



**Perry Rhodan**

Peacelord to the Universe

The Posbis

**102**

**ACTION: DIVISION 3**

Kurt Mahr

## ***A PLANET OF MONSTERS***

SUPER-SHARKS! With tusks as big as elephants' tusks! They swarm the deadly seas of the planet Ghama, where the Springer Alboolal is chief.

Red-eyed killer creatures with the head and body of a pachyderm and the flippers of a seal, a spiny fin atop their backs.

A Terran freighter has been mysteriously destroyed and Terranian 'blood hounds' Nike Quinto, Chief of Intercosmic Social Development Aid, and his aide Ron Landry, deploy future commandoes to discover and deal with the enemies of Earth.

The adventure never quits in—

# **ACTION: DIVISION 3**

THE ACTION IS DIVIDED BETWEEN—

*COL NIKE QUINTO*—Chief of the so-called Intercosmic Welfare and Development organization, an entity created by Perry Rhodan

*CAPT. RON LANDRY*—A Division 3 bloodhound for Nike Quinto

*Lt. Larry Randall*—In charge of a lonely Terran outpost

*Alboolal*—Springer clan chieftain on Ghama

*Zafok*—A loyal amphibian native of Ghama

*Gherek*—A native of Ghama

*Odie Rhyan*—Skipper of the ill-fated Terran freighter *Carolina*

*Lyn Trenton*—A passenger: chief liaison officer en route to Arkon

*Dynah Langmuir*—A passenger who becomes a girl castaway

*Ezekiel Dunlop Rykher*—A passenger: an Oregon farmer far from home, who wins more than he bargained for

*Lt. Richard Silligan*—Sharp-eyed leader of the survivors

*Cpl. Tony Laughlin*—Lifeboat pilot

*Marty Nolan*—A chemical analyst

*Warren Teller*—Leader of the strangest raid in history

*Alan D. Mercant*—Solar Marshal

...and the spaceships *Urania*, *Empress of Arkon*, *Carolina* and *Royal Irish*

THEY'RE IN FOR A WHALE OF A TIME!

PERRY RHODAN: Peacelord of the Universe

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# PERRY RHODAN

## ACTION: DIVISION 3

by Kurt Mahr



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ACTION: DIVISION 3

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## PROLOG

IT IS THE DAWN of a new era for Humanity!

*Since the death of Khrest, 57 years have passed. It is now 2102 AD. and much had happened in the mean time:*

*With the support of Earthmen, Atlan has succeeded in consolidating his position as Emperor. The treaty between Arkon and the Solar Imperium has borne fruit—especially for the Terrans, many of whom have already taken over important positions on Arkon itself. Atlan has to tolerate this because he cannot rely on most of the members of his own race.*

*The Solar Imperium has become a major commercial power along the rim of the Milky Way. For the past 22 years a virtual stream of emigrants has been flowing out to colonize worlds on many of the inhabited planets Terran embassies have been established as well as interstellar trading settlements.*

*It goes without saying, of course, that many a dangerous confrontation arises but whoever dares to challenge Terrans must always reckon with ACTION: DIVISION 3...!*



## 1/ ATTACK FROM NOWHERE

*Hyper-Relay Station 14 to freighter CAROLINA: You are approaching Springer territory. Caution advised.*

*Freighter CAROLINA to Relay 14: Thanks for the warning. Will be careful. All's well on board.*

\* \* \* \*

For a spaceship commander there is nothing more unpleasant than to see an alien ship suddenly appear out of the void in close proximity—so close in fact that he's not sure whether or not he can avoid it in time. Nothing is more frightening for such a commander than to get a reading from his instruments indicating high levels of energy operating on board the alien vessel. Because usually such activity can mean only one thing: the enemy's guns are being primed for instant action.

Few things make him feel more helpless than to see his collision screens flare up under such a situation, because that means the enemy has opened fire without previous warning.

These three things happened to Commander Odie Rhyan while en route from Terra to Arkon, with three transitions and half the long course behind him. Far from being the fearful type, Odie Rhyan took one look at the situation and realized that there wasn't a single thing he could do about it. A freighter was no match for a warship—and what had popped up out there was definitely a fighting vessel, long, slender and with a ring-bulge in the middle.

Rhyan remained seated and set off the alarms. At that moment the meters on the energy board rattled their needles against their upper pins, coinciding with a sudden darkening of the outer screen. Odie Rhyan knew what that meant! The next enemy salvo would hit the ship directly because his defence screens were gone.

Odie sent out a coded distress signal. All he had to do then was to press one more button. He pressed it but suddenly everything exploded in a burst of light. It engulfed him—swiftly and painlessly...

\* \* \* \*

One would have considered Lyn Trenton one of those types who seem to acquire their second prime along with a greying at the temples. But Trenton himself maintained that his first prime had never been interrupted, so it was a misnomer to refer to any ‘second Spring’. “Inasmuch as Lyn occupied a position in the Terranian Hierarchy that most other men only ventured to dream about, his assertion was taken at face value and, at least in his presence, everyone had ceased to refer to him as ‘the dangerous man with the grey sideburns’.

At the moment Lyn Trenton was setting out to do credit to his reputation. So far he had not had a chance to exchange more than a few inconsequential words with Dynah Langmuir. By his own rather abstract but self-sure evaluation, Dynah was ‘an opportunity not to be missed’. They were already halfway to Arkon by now and Lyn had begun to fear he might miss the boat if he didn’t make an effective move pretty soon.

With an elastic step he crossed that section of the corridor that separated his cabin from Dynah Langmuir’s quarters. He intended only to knock on her door and offer an invitation to dinner. Trenton was convinced that the invitation would not fail to achieve the desired objective. Even as fascinating a woman as Dynah Langmuir could not refuse an invitation from the chief Terran liaison officer on Arkon.

He had just reached her door when the unbearable bedlam of the alarm sirens began. Lyn turned irritably and headed for the lifeboat hangar in compliance with emergency regulations. However, he had hardly taken a step before Dynah Langmuir opened her door and emerged into the passageway, impelled by sudden fright. When he spotted her over his shoulder he turned back toward her, suddenly ceasing to consider the alarm a personal affront of Providence.

He smiled at her quickly. “I was just about to put in a humble request for your company at dinner but the way it looks now we’ll be on dog rations in the hangar—not quite the right atmosphere.”

Dynah was much too confused at the moment to share his levity. “What is it?” she asked. “What’s the meaning of the alarm?”

In view of her obvious concern, Lyn decided to show his fatherly side. “Nobody knows, my child. But in any case we’ll be safest in the hangar. Come on!”

As Dynah hesitated he grasped her gently by the arm and drew her along with him. By this time the ship was beginning to sway. From somewhere came a bellowing clap of thunder. When Lyn Trenton saw the girl’s shocked reaction he realized that the situation was really serious. He increased his pace but by now Dynah was running on her own.

\* \* \* \*

Until disaster struck, Richard Silligan had been carping about his boring duty in the lifeboat hangar. All the while he had been trying to dissuade himself from the

thought that Odie Rhyan had it in for him and for this reason he continued to assign him to guard duty in the hangar. Naturally that was ridiculous since nobody in the world could seriously doubt Odie Rhyan's impartiality in such matters.

Then the alarm had struck and the ship began to buck like a billygoat, so badly that the antigravs couldn't compensate for it. Silligan quickly opened the lifeboats' main airlock hatches. The enlisted men under his command slipped into their spacesuits and clambered into the smaller vessels' control seats. The engines were fired up and the hangar was suddenly filled with a thundering uproar that even muffled the shrieking sounds of the freighter's overstressed hull.

Richard Silligan waited. The lifeboats were intended for the passengers but when none appeared, Richard began to think of his responsibility for the men in his command. If no passengers showed up he'd have to let the boats take off without them so as to at least save the deck watch crew. There was no doubt in his mind now that the ship had reached her limitations.

He was about to swing up into the airlock of the lifeboat farthest back in line when two of the hangar's access hatches opened simultaneously, emitting two men and a woman.

For a moment Silligan lost his usual control. "Hurry, you fools!" he shouted at the passengers, although each of them had paid 22000 solars for their passage to Arkon.

\* \* \* \*

The ship burst asunder in a fiery spray of colourful eruptions which momentarily illuminated the darkness of the void with an unaccustomed brightness. Suddenly, where the long fighter with its central ring-bulge had been matching the Terran freighter's course but seconds before, there was nothing but emptiness. The attacker had disappeared!

A cloud of glowing gases spread out in space. Small pieces of debris were interspersed with it, continuing to glow like embers. Somewhere along the edge of this chaos a small object was receding swiftly. It would have been difficult to tell what it actually was—whether a larger piece of wreckage or a lifeboat.

But no one would have been inclined to believe, that even one single survivor could have escaped the destruction of the *Carolina*.

## 2/ BLOODHOUNDS OF TERRA

CAROLINA to Relay 14: CQD EA

(Crypto decode: Help! In imminent danger! Enemy attack!)

Relay 14 to CAROLINA! Hold out. Help under way. Give your position coördinates. Over and out.

CAROLINA to Relay 14:...

\* \* \* \*

Glord!—thought Ron Landry. I've had more likable chiefs than *this one* in my time!

'This one' was a small fat man with a sweating chubby red face. He had thin blond hair combed straight back and his puffy lips were always wet. It looked as if his bodily development had stopped at age 25 although he must have been twice that old.

From the first moment he saw him Ron Landry couldn't stand him. The worst part was when the little fat man opened his mouth to speak. He had the high, shrill voice of a eunuch. But Ron Landry found the fact equally hard to bear that the rank insignia of a colonel lay on this man's shoulders while he remained a captain. They both wore civilian clothes, considering the nature of their profession, but they were acutely aware of their difference in rank.

The uncongenial one was Nike Quinto, Chief of Intercosmic Social Welfare and Development. "Man, don't wear me out!" he scolded Landry in his high-pitched voice. "How did you ever get to be a captain when you're so stupid? What's going to become of my blood-pressure if all I get is subordinates like you?"

Ron thought grimly that as far as he was concerned the man's blood-pressure could do what it pleased—but he felt that he could not take the remark about being stupid even from a Colonel. "Sir," he retorted with emphasis, "I'd appreciate it if you could be more specific about this assignment. I don't think even a genius could make much out of just 3 or 4 words."

Nike Quinto stared at him in startled amazement. "What? So you have an insolent tongue as well?" he criticized.

Landry was on the brink of flaring up but somehow he could not quite take the

situation as seriously as the circumstances seemed to merit. So he held his 'insolent' tongue and waited for Nike Quinto to continue his tirade.

In fact Quinto was now shouting. "What the devil's so hard to understand? You have to take a ship to a precise location in interstellar space—is that so difficult?"

"Not at all, sir," Ron answered, but he had to struggle to suppress a smirk. "I merely wanted to know why."

Quinto whistled in exasperation. "*Why*, he says! Is a soldier supposed to ask *why* every time he receives an order? Just go there, take a look at whatever there is to see and give an exact report about your observations and remember it's urgent!"

Ron nodded. "Very well, sir."

Nike Quinto's frog eyes glared at him. "That is all!" he blurted out in high, harsh tones. "You may go!"

Although it seemed foolish for him to do so in civvies, Ron saluted and turned toward the door.

"Not there," complained Quinto. "Where the devil do you think you're going?"

Wonderingly, Ron turned around. "To check out a ship, sir," he answered, "and to take off for the target area."

With a pained expression Quinto placed a hand over his heart. "You're making things difficult for me," he sighed. "I'll bet my blood-pressure is up to 220 by now. I'm not supposed to have more than 160." Suddenly his temperament blazed forth again. "Do you really think I'd let you go like that? What in Hades would you be doing out there if I didn't brief you on what's going on and why you're making this flight?"

Ron was about to explain that this was precisely the information he'd been asking for all along but Nike Quinto didn't give him a chance to speak.

"*There* is where you go!" he almost squealed, pointing to a side door. "Go in there, sit down in the chair inside and relax. When you're ready, come back out and tell me what you think of the situation. Do you understand?"

"Yssir," replied Ron in some bewilderment.

He went to the other door and opened it. At first glance he realized what kind of room Nike Quinto had sent him to. The ultra-comfortable chair, the yellow-green colour of the walls, the grey light interspersed with a violet shimmering, the complete absence of any other furniture than the chair itself—all this could mean only one thing: hypno-schooling.

