



**1804**

# **STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE**

Arndt Ellmer

## **Online-Edition**

It was something no one could have expected. An alien culture has appeared next door to Earth, on the planet Trokan, the "second Mars," which had been exchanged for the Red Planet in a spectacular operation.

The situation in the year 1288 of the New Galactic Era - the year 4875 in the old calendar - is already tense enough. In Mankind's own galaxy, the Arkonides have revived their old imperial dreams and established the Crystal Imperium. For decades, the power blocs of the Arkonides, the League of Free Terrans, and the conflicting factions of the Raglund Forum have been eyeing each other with distrust.

Perry Rhodan is one of the few to whom billions of intelligent beings in the Galaxy look for a way out of the crisis. With his immortal friends, the Terran has withdrawn from politics and undertaken the mysterious Project Camelot.

A new civilization in close proximity to Earth evolving under the cover of a Time Lapse field - now it must confront a looming catastrophe that threatens its very existence. Now begins a **Struggle to Survive...**

# Perry Rhodan

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## 1.

"Myles Kantor is about to arrive," announced the receptionist on duty. "Should I transfer him to you, Gobert?"

The Chief Physician of the Tradha-12 Ward on Mimas raised his eyebrows, then nodded. "Yes, please, Cylona. Perhaps I can make him think of something else."

He knew better than anyone that the idea was hopeless. When Myles Kantor had his mind on something, nothing and no one could distract his attention.

"Very well," Cylona Pavelsson said.

Gobert Grifaan turned his chair to the side and watched the archshaped receiver of the matter transmitter built into the wall of his office. The high-energy field within the red-outlined area flared up, and moments later the form of the chief Terran scientist appeared.

Grifaan stood up and attempted to give the appearance of being relaxed and happy to see him. On the inside, the truth was quite different. Kantor came here regularly, and with only one purpose. His wife. He was not interested in anything else on Mimas.

Grifaan approached Kantor with an outstretched hand. The two men greeted each other without a word.

"I just came from Trokan," Myles Kantor said in a low voice. "I don't really have any time because we're still tied up with our examination of the Temple of Kummerog. Please understand if I don't stay any longer than I have to."

"Of course, of course."

Grifaan let the door slide up and stepped out into the corridor. It might have been just about thirty meters from his office to the quarantine station. He had never measured it exactly. Kantor followed close behind. The Chief Physician stopped at a door with multiple locks and hesitated for a moment.

*Do you really want to see her?* his thoughts shrieked. *Why?* But he suppressed the impulse and remained silent. None of it would ever cross his lips. In reality, Grifaan knew very well, he was the one who couldn't bear the sight of the woman in her survival capsule. He gave the code and stepped to one side. The door slid into the wall. As always, Kantor was in a hurry to cross through the disinfection lock, and he impatiently allowed the procedure to be carried out on him.

The Syntron let them on through, and they came out of the lock and stepped into the sterile hall. Machinery on the walls hummed softly. The Chief Physician read the data about the woman from the holo-display that the equipment projected over the capsule.

Kallia Nedrun was as healthy as any other human being. Her physical data showed no deviation from normal. Even so, she was unconscious. She had been in a coma for 76 years, ever since being seriously injured by a Spindle-Being. Medical science had healed her physical injuries within a few months. Nothing at all prevented her from awakening.

But there was *something*. Something that no doctor and no psychologist could explain. It was as much a part of her mysterious origin as the inexplicable additional component in her DNA that had been discovered almost by accident, and the fact that she had more than once

spoken in an unknown language when in a state of extreme excitement. That was all a long time ago.

Kallia had been silent for nearly 76 years, and had never moved. Her brainwaves showed a normal if reduced range.

*A living corpse.* That was how Gobert Grifaa always thought of her.

And he could do nothing about it although he had all the resources of this world at his disposal for curing even hopeless cases.

When Myles Kantor sadly took leave of his wife in order to go on the second Base expedition to the Great Void, he had entrusted Kallia to his mother. Enza Mansoor was now long dead, having lost her life in a laboratory accident in the year 1219 NGE. After the return of the Base to the Milky Way Galaxy, the first thing Myles Kantor did was bury her urn in the small garden of his bungalow on Lake Goshun. That Kallia still lived helped him endure the loss of his mother during the decades that followed.

But as for Kallia herself...

Grifaa stopped and stared at the display so he didn't have to look into the antigrav capsule. Mediprobos hung over Kallia. They ensured the supply of nutrients and fluids and maintained her body in the best possible condition. Kallia lacked nothing - except her consciousness.

As always, Kantor stepped up to the capsule. His hand slid slowly through the antigrav field that surrounded his wife. His fingertips touched her forehead, her nose, her cheeks, and finally her mouth.

Gobert Grifaa closed his eyes. He didn't want to watch. He couldn't. His knees went weak and trembled - as though it were his own wife and not Kantor's.

"My darling Kallia," Kantor whispered. "I'm here at your side. If you can feel it, that's enough. I know you can't give me a sign."

He slowly pulled his hand back, then just as slowly walked around the capsule and to the Chief Physician. "Thank you, Gobert. I'll see you later."

He went out, not even looking back. Grifaa had to make an effort to keep up with him. They avoided eye contact in the lock, then Kantor went straight to the office and the matter transmitter. The field was still up and the Syntron informed him that there was a good hyperconnection with Trokan and the *Paper Moon*.

Kantor waved and stepped into the energy field. Seconds later, his body vanished and the field dissolved.

Gobert Grifaa clutched the armrests of his chair. "I couldn't do it," he moaned. "Not after so long."

Even watching was difficult for him. He could barely stand being near Kallia.

And yet he couldn't bring himself to look for another job. It was for Myles Kantor's sake that Gobert Grifaa remained at his post.

## 2.

The glider convoy with the data-recording instruments headed towards the west and followed the smoke trail down in the plain. A train hopelessly overloaded with Herreach struggled in the direction of Moond. Some of the passengers clung to the outsides of the cars while others lay on the roofs. Now and then, one fell off in exhaustion and remained lying next to the tracks.

"Khan to convoy," the LFT Commissioner said. "The range of our tractor beams is too limited to be able to reach from here. Four craft remain on course. The others follow the train. We'll try to save what we can."

They swung around and accelerated. Cistolo Khan dropped some robots off near the tracks to tend to the fallen Herreach, but all they could do was confirm their deaths. The Herreach on and in the train didn't care about their fellows.

The LFT Commissioner sighed in frustration. "The ones who fell off didn't have any fatal injuries," he said. "They could have lived. But they just gave up and died."

He would have given anything to be able to help in every case and avoid such incidents, but it was hopeless. He would have to assign a guardian to every single Herreach, and that was impossible for a population of 145 million individuals.

"The train will need another two hours at least to reach its destination," Bruno Drenderbaum estimated. Next to the broadshouldered Cistolo Khan, the LFT Commissioner's friend and assistant seemed downright undernourished, even puny. "The city can't handle the flood of refugees. Large parts of Moond were destroyed or badly damaged by the earthquake."

Cistolo Khan shook his head as though trying to rid himself of an annoying insect. His hands gripped the armrests of the pilot seat. "They're reacting completely contrary to common sense," he murmured. "I would have expected them to leave the city and scatter across the countryside. Instead, it's just the opposite."

"It's because of their mentality." Drenderbaum leaned to the right to see more of the plain below. "They think only about the present and never about the future. Well, almost never. After all, they stormed the Temple after Schimbaa wrecked it almost as if they expected to find gold inside."

The glances of the two men met. Khan let go of the armrests and busied himself with the scanner controls. "There's an earthquake in progress 1500 kilometres to the west of here!" he exclaimed. "That's in the area of the Herreach city of Hovver." He made a decision on the spot and activated the com.

"Cistolo Khan to all personnel," he said. "All space units prepare for immediate deployment! The 42 research ships will send launches to the Temple of Kummerog. The 3000 units of the sentry fleet will approach the planetary surface to an altitude of five kilometres and prepare for a large-scale operation."

Confirmation was received from the fleet commanders. At the same time, close-range communications everywhere within the Terran fleet awakened into excited activity.



"What's going on, Khan?" someone called to ask. "What's this all about?"

"Take a look at the readings, Wallerten," the LFT Commissioner replied. He not only knew all the more than 3000 captains of the ships over Trokan personally, but also their voices. "We still have three hours until sundown on this side of the planet. Then the surface crust will cool down again. Have the robot units reached their positions yet?"

"That'll take a while," Prett Boemer reported from the *Paper Moon*. "Several units have been affected by disturbances in their antigrav systems."

"It must be due to local variations in Trokan's gravitational field." Khan groaned softly. "We're losing time that we'll probably never be able to make up again."

He ordered the robots to remain in the vicinity of the train and use their tractor beams to ensure that no more Herreach fell to their deaths. Then the gliders changed course and headed towards their original destination.

Cistolo Khan accelerated at maximum power. A defence field automatically formed around the outer hull to protect the glider from overheating as a result of air friction. The craft sped northwards and rose into Trokan's thin atmosphere. After a thousand kilometres, it went into a steep dive and braked to a stop just above the surface.

"Position Delta-Two-Eight-Five has been reached," the Syntron reported.

"Open hatch four and unload the data-collection instruments!" Khan ordered. He stood up and closed the helmet of his SERUN.

The two men left the glider and touched down on the barren plains of the planet. It was a world that had been on the negative side of the Universe just a few decades before, and during the last 66 years it had gone through an accelerated evolution.

That only roughly described what had actually taken place: On Trokan, time had passed 3.7 million times faster than in the rest of the Solar System. The planet had been enveloped in a Time Lapse field that had insulated it from its surroundings, and within, 250 million relative years had gone by.

During that time, Trokan had lost its negative Strangeness and developed into a life-bearing world. A race of humanoid beings called the Herreach had arisen. Beneath the whirling temporal field over the atmosphere, the Herreach had built their civilization and formed their view of the universe - until that moment when the evolutionary process stopped and their world readjusted to the space and time of the Solar System.

Now that the insulating layer above Trokan's atmosphere had disappeared, there were increasing signs that the cyclic changes of temperature brought on by the appearance of day and night would have consequences within the planet itself.

And it wouldn't be pretty.

Cistolo Khan took personal charge of the crew, communicating via his SERUN's Pikosyn. As he waited for results, he restlessly shifted his weight from one foot to the other and stared out at the sparse grass, turned brown from the night frosts.

"Tension in the planetary crust's surface is increasing exponentially," the Pikosyn announced. "Danger is at maximum."

Khan was not a scientist and the weight of the report broke over him like gigantic wave. All of his fears seemed trivial in comparison with reality.

"Khan to *Nathan*," he said. "You have all the data from the ships. Can you give us a preliminary high-level projection? How much time do we have?"

"Hello, Cistolo!" came the hypercom reply from Luna. "Time for what?"

"To save Trokan."

"About four months."

It sounded like a lot of time, but it was really damned little.

"I need an action plan as fast as possible."

"Very well. Preparations are already underway. I am working on it."

"Thank you. Meanwhile, we'll try to save what we can."

The two men went back inside the glider. The LFT Commissioner sank into his seat, closed his eyes, and breathed deeply. Then he sat up straight with renewed determination.

"Let's get to work, Bruno!"

Drenderbaum just sighed. "Where do we start?" He pointed to the displays on the scanner. Dozens of hot spots had sprung up everywhere on Trokan.

Cistolo Khan did not reply.

\*

Trokan had the same mass as Mars but a somewhat greater diameter. Its density was accordingly less, and that was now having its effect with the appearance of day and night and the new cycle of warming and cooling. As night began, cooling in an environment with only a slight amount of heatretaining moisture caused severe temperature differences between the surface and the deeper layers of rock. Cracks and crevices appeared and expanded with each passing day and night. Even so, it wasn't so much the cooling phases that eroded the stability of the planetary crust. The sudden and intense warming after sunrise placed additional strain on Trokan's equilibrium.

Cistolo Khan placed a call to Myles Kantor. "What do you think of the proposal to provide Trokan with a hemispherical shield against the sun?" he asked the scientist. "That would prevent warming of the surface."

After the devastating earthquake in Moond, they had discussed other possibilities for reducing the sun's warmth.

"Yes," Kantor said, "but we'd need more than 30,000 ships near the planet for that or a few thousand at a greater distance. We don't have enough ships for either option."

Khan nodded gravely. He thanked Kantor and broke off the connection.

From the *Paper Moon* came alarm reports and their accompanying coordinates. Some new zones of severe warming and tectonic activity had emerged and the worst was feared.

Cistolo Khan stared at the infrared scanner, which displayed an alien and threatening picture of the planetary surface. The number of detectable hot spots had climbed to more than a hundred. In some cases, it was only a matter of a few degrees of difference in temperature compared with the surroundings. In most, however, the difference was rapidly rising to frightening amounts.

The LFT Commissioner turned the glider towards the nearest danger zone. At the same time, he made com contact with the two *Protos*-class ships that were hovering twenty kilometres above the area and had sounded the alarm. Khan then tapped into the two spacespheres' scans and enlarged the surface view until he could see every bush and every tremor of the ground.

At the edge of the affected area, the infrared scan showed a scattered pattern of light and dark spots. The dark spots were warm areas with a stable temperature, while the temperatures of some of the light ones were rising fast.

"Those are Herreach," Khan realized. "Descend half a kilometre and use the tractor beam to move them somewhere else."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Someplace where they'll be safe for the time being."

The overwhelming majority of Herreach lived as farmers on the barren steppes. With a great deal of prudence and in harmony with their environment, they raised just as much food as the population needed to survive without the planet's sensitive ecosystem collapsing. There were no oceans on Trokan, only a few watercourses, and almost no rain. The thin atmosphere did not permit lush vegetation. The slight amount of moisture necessary for plant growth

resulted from the natural interplay of wind currents and the condensation of atmospheric water vapour from warming or cooling air.

The Herreach detected by the scanners were plainly not inhabitants of one of the seven cities. They were farmers who had no reluctance to sleep in the fields.

The increasing warmth awakened them. At first they didn't move, then they all suddenly leaped to their feet and began running in the same direction. Even so, they were in no particular hurry.

The warm zones were shining more brightly on the scanner. An alarm sounded on both *Protos*-class ships. Disturbances in the planet's magnetic field were being registered.

"Get down there - fast!" Khan ordered. "Don't waste a second!"

The ships were still too high to be able to intervene effectively.

The ground beneath the group of Herreach began to move, then bent like the planks of a small cutter in a typhoon.

"Hurry up!" the LFT Commissioner urged his pilots.

Bruno Drenderbaum said nothing. He knew only too well what was at stake now. He switched on the external loudspeakers and the Translator.

"We will help you," his voice echoed across the plain. "Stay together so the ships can pick you up."

None of the Herreach reacted. Mute and blindly following their instinct, they hurried onwards. Some turned towards the north, others towards the south, but their curving paths would all finish in the same place.

"They're heading for the nearest city!" Khan exclaimed. "Can't they think of anything better to do than flee to the worst place possible? This isn't natural."

