



43

BEWARE THE MICROBOTS

by Kurt Mahr

METALLIC MENACE...

The vital structure-compensator has been installed in the Spaceship Titan. Once more its massive bulk contains the most sophisticated destructive weaponry in interplanetary space.

But the toxin-ridden Nonues have wreaked havoc among the crew. And their deadly Ionized Argon has been artificially produced. So Perry Rhodan must return to Honor, and search the treacherous valleys and desolate plains from whence it came. And Honor also harbours the dreaded Microbots...

This is the stirring story of—

BEWARE THE MICROBOTS

THE ACTION AND ADVENTURE HAPPENS WITH

Perry Rhodan—*Chief of the New Power and Commander of the Titan*

Lt. Julian Tifflor—Second Pilot of the *Titan*

Col. Michael Freyt—Commander of the *Ganymede*

Dr. Hayward—*Discoverer of the cause of the 'Nonue Plague'*

Nathan—A Hono (native of planet Honor) who is surprisingly active

Maj. Chaney—*For no reason he finds life 'indescribably beautiful'*

Maj. Deringhouse—Officer of Rhodan's Space Force

Dr. Eric Manoli—Spaceship physician

Capt. Brian, Lts. Hathome & Crimson, Sgt. Dee—*Part of the complement of the Terranian Spacefleet*

The PERRY RHODAN series and characters were
created by Walter Ernsting and Karl-Herbert Scheer.

Series Editor & Translator:

Wendayne Ackerman

English Language Representative

of PERRY RHODAN:

Forrest J Ackerman

Perry Rhodan

BEWARE THE MICROBOTS

by Kurt Mahr

AN ACE BOOK
ACE PUBLISHING CORPORATION
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

BEWARE THE MICROBOTS

Copyright © Ace Books 1973

All Rights Reserved.

Original German Title:

“Rauschgifthändler der Galaxis”

Printed in U.S.A

Contents

1/ TOXIN OF TERROR

page *

2/ TRACK OF THE GODS

page *

3/ GOD TREK

page *

4/ GOD TRAP

page *

5/ INSECTS EXTRAORDINARY

page *

6/ WORLD ANNIHILATION INDICATED

page *

7/ ENTER: THE ARAS

page *

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE NEW POWER'S HISTORY

The rocket Stardust reaches the Moon and Perry Rhodan discovers the shipwrecked research cruiser of the Arkonides.

Establishment of the New Power against the combined resistance of the Big powers on Earth and defence against invasion attempts from outer space.

The New Power intervenes for the first time in the affairs of the Galaxy. Perry Rhodan encounters the Topides in the Vega sector and tries to solve the Galactic Mystery.

Perry Rhodan lands on the planet Wanderer where he & Bell gain a measure of immortality—but they lose more than 4 years.

Perry Rhodan's belated return to Earth and the fight for Venus.

The Mutant Master attacks.

The Springers come to eliminate the potential threat of competition for Galactic trade by Terra.

Perry Rhodan's first contact with Arkon. On mission as agent of the ruling robot brain in the globular cluster M-13.

When a strike-force of 700 men loses the inclination to obey their Commander, even a gigantic fighting machine like the Titan is in serious jeopardy.

To make things worse: the crew infested by the Nonu plague is close to death because the antidote is unknown to human medicine, Only one hope remains: to track down the microbots and extract imperative information.

1/ TOXIN OF TERROR

“A TERRIBLE SITUATION! We’re caught in a terrible situation!” Perry Rhodan said suddenly.

Julian Tifflor, Lieutenant in the Terrestrial Spacefleet, had been studying the panoramic observation screens which encircled the walls of the Command Centre of the great spaceship. There, amidst the glistening multitude of stars in the globular cluster M-13, he had seen faint reflections from the torpedo-shaped hull of the *Ganymede* as it waited motionlessly a few miles away from the Titan. Now his attention swung to his leader.

“We’ve taken a new crew of 800 aboard,” continued Rhodan, “and a structure-compensator which has to be installed. This brings us up to our full complement of 1500—which would make us the most powerful of battleships anywhere if 700 weren’t all sick. There’s an unknown enemy out there who wants to cut our throats. Unless we can find out who or what he is and where we can corner our invisible assailant, we can’t do anything more than shoot down the robot ships sent to attack us.”

Rhodan lifted his head and looked squarely into Tifflor’s eyes. “Tiff, as man to man: what would you do in my place?”

The youthful officer was so surprised that his face fell into the classic expression of amazement: chin nudging his Adam’s apple, mouth agape like an asthmatic during a smog alert. Rhodan—the almighty Rhodan—asking his youngest lieutenant for advice!

Tifflor’s quick mind realized at once that this was not the time to thank his superior for the confidence exhibited in him. Nor was any other polite gesture expected—Rhodan simply wanted a plain answer.

“Our troubles began on Honor,” Tifflor recapped the recent events after a short pause for reflection. “Honor, second planet of the sun Thatrel, 47 light-years from Arkon. Inhabitants Arkonide settlers from an earlier era of expansion, intelligent but primitive and completely apathetic.”

Rhodan listened attentively, as if hearing the history of Honor for the first time. He motioned Tifflor to continue.

“Honor is now off limits for us,” the lieutenant continued. “The entire planet is a veritable spaceship trap where dozens of wrecks already have been decaying for some time. —Why? Because cute little bear-like animals indigenous to the planet

are saturated clean through their fur with nerve poison. The slightest touch by human or humanoid hand is enough to cause infection. The toxin of the harmless-looking nonues makes a man lose his inhibitions and commit excesses to the point of completely ignoring his duty. A man infected by the nonue-poison collapses into a laughing idiot who rejects all food and exhausts himself in a state of euphoria.

“The *Titan* landed on Honor because, on the advice of the Arkonide Thora, this particular world had been chosen for a rendezvous with the *Ganymede*. The crew of the *Titan* fared no better than all the other ships which had the misfortune of landing on Honor. The population was peaceful due to their apathy. The little nonues were so tame and friendly that everybody cuddled them and took them aboard the ship. The disease spread with lightning speed. Only 5 people were spared: you, sir; the Arkonide Khrest; the 2 mutants, Pucky and Sengu; and I.

“At the most critical moment the *Titan* was attacked by another spaceship whose crew consisted of robots. We managed to repulse the attack and you, sir, succeeded in manning the Command Centre in spite of the condition of the stricken men. You started the *Titan* and left Honor.

“Several other alien ships followed us but the five us, surrounded by ecstatic mutineers, were unable to cope with them. We finally called in the *Ganymede* from Earth to help us and the nightmare was quickly ended.

“This is the story, sir. Am I correct?”

Rhodan nodded thoughtfully, a faint smile playing around his lips. “You’re taking a very commendable approach,” he said. “First state the facts and then draw the conclusions. That’s what you want to do, don’t you?”

“Certainly, sir. But I don’t know if...”

“Nonsense! Go ahead!”

Tiff shrugged his shoulders. “Well, then: the whole Honor affair looks like a put-up job. Nobody knows who gave Thora the advice to suggest Honor as a rendezvous but I’m sure she has been under the influence of somebody else—either our foe or his agent.

“The crew of the *Titan* was poisoned according to plan but thanks to the fact that five men remained unaffected the *Titan* didn’t fall victim to the first robot ship. Our opponent realized that his scheme had misfired to some extent and he pursued us with a more powerful squadron which we were unable to defeat by ourselves. Luckily the *Ganymede* arrived in the nick of time.”

He suddenly broke off and looked at Rhodan. Rhodan sensed that he wanted to say something else. “So what do you think?” he challenged Tiff. “What advice would you give me?”

“We’ve never met our adversary face to face. We’ve seen only his robots. For some reason he wants to destroy us. In order to defend ourselves we’ll have to determine where we can lay our hands on him. The only place where he has made his presence felt by his actions is on Honor although we never made direct contact with him. In my opinion there’s nowhere a better place to get on the track of this

enemy than Honor.”

Rhodan remained silently in his chair for awhile. Then he jumped up and Tiff rose at the same moment. Rhodan put his hand firmly on Tiff’s shoulder. “You know, Tiff, a man who normally makes his decisions all alone sometimes feels it is good to hear the opinion of somebody else. Before I listened to you I had my doubts whether it’d be better to seek help from the Arkonides or take matters into our own hands. You’ve helped me to make up my mind.”

Tiff felt happy although his faced looked serious. Rhodan took his hand off Tiffs shoulder and admonished him smilingly, “But don’t tell anybody about this! I’m afraid my authority would suffer.”

Tiff stood at attention. “Of course not, sir!” he said emphatically.

With a wave of his hand Rhodan replied: “Don’t take it so seriously! For now you’ll take over the job of the second pilot until all newcomers have been assigned and adequately trained in their tasks. We’re going to remain right here for the time being. I figure we’ll be able to take off in 8 or 10 days.”

By now Tiff had lost a little of his shyness. “As Second Pilot, sir,” he said with a smile, “shouldn’t I know where to go?”

Rhodan didn’t crack a smile. “Where you have suggested yourself. To Honor, of course.”

* * * *

The *Titan* was a truly gigantic vessel.

Its spherical body measured 5000 feet in diameter—a separate world equipped with all the accomplishments of the most modem war—and space-travel technology of Arkon.

While Rhodan and his young lieutenant held the talk which would remain indelibly in Tiff’s memory, other important work went on a few hundred feet ‘below’ them in one of the medical laboratories where doctors were busy solving the puzzle to which the original 700 men of the *Titan*’s crew had fallen victim.

Dr. Eric Manoli was in charge of the research project. He had returned half a day ago aboard the *Ganymede* from Earth with a number of other doctors and he was certain they could isolate the poison which had put the victims in a state of euphoria.

Farther back against the wall of the spacious laboratory a man had been tied to a chair with his arms and legs so that he was unable to move his body. He sang happily: “...over the ocean, over the sea, when will Matilda be waltzing with me...?”

It seemed to give him the greatest pleasure to mix up the two songs. He tried to rock on the chair and thereby jerked the chair forward.

“Be still, you fool!” Manoli shouted at him.

The man stopped singing and looked at Manoli with a beaming smile. “Why

take it so hard, Doc?" he asked. "Life is beautiful. There's no reason for us to make it difficult."

Manoli lost his temper. "You're making it difficult for me, you idiot!" he yelled at the patient. "When will you come to your senses?"

"Sense?" the man giggled. "I'm sensible. You're the fool!"

The physicians were baffled by the condition from which he and his 699 mates suffered. They had never before observed that type of euphoria on Earth. The affected victims knew no restraint whatsoever and for this reason Manoli and his associates gave the disease the name hyper-euphoria.

They were trying to find the poison. They tested the patient who had been brought in under strict guard and isolated from the others and they also conducted experiments with one of the few nonues who had been kept alive for this purpose.

The little furred animal was locked up in a cage and stared between the bars with big sad but curious and friendly eyes at the men in the white coats. They were careful not to get closer to it than three feet. The whole cute creature was from head to tail only one foot long but they were afraid it could spit and that its saliva contained the potent toxin.

Suddenly a deep calm voice said in the background: "I believe we've got it!"

Dr. Manoli dropped the test tube he held in his hand and spun around. Dr. Hayward, a gigantic figure of a man who had recently joined the medical service of the spacefleet, sat with a jolly grin at his microscope.

"What have you got?" Manoli demanded to know.

"The poison," Hayward replied, pointing to the eyepiece of his microscope.

Manoli rushed to his side with three or four steps. "Let me see!" he panted.

Hayward moved over and Manoli peered through the microscope. "I can't see a thing," he complained. "Is the stuff colourless?"

"Of course," Hayward answered.

"Can't it be dyed?"

"I haven't tried yet."

Manoli looked at him flabbergasted. "Then do it! Or do you think we've got cat's-eyes like you?"

Hayward's calm couldn't be shaken. He removed the microscopic slide and put a drop of blue liquid dye on it. Then he inserted it again into the microscope.

Manoli sighed with relief. "Well, its about time..."

The microscope showed a chain of crystals with a regular 12-cornered cross section.

"Do you have any idea what it is?" Manoli asked without taking his eye off the ocular.

"Yes," Hayward muttered, "some hexylamin, don't you think?"

Manoli nodded vehemently. "Of course. You're right. Do you have enough of the stuff for an exact analysis?"

“I suppose so.”

“Then go ahead and hurry up!”

* * * *

Hayward was a man who preferred to speak slowly and calmly, still he did his work faster than most other people.

The exact analysis of a hexylamin is no simple matter even with Arkonide methods but Hayward finished the job in an hour and a half and went to Manoli.

“Well?” Manoli grunted.

“Do you know something about atomic physics?” Hayward countered.

Manoli frowned. “Listen, Hayward, I wanted you to tell me what...”

“Yes, I know. But to understand it you must know something about atomic physics.”

“Why?”

“Are you familiar with Argon?”

“A noble gas, yes.”

“It can't be made to enter into chemical combination with any substance whatsoever unless it is ionized and kept in the ionized state. This can be accomplished by placing it next to a suitably constructed molecule so that the Argon atom is held by a molecular electron but not neutralized.”

“Ah!” Manoli exclaimed. “And?”

“And? Somebody has done just that with the toxin. It's an Argono-hexylamin, to coin a new word.”

Manoli blinked. “Somebody did it? Do you mean to say...”

“Precisely. Ionized Argon doesn't occur in nature in sufficient quantities. This toxin has been artificially produced.”

* * * *

The result of the analysis could not be questioned. Now that the substance of the poison had been discovered they had no trouble isolating it in ample amounts from the other secretions of the nonues and to conduct further experiments nor was it difficult to extract it from the spinal fluid of the stricken patients.

Hayward's designation Argono-hexylamin was adopted and it received in addition to its chemical description the medical name Argonin because of its unique noble gas ingredient. The process leading from the contamination to the hyper-euphoria was as yet to be determined. However the indisputable fact that Argonin was an artificial product proved to be far more challenging than the curiosity for ascertaining the mode of its effect.

Rhodan was immediately advised of the examination's outcome. He summoned

Hayward and Manoli and obtained a full report. However he was unable to learn what he was most anxious to find out; how did the nonues happen to be infested with this artificial venom?

* * * *

Exactly nine days after the arrival of the *Ganymede* the training of the 800 newcomers was finished and the structure-compensator was installed in the *Titan* so that they were ready to start.

The structure-compensator was a device which had been taken as booty from the Springers, the race of Galactic traders, and duplicated on Earth using the same principle. It produced a field shielding the structure disturbances of the four-dimensional space-time-continuum created by the transition of a vessel. Under normal conditions such disturbances could be tracked hundreds of light-years away but they were intercepted and neutralized by the structure-compensator.

Hence a ship equipped with the compensatory device was completely safe from structure-sensors hyper-rangefinders registering the disturbance caused by a transition—until the time somebody discovered a principle counteracting the effect of the structure-compensator.

The compensator brought in by the *Ganymede* from Earth was originally intended for the use of the Terrestrial Defence Fleet under the command of Maj. Deringhouse. Colonel Freyt, the Commander of the *Ganymede* mentioned several times that Deringhouse surrendered the device only with the greatest reluctance.

Rhodan's announcement that the *Titan* was to return to Honor caused considerable consternation among the new members of the crew. The mishap, which had occurred on Honor, was by now common knowledge. It required some additional explanations on the part of the Commander to alleviate the anxiety among the men. "Now that we know the danger, it has lost its worst terror. We're going to take all precautionary measures when we land on Honor and, most important, we'll have the *Ganymede* as rear protection. On the other hand we must all realize that we can't simply turn our backs on this menace if we want to keep the Earth safe. It would be sure to catch up with us. We must locate the enemy and reason with him or, if that fails, destroy him. We've no other choice. Hence we're forced to return to Honor."

2/ TRACK OF THE GODS

Honor's sun was a small star whose spectrum reached a maximum in the infra-red band. Therefore the light it radiated even in the middle of the day was as red as that of the Earth's sun in the early morning or before sunset.

Honor was a small world of moderate weight with a surface gravitation of 0.7 G. Its mean yearly temperature was 48.5° F according to Arkonide records—this was less than on Earth but much more than on Mars, for instance, with which Honor could best be compared.