Suddenly Ron Landry was looking at this assignment from another perspective. If they were going to all this trouble there must be more behind the whole thing than he had thought.

The door closed behind him. He sat down in the chair as Quinto had ordered him to do and stretched his legs out comfortably. He dosed his eyes and attempted to think of nothing. He became sleepy.

A few hours later he knew exactly what was involved.

He also had another opinion of Nike Quinto, the little fat man with his high blood-pressure and his perpetually sweating red face.

A spaceship had disappeared. The last emergency signal from the commander indicated that his ship, which was a freighter, had been attacked by an enemy spacecraft of some kind. Who the enemy was or why it had attacked the Terran freighter, nobody knew. Conjectures would be superfluous until somebody went to the location for a close look around.

This was Ron Landry's assignment. It was by no means an easy as it had seemed at first glance. Whoever the enemy might be, he would know that the Terrans were not inclined to suffer the loss of a freighter without taking the necessary measures to investigate. He would presume that a search expedition would be sent out to trace down the remains of the ship and attempt to draw some conclusions. If there were no unforeseen disturbances in the area the remains of the destroyed vessel could be analysed to furnish the Terran authorities with the data they wanted.

Nike Quinto had thought of all this. All Terran Fleet units in the vicinity of the catastrophe had been alerted. So when Ron Landry came to inspect the freighter remains he knew he would have a powerful fighting formation at his back. Quinto had thought of still more: the ship that he was consigning to Ron Landry was a heavy cruiser which could hold its own with every known type of ship in the galaxy, provided the enemy forces weren't too numerous. Landry was authorized to engage in a pursuit of the unknown enemy as soon as he found a clue to follow. Further, Landry would be under protection of the Terran Fleet task force in the area, which was to follow him on his chase.

Ron had to admit that he might not have been able to make such effective preparations himself. He had overlooked many factors that Nike Quinto had thought of.

When he finally took leave of Quinto he went out of his way to let the sweating little man know that he respected him.

But it didn't seem to mollify the frascible Quinto, who shouted after him: "And God help you if you don't handle this thing to my complete satisfaction!"

\* \* \* \*

All that was left of the *Carolina*: a cold gas cloud that swept through space with a velocity that matched that of the freighter at the moment of the disaster—aside from the effects of thermodynamic laws which were causing it to gradually expand and attenuate.

By the time the *Royal Irish* reached the cloud of gas its density had been reduced to a few trillionths of a gram per cubic cm. This meant that the vaporized material of the ship comprised a spherical configuration that was about 1000 km in diameter and by virtue of its attenuation it could not be detected against the star-fired background of space by any normal optical means.

On the other hand the cloud's density was ample for the analysts. Against the light of the stars whose spectrum constants were known they took an absorption spectrum of the gas and ascertained if this particular cloud actually did represent the remains of the *Carolina*. The spectrographs revealed the familiar metals of the ship's hull and bulkheads. Also they picked up the lines of carbon dioxide, the common plastic components of the ship's equipment—and the formerly living substances of those who had been on board the *Carolina*.

No, there could be no doubt of the fact that the freighter had been obliterated.

But the analysts did not stop there. They also examined the molecular chain patterns of the remains. The manner in which the matter had been split and ruptured, apart gave an indication also of the type of weaponry employed in destroying the *Carolina*. The molecular fragments were analytically sorted out so that a statistical conclusion could be made with regard to the kind of dissociating energy that would be needed for breaking down the original molecules into the fractional components and isotopes thus obtained. Using known molecular-count factors it was easy to calculate what kind of energies had been unleashed against the *Carolina*. For every weapon had its specific output rating and since the battle had only lasted a few minutes—otherwise Odie Rhyan would have been able to do more than send out a coded emergency call—the overall weapons-intensity could be calculated.

The results were: the *Carolina* had been destroyed by a thermo-beam bombardment. The total energy output was 15 times what would have been necessary to collapse the freighter's defence screens. The final hit must have caused the *Carolina* to burst like a bomb.

Ron Landry's task now was to draw some conclusions as to the identity of the unknown enemy who had attacked a defenceless freighter here in a comparatively well-travelled shipping lane.

It would have been a difficult task to accomplish if he had only had the results of the analysis to go by. Anybody in the galaxy could be in possession of a thermo-cannon. It was true that a weapon of the large magnitude such as was employed here would cost a great deal of money but there were more people in the Milky Way with a surplus of that commodity than seemed justified to Ron Landry at the moment. Any of them could have purchased such a weapon, installed it on board a ship and attacked the *Carolina*. The weapon alone offered no basis for any conclusion.

But there was something else to go on.

120 years ago, Terra had begun to play its own fiddle in the galactic orchestra of major powers. It was a soft fiddle at first while all the others like the Topides, the Ferrons and above all the Arkon Imperium with all its associated powers and allies proceeded to pound their drums loud enough to drown out anybody's brass. At the time there was an offshoot race of Arkonides known as the Springers who maintained a sort of galactic trade monopoly. According to them, all interstellar commerce was to go through their hands. No world was to carry out trade with

planets outside its own system without consulting the Springers' commerce control. Any extensive trading projects required Springer approval, and not only that: the Springers would then take over the larger project themselves and distribute a ridiculously small portion of the profits to the original merchants involved.

Since the Springers had the power in their hands their demands were met. At least until Terra switched to another instrument and began to play louder music. In their own mule-headed way the Terrans were not about to recognize somebody else's demands, *a priori*, however reasonable or unreasonable they might be. So they carried on their own interstellar commerce and promptly got into the Springers' hair. The result was a concrete example of defiance having its advantages over conventional forms of negotiation. Terra continued to carry on its own commerce with ever-increasing volume and in the face of the highly effective alliance between Terra and Arkon the Springers had no other recourse but to gnash their teeth as they bitterly pulled back from one domain after the other.

Of course their retreat was not quite as simple as all that. The Springers began to retaliate in a manner that was typical of their ways and style of living. They would lie in wait and whenever they caught a Terran ship they considered to be inferior to theirs they would attack and destroy it. Which led them to concentrate principally on space freighters, the kind of vessels that carried most of Terra's commerce. To be sure, there were times when the Springers suffered bitter defeats in this game because the Terrans were an ingenious lot. Many a Springer captain waiting with his ship in the deeps of space for his next victim ran into a bloody encounter with a battle cruiser which he had mistaken for a freighter. The Springers were no match for Terran cruisers. In such duels no quarter was given to either contender and they usually ended with one victor and a residual gas cloud. Whenever the Terranian vessel happened to be a warship the Springers usually took the role of the gas cloud.

It was a merciless form of partisan warfare which was carried on in the far reaches of the void, far from the broad avenues of interstellar politics. It was difficult to catch the Springers to pin them down because they lived on their ships. With but few exceptions they were space nomads.

Terra had adjusted itself to the fact that this war might go on for several centuries. Its warships were stationed almost motionlessly in space, acting as relay stations, having other purposes than to merely stand on guard against the Springer threat. Yet even they had not been able to prevent the destruction of the *Carolina*.

Every instinct in Ron Landry fought against merely ending this operation with a simple report to Nike Quinto, such as: "It was another Springer attack—no trace."

He was fairly certain that Quinto expected more than that from him. On the sensor instruments he could make out the expanded cloud of gas particles that had once been the *Carolina*. He was familiar with data concerning the freighter due to several hours of hypno-schooling he had obtained in the room behind Nike Quinto's office. It was one of the usual spherical ships, 100-meter diameter,



300,000 tons, equipped with hypertransition propulsion. It was half freighter and half passenger ship. This flight had carried 25 passengers among whom was one Lyn Trenton, Superintendent of the Terran Mission on Arkon, returning to his post after a leave of absence. As for armament: comparatively speaking, none.

It was this ship that the Springers had surprised from ambush. They had simply destroyed it without compunction.

*We can't simply let them get away with it, thought Ron Landry. We have to make them pay for this!*

Of course wishing alone was not going to do it. Landry went a step further than another commander might have done in his place. After all his other investigations he then proceeded to have the area analysed for traces of fuel exhaust. Since the Springer ships used a form of propulsion which left radiation trails, they couldn't have gone a kilometre in any direction without leaving a trail, which at least would indicate the direction they had come from or where they had disappeared to.

But nothing of this nature was discovered. The Springers had apparently dissolved into nothingness.

\* \* \* \*

Since Ron Landry had only had a few hours to select his crew, he did not know the man who stood before him. He only knew that his name was Marty Nolan and that he was a chemical analyst.

When Nolan spoke it was with a note of timidity. "Sir, you may not believe what I have to say but I'm pretty sure of the facts."

Ron waved him to a chair. "Have a seat, Marty," he said. "Then let's get two things straight. First, you can call me Ron—I don't think that'll lessen your respect for authority; and secondly, by all means speak frankly."

Marty appeared to appreciate Landry's unconventionality. He seemed to become a bit more relaxed. He was a small, lean man with large intelligent eyes and dark hair that was much too long. His manner of looking at a person pointed to an inferiority complex.

"I have completely measured the gas cloud, sir... I mean Ron... Actually I'm trying out a new method. If we're able to exactly determine its density as well as its volume, then we can also measure its mass, right?"

Ron Landry smiled faintly at Marty's questioning expression. "I follow you, Marty."

"Alright, then assume that I know the density precisely—with no errors. That I've measured the volume of the gas mass within plus or minus 5% of accuracy." Again he looked questioningly at Ron.

"I'm still with you," nodded Ron encouragingly.

"So in this case I've done all that," Marty continued, "and the results are—that

the gas cloud has a mass of 278,000 tons.”

Landry stiffened to new attention. “The *Carolina*’s registered mass is 298,000 tons,” he said.

It was Marty’s turn to nod. “I know. So I said to myself: I’ve got a plus or minus 5% variation here. That gives an upper limit of 292,000 tons and *not* 298,000.”

Ron got to his feet. Without looking at Marty he asked: “Are you sure that your error of margin isn’t any greater than that?”

“Absolutely, sir. Pardon me—Ron. In fact it’s a smaller margin than that: plus or minus 3.8%. I just wanted a good safety factor.”

Marty was startled as Ron swung about abruptly to ask him: “What do you conclude from this observation?”

Marty opened his hands as though to make an offering to Ron on a platter. “That one of the lifeboats has escaped the disaster, Ron. The mass differential fits in fairly accurately. A lifeboat of that type weighs between 18000 and 22000 tons. The *Carolina* had 3 of them on board.”

Landry was biting his lips in concentration. “Marty, do you realize the kind of action that drives us into?” he asked. “Please understand me: I don’t doubt your good intentions or your ability—but before we send out a report on this I want you to search your conscience once more. Are those measurements absolutely reliable?”

Marty replied without hesitation. “I’m as sure of them as the fact that  $2 + 2 = 4$ .”

Landry gave him a faintly ironic smile. “That’s putting it rather plainly, Marty.” Suddenly he became serious, muttering to himself: “Out there... somewhere... a lone lifeboat... but where? *Where?*”

### 3/ CASTAWAYS IN SPACE

*Cruiser ROYAL IRISH to Relay 14: Do you have any indications that a piloted spacecraft escaped from the disaster area after the explosion? Over...*

*Relay 14 to cruiser ROYAL IRISH. No such indication observed. Why? Do you have hopes? Over...*

*Cruiser ROYAL IRISH to Relay 14: Yes. Over and out.*

\* \* \* \*

Somehow they had escaped. Somehow the flaming and bursting hot fireball of destruction had spared them and concentrated only on the ship itself, which fell away swiftly behind them. Somehow they had shot out of the launching lock at the very moment that it was engulfed by the raging inferno that was the *Carolina*.

Their reason had failed them during those few seconds of terror. It seemed impossible to put the events in proportion and proper sequence. Their memories failed them when they began to ask themselves what had really happened.

But now they were out of it. The glowing gas ball that had once been the *Carolina* was far behind them. They were safe, thought Lyn Trenton, and that was the main point after all.

The hairbreadth escape of the lifeboat at the last moment had been a shock to Richard Silligan's nerves. For some time he had merely allowed the small spacecraft to shoot straight ahead into the void before he remembered his duties and started to check if at least everything on board the lifeboat was in order.