"You may be right," was all Drenderbaum had to say. He knew his boss well enough to know Khan was merely thinking out loud and didn't really expect an answer.

They both knew that the Herreach mentality and psychology were nothing like their own. The Herreach were a race that had evolved almost in fast forward as the rest of the Solar System's inhabitants watched, and had to be considered completely alien.

With new determination, Khan bent over the panel and manipulated the energy flow controls. "Hang on, Bruno!"

The glider shot off to the side as Khan diverted a portion of the energy from the drive to the side defence fields and the rear booster. An aura invisible in the normal visual range enveloped the underside of the craft. As co-pilot, Drenderbaum reduced the thrust still further and gently righted the craft.

"More to the right!" Khan ordered. "Now lower! Still lower. A meter and a half above the ground. Good. And now move slowly to the left."

Drenderbaum flew the glider without any assistance from the automatic controls. He preferred to rely on himself in serious situations rather than depend on the reactions of a Syntronic. The glider approached the running Herreach from the side and used its surrounding protective force-field to carefully nudge them away. None of the beings even so much as turned a head. They went on running, their bodies and heads bent slightly forward.

"This isn't accomplishing anything." The two men's glances met.

"I can see that." Cistolo Khan pursed his lips.

A look up through the overhead canopy showed the position lights of the two spacespheres. They were still 800 meters above the ground. That was 300 meters too many. They were running out of time.

The scanners flashed. Somewhere in front of them, a rapidly expanding heat source had appeared.

"You up there - activate tractor beams!" Khan exclaimed. "Make sure you grab all the Herreach, and I mean every last one!"

The plain was splitting apart. They could follow the rupture on the scanner as a fissure opened a kilometre below the surface and quickly spread upwards. Hundreds of spotlight beams stabbed down from the two spaceships in the sky and illuminated the chaos.

The ground gaped open. A dark crevice three or four meters wide suddenly ran across the plain. Smoke billowed out from within.

The Herreach reacted as though in slow motion. Some of them took no notice at all of the obstacle.

"They're like lemmings," Drenderbaum whispered. "They have one goal in their minds and nothing else."

*They're running after their Kummerog*, Khan thought, and threw his friend and assistant a quick glance. "There up ahead, Bruno," he said. "It's up to you."

A group of Herreach were headed towards the crevice as though magically pulled to it. Drenderbaum raced the glider ahead and grazed the natives with the force-field. He adroitly shoved them away from the crevice and forced them to change their direction. Moments later they came within range of a tractor beam, lost their contact with the ground, and floated upwards towards the two LFT ships.

The *Paper Moon* called again. Trokan's surface had broken open in two hundred different places. The phenomenon was occurring mainly in the equatorial region and at the two poles.

"Has *Nathan* reported yet?"

"No, Chief," Prett Boemer's voice replied, "but we're expecting something any minute now. We have a continuously open data link with the Supersyntronic on Luna. It has been kept informed of everything happening on Trokan and in the area surrounding the fourth planet."

Although decades had passed since the exchange of the crystallized Mars with its threatening death field, Cistolo Khan had trouble accepting Trokan as the actual fourth planet. The planet from the Arresum had never been more than an alien body, and it had been the undoing of the *Polyamid* along with Geo Sheremdoc, Boris Siankow, and its entire crew.

An exclamation from his pilot directed Khan's attention to the crevice in the ground. It had now widened to at least ten meters, and the growing distance between the edges was increasing fast enough to be easily seen. Herreach were crowding along either side. They found themselves in a blind spot between tractor beams and paid no attention to the danger they were in. They hurried along the very brink of the crevice and now and then one of them fell into the depths. Drenderbaum dropped the glider into the abyss, using the vehicle's one tractor beam in an attempt to prevent the worst from happening. The beam caught most of the falling Herreach, but a few were already too far down. They fell more than a kilometre to their deaths.

"Reinforcements are on the way," the two ships reported. "Several space-jets have disembarked and are coming to help you."

"Thank you," Cistolo Khan said. His words were lost in a rumbling and clattering - part of the crevice face had collapsed, its debris falling into the abyss and taking the glider with it.

### 3.

"Attention, groups three and nine! Shield your positions! The Herreach are coming towards you."

One of the men gave a sharp whistle and leaped for the projector. Moments later, a defence field flared up and cut the rear part of the hall off from the passageway that led outside.

They were everywhere. They crept out of the smallest openings in the rubble, bored like worms into the wreckage that the materialized projection of Schimbaa the Giant had caused, and felt their way blindly through the few still passable corridors. They got in the way at every turn and hindered the scientists and technicians from the 42 research ships. They surrounded scientific equipment and bothered the tech teams with insistent questions and nonsensical remarks.

And over everything lay the constant, never-ending murmur of their cry for Kummerog.

Ose Bandolph faltered in mid-step. The Herreach were coming towards him in a broad line. They cut off his retreat, so he could escape only by going forwards. The Trokanian natives were crowding through the corridor, and the relatively small Terran could hardly tell how many there were. On average, the Herreach were more than 20 centimetres taller than he was.

"Kummerog? Kummerog?"

"There isn't any Kummerog here, whoever that is," he said aloud. His voice coming from the Translator didn't sound especially convincing. What was the point in trying to block them from entering a building to which they had an older claim - or perhaps even the only rightful one?

He spread his arms out, but the natives didn't pay any attention to him. Their bodies bent over forward, they moved towards him in a wide front. They dug their hands into the rubble like excavator shovels, and from their mouths came that constant moaning: "Kummerog!"

Bandolph activated his com unit and called the *Paper Moon*. "We urgently need reinforcements," he said, and hunkered down.

The Herreach had almost reached him. By now at the latest, his Pikosyn would have activated the defence field, but Bandolph had turned off the Syntronic. Unprotected, he waited for them to trample him. The Herreach were swarming in the direction of where the science teams from the *Paper Moon* were working under Myles Kantor's leadership. Thousands of natives were combing through other areas of the Temple and following the paths of destruction that Schimbaa, their mentally projected giant made flesh, had carved out before dissolving into thin air.

"You have force-field projectors with you. Use them to shield your positions." That was Prett Boemer personally. The commander of the *Paper Moon* had eyes and ears everywhere.

"That goes without saying. But the Herreach don't worry about force-fields. They just run right into them."

"We'll send you a few extra projectors."

"That's something, at least. But hurry up!"

The crowding Herreach pushed Bandolph to the ground. He forced himself between them, thereby avoiding the fate of being trampled outright. They didn't even notice his presence. Shoulder to shoulder, the line of Free Breathers and priests of the Cleros rolled on, their constant cry droning in the air above them:

"Kummerog. Kummerog."

Ose Bandolph struggled to his feet from the dust and stared at them, flabbergasted. When would they finally understand? There wasn't any Kummerog. He clapped his SERUN's gloves together to shake the dust off and shook his head inside his helmet.

"It's probably a greater cultural shock than any other race in this universe has ever experienced," said a soft voice behind him.

Bandolph turned around. "Myles! At last! Where have you been hiding?"

"On Mimas." Myles Kantor pointed to the Herreach. "As for the natives, we should leave them alone. They'll have to figure things out for themselves. Certainty will help them more in the long run than uncertainty. Keeping them away from the Temple would be a serious mistake."

"You're right about that. Could you come with me? I left my post in order to meet you."

"Any news?"

"No. You didn't miss anything during your absence. The wreckage and the Temple machinery are still being analysed but we haven't gotten any results."

They followed the Herreach for a bit, then turned down a side corridor. Entering through a low door, they came into a small room where one of the science teams had set up quarters. Several robots and floating platforms were occupied with moving rubble out of the way.

Kantor bent down and picked up a small object made of dark blue metal. It looked like a miniaturized handbeamer and was reminiscent of something made by the Swoon or the vanished Siganese.

"It's about one-tenth regular size," Kantor said and tried to bend the object. Using all of his strength, he managed to break it apart. Its interior glistened black and dark red. As he held the pieces down, dark dust sprinkled out.

"It's always the same." Bandolph tapped a machine that rose up next to him and reached the ceiling. It appeared to be in about the same condition as the tiny object. "When we open up the large ones, we get the same results."

"Chain fire," Kantor murmured, lost in thought. "Come on, this way."

They went from one team to another and listened to reports on the results to date of the investigation. Except for dust and wreckage, there was nothing in the Temple. Even the machines in the areas untouched by Schimbaa were internally pulverized.

Kantor's term "chain fire" made the rounds and reduced all the results to a common denominator. Something must have destroyed the machines from within so they wouldn't fall into alien hands.

The scientists were working their way through an apparently random mixture of miniaturized technology and machine parts that looked as though they had been enlarged to the point of unusability. A unified picture could not be formed. Many objects were so large that only a giant like Schimbaa could have used them. Others could be measured in the tenth of a millimetre range and smaller. Not one piece or machine fit human hands.

Almost all elements within the Temple of Kummerog were movable to some limited extent. They could be pushed a few centimetres, but no more. Corridors and shafts ran horizontally and vertically through the structure without any discernible system. The rooms large and small seemed to have no coherent overall arrangement.

The specialists interpreted the lack of any common construction characteristics as evidence that either different races had worked on bringing the Temple of Kummerog into

being, or an extremely flexible, highly advanced mind had been behind it, for which size relationships were of no importance.

There was one thing that the drillhead-like structure most definitely was not, and Myles Kantor made it emphatically clear to everyone.

"Forget the Ayindi," he said. "Whatever else it might be, it's not an Ayindi archive."

"But what is it, then?"

Ose Bandolph was not the only one who asked that question. It was on the mind of everyone on Trokan, on Terra, and in the entire Solar System. The people on the *Gilgamesh* were probably also wondering - unless they already knew the answer.

Kantor pursed his lips. "I don't know. We don't have *Nathan's* analysis yet. Something completely alien must have produced the Time Lapse field. If we could find the reason for it, we could probably come to some kind of conclusion about whoever caused it. But that might take a thousand years."

The ground began to tremble. A slight jolt ran through the Temple. From outside came the report that it was either an aftershock from the last quake or a precursor of the next.

The Lunar Syntronic called two hours later with the answer. The content of the message pulled all the speculators onto the shaky ground of facts.

"At present, only one conclusion is possible," *Nathan* explained. "The purpose of the Time Lapse field was the evolution of Trokan and bringing forth the Herreach."

"That's all very well, *Nathan*." Myles Kantor leaned back against one of the gigantic machines. "It just doesn't make any sense to put an alien race, not very far advanced by our standards, on our doorstep. The Herreach are an utterly peaceful people."

"That is correct. Do not forget the projections, however. Trokan is falling into chaos. The Herreach will be destroyed in a very short time. It would be a moral defeat for the human race in the Solar System. It is unknown as yet who in the Universe would profit by it."

The Syntronic emphasized the words "as yet."

Kantor felt the heat rising in his face. His otherwise pale and cool cheeks suddenly glowed. "It doesn't matter how it all happened or what the ultimate purpose is - we will never accept anything like that. The Herreach are entitled to protection in accordance with the Galactic Convention of the year 117 NGE."

Ose Bandolph laid a hand on his shoulder. "That's easier said than done, Myles. You shouldn't take *Nathan's* analysis so hard. Who knows how long these beings will need our protection? Perhaps next week it will be the other way around. Who will protect us from them when they've finally gotten the hang of our technology and civilization?"

Kantor shook his head vigorously. "They aren't capable of it. They never will be! Unless, that is, this Temple has some kind of direct influence on them. What would happen if Kummerog really does appear?"

For that question, no one in the Solar System had an answer.

\*

Presto Go had lost most of her former decisiveness and urgency. Slowly, almost as if asleep, she made her way across the now jumbled and broken paving stones of the Temple plaza. Some of them crumbled beneath her shoes. She had to make wide detours around the deep crevices that had resulted from the earthquake. Four purple-robed Exhorters accompanied her.

In the distance, at the edge of the plaza and in the shelter of an open space by some collapsed buildings, stood dozens of Clerea. Their white robes were faded and dirty, and to some extent torn and tattered.

The Supreme Herald of Kummerog tried to make up for the shabby impression by the especially striking splendour of her own clothing. Her robe shone bright yellow and flattered her body. On the back was emblazoned a blue oval, its colour a little reminiscent the sky over Terra though it had no resemblance to that over Trokan.

"Be careful," Prett Boemer advised the Terran Chief Scientist. "It'll be best if I give you a little

company. Cistolo Khan and Bruno Drenderbaum are otherwise occupied."

Moments later, Boemer appeared beneath the *Paper Moon* and hurried towards Kantor with outstretched hand.

"Presto Go seems to have a healthy fear of the Temple," Kantor said. "That makes her different from the rest of her kind."

"The Supreme Herald has probably never had to do any of the dirty work," Boemer replied in a low voice. "What's really surprising is that she requested a meeting with representatives of Terra. What for? She knows that we're helping her and her people as much as we can. All the Herreach have accepted that without a word. Why is Presto Go suddenly taking the initiative?"

"If you wait a moment, she'll tell us herself."

Silently, they watched the odd roundabout path the Supreme Herald and her four companions took towards the centre of the plaza where the Temple of Kummerog rose to the sky. In spite of their impressive size, the Herreach seemed to shrink. The ground beneath them began to sag, as though the weight of five people was too much for it.

"Don't worry," Serah Jennin called from the *Paper Moon*. "We have them on the screen. If the ground collapses beneath them, we can pull them out again with the tractor beam."

Fortunately, that proved to be unnecessary. The ground stabilized and the teams in the boundary zones between the Temple plaza and the city sounded the all-clear. They worked mainly with small, portable equipment, clearing the rubble of the lightly constructed buildings and keeping an eye out for anyone buried alive.

The Herreach didn't try to stop the Terrans, but they didn't show any great interest in helping them, either.

That was one point Kantor wanted to talk with the Supreme Herald about.

The small group reached the two men. Kantor spoke a few words in greeting, then waited.

The Herreach whispered to each other. Finally, the Supreme Herald managed to reach a decision and began speaking. "Give us some proof that you had nothing to do with the accident within the Temple," she requested. "That is the least that you owe us."

"Your people are inside the Temple," Boemer said, dodging the question. "We have seen Herreach in purple and white robes among them, as well. They are looking at everything and will tell you what they've seen. As for us, we've known all along what really happened. Do you want to hear it?"

"No."

"Ha!" The Commander of the *Paper Moon* made a snort that caught the Herreach's attention. "You should get used to the truth sometime, Presto Go. If I remember correctly, it was Gen Triokod's people whose solidified projection laid waste to the Temple. Schimbaa the Giant, a manifestation that went out of control. The whole thing is fascinating, but also very careless."

"You are right. We are the ones who caused it. I am convinced of that even without looking inside the Temple." The words from the Translator turned formal. "It does not matter if the Free Breathers or we of the Cleros were responsible. We are one people, and our



destiny is to awaken Schimbaa the Giant and thereby bring about the arrival of Kummerog. Kummer..."

"Apparently just the opposite has taken place," Boemer interrupted. "Schimbaa has destroyed the Temple and everything in it. It's possible your god Kummerog will never come."