Its surface was dry. There were no oceans and only a few lakes but it had mountains with peaks reaching considerable heights.

At the foot of one such massif, whose crest towered above 13,000 feet, the *Titan* had landed near a little lake on that fateful day when its misfortune began.

The *Titan* landed again at the same plate while the *Ganymede* remained in a wide orbit around the planet. The Command Centres of the *Ganymede* and the *Titan* maintained uninterrupted audio-visual contact via telecom.

Rhodan took no more chances.

The natives, the 'Approved People' as they called themselves, were nowhere to be seen. Shortly after the previous landing they had silently squatted down at the shore of the lake and motionlessly stared at the gigantic ship.

Now the *Titan* had been already there for 10 hours and none of the natives had appeared. Did they have a hand in the mystery? Could they be the faithful servants of those strangers they called the Gods?

Rhodan gave his instructions. A search team under Lt. Tifflor was ordered to comb the neighbourhood of the *Titan* in a radius of 50 miles. The rapidity with which the natives had appeared on the scene after the first landing of the *Titan* indicated that there was at least one inhabited place to be found within this radius. Tifflor's group of men took some of the multi-purpose vehicles, which could travel on land, in the water and through the air and were armed with some powerful weapons. Their special objective was to find one of the 'Approved Ones' and to bring him in for a psycho-examination.

A second group under the command of Maj. Chaney was assigned the task of crisscrossing the planet with three long-range reconnaissance crafts of the Gazelle type and to study the physical features of this world. Rhodan felt sure that the unknown enemy was bound to consume a great amount of energy if he had a base

somewhere on the planet and that the sensitive measuring instruments of the Gazelles could easily verify it.

Rhodan took for granted that the enemy, if he stayed on Honur, would harbour no doubts about the intentions of the *Titan*, provided he was endowed with human or humanoid mentality. He was likely to consider the search action as a provocation and to retaliate without delay.

Attacks on the 2 search teams and the *Titan* could be expected to take place any moment. Additional Gazelles stood ready to take off to go to Tiffmor's or Chaney's aid in case they were in distress. The *Ganymede* was also in a state of continual alarm. Chaney and Tiffmor were advised to keep in touch via telecom at all times.

Everything had been done that was humanly possible.

* * * *

Julian Tiffmor performed his duty with an enthusiasm only a young officer could muster. His team consisted of four amphicarplanes. The vehicles glided close above the ground along a high narrow valley. Tiff had arranged for the telecom connection with the *Titan* to be taken over by another vehicle every hour.

Each amphicarplane was occupied by five men who were equipped with compressor masks which were required outside the protected vehicle due to the insufficient oxygen content of the air. The masks dangled under their chins and could be fastened with switched-on compressors by a twist of the hand.

2 hours had elapsed since they debarked from the *Titan*. Tiff saw to it that the vehicles advanced with moderate speed and were held close to the ground.

The mountains looked desolate. Tiff followed the little creek coming down from the mountains and feeding the lake at the base of the cliffs. A 600-foot-wide strip with peculiar prairie plants ran through the valley to the sides of the naked rocks forming virtually vertical walls and rising thousands of feet up to the top of the mountains.

The reddish light of the sun didn't penetrate very deep. Down where Tiff's four vehicles cautiously wended their way it was semi-dark, which was another reason Tiff proceeded slowly with the search.

* * * *

Maj. Chaney made the mistake of treating his mission as a routine flight, which it would have been under normal circumstances—anywhere else. He considered it strictly as a reconnaissance flight to get the feel of the physical and geographic features of the land.

The crews of the Gazelles had little to do. The synchronized automatic pilot kept the vehicles at a constant altitude of 100,000 feet and changed the course as they circled above the planet. The measuring instruments were designed to record

everything without requiring their attendance.

In his morose mood Chaney questioned the wisdom of sending him on this mission that could have been carried out in an unmanned flight by remote-controlled steering, forgetting that the synchromatic was incapable of conducting such difficult operations as air battles.

On the other hand this was understandable. In the two hours the flight had already lasted the instruments registered not even a settlement of the natives let alone the base of an opponent who could have fighter planes at his disposal.

* * * *

“Damn it, just when I’m beginning to think we get some light, the sun goes down!” Sgt. O’Keefe narrowed his eyes and stared at the pilot screen where the walls of the valley retreated to both sides and a high plain spreading out before them was barely visible.

In the background to the right the murky red circle of the sun Thatrel had already half-disappeared below the horizon.

It was the turn of the carplane in which Lt. Tiffdor rode to maintain communications with the *Titan*. It was steered by O’Keefe, who lamented the fading light.

“We’re approaching an unobstructed mountain plain,” Tiff reported to the officer on duty. “Request instructions whether to continue the search during the night.”

“The Chief said no,” the officer replied. “You’re to stop at a safe place and wait till dawn.”

“Very well, sir!”

Tiff considered it inadvisable to leave the valley. He made O’Keefe move the vehicle to the southern wall of the valley and take cover beneath the cliffs. The other vehicles followed his lead.

Watches were set up. The hum of the antigrav-motors faded and calm spread inside the carplanes.

Julian Tiffdor had picked one of the intermediate watches. Contrary to his custom he was wide-awake when his predecessor called him to change watches. “Anything unusual?” he whispered.

“No, sir. All quiet.”

Tiff slid down from the seat on which he had stretched out and made room for the first guard. He went up front to the pilot seat and slouched in its soft contours.

The observation screen showed the exit of the mountain valley in the bright shine of the countless stars radiating from the enormous globular cluster. The light was better than on a night with the full moon shining on Earth. Tiff was able to see clearly at least 600 feet away.

One of the telecom sets was in service. The green control lamp glowed

comfortingly in the semi-darkness. Carplane #4 kept in contact with the *Titan* at this hour but carplane #1 was ready to take over the communication at any moment.

Tiff was satisfied that everything was in order. After 15 uneventful minutes he poured himself a cup of coffee which had been prepared by the man on duty before him and took a sip. While getting his coffee he had averted his glance from the observation screen for a few seconds. When he put down his cup and looked again at the screen, the picture had changed.

The tall spindly figure of a native stood out against the star-studded sky. Tiff saw the stranger raise his arm and wave. After a minute he repeated the gesture.

Without looking, Tiff flicked the switch of the telecom. A second screen lit up. "Get off the line!" Tiff ordered. "I've got to call the *Titan*."

The picture flickered for a second and became clear again. It was Capt. Brian aboard the *Titan*.

"I've got something for you," Tiff announced and transmitted his observation to Brian's screen.

"Why is he waving?"

"He's been doing that ever since he appeared, sir. He probably wants us to come out."

Brian looked up. Tiff disconnected his observation screen so that the captain saw his face again.

"Of course you're not going to do it"

Tiff smiled. "Is that an order or good advice, sir?"

Capt. Brian hesitated. "Why, it's an advice of course. Do you know a better way?"

"I could go out..."

"...and get yourself poisoned?"

"To begin with I'd put on a spacesuit for protection and secondly I don't have any intention of getting so close to the man that I can reach him or his nonues with my hand. And thirdly I've got 19 men to back me up who'll keep a sharp eye on me."

Brian scratched his head. "You know," he growled, "the Chief wants me to let you have a free hand. If you promise to be as careful as possible I don't want to talk you out of it. But look out! That codger might have another 100 men with him hiding behind the rocks."

"I'll watch myself, sir," Tiff promised.

"O.K. Relay the picture again! That'll be all."

The men in car #1 had been awakened by the conversation. They sat up on the benches and stared at the observation screen.

"What did he do in the meantime?" Tiff inquired. While talking to Brian he'd had no time to watch the native.

"He's raising his hand each minute and waves," O'Keefe reported.

Tiff slipped into his protective suit. The elastic covering was made of an especially tough plastic material. Since it had been designed to withstand cosmic dust particles up to a certain size, it should be able to protect him from the touch of a nonue or even the native himself. "O'Keefe, warn the other vehicles! Order state of alarm #III"

Before Tiff had closed his suit the crews reported back. Twenty men were alerted. Tiff felt reassured. He removed the compressor mask since his suit had its own oxygen supply. Before locking his helmet he told O'Keefe: "Keep in touch with me! Don't do anything without my instructions!"

Then he flipped the spherical helmet with the wide faceplate, the circular grid of the outer mike and the small cone of the amplifier, over his head.

A corporal opened the hatch and Tiff stepped outside. He saw the native raising his hand to wave again. When he saw Tiff's figure emerge from the shadow of the carplane and the mountain wall, he dropped his hand and waited motionlessly.

Tiff slowly walked toward him, casually carrying his impulse-beamer in his right hand.

* * * *

"The radar set is out of order, sir," Sgt. Dee complained. "It's making double images."

Maj. Chaney was a radar expert. He unfastened himself and shuffled across the room to Dee. Wordlessly Dee pointed to the oscilloscope of the Gazelle. Normally the screen showed the transmitted impulse and below it the smaller reflected blip. The distance between the grid lines was a measurement of the distance between the sender and the reflector, in this case, the surface of Honor.

What Chaney saw, however, and what worried Dee, was a third tiny impulse visible below the reflected blip. Chaney turned a few knobs. The impulse dots faded but each time they appeared again the little blip was also present, causing Dee to conclude that the radar wasn't functioning properly.

Maj. Chaney called the other Gazelles. Their oscillographs showed the same picture and the observers had drawn the same conclusions about their instruments as Sgt. Dee.

"Something's wrong," Chaney murmured rather confused. "The third impulse is genuine. Is the oscilloscope still on?"

"As always, sir."

"Good, then we can..."

He didn't get a chance to say what they could do. A terrible jolt knocked Chaney and all those who weren't fastened to their seats off their feet and hurled them to the floor. The shrill whine of the alarm signal started up the same instant.

The men screamed in surprise. Dazed, Chaney pulled himself up, grabbing the back of a chair. He felt a peculiar light sensation in his stomach and realized the

same moment that the neutralizers had stopped functioning.

Chaney saw the lighted indicator of the altitude meter sinking rapidly. He crawled back to the telecom as quickly as he could and saw Capt. Brian's troubled face on the screen.

"We're going to crash!" Chaney shouted above the din of the alarm sirens. "I guess we're caught in a tractor beam."

"We've got your position," Brian replied. "Try to pull your machines out of the dive. We'll be with you in a few minutes."

Brian disappeared from the videoscreen and Chaney eased himself into the pilot seat. With great determination he shoved up the thrust lever of the engines as far as it would go.

A second jolt shook the Gazelle. The fall was braked. Chaney glanced at the altimeter and saw he was still losing height but no worse than in a steep downward glide. His face broke into a grim smile.

It took a few seconds to send the message to the other machines. They all pulled out of the dive at 20,000 feet and went down to the ground in a flat curve.

Suddenly Chaney had an idea. The telecom screen still showed the empty place of the officer on duty in the Command Centre of the *Titan*. Chaney pressed the alarm buzzer till Capt. Brian showed up again. "A suggestion, Captain!" Chaney panted. "Call back your men! We've pulled out and will manage to make a fair landing. I think our enemy will come to inspect what he shot down. Your people would only drive him away."

Brian agreed at once. "Alright, sir. I'll hold the men back and wait till you've landed. If you land smoothly we won't come to help you."

"Thank you!"

Chaney turned to his men. "Fasten your seat belts and pull in your necks! You might get a big bang."

Lt. Hathome, pilot of machine G-021 called, "I'm going to touch down, sir. The terrain looks quite favourable."

"Good luck, Hathome!"

The G-021 was the last machine to pull out of the plunge. Hathome was therefore the first to approach the ground.

Chaney took a last look at his radar relief profile. Hathome was right: the terrain was the best a pilot could wish for a crash-landing. Flat as a pan. Around the edges of the picture the landscape was highly uneven. Probably mountains of considerable height. The area directly below the three Gazelles seemed to be a high plain.

The G-021 appeared as a little bright blip on the radar screen. Chaney watched as its movement suddenly slowed down and its direction changed. From the receiver still tuned in to the G-021 came a resounding roar, the screeching of tearing metal and finally a thunderous crash. Then everything was quiet.

"Hathome?"

No answer.

“Hathome...?”

Finally a weak voice, “Yes, yes-sir...?”

“Did you all make it?”

“I think so, sir. Yes, they’re back on their feet again.”

Chaney’s attention was diverted. His altimeter showed only 500 feet. The G-020 was about to hit the ground together with the G-022. He braced himself firmly against the pilot console. When the altimeter almost reached zero he blasted the last bit of energy out of the forejets to brake his speed.

A violent blow struck the machine. Chaney saw that the radarscope began to rotate and that the blurred shadows on the observation screen bounced wildly around. An infernal noise drowned out the moaning of his men. Chaney held his breath till the final crash came, which meant that the G-020 had run into an obstacle and that its momentum had been stopped.

Chaney’s head hit a hard object and he was knocked out for a few moments. When he came to again it was still around him except for some scratching noises made by the men trying to get back on their feet.

“Everybody here?” Chaney asked.

They answered with a loud “Yes!” out of pure joy that they had got away with their lives.

It was dark inside the Gazelle. The power generators had quit working, putting the transmitter out of commission as well. The telecom screen was blank.

“Let’s get out of here!” Chaney bellowed. “But keep under cover of the machine!”

They snapped the helmets of their protective suits shut and climbed out. The hatch worked perfectly since it was connected to its own emergency power supply, being the only exit and entrance to the ship.

Chaney waited quietly till the noise from the mikes abated and then called over the helmet radio: “Hathome? Crimson?”

Hathome reported at once but from the G-022 came the answer: “Lt. Crimson is unconscious, sir. This is Sgt. Halligan speaking.”

“How many of you have been hurt, Halligan?”

“Two, sir.”

“Alright! Hathome, this goes for you too! Take your weapons and leave your ships. We’ll be hiding under our machine. Don’t use your searchlights—and hurry up!”

Hathome and Halligan got the message and Chaney signed off. He picked up the heavy disintegrator from the floor. It had scooted across the room under the strong impact and put a big dent into a console. Then he too left through the hatch.

Outside the view was brighter than it had appeared to Chaney when he last looked at the observation screen. The M13’s voluminous mass of stars covered the northern firmament like a huge bunch of grapes and cast a light of considerable

magnitude.

Chaney's men crouched in the shadow of the machine, which was shaped like an ellipsoid. They held their weapons at the ready and stared out into the semi-darkness.

As they waited Chaney tried to guess what action the *Titan* would take. All communication was lost since the emergency landing. If Chaney could have given his advice to Capt. Brian he would have recommended leaving the other Gazelles on board if he didn't want to come with the *Titan* itself. The suction effect of the field produced by their unseen enemies were so strong the best efforts of the Gazelles' engines were no match for it. If Brian's rescue team used the same reconnaissance crafts they would fare no better than the three machines, G-020, 021 and 022.

Unfortunately the telecom was inoperable and Chaney had no way of informing the *Titan* of his experiences.

While he racked his brain about this his helmet receiver clicked and he heard Halligan's voice: "We can see your machine from here, sir. We'll be with you in 15 minutes."

"Alright," Chaney muttered. "What do you hear from Hathome?"

"Nothing so far, sir."

However Hathome soon called in from a greater distance. "We're just passing Crimson's machine. We should be there in about half an hour."

Chaney peered anxiously into the distance. He didn't expect the machines to come down so far apart. A lot of things could happen in half an hour and 15 minutes had already elapsed since the crash-landing.

But for the present he could see nothing that looked suspicious. There was little Chaney could do except urge Hathome and Halligan again to speed up.

* * * *

Tiff stopped at a distance of 30 feet from the skinny figure. "What do you want?" he inquired, using the Arkonide language.

The Approved People—or Honos as the crew of the *Titan* had baptized them—spoke a variation of the Arkonide language.

The lean figure started to move. When Tiff saw that the Hono wanted to walk toward him, he called: "Stay where you are and tell me what you want!"

The Hono complied obediently and answered: "I'd like to show you something." His voice sounded ridiculously high and thin in the oxygen-poor atmosphere.

"Like what?" Tiff demanded. "Do you have some more nonues for us to pat so we can get poisoned too?"

"You shouldn't talk so nasty about our nonues," the Hono quickly replied. "They're very friendly and we can't live without them. No, there's something else

I want to show you—a track of the Gods.”

