened visibly. Deringhouse estimated the velocity of the storm at about 250 to 300 kms/hour. Anticipating that the Gazelle would not withstand the storm without the help of the propulsion section, he began to make the necessary adjustments.

Otherwise the storm suited him perfectly. It simply lessened the Druufs' prospects of discovering him. The longer the stormy weather lasted, the better for the Gazelle.

* * * *

It was the ‘Tommy’ who had finally gotten things moving. He had been unconscious for a few hours. During that time his subordinates had discovered the escape of the prisoners and had initiated a few ineffectual measures to recapture them.

According to the report received by the Tommy after he had reentered the scene, the Terranians had fled through the secret passage designated as escape route for the commander of the base and the top-ranking officers in times of enemy attack. Granted there had been no enemy attack for 200 Druufon years—as there were no more enemies in Druuf Space—the passage was nonetheless secret and the robots that had discovered it were programmed to inform no one of their discovery.

So the Tommy had finally regained consciousness. He found that his suit had been stolen. However, the ‘Oscar’ he had been lying on still wore his. The Tommy saw that the Oscar had meanwhile died—either as a result of his wound or because the Tommy had crushed him. Whatever, the Tommy peeled off his suit and put it on himself. He did not feel particularly well. The blow delivered him by that insidious little creature was causing him terrible pain but the Tommy compensated for his lack of physical well being with a heightened sense of duty.

He left the room in which he had been attacked, returned to his own office and sounded an alarm. He held a quick briefing with the officers and was informed of everything that had meanwhile transpired. The Terranians had apparently escaped to the upper world and they had possession of shock weapons. Thus it would be more advisable to have the robots recapture them. The Tommy ordered two companies of robots from four separate places to hunt for the fugitives. The order was carried out at once. Now the Tommy had time to tend to his wounds. He was convinced that everything was well taken care of and that it was only a matter of hours until the prisoners would again be in secure custody.

He had not calculated on the storm that at that very moment was setting out far to the south to ravage part of the planet’s surface with its devastating might.

* * * *

It was incredible. Still, as often as they glanced over there in constant fear that the mirage might have disappeared—the picture remained. The Gazelle remained rooted to the spot. The robots ignored it, persistently storming towards the fugitives.

Perry Rhodan briefly attempted to reach the Gazelle over helmcom. The attempt failed. The Druuf transmitter operated on unusual frequencies and there was no time remaining to continue to repeat the attempt until the communications man on board the scoutship accidentally tuned his receiver to the right place.

Their direction was not determined. There was no more unclarity about what had to be done next. The question was now: how could it be done? Namely, how could they reach the Gazelle without running

straight into the hands of the robots?

Perry Rhodan only needed a few seconds to develop a plan. "We'll split up!" he decided. "At least that will confuse the robots for awhile. We'll take cover wherever possible and try to get over to the Gazelle. Some time or other they'll catch sight of us. They'll help us, get us on board. Don't think it over too long. We haven't a second to lose!"

They knew that. If anyone could plan quickly and well, it was Perry Rhodan, who needed only a second to think over what took others a minute. Atlan the Arkonide, also familiar with Rhodan's ability of 'instant re-think', trusted it implicitly.

They crept away from each other in all directions. The speed of their movements was in grotesque disproportion to the hurry they were in.

Perry Rhodan did not veer from the path he had taken from the rock chamber. The robots were approaching from the left. There was some chance of reaching the shelter of the monolith before them and making himself seen by the Gazelle from there—but it was very slim.

Panting, Perry Rhodan hoisted himself forward meter by meter. The distance between him and the robots reduced with every second. The metal mammoths were moving slowly in keeping with their specific time but each step was almost two meters long and the oppressive gravity of the methane planet did not seem to make any difference at all to them.

Perry Rhodan thought he could feel the ground rumbling under the steps of the mechanical beings. He remained still a few seconds and raised his head. There seemed to be others coming from somewhere else. Indeed, at three other places he saw robots appearing out of cracks in the ground and rock doorways. But they were much too distant to cause the rumbling.

Bewildered, he turned to the other side and there he saw the cause of the rumbling. A gigantic, dirty brown wall was rushing at him with terrifying speed. He expected it to swallow first the robots, then him at any moment. But when he looked at the foot of the wall he realized that it was still a few kilometres away and much larger than he had at first assumed. It actually towered above the highest of the rocky peaks.

At that moment the robots discovered that the prisoners had separated. Confusion set in among them. A few minutes passed before they agreed to separate as well and pursue each prisoner individually.

Rhodan took advantage of the time. With superhuman strength he jerked forward and won several meters headway. This was soon of no consequence, however, as the robots implemented their new tactic. With slow but long steps they went after him and now it really seemed as if there would be no salvation if the storm did not reach them in time.