Presto Go and her four purple-robed companions slumped even more. "Schimbaa must never be called forth again," the Supreme Herald whispered. She closed her eyelids so tightly that her close-standing eyes seemed to disappear almost completely from her face. "The Giant is a curse."

"If the god is anything like the giant, it might be a blessing for you if Kummerog never does appear."

Myles Kantor took Prett Boemer by the arm and pulled him back a little as a reminder to show more restraint.

"Everything's going to be all right," the Chief Scientist insisted. "As far as the quakes and crevices are concerned, we'll take of that. And Kummerog? You can go on worshipping him, too. It won't change anything."

"No, no, no!" Presto Go howled at him. "Nothing is like it was before. Our hope is gone. Our view of the world, the philosophy of our existence - they're lying smashed on the ground. The world is in upheaval. What more signs do we need? Our life has lost its meaning."

"You are mistaken," Kantor said, smiling reassuringly even though the Herreach wouldn't understand the gesture. "You are very much mistaken. There's always another tomorrow. Sometimes it's worse, sometimes better. Your life cannot lose its meaning. Not as long as our universe exists."

Presto Go did not reply. She stood there stiff and silent, and her companions were equally mute. Not even a muscle twitched in their faces.

When they had been standing like statues for a quarter of an hour, the two Terrans left them. Prett Boemer returned to the *Paper Moon* while Myles Kantor went back into the Temple. A few robots were ordered to watch over the five Herreach.

Then Presto Go and her companions finally came out of their seeming trance and hurried in the direction of the city as fast as they could.

## 4.

The Syntron's emergency program came on. For situations like this, there was a command code that allowed the automatic pilot to take control even without authorization and initiate rescue of the occupants.

Within a fraction of a second, an energy field flared outwards from the glider's hull. The craft pulled up as the Syntron attempted to stabilize its flight despite the heavy masses of dirt and rock weighing it down. Even though the energy field burned much of the dirt away and melted some of the rock, it was only a little help.

A shrill whistling indicated that the many tons of fallen dirt and rock were too much. Before the glider could reach even a minimally useful acceleration, the avalanche had forced it nearly 300 meters down.

Cistolo Khan struggled futilely against the restraining fields that held him in his seat. "Bruno, we've got to get out of here before we crash. If nothing else works, we'll break out. Understand?"

"Loud and clear."

Four hundred meters below mean surface level. Somewhere far ahead, tiny shadows could be made out in the glare of the spotlights, dropping fast into the depths. The bodies of Herreach?

With difficulty, the glider worked its way forward with its heavy load. The only manoeuvring room was ahead of the glider, which limited the Syntron's options considerably. The craft started to list as a portion of the dirt and rock masses slid off to the left. The control system tried to adjust for the tilt, but the readings on the holographic indicators suddenly shot into the red zone. Only ten seconds until the field projectors burned out!

The tilt increased. The glider grazed the steep wall of the crevice and lost speed. Its bow started to sink.

"Now!"

Khan touched the controls on his belt, trying to use the Pikosyn to help turn off the restraining fields holding him in his seat.

"I am sorry," announced the quiet voice of the glider's automatic control system. "You will not be safer anywhere else than in your seat."

A moment later, the glider finally tipped over completely and hurtled straight down into the depths. The masses of dirt and rock slid down along the force-field and disappeared into the darkness.

Khan spat out a curse and thought of the Herreach in the tractor beam. The beam wouldn't be able to do anything against the force of the dirt avalanche.

Almost at the same time, something began to pull at the glider and slow its fall. The automatic pilot reacted at once, switching to a stable glide and turning the drive off.

As gently as a feather, the craft settled into its new course. The bow gradually pointed itself upwards in the direction of the space-jet that had caught it with a powerful tractor beam and was pulling it towards the surface.

"Oh no!" Bruno Drenderbaum slapped his hands against his helmet. The glider's tractor beam showed no trace of any Herreach. The rescue attempt had failed.

"Is everything all right with you?" asked a deep contralto voice. "Donder Pereira speaking. It doesn't look to me like your glider's damaged."

"But that's the only thing," growled Cistolo Khan. "Couldn't you get here a little faster?"

"I'm sorry. Fate seems to be against us. The teams had better luck in the other places. Meanwhile, we've managed to get everything under control. No more Herreach are falling into the crevice, in case that reassures you."

"No."

A holo formed and showed the woman's troubled yet composed face. "Very well, Khan. You're our leader. I'll give you a summary of the casualty numbers."

Khan ground his teeth. "Make it short."

"Twenty-three Herreach fell in. Another nine were trampled to death in the crowding at the edge."

"If you think I'm going to be relieved, you're wrong."

"I'm not happy about it either. Over and out." The hologram dissolved. Cistolo Khan tried to remember what he knew about this woman. It was not a great deal. She had been a typical loner ever since some terrible tragedy. Traces of it were deeply engraved in her face.

Gliders appeared among the space-jets. Prett Boemer had sent additional support for transporting the Herreach. The natives showed no reaction as the strangers loaded them into vehicles or transported them with tractor beams. The danger in which they had recently found themselves had not shaken them out of their passivity.

Death was one of those things in life that didn't interest them. Either death came or it didn't.

Even so, they asked questions. Previous experience with these beings showed that they learned slowly but thoroughly. They marvelled at the flying craft and the invisible energy fields, comparing them with the ghost trains that sometimes ran between the cities. Those trains were called Tschukas in Herreach mythology and could not be distinguished from regular trains, but anyone who climbed aboard one was never seen again.

Donder Pereira set Khan and his craft down a kilometre away from the crevice. The space-jet then withdrew and sped towards the nearest trouble spot. Cistolo Khan left it to the crews of the other gliders to deal with the Herreach.

"Syntron, I want a complete check," the LFT Commissioner said.

"Already executed, Cistolo. The results are coming - now. Except for some excessive strain on the drive system, there is nothing to report. There was no damage."

"Well, that's something." Khan clapped Drenderbaum on the shoulder. "Hey, Bruno! Pull yourself together!"

Drenderbaum's distress was genuine. He was not playing a part as he so often did on occasions when it was necessary to give people a false impression of himself. He sat there with sagging shoulders, and when he opened the helmet of his SERUN, he looked at Cistolo Khan from eyes deeply sunken in a haggard face. Bruno Drenderbaum appeared as though he had been dead for hours.

In the next moment, however, he collected himself. With new determination, he manipulated the highly sensitive control fields on the guidance console.

"Important news," he announced. "Myles is coming on hologram. And *Nathan* is setting up a hypercom link to us, as well."

\*

The Terran Chief Scientist stood amid the wreckage inside the Temple of Kummerog. Behind him, Terrans and Herreach sorted through the debris that Schimbaa the Giant had left

behind. The two occupants of the glider were able to see everything in the three-dimensional hologram that appeared between the seats.

"Good evening," Kantor said. As usual, he looked bleary-eyed. His hair stood out in all directions, and he outdid Bruno Drenderbaum in paleness by a few nuances. "I'm glad to see you healthy and safe."

"Thanks," Cistolo Khan said with a grin. "It could have happened to anyone."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing. It was supposed to be a joke."

"I'm sorry, Cis. I'm not in the mood for jokes now."

"Of course. I apologize, Myles."

Then the Lunar Supersyntronic came on line. "*Nathan* speaking. Analysis of the most recent events on the fourth planet has been completed."

Using the on-board Syntron, *Nathan* projected a hologram a meter in diameter in the glider cabin. A miniaturized, perfectly detailed image of the fourth planet formed.

"The projection includes predictions for the next seven days. The images that were taken at 30-minute intervals are shown here in fast forward. Volcanic activity is indicated in red. Atmospheric disturbances are depicted as green patterns."

All three stared at the planetary globe. The tiny red spots on the brown surface gave Trokan the appearance of a face blotched with measles or pimples. As the spots grew, the brown crust showed cracks and then the first faults. Entire sections of land rose and sank. At their edges appeared fissures, and some of these stretched out for more than a thousand kilometres. Three of the seven Herreach cities were in imminent danger.

"Because of the cyclic temperature changes in the morning and evening, Trokan will not be able to stabilize," *Nathan* continued. "Seismological activity is increasing. The crustal changes are leading to oscillations in the magnetic field, which in turn are causing increasing instability in the entire rotational system. Gigantic whirlwinds are forming in the Polar Regions and soon they will spread out across the whole atmosphere."

"In other words, the Herreach civilization is standing on the edge," Cistolo Khan said.

In the present circumstances, the Herreach will not survive the catastrophe," *Nathan* replied. I am now transmitting the relevant operational procedures to all ships. At present, there is still a feasible chance of containing the catastrophe. Once the planet's entire crust bursts open, it will be too late. That will occur in one hundred days if you do nothing to stop it."

One hundred days - that was less than the four months that *Nathan* had predicted at the beginning. Khan seriously doubted that they could win the race against time no matter what they did.

"We'll put every available ship into action," he said quickly. "Khan to *Paper Moon*: Execute *Nathan's* plan at once."

"Sorry," Prett Boemer answered at once. "It won't get under way for ten minutes yet. At the moment, we're evaluating the data from the robot units and dividing the ships over the planet's surface."

"At least there's one person who's on top of things. Thank you, Prett."

Myles Kantor brushed the strands of hair from his forehead. "You can count on me any time. Let me know if you need me."

His hologram dissolved and the LFT Commissioner looked at his assistant.

"If only I could be certain that rescuing Trokan won't backfire on us. What do the Herreach mean to us and the Solar System? Why did they happen to evolve now and not a few centuries ago?"

Bruno Drenderbaum shrugged. "I don't know..." he began. "Why are we constantly trying to persuade ourselves that there's a connection? Trokan came from the Arresum. Perhaps the Herreach would have appeared there at the same time, too."

Cistolo Khan muttered something that couldn't be understood. He stared at the planet's hologram as it slowly faded out. Then he turned his massive body around and sank into the co-pilot's seat. He called up *Nathan's* data and reviewed it in detail.

"I can only hope it's a coincidence," he murmured. "But there are still a few questions bothering me. Why did Rhodan come here and mention a Meganon Wave that could only have been named after the Terran scientist Attaca Meganon? Had he been expecting Trokan to develop like this, perhaps?"

"You'll have to ask him, Cis."

"That's exactly what we'll do. Let's hope it accomplishes something. In any event, we won't let our guard down."

It was for good reason that a state of Yellow Alarm had existed in the Solar System since the appearance of the drillhead on Trokan and the subsequent accelerated evolution. Trokan was not just any planet exchanged for the contaminated Mars. The Ayindi must have had something in mind when they chose just this planet and insisted that there was no more ideal substitute.

Was Trokan more than a once-dead planet? Intended as a Trojan horse or fifth column in the heart of the human realm?

If that was true, then there wasn't any Iratio Hondro or Blue Legion behind it. Nor any Galactic Guardians. And certainly not the Crystal Imperium or the Raglund Forum. It had to be something else, something unimaginable.

The LFT Commissioner finished his review of *Nathan's* data and threw his head back. "Khan to all personnel," he said. "We will begin Acupressure on Trokan in 90 minutes."

## 5.

Donder Pereira was a woman who had worked her way up through the ranks. After being trained as an astronaut and plasma engineer, she had entered the Home Fleet, as the 3000 LFT units stationed in the Solar System were called. She was first an assistant and later the manager of a science section on the research cruiser Pollux; half a year before evolution on Trokan stopped, she was given the assignment of coordinating scientific preparations for investigating the fourth planet.

She went to work with zeal, and reported the completion of her task after four and a half months. The small scientific fleet stood ready for action.

But then Trokan's accelerated evolution slowed down before an end to the process was in sight. When it finally ceased and the whirling mantle over the planet dissolved, everything else went much too fast.

On the surface lived a race that called itself the Herreach. It possessed a culture that was comparable to Terra's during the first industrial age. Electricity and steam-powered railroads had been invented, and there was a working telegraph system in operation. It had to be assumed that in the near future this race would make further progress in technology, perhaps even space travel.

Donder Pereira was familiar with the fears felt by Cistolo Khan and the First Terran, Paola Daschmagen. A second space-faring race in the Solar system meant problems in the future that could lead to a weakening of the League. Considering the impotence of the Galacticum and the general political climate in the Galaxy, prospects for the future were not especially bright.

The *Paper Moon* landed in Moond, between the great city and the Temple of Kummerog. Everything pointed towards a routine reconnaissance. Donder Pereira was already trying to guess when she would finally receive permission to search for remains from a long time ago.

The situation suddenly changed, however, when the first violent shockwaves swept through the planet's crust and laid waste to large parts of Moond. After millions of years of lying dormant in stable conditions, Trokan was beginning to react to the sudden introduction of day and night phases and the variations in temperature that came with them.

The new situation demanded new thinking. Donder Pereira threw herself into her work as she had done for all the years since that fateful day in September, 1222 NGE, when the *Polyamid* exploded over Trokan. Her life-companion and her son had been on board the research ship and were considered dead. Since then, Donder had made it her mission to search for any remaining traces of the ship and its occupants.

Cistolo Khan wasn't the only one who had told her it was impossible. After the millions of years that had passed on and around Trokan, it could be safely assumed that nothing was left of the *Polyamid* now.

Donder Pereira didn't care. She just wanted to know. Even if she didn't find anything, she would still be able to look at herself in the mirror with a clear conscience. Only when she had

convinced herself would she be able to sleep peacefully again - and that was a blessing of nature she had been denied for the past six decades.

Now, as she flew the space-jet low over the surface of Trokan, she was overcome once more by the same fever that had afflicted her at the beginning of her widowhood. Her face was flushed and her hands trembled slightly. Her SERUN's Pikosyn was aware of her condition but held back. There was no reason yet to intervene.

Donder pulled Khan and Drenderbaum out and looked for any Herreach in the area of the crevice, which had grown to twenty meters wide and four kilometres long. None of the natives were in danger now.

Donder contacted the mother ship. "I need about six hours, then I'll be available again," she told Marcel Whitcombe, the commander of the Protos-class *Sevilla*. "Is that all right?"

Whitcombe knew the story and merely nodded. "Good luck," he said.

Donder managed a very slight smile and switched the connection off. She brushed her black mane of hair back behind her head and wiped her nose once more. Then she checked the half dozen probes that she had brought as personal property to Trokan.

Six probes for an entire planet. That was all she had. They would have to be enough. She'd had two robots at her disposal but left them behind since they would have required an estimated 10,000 years to search the planet completely. And Donder had no intention of listening to the final report in a postmortem freezing chamber.

One last tear crept away from her right eye as she accelerated the space-jet and set her course towards the first of six points around the planet that she had identified beforehand as being suitable positions for her probes. As soon as she reached the site, she released a probe. The ideal altitude was 60 meters above the surface. High enough not to bother the Herreach, and low enough to undertake a thorough search of the ground and lower levels of the atmosphere.

The 130-year-old woman wasn't expecting any success. She only wanted to do something for the two men in her life who had been taken from her. It was one last proof of her love, no more and no less.

\*

"Tectonic stress is building up on the south side of the hills," the Syntron announced. "The heat output from the ground has suddenly increased..."