Tiff laughed. “Since when do your Gods leave tracks?”

To be truthful Tiff was not in a very scornful mood. Perry Rhodan was convinced that the mysterious Gods of the Honos were somehow connected with his invisible enemies. The offer would have sounded very tempting to Tiff if he hadn’t learned already that a real Hono would never think of betraying his Gods even if they were so careless as to leave a trail behind.

The man was obviously putting on an act and he did it with so much insistence as to be incompatible with the nature of a Hono. Tiff was convinced that the unknown foe was setting a trap for him and he tried to gain time. “Why do you want to put us on the trail of the Gods?” he queried.

The Hono raised both arms in an explanatory gesture. This was unusual too because gestures meant physical efforts, which the Honos strictly avoided.

“I belong to a clan that is considered less pure by the others,” he explained. “We’re virtual outcasts and shun all relations with the Approved ones. When we learned what happened to you we wanted to help you.”

“And what guarantee do I have that you aren’t leading us into a trap?”

The Hono took his time before answering. “Why would I do that?” he finally asked. “You’re so much stronger than we are and you can kill me any time you become suspicious. I’d be very foolish to expose myself to such a danger.”

Tiff had made his decision. “How do you want to lead us?” he asked. “Do you want to walk ahead of our vehicles?”

“Yes, unless you let me ride with you.”

Tiff shook his head. “We can’t do that. You’ve been in contact with the nonues and you’d contaminate our men.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Then you’re willing to show us the way on foot?”

“Yes.”

“Do the Approved People have any villages around here?”

“They did but they’re all abandoned now.”

Tiff was puzzled. “Abandoned?”

“Yes. The Approved Ones have left their villages and moved into the mountains.”

“Why did they do that?”

“I don’t know. We didn’t see them leave. They were suddenly gone.”

Tiff was reasonably sure what caused the exodus of the natives—it must have been the will of the Gods. Their hidden enemy knew as well as Perry Rhodan that the men from the *Titan* only had to capture one of the natives and to question him with his effective methods to get too close for comfort.

Tiff believed that the latest clue was very significant. He assured the Hono that his 4 vehicles would follow him and he returned to his carplane.

The first thing he saw when he got back in was Brian's worried face on the telecom screen. "Disconnect your obscreen," Brian ordered. "We're having serious trouble."

Tiff severed the connection to the outside picture so that Capt. Brian was able to see him.

"Chaney, Crimson and Hathome have been forced down with their Gazelles," Brian blurted out. "We've lost contact with them after they crash-landed. The area where they crashed is about 100 miles north-northeast of the spot where you are. The Chief wants you to go and look for these Gazelles. It would be useless to send other machines after them because they'd suffer the same fate."

Tiff tossed his helmet back and scratched his head. In a few words he told Capt. Brian about his conversation with the Hono. Brian understood quickly what was on Tiff's mind and waved his hand in a rejecting gesture. "If you think the Chief is going to dispatch a third reconnaissance team you're badly mistaken," Lieutenant," he interrupted Tiff's report. "We need all our men on board. The only way you can do it is by dividing your group. One detachment can follow the Hono and the other can search for Chaney and his men."

Tiff looked disappointed. "Who the devil gave you such an idea, sir?" he exclaimed, forgetting all respect. "4 units is the absolute minimum for staying alive in this land."

Brian agreed. "I know. I leave it up to you. You can let the Hono go and take all your vehicles to rescue Chaney."

Tiff sighed. "Tell the Chief that his orders will be carried out," he said finally.

Brian grinned. "OK. Keep in touch by telecom."

Tiff assigned carplane #4 to take over the connection. Then he vacated the pilot seat for Sgt. O'Keefe and instructed him to follow the Hono.

O'Keefe looked dubiously at Tiff but Tiff knew what he wanted. "First let's get out of this valley and onto the plain. Then we can see from there. If the Hono happens to march north-northeast we won't have to fret about it. Right?"

O'Keefe's face lit up with a broad grin. "Right, sir!" he acknowledged.

The engines started to whir and O'Keefe carefully swung the carplane out of the mountain wall's shadow toward the waiting Hono. Tiff looked back to make sure the other vehicles followed in regular formation.

3/ GOD TREK

Maj. Chaney clearly realized that for the next few hours his survival depended solely on his own resources. He knew better than Rhodan that all other Gazelles would have become casualties like the three stranded in the wilderness due to the extraordinary power of the tractor beam.

Crimson and Hathome's groups had reached machine #020 in the meantime. Crimson had already recovered and he continued on the second half of the way under his own power.

Chaney had now been joined again by his full complement of 35 men, each of whom was well-armed. He was certain he could repulse any open attack unless, of course, his 35 men would face an entire army.

Furthermore his men wore protective spacesuits making them invulnerable from a horde of nonues.

Hours went by and the murky dark-red of the morning began to tinge the mountain peaks in the southwest.

When the red sun rose over the wall of the valley, Chaney was convinced that further waiting would be a waste of time. If the enemy had failed to show up so far, it had to be assumed that he was satisfied with bringing the machines down and that he was not interested in knowing whom he had forced to crash. Or else he realized that he would be unable to confront them—with superior fighting strength.

Consequently Chaney ordered his troop to march back to the *Titan*. He knew that the ship was located about 200 miles in a south-southwesterly direction.

However marching straight into that direction from the place where the G-020 had come to rest was out of the question. The valley stretched almost exactly from west to east and the cliffs jutted up so steeply that Chaney couldn't ask his men to attempt the climb despite the low gravity. He hoped that they would soon come to the end of the valley or that it would somewhere branch off to the south.

On the western route they passed by the wrecks of the two machines G-021 and 022. Chaney ignored the whispered remarks of his men who scoffed they could have stayed right there if they had known better. More important was the inspection which established that the two machines were as badly damaged as Chaney's own and that the telecom sets were also unusable.

After marching a few hours, the sun crept over the ridge of the mountains and

shone down into the deep valley, raising the temperature so high that they had to switch on the climate control of their spacesuits.

Chaney looked for a suitable spot to take a rest. He discovered a cave in the northern wall and sent two men to examine it, who reported it to be safe and adequate.

When Chaney opened his mouth to tell his men to head for the cave, Sgt. Dee suddenly shouted: “Hey... look at that! Isn’t it great?”

He had stopped and pointed with his outstretched arm into the valley. Chaney looked in the indicated direction but was unable to see anything out of the ordinary, let alone something great. “What are you looking at?” he asked Dee.

Dee raised his other arm too and clapped his gloved hands, making a loud noise in their helmet radios. “Wonderful!” he shouted in utter delight. “Magnificent! Simply precious!”

Chaney became angry. “What the hell is so magnificent and precious? Answer me, Sergeant, when I ask you a question!”

Dee was still clapping his hands. “Why be so rude, Chaney?” he laughed. “I’m only having fun!”

Chaney lost his composure. Before he got hold of himself Lt. Crimson broke in, guffawing. “He’s right, Chaney. Why not let him have his fun?”

Chaney spun around and stared at Crimson. Suddenly it dawned on him. “Quick, to the cave!” he shouted with a cracking voice. “Hathome, Halligan! Help me get these 2 fools to the cave!”

Hathome and Halligan were already off. They returned and helped Maj. Chaney escort Dee and Crimson to the cave. The two offered no resistance. They laughed and poked fun at people who took life so awfully seriously.

Chaney, his helpers and the 2 who had blown their minds—as Sgt. Halligan expressed it—reached the entrance to the cave unmolested. The other 30 crouched along the walls and 5 of them took up positions at the entrance and covered Chaney’s retreat with raised weapons.

Chaney put Dee and Crimson in a rear corner of the cave where they were well guarded. Then he took time out to examine himself for symptoms that he too would in a few more minutes regard the whole world as beautiful and life as one great lark.

No, all seemed normal.

Hathome, who stood next to him, had apparently noticed that Chaney was absorbed in himself and asked: “Are you alright, sir?”

Chaney looked at him—half-angry and half-amused. “Don’t you start grinning! Or do you also feel that life is a ball?”

Hathome shook his head. “Not at all, sir!” he answered emphatically and Chaney was pleased.

Then he stretched out on the floor behind the entrance of the cave and stared out into the valley. What possessed Dee and Crimson?

Mulling over this question lead him straight to the problem of what protection this cave offered if they got into more serious trouble. Hence it was essential to find out how Dee and Crimson had become infected and Chaney was thus again at the beginning of his train of thoughts.

He kept a sharp lookout on the valley and tried to detect where the danger lurked but he saw absolutely nothing.

Chaney was engrossed in his thoughts. The sun moved onto the northern edge of the valley. It passed beyond the crest of the cliffs and cast a shadow on the entrance to the cave. Chaney had the impression that he had dozed off for a little while when suddenly he was startled by the excited voice of one of his men: "Somebody is coming!"

Chaney raised himself up. The man next to him pointed his hand out of the cave toward the east. Chaney looked down the valley and discerned three tall spindly figures coming around a rock and walking toward the cave. Loose colourful capes were draped around their slim shoulders. Honos!

Chaney was wide-awake and he quickly ordered: "Be ready to shoot!"

Not that he was afraid of three Honos but there could be more of them hiding in the neighbourhood and waiting for a chance to ambush them. The three the sentry had made out kept coming closer to the cave. They acted as if they knew somebody was hiding inside.

* * * *

"Whose spacesuit is this?" Tiff inquired.

O'Keefe turned around and furrowed his brow. "It's yours, sir."

Tiff was taken aback and then began to laugh. "Oh! Where did I get this hole?"

O'Keefe relinquished the steering to another man and got up. The hole in the back of the heavy suit was tiny but clearly visible on the smooth surface.

Tiff took the suit off the bracket and turned it inside out. The hole had failed to penetrate completely through the plastic material. "Hm... something has pricked me but the pin wasn't strong enough," Tiff surmised.

O'Keefe looked dubious. "Isn't it possible, sir, that this flaw could've been overlooked aboard the *Titan* and...?"

"The inspection instruments would've detected a hole a hundred times smaller than this one," Tiff replied with a disparaging gesture. "No, the suit would've been rejected aboard if the hole had been made before."

O'Keefe took a deep breath. "That means..."

"That means," Tiff gravely finished his sentence, "that something has tried to sting me while I was talking to the Hono."

O'Keefe scratched his head. "You ought to question him about this, sir!" he suggested.

"Why? So he'll play dumb if he had something to do with it or becomes

insulted if it's not his fault? No. We'll simply keep following him and see what he's up to."

O'Keefe muttered under his breath and returned to his seat. He took over the steering of the carplane from the man who had relieved him and kept on the heels of the Hono marching with a long stride at the head of their vehicle column.

The sun had risen long ago. The Hono had turned northeast on the high plain and Tiff had decided against splitting his group since the direction in which the Hono was leading them was more or less the same where Chaney and his 3 Gazelles had made their emergency landing.

The high plain was even more desolate than the valley through which they had come on their way from the *Titan*. It was virtually flat and other than some huge boulder which the wind seemed to have blown down from the distant mountains nothing rose above three feet. The ground was almost solid except for some small fissures. No plants thrived anywhere. The only thing that moved was the wind howling monotonously across the wide plain.

Tiff took a reading of the outside temperature. It was 125° F. The rock seemed to be boiling hot and it would be just the opposite at night. He had to admire the Hono who proceeded on his way at a steady pace without being bothered by the oppressive heat.

O'Keefe was baffled when the lean man suddenly vanished as if the ground had swallowed him up. The sergeant skidded to a stop. "Confound it! Where did he go?"

The Hono was gone.

"Where did you see him last?" Tiff asked after checking the observation screen, which showed no trace of the Hono.

"Over there! About 50 feet to the right of... ah, he's back!"

The thin man shot out of the rock like a cork out of a champagne bottle. He stopped and waved, presenting a rather comical picture.

"See what he wants!" Tiff ordered.

O'Keefe started up again. As he got closer he noticed a dark crack which began behind the Hono and extended through the rocky ground to the horizon.

"He's not going to lure us into that crack," O'Keefe muttered. "Our cars couldn't even fit into it."

Tiff didn't listen to him. He tried to understand the gestures of the Hono. He pointed alternately to himself and to the ground, then to the carplane and finally toward northeast, while lowering his hand at the same time.

"If I understand him right," Tiff surmised, "he wants to climb down into the crack and we are supposed to continue on the plain and join him later on. The crack is probably wide enough farther ahead so that we can get inside."

O'Keefe steered the carplane past the Hono and alongside the cleft. Tiff saw that the Hono made an affirmative gesture and disappeared again in the crack. "It's correct," he told O'Keefe. "Keep going!"

To their surprise the insignificant fissure widened into a regular valley after a few miles. The floor of the valley lay 600 feet below the level of the plain and dipped down toward northeast.

O'Keefe stopped the carplane at the rim of the valley and used his tracking instruments to search for the Hono.

He finally detected him almost abreast of the vehicle column. "By golly," O'Keefe grunted, "that guy must have been running to beat the band!"

The picture screen clearly showed that the Hono was looking upward. When he saw the carplane edging over the rim he waved his arms, gesticulating more violently than the apathetic Approved People possibly could have done.

O'Keefe turned around. "Shall I?"

Tiff gave him a nod. "But slowly and carefully."

O'Keefe gingerly manipulated the carplane into the thin air over the gorge. He hovered for a while without moving and slowly descended into the gorge. The other carplanes followed quickly, keeping their customary distance in free flight.

A few minutes later, O'Keefe paused a couple of feet above the floor of the valley where the Hono waited and motioned him anew to follow his lead. O'Keefe set out again without waiting for Tiff's instructions.

Half an hour later the ravine took a sharp turn to the north. The Hono rounded the corner and continued in the northern direction for a few more hours.

Meanwhile the sun wandered across the zenith and the western wall of the ravine soon cast long dark shadows.

When they came to the next bend where the canyon turned east the Hono stopped at a corner and looked back at the vehicles. He pointed both hands to the ground and sat down.

O'Keefe advanced within 30 feet of the Hono. In doing so the right hand wall shifted to the side of the observation screen, opening up a wider view. O'Keefe was too busy steering the vehicle to see what was behind the corner.

But Tiff had kept his eyes wide open and he noticed the narrow split in the opposite wall and the little trickle of water flowing from it. The water quickly oozed away in the porous stony bottom. There was a little patch of sparse vegetation fed by the water and a few ramshackle houses close to the wall.

"Stop!" Tiff shouted, startling O'Keefe, who quickly turned off the engine. "What's the matter?"

Tiff pointed to the observation screen. "There!"

O'Keefe whistled low through his teeth when he saw the little village. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "The secret town in the mountains!"

"Appears to be empty," Tiff commented.

"Sure looks like it. But the Hono told us before that the Approved Ones have fled from here."

"I'm going to take a look," Tiff announced and O'Keefe murmured: "You better take a suit without a hole this time!"

Tiff got out and walked to the Hono who sat motionlessly on a stone, his head bent down. Tiff stopped 10 feet from him and called, "Hey!"

The Hono shuddered and looked up as if he had fallen asleep.

"I know you're tired," Tiff said, "but I'd like to know why you've brought us here."

"Because I wanted to show you the trail of the Gods," the Hono replied.

"So?"

"It begins here."

"Where?"

"Over there at the huts."

"Show me where it is!"

The Hono made a declining gesture. "Not now. The light is almost gone and I'm too tired."

Tiff gave up. "Where are you going to sleep?" he asked.

"Right here."

"Why don't you sleep in one of the huts over there? You'd be much more comfortable."

The Hono stared at Tiff as if he doubted his sanity. "Over there? Where the Gods have driven out the Approved? I'd rather not sleep at all!"

Tiff shrugged his shoulders. "Suit yourself. I wish you a good night."

"Thank you, the same to you!"

Tiff turned around to return to the car. At the same moment he felt a sharp sting in his shoulder. He spun quickly around but no matter how much he strained his eyes in the twilight of the early evening all he could see was the Hono, sitting quietly on his stone, the rocks scattered in the ravine and the row of houses against the opposite wall.

Nonetheless he was sure he would find a tiny hole in the shoulder of his spacesuit when he inspected it after his return to the carplane and he rushed to get back inside.