* * * *

When the storm seized him at the proper angle, Rhodan simply let go and rolled with the might of the wind across the plain. What luck that it was perfectly smooth and that no bits of rock were lying about! Otherwise it would have simply been a matter of minutes until his suit would tear, exposing him

defenceless to the toxic, dusty atmosphere of the methane planet.

All around him was darkness. The storm had come with a vehemence that he had only experienced once before on Grautier after the Arkonide bombardment. Were he his normal weight, no amount of clinging would have helped. He would have been lifted and blown away.

He had wished for the storm to come in order to reach the Gazelle unharmed in the cover of darkness. But now he cursed it and was not even sure that he could keep his direction in the dark.

The robots were completely out of sight. They did have better vision than he did and the world would not seem so black to them, even in the midst of a storm. However, they had a different handicap, they had to stay erect and thus presented the wind a large surface to attack. Perry Rhodan did not know if the strength of a robot was sufficient to defy this world-ending storm.

Blindly he placed one knee before the other. He estimated that he had long since covered the 600 meters from the monolith housing the chamber. But in a radius of half a meter, as far as he could look, there was no incline to be seen.

Perry Rhodan did not know if he could endure the strain. His own weight tugged at his arms and more than once he came within a hairsbreadth of simply letting go and flying away with the wind. Occasionally he attempted to speak to his companions but the drumming of the dust against his helmet prevented him from even understanding his own words.

He felt a new squall that blew at the correct angle, and let go. The wind carried him away. Rhodan frantically moved his head to keep the helmet's view panel from hitting the ground. After a few seconds the squall diminished and it was time to seek another steady support so that the next gust would not drive him in the wrong direction. He stretched out his arms in an attempt to lessen his momentum and grab hold of something. Before he could manage, though, he slammed against a solid obstacle. For a few seconds he was so dazed that he was unable to move. Then he realized that the obstacle he had backed up against was seeing to it that the storm could do him no harm.

At last he had a look around. Behind him a dark wall cut steeply into the darkness. The rock needle! He had not lost the way. He was still headed in the right direction. If the storm had not appeared, he would have only had to go another 500 meters before arriving at the place where he could attract the attention of the Gazelle.

A fierce joy welled up in him. He was halfway there. Now he only had to crawl a short stretch, then remain motionless and wait out the end of the storm.

As this went through his mind, something hit the rock near him with a thundering crash. Instinctively he ducked and felt a shower of heavy little pieces rattle down on his helmet and suit. Nothing more happened, so he sat up again and gazed in astonishment at a piece of dented metal with a silver shimmer lying exactly in front of his eyes.

Doubtlessly it had still been some component of a robot a few seconds ago. The storm had clutched the erect robot and flung it against the boulder. The battered piece of metal was one of the few things that had remained.

If only that had fared all so badly! Perry Rhodan hoped. Then, suddenly, an acrid stench rose to his nostrils. Ammonia! He did not have to think long about what this meant, his suit was not airtight! One of the metal slivers must have penetrated the synthetic folds and the poisonous air of the planet was pouring

through the hole.

The robot had still achieved his goal in death!

* * * *

At first the Tommy was not willing to believe that the storm could hinder the search in any way. After all, in this hellish world there was a murderous storm every two Druufon days on the average and the work of the base had never been affected by them.

He had meanwhile received the highly bewildering report that two alien beings had been apprehended at almost the same spot in an outer passage of the base and that they had been taken into custody. One of the creatures looked like a Terranian, only his skin was as dark as a Druuf's, the other creature did not look like anything the Druufs had ever set eyes upon. Both were wearing spacesuits tailored to their body proportions and no one knew how the two of them had entered the cavern. The 'Mike' that had stunned them by means of shockray and taken them prisoner, claimed that they had appeared out of thin air. That, of course, was nonsense.

The Tommy considered it important to have a look at the new prisoners. He rode the conveyer strip to the place of their confinement and inspected them. First of all he realized that the description he had gotten was correct. One of the prisoners was doubtlessly a Terranian, while the other was, by Druuf aesthetic standards, a genuine nightmare.

The Terranian was still unconscious whereas the nightmare had already regained consciousness. Through the plastic dome of his helmet he glared malevolently at the Tommy.

The Tommy was accompanied by several officers. Suspiciously he circled the curious creature and regarded it from all sides. The prisoner followed his gaze. His mouth was open, revealing one single tooth, but a gigantic one.