"There's nothing visible. Not yet." Marcel Whitcombe rubbed his fleshy chin with one hand while with the other he smoothed flat the last few thinning strands of hair at his temples.

A bright red dot on the hologram showed the position of the Protos-class cruiser. It pulsed wildly, and when the ship's commander looked at it, the rhythm seemed to accelerate.

"Syntron, I need an enlargement of that section."

A tiny piece detached itself from the globe-shaped holo-projection just above Cirrus Vonnegutt's head and he made a derisive remark about the resulting hole in the primary image. His eyes had long hurt from constant staring at the huge holoprojection, which took up more than half of the control centre. Trokan hung as a living globe in the middle of the *Sevilla*, and the south pole was at most ten centimetres above Vonnegutt's hair.

The detached holo-section enlarged itself directly in front of the command chair. Whitcombe, sitting in a seat that was much too large for him, involuntarily ducked.

"Larger," he said. "I want to see more surface details."

Again the holo-section increased its size.

The scanner sounded an alarm. The surface tension of the rock was increasing exponentially. Cracks were appearing in Trokan's barren turf. The ground underneath was splitting apart, and heat was emanating from the ensuing fissures.

"Ten degrees, fifteen degrees, twenty degrees," someone in the science section counted. "It's rising pretty fast."

"How far away are we?" Whitcombe asked, knitting his brows.

"We'll reach the eruption point in three and a half minutes," Vonnegutt replied.

*Nathan's* action plan had assigned each of the 3000 ships a precisely defined position in Trokan's atmosphere. From that position, the ship patrolled an assigned area.

As head of the operation, Cistolo Khan had developed a concept he called Acupressure. It meant that the ships applied pressure to the surface of the planet.

Beforehand, however, the Terrans had to apply acupuncture to Trokan's skin. That was done with the help of the implanted sensory probes. They drove tiny needles into the ground, measured the warming and extent of the underlying rock, and transmitted the results to the *Paper Moon*. The linked Syntrons on Khan's flagship evaluated the data and passed it on at once to the 3000 ships in Trokan's atmosphere.

Meanwhile, the temperature in the target area rose rapidly, a hundred degrees in a minute. The process resembled a subterranean atomic bomb explosion. From an all but point-like centre, the heat radiated to all sides. A wave of pressure swept up through the crevices to the surface and blasted the rock apart. The *Sevilla's* sensitive exterior microphones picked up the sound of the cracking and exploding rock in the planet's crust. The ship increased the strength of its protective force-field and reduced its speed. Only six kilometres remained before it reached the site.

A roar like a cannon blast echoed across the landscape until it reached the flanks of the line of hills. Everything before this had been a prelude. Now things were finally happening.

The ground literally exploded. A shockwave burst upwards from the depths and carried tons of turf and humus along with it. At an altitude of two hundred meters, the debris billowed out and fell back to the surface.

Small droplets of sweat formed on Marcel Whitcombe's forehead. "What's happening with the gravoprojectors?"

"Ready for activation," the Syntron reported. "The ship will reach optimum position in just 40 seconds."

The commander acknowledged with a slight nod of his head. "*Sevilla to Paper Moon*," he said. "We're starting now."

"Boomer here. Agreed. Good luck!"

Whitcombe stared at the monitor on his console. It showed the pressure readings at the surface as reported by the scanner as well as by one of the measuring instruments dropped on the surface.

Why did they have to be the first? Couldn't the initial eruption happen somewhere else?

"Projectors on!" Whitcombe ordered. From the corner of his eye, he glanced at the screen showing the situation in Trokan's atmosphere. The 3000 ships were staggered at two different levels above the planet.

Powerful gravity fields suddenly appeared between the LFT ships and the surface. The fields exerted pressure against the ground and prevented the rock from erupting at full strength. Reducing pressure with counter pressure was what Cistolo Khan had meant by Acupressure.

The *Sevilla* began to vibrate noticeably. The stabilizers in the antigrav drive were working at full capacity and their peak values were now reaching into the danger zone. Even so, the pressure of nearly 50 G wasn't enough to stop the forces welling up from the planetary interior.



"Increase to 70 G," Whitcombe said.

He sat completely still in his seat and alternately watched the readouts on his monitor and the holo with a visual depiction of the surface.

They had never done anything like this before, or at least not on this scale.

The commander of the *Sevilla* and leader of the small squadron thought fleetingly of his training 60 years before. They had blown asteroids apart so they could use gravofields to push the pieces back together from all sides. That was all. The long-ago experience was no help to him now.

Trokan was not a dead clump of rock. The planet was alive inside and out. But for how much longer?

"We'll take care of this." Cirrus Vonnegutt grinned almost shamelessly and stared up at the globe hanging above him. "And don't you dare fall on me!"

A giant's invisible fist knocked the *Sevilla* away from Trokan. Whitcombe reacted at once.

"Activate field drive - go to counterthrust!" It was the only way to take the load off the engines and energy storage of the antigrav and gravity fields.

Now the surface scanner sounded an alarm. "Crustal density decreasing. Systematic loosening of the rock detected beneath the surface to a depth of 600 meters."

Marcel Whitcombe glanced at Cirrus Vonnegutt, the colour of whose face was slowly but surely changing to dark red. "Oh, we've got everything under perfect control here," growled the commander sarcastically.

Down on the ground, a ghostly process was taking place. A gigantic patchwork of bright and dark areas had appeared. The heat and pressure were undermining the loose surface rock and the soil layer on top.

"Reduce all gravofields by 70 percent," the commander ordered. "We'll try it a different way."

Suddenly, the excess pressure from the depths of the planet found its way to the surface. The ground erupted in an area seven kilometres long and five wide. The explosion blew rock more than three kilometres into the atmosphere. Without the restraining influence of the gravity fields, it would have been five or six kilometres. The shockwave reached the *Sevilla* and was repelled by the protective force-field enveloping the ship.

"Something went wrong, Marcel!" Vonnegutt finally managed a groan. "And that's an understatement."

"That's for sure!"

Masses of rock weighing many thousands of tons shot upwards towards their ship and slammed against the protective energy fields.

Now data from other breaks in the planet's crust came in. The crews of the other ships were struggling with the same problems. The entire planet was in upheaval. It was questionable whether *Nathan* had calculated correctly. If the surface quakes and ruptures continued at this magnitude, there wouldn't be anything left long before a hundred days had passed.

The fissure in the hillsides now measured ten kilometres long and eight kilometres deep, and yawned a good six kilometres wide.

Marcel Whitcombe shuddered. The hole was like a monster, its ravenous maw gaping wide to swallow everything in its path. Glowing spots appeared. Molten lava was slowly surging into the open.

"Hold it back!" he said. "Carefully, now. Yes, that's good."

The gravity fields pushed into the fissure. Where they met the rock and lava flow, a high-energy zone appeared. It could be compared with sprinkling cold water on a hotplate, only on a much vaster scale.

"Three days at most," Vonnegutt said, tossing his head back. "I don't give this planet any more. The best thing to do would be to simply evacuate the Herreach."

"Evacuate them where?" Whitcombe demanded. "Besides, you're forgetting that they won't even let themselves be evacuated. The news of the disaster at the Temple of Kummerog was circulated over the telegraph network. The Herreach don't see a future any more. They want to go down with their world if we can't prevent it from breaking up."

The lava drove upwards. There was no point in holding it down. They looked for other ways. Whitcombe called for additional support and received it in the form of ten more ships. They spaced themselves around the area and attempted to close the surface fissure.

The lava helped them. It spread out evenly, sealing the gaping hole in the ground, and slowly cooled.

For five hours they maintained a constant equalized pressure between the eruption and the gravity fields, and drained off newly appearing excess pressure to the sides. Finally, the forces welling out of Trokan's interior subsided, and they could reduce the energy of the fields.

The danger wasn't over, however. The cool night air jolted the rock with a drastic change in temperature. The difference of several hundred degrees provoked a new outburst.

"*Sevilla to Paper Moon*," Marcel Whitcombe called. "This is getting tiresome. Other teams are moving masses of rock, relieving surface stresses, and sealing the fissures with thermobeams. But all we're doing is just struggling away, without any end in sight."

"Serah Jennin here. Remain at your posts nonetheless. The number of hot spots is increasing. When the night is over and the morning warming begins, the fun will really start."

"Can I at least turn in my immediate resignation?"

"Sorry. Our Administration Syntron is offline at the moment. Its energy is required elsewhere."

It was all just a joke, of course, but Marcel Whitcombe joined in the game.

"Then we'll just postpone it. But if you can see your way to an increase in the hazardous duty bonus, I wouldn't have any object..."

He broke off in the middle of the sentence. The Syntron link was informing him that a new eruptive zone had appeared six kilometres north of the fissure.

Now all the Terrans on duty over Trokan realized that what they seen so far was only the beginning of an enormous catastrophe.

## 6.

Cistolo Khan leaned back against the glider and faced the Temple of Kummerog. Myles Kantor appeared in the entrance, looked around, and approached the LFT Commissioner.

"Hello, Cis!" He was out of breath as he reached the glider. "It's a good thing you're here."

The two men looked at each other through their helmet visors. As he so often did, Myles Kantor appeared exhausted.

"What's on your mind?" Khan asked.

"It's about the *Gilgamesh*. Paola Daschmagen can't be reached, so it's up to you. We've hit a dead end. The Temple of Kummerog won't give up its secrets. We've done everything we can with everything we have, and it still isn't enough. Only Perry's people can accomplish anything now."

"Why are you so sure?" Khan glowered at him. Kantor didn't seem to notice.

"Does it matter, Cis? Have you already forgotten the Meganon Wave?"

Khan laughed hoarsely. "Of course not. They detected something on the *Gilgamesh* that we know nothing about. That's why I've already spoken with Paola. The First Terran has agreed to my suggestion."

Kantor seemed to beam. He suddenly no longer resembled a tired, worn-out scientist, but a happy, carefree boy.

"So the *Gilgamesh* can be here right away...?"

"Not so fast, Myles! I'll give permission for a launch from the *Gilgamesh* to land on Trokan, that's all. If none of our scientists have any objections, I'll get in touch with Rhodan."

"None of them have anything against it," Kantor said happily. "They even asked me to try to arrange this."

Khan leaned forward and looked at him grimly. "Oh? And there wasn't a single objection?"

"No. You can ask them all."

"Most peculiar," the LFT Commissioner muttered, barely audible. "If Gia only knew...Never mind. The only things that count are the facts." Gia de Moleon was the Director of the Terran League Service, or TLS, the LFT's intelligence organization.

"Attention!" the Pikosyns of their SERUNs announced. "*Nathan* reports that a twelfth of the *Gilgamesh* just separated from the main body of the ship. It accelerated, then disappeared into hyperspace."

"A twelfth?" Dumbfounded, Cistolo Khan stared at Myles Kantor. "What does that mean?"

The Terran Chief Scientist shrugged. "Figure it out for yourself. Or ask Perry. If I know him, he'll be here shortly."

Barely ten seconds later, the scanner reported that an alien craft in the form of a pentagonal dodecahedron had just appeared high over Trokan.

"*Gilgamesh* I here." They heard the striking, unmistakable voice of Perry Rhodan. "We request landing coordinates."

"Not necessary," Cistolo Khan replied. "Land next to the *Paper Moon*."

When the Pikosyn gave him the exact mass of the *Gilgamesh* I, he wasn't so sure the suggestion had been a good one. He didn't let it show, however, and waited patiently as the splinter-ship dropped down through the atmosphere and came to rest on the Temple plaza.

Even though the craft clearly surpassed the *Paper Moon* with its thousand-meter length, Khan accepted it as a launch. The LFT spacesphere was "only" 800 meters in diameter.

Some serious thoughts went through Khan's mind. He could only hope that Rhodan's presence would lead to progress. While he didn't know how it related to Project Camelot, he suspected this was the only way they could expect any help. It didn't make Khan's worries any less, but he could bear them a little better.

In the public media, the sensational aspects of events on Trokan dominated everything. Given the harmlessness of the Herreach, there hardly seemed to be any danger - but what was behind it all? Who was responsible for the Time Lapse field and who was Kummerog? Where was the as yet unknown enemy or the threat?

It was his job to take a darker view of everything than other people, and he would never be able to forgive himself if he were to act without thinking.

A hatch on the *Gilgamesh* I opened and Cistolo Khan and Myles Kantor began to walk towards it.

"The gentlemen with the Meganon Wave have arrived," the LFT Commissioner said, knowing that those within the peculiar craft could hear his every word. "That means Meganon himself can't be far away."

Kantor laughed. "You might be wrong, Cis."

\*

Shadows appeared beneath the stern of the launch. They moved forwards and stepped out into the pale light of Trokanian day. They were three men, plainly of Terran heritage. Their faces were very rarely seen these days.

Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bell, and Alaska Saedelaere.

Rhodan and Bell wore tan uniforms with boots. Saedelaere's clothing consisted of black overalls with many apparently empty pockets.

And they used neither SERUNs nor breathing equipment.

"There is a very high probability that they have taken supplemental oxygen tablets," Khan's Pikosyn reported.

Khan hesitated imperceptibly. For the first time in his life, he was meeting Perry Rhodan, the legendary Immortal, once the Great Administrator of the Solar Imperium and later granted the status of Knight of the Deep.

An aura of majesty surrounded Rhodan - or perhaps Khan was only imagining it. He pulled himself together with an effort and continued determinedly forward.

They met about halfway between the *Gilgamesh* I and the glider. Khan took Rhodan's hand and pressed it firmly.

"There's always a first time," he said. "I'm glad that we're meeting under these circumstances and not others. Welcome to Trokan, gentlemen."

The three returned the greeting and nodded to Myles Kantor.

"I share your feelings," Rhodan said. "We are grateful that you have permitted us to land on Trokan."

Khan grinned, though it was somewhat reserved. "Could I have stopped you?"

"No. But we respect the decisions of the LFT. After all, this is its own territory."

Perry Rhodan's words triggered a storm of mixed feelings within Khan. The Terran was acting as though he were an alien in the Solar System. Or was he referring only to Trokan? The planet didn't really belong here. Or was Rhodan trying to make the opposite clear to him - that like it or not, Trokan and the Herreach were now permanently embedded in the heart of the LFT's territory?

"That speaks well for you and your companions," Khan said. "As you're aware, we don't know a great deal about Project Camelot. Your presence here tells me that this situation will change."

Myles Kantor sighed. "Er, Cis, wait..." he began.

Khan didn't pay any attention to him. He was of course aware that in these circumstances, Myles would be on the side of the Activator-carriers - he'd have to be.

"All right, explain!" the LFT Commissioner demanded of the three Immortals, and looked at them expectantly.

Alaska Saedelaere remained silent. Reginald Bell's complexion changed to a deep red and he swallowed heavily. A trace of amusement showed in Rhodan's eyes.

"We aren't making any major demands, Cistolo Khan. All we want to do is investigate the distortions in the Meganon Wave that we've already mentioned. As soon as we have solid data, we'll withdraw."

"Provided that you share your results with us."

Sudden patience appeared in Rhodan's face. Khan found himself holding his breath.