* * * *

The 3 Honos still stood 30 feet from the entrance to the cave. Chaney switched on his helmet radio so that his voice could be heard outside through the loudspeaker. "What do you want?" he asked in Arkonide: "Kovala?"

"We've heard that you've crashed here," one of the three replied, "and we thought you need help."

"That's very decent of you," Hathome murmured but Chaney asked: "How do you want to help us?"

The Hono answered: "We can show you a place where the walls of this valley are less steep than here or we could..."

He hesitated, rousing Chaney's curiosity. "You could what?"

The Hono thought a moment and then said: "We could show you the trail of the Gods."

"The Gods?"

"Yes. You're trying to find them, aren't you?"

Chaney was aware that the Gods existed in the mythology of the Approved People and that Rhodan was convinced that these Gods were responsible for the Argonin. "How did you learn about that?" he inquired.

The Hono explained that he had heard it from the Approved who had left their villages and that he was not one of them but an outcast and that he had discovered a track of the Gods.

Chaney quickly made up his mind and told the Honos to wait a minute. Then he instructed four of his men to leave the cave and to stand 30 feet away from the entrance.

Nothing happened. The men after 10 minutes were still just as sound of mind as inside the cave. The scourge that had struck Crimson and Dee seemed to have left the valley or made a pause.

Chaney got up. "Alright," he said to the Honos. "We'll go with you."

"We've got to follow the valley to the west," one of them explained. "We won't get very far today but tomorrow morning..."

"Don't let the darkness hold you back," Chaney interrupted. "We've got good lamps and if you aren't too tired we can march all night."

Chaney had expected the Honos to decline his suggestion. The outcasts seemed to act quite differently from the Approved in many respects. They completely lacked their apathy and disinterest.

The Honos agreed. "So much the better. We'll get there that much sooner."

Chaney wondered why the Honos were so anxious to show the trail of the Gods to total strangers.

He ordered his men to leave the cave and to follow the three Honos who had already started out on the trek to the west. The valley would be completely dark in one hour at the latest and they held their searchlights ready.

In spite of the rough ground they made good headway. The 3 Honos moved nimbly forward on their long legs and the reduced gravitation enabled the Earthlings to maintain a pace they could not have kept up for half an hour on Terra.

Chaney estimated that they covered about 7 miles an hour. They forgot all about their fatigue the minute the Honos had hinted at the trail of the Gods.

Three-quarters of the night were gone when the Honos suddenly stopped and waited for Chaney and his men to catch up.

"What's the matter?" Chaney asked.

"We're close to our goal," one of the Honos replied.

"What do you mean by goal?" Chaney demanded.

“A deserted village where the track begins.”

“I see. Then let’s go on!”

The Hono hesitated. “I... we...” he stuttered.

Chaney was overly tired. He was nervous without realizing it. “What’s there to stutter about? Take us to the village!”

“The Gods will punish us!”

Chaney smiled grimly. “The Gods! I thought you didn’t believe in them.”

“Not the way the Approved People do,” the Hono admitted. “But they’re mighty beyond a doubt.”

“We’ll protect you from them,” Chaney promised. “Now go on!”

“Protect us? Can you really do it?”

Chaney thought he could detect a little scorn in the question and he decided to watch his step. “I believe so,” he retorted. “At least we’re going to try it to the best of our ability.”

The Hono, was visibly pleased. “Then we’re agreeable. We’ll hide behind your backs if the Gods try to do something to us.”

And so the trek continued.

4/ GOD TREK

Tiff was rudely awakened from his sleep, as he was shaken hard by the shoulder. He bounced up and saw O'Keefe's worried face leaning over him, in the darkened carplane.

"Something's coming out there," O'Keefe reported.

Tiff got on his feet. Still drowsy he squeezed between the benches and the sleeping men to the pilot seat

The gorge was an eerie sight on the obscreen. The starlight reached only halfway down the cliffs. Everything below the faint reflection on the walls lay in deep darkness with the exception of a narrow trace of light illuminating a strip of the valley floor.

Tiff had to concentrate for awhile before he knew what O'Keefe was talking about. When he was able to penetrate the darkness he discerned a small glimmering spot near the corner where the gorge turned east. Tiff noticed that the spot changed its brightness and that it didn't remain still. "What do you make of it?" he asked O'Keefe.

O'Keefe muttered: "Looks like a distant searchlight behind the corner."

"Right, but who'd be roaming in this neighbourhood with a searchlight?"

Before O'Keefe could reply another thought suddenly occurred to Tiff and he added: "Wait a minute! How far are we from the place where Chaney cracked up his Gazelles?"

O'Keefe nodded in approval. "That's just what I was going to say, sir. It could be Maj. Chaney with his men."

"Good. Let's see if we can pick up their conversation with our antenna. If it's Chaney and his men they'll probably be talking to each other on the radio of their spacesuits."

O'Keefe extended the antenna of the extremely sensitive listening device for the whole spectrum of radio waves and as soon as he turned it on the loudspeaker blared: "He says the village is at the bend. Halligan! Keep your eyes open!"

And Halligan called back: "Yes, sir! I'm looking."

O'Keefe began to groan. "No!" he gasped. "What did I do wrong to deserve this? It's Halligan, the old cannibal!"

The love-hate relationship between the two sergeants, Halligan and O'Keefe, was a famous topic in the Terranian Space Fleet. They couldn't sit down to play

poker without getting into each other's hair. On the other hand they had fought shoulder to shoulder on Venus with comparatively primitive weapons and they had held Gen. Tomisenkow's hordes at bay for 3 hours until reinforcements came and the enemies could be taken prisoners.

Tiff was delighted and he sent a code signal that could be received by Chaney's helmet radio, adding: "This is Lt. Tifflor speaking, sir! Our carplanes are located around the bend but don't stumble over our Hono; he's sitting at the wall."

For a few moments everything was quiet. Then they heard Chaney's surprised voice: "Tifflor! Can you hear me?"

"Perfectly, sir! We've intercepted you with our radio tracker."

"Excellent! We'll be there right away. Turn on your headlights!"

Tiff complied. A few minutes later Chaney's troop, led by the 3 Honos, turned around the corner. Tiff got out off the carplane and told Chaney that the vehicles had room only for half of his men and that the others would have to spend the night in the open. Chaney didn't like the prospect of sleeping outside and related the story of what had happened to Lt. Crimson and Sgt. Dee.

They searched the mountain walls with the bright cones of their lamps and found a cave similar to the one Chaney's band had used before the appearance of the Honos. Two-thirds of Chaney's men took refuge in the cave and the others were put up, in the vehicles. Chaney and Halligan climbed into carplane #1. O'Keefe, who saw them coming on the observation screen, flopped down on the bench and pretended to be asleep.

The 3 Honos who had guided Chaney joined the fourth, which had led Tiff's column, without greeting each other. The sleeping Hono apparently didn't even wake up. They squatted down in the same manner and went to sleep with drooping heads.

Thus Chaney's mission obviously had taken a turn for the better. The *Titan* was immediately informed that they had joined forces and the officer on duty made no bones about the relief he felt. Tiff requested further instructions and was advised to conduct the search as he saw fit; he could follow the Honos and it was unnecessary to take them to the *Titan* by force. Rhodan intimated he considered their story of belonging to a different clan from the Approved People to be credible and that he didn't expect to find anything important by a psycho-examination.

The main cause for concern was that Tiff found his suspicion confirmed when he examined Dee's and Crimson's spacesuits the following morning. Both suits showed three tiny holes that—in contrast to the prick Tiffs protective suit had suffered—penetrated through the plastic material. The two patients were disrobed in one of the carplanes and examined for needle wounds but none were detected. If there had been any—and Tiff was convinced they had been present—they were already closed up since the day before without leaving a mark.

Next they investigated the deserted village. The huts were made of bamboo-like wood and constructed in a primitive manner, containing a single room. To judge

from the dirt accumulated on the compacted floor the huts must have been abandoned long before the Earthlings set foot on Honor. But Tiff, Chaney and Hathome, who conducted the investigation, realized they knew little about the sanitary customs of the Approved Ones and that it was quite possible that they preferred to live in this dirt.

The four Honos seemed to stay away as far as possible from the huts during the search as if they were afraid of the forsaken dwellings. But Tiff had to call on the four Honos because he was unable to find the track of the Gods.

They approached reluctantly. The Hono who had accompanied Tiff's column, and who had been given the name Nathan by O'Keefe, walked at the head.

"We're looking for the track of the Gods but we can't locate it," Tiff said.

"It's not here," Nathan answered with dignity. "It's farther back where the cleft between the walls begins."

Tiff looked at the cleft. It was about 6 feet wide and seemed to get narrower toward the back. The little creek flowing through the hollow at a leisurely pace was a sign that the ground inclined very gradually. Where the creek left the opening some low shrubs with hard leaves grew along the rocks.

Tiff, Chaney and Hathome scoured the ground around the shrubs while Nathan and the 3 other Honos looked on, showing little interest. After a few minutes Nathan finally said: "You'll have to go into the bushes over there where they are thinner and you'll find the trail."

Tiff went to the spot pointed out by Nathan and examined it. It indeed looked as if it had not come about naturally. "Do you see these broken twigs, sir?" he asked Chaney.

"It looks as if something forced its way through it a few days ago, I guess," Chaney replied.

Tiff knelt down. "The branches and stems are damaged down to the roots," he observed.

Chaney squeezed through the bushes, breaking a path with his elbows, and disappeared in the cleft. Tiff heard him gasp in surprise and call out: "Hathome! Tiff! Come here!"

Tiff pushed through the bushes with Hathome hard on his heels. In the twilight inside the mountain fissure Maj. Chaney crouched near the narrow brook, pointing his gloved hand to a deep, distinct impression on the ground.

The impression was about 3 feet long and half as wide. The width was divided into small rectangles of about 10 by 15 inches, by deep lines.

Tiff didn't know what to think of it. But meanwhile Chaney had walked on a little and suddenly shouted once more: "Over here! It's much clearer here."

The second piece of the track was about twice as long. In all other respects it looked exactly as the first except for the dirty white, crushed body of a nonue lying in the middle of the imprint.

"It's a caterpillar tread!" Tiff exclaimed.

Chaney jabbed his finger at the ground. "Of course, but only one! Where's the second tread?"

Tiff measured the width of the impression. "I don't believe there's a second one," he claimed.

"What do you mean?"

"He means it's a one-track vehicle," Hathome interjected.

"Exactly. The track is about 20 inches wide and it can easily support a narrow vehicle."

Chaney thought for a moment. "You could be right, Tiff, he admitted. "It's got to be a small vehicle or it'd never fit in here."

Tiff looked at the little dead animal. "Now if you consider that the Approved have no other means of transportation than their own legs..." he said thoughtfully.

"...then you come to the inevitable conclusion," Chaney continued doggedly, "that we've indeed discovered the trail of the so-called Gods."

Hathome failed to agree. "Now if you could tell me why anybody'd want to get into this dark hole with a tractor I'd be very much obliged. So far this all seems pretty..."

"Why?" Chaney interrupted. "The fact is that they did drive in there. They've probably taken the Honos to some hiding place. According to everything I know about the Approved they'd not have moved quickly enough without a vehicle."

"Could be..." Hathome murmured.

"Don't be so sceptical!" Chaney chided him good-humouredly. "Here's the trail and we're going to follow it."

Tiff looked around ostentatiously. Chaney noticed it and asked: "Any questions?"

"Yes, to be frank," Tiff replied. "We can't get through here with the carplanes."

"That's right. We'll leave half our men behind with the carplanes to cover our rear. I think we can take care of ourselves with the weapons we'll have with us."

Tiff thought of the little holes in the spacesuits but raised no objections. Not because he was afraid to contradict Chaney but because he was anxious himself to pursue the trail.

The time was to come when he would feel the heavy burden of responsibility for his recklessness.

Meanwhile Chaney had walked deeper into the cleft. The ground was in general hard and consisted of smooth stones. Only where the creek curved a little and deposited sand and pebbles on its banks was the impression of the tread visible. There were also shrubs or little trees at these windings and they were able to get some idea about the shape of the vehicle from the damage it left in its wake.

It appeared to be about three feet high and not much wider than the track it left on the ground. If it was longer than 6 or 8 feet, it had to be flexible or jointed since there were at least 4 places in the first 300 feet of the cleft where a rigid vehicle could get stuck.

Tiff was vexed by the presence of the dead animals they found in half of the impressions at the beginning of the trail.

Hathome expressed his theory with a great deal of doubt: "It looks to me as if they threw one of the creatures in front of the vehicle every 100 feet or so. Maybe as some sort of sacrifice?"

It was useless to ponder the mystery. They knew too little about the mentality of the Approved Ones to guess the answer.

They returned to the exit of the cleft. The four Honos with Nathan at the head were still waiting, full of dignity, at the other side of the bushes.

"Did you find the trail?" Nathan inquired.

"Yes, we did," Maj. Chaney said loudly in a breezy tone, "and we're going to explore it."

Nathan looked apprehensive. "You know that we don't believe in the Gods as the Approved do. Nevertheless we're afraid the Gods are extremely powerful beings. We don't know if it's wise of you to follow their trail. They could lure you into a trap and destroy you."

Maj. Chaney stepped close to Nathan. "Listen, my boy," he said in a friendly manner, "why did you show us the trail? Did you expect us to look at it and run away?"

"No, not really."

"But?"

Nathan glanced at his three clansmen; then he answered more confidently: "We assumed you'd go on but we wanted to warn you first."

"Are you going to accompany us?" the major asked.

Nathan was terrified. "Oh no! What could we do to help you?"

"Well," Chaney drawled, "I didn't expect you to help us. I just thought you might be interested to know where the Gods hang out."

Again Nathan looked at his companions as if asking for help. "I'm afraid," he finally confessed, "we don't have as much self-confidence as you."

Chaney gave up his prodding. "If you are seared, you might as well wait here till we come back."

* * * *

The men were assigned to two details. One group under the command of Hathome remained behind with the carplanes and the two patients and the other led by Maj. Chaney and Lt. Tiffloor took up the pursuit of the trail of the Gods. There was only one slight hitch, and it was caused by Sgts. Halligan and O'Keefe.

When O'Keefe heard that Halligan was to take part in the search he rushed immediately to Tiff. "Sir, it's impossible for me to work in the same group with that cheater Halligan! I won't be responsible, sir; I swear there'll be bloody murder in the first hour," he gasped.

Tiff wanted to appease the furious O'Keefe but before he had a chance he already heard Chaney's voice calling him on the helmet radio: "Lt. Tiff! This is Chaney speaking."

Tiff answered at once.

"Listen, lieutenant," Chaney began and his voice sounded as if he would crack up with laughter any moment. "I've got Sgt. Halligan standing in front of me complaining that he couldn't possibly stand it if he has to go with Sgt. O'Keefe. By the way, does that counterpart of the sergeant happen to be with you already?"

Tiff suppressed a chuckle. "Yes, sir!"

"Good. Then tell him what I've told Halligan, that I'll personally slit open their spacesuits the first time they give me any trouble on the march."

"Right, sir! I'll give him your message."

Of course O'Keefe had heard every word on his helmet radio too. Tiff saw him roll his eyes and said: "Too bad, O'Keefe, just too bad."

O'Keefe stomped away without another word.

However there was a real surprise which had nothing to do with their men. Nathan provided a little flurry of excitement when he sought out Maj. Chaney and announced: "The four of us have changed our minds. We'd like to accompany you after all."

Chaney was diplomatic enough to control his inclination to sneer and simply answered, "You're perfectly welcome," letting it go at that.

* * * *

The detachment selected by Maj. Chaney consisted of 20 men, not including the four Honos, and it set out at noon. In addition to their weapons the most important piece of equipment they carried was a portable transceiver with its own power supply which they had removed from one of the carplanes. It had a considerable range and enabled them to keep in touch with the carplanes or, if necessary, they could easily contact the *Titan* or the *Ganymede*.

It had been impressed on the 30 men remaining with the carplanes not to leave the vehicles. It was still unknown what had caused Crimson and Dee to become sick but no more attacks had occurred in the meantime. However it was too early to draw the conclusion that they were now safe.