Which turned out not to be the case. Of course all equipment absolutely necessary for survival was functioning perfectly, such as the oxygen recycling and air-conditioning systems. There were also enough provisions for a space trip of several months' duration. However, tremendous electromagnetic discharges in the attack zone had so thoroughly damaged the two transmitters on board that any repairs with the means at hand were out of the question.

This meant that the ship was cut off from the interstellar communications network. Silligan kept a lookout for the other two lifeboats that had been ready for take off in the *Carolina's* launch bay but he couldn't find a trace of them. Either they had gone off in some other direction or they had not been able to escape in time from the exploding mother ship.

Richard's next task was to decide on a course and destination. He didn't want to make the decision without a consensus of opinion from his 3 passengers, as well as from the corporal who had piloted them during the first few moments of the flight.

The ship's control room was the passenger cabin as well. Arranged in a semicircle behind the pilot's seat and flight console were 3 rows of comfortable seats. Above the pilot's seat the largest of the viewscreens had been installed.

Silligan turned around. Naturally he knew Lyn Trenton, the highest Terran official on Arkon. He had seen Dynah Langmuir before and remembered her because she had made quite an impression on him. But he couldn't recall having seen the third passenger before. He was a small elderly man who did not appear to feel comfortable in his formal suit, which was obviously new. It seemed as though this kind of apparel didn't go with his nature and that he wished he might go back to something more casual.

"Well, gentlemen—and lady," he began without preamble, "it seems we have to figure out a destination. Does anyone have a suggestion? Corp. Laughlin—that includes you."

The first reaction to the question was from Lyn Trenton, who gave him a superior and patronizing smile that was touched with sarcasm. Richard felt like jumping up and punching him but he forced himself to remain seated with a poker-faced expression.

Trenton spoke calmly and politely. "Isn't that asking a little too much of us, Captain?" he asked. "How could we know what this sector of space looks like, what the chances are here or what kind of range this lifeboat has?"

He was the kind who would give a man a higher title than he had so that he could be amused by the other's struggle and perhaps his reluctance to admit that he had not yet come up that far.

Silligan replied promptly but the hostility in his words was obvious. "In the first place I am only a lieutenant, in the second place it might be possible that our other two passengers are a bit more familiar with space than you are, wouldn't you say?"

He was glad he had said it. It was a form of retaliation and he was pleased that he had defended himself—even though Trenton did not show the slightest reaction. Richard's gaze turned next to Dynah Langmuir, indicating that he wanted to hear her opinion.

Dynah forced a faint smile and shook her head. "Sorry, Lieutenant, I'm as green at this as Mr. Trenton."

Trenton turned to her and gave her a friendly nod.

*They're in collusion,* thought Silligan irritably. "Alright," he growled, "then perhaps..."

The little man in the uncomfortable suit understood the hesitant invitation to speak. "My name is Ezekiel Dunlop Rykher," he said, in such a querulous tone of voice that it was almost comical. "From Lupine, Oregon," he added. "I won this

trip in a contest. If I'd used my head I'd have had no part in the damned thing but you know how it is. They keep pushing you into it." He looked at Richard directly. "As to your question... I think we're close to the Toghma System, aren't we? The way I see it we should take as few risks as possible and fly there, wouldn't you say?"

Silligan was flabbergasted as was everyone else present, except for Lyn Trenton. Who would have expected that someone named Ezekiel Dunlop Rykher from Lupine, Oregon, would know exactly where he was out here halfway to Arkon?

After recovering from his surprise, Richard answered: "You're very well oriented, Mr. Rykher. Our present location..."

Rykher interrupted, "Call me Ez like everybody else does," he grumbled. "And you're Dick, right? Dick Silligan."

Richard nodded. "OK, Ez. You've got your bearings alright. From here to Toghma it's about 1100 astronomical units or roughly 6.5 light-days. The system has 4 planets, of which #2 is inhabited. It's called Ghama. Ghama is a water world with primitive native intelligences. There's a Terran representative there for ISW—Intercosmic Social Welfare—and a big Springer base for trading operations. That's about all we know about Toghma and Ghama."

Ez Rykher's brows went up. "Springers, you say? Then maybe we'd better pick out another place. If I know Terran politics, our own base there is probably pretty small. Couldn't do very much if the Springers captured us."

Lyn Trenton laughed suddenly. "That's rich!" he exclaimed. "The Springers capture *us*? Why should they do that? Why get themselves into such a diplomatic hassle? My good man, please don't make Ms. Langmuir nervous with your pirate stories!" He patted Dynah's arm reassuringly. Richard was vexed to see that she didn't seem to mind it.

Ez Rykher had remained calm. "Seems to me you're pretty far behind the times," he answered Trenton, speaking as casually as if he were discussing the laying capacity of his hens. "Everybody knows that the Springers attack and destroy our freighters. If they do that then why shouldn't they grab up 5 defenceless Terrans?" Then he turned to Silligan as though he didn't consider Trenton worth talking to. "How far is it from here to the next likely place?"

Richard didn't have to ponder the question. "Too far for us," he answered. "It's 7 light-years."

Ez Rykher wrinkled his brow in rejection. "This ship only has quantum jets that'll bring to 99-point something or other speol." He seemed to be speaking more to himself. "Catherine won't hold out that long. Well, for my part, in spite of everything, I'm in favour of flying to Ghama."

Richard nodded. "Cpl. Laughlin?" he asked.

"Agreed, sir."

Richard swung his chair around and leaned over the keyboard. He was waiting for Lyn Trenton to make a protest about the decision since he'd not been asked for

a vote on it, and he was ready with a suitable reply. But Lyn Trenton was smarter than he had assumed. He made no complaint and thus spared himself the embarrassment of the perfect squelch.

“Laughlin, set course for Ghama!” he ordered.

\* \* \* \*

The blue globe of Ghama was glowing on the viewscreen. The glittering surface areas of its tremendous oceans amidst the dark spots of many small islands were all clearly discernible. It was a strangely beautiful sight but the only one who seemed to really relish it was Ez Rykher.

“Well, at least this way,” he grumbled, “I might really be getting something out of that stupid contest I think Arkon would have been a bit boring for me, but this Ghama layout is something else again!”

The small spacecraft had covered the 1100 astronomical units in slightly more than 30 hours by ship-time reckoning. The propulsion system had worked flawlessly and the effects of time contraction at relative light-speed were not as apparent to the passengers as it would have been to a stationary observer in space.

When the Toghma System had come into view, Richard Silligan had turned over the flight controls to Cpl. Laughlin so that he could try to at least get one of the ship’s radio receivers back in operation. As Rykher had already observed, any landing on Ghama involved a not inconsiderable element of risk. The Springers had their eyes everywhere.

The native intelligences were dependent on them and consequently subservient to them. Richard had no idea which of the many islands might harbour the Terran settlement. He hoped to be able to repair the receiver and listen in on radio traffic over Ghama.

However, this proved to be a false hope. The equipment was too severely damaged. Lyn Trenton had been watching Richard’s efforts attentively and when the latter finally admitted his failure he had a ready remark to make.

“You can’t help it, Lieutenant. On Terra they ought to give our space officers better training in electronics.”

“Don’t be funny!” Richard growled at him. Even an electronics chief couldn’t repair these receivers.”

Ez Rykher’s grumbling voice was heard from the background. But of course you know, Dick, there are *some* people who can repair a thing like that just with their big mouth!”

Trenton turned around and for the first time Richard noted that he was irritated. It gave Richard some satisfaction even though his more practical side told him it would be rough going on Ghama for 5 castaways if they were all going to be getting into each other’s hair—what with the imminent dangers of an alien environment and the threat of the Springers too.

During the entire flight Dynah Langmuir had remained silent. Lyn had attempted to draw her into a conversation but she had answered him in such an absent manner that he had finally given up. He lowered the back of his seat and slept awhile but Dynah, Ez and the two crew members had remained awake.

During those hours when there had been nothing to do, Ez Rykher had carried on an extensive conversation with Richard. He had told him about his farm in Lupine, of his wife Catherine and his two sons, one of whom was attending one of Terra's space academies. Richard had listened attentively and with the passage of time it seemed to him that his present situation and surroundings were becoming progressively less real. The man had a way of describing things so vividly that one could almost forget his own environment. Richard had imagined that he could even smell the Oregon spruce and catch the perfume of the meadowlands while hearing the humming of bees and the lowing of cattle. There were moments, finally, when he wondered what he was doing out here en route to Toghma, 18000 light-years from Earth.

Ez Rykher was a remarkable man. He had a vast knowledge concerning lumber, grass, chickens, cows, milk and all those other things that one would expect him to be familiar with, but in addition he was also very well versed in galactology, astronautics and mathematics—which no one might expect him to know about. He went into discussions on a variety of problems in which Richard should have been the better expert but which didn't turn out to be the case. Of course Rykher didn't make him sense this since he had a pleasant and conciliatory way of intimating that of course he might be mistaken here and there. Ez Rykher turned out to be one of the most unusual and agreeable acquaintances that Richard had ever made in his life.

Even now he came forward to watch the landing manoeuvres that Tony Laughlin was making. The corporal brought the ship on a flat curve into the highest layers of the atmosphere in order to brake their speed by friction as much as possible and to save fuel. The craft still had an ample amount of fuel but it was an unwritten law of astronautics that fuel should never be wasted if there was some other way to reach the desired destination—and by this manoeuvre Laughlin was avoiding the use of the retropulsion.

They had time. They would have to fly around Ghama several times before the craft would have reduced its entry rate to the speed required for an actual landing. But at the same time this had the advantage of giving them a chance to watch for the Terran station.

At least that was the way they had planned it. But just as they started their second circumnavigation of the planet the ship suddenly received a violent impact of some kind, causing it to whirl about a few times before it tumbled downward into the depths below.

Nobody knew what had happened. The whole action looked like the result of a meteor impact but there was no trace of such damage. Tony Laughlin was only able to right the ship by means of his airflight controls and to bring it a bit higher

in altitude so that it could lose some of its still dangerous velocity.

But even that failed. The small spacecraft dropped like a stone. The engines did not respond. The antigravs had also broken down and as they fell the 5 passengers floated weightlessly through the cabin. Laughlin and Silligan finally desisted in their efforts and merely stared at the viewscreen in which they could see the blue-grey surface of the ocean rushing toward them with alarming speed.

They feared that the approaching impact would kill them all.

\* \* \* \*

Larry Randall looked up when he heard the high shrieking sound. The weird noise was emanating from somewhere above in the cloudless blue sky but he couldn't see who or what was the cause of it.

With a sigh he pulled in his fishing line and tossed it behind him into the boat. It looked as if he wasn't going to catch any moon rays today. He looked up again and placed his hand on the starting lever of his small, soundless motor, in order to be ready in case anything serious happened. By now the howling sound had increased in pitch, sounding like a strong wind whistling steadily around the corner of a house. He had never quite heard anything like it. He was puzzling over it when he finally saw something. It was a small, glittering speck that was dropping like a stone from the sky and heading for the water. *It's a Springer ship, he thought, and it's going to crash. Glord, maybe I shouldn't be so malicious about it but it would be alright with me if they all crashed together.*

When the glittering object came within a few hundred meters of the water it seemed to come under control for a moment. The previously steep descent angle flattened out, which again altered the pitch of its sound. It described a tight curve and managed to gain a little altitude, which served to lessen its speed. When it reached the highest point of the curve it finally began to drop again. It swerved just once more from its falling course but didn't quite make it. Then it plunged into the water a few kilometres away, producing a high, foaming splash in its wake.

Randall set his boat in motion. Alright, so these were Springers who had been unlucky enough to crash and all Springers could go to the devil. But one couldn't just simply let them all drown. If any one of them should manage to climb out of that thing he'd be paddling around out there in the water somewhere and in about an hour or less he'd be eaten up by a Lidiok. That was a death that Larry couldn't wish even on a Springer.

As he increased his speed the boat lifted partially out of the water. No other sound than the rushing water was to be heard. Larry glanced quickly behind him and noticed that the long flat coastline of Killanak was slowly sinking behind the horizon. He became aware of the fact that he was venturing out farther than he had ever gone before. He made a check of the sun's position with relation to the coast so that later he could find his way, yet he thought the whole thing ridiculous.