"We aren't making any of it a secret, of course. You can watch us take readings and record the results. Just a moment, please."

Rhodan spoke to an extremely flat wristband. The answer came in an inaudible whisper.

"Our scientists are now disembarking from the ship and positioning themselves at a safe distance from the Temple of Kummerog," Rhodan continued. "Would you please provide the appropriate personnel to accompany them?"

"The scientists in the Temple will do that," Kantor said quickly. "I'll call them."

Several groups of men and women left the *Gilgamesh I*. Khan recognized most of the faces as soon as he saw them. Without exception, they were well-known and highly qualified scientists who had been listed as missing for many years.

Finding them in Rhodan's service was no surprise at all to the LFT Commissioner. He had suspected it all along, and Myles Kantor's behaviour had confirmed it for him.

One face was missing: Attaca Meganon was not among the scientists working for Camelot. At least not among those who had come to Trokan.

"In the name of the LFT, I welcome you back to your former home system," he called to them. "Make yourselves at home on Trokan!"

"You can bet we will," one of them said.

The scientist hurried on past him in the direction of the drillhead-shaped colossus. The others followed.

A slight grin played at Perry Rhodan's mouth. "Don't take it too hard, Cistolo Khan. They're scientists."

"What have they found to justify all this secrecy - the Philosopher's Stone? What is the Meganon Wave, Rhodan?"

The Activator-carrier and Knight of the Deep gave him a friendly punch in the upper arm and started moving. "We'd better hurry. Trokan isn't giving us much time."

\*

As a hyperphysicist working for the LFT, Ose Bandolph had joined the group that had taken position 368 meters up on the entrance side. The scientists from the *Gilgamesh I* brought

small instruments with them whose construction was a mystery to him. From their outward appearance, it was impossible to tell what function they served. He satisfied himself with the provisional conclusion that they were just ordinary scanners.

They, too, would break their Syntronic heads against the Temple wall. Outwardly, the drillhead looked as though it was made of sand-coloured natural stone. In reality, it was an ultra-solid, alien substance that had defied every analysis.

"All right, you're scanning, then," Bandolph said after a while when nothing had happened and the group of five men and women cloaked themselves in utter, unbroken silence. "At least explain to an ignorant Terran what's going on. What kind of scanning beams are you using?"

No answer was also an answer. After a while, one of the three women finally turned her head and looked at him as though he had escaped from an ancient history museum.

"Surely you know." Her voice sounded insultingly patient. "We're measuring the distortions in the Meganon Wave."

"And what will these distortions tell you?"

"We don't know yet. That depends on the kind of distortions."

"I see." He should have guessed he would know about as much as he did before. The scientists were stonewalling.

It was an old illness afflicting the Terran mentality, as Bandolph knew. They jealously defended their technological and scientific advantage against everyone else. It didn't matter whether he was on their side or not.

Bandolph turned his attention to the other teams, floating at distances of 30 to 40 meters from the tower. They formed rings about 20 meters apart. The men and women worked in silence, manipulated the small scanning devices, and continually changed their positions. They had generated a bell-shaped energy field reaching from the top of the drillhead to the baseplate. Bandolph learned over the helmetcom that the field could not be analysed by LFT technology, but Khan and the others assumed it was what it was supposed to be: the Temple of Kummerog was completely enveloped by a single, massive scanning field.

Now and then, the men and women of the various groups spoke softly to each other. The thin energy auras around their bodies were not only effective against the oxygen-poor air but also distorted their words. Bandolph didn't understand anything they said, and no one had ever taught him how to read lips.

Don't let it get to you, he told himself. They're just trying to make an impression on us - that's why they act so mysterious and pretend to be immeasurably superior to us. And all they're doing is making a few simple measurements.

The group at the top stayed where it was while the others retreated downwards. Their communications with each other increased, then Bandolph suddenly heard Myles Kantor's voice as well over his helmetcom. He listened to the insistent words of the Terran chief scientist:

"...It's clear that a weak permanent radiation predominates, while the distortions in the Meganon Wave have completely faded out and can no longer be detected. Does the intensity of the radiation increase as you go downwards?"

"Yes, it does," an unknown voice replied. "We will inform Perry Rhodan."

As far as Bandolph had been able to make out, Rhodan, Bell, and Saedelaere were inside the Temple with other scanning teams. Bandolph remained with his group until they reached the ground of the Temple plaza and went through the entrance into the interior of the strange building. This much was certain: there was nothing else on Trokan made from this substance. Nor in the rest of the Solar System. The rumour that it had come along from the Arresum persisted stubbornly. As yet, there was no definite evidence to the contrary.

The scientists from the *Gilgamesh I* were suddenly in a hurry. They paid hardly any attention to the wreckage and the Temple interior that had nearly crumbled into dust. They looked only at the floor, and Bandolph's stomach started to feel uneasy.

"We haven't been able to find anything on the Temple or inside it," he said to himself. "Our work will stop at the drillhead's baseplate because there isn't anything under it except the rock of the planet's crust. The drillhead bored its way completely into the open. So why are they all staring down?"

When they reached the centre of the Temple's ground floor, they could assume that the Activatorcarriers were within the crowd of men and women gathered there. The scanning was complete and the data had been analysed. And Myles Kantor was announcing the results as though it were an ordinary briefing.

"There is a radiation source beneath the Temple. It cannot be located using normal instruments, which is doubtless due to the nature of the substance used to construct the Temple. If we want answers to our questions, we must look for a way to descend further."

Ose Bandolph was hardly listening. He had spotted Mercedes Sibur. She was about the same age he was and served on one of the 42 research cruisers assigned to Trokan. He pushed his way to her through the crowd and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Hello, Mercedes!"

"Ose! It's nice to see you. What's your take on this radiation?"

"It's there. No question about it. Only we can't detect it with our Stone Age technology."

"There must be some little adjustment that makes our guests' equipment sensitive to this radiation," she whispered into his ear. "Even so, I have to admit I'd gladly serve on board the *Gilgamesh* for half pay. Unfortunately, they don't look like they're understaffed. Maybe we should talk to Myles or Rhodan himself about it."

"Not a bad idea."

"We'll take the direct approach into the ground," Myles Kantor was just then saying. "We'll see how this material reacts to disintegrators."

"No LFT models, please!" Alaska Saedelaere interjected. "We brought our own equipment."

Ose Bandolph swore softly to himself. If things went on like this, they would all sooner or later be coming down with inferiority complexes.

## 7.

"Stay down there! We can't pick you up just now!"

"Understood, Marcel. See you later!"

Donder Pereira changed course and flew towards the east. Just 300 kilometres remained until Keerioch. The glider could cover that distance in less than four minutes.

The scanner showed her a sky full of metal. Irregularly distributed clusters of ships hung over Trokan; many were thousands of kilometres away from her position while others were only a few hundred.

The battle had begun in earnest. It was a battle for the survival of a planet. The Terrans had never fought such a battle before - though perhaps their distant ancestors had, back in the dim reaches of the past when the fifth planet was destroyed.

The glider's Syntron processed the masses of information that constantly streamed in. Again and again it executed minor course corrections, and when Donder looked at the scanner's hologram, it made her dizzy. Innumerable cone-shaped gravity fields pushed continuously against the ground, shifting back and forth as they searched for the ideal position. In other places, they pushed dents into the ground or gave way so that the pressure from Trokan's interior could be vented. The gravo-cones formed an irregular pattern over the surface and partially blocked the entire air space.

"We must make a detour to the south," the Syntron announced. "Do you wish to continue to your present destination?"

"Not necessarily. What do you suggest?"

"Head for Hovver, the next city after Keerioch. It is quiet there at present."

"All right."

She knew from listening to the com traffic from the last few hours that Hovver had suffered two small eruptions that laid waste to half the city. That was due to the Herreach's lightly constructed buildings. This in turn resulted from the planet's sparse vegetation. Besides baked Braad-bricks, the Herreach used fibres from Thunam, a finely branched plant that grew up to two meters high.

The glider made a wide curve towards the south, climbed through a gap 40 kilometres wide between two groups of ships to an altitude of ten kilometres, and accelerated at moderate speed. A sprawling plain with Keerioch at its centre rolled beneath the glider.

From above, the city resembled a smoking hill. The ruptured power lines had set a portion of the buildings on fire after the quake, but there was no water to extinguish the blaze. The Herreach fought fires by carrying sand and dirt into the city to suffocate the flames.

From there to Hovver, it was just over two thousand kilometres. The glider was now travelling several times faster than the speed of sound and covered the distance in barely a quarter of an hour.

Donder listened to the verbal exchanges on the official LFT channels. The three thousand ships were in constant communication with the *Paper Moon*. Without a filter, the flood of



auditory information would have been impossible to digest. The Syntron selected the most important for her.

At the moment, there were four hundred eruptive zones in Trokan's equatorial region. Most were going wild. As yet, efforts to control them had not been successful.

The glider changed course again and struck north. Donder Pereira tried to estimate how many times she had crossed the equator since leaving the *Sevilla*. More than a dozen, certainly.

"*Paper Moon* to Pereira," she suddenly heard. "You are in the vicinity of Hovver. Head for the mountain ridge one hundred kilometres south of the city. There are Herreach there. They are walking directly towards an eruptive zone. Try to stop them. There isn't much time. The subsurface processes are speeding up."

"Will I have support?"

"Three ships are on the way."

"That's something, at least."

She found the ships on the scanner. The three spacespheres were dropping down from their positions twenty kilometres overhead and would reach their destination ahead of her.

The explosion took place two minutes later, right at the foot of the ridge. A section of the rock massif was simply blown away and rained down in uncountable pieces of debris. The Syntron pushed the glider lower and generated a protective force-field, a wall 100 meters high and half a kilometre wide, between the rock massif and the Herreach.

"Run to the west!" Donder shouted over the external loudspeaker. She hoped that the Translator could make itself understood over the convulsions of the mountain.

The robed and hooded Herreach didn't react. They continued on towards the city.

"They're running to their deaths!" She had to watch helplessly as several hundred of them even stood still and waited for the rocks to reach them.

Since the debris struck an invisible barrier in the air and fell harmlessly to the ground, the Herreach were only strengthened in their belief that they would be safest here.

"We need more gliders!" Donder exclaimed.

"Sorry." That was unmistakably the voice of Prett Boemer. "We don't have any craft available. We're getting reinforcements from Terra, but it will still take a few minutes."

That wouldn't help her, but she couldn't do anything about it.

The three ships finally reached their positions over the mountain ridge and attempted to hold back the rock eruptions. They struggled against the same problems as the *Sevilla* and all the other ships. As soon as the gravity fields produced too strong a counterthrust, the ground began to break up and offered no more resistance to the forces from within the planet.

"Watch out, you in the glider," someone called. "A channel is forming right under us!"

No one had to tell her what that meant. The channel reached the bottom of the crustal rock and opened a connection between the magma layer and the surface.

Donder reacted instantly. She headed the glider to the north at high acceleration, and grabbed as many of the Herreach with the tractor beam as she could find.

She packed them tightly together like sardines in a can and within forty seconds had completely filled the tractor beam.

The majority of natives in the plain still showed no signs of fear or the instinct to flee. When a magma fountain burst out of the eastern side of the ridge and painted the sky in yellow and red colours, many stopped and even admired the spectacle. They called Kummerog's name, forgetting for the moment that Kummerog was supposed to appear in his temple and not somewhere in Trokan's open countryside.

"A gigantic outbreak is imminent," the Syntron reported. "We should change our position."

"You up there!" Donder called to the ships. "Do something for once and use your tractor beams even if you can't stop the eruption. Take the Herreach on board. All of them!"

Some of the natives were already flying upwards at high speed, above the inferno and towards openings in the spherical ships overhead.

Moving the glider forward, Donder herded other Herreach with the force-field wall and then shaped it into a sphere. She caught the Herreach in it as though it were a fishing net. Their wriggling resembled that of the fish in the waters of the neighbouring planet Terra.

The number of natives who were not caught up in the net, but simply stood and watched the show, bordered on five hundred. They were beyond help.

Donder Pereira felt a strange prickling sensation between her ribs, the same as she had felt when her husband and son died. She sighed softly and massaged the area around her sternum.

The Syntron guided the glider to the west where the plain gently rose and ended in a plateau. The scanner showed no tectonic or volcanic activity as yet beneath the plateau.

Donder released the Herreach from the energy field and the tractor beam, and warned them to stay in this area for the time being. Filled with helpless anger, she watched as these beings immediately resumed their march towards Hovver, taking exactly the path that would lead them to the mountain ridge.

She quickly transmitted her observations to the *Paper Moon*. The answer made her doubt her own sanity.

"Donder, it's hopeless," Prett Boemer said. "We'd have to confine them within energy barriers in order to prevent it, but we can't do that because we need the energy to save Trokan. I urge you to be reasonable about this. If they run to their deaths, you can't stop them. You don't have to feel responsible for their destruction."

"And that's it? What am I supposed to do - go back to the mother ship and have a bite in the canteen? Eating calms the nerves, right? I can't listen to any more of this."

"The *Sevilla* is currently in a position that will facilitate your return. It can now take the glider on board."

"I don't have time. Over and out."

She deliberately broke the connection so she wouldn't have to listen to such nonsense any longer. With a quick movement of her hands, she switched the automatic systems off, thereby preventing the Syntron from intervening or even executing commands from one of the other ships.

"You are losing your perspective, Donder," the Syntron said, sounding as friendly as ever. "It is my duty to protect you from mistakes."

"I'm aware of that, but forget it! I'm going to see to it that the Herreach develop an instinct for self preservation."

"You will never be able to do it on your own."

## 8.

"Kummerog! Kummerog! Where will we find him?"

"We don't know." Cistolo Khan stopped and looked at the group of Herreach.

In terms of bodily size, he could deal with the smallest inhabitants of Trokan on equal terms. His height of two meters made it likely that the Herreach had approached him in particular for just that reason.

"Help us!" the natives begged. "Help us find him!"

"If we had found even a single trace of him, then you wouldn't have to search for him any longer. We would have brought him to you in the city. Believe me, there isn't any Kummerog here. Now would you please move back? The projectors are in position and this area is being sealed off."

The Herreach reacted with incomprehension. They continued to wander around nearby and root through the wreckage.

Finally, it was too much for the scientists. They caught the natives in a restraining field and transported them to another hall, where they turned the Herreach loose. Then they sealed off the area around the investigation site to a distance of one hundred meters in diameter. A low-power energy field that delivered mild to piercing electrical shocks prevented the natives from re-entering. The LFT Commissioner considered this form of behavioural reinforcement to be legitimate in the circumstances.

"We're ready," Myles Kantor announced. "We're now attempting to open the baseplate."

Despite the relative security under the protection of his personal defensive energy field, Kahn felt a slight prickling at the back of his neck. It signalled danger to him. For a moment, he was tempted to give an order to break off the attempt, but he suppressed the impulse.

A yellow-red burst of energy shot upwards and blackened a portion of the Temple rubble. A few dozen Herreach outside the field fled without uttering a sound and disappeared through a gap between collapsed walls. The scientist spoke among themselves in low voices and checked the instrument readings on the energy supply.