Chaney and Tiff had at first assumed that the mountain crack, being so narrow at the entrance, wouldn't extend farther than one or two miles into the cliffs. After having marched till dusk without seeing more than the little creek, the smooth stony ground and the occasional sand and pebble deposits with the shrubs growing in them, they realized that their assumption had been premature. And for all they knew, the cleft could stretch for hundreds of miles.

Fortunately they encountered the caterpillar tracks in the sandy silt again and again so that they were not left in doubt which way the unknown foe had

travelled.

When it was completely dark, Chaney ordered the men to rest. He posted three men with searchlights both at the front and the rear of the column and instructed them to check the cleft continuously with their lamps. He advised the other men to switch off their helmet radios and catch some sleep.

Due to the crowded conditions of their camping place there was no possibility for the Honos to seek seclusion. They sat down among the men and were ready to go to sleep.

Tiff made himself comfortable at the wall. He lay next to Nathan who had put his long bony arms on his legs and was staring pensively. From time to time the reflections from the searchlights illuminated his sharp features.

“I’d like to know,” Tiff said suddenly, “in what respect you differ from the Approved People.”

Nathan shuddered as if he had been aroused from deep brooding. He looked to the side and tried to recognize who talked to him. “Oh, it’s you. Your question is easily answered. We don’t believe in the Gods the way they do.”

“Hm,” Tiff insisted. “I’ve heard this already before. But—what *do* you believe?”

“We think that the Gods are very potent beings,” Nathan replied after awhile, “but we don’t believe they’re Gods.”

“And how do these mighty beings differ from Gods?” Tiff felt that the question caused Nathan to squirm.

“They can’t perform miracles,” Nathan explained quickly and Tiff thought he detected an undertone of regret.

“What would you consider a miracle?”

Nathan reflected a little. “For instance if the Gods could destroy you by their mere wishes without having to resort to practical methods.”

“Listen,” Tiff protested, “that isn’t a very friendly example.”

Nathan produced something like a snicker. “But it’s clear.”

“Are you sure the Gods wish to destroy us?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“But why?”

“Because they’ve never tolerated somebody pursuing them.”

“Did you every try to sneak up on them?”

“No. We fear the Gods too much to do that.”

“And you don’t know where they live?”

Nathan made a negative gesture. “There’s a legend among the Approved...” He hesitated as if he had some doubt whether it was proper to trust Tiff with such knowledge.

“A legend?” Tiff urged.

“Yes. The Chastened People believe that the Gods live underground. But this is

sheer nonsense of course. If they're Gods—or only powerful beings as we believe—why should they go to the trouble of living beneath the ground?"

This seemed a sensible conclusion. Tiff pondered on the legend and when he wanted to ask Nathan another question he noticed that he had fallen asleep—or at least pretended to be asleep to avoid further curious questions.

* * * *

The night and the following day passed into late afternoon without any significant events. They continued on their trek and the cleft never changed its width or appearance. The strange caterpillar tracks were still imprinted on the sandy spots.

In the late afternoon, however, the cleft suddenly widened into a basin. The change occurred without transition and came unexpectedly because it could not be foreseen in the permanent twilight. The first men of the column were already standing on the grassy soil of the basin before Chaney ordered them to stop.

The basin was circular, as Chaney determined by sweeping his searchlight along the walls, and measured about 150 feet in diameter. The walls rose vertically all around. The creek along which Chaney's troop had advanced seemed to spring from the opposite wall. It traversed the basin and provided enough moisture in the ground to create what was, for the general conditions on Honur, luxuriant vegetation. The ground was covered with high dense grass with bushes in profusion. There was a group of low trees along the bed of the brook.

The abundant vegetation in the midst of the desolate stony mountains presented almost the effect of a miracle and it took a little while before the always practical and unimpressionable Chaney recovered enough to start searching for the track of the caterpillar treads.

Naturally the grass had risen again and thus didn't retain the trace of the trail as well as the lifeless sand along the bank of the creek. However, they could recognize a small strip of dried up blades along which the strange vehicle had moved.

Chaney was reluctant to let his men enter the basin. "I don't know," he said to Tiff, his helmet radio at low volume. "I don't like the situation. Once we get inside they can close the exit and we sit in a trap."

Tiff looked around. Two of the searchlights still spread their beams broadly into the basin. There didn't seem to be another exit. "The *Titan* could send in a few Gazelles to assist us in an emergency," he suggested. "After all, we're not playing Indians here."

Chaney smiled bitterly. "You've not yet been forced to crack up with a Gazelle on Honur."

"In that case Rhodan would move in with the *Titan* itself," Tiff defended his proposal. "In any event it wouldn't make much sense to turn around now."

“But it’s better to be inconsistent than dead,” Chaney opined.

In the end he informed the carplanes of their discovery and thoroughly combed the basin with a patrol of 10 men. Then he no longer objected to letting the entire detachment follow the strip of dried grass, which the caterpillar tread had left behind, till they reached the opposite wall.

The trail ended abruptly a few feet before the wall. But Chaney decided to postpone further scrutiny till the next morning since it was shortly before dark and the most important consideration for the present was to secure their camp in such a manner as to preclude all surprises.

The men whom Chaney had sent to explore the walls of the circle reported they had found only one cave. And even that one was so small that it had room for no more than 4 men. Chaney disliked this intensely. Ever since Crimson and Dee had been so suddenly afflicted he abhorred open areas.

However there was nothing he could do about it. It would have been possible to burn out a big cave in the rocks with the disintegrators but such weapons used an enormous amount of energy, which could have been detected thousands of miles away with sensitive instruments. Hence Chaney preferred the risk of sleeping in the open.

His men were seized by anxiety. Everybody could see that the trail they had followed ended here in the basin. The tracked vehicle either had to be in the basin or it had disappeared in the mountain wall.

Whatever the case, they had reached some sort of a turning point.

Tiff tried again to find a place for the night near Nathan but the Hono seemed to have anticipated him and avoided him. Obviously he was not inclined to answer more questions.

* * * *

Sleeping in a spacesuit is uncomfortable at best. Although the helmet provided some support for the head it was useful only if one was in the habit of sleeping on his back. Otherwise he already had a disadvantage to contend with.

Tiff woke up several times during the night. He cursed his uncomfortable helmet, moved his head and tried to fall asleep again.

But once, he slipped off the stone on which he rested and became wide-awake by his effort to restore his position.

Five or 10 minutes long he stared motionlessly up into the circular segment of the star-studded sky described by the walls of the basin, waiting to doze off again.

He noticed, at first unconsciously, that something seemed to be amiss in the neighbourhood. Slowly and cautiously he slid down from the stone on which he had climbed with so much trouble; now that his head was upright, he began to watch.

Minutes elapsed and Tiff was already half-convinced that he had been

mistaken, when he saw a movement. Although it was indistinct he could see something slowly crawling through the grass about 15 feet away.

It was chiefly pure curiosity that motivated Tiff. Guards were stationed at all important places in the basin and no stranger could have entered it without being noticed, even from above.

Then Tiff looked at the spot about 30 feet away where Nathan had sat down to sleep the evening before. The light of the stars was bright enough to let him see that Nathan's place was empty.

Tiff craned his neck and looked for the other Honos who had been sitting near Nathan. They were also gone.

Tiff's first guess was they had rued their decision of following the Gods and attempted to get away secretly, perhaps to escape the ridicule they anticipated. On the other hand he considered the matter important enough to investigate further.

Tiff ducked down and crawled to the spot where he had seen the shadowy movement. Half groping and half seeing he discovered the wide trail stretching through the grass. What puzzled him was the fact that it didn't lead to the exit of the basin but toward the wall on the left.

He followed the track and moved fairly quickly without seeing the Honos. When he had almost reached the wall 20 feet away from where the row of sleeping men began, he noticed once more the hasty blurred movement that had attracted his attention in the first place.

Throwing caution aside he jumped up and rushed to the wall. The thought of exposing himself to a danger came at the very moment he was grabbed by an unseen force and hurled back. Then something was done to his head, which felt as if a hand grenade exploded in his brain.

Tiff fell to the ground and almost lost consciousness. After lying for a few seconds he pushed himself up again with great effort and stared at the wall. He was close enough to see that the Honos, or those he had followed, had vanished.

He realized they were in trouble without understanding its nature. He turned his helmet radio full up and shouted: "Alarm! The Honos ran out on us!"

For awhile he heard only the noises from men waking up from their sleep, slowly raising themselves up and fiddling with their helmet radios. But then came Maj. Chaney's carefree, fatherly voice: "What are you getting excited about, Tiff? Why do you care about the Honos when life is so indescribably beautiful?"

5/ INSECTS EXTRAORDINARY

The attack on the *Titan* began in the middle of the night. It didn't take the ship by surprise since the crew had nothing else to do after the ship landed the second time on Honor but to keep their eyes open.

Moreover the attack was carried out in such a peculiar fashion that the outcome of the battle couldn't be doubted for a minute. Vast hordes of robots emerged from the valleys, the shores of the lake and from the plain on the observation screens of the Command Centre and marched toward the ship.

Perry Rhodan was present in the Command Centre at the time. He allowed the robots to advance until they revealed their true intentions by loosing a salvo of shots from a type of impulse-beamer.

The protective screens of the *Titan* absorbed the barrage without difficulty. Disintegrator shots from the ship's heavy cannons tore a wide swath through the rows of robots and blew clouds of whirling metal dust over the lake.

The hostile machines scattered but continued their unrelenting bombardment. Without interruption the white-hot energy rays hissed against the invisible defence shield, going up in a puff with colourful light-effects.

The crews in the artillery stations of the *Titan* had to change to precision firing after their massive hail of fire had wiped out half the robots. The total number of robots was estimated at 8000. They were of the same type that had launched an attack from a spaceship the first time. the *Titan* had landed on Honor.

Perry Rhodan directed the fight from the Command Centre. The mass of robots melted away. They came nowhere nearer to the defence shield of the *Titan* than 300 feet. A few machines that had ventured too close went up in flames in the field of the screen.

Not a single robot moved after two hours of battle.

Now the men aboard the *Titan* tried to surmise the purpose of the attack. They had no reason to assume that their opponent was so misinformed as to believe he could defeat the *Titan* with 8 or 10 thousand such robots.

The receivers which had been in constant operation during the battle had automatically recorded the answer. The communication officer picked up the printed telecom message sent from the amphicarplanes: "Commando team Chaney-Tifflor ambushed by unknown enemies Position..."

It was followed by a few data by which the little valley basin in the mountains

could be exactly located. The message further stated that Lt. Tiffmor had sent the alarm call.

Apparently the assault on the *Titan* by the robots had served no other purpose than to divert their attention from the search team in the mountains.

A few minutes later the men stationed at the carplanes had received a second message: "Don't worry about us! we're fine. Life is so beautiful!"

This message was transmitted word for word to the *Titan* and spread panic in the Command Centre. Everybody rushed to his station to perform the operation necessary for the instant start they expected Rhodan to order.

However Rhodan did nothing of the sort. With a faint smile he admonished his men to stay calm. "I don't see how we can help the poor fellows at the moment," he explained—but he failed to say what made him think he could help them later on.

Aggravating the confusion among his officers, he ordered the column of carplanes to return to the *Titan* as quickly as possible.

A while later, after the carplanes were already on the way back, the vessel received a short and unusual message on the regular radio frequencies: "The three of us are gonna go on a little junket."

If they could trust their ears, it was Tiff's voice but it sounded as if he had a Scotch Whisky accent. The officers in the Command Centre blamed Tiff's merriment on the Argonin. What else could it be? But Rhodan's secret chuckle baffled them.

* * * *

Of course Rhodan couldn't be quite sure of the circumstances. Tiff could have remembered the cue 'junket' in his poisoned state and could be having fun tweaking his commander's nose by using the pre-arranged code word.

Nevertheless Rhodan doubted that a person drugged by Argonin was still capable of thinking up a reasoned joke. It was far more likely that Tiff and two other men had found a way to escape the frenzy.

Now there was nothing else to do than what grated Rhodan's temperament most: Wait. Wait for the success of the 'junket'.

It was almost as unpleasant that Rhodan had kept his knowledge to himself and had to bear the sight of the painfully confused faces of his helpless men.

But the risk was too great. He had to reckon with the possibility that his adversary monitored their radio and telecommunications and if so he was already familiar with their language. In case somebody happened inadvertently to drop the merest hint about Tiffmor's true fate—as for instance in a call to the *Ganymede*—it would rain Tiff's 'junket' and the entire enterprise would be back where it started from.

It was better to wait and keep his mouth shut!

* * * *

Tiff grasped at once what had happened. The worst of all calamities that could have befallen his mission had occurred.

After Tiff had shouted his warning and got Maj. Chaney's joyous reply, the whole basin was in an uproar. Searchlights flashed and shined on men who bounced around in the grass with grotesque leaps. The cries of the stunned but not yet affected people mixed with the jubilation of those who already felt the effect of the Argonin. Soon the rejoicing became louder and the cries diminished.

Tiff crawled on his belly across the basin to the spot where Chaney's men had detected a little cave the evening before, calling out repeatedly: "Everybody who's still well, to the cave!"

He kept shouting till he thought everybody in his right mind would have understood and followed him. When he reached the cave it was empty except for one man

"Who are you?" Tiff asked.

"Sgt. O'Keefe, sir," came the reply.

"Do you have your arms?"

"Not only that, I've got the transceiver too."

"Excellent!"

Tiff took the transceiver and sent the first message that was received by the *Titan* after their battle with the robots. Then he warned O'Keefe. "Turn down your radio to a minimum. We mustn't be heard more than 10 feet."

O'Keefe complied silently. Then he asked: "What are we going to do next?"

"Wait a little," Tiff murmured. "I don't want to tell everything twice."

After an hour had gone by since the ruckus started, Tiff was fairly sure nobody except O'Keefe and himself had been spared from the perfidious onslaught.

The men poisoned by the Argonin kept howling and cavorting in the basin like freaked out hedonists, enjoying life to the hilt. The noise of the pandemonium was muted by their receivers which were turned low.

When finally a dark body slowly moved through the grass in the direction of the cave, Tiff thought at first it was another of the infected men with an odd idea of having fun.

When the man got close to the wall he raised his head and asked in a muffled voice: "Lt. Tiffmor?"

Tiffmor confirmed his presence. "Halligan? Is that you?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Come on in and turn down your radio! What kept you so long?"

"I was waiting till that swarm of beasts disappeared."

"Did you see them?" Tiff asked in astonishment

“Yes, very clearly. The poor devil next to me was one of the first to catch it. He waved his searchlight all over the place and I was able to see the flies quite distinctly.”

Halligan crawled closer and began to groan: “For heaven’s sake, if it isn’t that old buzzard O’Keefe!”

“You bet your life!” O’Keefe gnashed his teeth furiously. “And I’ll tell you something, if...”

“Cut it out!” Tiff ordered sternly. “We don’t have time for your banter.”

Two hours after the attack the sky slowly began to turn red. Tiff knew that he couldn’t expect to find another healthy man. Of the 20 people 17 were afflicted by the Argonin of the mysterious enemy whom they had set out to nail down.

Tiff took the transceiver again, connected it with the outside speaker of his helmet and began singing with the raucous voice of a drunk: “The three of us are gonna go on a little junket.”

Then he explained to the two sergeants: “We’ll have to act crazy like the others. I assume that the enemy is closely watching the basin. We can’t let him find out that we aren’t sick because we are going to continue our search. If we know how to take advantage of the situation we’ll have a better chance than ever.”

As soon as the day was light enough they left the cave and joined the crowd that frolicked in the basin like madcap kindergarten kids.

O’Keefe and Halligan fell right in with the others, playing their roles, hopping up and down and singing nonsensical ditties.

Tiff, however, had trouble putting on an act. The 17 men who cavorted in the grass like a bunch of brainless brats, and for whom nothing existed in the world except the joy of life, presented, despite their hilarity—which was only caused by a poison—a sad picture. It was a heavy burden on Tiff’s conscience that he had failed to mention all his reservations and fears to Chaney when they first discovered the caterpillar treads at the entrance of the cleft. Maybe he could have induced Chaney to take fewer men along.

One of the drugged men roughly jostled Tiff and interrupted his brooding.