Here he was, equipped with a soundless field-propulsion motor, and yet he didn't even have a primitive compass for navigation.

After awhile he began to meet the waves that were spreading out from the crash site and they started to shake the boat roughly. Larry reduced speed and kept his eyes open. He raised up to get a better view but as far as he could see there was nothing but water. Nowhere could he see the head of a swimmer or any part of the spacecraft that had gone down here.

For an hour or so Larry crossed back and forth over the spot, searching visually and calling out from time to time. He finally became convinced that there had been no survivors and he started to turn back toward home.

It was just at this moment that he heard a gurgling sound nearby. He saw a surge of large airbubbles coming up out of the depths, followed by a grey shadow. At first he thought it was a Lidiok and he prepared to get going in a hurry because a Lidiok was big enough and powerful enough to even endanger the boat itself. But the grey object rose higher so Larry could see that it had a trapezoid shape, Lidioks did not answer, that description. He waited.

Finally the thing reached the surface. A few seconds before, Larry had recognized what it was: a piece from the empennage. Apparently it had broken off at a transverse rib in such a way that its camber slot was bent shut, thus preventing the air from escaping. So the control elevator was lighter than water in spite of being made of metal and thus it had returned to the surface. The only thing Larry wondered about was why it had taken so long to come up.

But he wondered a great deal more when he saw the name on the metal surface: *Carolina 2*.

Suddenly he sensed a need for haste. Whoever may have crashed in the *Carolina 2* was now beyond his help but Terra had to be advised of this incident as quickly as possible.

Larry made another check of the sun's position, turned the boat in the right direction and pushed the engine's throttle all the way open.

10 ADVENTURES FROM NOW  
you'll meet  
*The Man with Two Faces*

## 4/ THE GHAMA GAMBIT

*Relay 14 to cruiser ROYAL IRISH: RHH IT... Over...*

(Crypto decode: Return immediately to home base!)

*Cruiser ROYAL IRISH to Relay 14: UXD... over and out.....*

(Crypto decode: Wilco.)

\* \* \* \*

Nobody could imagine the meaning behind this order, least of all Ron Landry. A return to Earth partially contradicted the instructions he had received during the hypno-schooling. But there could be no doubt that this latest order came from Nike Quinto himself, which left Ron no choice but to comply with it.

So it was that 6 days after its take-off the *Royal Irish* landed again at the spaceport of Terrania. Ron Landry realized the importance of his new assignment when he saw that Nike Quinto himself had come to pick him up from the ship.

Nominally Nike Quinto headed the Intercosmic Social Welfare Development organisation, which was strictly a non-military operation.

He normally had better things to do than to let himself be seen in the vicinity of a heavy cruiser. It was necessary to avoid even the slightest hint that Division 3, which Quinto was personally subordinate to, was totally unconnected with 'Welfare and Development'. Thus it appeared that something very unusual had happened to cause Nike Quinto to overlook normal security measures this time.

Ron soon found out what it was all about it.

Lt. Randall on Ghama had fished a piece of lifeboat *Carolina 2* from the ocean near the Terran station there. Randall himself had witnessed the crash. A quite graphic report had been submitted concerning the incident. The salvaged portion of the spacecraft was a part of the aerodynamic controls. Randall had tested it. He found out that just before its crash the lifeboat had encountered a tremendous energy shockwave. The molecular grid structure of the metallic crystals in the stabilizer material had been powerfully distorted. Randall had subjected it to a process of retrogressing the distortion so that by knowing the relaxation period which was typical for such metallic crystals he could arrive at a time of the energy impact.

What it all meant was that the lifeboat had been shot down.

The natives of Ghama did not possess energy weapons. Therefore the Springers had shot down the auxiliary craft.

The Springers would not simply shoot down such a ship when under normal circumstances they could not know, at the time of firing, either where it came from or to whom it belonged. This meant that the Springers on Ghama were familiar with the fate of the *Carolina* and that they were afraid any report from its passengers or crew might lead to identifying the treacherous attackers.

“So finally we’ve got a clue,” said Nike Quinto in his high-pitched voice. He was somewhat out of breath. “I don’t need to tell you,” he continued, “that now we have to proceed with special caution. In case you don’t believe me I’ll let you see it on paper later—the order from Solar Marshal Mercant. Ghama’s important for us, first because of its galactic position and secondly because of certain raw materials we obtain from the indigenous inhabitants. The natives are still dependent upon the Springers and that’s why they’ve remained loyal to them. So far the Springers have taken pains to play a clever game of politics on Ghama. We may not count on the Ghamese for any resistance against the Springers.

“Naturally we can’t simply let the Springers get away with the *Carolina*’s destruction. They have to be punished for it. That means we need to have the responsible parties here on Earth so we can bring them before the Court. They won’t choose to do that of their own free will so we have to force them to it. That’s your assignment. If you get the natives into an uproar in the process, that won’t be taking care of the assignment to Marshal Mercant’s way of thinking. In that case he’ll designate the operation a failure. Just remember that, it seems to be the most important thing of all.”

“And now sit down again in that chair in the other room. Let yourself be brought up to date on the rest of the intelligence we’ve gathered.”

\* \* \* \*

Larry Randall was not surprised when the monthly supply ship to Ghama came in from Terra a few days earlier than expected. He had figured that his dispatch concerning the crash of lifeboat *Carolina 2* would elicit some kind of reaction. The accelerated arrival of the supply ship must have something to do with it.

Larry sat at his desk and looked out the large window across the island’s flowered grasslands and along the dull-gleaming grey surface of the street. The latter led to the low buildings of the small spaceport where the ship was just now descending. It was the *Empress of Arkon*. She was equipped with one of the new field-propulsion engines so other than a distant humming during the landing there was no other sound to be heard. Larry always found it fascinating to see a colossal metal ship like that come down effortlessly out of the silent sky.

He wondered whether or not he should go out to the field. Usually he did not do so on such occasions because he well knew that the officers and crew of the ship would keep the small settlement on Killanak in an uproar for a couple of days

anyway without his help. So he decided that today he wouldn't go out there either. Something was up. It would be better not to alter any of the accustomed patterns because even the slightest hint of suspicion had to be avoided. The smooth-skinned natives on Killanak had sharp eyes. Larry didn't care to risk having one of them swim the 250 km distance to the main Springer station and perhaps report: "Terra man... go to ship... not always go... but go today..."

So Larry Randall remained seated where he was and waited.

Suddenly one of the native inhabitants was standing in the doorway. Small, smooth-skinned, with large, protruding eyes, his skin had a bronze-like hue which gleamed with oil that came incessantly from his pores. The small dark slits behind his jaws were gill openings which at present trembled slightly as though he were excited.

It was Zatok. During his first few weeks on Ghama, Larry had experienced difficulty in differentiating between these people. The only difference he could be sure of at that time was that which existed between male and female. The Ghamese wore nothing more than skin-tight loin cloths and their bodily build was very similar to that of Terrans. Since then, however, Larry had not found it hard to distinguish them as individuals.

"A stranger comes, my friend," said Zatok gutturally.

Larry nodded. "Have him come in," he answered in the same language. "He probably is looking for me anyway."

Zatok returned the nod. "I think so too," he said.

Larry frowned. "You mean he's out there already?"

Zatok drew up his features to reveal his splendid white teeth in a sort of friendly grin. "Yes, I think so."

Larry got up. "Then tell him to come inside, you rascal!" he ordered him with a smile.

Zatok turned and went out. His movement consisted of a sort of graceful waddling, which was typical of a creature who was more accustomed to moving through water than 'walking' on solid ground.

Seconds later another man stood in the doorway. His breadth and width almost filled the doorframe. Larry's first impression was that he wouldn't care to tangle with this fellow if fists were the only weapons available. The stranger didn't seem to be more than 30 years old; but the look in his eyes revealed more experience than that. In spite of his impressive size his movements were graceful, self-assured. The man was dark-blond. Larry had never seen him before, but he knew his type.

Division 3!

"I'm Ron Landry," said the stranger. "If you are Larry Randall and you have something for a dry throat, I'd say I've come to the right place."

Larry smiled. "Correct on both counts, Mr. Landry," he said, pointing to a chair.

Ron lowered himself into it and stretched his legs way out in front of him, yet in spite of this he seemed to be bigger and more powerful-looking than before. Larry fetched a bottle with glasses and did the pouring.

Ron started talking without being asked. "Larry, they've sent me here because they have an idea that you could use some help. In view of the growing influence of the Springers here the work of Welfare and Development on Ghama has to be pushed ahead. Please understand that my being sent here does not mean in anyway that Terra is dissatisfied with you. It's just that the workload stacking up here nowadays is too much for you to handle alone."

Larry idly listened. He merely nodded when Ron paused. He knew he was not expected to retain anything of what the other was saying. It was more or less improvised. What Ron really was here for he'd have to learn in another way. He was sure it would be in a way that would not allow any Springers to eavesdrop.

Ron took a second glass as he continued. "On the *Empress of Arkon* I have a whole heap of new instructions I've brought along. They're in the form of a sort of guidebook. I haven't studied it yet myself, but it would be best if both of us went over it together. The Chief is of the opinion that by use of appropriate methods it should still be possible to gain some ground against the Springs."

Larry was suddenly attentive. Here was something that sounded rather specific.

"The Chief believes we can offer the natives just as much as the Springers can, if not more. The trick of it is to change one of their old customs around here. For centuries they have looked to the Springers for their needs. All it takes is to convince a few of them that they can do even better with us. The news will make the rounds and the Springers will start losing points."

Not too significant, Larry decided, wondering when the real hint would fall.

"Above all we must consider one thing: the welfare of the Ghamese is our first concern. Whatever we undertake around here we must never conflict with the natives. Otherwise everything is in vain."

*Aha!*—thought Larry. *Now he's planting something.*

At this moment Zatok reappeared in the doorway. Since Ron's back was to the door and he was about to continue speaking, Larry gave him a signal.

Ron turned around. "What's on your mind, garma (Friend)?" he asked in the Ghamese tongue.

His easy fluency in the language astonished Zatok. As was typical of his race, the latter demonstrated his reaction visibly.. The hairless brown bulge of his forehead moved. upward, widening his eyes even farther, while he executed 3 or 4 jumps that came within less than an inch of knocking his skull against the doorframe.

"Garma—you speak my language!" he cried out in the strange sing-song tone that expressed his joy. "You make me happy so that my heart floats and my hands swim!"

"I'm glad to know that, my friend," replied Ron. To Larry's surprise he noted that he handled the singing lilt of the language without a trace of accent perhaps

then you wouldn't mind if I were to stay for awhile on the beautiful world of Ghama?"

Zatok clapped his hands together very forcefully, which was a sign of decisive negation. "Not in the least, my friend! That only floats my heart the more!"

Ron made a ceremonious gesture, stretching out his right arm before bending it as though to embrace someone. It was a signal of agreement and confirmation, serving to ratify the theme under discussion. Ron seemed to execute it with consummate elegance.

Larry figured that the man must have come through a hypno-course of some kind—if it had come to that, then something big was really cooking somewhere.

"You were about to say something when you came in my friend," suggested Ron. "What was it? I didn't mean to interrupt you."

Zatok made a cross-like sign at the level of his head, which meant: *And how!* "I believe somebody wants to see one of you two," he announced.

Ron gave him a friendly smile. "If you believe that much, then probably that somebody is outside the door. Bring him in. Who is it?"

At that moment there was a din of stomping feet without. Zatok was somewhat unceremoniously shoved aside as the giant figure of a bearded man marched into the small room. He was even a slight bit taller than Ron Landry.

Larry struggled to conceal his surprise. This man was Alboolal chieftain of the Springer clan that operated the large trading station on Ghama.

"Just happened to be in the area," he said in Arkonese. His blustering tone was typical of his kind. "I thought maybe it'd be a good idea to drop in to say hello."

He looked about him. Larry offered him a seat after introducing him to Ron.

The Springer was obviously curious. "So you're intending to stay here for awhile?"

Ron shrugged. He made no attempt to be courteous. His interkosmo was so abominable that even Larry could hardly understand it.

"Don't know... depends on a couple of things... have to see."