"We're reducing the energy." Kantor left his place and gestured to everyone in the area. "Please go to the front corridor. I can't guarantee anything."

The LFT scientists reluctantly followed his advice. From presumably safe cover, they observed the work of the *Gilgamesh* personnel. Judging by the energy resulting from the disintegration, the flooring material had been compressed by a factor of thousands, something Terran technology never could have accomplished. There weren't any free-flying energy displays with the second attempt, but the edge of the circular surface boiled and formed a wall of fire that rose half a meter high and created the impression that Trokan's magma was forcing its way to the surface.

Fortunately, the area around Moond had been quiet for hours. Only now and then did the ground vibrate from distant earthquakes and surface upheavals. Since the material used to construct the Temple had a dampening effect, the tremors could hardly be felt inside and the scientists could work relatively undisturbed.

When the wall of fire collapsed on itself, a dark, hair-thin cut remained in the flooring material. The technicians manoeuvred an antigrav device onto the disk that had been cut into the floor and carefully lifted it out. The scanners went into immediate operation.

"Object detected at a depth of twenty meters," the guidance Syntron reported. "Diameter of six meters."

Kantor turned to Rhodan. "We can get that with two moles in no time. I'll take care of it."

"Very well, but use extreme caution." Rhodan turned to Cistolo Khan. "The Temple is to be completely evacuated. Only then will we start digging. Just the bare minimum of scientists will remain here."

The evacuation of the Herreach took more than three hours. During that time, the scanners were in continuous operation. In the depths beneath the Temple, nothing changed.

The moles came from the *Paper Moon*, not the *Gilgamesh I*. At least in the technological realm, the machines were the most powerful digging devices that could be imagined. They bored tunnels into rock or soil, vaporizing the material instantly. What remained was a hot particle stream that the machines sucked up like vacuum cleaners and converted to highly compressed gas. The equipment pumped the gas as necessary into a miniconverter, where it served as energy recycling.

Here, the two machines worked side by side and within ten minutes had produced a shaft twelve meters deep that went straight down and stopped near the object that had been detected. The moles transmitted the first scanning results to the scientists above: the object was hollow and showed no reaction.

Kantor sent several probes down. They sank slowly through the additional force-field layers that had been emplaced. When they reached the bottom, they began chemical tests.

Alaska Saedelaere looked at the hologram showing the images from the moles' cameras. "The connection is obvious," he said. "The drillhead came from below. The object and the drillhead are directly related."

"I'm just now getting the first readings and an age determination," Kantor called. "Like the Temple, the hollow object has a hull with a highly compressed molecular structure. Get ready for this - the hull is at least 250 million years old."

An excited murmur could be heard over the helmetcom.

"This means that the object below has endured throughout the entire evolution of Trokan and the Herreach," Kantor continued. "The interior space is large enough to have contained the drillhead in its original dimensions without any problem, along with other things."

"Bring the moles up. We'll go down and have a look at it ourselves." Perry Rhodan motioned to the scientists from the *Gilgamesh*. "Bring the cutting torches. Increase the force-field strength. Alarm level red is now in effect."

Outside on the Temple plaza, the *Gilgamesh I* and the *Paper Moon* wrapped themselves in layers of High-Energy Overload (HEO) fields. Robots set up supplemental protective fields within the Temple and in the shaft. Paratron projectors were standing by: at the slightest sign of danger from the object, they would shield it off from the scientists and the Temple and send it into hyperspace.

The nervousness of everyone present increased noticeably. Even the Herreach out in the open seemed to realize that something extraordinary and threatening was in progress. They fled the area around the Temple and retreated into their city for safety.

Rhodan's people moved the heavy equipment into the shaft. The Activator-carriers and the six men and women of the science team followed. Two robots provided security as well as video coverage. Those outside the Temple could watch the process on monitors.

"No change in the object's radiation," Kantor observed. "Let's get started."

The composition of the object's hull was similar to that of the Temple floor. Under the heat beams, however, the molecular compression gave way to some extent. The material

melted and oozed away. At the edges of the opening, a thick residue built up. Then, in slow motion, the opening began to close - like a wound.

They tried it again at several other places with the same results. Kantor conferred briefly with the scientists, then turned to Perry Rhodan. "On the next attempt, we'll use the energy vise to stabilize the edges of the opening. If you have no objections, we'll begin."

Perry Rhodan had no objections.

They succeeded on the third try. The opening remained stable, and Kantor looked into the hollow space. The LFT Commissioner's head appeared next to his.

The chamber within the object was empty - except for a spectral form something like a honeycomb. It appeared completely flat, almost two-dimensional, and floated a meter above the floor.

"No scan readings," the Pikosyn reported. "The room is empty."

"Hey, what about the visual pickup?" Reginald Bell called.

"Visual transmission must be suffering from interference," was the laconic answer.

Bell dismissed it with a snort of annoyance. "Phooey! I can trust my own eyes!"

He was about to climb through the opening into the interior of the object, but Kantor held him back.

"Not so fast. We aren't even close to finishing our data recording."

They did that with everything that could be provided by Terra as well as Camelot. Finally, they transmitted all the data to *Nathan*. The result was devastating, a painful blow in the face of any scientist.

*Nathan* reported that despite the visual perception, no object existed in this location.

Bell pushed Kantor to one side. "I'm going in."

"I'll come with you," Cistolo Khan added spontaneously and climbed through the opening after him.

They approached the manifestation from two sides at the same time. Bell described the thoughts that went through his head as he looked at the spectre.

"It kind of reminds of Treogen more than sixty years ago. Still, that character distinguished himself mainly by the way he could leave in a hurry. This thing seems more sure of itself."

He stretched his hand out and tried to touch the form. His fingers passed straight through as though it were a projection. It remained completely dead as far as energy was concerned.

Cistolo Khan didn't have any greater success. He threw himself at the honeycomb, but fell through it and landed on the floor. He agilely rolled with the fall and sprang to his feet.

"It's useless," he said. "Let somebody else try. That thing is making fools out of us, just like the Temple's doing. It's just as well. This way, we're spared a possible threat to the Solar System from within."

"Perhaps hasn't completely materialized yet," Saedelaere's voice sounded. "Maybe something interrupted the process of bringing it into our reality - like Schimbaa the Giant's senseless rampage?"

Perry Rhodan interrupted the sudden silence. "Good thinking, Alaska! The last thing anybody thinks of is often the most obvious. That nebulous form could be Kummerog."

\*

Rhodan sent the scientists outside. Each of them had tried to touch the apparition without success. Now Rhodan himself wanted to convince himself of its utter intangibility. It wasn't strictly necessary, but he would have felt useless otherwise. Why else was he here, after all?

He climbed through the opening and walked once around the manifestation. The spectre didn't react to the presence of a human being, even an Activator-carrier. If the thing had some

connection with Kummerog and the Herreach, that wasn't surprising. Some of the Herreach would have to be brought here. If they entered the chamber, perhaps then there might be a reaction.

*No perhaps about it, Perry told himself. It's a certainty.*

He took a step closer to the honeycomb-shaped form, then shut his eyes, blinded by a sudden light that hadn't been there before.

"It's lighting up!" Kantor cried. "The manifestation is beginning to shine! And the scanners still aren't showing any readings."

Rhodan blinked. Was he mistaken, or was the light growing brighter? He wanted to take a step back, but instead he went forwards. Something in the light was moving. His eyes now perceived a pulsing, and at the same time several voices could be heard announcing that the scanners were picking up something.

"Get back, Perry!" Bull shouted. Out the corner of his eye, Rhodan caught a glimpse of a shadow covering the entrance.

"Wait," he whispered, without taking his eyes from the pulsating thing. Two more steps and he would come in contact with it.

*Get out of here fast!* his reason warned him.

He tried, but couldn't. The pulsating magically drew him closer. Before he knew it, he had taken another step forward. If he now raised his arm, he could touch the thing.

"Out of the way, Bell! I'll get him out. He's under paracontrol or something like it." That was Cistolo Khan's voice, but Rhodan didn't realize it. He thought that someone was trying to deny him this wonderful experience.

"Don't come near me!" he screamed. At least he thought he screamed. In reality, not one word left his mouth.

The final step. Rhodan bent his arms and raised them. The honeycomb pulsated directly in front of him and invited him closer. With an utmost effort of will, he tried to make out something familiar or recognizable in the apparition but didn't succeed.

Behind him came the sounds of hurried steps. He didn't hear them. Rhodan stretched his hands out and touched the honeycomb. He felt the resistance of its substance. It was no longer a question of a projection.

A tingling ran through his head. At the same time, a message pounded with the rhythm of a hammer in his brain.

THE PILLAR IS OPENING. PLEASE WITHDRAW TO A SAFE DISTANCE.

Someone pulled him back and he lost contact with the form. The voice remained, however.

THE PILLAR IS OPENING. PLEASE WITHDRAW TO A SAFE DISTANCE.

The voice came through to him mentally, as a sort of symbol code that couldn't be classified as any particular language. Any living being would have understood it at once.

THE PILLAR IS OPENING. PLEASE WITHDRAW TO A SAFE DISTANCE.

*A pillar? Opening?* Rhodan's thoughts raced. Reluctantly, he allowed himself to be pulled away from the thing.

"No!" he whispered.

Something thumped and fell hard to the floor.

THE PILLAR IS OPENING. PLEASE WITHDRAW TO A SAFE DISTANCE.

Rhodan yanked his eyes open. The honeycomb form lay on the floor in front of him. The LFT Commissioner stood next to him and was trying to drag him out of the room.

The thing on the floor began to glow and radiate heat. At the same time, it generated a painfully swelling noise at the edge of human audibility. The chamber began to vibrate.

THE PILLAR IS OPENING. PLEASE WITHDRAW TO A SAFE DISTANCE.

Up in the Temple, someone sounded the alarm.

"It's time to go!" Khan pushed Rhodan to the opening and shoved him through. "Get out of here!"

## 9.

Flying close to the ground, she took the glider back the way she had come. Through the cockpit canopy she heard the thundering and howling of the planet defending itself against its abuse by the sudden appearance of day and night after 250 million years of peace.

The bow paralysers operated at maximum intensity, and Donder used it to roll up the line of Herreach from the rear. They fell in rows and remained lying, unable to move. Even if the paralysis lasted for only an hour, that could save their lives.

A single crater now gaped where the mountain ridge had once risen above the plain. Magma from the depths and liquefied rock from the surface streamed in all directions. Again and again jets of lava shot out of the crater, which by now had reached a diameter of more than ten kilometres. The lava streams struck the ship's gravofields, veered to the sides, and then fell back to the ground as a glowing rain of several thousand degrees Celsius.

There was no trace any longer of the nearly five hundred Herreach left behind. The hellfire had covered them, had absorbed them - a fast death that had not made them suffer long.

Donder Pereira discovered another group that was on the way straight back into the danger zone. She switched the com unit on again and suddenly found herself caught in a bombardment of instructions, warnings, and requests.

"How can you just sit there and watch?" she demanded. "Well, I can't!"

"The main eruption is imminent," one of the commanders warned her. "We're maintaining the pressure of our gravofields so that there isn't further disruption of the surface rock. The subterranean layers must be relieved of their excess pressure. Then things won't be quite so bad."

"Of course. And millions of Herreach around the planet will die as a result. At least we won't have to feed them, now that their planet won't be giving them enough to eat." There was silence for a few moments, then Whitcombe came on. "A comprehensive aid program already exists, as you know. The only reason you weren't involved with it was because you were completely occupied with organizing the scientific research program for Trokan. So why this hysteria?"

"Can't you figure it out?" she demanded contemptuously. "Four of the probes I released have already been destroyed in the chaos. Soon we won't have any chance at all of searching for traces. The idea makes me angry."

"Donder, your feelings do you credit. But you knew from the start that your probes wouldn't accomplish anything. I've understood it as simply a hopeless gesture on your part. There's nothing you haven't tried. No one can expect any more of you."

"I don't want to leave anything untried here, either. Can't you get that through your head, Whitcombe? Over and out."

She left the com activated, but didn't reply to any calls. Naturally, they all meant well, but they were arguing from their safe seats up in the ships.



"Come down here and fight for the life of every single Herreach. Then you'll be accomplishing something."

She headed the glider towards the north. Hovver lay in the glow of the evening sun. It was a bizarre city, whose devastation was swallowed by the pale yellow light. Appreciably less light reached Trokan than Terra, so shapes blurred all the faster. Twilight was short and visual sharpness faded with almost surreal speed.

As Donder approached the city, it slipped to one side. A quick glance at the controls showed that she wasn't suffering from hallucinations. The city really was moving.

"Attention!" she called. "Hovver is in danger. Activate tractor beams. The entire city is sliding away."

"It's a matter of two thin rock plates, one of them sliding under the other," the answer came. "We can't do anything about it. If we hadn't released the pressure at the mountain ridge, the whole city of Hovver would have been blown to bits a long time ago."

"I need a ship and four space-jets for evacuation," she insisted.

"Are you crazy? There are 600,000 Herreach living in the city. See that spacesphere to the northeast? It tried to take some of them on board. They even resisted the tractor beam. Polanzen finally left with less than a thousand of the natives on board. If you hadn't had your com turned off for so long, you'd know all about it."

Donder shook her black mane. Such remarks didn't bother her. She had one goal in mind, one mission. No one could hold her back from it.

The glider raced towards the half-destroyed city. Under the constant tremor of the shifting ground, the still intact buildings gave way and their walls collapsed either inwardly or outwardly. In the middle of an inhabited city, a crevice opened up. The Herreach suddenly looked at each other across an abyss nearly a kilometre deep.

Donder heard cries from hundreds of mouths; hollow-sounding cries that no human being could have imitated. They distantly resembled the barking of dogs.

Yet the Herreach made no effort to flee the threatening doom. Many tried to leap over the crevice in order to reach their houses. They didn't manage even half the distance and fell silently into the depths.

Then Donder saw the children. At a height of 1.7 meters, the older ones had reached the size of an adult Terran. They played in a square right next to a row of houses sliding past. Adults looked out of their windows and spoke of a *Tschuka*, a ghost train that could not be escaped.

There was no time to think. Donder closed the helmet of her SERUN, activated one of her glider's programs, and stepped to the entrance hatch. "Pull those children on board!" she ordered. "I'll fly on ahead and look for other playgrounds. If the adults won't let themselves be helped, we'll at least take the children to safety."

"You are thinking too much in human terms," the Syntron admonished.

She didn't try to answer that. "As soon as the cabin and your tractor beam are full, take them to a safe place - to the north and the temperate latitudes - then come back here."

"That contradicts my human-protective programming. I cannot permit something to happen to you."

"Aren't those people outside human? And what do I have my SERUN for? If you resist my order, I will destroy you. This is an Alpha-command, Syntron."

"The command will be executed."

She opened the hatch and flew away from the glider. She came in over the houses and looked around. She found dozens of open squares and many children who, like the adults, hardly seemed to care about what was going on around them. They played with flat stones on a pattern drawn on the ground. It looked like chess, but the pieces didn't make any sense by human standards.