“Hey, buddy! Why so glum? Don’t you think this is a great life?”

It was Chaney. Tiff looked at him but wasn’t sure that Chaney even recognized him. “Of course it is, pal,” Tiff beamed. “It’s terrific. I’ve never been happier all my life.”

“That’s better. Now let’s sing together!”

Without waiting for an answer Chaney began a song. Tiff joined him in a few verses, then bounded friskily away, rolling head over heels through the grass, hollering hysterically and getting away from Chaney’s happy singing.

In the meantime Halligan and O’Keefe had reached the opposite wall and waited to the left and right of the spot where Tiff had seen the Hono for the last time during the night.

Tiff stood on his head and dangled his legs from his knees. Then he furtively

kicked a little object he had noticed a few minutes earlier. He had been afraid to pick it up because he felt certain that their enemy kept a sharp lookout on the goings on in the basin. He kept gaily turning around and eventually managed to conceal the little gadget in his hand.

His invitation “Now we’re all going to sing *My Darling Clementine!*” was a sign for the 2 sergeants to retreat to the cave, where they met again after 15 minutes, the time needed to cover the distance of 150 feet as inconspicuously as possible.

One of the rabid revellers called to them: “What do you want in the cave? Why don’t you stay in the nice sunshine?”

Tiff had the presence of mind to answer: “We’ll be with you a little later. It’s still so warm and cozy in the cave.”

This seemed to satisfy his doped comrade and Tiff fervently hoped that it was good enough for the enemy too.

In the cave they examined the little gadget Tiff had found. Although they had intended to track down the Honos, now they figured it was more important to get to the bottom of the device.

It seemed to be made out of one piece and Tiff had to open it with a precisely aimed but weak disintegrator beam in order to see what was inside.

The device was built with an alien technique. But principles serving the same purposes are not so different that an expert would have trouble identifying a fork as a fork a comb as a comb, or a code transmitter as a code transmitter.

And this gadget was a code transmitter. As far as Tiff could determine the little set was capable of sending at least 10 different code signals via hyper-radio although its output was minimal.

One of the Honos—probably the one Tiff had shot at—must have dropped the instrument in the excitement.

Since when did the Honos have such devices?

This brought up the question of how credible the whole story of the Approved People and the outcasts was in the light of the newest developments. Wasn’t it more likely that Nathan and his 3 companions were sent by the ‘Gods’ in a plot to lure the enemies of the Gods into a watertight trap?

If so, they would have to be equipped with the means of informing the Gods, such as a code transmitter for instance.

The reasoning was altogether logical and nothing should have prevented Tiff from accepting the conclusions. Yet he remembered the Honos from the time of the *Titan*’s first landing on Honor; they were peaceful, lethargic, almost stupid beings who did nothing else than play with their nonues.

What had to be done to such indolent people to change them into efficient operators like Nathan and his 3 companions?

Tiff was interrupted by Sgt. O’Keefe, who was trying to get his attention by coughing discreetly. “Sir, I’ve also found something. If you care to take a look at

it...”

“Don’t think you’re the only one who’s found something!” Halligan broke in. “Sir, I’m sure you’ll be more interested in my...”

Tiff laughed. “Let me see what you’ve got, both of you!”

They stuck their hands under his face. They had both found the same thing but even in duplicate it was interesting enough to cause Tiff the greatest excitement.

He took the find carefully out of O’Keefe’s hand. The little object was about two inches long and consisted of 5 moving parts which could change their positions with respect to each other. Four of them looked like 2 pairs of wings and the fifth one doubtlessly was the body of the strange contrivance. There was no clearly distinguishable head but in its place it had a long sharp needle which was surrounded at its base by a circle of 15 tiny points shimmering like crystals.

It was one of the ‘flies’ Halligan had observed in the night.

In his agitated state, and in the unsteady light by which Halligan had made his observation, it was easy to be mistaken about the true nature of the peculiar object. Now that Tiff held it in his hand he recognized it from the metallic needle and from the regular form of the jointed wings for what it was: the ‘fly’ was no organically grown creature but a miniature robot.

It took Tiff quite awhile to convince Halligan and O’Keefe. They had trouble believing that such a tiny remote-controlled robot could be built. But Tiff remembered the skill exhibited by the Ferrons in the Vega sector in the field of microtechnology and he persuaded them step by step.

“The real marvel in the matter,” Tiff finally explained, “lies somewhere else. Each of these little machines has to be steered separately, In an attack such as occurred last night it would be useless to guide a whole swarm as a unit; the flies wouldn’t have finished the job yet.

“In order to direct a swarm of about 100 of these miniature robots in a battle it is necessary to issue commands in the tiniest-fraction of a second, to countermand them and replace them by new ones. This requires an automatic positronic control mechanism. No living being possesses such an instant and wide grasp of a complicated situation nor does it have the ability to react so spontaneously. By all appearances even the positronic experiences difficulties; these two flies obviously careened in full flight against the wall and fell to the ground.”

O’Keefe and Halligan were utterly amazed.

“I would guess,” Tiff continued thoughtfully, “that we’re dealing here on Honor not so much with real enemies as with an intricate system of positronic brains and remote-controlled robots; otherwise we’d already have caught a glimpse of our foes.”

“Don’t you think, sir, that the four Honos...” Halligan began.

Tiff shook his head. “No, I believe they were only acting as agents.”

Halligan said nothing and Halligan cogitated on the implications. Tiff paused for awhile, then said: “Tonight we’ll go after the Honos.”

The sergeants perked up. “The four Honos? Do you know where to...?”

“I saw the last of them over there at the wall where we found the code transmitter. I’m sure there must be a second exit over there.”

O’Keefe peered out of the cave. “I can’t see a thing,” he murmured sullenly.

“No wonder,” Tiff laughed. “They’d be pretty dumb to show an open hole.”

“Do you think they’ve camouflaged or locked the entrance?” Halligan asked.

“I suppose.”

“How will you open it?”

Tiff tapped the code transmitter. “With this,” he explained. “One of the 10 signals should open the exit—or the entrance as it were. How else could they’ve escaped so suddenly?”

He looked gravely at Halligan and O’Keefe. “It’s got to be that,” he concluded.

* * * *

The day passed and the boisterous drug-inspired carousing never let up for a single minute. They no longer felt tiredness, hunger or thirst since the Argonin had permeated their spinal fluid and to a lesser degree their blood and lymph ducts. The infected body stimulated all their energies and didn’t permit even a temporary lapse of their hyper-euphoria.

It was a very exasperating day for Tiff and the two Sergeants. It was torture to stand by idly all day long before they could resume stalking the unknown enemy.

Tiff picked up the little transmitter several times to send a short call to the *Titan*. The boredom led him to believe that a message couched in the same exultant tones as the night before could do no harm even if their tormenter intercepted it. But Tiff knew better than that. A man under the influence of Argonin could hardly be trusted to perform a logically coördinated operation involving purposeful manipulations such as sending a message by a complex transmitter. If he flipped a lever and turned a knob he would find something else more amusing and discard the set. Tiff had got away with one humorous radio call but a second one would doubtlessly make a listener suspicious.

At dusk Tiff, Halligan and O’Keefe mixed again with the prancing crowd. But this time they carried in addition to their weapons the transceiver and the code transmitter.

They unobtrusively worked their way to the opposite mountain wall and while Halligan and O’Keefe crazily scrambled up the wall and painfully tumbled down again and again, Tiff systematically tried all the code signals on the band of the little transmitter.

Each time he sent a new code signal he waited a moment and watched for the effect. He didn’t have the slightest idea what reactions the signal would conjure up and he didn’t discount the possibility that the robot flies could invade the basin once more.

But nothing of the sort happened. The whole operation turned out to be much less elaborate than Tiff had imagined. When he came to the fourth code signal a part of the wall suddenly receded and turned to the side before Tiff could call the two sergeants. The opening thus laid bare was about 10 feet wide and almost 8 feet high.

Halligan and O'Keefe dropped down. They stumbled around and babbled as if inebriated. Finally they staggered into the dark hole. Tiff followed quickly and pushed them deeper into the corridor which seemed to lie behind the opening. Then he turned around and waited breathlessly if the door closed automatically or waited for another signal.

The door snapped back in place and although Tiff felt it had taken half an eternity no more than 30 seconds had elapsed between opening and closing. None of their deranged comrades had noticed the incident. Tiff's decision to continue their pursuit at night had been correct. "Turn on your searchlight!" Tiff whispered in the darkness.

The light flooded a smooth corridor which was as high and wide as the entrance into the cliffs. It was slightly inclined and stretched as far as the eye could see.

"Go ahead!" Tiff ordered. "Keep your weapons ready! We've got to be prepared that the opening of the door has alerted somebody with a signal. I imagine somebody is waiting for us unless he comes to meet us head on."

But the corridor remained still and dark. The din of the caper behind them abated in their helmet radios.

Sgt. O'Keefe took the lead while Halligan and Tiff marched side by side behind him. O'Keefe moved forward with long strides and snorted impatiently. He sounded as if he wanted to say something but instead uttered a terrified cry and Tiff and Halligan promptly did the same.

The ground under their feet had suddenly begun to move. O'Keefe lost his balance and toppled down, dropping his searchlight and plunging the corridor into darkness again. Tiff could hear wind rushing by his helmet. "O'Keefe, switch the light on again!"

O'Keefe muttered something under his breath nobody could understand, which was just as well. Tiff heard him rap the floor with his gloved hands; then a sigh of relief and finally the searchlight lit up again.

Their surroundings didn't seem to have changed. The walls and the ceiling of the corridor were covered so uniformly that the eye found no reference point for orientation. Tiff pulled an empty plastic container out of his pocket and threw it at a forward angle against the right wall.

The result was perplexing. With unexpected force the container ricocheted from the smooth wall and instead of obeying the law of reflection, flew back the same way Tiff had thrown it. It zoomed past Halligan's helmet to the opposite wall, bounced off again and disappeared in a flash from the cone of O'Keefe's searchlight.

Tiff knelt down and felt the floor with his hand but no matter where he reached,

the floor gave no evidence of the peculiar properties the walls now exhibited. Only when Tiff stretched out his hand and touched the wall with his fingers was his arm hurled back with full force. "Conveyor band," he murmured. "Moves at least 50 miles an hour. The entire width of the floor is a single band!"

The two sergeants remained silent; they were bewildered and waited for instructions. Tiff tried to assay the new situation. He didn't know if the conveyor had been started automatically or whether the intruders were deliberately transported to a place where they were wanted.

Which ever was the case Tiff didn't care to rush into hostile arms at 50 miles per hour. "Halligan, go ahead!" he instructed the sergeant. "Keep your disintegrator ready to shoot. When I give you the sign, cut through the floor before you from wall to wall. This ought to stop it from moving. But for the time being we could wish for nothing better than to get a free ride."

Halligan took up his position in front of O'Keefe and trained the barrel of his weapon on the floor. Tiff figured that, if things became desperate, it would take Halligan only a second to sever the band and perhaps a total of 10 before the conveyor came to a stop. The jolt would be violent but they were prepared for it.

Tiff watched the time. They advanced with considerable velocity through the corridor for 15 minutes before O'Keefe signalled a change he discerned ahead of them.

Almost at the same moment the band began to slow down.

"Halligan, watch out!" Tiff urged.

However there was as yet no cause for alarm. The band ran into a circular room of the same height and with a diameter of about 100 feet. It ended at a round disk in the middle of the room and deposited the three men on the smooth surface so that they didn't feel the transition. The velocity of the band had by that time been reduced to the speed of walking.

But the disk didn't give the men time to think. As soon as Tiff had been transferred as the last one on the disk, it started to rotate. Tiff noticed hairline cracks radiating from the disk and he recognized the purpose of the seams. The disk turned until Sgt. Halligan, who still kept his disintegrator aimed at the floor, came between two parallel seams. The ground under Halligan's feet started to move again and pulled him from the disk. He continued to move with growing speed toward the wall of the room.

The parallel seams in the floor were the edges of other smaller conveyors and where they ended at the wall a heretofore-invisible door would presumably open at the proper moment. Meanwhile the disk resumed its rotation and put the horrified O'Keefe down on another band moving out at an angle of about 40° with Halligan. Tiff had no intention of letting his small team be split up by rotating disks and conveyor belts. He shouted: "Jump off!"

This presented—in contrast to the corridor through which they had arrived—no problem. Halligan and O'Keefe stepped to the side and stood on the solid floor of the room. Their respective bands continued moving a short distance with a soft

whir and came to a stop.

Tiff also jumped off the disk. O'Keefe broadened the beam of his searchlight and directed it toward the ceiling, bathing the entire room in light.

Halligan and Tiff leaped across several bands to get together with O'Keefe. Halligan slung the disintegrator over his shoulder; there were no bands to cut here.

"This is apparently a distributor station," Tiff commented. "Whatever comes in from the outside lands on the disk and is transferred by another band to its destination. I wonder how to recognize the selection of a band?"

Tiff scrutinized the bands leading in 18 different directions from the disk in the centre; each looked exactly like all the others. There was no clue, which of them could lead them to the innermost secrets of this subterranean installation.

Tiff chose one at random. "Let's take this one!"

He let Halligan and O'Keefe step on the band and waited. What he had hoped for really happened: the band started to move as soon as it was loaded.

When Halligan, who was first, came within 15 feet, a part of the wall slid open just as Tiff had envisaged and the band entered with the three passengers unmolested.

However what followed next could not have been foreseen by Tiff. O'Keefe still pointed his searchlight at the ceiling but it was clear that the band went down steeper and steeper at increasing speed. Halligan became frantic and shouted: "Help! We're falling!"

Tiff crouched down on the band and tried to grab a hold with his hands. Before he succeeded the band changed into a vertically downward direction but instead of the fall anticipated by Halligan they began to float gently. The strange pulling sensation as caused by an artificial gravity field was unmistakable. O'Keefe quickly collected himself and shined his light down the shaft through which they moved.

An antigrav elevator!

Tiff advised O'Keefe to douse his light. As soon as their eyes got used to the sudden darkness Tiff noticed a light down below. It was more a glimmer than a well-defined light source.

It took two hours till they reached the bottom and Tiff estimated they must have dropped a height of 25,000 to 30,000 feet.

The shaft ended where the light came in through a semicircular 10-foot-high gate and the light itself originated from a lamp high up in the cupola of a vast dome in the rocks.

The dome was circular and Tiff estimated its diameter at close to 20 miles. The bottom of the dome was covered with grass and the huge lamp at the zenith simulated to a perfect degree the radiation of the sun Thatrel around which Honur gyrated. The grass was divided by low fences into more or less quadratic parcels whose sides measured about 60 feet. The parcels formed long rows and between each two parcels was a path about 5 feet wide.

Packs of nonues ran wild behind the wire fences. About 30 of them were housed in each parcel and there were many stones and branches lying around to build their lairs. They seemed to be perfectly at home in this artificial subterranean world and their yelping and screeching filled the gigantic dome with infernal noise. And the stench, which penetrated the filters of Tiff and his two men, was doubtless caused by them too.

And there was another remarkable sight: tall Honos clad in colourful robes walked with great dignity up and down the paths between the rows of the compartments.

Tiff and the two sergeants were stunned by the surprise. Halligan was the first to find his tongue again. "The double impulse!" he groaned. How stupid of us!"

Tiff turned his head. "What's the matter?"

Halligan recounted the incident. "Shortly before we cracked up we received a double reflex on the radar oscillograph screen. It looked as if something were wrong with the set or if Honor had a false bottom. Now you see it *does* have 2 levels."

Tiff listened attentively. He was familiar with the electronic equipment of the Gazelles. He knew that it automatically recorded all observation data and simultaneously transmitted the information to the mothership, in this case the *Titan*.

Perry Rhodan was therefore aware what the radar of the 3 Gazelles had registered and knew they had shown the identical effects. Thus he was not likely to conclude that the sets were defective as Halligan and Dee had done.

Tiff made a mental note to scratch the subterranean dome from the list of items he had to report to Rhodan shortly before zero hour—the time to strike. Rhodan must have realized, long ago, what type of base the enemy had installed on Honor.