The Tommy felt very ill at ease. His uneasiness kept him from noticing that his weight was gradually reducing. He only became aware of it when, quite involuntarily, he lifted from the floor and slowly drifted to the ceiling. Instinctively he had the feeling that the strange prisoner was responsible for this incident. He became enraged and kicked the odd creature. His kick landed below the helmet on the neck. The attack was powerful enough to lift the little creature from the floor and hurl him against the wall. He seemed to lose consciousness, sinking down the wall and remaining motionless with closed eyes.

All at once the Tommy plunged to the floor. This happened so quickly that in the confusion no one noticed that the Terranian prisoner had just regained consciousness. He moved his head with utmost caution so as to attract no attention and looked around. The nightmarish creature that had received a kick from the Tommy also opened his eyes.

The glances of the two prisoners met. They needed no words to communicate. Simultaneously they activated the extra sections of their brains and disappeared before the Tommy and his officers understood what had actually happened.

When they noticed, they could not believe their eyes. The room they were in was locked. There was no

way for the prisoners to slip past them unnoticed. There was no exit other than the usual airlock. Still the prisoners had vanished without a sound or trace.

The Tommy began to consider the possibility that the blow he had received had damaged some part of his brain, overlooking the fact that his officers had made the same observations.

* * * *

The hole was on the lower left arm. It could be held shut with the right hand to prevent any more ammonia from seeping in but then he would no longer be able to crawl.

Nonetheless Perry Rhodan tried.

The storm had not slackened. With undiminished impetus it swept across the plain, howling as it broke against the monoliths. The dust rained down on his helmet as before and suffocated every other sound.

Rhodan shoved his way out from under the rock, let himself be caught up by the squall and whirled away. He pressed one finger of his right hand against the hole with all his might and, while rolling, tried to determine by the intensity of the ammonia smell whether his measure was successful. The odour did not become stronger but even as it was, it sufficed to cause pains in his nose and to stimulate constant sneezes.

He did not know how long he was jostled by the wind before he got stuck at the next obstacle, a gentle recess that drew across the plain like a furrow. It provided sonic shelter from the storm, but Rhodan could not remember having ever seen that furrow before. It certainly did not lie in the direction of the Gazelle.

The ammonia dried out his mouth. He attempted to speak but was unable to produce a single word. His strength was at an end. He knew that he was lost if a miracle did not occur—and he had never in his life been a man to believe in miracles.

He tumbled out of the furrow and was picked up by the new squall. Ordering no resistance, he allowed himself to be tossed over the rocky ground, shoulder over shoulder, his head high to safeguard the helmet, his hand pressed to the hole in the sleeve.

Interminably long. He became dizzy. Nausea plagued his stomach. The salivary glands of his mouth did their utmost. Saliva trickled down his cheeks.

Then all at once he stopped. He was surrounded by some sticky, swishing liquid. He glanced around and discovered that he had arrived again at the shore of the red lake. He had moved in a circle. The storm had driven him back to the place from which he had set out to reach the Gazelle.

This was the end!

* * * *

Deringhouse was almost overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events. At a moment when he least expected it, Pucky and Ras Tschubai returned together. Ras Tschubai gave him a brief report while Pucky retired to one corner of the Command Room and seemed to be listening to something. Tschubai had not yet finished his report when Pucky interrupted him in a high, lisping voice to state that he could pick up the thoughts of four Terranians in the vicinity of the Gazelle and that they were beyond doubt the four that had been missing since the catastrophe of Grautier.

The mousebeaver, whose head was still throbbing from the severe kick it had received, stated this with supreme casualness, then instantly disappeared without having been instructed to do so. When he reappeared, some being clad in a strange outfit was clinging to him. He stood up.

Deringhouse's gaze was at first fixed upon the accordion folds of the draped spacesuit. Then he turned his attention to the enormous spherical helmet and its viewplate. The face behind it was that of Fellmer Lloyd, whom they had considered dead on Terra for 14 days.

He was by no means dead. He grinned shyly at Conrad Deringhouse, as if begging pardon for the peculiar get-up in which he had made his appearance.

From then on things developed with the speed of lightning. His telepathic talent enabled Pucky to determine the whereabouts of the three other missing persons in spite of the darkness and the storm. It only took three teleportation jumps and they were all in safety. Last of all was Perry Rhodan, whom Pucky found lying utterly exhausted in the gummy billows of the red lake.

Conrad Deringhouse wasted no time. As soon as the last of them was on board, he started up the Gazelle. He disregarded the customary precautions and was promptly positioned by the Druufs as the ship rose vertically above the base. Deringhouse had counted on that, it was part of his plan.

The transmitters were in readiness. Perry Rhodan was the first to leave the positioned Gazelle. In the same second he appeared on Hades, still partially dazed. Atlan followed him as the first direct hit by Druuf ray cannons lit up the protective shell of the Gazelle.