Using the com, Donder directed the glider from place to place. Only when its carrying capacity was exhausted and the tractor beam couldn't take on even one more body did her heart feel at least a little lighter. The craft informed the *Paper Moon* of its destination and went on its way.

Donder watched the glider until it disappeared from view, then flew to the centre of the city.

"Citizens of Hovver!" she called over her external loudspeaker. "Get over your lethargy! Head for the north! There you'll find your children. Go to your children."

It had no effect at all. Even the adults in the surrounding houses, who had witnessed the rescue, didn't move.

Donder Pereira felt as though someone was constantly hitting her with a hammer. Her head roared, and every breath hurt.

The trauma of these people - it had affected every one of them everywhere. Trokan's inhabitants suffered from the damage caused by Schimbaa the Giant.

What a tragedy! The realization that Kummerog could no longer awakened or called had destroyed them psychologically.

The Herreach stood on the brink of extinction.

## 10.

The Temple plaza lay under an energy dome. Squads of robots held the Herreach back and made sure they didn't venture out of their city. Apathetic, the natives sat in their houses and streets and waited for the appearance of their god. Many of them must have realized that Kummerog was not in the Temple and would never appear there. Most, however, perceived every change in their environment as a sign of something happening at the Temple.

The building dedicated to Kummerog shook and trembled. A cloud of dust rose along the sides of the drillhead. The cracking noises of collapsing floors and walls rumbled across to the city. More and more Herreach appeared and emitted loud moans at the sight of the shaking Temple.

The vibration increased without stopping. Within minutes, the Temple was rocking back and forth on its baseplate.

"Snap out of it, Perry!" Reginald Bell stood together with Alaska Saedelaere close to the *Gilgamesh I* and gently shook his friend's arm.

Rhodan didn't respond. Silent, he stared at the Temple, and the light of the honeycomb-shaped object was still reflected in his eyes.

The medibots' examination had revealed nothing, no after-effects from his experience and no discernible injury.

"Let me be," Rhodan insisted. "I think this was only the beginning."

The Temple seemed to rear up. At its rounded top, an exterior wall began to fall in. At the same time, crevices in the ground were opening up, shooting from the Temple across the plaza towards the city. The paving stones of the Temple plaza broke with an ugly cracking sound. The crevices were as much as half a meter wide. Crackling noises came from everywhere around and within the Temple, racing from the bottom to the top.

The naked eye could make out little, but optical enlargement showed fine hairline cracks suddenly appearing in the Temple exterior's invulnerable substance. More dust clouds welled out of the Temple and into the open, and then the entire structure came crashing down, collapsing in on itself like a smokestack demolished by a skilled demolitions specialist.

The dust enveloped everything, and when the cloud was finally dispersed by the slight, barely perceptible wind, nothing was left of the Temple of Kummerog but a low hill of dust and dirt in the middle of the paved plaza.

"The decay of the machinery in the Temple was just the first step," Myles Kantor said softly, "and now the process is complete. What does it mean?"

"It doesn't matter to me just now," Cistolo Khan replied. "All units on and over Trokan are standing by for immediate withdrawal."

"I think that's overreacting, Cis. What will become of the Herreach if we don't help them?"

"I can't worry about that when our own necks are at stake, Myles. Or do you think it's all over now that the Temple has fallen into dust? It's still beginning."

As though Fate wanted to confirm his worst fears immediately, a gigantic tongue of flame shot up. It came from beneath the Temple and blew the dust away, burning some of it in the process. Moments later, a fireworks of light blazed over the place where the drillhead-structure had been. A second, dazzlingly bright light followed, and at the same time a mental shock raced across the plaza.

Rhodan tore himself away from Bell and took a few uncertain steps forward. He gave a long sigh and then went rigid, standing as though frozen.

Reports came in stating that the mental shock had been felt everywhere on Trokan.

His eyes wide, the Terran stared at the spot where a few minutes before the Temple had reared up against the sky.

The ground rose up steadily. Something underneath was forcing its way into the pale Trokanian daylight.

Something was making an appearance, reminiscent of the appearance of the drillhead in September, 1222.

"The best thing for us is to get ourselves into safety inside the ships," Cistolo Khan said. "It doesn't take much imagination to figure out who or what is making his appearance there."

\*

The streets were empty, as though in a ghost town. No robes could be seen anywhere. The last Herreach had disappeared into the rubble of the city. Each had found shelter with friends or relatives.

The air shimmered around the two ships, indicating the location of their protective force-fields.

In the dust of the former Temple of Kummerog, the first edges were showing of what was rising from the depths to the surface.

Myles Kantor's eyes were red and watering slightly. He stood with Bell and Alaska in front of one of the holograms and anxiously awaited the moment when they would finally be able to make out details.

"The *Paper Moon* is taking off and will position itself at a safe distance of five kilometres," they heard Cistolo Khan say.

At the same time, the shadow next to the *Gilgamesh I* disappeared.

"We're staying here for the time being," Bell decided after a glance at Perry. Rhodan was silent and uninvolved.

"Look!" Kantor exclaimed. "Something's happening!"

His thoughts came in a mad rush. Was Trokan's second evolution starting? Were they witnesses to a manifestation of an alien and superior power? Kummerog? Or was it just the next piece of a puzzle of unimaginable dimensions?

Bell exhaled loudly. "There!" he gasped. "There it is!"

Out of the ground rose a kind of upside-down bowl. Beneath it followed a supporting column first five meters long, then ten meters, then twenty. The object resembled a geometrically perfect mushroom with a circular cap. It gleamed silver and exhibited neither surface detail nor any entrances. Its growth came to a halt at a final height of 33 meters. The scanner showed that it extended into the ground. It was anchored in the soil by two-thirds of its length, so the total length came to 99 meters.

"I can't believe it," Kantor murmured. "Did it actually grow out of the object buried over there? Or was it something else much deeper down that we missed?"

No one gave him an answer. They stood there without moving and looked at Perry Rhodan. His face was turning increasingly pale; he looked as though all the blood had drained out of his head.

"Perry..." Alaska began. He stepped to his friend and looked at him worriedly. "Something's wrong with you. Could you tell me-"

Rhodan shook his head violently, cutting him off. "No! Be quiet!" He walked away and left the *Gilgamesh I*. Outside, he stood as though hypnotized, staring only at the structure.

"I'm sorry," the medibots' Syntrons reported. "There is nothing wrong with him. There is a possibility that he came under some influence while he was beneath the surface that is exercising a lingering effect on him."

"You can call it what you like," Bell grouched. "I call it hypnotism. Come on - we've got to stop him!"

They hurried after him and found him on his knees on the ground outside. He was drawing strange patterns in the dust of the crumbled paving stones. Then he stood up again and looked silently at the mushroom. Alaska held his finger in front of Rhodan's face and waved it back and forth.

Rhodan didn't react. Only after a while did he make a distracted movement, as though he wanted to fend off the hand that was no longer there.

Then he suddenly asked, "Is there any more precise data from the scans?"

"No." Myles Kantor stepped in front of him and tried to block his view of the mushroom. Rhodan moved out of the way.

Cistolo Khan called. The *Paper Moon* was flying at a high altitude over the plaza and scanning. "We can't detect anything significant," the LFT Commissioner said. "The thing seems to be bewitched. It's remaining visually stable, but that's the only definite thing we can say about it."

All the data was changing constantly, showing different values every second. The *Gilgamesh I*'s advanced equipment gave the same contradictory results as the conventional equipment of the LFT ship.

"It's some kind of mimicry," Kantor concluded after half an hour. "It deliberately employs this tactic to avoid any examination."

The data-collecting instruments sounded an alarm. They reported an exploding fusion bomb, frightening the Terran scientists. An explosion did not take place, however; instead, a black hole appeared at the location of the mushroom. A second later, the energy emissions changed again and simulated a threatening vacuum that was rapidly expanding.

Yet the visual appearance of the object did not change at all.

After three hours, Cistolo Khan gave the order to land. The *Paper Moon* returned and assumed its original position next to the *Gilgamesh I*.

## 11.

The number of wounds in Trokan's surface grew to more than a thousand. The shining spherical bodies of the Terran ships hung everywhere and attempted to hold back the crevices in the planet's crust, the fissures in the rock, and the eruptions of magma. In all, 3042 ships were battling for the life of the planet.

Two space-jets lay damaged in the hangar of their current mother ship. During a risky manoeuvre, they had not been able to escape to safety. The impact of hurtling rocky debris against their hulls had caused considerable damage despite their activated protective fields. Fortunately, no one had been injured.

It was small consolation in comparison with the 140 million Herreach, whose existence was now in the balance.

Prett Boemer stood next to Marcel Whitcombe in the control centre of the *Sevilla* and balled his fists. He almost looked like Myles Kantor. For days, he had allowed himself only minimal sleep. The situation was too tense. Everywhere beneath Trokan's surface, it was crackling and seething. No one could predict where the next outbreak would occur.

For days, the glider had lain in one of the *Sevilla's* hangars. It was the reason why Boemer had remained in the ship. Patrol craft had found it halfway to the north pole, wrecked and without survivors.

The first results of the investigation confirmed their initial suspicion. Donder Pereira had flown for hours on manual and then didn't switch over to automatic pilot, but had activated only a single program. That had allowed the occupants of the glider to haphazardly play with the controls and systems without the Syntron being able to intervene. The Herreach children had managed to send the glider crashing.

Their evacuation from Hovver now appeared in hindsight to be largely pointless. The sliding motion of the city had come to a stop. Moreover, a large percentage of the still intact buildings had survived the shifting of the subterranean rock without much damage.

They could stave off the catastrophe, but they couldn't undo it or even get it completely under control. Prett Boemer would be happy if they didn't suffer any greater setbacks. In any event, the number of casualties surpassed his worst fears. More than a million Herreach had now died in the ongoing catastrophe.

The number was increasing further because these beings had no psychological defence against such a threat. With their philosophy and belief in Kummerog, they had lost their belief in the future. Presto Go had dropped out of sight, and the colours of purple and white had disappeared entirely from the seven cities. Matters weren't any better out on the broad plains. Every inhabitant of Trokan knew by now of the events in Moond, and reacted with depression.

"We should be hearing from Luna soon," the commander of the *Paper Moon* said. "*Nathan* has been working for days on a plan for the Herreach. Whether it will be of any use to us, I have my doubts. At least I have the feeling that we've done everything humanly possible."

"Doing everything humanly possible..." Whitcombe murmured. "That's the motto Donder lives by. I hope we hear from her soon."

Com calls hadn't had any results. Neither she nor her SERUN had responded. After days of waiting, they were not far from giving up all hope.

"Maybe she's searching on her own for traces of the *Polyamid*," Boemer speculated out loud. "She must have realized that there won't be any after such a long..."

"Just a moment, Prett. Something's just now coming in. One of the probes that Donder herself dropped on Trokan has found her SERUN!"

The two men stared at each other without saying a word, then sprinted in the direction of the nearest hangar.

Half an hour later, they reached the site where the SERUN had been spotted. It lay not far from Hovver in shattered and torn terrain. Quakes had shaken rocks loose and partially buried the SERUN.

Robots dug the suit out.

"That isn't Donder!" Whitcombe exclaimed.

There was a Herreach in the SERUN. Dead. A check of the Pikosyn showed that it had been mostly shut off.

"Continue to search," Prett Boemer told the robots. "She must be somewhere close by."

The infrared scanner showed no heat traces or temperature variations in the rock.

The two men suddenly found themselves hoping that Donder was a long way away. In Hovver or heading towards Moond on foot.

Unfortunately, their hope was not fulfilled. After more than an hour, they found the woman's body.

\*

Donder encountered the two Herreach just after nightfall. The stars of the Galaxy shone in the sky, but Trokan's atmosphere also reflected the fiery glow of volcanic eruptions.

They were a male and a female. The male half-carried the female on his back, and he constantly had to stop and catch his breath.

The Terran caught up with them and pushed her helmet back. "Don't be afraid," her Translator said in Herrod. "I'm wearing a protective suit. That's why I look a little strange. My name is Donder Pereira."

The male straightened up. "We have grown accustomed to the sight of you Terrans. What do you want?"

"The woman is injured. I can help her."

"That is not necessary. We will soon reach our destination."

"Where are you going?"

"To the north. Kummerog has called us. We will meet him sometime, somewhere."

Donder bent over the female, who had sunk to the ground. There were several serious wounds where the ribcage met the abdomen, probably resulting from the events in Hovver.

"This woman won't last the night if no one helps her," Donder told the Herreach. "Do you want to carry a dead body with you?"

"No. If she dies, I will go alone."

"Is she your wife?"

"Yes."

"I can save her. Then you can go on your way together."

"We are already going on our way together."

He picked up the injured female again and carried her onwards. Donder followed them for two hours and waited until the male was too exhausted to go any further.

"You're making it hard for yourself, Herreach! Let me help you! Let me take care of your wife."

"Do not touch her. Kummerog has called us. We are not to be touched."

The Terran thought feverishly. "Very well," she said. "I won't touch your wife. But my suit can heal her."

She opened the SERUN and climbed out.

"You know that this is irresponsible," the Pikosyn reminded her.

She turned it off except for the medical care program. She manually guided the SERUN to the ground next to the injured female. A gentle antigrav field enveloped the moaning female and carefully lifted her into the suit. The SERUN closed and the medunit immediately began to analyse the injuries.

"The suit is saving your wife. The two of you will not miss Kummerog's call."

Donder misunderstood the Herreach's silence. He crouched on the ground, then suddenly ran towards her. She saw the shadow and reflexively stepped back. The Herreach missed her by a few centimetres. His fist grazed her shoulder and shattered the collarbone. Donder screamed. She felt for her armband com and at the same time rolled over her uninjured shoulder.

"Stop!" she cried. "Nothing will happen to your wife." She now regretted having taken the SERUN off.

The Herreach wasn't listening to her. He threw himself at her again. "Terrans are weak and unfit for this world," she heard him say.

A second blow slammed into her and Donder Pereira's consciousness went out.



## 12.

"What you're planning is irresponsible."

Cistolo Khan looked piercingly at Reginald Bell. "So?" he asked with deliberate slowness. "We can't get any farther any other way. We cut an opening in the thing under the Temple, after all. And now we're supposed to just sit on our hands?"

"It's simply too dangerous," Alaska Saedelaere added. "Just like the Temple, the mushroom originated from an advanced alien technology. Also like the Temple, it isn't wrapped in a protective field; its defence system works differently. Didn't you use force to penetrate the Temple of Kummerog?"

"That's true. But at least there we found a way to get inside," the LFT Commissioner reminded him. "Here we're at a dead loss. We've been working on it for the last thirty hours. Nothing. No technique known to us will help. No occupant and no automatic system has reacted to our com messages. We haven't missed a single frequency or wavelength; we've tried everything in the Normal- and Hypercom ranges. All that's left is this one last possibility."

"An automatic system or a live crew could interpret it as an act of aggression, Cis."