Tiff also remembered the conversation he had with Nathan at the camp in the cleft when the Hono told him about the myth of the Approved People that the Gods live under the ground. If Nathan knew the truth and wanted to deceive them, why did he tell him about the legend? Was he so sure nobody could escape the attack of the robot flies in the basin and live to tell the tale and utilize the knowledge?

O'Keefe brought Tiff back to the present. "We ought to collar one of these Honos and question him," he suggested. "Perhaps they know something. I wonder how they got down here."

One of the Honos strolling along the pathways meanwhile came within 30 feet of the semi-circular gate. He had already seen the 3 outlandishly dressed figures but they interested him only for a second.

Tiff was reminded of the first time the *Titan* had touched down on Honor. The Honos then had acted in the same manner. These people seemed to be genuine—in contrast to Nathan and his 3 companions.

"Come here!" Tiff ordered.

The Hono had reached the end of the parcels and slowly turned around to walk

back. Tiff and the 2 sergeants caught up with him with a few steps.

Tiff turned up his amplifier and called after the Hono: "Please wait a minute!"

The Hono stood still and turned around giving the 3 strangers a bored look.

"What are you doing here?" Tiff asked.

"I'm watching over the nonues; so that nothing will happen to them."

"Are they yours?"

"No, they belong to the Gods."

"And what are the Gods doing with them?"

This question elicited the first sign of excitement from the Hono. "How can you ask such a question? Do the Gods have to account to you?"

Tiff was more conciliatory. "No, of course not. Where can I find the Gods?"

The Hono made a weary gesture indicating his lack of knowledge. "Who am I," he asked, "that the Gods should tell me of their whereabouts?"

"Did you ever see a God?"

The Hono made an affirmative sign. "Yes, 2 of them. They were very friendly."

"When was that?"

"I don't know."

Tiff tried to think of another question. At that moment a new noise pierced the yapping of the nonues. It was a high-pitched monotone hum blended with a menacing muffled roar. Halligan spun around on his heels to see where it came from. His voice cracked in horror as he shouted: "There they come!"

Tiff whirled around. An iridescent cluster hung humming and twitching under the gate through which they had entered reaching from the zenith of the semi-circle almost to the floor. The cluster looked like a huge swarm of bees.

Tiff estimated there were about 5000 robot flies in the swarm behaving like the natural species and waiting for the positronic command to attack. "Look out!" he panted. "Keep your weapons ready to shoot! They've discovered us and they'll let us have it any moment!"

He had hardly finished when the cluster began to dissolve. Shimmering and whirring like little projectiles the mechanical mini-flies scattered in all directions.

Tiff told Halligan and O'Keefe to fan out their beams and did the same with his. They stood shoulder to shoulder, forming a 3-cornered star with the barrels of their weapons and covering half the vulnerable space sectors with the wide angles of their disintegrator beams. All the robot flies that were caught in their range were instantly destroyed.

6/ WORLD ANNIHILATION INDICATED

Perry Rhodan admitted that he had seldom passed more unpleasant hours than these. Now as before he was certain that Lt. Tifflor and 2 other men had succeeded in warding off the general euphoria and were still prowling the enemy.

But the lack of information was hard on his nerves. Hours followed hours and the hours became days without news from Tifflor.

Rhodan began to consider the possibility that Tiff and his 2 men had fallen into the hands of the enemy. In that case he would be forced to intervene with the *Titan*. Intervene where and against whom? Nobody had even the slightest inkling. Since Rhodan was compelled by tactical reasons to secure his rear while taking any action in the innermost sphere of influence of the Arkonide Empire, this lack of information meant that not much would be left for Honor.

Rhodan contemplated grimly that he was about to adopt an old and inhuman war rule of the Springers: if you can't pinpoint the base of an enemy, annihilate his entire world.

He had no other recourse if he didn't want to jeopardize his mission and thereby the entire Earth.

However he was still hesitant as long as he entertained a last flicker of hope that remained in the wake of Tifflor's endeavours with his team.

* * * *

Tiff realized after a few seconds that they would be unable to withstand the onslaught on the open grassland. The fences did not hinder the robot flies. They seemed to have excellent orientation and shot through the wire-mesh as if through open air.

The disintegrators devoured them by the dozen and hundreds. Metallic dust wafted in the air.

O'Keefe shot aimlessly up and down and straight ahead, as the ground began to boil in front of him.

As it turned out it was the heat, which gave the 3 men some relief after a time. Tiff noticed with a sidelong glance that the rising temperature affected the manoeuvrability of the flies. The surge of hot air drove them a few feet up before they reached their goal, making them hiss high above the heads of the imperilled

men.

Tiff gave his instructions. "Pull back to the nearest wall, you guys! We've got to cover our backs. O'Keefe, keep shooting at the ground!"

O'Keefe didn't understand what it was all about but did as he was told. He lowered the barrel of his weapon and drew glowing circles around their positions as they retreated. The flies, which before had come as close as 5 feet, were immediately averted. They were unable to inflict any harm on their intended victims, zooming 15 feet over their heads.

"Run!" Tiff shouted. "To the wall over there!"

Halligan darted away first and Tiff followed him while O'Keefe covered their retreat by continuous firing, setting the grass afire and turning the ground into pools of molten rock.

The flies were helpless. The positronic steering control had obviously failed to evaluate the situation adequately.

Tiff felt better as soon as his back was against the smooth wall of the dome. Halligan planted himself next to him with his feet spread wide apart and shot down whatever was caught in the wide open field of his disintegrator beam from the swarms O'Keefe's heatwave had diverted upward.

Tiff began to think they had a real chance to survive the attack with O'Keefe's scorching air technique. They must already have demolished at least 2000 of the 5000 estimated flies, he figured.

However by the time O'Keefe had reached the protective wall the positronic had caught on why the flies consistently missed their aim. Tiff saw a clump flying in at an angle too steep to hurt them but the heatwave corrected its course so that the whole mass shot straight at them. Halligan yanked his disintegrator down just in time to repulse the danger.

"O'Keefe raise your fire," Tiff shouted.

The next swarm, also positronically guided on the new course, swerved 20 feet from the wall into the ground, deeply burying its sharp needles because O'Keefe's changed aim affected the blast of hot air.

But after the third pass the tron could no longer be tricked and deflected. It sent in the flies on a downward trajectory and lifted them up again when it failed to sense the heat. Tiff heard the metallic insects clatter against the stone wall after they had penetrated the thermo- and disintegrator-shields. He felt something sharply impinge against his leg but life didn't look much rosier as yet. He had been lucky once more.

O'Keefe and Halligan doggedly kept up their fire but Tiff realized it was only a matter of seconds before one of the flies, and then a second and third would hit their target.

Between 2 attacks O'Keefe moved a couple of steps to the side to gain a better field of fire for his thermo-weapon. Tiff looked at him instinctively.

Nobody really knew later what had happened. Either O'Keefe had touched a

concealed contact or the door opened automatically if a person got close enough—whatever the case a hole suddenly gaped behind O’Keefe although he didn’t notice it himself.

Tiff called out to alert him. O’Keefe whirled around, saw the opening and uttered a joyous cry which could be heard above the din of the frightened nonues.

Tiff nudged Halligan. “Move!”

It took a few long leaps to reach the opening. The positronic had adjusted to the burning air but it needed a few milliseconds to shift to the running victims. O’Keefe was the first to disappear; Halligan scooted behind him and Tiff was last to get in. The door closed promptly behind them, ending their troubles with the robot flies.

The door was the beginning of a long, brightly-lit corridor slanting into the rocks.

Tiff hesitated. Had the time come to give Rhodan the go-ahead for the counter offensive? Had they already got to the bottom of the subterranean base’s secrets? Did they know enough to spare the crew of the *Titan* all unnecessary risks?

The answer to these worrisome questions was ‘no.’ Moreover Tiff took into consideration that the tron might not yet have detected their escape through the hidden door and was still in the process of determining the location of its prey. This was an advantage to be quickly ruined by an easily monitored radio message.

He decided on ordering his men to go on and followed them into the corridor.

Tiff estimated the length of the passageway at one and a half miles. Then it ended in a low hall which was completely empty and furnished no clue which purpose it served.

They had already traversed an underground maze of passages at least 25 miles long and in addition had seen the rocky dome. It was enough to persuade them that their opponent had built not a mere base in the mountains of Honor but a whole artificial world.

Tiff’s respect for the technical capabilities of their adversary had grown considerably during the last hours.

He immediately set about to scrutinize the walls of the rectangular room with Halligan and O’Keefe. The predilection of their unknown adversary for the construction of hard-to-find concealed doors was already established for them.

At first it seemed to make no difference whatsoever where the exit from the room was located. But then Halligan, who had taken over searching the left side of the room from the corridor, suddenly stopped and exclaimed softly: “You can hear something here, sir!”

Tiff ran to him. He had to concentrate hard to perceive what Halligan had heard; but there was no disputing that a noise came through the wall. It was propagated through the massive rocks and walls; the walls finally transmitted it to the thin air filling the rectangular room. Their helmet mikes picked it up; it was weak but an unmistakable, monotone bum at a varying pitch.

A big machine seemed to be running somewhere behind the wall, perhaps the air or power supply of the base, or the positronic guiding the defence of the installations.

“There has to be a door in this corner,” Tiff said tersely. “We’ve got to find it!”

The remark was none too logical but strangely he was right. They passed back and forth close to the wall and it fell to O’Keefe again to find the correct position so that a section of the wall slid to the side and laid bare a narrow corridor angling from the hall into the rocks.

The hum became a few decibels louder when the door opened up. O’Keefe wavered and pointed with a silent gesture into the corridor.

Tiff nodded. “Go in!”

They all entered and the door automatically closed again the way they were already used to in this underground world. The corridor seemed to be short compared to the previous passageways. A glaring light entered at the end of the tunnel. It seemed to come from a larger room but it was impossible to make out any contours.

Tiff pressed forward. Suddenly he was certain they would solve the elusive mystery if they beheld that sunken room.

Later on he remembered little of what followed next and the 2 sergeants’ memory failed them likewise. Tiff still could see that the walls of the corridor retreated to the sides and opened up to a large diameter circular room. The room was crammed full of many instruments whose purpose he didn’t know, the most remarkable of which were a row of concave mirrors shining with unbearable effulgence.

As soon as he stepped into the room he was struck a terrific blow rendering him instantly unconscious.

* * * *

Rhodan knew that each second of further waiting was fraught with danger.

He alerted the *Titan* to alarm phase #1 and briefed his officers in concise words as to their imminent tasks.

“Of course we’ll try to localize the military base of the enemy and to spare the rest of the planet,” he concluded. “But our chances that we can do this are limited. I’d like you to know that we might be compelled to obliterate Honor completely. We’re confronted with a choice: the Earth or Honor. I don’t believe it’ll be difficult for you to decide which it shall be.”

A force of 800 men who were still in fighting trim manned the *Titan*. Rhodan assigned 500 of these to the impending major action. The remaining crew was ample to operate the cannons of the *Titan* in case of an attack.

Rhodan ordered the *Ganymede*, which was still vigilantly circling around Honor, to go on alarm stage #2. Col. Freyt was advised that a landing of his vessel

could become necessary at any moment.

All preparations proceeded so quickly that Rhodan and his force of 500 men had almost left when the communication officer of the *Titan* received a sequence of unintelligible signals and sounds.

Rhodan was notified at once and he postponed the debarkation of the fighting force. Although the sounds emitted by the transceiver made no sense Rhodan didn't give up hope and eventually his patience was rewarded.

The inarticulate stammering began to form words. Rhodan didn't recognize the voice—it wasn't Tiff's—but it spoke English, which lifted most of the doubts in Rhodan's mind. "...valley basin... entrance northeast wall... subterranean installations... caution robot flies... 2 inches long, look like dragonflies... impregnated with Argonis... carry nets, fine mesh..."

The message seemed to have exhausted the strength of the speaker. For awhile only the usual static came through the transceiver. Then the voice called again and repeated what it had said before. Rhodan realized he was not going to learn any more and issued the necessary instructions to the technical staff.

Nobody had thought of taking nets along until now.

* * * *

Tiff was awakened by the monotonous sound of a voice speaking to him.

Speaking?

He was still in a semi-conscious state and tried to recognize the language; he didn't succeed but he understood the words nevertheless.

He opened his eyes and saw that he was in twilight. When he tried to move his head to look around it refused to budge. Then he attempted to lift his arm and to shift his leg with the same negative result.

He was captured. Captured by a method which paralysed his brain.

Nonetheless he understood the voice: did you believe you could defy the Gods? Don't you realize that you're nothing but a little worm against the almighty Gods? They've followed you on your way and taken you prisoner at the opportune time. You'll remain here for the rest of your life and serve the Gods!"

The voice fell silent. The clearer Tiff's mind became the more he became convinced that he had really not heard a voice at all but that his brain had received a telepathic message. This was the reason he couldn't recognize the language: no words had been spoken; he had received thought-impulses which were not limited by the restrictions of spoken language.

Tiff tried to remember what happened. There was the short oblique corridor, the room full of instruments, the row of concave mirrors—and then the stunning blow.

Tiff was reminded of the time when he felt a similar if less violent hit when he followed the Honos during the night in the basin and caught up with them near the

wall.

What was it? A paralysing weapon?

An adversary able to produce such sophisticated toxins as Argonin was also bound to possess nerve weapons to which he attributed his paralysis.

All he could move were his eyelids. He studied the room where he found himself—or rather the sector he could see, from his position, which was very little; but he determined that he was lying in a small low chamber. He was unable to tell how far the chamber stretched behind him since it was outside his field of vision. The next object his eyes caught terrified him—3 shimmering concave mirrors hanging where the wall of the chamber joined the ceiling exactly in front of him. The mirrors were inclined in such a way that one of them shone straight into Tiff's face.

It took Tiff awhile to digest their import; the single shock dealt by the radiation from the big concave mirrors in the circular room was insufficient to keep the prisoners immobilized for an extended period. To secure their prisoners permanently the Gods had to maintain the influence on their nerves.

Break those mirrors up there and everything will be all right again, Tiff concluded. However he was not even able to stir his head, let alone get up and carry out his thoughts.

Three mirrors, Tiff kept thinking *this means—*

He tried instinctively to move his head again but had no more luck than the first time.

Tiff figured that Halligan and O'Keefe had to be nearby, judging from the presence of the 3 mirrors, unless there were more such rooms and the Gods kept the prisoners separated.

Tiff racked his brains how to solve the problem. Finally the question was answered in an unexpected manner. He heard a rasping noise in his helmet radio like the scraping of a saw, followed by a sharp hissing whistle and then something that sounded like "bah".

Finally a voice stammered slowly and awkwardly: "S-s-sir...?"

Tiff wanted to answer but his tongue, jaw and vocal chords obeyed as little as his other muscles; he remained mute.

"S-s-sir...?" the voice asked a second time, now already a little more fluently. It was without a doubt O'Keefe's voice.

To his surprise O'Keefe seemed to realize the situation Tiff was in. He said: "S-sir... I know what... it did to you. I was a little... luckier. I shot the last moment at the... damn mirror... didn't catch such a severe shock. Am still able to move."

Good old boy O'Keefe, Tiff thought; *but why doesn't he get up and smash the mirrors if he still can move?*

O'Keefe's talking became more articulate the longer he spoke. "The damn... Gods... have locked us up in here. Arms and transmitter... everything is still here... They think... we're all paralysed. I can see your face, sir. Do you want me

to shoot up the mirrors? If yes, close your eyes twice. Or can't you move your eyes either?"

O'Keefe, you old dogface, Tiff thought enthusiastically, closing his eyes twice.

"OK," O'Keefe groaned. "I got you!"

Tiff heard a variety of noises. He thought he heard O'Keefe turning to his side and slowly reaching for something lying farther away. He moaned continuously while swearing under his breath. Finally he panted: "... oooh... aaah... I've got it. Wait a minute, sir!"

The muzzle of a thermo-beamer emerged at the extreme right edge of Tiff's restricted field of sight and he narrowed his eyes. O'Keefe groaned once more as if it were a great effort to pull the trigger. Then he blasted away.

The 3 mirrors were devastated with blinding light from one second to the next. Steaming liquid metal dripped from the ceiling and splashed on the floor.