Alboolal let out a thunderous laugh. "Aha! I get it! Secret—right? Something you don't want the opposition to know about. But I assure you the Ghama trade is beginning to drag for us. I think we'll be pulling out of here before long. You can have this water world all to yourselves..."

"Oh...?" muttered Ron.

"Yes, that's right. For you people it can still be a big chunk of commerce maybe." Alboolal made a deprecating gesture. "But we're not much for these country trading posts. We go for the main stream."

Nobody answered. Alboolal looked about and suddenly felt uneasy. He got to his feet. "Maybe I shouldn't take up so much of your time. Anyway, all I wanted to do was say hello. Well—here's to good neighbours!" He nodded to Ron as he said this.

Ron got up and although he might have been a hand-breadth shorter than

Alboolal there was something in his supple efficiency of movement that was quite impressive enough. Alboolal's grinning expression froze. He seemed to sense the hostility that radiated from Ron. He had been about to leave but now he stood there transfixed by Ron's glaring look.

"Don't forget to make your will and appoint your successor," said Ron in a low tone of voice.

But his words were unmistakable because he spoke Interkosmo this time without the trace of an accent.

25 ADVENTURES FROM NOW  
it's action  
*Between the Milky Ways*

## 5/ DAY OF THE MONSTER

*Relay 14 to EMPRESS OF ARKON: All cups are in the pantry. All cups are in the pantry. Over...*

*Freighter EMPRESS OF ARKON to Relay 14: Housekeeping's fine down here. How about you? Over and out...*

\* \* \* \*

When it was over with, Richard Silligan didn't know how or in what sequence of events everything had transpired. When he was finally able to think clearly he knew that in any ease he was sitting on a wooden bench and close before him was the face of a creature that seemed to have spring from a nightmare.

He remembered Tony had sought to bring the nose up fast before they hit the water. He had succeeded partially. The lifeboat had groaned as if ready to explode—but it had responded. It even climbed slightly higher. It served to cut down some more of their speed but the final crash from a height of several hundred meters had been rough.

For a few seconds Richard lost consciousness. As a regulation precaution his spacesuit was closed, so nothing could happen to him in the water. When he had opened his eyes again there was a dim green light around him and the outside microphones were picking up nothing but gurgling sounds. He found himself paddling through water, actually at a considerable depth, judging by the comparative darkness. When his reason returned to him he had started to call out. The others also had their spacesuits on and if something hadn't happened to all of them at the moment of impact at least one of them should hear him.

But before Richard had received an answer there was a sudden movement in the water. He had seen a shadow approaching him. At first he thought it to be a large fish that had caught his scent Ghama was famous for its voracious sea monsters and the thought of a lidiok or whatever the things were called did not fill him with any special enthusiasm.

But it had not been a Lidiok. It was a fairly crude-looking submersible craft of some kind with thick glass portholes. It had come to a stop next to him. A hatch opened on the side of its hull and a pair of hands gripped him heftily, pulling him into an airlock chamber. The hatch closed and water was pumped out of the small



room. Until this point Richard had not been able to see any of his rescuers: however now another hatch opened and somebody had dragged him into the interior of the boat. Breathlessly he sat down on a wooden bench and in the dimly-lit chamber he was aware of many other benches around him.

“The brown-skinned creature with the protruding eyes and hairless skull observed him carefully as though he wished to memorize every detail of his face and never forget them. A Ghamese, thought Richard. Friendly, peaceloving, motivated by childish curiosity. This much he remembered—but also that they were faithfully subservient to the Springers. He concluded his own observation with the mental note that this latter was the only drawback these creatures had.

He looked around. Two benches behind him sat Tony Laughlin, who had his helmet off and was staring about in wide-eyed amazement. At the end of the same bench where the bulkhead served as a back support, he saw Lyn Trenton and Dynah Langmuir. Neither Lyn nor Dynah had opened their helmets. Dynah seemed to be unconscious, probably from fright.

But something else was stirring back there. Two of the benches began to shake and wobble as an unkempt head of white hair came into view. This was followed by a pair of curious, beady eyes and finally the rest of the little man rose up with his helmet back on his shoulders like the hood of a Capuchin monk.

Ezekiel Dunlop Rykher was grumbling bitterly: “I pity the next person who tries to talk me into a cratchy (lousy) contest...!”

\* \* \* \*

Other than the one Ghamese who had just finished studying him, there were no others of his kind in this inner chamber. However, as Richard’s eyes became accustomed to the twilight dimness of the place he made out a door in the forward bulkhead which no doubt led to the craft’s control room. Undoubtedly more of the small fishmen were up there.

The meagre light available came directly through the portholes from the water outside. The vessel was in motion. Richard could see it in the swirling of the water and he could feel the powerful vibrations which came through the walls. Everything smelled of sea-water and fish. Even the Ghamese smelled of the sea and fish. Richard caught himself wonderingly asking what else they were supposed to smell of.

He was still a bit confused and his reasoning powers returned only slowly. A few moments before, it had seemed that he was sitting in a crashing lifeboat. Now he was crouched on a primitive bench inside a wooden submarine that was being piloted by the smooth-skinned native inhabitants!

Meanwhile their Ghamese rescuer had moved to the wall near the airlock and was now observing the five Terrans with a smile on his face.

Richard turned around. “How are you doing, Tony?” he asked.

Tony seemed startled. “OK, thanks,” he more or less stammered. “Still a little

confused.”

Richard nodded to him encouragingly. On the bench behind Tony, Ez Rykher had been brushing imaginary dust from his suit, which of course was a ludicrous instinctive gesture, but now he turned to see what he could do for Dynah.

“Leave her alone!” Trenton challenged him. “It’s just as well she doesn’t experience too much of this.”

Ez paid no attention. He simply stretched out his arm and shoved Trenton to one side. The latter was not accustomed to such treatment. He failed to react out of sheer astonishment. Ez opened Dynah’s helmet and threw it back. Then he lifted the girl from where she was sitting and stretched her out on the bench. He had shaped the plastic helmet material into a cushioning sort of pillow for her head.

When Dynah opened her eyes her first words did not sound too feminine. “Phew—what a stink in here!”

Ez laughed in his grumbling sort of way. “It’s not the most elegant of drawing-rooms,” he told her, “but it’s dry in here!”

Dynah sat up, assisted by Ez. “Where are we?” she asked.

Ez turned around. “Hey, Dick! She’s asking where we are. Do you think these natives can understand Interkosmo!”

Richard was chagrined that he had to be reminded of this. He turned to the Ghamese and spoke to him in Interkosmo. “We are grateful for our rescue,” he said. “You’ve really helped us out of a bad scrape.”

The Ghamese grinned. “I Gherek,” he answered brokenly. “No need thank. We go city. You rest. Then see what do.”

“But we don’t prefer to go to the city,” asserted Lyn Trenton suddenly and his tone was none too gentle. “Take us to the Terran base!”

Richard turned toward him with an angry retort on the tip of his tongue but before he could express himself Gherek answered.

“Not possible. Must go city. Friends say.”

While speaking he had been slipping along the wall toward the forward bulkhead door. Richard could clearly see that the situation was going to become unpleasant. He turned quickly to Trenton again and shouted at him.

“Trenton, you keep your mouth shut. These people have...”

Trenton had jumped to his feet. The events of the last few minutes appeared to have taken him half out of his mind. He was no longer the calm, superior man that he had represented himself to be. He interrupted Richard in mid-sentence to yell in Arkonese at their rescuer.

“I’ll show you whose orders you are to obey! We’re going to our own base here and not to your filthy city. We...”

His hand lowered to his belt since every spacesuit was equipped with a small beam weapon. It was plain to see that Trenton wanted to intimidate the Ghamese with it and force him to do his will. But it was Trenton who was the first to

discover that they no longer had their weapons.

“They... they’ve taken our beamers from us!” gasped Trenton chokingly. He looked as if he were about to faint from fright.

Richard jumped up, instinctively grasping their dangerous position. If the Ghamese had taken their weapons he knew he’d have to capture Gherek and hold him as a hostage. But Gherek was aware of the situation. Before Richard could jump over the bench that was in front of him, the Ghamese opened the door of the forward bulkhead. For the fraction of a second Richard had a glimpse of a small, brightly-lit room filled with strange equipment where two other Ghamese looked up in startlement to see what was happening behind them.

Then the door slammed into place and Gherek disappeared. Richard hit the door panel with full force but it was solid. The only result was a sharp pain in his right shoulder.

“Tony! Ez! Trenton! Come here!” he panted. “We have to get this thing open before they...”

He spared himself the rest of the words since everyone seemed to know what to do and why. They ran against the door with their combined strength. After the first 5 attacks against the wooden panel it appeared that in time they might succeed. Until now everything had remained silent behind the door.

But then Richard suddenly heard a hissing sound. “Quiet!” he ordered. “Everybody be still!”

They stood where they were and listened. The hissing sound appeared to come from all directions. There were a few places along the wall where it seemed to be more audible than elsewhere. Richard found a small hole and when he transferred saliva to it on the tip of his finger, he saw that it made bubbles.

He was about to say something but at that moment he felt his legs go out from under him. Suddenly the inside of the submarine looked as if he were staring through a long tube. He heard Tony cry out but even his voice sounded strangely remote.

Richard crashed to the deck but hardly felt a thing. It felt as though the strange vessel were rearing upward wildly. Then for a long time he did not feel or sense another thing.

\* \* \* \*

Larry chewed a bit nervously at his lower lip. “I don’t, understand anything about diplomatic strategy,” he admitted, “but do you think it was a good idea to say that to Alboolal, right to his face?”

Ron stood by the window with a glass in his hand. He laughed. “Do you really think we could have pulled the wool over their eyes? The minute they shot down that lifeboat they knew they were sitting on a hot bed of coals around here. So when they saw our supply ship come in 5 days ahead of schedule they knew what

they were in for. The only reason Alboolal came in here was to see who the man was that Terra had decided to send.”

He came away from the window and set the glass down on the table rather emphatically. “No, my friend, Alboolal knows what’s up between him and me. What he does not know—and hopefully won’t find out—is where we propose to go from here. All security measures we’ve employed so far have related strictly to the Ghamese. *They* must not suspect that we’re getting ready to make things hot as Hades for the Springers.”

Larry ran both hands through his hair. “Glord!” he moaned, thinking of the space castaways. “If I could only see how we could help the poor devils! Do you think they’re even alive at this stage?”

Ron shrugged his shoulders. “There are three possibilities,” he answered. “First: when they crashed the impact killed them or they were so badly wounded by it that they were helpless and sank to the bottom. Secondly: they survived the crash but became victims of one of your hair-raising sea monsters.”

When he gave Larry a white-toothed grin, the latter interrupted him somewhat peevishly. “Laugh as much as you want to, Ron! One of these days you’ll get to see a Lidiok and then you won’t think they’re so funny.”

Ron nodded, though still grinning. “Suits me,” he said. “But now then, third: they survived the crash and no Lidiok ate them up. I’m assuming that the lifeboat carried them at least 200 or 300 meters into the depths. Before they quite regained their senses or got to the surface, the Ghamese fished them out. There’s a 10-to-1 chance the natives would turn the survivors over to the Springers before they’d bring them to us.

“In which case they are prisoners.”

“Precisely. Two hours ago the *Empress of Arkon* received a ‘cups-in-the-pantry’ sign. You know what that means. The Fleet is deployed to its advanced positions and is ready to give us support if it should come to an open conflict. Tonight we’ll pay a visit to the Springer camp and have ourselves a little look around. All I need is for Alboolal to cross my path just once...!”

He turned again and looked out the window toward the narrow beach which ran along below the small house. It was just wide enough to keep the surf from reaching the foundation wall.

“What do you do, anyway, if you have a storm here?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Larry answered disinterestedly. “There aren’t any storms here. This climate is so well balanced that it never works up a storm. The weather on Ghama is one of the most monotonous things I’ve experienced.”

Ron laughed. “You should watch out that a Terran tourist agency doesn’t find that out. The World with the Absolute Weather Guarantee... or something like that. Already I can see them.

He interrupted himself to listen. A chorus of cries emerged from somewhere. Larry had also tensed to listen attentively. Outside in the passageway they heard the patter of naked feet. Very close by they heard the high, lamenting cry of a

native.

“Liidiioook...!”

Larry was at the door in a flash “A Lidiok!” he exclaimed. “A Lidiok is approaching the island!”