Khan whirled around in surprise and stared at Myles Kantor. "From you I would have expected more support," the LFT Commissioner complained. "Do you know any other ways?"

"Patience and being ready to communicate. Maybe someone is asleep inside."

"That someone is very likely the god that the Herreach are waiting for. Do you want us to crawl over there on our knees?"

"If it serves the cause of peace, why not?"

"Your pacifism is commendable, Myles, but we won't get anywhere that way."

"Of course not. We should still try it."

Khan didn't answer. His face twitched. He hurried to Perry Rhodan, who was now standing on the plaza for the third time. The Immortal paid no attention to Khan. He stood there as though paralysed and gave the impression that he hadn't gotten anything out of the conversation. Shrugging, the LFT Commissioner went back to Kantor.

"Your suggestions remind me of a rabbit and a snake," Khan finally said. "The rabbit freezes to show its peaceful intentions but the snake eats it anyway. Me, I'm not about to play the rabbit! Who can say that our intentions won't be totally misunderstood no matter how we try to make contact? I'm going to take the risk, Myles. My people can hardly wait."

"As you like. I don't recommend you do it, though. Let's wait some more. There's enough to do on Trokan. Your people certainly won't get bored."

Khan growled and gestured for Bruno Drenderbaum to come over to him.

"I formed my opinion long ago," Drenderbaum murmured. "It's entirely our own affair. Not that of the *Gilgamesh* crew and not that of Camelot. The bottom line is that we're responsible no matter what happens."

Khan turned again to Bell, Myles, and Alaska. "There you have it. Will you make your cutting equipment available to us?"

"With a reminder of the possible consequences, yes." Myles Kantor avoided eye contact with Cistolo Khan. "If you're of the opinion that everything has to be finished quickly and within a few days, go ahead. But leave our scientists out of it! They will explain to you how to operate the equipment."

With that, the matter was settled for him. Kantor took his leave, saying that it was high time he made a quick trip to Mimas.

\*

Visiting Kallia always took Kantor's mind off his immediate worries. He forgot about Trokan and the problems there. He touched his wife, spent some time with her, and then let Gobert Grifaan escort him back to the matter transmitter. This time, however, he didn't set the controls to the *Paper Moon's* receiving station, but to that of his bungalow on Lake Goshun. He waved good-bye to the doctor, then the field beamed him to Terra, and he stepped out of the small private receiver into the corridor.

"Hello, Myles," the Servo greeted him. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. Did you water the flowers in the garden?"

"Yes. You must see them."

In the front garden, he admired the white and yellow chrysanthemums. They formed a circle around the place where the urn rested a meter below the surface.

"I know that you are watching me, Mother," he said. "From somewhere you are looking at this garden. You probably also know that Kallia is doing as well as can be expected under the circumstances."

He returned to the house and went down into the basement. As always, he was greeted by the cheerful ticking of his antique clock collection. Kantor entered the bedroom that had been his as a child and sank down on the bed.

The clocks marked time in a common rhythm. No Syntron controlled them. They followed only the rhythm of their mechanisms. The small wall clock as well as the large grandfather clock from the 19th Century AD.

The ticking lulled Kantor to sleep. He was startled awake more than hour later when an alarm sounded.

"There has been an explosion on the Temple plaza in Moond," the Servo announced. Kantor was on his feet in a leap. "I need a Transmitter connection to the *Paper Moon* at once," he said.

\*

After two hours, Cistolo Khan's people reported that preparations had been completed. Around the mushroom, disintegrators from Camelot stood ready for action. Eight groups of three men and women apiece had learned how to operate the equipment.

"Exercise extreme caution in your work!" Cistolo Khan impressed upon them. "Employ only minimum energy! Anyone evaluating our activity must realize that we're not bent on destruction. In addition, the SERUNs will transmit com messages to emphasize our peaceful intentions. Group One, begin."

Group One was located on the side facing the two ships. They aimed at a piece of the hull near the ground. A ring of fire formed on the mushroom's smooth hull, half a meter high and about five meters in diameter. The flames stabilized into a brilliant white circle and began their attack on the silvery metal.

"Energy constant," the Syntron reported. "Surface analysis of the material is complete. Minimal- power disintegration beam now being deployed."

A low hissing could be heard, but it didn't come from the equipment from the *Gilgamesh* I. Suddenly, dark red light bathed the mushroom. A thunderclap echoed across the Temple plaza, followed by a yellow flash.

It was all over in less time than it took to draw a breath. Then silence returned and with it daylight. The mushroom stood unchanged and undamaged in its place. Around it, however, nothing was the same.

The three-person group at the active disintegrator no longer existed. A few shreds of their SERUNs lying on the pavement were all that was left of them. The machine itself existed only as slowly cooling lumps of metal on the ground.

Cistolo Khan had to take another look before he understood what had happened. "Good God!" he choked. "What was that?"

Bell and Saedelaere said nothing, but Rhodan whirled around and looked at him angrily. "That was the answer to your stupidity, Khan! The mushroom will defend itself against any act of violence."

"That thing is a menace!" the LFT Commissioner exclaimed. "It's a threat to the Solar System!"

To everyone's relief, the seven other groups around the mushroom had not suffered the same fate. A shockwave had knocked them and their equipment back. Thanks to their SERUNs, the scientists weren't injured, but the Camelot technology was nothing but scrap.

"You risked human lives without thinking," Alaska accused. "Can you justify that?"

"No," Khan replied in consternation, "but I will stand by it. There was no way to predict that the object would react so ruthlessly."

"It's apparently a machine, an automatic system."

Cistolo Khan closed his eyes. The mushroom wasn't acting aggressively, but it defended itself against attacks or what it interpreted as attacks. The LFT Commissioner's head throbbed. He had the feeling someone had hit him in the forehead with a large hammer.

The death of three people - it hadn't been necessary. It could have been avoided.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw Perry Rhodan walking across the Temple plaza towards the mushroom. The Immortal was taking short, mechanical steps. His arms stiff against his body, he looked like a marionette that an invisible puppet master had picked up and was making walk.

Reginald Bell and Alaska Saedelaere noticed and ran after him. Khan followed them.

"Stop him!" he urged. "I don't need any proof that it's acting in self-defence. Maybe it just won't tolerate anyone touching it, period. Perry, come back!"

He was hardly aware of the report from the *Paper Moon* that Myles Kantor had just returned. He instructed his SERUN to catch up with Rhodan, and if necessary hold him back by force.

"You're wrong," Perry said loudly. "There isn't any danger this time."

Alaska and Bell caught up with him and prevented Khan from being able to intervene. "Touching the thing won't get us anywhere," Bell said. "You won't accomplish anything with your bare hands, Perry."

Rhodan stopped and looked at Bell.

Under the gaze from the hard, grey eyes, Bell felt queasy. "You've never looked at me like that before," he said. "Please - don't go any further."

"Are you worried about me?" Rhodan laughed hoarsely. "Nothing's going to happen to me."

Determinedly, he went on, but his friends continued at his side.

"We won't leave you alone in any case," Alaska asserted. "No matter what happens."

"Don't you want to give the scientists another chance?" Cistolo Khan implored.

Rhodan didn't dignify the question with an answer, and the LFT Commissioner remained standing where he was.

*You are so right, he thought. I've made too many mistakes already. But even so, I'm the one with the responsibility for making decisions here.*

Perry Rhodan and his two companions reached the hull of the mushroom. Khan watched as Rhodan reached out his right hand and touched the silvery material with his fingertips.

Suddenly, fog appeared in the air in front of the object and obscured the three men from view.

"Watch out!" Cistolo Khan cried.

He ran forward and saw the three figures in front of him. They disappeared through the hull of the mushroom and into the interior. There was no opening, no Transmitter, nothing. Rhodan, Bell, and Saedelaere simply diffused through the metal. Nothing of them remained behind, not even Alaska's beamer.

"Stay back, Cis," said a low, patient voice behind him.

Khan stopped and turned to see Myles Kantor walking towards him.

"You can't just go and get them back," Kantor added as he came up. "That's something they'll have to do on their own."

Together they stared at the hull. A black shadow formed on its surface, took on solid form within a fraction of second, and detached itself from the mushroom. A body fell on the dusty ground of the plaza and lay there motionless.

Khan cried out and ran towards the body. His thoughts raced. Why hadn't he prevented Rhodan from touching the wall?

He hesitated the last few meters. The body - it wasn't Rhodan. Nor was it Bell or Alaska.

An alien!

Before them lay an alien creature, somewhat more than a meter and a half tall, bent and with black, cracked skin. Its shoulders were a meter wide, and the round head had a lipless mouth and a flat nose with three nostrils. Instead of rows of teeth, the slightly open mouth displayed half a dozen individually standing bright yellow cutting teeth. The one hand was as large as a shovel blade and had two thumbs and two fingers. The other seemed to have been cut off with an extremely hot instrument. The cut surface at the wrist was smooth and not crusted over. The legs were curved to a degree that on a human being would have been called bow or bandy-legged.

Cistolo Khan touched the being cautiously with the fingertips of his gloves.

"We need medibots," he said quickly, and gave Myles Kantor a sideways glance. "That was a weird exchange, wasn't it? The mushroom swallowed three Terrans and threw an alien back. What is that thing? A prison? Or a swap meet?"

The first medibots approached and began examining the alien body. The being's arms and legs began to move, and then its eyelids opened. Two watery, completely white eyes looked at them. The mouth moved slightly back and forth.

"Kummerog!" they heard it say. Then the alien sank back into unconsciousness.

## 13.

One of Gobert Grifaaan's duties was informing himself at regular intervals of his long-term patient's condition. Usually, he looked at the data displays from his office. It was hard enough for him to have to look at Kallia Nedrun on the hologram.

Years before, he had agreed with Myles Kantor that he would call only when there was a change.

Grifaaan was firmly convinced that this would never happen. Pulse, breath, and brain activity always stayed exactly the same. In the first months and years of care, this was precisely the reason why he suspected that this was a case of a consciously induced, perhaps even self-controlled coma. Only gradually did he reach the conviction that Kallia could do nothing about her condition.

He hadn't dared discuss the subject with Kantor in a long time. He met the Terran Chief Scientist at the Transmitter, took him to the survival capsule and back again, and wished him a good journey home. Even though the journey was instantaneous and accomplished with energy supplied from a gigantic storage battery far from the clinic and not by the expenditure of bodily effort.

On this morning, October 28, 1288 NGE, a soft chirping tone signalled that movement had been detected in the survival capsule. At the same time, a hologram formed. For a moment, Grifaaan stood there without moving, then he looked at the three-dimensional image. He saw Kallia start to sit up in her antigrav capsule but fall back in exhaustion.

"Attention!" the Chief Physician of the Tradha-12 Section called. "Two medibots report at once to Kallia Nedrun!"

He nearly knocked over his chair. Suddenly the distance from behind his desk and through the door to the lock in front of Kallia's quarantine station seemed terribly long to him.

It had been at most an hour and a half since Myles Kantor had visited his wife.

The medibots were already at work examining her when Grifaaan came in. Moments later, the first results were available.

Grifaaan listened in disbelief to what the robots told him. He gathered his courage and bent over the capsule.

Kallia's eyelids fluttered

"Can you hear me?" the doctor whispered, then repeated the question somewhat more loudly.

The woman's lips moved. But she remained silent.

"She is in a state between sleeping and wakefulness," explained the Syntron that watched over the capsule. "The comatose state has ended. Her consciousness has returned."

The increased brain activity and accelerated breathing supported the conclusion. Her pulse rate had increased also, to the value that had been measured as normal for Kallia Nedrun many years before.

"Thank you," Grifaaan said. "I'll inform Myles Kantor at once."

Shaking his head, he went to his office and made a hypercom call to the *Paper Moon*.  
"After 76 years..." he murmured as he waited for a response.  
He still couldn't quite believe it.

\*

Kummerog!

If three people hadn't just been killed and if Rhodan, Bell, and Saedelaere hadn't just disappeared, they could have laughed at the comedy of the situation. Instead, every superfluous word stuck in their throats.

The being before them - was it really Kummerog? Or was it just that anyone who fell out of the mushroom would know that name?

Whatever the answer might be, the mushroom had some connection to Kummerog, just like the Temple that had stood in its place before.

The simplest solution now would have been to call Presto Go and her Exhorters together and show them the unconscious being. But the Herreach would not be able to say what their god Kummerog, for whom they had waited tens of thousands of years, was supposed to look like.

Moreover, they found themselves in a state of psychological vulnerability in which one might expect anything of them - anything but accept an unconscious and injured god who in the bargain would have struck them as downright puny in comparison with their own physical size.

"Well, as things stand, it looks as though we've been given a security for Rhodan, Bell, and Saedelaere," Cistolo Khan said. He had regained his inner balance. "The alien is injured and rather weak. Someone seems to have chopped one of its hands off. A confrontation between this creature and the Herreach strikes me at the moment as undesirable. The best thing is to get it away from Trokan immediately."

Myles Kantor nodded. "I agree. How does Mimas sound?"

"I was just thinking of that. That should be far enough away from Trokan to avoid any problems, and we have everything we need there to take care of it. Perhaps the god will turn out to be generous and help us get the three Activator-carriers out of that thing." He gave the mushroom an angry look.

"We have just received a com message from Mimas," the Pikosyn announced. "It was sent by Gobert Grifaan. Kallia has just awakened from her coma."

Kantor made a choking sound. "Say that again!" he gasped.

"It's true," the Chief Physician said, coming online, and described the latest developments. "The event took place at 9:24 plus 14 seconds. Standard Time, of course."

Kantor made a rapid calculation. "That was exactly the moment when Perry, Reggie, and Alaska touched the hull and disappeared inside the mushroom."

"Do you suspect a connection?"

"Certainly. It would be a strange coincidence if there wasn't one. I'm coming to Mimas as fast as possible. I'll see you soon."

"Understood. I'll be waiting for you."

The hypercom connection dissolved. The LFT Commissioner and the Terran Chief Scientist looked at each other.

"Mimas, then," Cistolo Khan said. "If there really is a connection, I would consider it unwise to take the alien to Mimas. On the other hand, there isn't a lot of damage it can cause. Still, we should be ready in case it's some kind of trap."

"What do you suggest?"

"Move your wife to an isolation area and have her watched by a dozen battle robots. You can never tell. Perhaps Kallia will exercise some sort of irresistible attraction on this being."

Kantor lowered his head. "I find that hard to imagine. I'd better go."

With a jerk, he turned and went back to the *Paper Moon*.

Khan pointed to the creature lying motionless in the dust. "Put it in a restraining field and send it to Mimas."

When the scientists and robots were long gone, the LFT Commissioner still stood unmoving on the Temple plaza. Wind whirled dirt up and within moments had turned the plaza in the centre of Moond into a raging duststorm in which all orientation was lost.

The first whirlwind storm from the polar regions had reached Trokan's equator.

THE END

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*Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bell, and Alaska Saedelaere have vanished, leaving innumerable mysteries behind. What happens to the three Immortals is the story of ARSENAL OF POWER, written by Peter Terrid, in the next issue of PERRY RHODAN.*

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