Conrad Deringhouse remained at the controls until the very last. The Druufs had perfected their aim. Several volleys were striking the energy fields at once and the instant at which the energy field generators would break down under the constant overload was just a few seconds off.

Deringhouse left the condemned ship five seconds before it received the decisive shot. Just as Deringhouse found himself in a transmitter cage on Hades, the Gazelle exploded from the concentrated fire of Druuf defensive weapons, sending down a shower of glowing metal bits onto the surface of the planet.

* * * *

What followed was like a pleasant dream to Perry Rhodan. He had not been fully conscious when he landed in the transmitter on Hades. They helped him out, lifted him on their shoulders and carried him

through the transmitter hall in a triumphal march. Atlan, Reginald Bell, Fellmer Lloyd, Ras Tschubai, Pucky and Conrad Deringhouse joined in as soon as they got out of their grid cages.

For a few hours the huge cavern on Hades was no advance base in the midst of enemy territory but a witch's cauldron bubbling over with joy.

Two doctors assured Perry Rhodan that he needed rest more than anything else. Rhodan, however, had meanwhile received a concise report from Gen. Deringhouse about the political situation on Earth and now replied to the doctors that while it could well be that he needed his rest, the Earth needed him even more.

Maj. Ostal promptly appeared with the *California* at one of the designated times. A transmitter in the large transmitter hall flashed green. It took barely two minutes and the seven involved in the Roland venture had returned from Hades to the cruiser. The *California* stood ready for transition. Pucky, who was last, had not yet left the transmitter on board the ship when Clyde Ostal began the transition.

Meanwhile the Arkonides had detected that some foreign ship was appearing in the midst of the blockade at irregular intervals, lingering a short while, vanishing again within a split second. A few times they had attempted to determine in advance the point at which the *California* would emerge by a probability calculation and had come dangerously close to Ostal twice in the process.

This time they had miscalculated, otherwise Ostal could not have dared to remain two minutes at the same place. He would have been forced to interrupt the transmissions.

The Arkonides only spotted them as Pucky had already completed the long journey from Hades to the *California*. They arrived much too late.

A few hours later Perry Rhodan landed in the fleet harbour of Terrania. His arrival was kept secret. Nobody except Marshall Freyt and a few high staff officers were informed. Marshall Freyt presented the report that on the morning of the same day the police had dispersed a huge demonstration under the leadership of Lt. Cardif, who had meanwhile been divested of his officer's commission by the fleet. Cardif himself had been arrested.

Perry Rhodan was exhausted from all that he had undergone but no one could tell whether Marshall Freyt's report had affected him. He took note of it and praised Freyt's circumspection. Nobody could have detected by his reaction that it was his son who had been arrested.

All at once Perry Rhodan was anxious to receive medical treatment. He would have to be in top condition mentally and physically when he again presented himself to the public.

He knew that his reappearance signified the end of the domestic crisis. He meditated on this and was dismayed at the realization that the welfare and misery of Earth, of mankind and the Solar Empire, was associated with his person to a much higher degree than he had previously assumed. This he considered wrong.

He decided to handle this differently in the future. In the long run it would be disastrous for mankind to connect its destiny to the existence of one single man. This thought brought him tranquillity at last and he fell asleep.

* * * *

Far away from Terra, in a world that lay in another time plane, a consortium of high officials were shelving the plans they had made to compel the cooperation of the Terranians with their own race.

The most important Terranian, who had already been in their custody, was no longer alive. The commander of a base located far out in space had failed to grasp the significance of the situation and had simply allowed the ship in which the Terranian was attempting to escape to be shot down. Upon his return to Druufon the commander would be charged with incompetence and be degraded.

* * * *

Around 600 million kilometres from the place where the officials were temporarily filing away their plans sat a Tommy—stripped of his rank insignias just because a small, inconspicuous creature had first knocked him down with a metal rod and then removed his spacesuit. He thought about how he should have proceeded in order to have remained in the good graces of the governing aristocracy of Druufon.

As hard as he tried, the Tommy could find no error in his actions. He arrived at the conclusion that someone had betrayed him.

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

CAVES OF THE DRUUPS

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

WORLDSHIP

A gigantic spacer, thousands of years from home, moving majestically through the maw of the universe.

A self-contained world unto itself, pacing through the untravelled spaceways, past unknown worlds living and dead, planets where life is but burgeoning and burned-out worlds where life has become extinct.

And the crew of this cosmic ship?

Slaves!

Flesh-and-blood slaves to metallic-and-electronic robots!

A situation which intensely irritates Pucky... who does something drastic about it in—

SPACESHIP OF ANCESTORS

by

Clark Darlton