Ron made an easy jump over the table that was in his way. Larry was already outside in the passageway. Ron ran after him, shouting: “Get your boat ready! This is our chance!”

\* \* \* \*

The sea was as calm as ever. The only thing that hinted of danger was the small group of natives that pressed anxiously inside a seawall enclosure around a warehouse. From time to time one of the Ghamese would poke his head out to look toward the water but usually after 2 or 3 seconds he would go under cover again.

Larry and Ron sprinted to the boat that lay on the shore, half pulled up onto the sand.

“Do you have some strong tackle?” Ron called out while they were running.

Larry widened his eyes at him in amazement. “Are you serious—?! You think you’re going to catch a Lidiok with tackle...?”

Ron smiled. It was a young and insolent smile. Larry thought to himself that he had no idea of what he was doing.

“With tackle, skill and this here,” Ron laughed as he slapped the heavy energy weapon which he wore in his belt.

They reached the boat and gave it a powerful shove into the water. Larry swung aboard skilfully but Ron didn’t know about such things and so missed his chance. The boat was rocking in the water about 3 meters from shore and there was Ron still on dry land.

But it didn’t seem to matter to him. He yelled to Larry: “Duck!”

Then he made a short but swift run and jumped. It carried him flat across the water and into the boat with such force that Larry was almost thrown overboard. He caught himself on the gunwale and looked at Ron reproachfully.

“Do you always embark like that?” he asked.

“Only when my host can’t offer the luxury of a gang-plank,” Ron answered. “where do you keep the tackle?”

“Here,” said Larry as he produced a box from under the stern seat.

Ron opened it impatiently and spent awhile looking over the powerful line with the hooks as big as the palm of his hand. “Not bad,” he admitted. “what do you usually catch with this stuff—sunken spacecraft?”

Larry did not answer him. He was looking seaward but the Lidiok was not letting itself be seen yet. The same as with all of its kind. It would show itself just once in the beginning, only to disappear for awhile.

The next time it appeared, it was always to make its attack. It was as though it knew that its first appearance could fill the Ghamese with such unholy terror that for that very reason they would become its helpless victims.

“I need a kind of harpoon,” said Ron.

“It’s there,” said Larry without turning. “Everything’s there. The only thing we’ve never had around here is somebody who thinks he’s going to catch a Lidiok with harpoon and tackle.”

“Yup, I’m a rarity alright,” Ron laughed. He brought out the harpoon and started to fasten it to the line instead of the hook. “When does this fellow show up?”

“In 3 or 4 minutes,” Larry answered, “If it hasn’t figured out a new strategy.”

“Why do the Ghamese hide themselves behind that enclosure? I always thought a Lidiok was a kind of fish. What can it do against them on land?”

“Quite simple. It rushes up onto the land, takes hold of as many as it can and rushes back into the water.”

“Aha! As simple as all that? I thought it was as big as a house.”

“That it is,” grumbled Larry.

“But how can a...” Ron started to ask more but was interrupted by Larry, who was by now worked up.

“Listen, you Terran greenhorn! The last local sighting of a Lidiok was 3 months ago. It rushed onto the land and ate 4 of my Ghamese before I could do a thing. I was actually at the opposite end of the island at the time. If you look over there you can still see the trough the monster made in the ground! That wreckage is what’s left of a warehouse that collapsed when it hit it. And so—you were saying...”

He had turned away from the sea toward Ron to tell him this and now Ron was looking over his shoulder.

“OK, OK, Larry,” he muttered reassuringly. “I didn’t mean anything by it and now that I see it I’ll take you at your word...”

Larry whirled around: 50 meters ahead of the boat the main fin of the Lidiok had emerged, towering at least 5 meters above the water.

“Better keep more to the right!” called Ron.

He stood in the stern of the boat with the heavy automatic in his hand, its barrel pointed downward.

Larry wished that he’d tell him what he had in mind to do. So far Ron had only given out orders and it was not easy to figure what he was up to. The Lidiok had become alerted. A portion of its massive head appeared above the surface, showing the 20 cm hemispheres of its giant eyes. Apparently it had decided to hold up its attack on the island until it had investigated this small object that had been coming at it so sharply.

Larry did not feel any too confident. He knew that the boat and the Lidiok were equally fast at top speed. But he also knew that the Lidiok could shatter the boat

with one blow of his mighty tail. He felt that Ron Landry did not understand too much about Lidiok hunting. That was the worst part about it.

Now the monster was swimming laterally from the boat. Since the boat was even with it, it would have to turn to keep it in view. From a distance of 30 meters Larry could see the thing's watery, treacherous eyes, the broad forehead-like superstructure of its skull and the triangular fin that towered as high as a house above the water.

"Faster!" yelled Ron. "Before it thinks of something else!"

Larry shoved the throttle to the limit. The Lidiok turned a bit more but did not seem interested in having the boat follow it. Larry knew that after awhile it would turn toward the land to make its attack.

So far Ron had not taken his eyes from the creature for a second but now he turned about swiftly. In a smooth, deft movement he bent down and snatched the harpoon from the floor of the boat. "Make a sharp turn!" he called to Larry. "Then come in toward it at an angle—at top speed so we can pass its head within 1 or 2 meters!"

Larry did what he was told. While the boat spun the sharp turn in the water he began to suspect what Ron was intending. The fever of the chase began to grip him also. His previous apprehensions of only moments before had vanished. He brought the motor to top speed and the boat seemed to spring from the water rushing with rising momentum toward the preying monster.

Ron now had his weapon raised for action.

On the island the Ghamese spectators emerged from hiding. Having finally perceived what the two outworlders were attempting to do, curiosity overcame their instinctive fear. They crouched in the low beach grass with their eyes fixed on the scene before them.

The boat's sudden turn and speed surprised the Lidiok. Ron timed their movement precisely. The distance between the pivot-point of the turn and the Lidiok's skull was great enough to permit a powerful approach run, yet it was short enough so that the beast could not do much before Ron reached it.

Larry was bent far forward now with his hand on the throttle and his feet braced against the floorboards. He knew he'd need firm anchorage if the Lidiok turned savage. He stared in fascination at Ron.

Ron was far forward, practically on the bowsprit. It would take but a very small jolt to send him flying into the water, where he would be beyond help under the circumstances. In addition to his energy gun, he now had the harpoon in position also. His gaze was fixed immovably on the eyes of the Lidiok as though he hoped to hypnotize it.

5 meters to go!

Then Ron let out a cry that was primordial, utterly savage. In the same instant the gun recoiled in his left hand. A brilliant ray of unleashed energy struck the wide, ugly head of the giant. The water began to glow as hissing steam rose upward.

Ron leaned way back. Although the weapon seemed to drop from his hand inadvertently, it fell precisely into the sharp bow compartment of the boat. He put the whole force of his body behind the harpoon throw and in the midst of the hissing sounds of the water Larry heard a muffled "plop!" Momentarily frozen in alarm he also noted that Ron was about to fly right out of the boat after the harpoon. His heave had been too wide, or so it seemed. But Ron very calmly yielded to the pull while at the same time falling just aft of the gunwale. He supported himself powerfully then and heaved back. That gained him his balance and he again stood up in his former position.

By this time the Lidiok had come to realize what was happening although it did not have much left to think with. The impulse beam must have carved a deep molten channel through its skull. But an instinctive reaction against the attack caused the creature to lunge forward. With the last sparks of its consciousness it had perceived the boat's direction of motion as it shot past its head and the Lidiok began to follow the comparatively flimsy craft.

Larry tried to push the throttle down farther but the motor had no additional reserves of power. He saw the steaming cloud that concealed the Lidiok's great head, no more than 10 meters astern. In its death throes the monster was generating a titanic burst of energy. If Ron's shot didn't take effect within a few seconds the boat was doomed.

Something slid past Larry's head and came within a hair of making him lose his balance. It was the harpoon line. It was running through Ron's hands and paying out behind them. The Lidiok remained exactly on course.

Larry was kneeling down beside the motor. He wasn't thinking anymore of the fact that the boat was very close to shore now and that it would strike the land with a heavy impact if he didn't slow down at the right moment. He was going for cover behind the motor block because the Lidiok was gaining with incredible speed.

Ron shouted something that Larry couldn't understand. His gaze was fixed in fascination on the steam cloud which by now he could almost reach out and touch. He could see the mighty shape of the beast in silhouette behind the steam.

Then the vapours suddenly fell back. Larry couldn't believe his eyes. He thought that the Lidiok was merely gathering itself for a renewed charge. But the vapours gradually settled and hovered sluggishly over the water while the boat continued its headlong course toward the land. Larry jumped up and began to yell. He threw his arms in the air and shouted senseless words out of sheer joy and relief. But providence granted him only a brief instant of triumph. A murderous shock ran through the boat Larry's feet shot out from under him as he described a high arc thin the air, finally landing almost at the feet of the watching Ghamese, who were momentarily frozen in fear.

The grass eased the impact of the fall. He got to his feet although he felt slightly benumbed and confused. Not far away, Ron was also getting up, still holding onto the harpoon line.



Lying partially on its side the boat had come 5 meters up onto the beach. It did not appear to be damaged but it had cut a deep trench thin the sand which was now slowly filling with water.

Nothing more could be seen of the Lidiok. The harpoon line sank into the water a few meters out from shore.

Ron watched it and grumbled: "I thought we could get it in closer than that!"

Larry shook his head. "Tell me the truth—you knew more about Lidioks than you've let on!"

Ron laughed. "Maybe a little bit," he answered. "Back on Earth they had an idea that maybe I'd run into a Lidiok so they put me through a short hypno-course on the subject." He attempted to pull on the line. It lifted slightly out of the water but then suddenly tautened and would not budge farther. "OK," he muttered. "We'll span a few boats together and then pontoon it out."

"You want to bring it onto the land?"

Ron nodded. "Otherwise why would I have gone to all this trouble? I knew that we'd lose it if we killed it out in deeper water. Then we'd have either had to cut the line or be dragged into the deep. I tried to guide it in behind us and it worked. Besides—you were a terrific boatman!"

"Much obliged," retorted Larry drily. "But I'd like to know..."

He was interrupted by the Ghamese natives. They had recovered from their state of shock and had begun to hop around, singing for joy. They formed a circle around the two Terrans and started a ritual sort of euphoric roundelay. The singing wasn't especially harmonious but from the words chanted it was plain that they held the two outworlders in high esteem for their heroic deed.

In spite of being ready to burst with restlessness, Ron Landry forced himself to endure the ceremonies. He squatted in the grass and occasionally gave the dancing Ghamese a friendly nod. He knew that the poorest protocol possible at the moment would be to interrupt these smooth-skinned fishermen in their present activity.

More than an hour passed before the Ghamese appeared to be satisfied that they had given sufficient expression to their enthusiasm. The circle finally broke up and the little brown-skinned men and women returned to their work.

Ron got to his feet. They went back to Larry's office. Ron was about to speak when Zatok suddenly appeared at the door.

"Ah, there you are, garma!" said Ron in the indigenous tongue. "I'm happy to see you. What brings you to us?"

Zatok was acting strangely in a way that Larry knew was not his custom. He had known Zatok for more than a year now. He had been one of the first of the Ghamese to declare himself willing to live together with the Terrans on Killanak and help them build their station. Larry thought he knew every expression of Zatok's face but at the moment the fellow was acting differently than ever before.

He seemed to be ashamed or embarrassed. He held his gaze averted and in spite

of Ron's friendly overture he did not speak a word. It took him a minute before he finally looked at Larry, then at Ron as he finally spoke.

"Garma-ma (Plural: Friends)," he began softly, "you have done us a great service. We're thankful to you that you have killed this evil Lidiok and we wish to show our gratitude. We know something that we believe you'd like very much to be informed about I'd like to tell you this. It has to do with 5 people of your own race..."

50 ADVENTURES FROM NOW  
you'll discover what is  
*Greater Than the Sun*

## 6/ CITY BENEATH THE SEA

*Freighter EMPRESS OF ARKON to Relay 14: Sample secured. Standing by. Over...*

*Relay 14 to EMPRESS OF AKON: Take off at once. Out...*

\* \* \* \*

When he finally regained consciousness, Richard Silligan's first sensation was that of the terrible odour around him. He opened his eyes. Somewhere high above him was a bright, smoking red light.