The climate control of Tiff's spacesuit started with a click. He felt as if an oppressive load had been lifted from him when the mirrors were consumed by the blaze but his attempts to move were still stymied as before.

O'Keefe was aware of his troubles. "Don't think he panted, "that your lame state is all over at once. It takes awhile."

O'Keefe hit upon the idea to inform the *Titan* immediately. Tiff was happy to see that he crawled with much grunting to the transmitter, switched it on and sent the somewhat incoherent message Rhodan received just in time.

After that was done O'Keefe returned to the pit at which one of the 3 mirrors had been focused, and rested.

Tiff tried to anticipate the next turn of events. He was anxious to restore the resilience of his nerves again and concentrated for a few minutes on the reaction of his right arm. Suddenly he let the dammed up potential energy of his brain flow into an explosive command:

Bend the right arm!

And the arm moved, not as much as Tiff had wished, but it moved.

Tiff continued relentlessly and after awhile he was able to manipulate his right arm in obedience to his will. The left arm began to function much quicker. Then he trained his legs and finally his mouth, tongue and vocal chords.

An hour and a half after he woke up he was able to utter his first two words: "Good job...!" which was meant to praise O'Keefe.

Then he rose, each movement causing him great pain. If his vocal chords had been in better shape he would have screamed. He staggered past Halligan's motionless figure to the place where the Gods had deposited their weapons in the mistaken belief that their captives would never be able to use them again.

He picked up his disintegrator but the strain was so great he had to sit down again as soon as he held the weapon in his arms.

Tiff was baffled why the Gods failed to take action. Surely they must have noticed that the hollow mirrors had been destroyed. Why did they neglect to get

their prisoners back under control?

Part of the answer probably was that their antagonists knew the long-lasting effect of the shock treatment and felt no need for urgency.

The other part of the answer could not be known by Tiff. At this very moment the Gods had to worry about a far more dangerous intruder than the 3 prisoners, a resolute, swift and powerful force advancing with a plethora of extraordinary fighting equipment toward their base.

Perry Rhodan and his 500 men.

* * * *

The procurement of the nets had required an hour and a half and to reach the valley basin with the carplanes took 2 more.

There they first removed those poisoned by the Argonin from the basin and sent them on their way to the *Titan*, which caused a delay of 30 minutes.

It took only 10 more minutes to locate the entrance to the subterranean stronghold. Rhodan ordered the mountain walls of the basin razed by disintegrators. What remained was a wall 50 feet farther back, exposing a dark hole which led down into the rocks.

At this moment the robot flies launched their first attack. However they were caught in the fine mesh of the nets draped around the helmets and spacesuits of the men. The flies lost their energy and fell harmlessly to the ground, where they remained till their energy was restored again by the positronic.

By that time Rhodan's 500 men were already deep inside the tunnel.

* * * *

It would have taken Halligan much longer to get back on his feet if O'Keefe wouldn't have made him so furious with his ribbing. "You lame duck will still be lying here a week from now...!"

Halligan shot up like a bolt from the floor in an astonishing performance, staggered to his feet and lurched with raised fists toward O'Keefe. Shortly before he reached his tormenter his abruptly acquired strength left him and he fell ignominiously to his knees.

"You see, now you got the idea," O'Keefe laughed.

Tiff couldn't help it: the sight evoked his smile. And it distracted his attention long enough so that he failed to see when a section of the wall on the left side of the chamber started to slide back. O'Keefe was much too busy having fun with Halligan to notice it either. When Tiff finally caught on, the opening was already 3 feet wide.

He managed to utter an inarticulate cry when he saw a metallic figure come through the wall but it was enough to alert O'Keefe.

Tiff threw himself backward to the floor and hit it so hard that he had trouble lining up his disintegrator, while O'Keefe jumped to the side to protect the helpless Halligan. His sudden movement disturbed the huge robot, which had already raised his weapon arm.

O'Keefe went down to the floor on one knee and fired. He couldn't miss his target. Before the robot was able to swivel its arm in his direction the beam of O'Keefe's thermo-gun blasted it apart and spattered the molten metal in all directions.

As the experienced close-combat fighter O'Keefe was, he dashed forward and crouched at the side of the open door. It was amazing how well his muscles already performed.

Spurred by O'Keefe's bravado, Halligan rose once more, grabbed his weapon and crawled to the other side of the door. O'Keefe saw him coming and growled: "I didn't mean to get you up, old boy. Lie down and rest a little! I can handle it by myself."

"That's what you think," Halligan grunted, nearly choking on his words.

O'Keefe shrugged his shoulders and cautiously stuck out his head through the door to see what was behind it. "There's a corridor out there," he reported, "30 feet long on both sides and the ends are closed. No more robots in sight."

"Where did the robot come from?" Tiff asked.

O'Keefe looked at the rubble of the fighting machine. "I'd say from the right-hand side."

"Alright," Tiff groaned, "let's go to the right. The Gods seem to have stopped playing around with the robot flies; now they're going all out with deadly weapons."

It was a pretty tired bunch that shuffled down the corridor, with the exception of O'Keefe who had meanwhile recovered completely.

The closed end of the corridor didn't present much of an obstacle. O'Keefe walked a few steps up and down near the end and the wall slid to the side. He was so overwhelmed by the exposed view that he momentarily dropped to his knees.

Tiff swerved to the side as quickly as he could and Halligan flung himself against the wall.

"Use your disintegrators!" O'Keefe shouted. "If I shoot with the thermo-beamer we'll never get through here."

The room behind the door stretched very far back. The subdued light revealed shimmering rows of stationary metallic figures lined up in a regular order as if waiting for something.

Robots! Hundreds of robots!

Tiff decided without the slightest hesitation. The robots were not activated. The Gods did not yet know that their 3 prisoners were standing at this door and the robots had up to now received no orders to go into, action.

Halligan had already raised his weapon.

“Fan your fire!” Tiff shouted, suddenly gripped by a fighting fury that wiped out the last twinges of pain lingering from the shock treatment.

The trio marched into the room with O’Keefe in the middle. The robots stood stock-still and let themselves be slaughtered without putting up any resistance.

Tiff estimated their number at 500. It seemed to take an eternity to finish off the entire robot army although they had spent no more than 15 minutes on the job.

Clouds of metallic vapours and dust swirled and glittered in the air. By the time the green beam of the disintegrator had dissolved the last robot, they had reached the far end of the room.

“Thank heavens!” O’Keefe sighed with relief. “I thought they’d pounce on us any moment.”

Tiff’s zeal permitted no rest. He walked along the rear wall and found the door leading out of the room exactly opposite from the one through which they had entered.

The door opened to another room illuminated by the same subdued light but not as large as the place where the robots had waited.

Tiff screamed with delight “Now we’re getting somewhere, fellows! This is a control room!”

It was unmistakable. Wide control panels covered the walls, interspersed with oscillograph- and picto-screens. A multitude of instruments and aggregates were humming softly.

But no trace of the Gods!

Tiff stormed ahead. The next door opened before him and he ran into another hallway, O’Keefe and Halligan following on his heels.

The hallway spread out and grew into a tremendous hall at whose centre the outline of a small cylinder-shaped rocketship could be more guessed than seen in the weak light.

Tiff suddenly caught sight of 3 long-legged figures in colourful cloaks running to the rocketship which was apparently ready to lift off.

“The Gods!” O’Keefe cried out jubilantly. “The Gods are taking it on the lam!” He kneeled down and carefully drew a bead with his thermo-beamer.

“We want them alive!” Tiff admonished.

O’Keefe conceded and started shooting. First he drew a glowing line along the 3 fleeing figures, forcing them to the left. Then he drew a second line past their left side, throwing them into confusion and causing one of them to stumble. He fell down but quickly got up again. The 2 others had scrambled ahead of him.

O’Keefe increased the intensity of his fire and caused the rocky ground near the fugitives to melt. They tried to escape to the opposite side but O’Keefe methodically surrounded them with a circle of fire.

Tiff saw them collapse one by one as the heat rendered them unconscious. With a wary look at the rocketship he wanted to run over to the fallen men when the hall was suddenly filled by a thunderous roar. The rocketship rose in a cloud of

dust, hovered for a moment suspended in the air and shot up to the ceiling of the hall. Tiff saw what he had failed to notice before: a broad fissure gaped in the ceiling through which the red light penetrated. There was no artificial light source as Tiff had assumed at first.

The rocket disappeared through the crack with almost unbearable thunder, raising a storm of hurricane proportions inside the hall which slowly ebbed away along the walls.

O'Keefe cautiously lifted himself up and stared at the 3 motionless figures. "That monster!" O'Keefe gnashed his teeth in frustrated fury.

Tiff understood why he was outraged. The 3 helpless men had been caught in the wake of the rocket engine, which used the propulsion of highly accelerated particle streams like all rockets in the Great Empire.

"The poor devils!" O'Keefe mumbled, perturbed; "they're more radioactive than a lump of lead after 2 years in a reactor."

They went over to the 3 Gods who were lying as if asleep. There was no longer any need for haste. When the fugitives fainted they had closed their eyes. Nobody could tell by looking at them how badly they were contaminated by radioactivity.

O'Keefe and Halligan turned the trio on their back. They were Nathan's erstwhile companions—the 3 Honos who had shown Maj. Chaney the way to the abandoned village.

There was a sudden commotion at the entrance to the hall. Tiff was startled. "What's going on?"

"Don't worry!" Halligan calmed him. "It's only the Boss!"

Perry Rhodan surged into the hall, leading 50 men.

7/ ENTER: THE ARAS

It took 10 days to search the subterranean fortress from top to bottom. Then they knew that there were no more 'Gods' present on Honor.

The little rocketship had been tracked by the *Ganymede* and was shot down after it had been vainly warned 3 times. The sole occupant didn't survive the blast. He turned out to be Nathan, as had been suspected all along.

The underground base served as the inspection established, mainly as a production facility for Argonin. The nonues were bred in 3 vast domes under artificial conditions that imitated the world outside in all details. The grass with which they were fed had been especially treated and the little animals produced the virulent toxin from their fodder.

There were also facilities for extracting the surplus poison from 100,000 nonues in a few hours and for filling it in ampoules. The entire operation was fully automatic and the base required no more than 4 men for supervision.

These 4 men were all dead and it was too late to pry the secret from them of why they had played this often-grotesque game of confusion and deception.

But there was no paucity of pure conjectures, such as the theory Rhodan began to expound: "Despite their elaborate installations they were mortally afraid of us. They endeavoured to eliminate the crew of the *Titan* step by step, forced the pilots of the 3 Gazelles to ditch their ships and tried to lead our land-water-air mobile team to disaster. Before that they evacuated all real Honos and left a track from the deserted village into the mountain gorge to lure our men where they wanted them.

"Meanwhile we've also found the tracked vehicle. It's 20 feet long, very flexible and holds the inhabitants of a village of about 20 men. If we'd investigate the other villages we'd find the same tracks although perhaps not as distinct.

"After the attempt to subdue Maj. Chaney's group with an attack with robot flies miscarried because of Chaney's circumspection, they staged their reunion with Tiffior's team in order to mollify his suspicions. Subsequently they led him and some of his men into the valley basin where they used their trick with the flies again when Chaney had begun to doubt their existence. The fact that they themselves took off before that proves 2 points: firstly, they're not immune to Argonin and secondly, they don't have the antidote available here on Honor. Otherwise they'd not have aroused premature suspicion by their flight.

“In any case this is where our special plan came in. I had already considered this contingency among a number of others and had given the necessary instructions to Lt. Tifflor. It was a lucky accident that 2 other sergeants beside himself escaped the injuries and remained fit.

“The 3 men infiltrated the base and you already know the rest of the story. However it’s puzzling that it was relatively easy for them to break through to the ‘Gods’ themselves. I’d guess that the explanation for this lies in the fact that the ‘Gods’ have not yet been able to take our true measure. They thought they could rely on their technical superiority, especially as they must have felt they were bothered by only 3 intruders, who had been stunned by a nervous shock.

“This turned out to be their mistake and our salvation. When Tifflor and the 2 sergeants annihilated the remainder of the robot army before they could activate them, they panicked and fled and 3 of them who had been prevented from escaping were murdered in cold blood by the fourth one to keep them from giving us information.

“That’s about it, the way I see it, and I don’t believe I’m too far from the truth.”

His listeners remained in thoughtful silence. Only Tifflor cleared his throat after awhile and inquired: “I’d be grateful to you, sir, if you could enlighten us as to why there exist such radically different groups of natives on Honor, those infected by the Argonin and the 4 with whom we were embroiled.”

Rhodan tapped his forehead and smiled. “Right! I’m glad you reminded me, Lt. Tifflor,” his voice suddenly became stern, “I have to reprimand you!”

Tiff was scared stiff but Rhodan allayed his fears. “Don’t take it so hard. It wouldn’t have made much difference anyway. Lt. Tifflor, what is the colour of the Honos’ skin?”

Tiff thought a moment. “Reddish brown, sir,” he answered.

“And the 4 ‘Gods’ you’ve seen?”

It began to dawn on Tiff. “Colourless, sir. Albino type.”

“All 4?”

“Yes, sir. All 4!”

“This should have made you stop and think, shouldn’t it? You can meet one albino occasionally but 4 together under such suspicious circumstances... this should have piqued your curiosity.” He paused for a second and Tiff knew what came next. “The ‘Gods’ are no Honos! They were not born on this planet but belong to another race. Our friend Khrest has examined the ‘God’ I shot down by the *Ganymede* and refreshed his memory. I wish we’d have had this information from the beginning.”

“These people are members of a race called Aras. It’s a branch of the Springers with whom we’ve had so many run-ins. They’ve lost nearly all contact with that race of Traders and have established a life of their own.”

“The Aras are endowed with a special gift in the area of biological medicine. They know every disease in the Galaxy and can cure them all. Khrest says they’re

not handicapped by consciences, so it may sound like an old doctors joke but there's nothing the least bit funny about it: they're quite capable of inventing new diseases just to have handy for whatever dirty work best serves their purposes."

"The Aras are the biggest medicine men in the Galaxy: 95% of all drugs used in the Milky Way are manufactured by them—and 99% of all narcotics.

"These were Aras, Lt. Tifflor, not Honos as they pretended. But don't feel bad—it was easy for them to fool you: they look so much like Honos it was only natural for you to assume they were members of the same race."

The production base of the poison traffickers was so thoroughly gutted that it could never again be used for the manufacture of Argonin.

The 19 casualties claimed by the action on Honor were lodged with the 700 others.

The 4 dead Aras were buried at the lakeshore for Perry was loath to deny the last rites even to the most loathsome of enemies. Afterward he called Lt. Tifflor again. "You'd like to know what measures we're going to take next. I'll tell you. First we'll have to learn all they know about the Aras in the Arkonide Empire, then we're going to pay them a visit, put the pressure on them if necessary to make it clear we won't stand for any trouble from them. We've got a difficult mission ahead and can't tolerate any interference from a troublemaker on our back"

"To get the information we need we'll have to consult the robot brain on Arkon. Now that both our ships have structocomps we don't have to be afraid any more that the Brain might track our flight so there are no objections to such a trip."

"We'll have to exercise extreme caution but every scrap of information we can glean from the Machine will be worth it."

"We'll have to keep our eyes and ears open, won't we, sir," observed Lt. Tifflor.

"More than that, Tiff. Our minds."

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE SINGERS!

That's right—not the Springers... the Singers! Synthetic... nonliving... creatures capable of teleportation. One knows when these alien menaces are in the vicinity because of the high keen sound they give off.

Perry & his people track the Mooffs back to their planet of origin—a world of Jovian dimensions wracked by fierce storms & drowning in ammonia—and there they receive a decidedly unwelcome welcome.

But 700 of Perry's crewmen lie in deep sleep, near to death, and the galactic medical masters, the elusive Aras, are their only hope of recovery.

Thora plays her part (with Perry's heart) and some 'one' new has been added to the activities: Rhodan's adviser on the psychology of the Robot Regent of Arkon Dr. Certch—himself an automaton!

It all comes on, loud & clear, in high gear, in an episode geared to high adventure as you meet Trorth and observe the clash of—

MAN & MONSTER

by

K. H. Scheer