His memory came back to him slowly. The first thing he recalled was the space boat. They had tried to land on Ghama. They had crashed. They had fallen into the sea and—yes, that was it—a submarine vessel had picked them up. Then Lyn Trenton had flipped his lid and tried to throw his weight around. The Ghamese natives had put them under gas and they had passed out.

So now?

He had no idea where he was at present. Vertical stone walls rose up on both sides of him and the red lamp was at least 7 meters overhead. He raised up slowly. Not far from him were 4 dark shapes lying on the floor. They were his companions. They had all been brought to this place together and he was the first to regain his senses.

Richard got to his feet. He felt somewhat better and above all was filled with curiosity. He recalled that the Ghamese in the submarine—the one called Gherek—had mentioned that they were to be taken to 'the city'. But the Ghamese natives were water people. The larger portion of their settlements were always under water, normally on the coastline of some island land mass so that shafts of fresh air could be brought into the undersea areas.

Richard wondered if the room they were in now belonged to such a submarine city. He began to explore the walls. He discovered that the chamber was nearly circular in shape, about 6 meters in diameter and that there were no doors anywhere. If there were a means of exit at all it would have to be above him. He leaned back and stared up at the lamp. A sense of despondency came over him. How could they ever climb up there? If they still had their weapons they might have been able to burn some handholds in the wall. But without them...?

Something was rustling nearby. When he whirled around he saw that one of the shapes on the floor had started to stir. Somebody groaned aloud and Richard recognized the voice. It was Ez Rykher. He kneeled down in order to help him up.

Rykher got up with astonishing swiftness. “Ye gods,” he groaned, “do I ever feel cratchy! What have they done with us?”

As he began to stagger sideways, Richard caught him under his arms. “They put us under some kind of knockout gas,” he answered. “The effects wear off pretty fast—it’s just the first few minutes you have to fight it.”

Rykher struggled valiantly to stay on his feet. He was the oldest one in the group, thought Richard, but so far he had come up with the best ideas, and if Lyn Trenton could follow his example he would gain more respect from others.

“Where’s the way out of here?” Ez wanted to know.

“No place,” answered Richard. “Except maybe straight up!”

The old man looked above him. “Too high!” he muttered, disappointedly. “Way too high!”

One after the other the rest of the survivors came to. First Tony Laughlin, then Dynah Langmuir and finally Lyn Trenton. The latter felt so bad that he was moved to submissiveness.

He finally came and spoke to Richard, “I’ve been thinking this thing over, Dick. I guess I’ve acted pretty stupidly. Forget it and let me join forces with you.”

Richard concealed his surprise behind a smile. “That’s OK with me,” he answered. “But why not start now? How are you for high-jumps, Lyn—like up there, for instance?”

Trenton looked up. Each of them had so far only stared at the lamp above them without any idea of how it might help them to get out of their predicament. However, Trenton observed it a little longer and as he dropped his gaze finally he seemed to have something in mind.

“What are these spacesuits made of?” he asked suddenly.

“Anybody’s guess,” retorted Richard. “Chemicals? I don’t know. Most likely they’re synthetic.”

“Can they be torn into pieces?”

“Not on your life! Maybe with a good knife you could get through the stuff.”

“Do you have one?”

“I think I should have...”

He began to search through his pockets and finally he produced a small pocketknife. This type of spacesuit was also equipped with a large jackknife but the Ghamese captors had taken them away. Apparently, however, they had not considered the smaller penknife to be of any importance.

Now Trenton pointed upward again. “That lamp has to be suspended by something,” he said. “On a line or a cord of some kind. If we also had a cord and tied something heavy to it, we could swing it upward and maybe snare that lamp. Then if we’re lucky, what’s holding it could also hold us while we climb up.”

Richard rocked his head slightly from side to side, considering. He didn't give the idea much chance of success but any measure of hope was better than none at all. "Alright," he decided, "we'll give it a try."

Everybody caught on to Lyn Trenton's plan and started to work with enthusiasm. Of course there was only one knife but each survivor got busy looking for anything on his person which could be used for making a strong enough rope. Ez Rykher contributed his suit jacket and shirt and Tony Laughlin surrendered the jacket of his uniform. There was nothing much Dynah Langmuir could offer without denuding herself; however to the astonishment of the men she knew how to tie old-fashioned ship's knots, which required little material yet held fast. The length of rope made out of such pieces, however, only reached about 4 meters and of course the rest of it had to be fashioned out of strips from the spacesuits. If that didn't succeed, then they would have laboured in vain.

Silligan took off his spacesuit and began working on it where he thought he might have the best chance—where the outside pockets had been sweated onto the tough material. They were not integral to the actual suit envelope, being designed to carry such objects as could be used safely under outer space conditions. Richard worked for some time without results until he discovered a way to separate the seams. If he worked the blade back and forth fast enough so that the factor of heat was added, the process began to become effective. It still took him another half hour before he could cut off the pocket flap but it was only 20 cm long, not even a pitiable 20th of the length they still needed.

But they did not tire. Richard handed the knife over to Ez Rykher and the old man demonstrated that he was very familiar with the use of such a primitive instrument. Within another hour and a half he produced an additional 80 cm of rope length.

They were making progress, which served to bolster their spirits. After many long hours of incessant labour the makeshift rope was finally ready. For a weight to tie to the end of it, Ez Rykher donated one of his space boots.

He insisted upon it with a typical argument: "How many of you city slickers have ever gone barefooted? Not a one! As for me—for many a year it was every summer for months at a stretch. So?"

The next thing was to test the rope's strength. A trial tug of war ensued, with Richard and Trenton on one end of it and Tony and Ez on the other. Dynah's expert knots held firm. If the lamp's suspension cord were equally strong they would be able to climb up without danger of a sudden drop.

It was time to make the rope throw.

They had thought they had the most difficult part of their task behind them but this operation proved to be a greater challenge. It took them awhile to even gauge the height of the throws. The boot clanked a number of times against the lamp, which indicated that its holder was made of metal, and each time the smoking flame flickered ominously. At each throw they held their breaths because if the lamp went out they could forget the whole idea.

Only after many efforts, when their arms were aching from repeated attempts, they struck an obstacle somewhere above the lamp itself. They saw the boot whirl around as the rope struck against something, and Ez let out a whoop of joy. But then the boot seemed to change its mind and it fell back again to the floor. When Ez became silent, Dynah began to cry.

In spite of everything, however, they had come a long way. Now they knew that there was a grappling point above the lamp and all they had to do was develop a proper throwing technique so that the boot would wrap the rope a few times around the lamp's suspension line.

"Maybe we'd all better take a break first," Richard decided. "I think we could use it."

"OK," grumbled Ez Rykher grimly, "but first I'm going to give it one more try. That lousy lamp's getting to me!"

Impelled by his fit of anger, he grasped the home made rope about 3 feet behind the boot. Stretching his right arm out high and wide, he swung the boot around his head a couple of times until it had built up the right momentum. Then with a quick lift of his head he swung the boot upward and let go. Richard saw the boot shoot past the lamp and disappear into the darkness above it. Ez thought he heard a faint scraping sound but didn't pay much attention to it. He was staring upward to see what place the boot would fall back from.

Then Rykher let out a sudden wild cry that seemed alien to his age and mannerism. "It's up there! By God, we did it!"

\* \* \* \*

Suddenly all thought of a rest was forgotten. Richard had to shove everybody back from the rope as there was a general tendency to grasp it eagerly. If it had caught on something somehow, then they had to go easy with it.

At first he pulled on it carefully with one hand. Above them the lamp began to sway, which was a good sign that the rope was caught on a suspension line somewhere. It seemed to be well-anchored because it did not yield when Richard pulled on it with both hands, using all his strength. Finally he even jumped upward and clung to it, swinging above the floor and completely supported by it. Nothing happened.

The rope was fast!

Richard claimed the prerogative of being the first to go up and he decided that Tony Laughlin should follow him—with good reason. If they should be surprised up above by the Ghamese, they had to be ready to defend themselves with their fists, and the best-trained fists in the group happened to be those of Richard and Tony.

Richard found it comparatively easy to climb the first 9 or 10 feet because Dynah's knots provided many good handholds. But then he began to sense the fatigue in his arms. He locked his feet on a knot in order to rest his arms for

awhile and then, gritting his teeth, he continued climbing.

Finally he was a scant 3 feet under the lamp and he could see that beyond it the dungeon walls tapered abruptly inward, leaving one small opening that was hardly a meter in diameter. Richard couldn't make out what was inside the opening.

It was not too difficult to get past the lamp itself. It was framed in the shape of a 3-foot wheel of metal. Four spokes led from the outer rim to the centre where the actual flame was housed. Richard saw an oily basin in the hub, from which a burning wick protruded.

He was able to stand on the wheel rim and grasp the chain that held it. He rested awhile with the lamp frame swinging wildly back and forth under his weight. Then he grasped the rough links of the chain and climbed higher.

When he reached the place where the rope had been caught by the chain he came within a hair of losing his grip. The boot had only made a 3-quarter turn around the chain, and apparently all that had held Richard was his own weight on the rope, which was all that had kept it snagged over the toe of the boot. He was dizzy by the thought of what might have happened if the rope had slipped over the end of the boot at any moment. It would have been a pretty severe fall.

After unfastening the rope, he swung it and the boot around his neck and then climbed the rest of the way up to the opening. He had no difficulty in getting over the edge of the hole onto a solid stone floor but once safely inside his strength left him for awhile. He lay down and gave his body a chance to recover from its cramped stiffness.

Only then did he firmly fasten the rope so that the others would not have to fear it would come loose. Tony came up swiftly, followed by Ez. Then it was not very difficult to haul up Lyn Trenton and Dynah.

The room over the dungeon had roughly the same diameter but its ceiling was considerably lower. While Dynah was still untying herself from the rope, Richard was already examining the walls. It did not require much skill to locate the door because nobody had taken pains to conceal it. Apparently the Ghamese had considered their prison to be absolutely secure. The door was suspended by 3 wooden hinges of somewhat grotesque dimensions. It had a simple locking bolt which apparently worked in the same manner outside as in. Richard cautiously lifted the bolt and sought to move the door. It moved heavily on its hinges. Immediately he closed it again and replaced the bolt, waiting for everybody to be ready at once for the breakout.

It came to Richard in that moment that their attempt was actually rather hopeless. This city was under water, deep below the surface of the sea. There were exit locks, of course, and for a Ghamese it would be no particular task to swim up to the surface without any kind of equipment. Also, if he wanted to use a more convenient method he could use one of the submersible boats. But for Terrans there could be only this latter choice. They were not capable of swimming up through 30 or 40 fathoms of water unaided. It meant they would have to steal a boat from the Ghamese before the pursuit began and that they'd also have to learn

how to operate it without any loss of time. This prospect seemed to offer little chance of success.

There was still a 3rd alternative: through the airshafts that connected the city with the upper world. Although the Ghamese had both lungs and gills they chose to live in a gaseous atmosphere. However, Richard doubted that such a route would be negotiable. The shafts probably extended upward vertically and had no provisions for climbing them.

When everyone had gathered closely behind him, Richard carefully opened the door. It squeaked frightfully in its hinges and he hesitated awhile, fearful that somebody on the outside might hear it. But then he saw what was out there and the spectacle caused him to throw caution to the winds.

There was a passage or street of some kind that slanted gently upward from left to right and which was only illuminated by a dim greenish twilight glow. But directly across from him, only a few meters away, was the hideous skull of a tremendous sea monster. It stared at him curiously and started to open its mouth, which was as big as a barn door. It was as though the sight of the humans had stirred up its appetite.

Richard shot through the door, dove to his right and then threw himself instinctively to the ground. The monster moved to attack, approaching him with uncanny swiftness. Dynah screamed loudly while at the same instant a thunderous shock of impact ran through the street-like passage. Richard turned on his side in time to see the weird sea giant swim off into the darkness with a lazy movement of its huge fins.

He sat up. After all—that was sea water. What the devil! How could this passage be dry when some whalish creature was swimming out there?

Ez Rykher suddenly started to laugh in his carping sort of way.

“It’s a trick illusion, Dick!” he exclaimed. “That critter was playing games with us. He knew there was a glass wall between us—only *we* didn’t know it!”

Almost as if walking in a dream, Richard slowly crossed the passage to the other side. He had to hold his hands out in front of him because the glass was literally invisible. He didn’t know where it was until his hands collided with it.

This was a kind of glass that Richard had never encountered before. It was completely transparent and free of reflections. There was no way in which the material could be seen by any normal means. It was the ultimate material for windows and it was a Ghamese product Richard and his companions were staring out into the ocean depths through a transparency that extended the whole length of the street-like passage. Or at least it extended as far as they could see.

Close overhead was a stone ceiling that joined the glass wall. The glass-walled street passage made a slight ascent to their right ahead of them and disappeared around a curve. The inner wall of the structure was also of stone, in which there were doors at evenly spaced intervals.

It was a strange situation, alien and weird, in fact. None of them had ever seen anything like it. It finally dawned on them that they were in a place where human



feet had never ventured before: 40 or 50 fathoms beneath the surface of an alien sea, in a glass-walled avenue of a unique city of amphibious fishmen.

Richard seemed to sense the emanation of something ominous in the silent stones of the ponderous structure. He looked around several times, expecting at any moment to see one of the ponderous doors swing open before a hostile horde of Ghamese. But nothing happened. The undersea avenue remained undisturbed.

He had a presentiment that the deserted aspect of the place might have something to do with the giant fish creature who had made such a fool of him. He knew that there were aquatic monsters in the oceans of Ghama which filled the natives of the planet with an instinctive and panicky fear. He considered it possible that the Ghamese in the area may have taken to their heels at the sight of the giant sea denizen. It might explain why this section of the street passage was empty of any local traffic.

Richard knew they had to go on. They couldn't just stand where they were. He could sense his own rising nervousness and apparently the others were in the same mood.

"Let's go!" he said suddenly, in an attempt to appear vigorous and confident. "We have to head for the surface. Somewhere we'll find a lock and a boat."

He started off, leading the way. He hoped that after he rounded the curve up ahead he would get a clearer picture of what was going on and why this passage was so ominously quiet but this hope was not realized. Actually, there wasn't any curve, as such. That had only been an illusion. The passage merely described a slow, constant arc so that from any given point one's range of vision along its extent was limited to some 15 or 20 meters.

After marching along for about a quarter of an hour they began to notice for the first time since they had emerged from their dungeon that the air they were breathing was not quite suited to them. They had long since ceased to pay much attention to its oily fish odour but now in addition they realized that it was poor in oxygen content. They broke out in sweat and often had to rest in order to recover from a dizziness that was slowly creeping over them.

At times Richard thought he heard noises up ahead somewhere but each time he would stop to listen he found he had been deceived. The deathly silence continued—with the exception of their dragging footsteps.

The left wall of the passage was made up of one long window after another, which were only interrupted here and there by brief stretches of massive stone masonry. The glass panels must have been tremendously thick to withstand the awful pressure of these depths but in spite of this their factor of light distortion remained zero.

The strange way continued to curve before them and in the stone wall to their right the fugitives continued to encounter the ponderous, silent doors. Richard was tempted to open one of them to see what lay behind it but decided that it was more important to continue onward and try to find a way out of the city.

After they had continued in this manner for half an hour they gathered the

impression that during this time they must have completed a circle, if not more. The city appeared to be built on a plan like the Tower of Babel, having one passage on the outer wall that ascended like a spiral.

A few minutes after that the inner stone wall of the passage altered its appearance. Now the monotonous masonry was broken by a series of windows also. Of course they were smaller than the sweeping thick panes that separated the city from the sea and they didn't have the same marvellously smooth clarity, yet they were transparent enough to permit a view of what lay in the interior rooms behind them. Inside they could see a confusing maze of objects which were totally unfamiliar to Richard and his companions and which seemed to have lain there for a long period of time.

Then the passage became wider and higher. Richard slowed his pace cautiously. A warning presentiment assailed him when he perceived that a kind of plaza or square lay before him which opened inward to his right, into the main structure of the city. It was completely empty. The dim light filtering in from the sea was sufficient to enable him to see where the passage narrowed again to the width of the avenue they had been following.

He kept hard right and next to the stone wall, which gave him a sense of security. He would not have crossed the centre of the plaza for anything in the world, no matter how much time it might have saved him and it appeared that the others were of the same opinion.

Lyn Trenton muttered, "Something smells fishy here... and I mean that literally. I'll bet you the local inhabitants are hiding somewhere close by and are watching us."

Richard would have preferred that he hadn't expressed this fear. It matched his own presentiments exactly but for Dynah's sake it would have been better if he'd kept his mouth shut. He had turned to look back at the girl several times and he knew she was at the end of her stamina, both physically and mentally.

He stopped to let Ez and Tony pass him and then he went to her. "If you want to we could take a rest before going on," he suggested.

She shook her head almost too vehemently, it seemed to him. "Not on my account," she answered stubbornly. "I can still make it a little farther."

Ez was in the lead now and he moved forward at a faster pace than Richard. The square seemed sinister to him and he wanted to get it behind him as quickly as possible. Within 5 minutes they had reached the middle of it—that is, halfway along one wall—and under the new pace Ez was setting they were relieved to see the opposite continuation of the passage draw nearer swiftly.

"We'll soon be there," Ez growled, half aloud. "I'll be glad when we—"

He got no further.

It was then that it happened, Doors flew open. Hinges squeaked raucously and the pattering of naked feet was heard on the stone floor. Swarms of the small, oily-skinned little brown Ghamese streamed outward from openings in the wall of the city. They spoke not a word, apparently operating under an agreed plan of

action. No one came close to the Terrans. The ones that had emerged from doors ahead of the Earthmen occupied the street opening across the plaza and those who had emerged behind them blockaded the passage they had come from.

Richard and his companions were surrounded! And then suddenly the giant stepped into the arena. He was the last one to emerge from one of the doorways, being forced to duck down as he entered in order not to bump his head. He was wearing some close-fitting synthetic clothing that was in modern contrast to the primitive loincloths of the Ghamese inhabitants and in his hand was an imposing energy weapon. His wide face was framed by a fiery red beard and when he began to speak his voice resounded like thunder through the square.

“Welcome, Terrans! I see you troubled to get up here on your own. That saves us a lot of bother. Otherwise we would have had to fish you out of your hole down below. He spoke Interkosmo and the way he gloated in amusement over his victims was the typical characteristic of a Springer. The beard and powerful structure were merely incidental proofs of his identity.

There was no way out.

“Come on! Be my guests!” scoffed the bearded giant. “You’ll be as comfortable here in this wonderful city as you would at home!”

Richard could only stand there with his jaws clamped shut, on the verge of gnashing his teeth. He noted that Ez was watching him questioningly along with Tony and Lyn Trenton.

“Go to him!” he almost gritted, half under his breath. “Don’t try anything with him. I’ll try to get help!”

He had no idea of how he might keep such a promise. There were a number of doors in their vicinity but he didn’t even know if he could reach one of them before the Springer fired, aside from whether or not the door he chose would have an exit behind it.

But he was going to attempt it.

Ez understood his plan. He shrugged his shoulders and walked toward the waiting Springer in an apparent mood of resignation. After some hesitation, Tony followed him and then finally Lyn brought up the rear.

It was at that moment that the Springer assumed he had won and he relaxed his alertness.

It was also the moment when Richard Silligan made a mighty leap to one side and started running for the nearest door.

100 ADVENTURES FROM NOW  
you’ll root for  
*The Saviours of the KHREST*

## 7/ FRANTIC FUGITIVES

*Relay 14 to Ghama Station: Expect delivery in 34 hours. Over...*

*Ghama Station to Relay 14: That's dragging it out. It will be a tight schedule here. Over and out...*

\* \* \* \*

For about the 10th time in the past 4 days, Larry repeated his question: "So you're not going to tell me why you shipped that Lidiok out of here?"

Ron soberly shook his head. "No," he answered succinctly.

"And why not?"

"Glord!" sighed Ron. "As if I hadn't made it clear to you a hundred times already! If only one of us knows why, it's better and safer than if two of us knew the reason. Can't I ever get that into your dull skull?"

"No," retorted Larry with the same laconic brevity. And after awhile he added: "I only hope there's a plausible basis to it."

Ron nodded but said nothing. He seemed to be thinking of something else.

Larry walked to the window and as he looked outside he wondered how long he was going to have to wait before something happened. It was 5 days now since they had killed the Lidiok—that is, 5 Ghama days, which were 52 Terran hours long. Five days ago, Zatok had also confessed that some men of his own race had fished the Terrans out of the sea after they had crashed in a spaceboat and that they had taken them to their submarine city under orders of the Springers. So for 5 days they had known that the 5 unfortunate Earthlings were being held prisoners in the city of Guluch off the coast of the island of Tarik, some 500 km from Killanak. Yet in spite of this nobody had taken any action—at least no action that had anything to do with freeing the prisoners.

On the morning following the successful Lidiok hunt, the giant cadaver of the beast had disappeared and with it had gone the gleaming metallic sphere of the *Empress of Arkon*. With a somewhat insidious smile on his face, Ron Landry had explained that he had sent the dead monster to Terra as a scientific specimen. Larry hadn't believed a word of it. Finally Ron had given up trying to support the statement as being the truth. At any rate he had wasted no words to explain what was really going on.

Larry sighed. He remembered something that had been imparted to him at the time he had applied for a position in the Intercosmic Social Welfare and Development organization. In those days he had been a cadet in the Space Academy and the Academy's commanding officer had informed him that 'Welfare and Development' could use men like himself. He had let drop a few hints that the organization was involved in more than the welfare and development activity. It had caused Larry some confusion. It had disconcerted him to realize that if he should decide against the C.O.'s recommendation they would have to give him a hypno-shock treatment in order to erase his memory of this conversation. But he did not reject the proposal, not out of fear of the hypno-shock but rather because he knew that the outfit really was not a Welfare and Development setup. The whole thing had been mysteriously fascinating to him. They had taken him in and he had gone thru a long, hard period of training.

At the end of his indoctrination and training he had been transferred into Division 3. This was the inner corps of the outfit and its activities actually had nothing at all to do with 'welfare and development', either intercosmic or social or whatever. Larry soon realized that he had landed in the toughest and most effective branch of Intelligence. At the inauguration of the Division, Perry Rhodan himself had acted as godfather, one of the loneliest of men at the pinnacle of renown. Division 3 was his own personal instrument and although it was by far less famed than Rhodan's fabulous Mutant Corps, it was no less effective in its operation.

At this moment Larry recalled the motto of the Division which had been taken from an old proverb: 'Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.'

And at present he was damned if he didn't seem to be the left-hand factor in the equation!

\* \* \* \*

They had slept through another night. But as they were having breakfast Ron suddenly looked at his watch.

Rather negligently he remarked: "Finish your eggs and then we'll get going."

Larry's food almost choked in his throat. "Where to?" he wanted to know.

Ron laughed. "Where to, he asks! Have you forgotten that 5 Terrans have crashed on Ghama and been taken prisoners by the Ghamese by order of the Springers against every agreement of intergalactic law?"

Larry finished swallowing his food. "Oh, so that's finally come to your mind, after all!" he retorted bitterly.

Ron failed to respond to the challenge. He merely remained silent while watching Larry chop away at the rest of his eggs. But finally Larry couldn't stand the suspense anymore.

"Where are we going actually?" he asked.

“We’re making a boat trip,” Ron answered.

“Far?”

“M-hm-m... Pretty far.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask so many questions. Chow down!”

Larry nodded grimly and finished his breakfast.

After that they went outside. Unknown to Larry, Ron had evidently briefed Zatok in regard to the excursion. This became apparent when they came upon Zatok and a couple of other Ghamese natives beside the boat on the shore. With unmistakable pride, Zatok declared that he had accomplished everything that had been requested. Ron complimented him for his efforts and Larry again had to admit that Ron Landry knew how to handle the Ghamese better than he did.

Without another word, Ron shoved the boat into the water. Larry got in and sat in the bow section. After all, if Ron wasn’t going to open his mouth he could drive. Which Ron proceeded to do. He shouted a few cheerful words to the Ghamese and started the motor. Then he steered the boat at a lively clip into the open sea.

Hours passed. The sun gradually developed a heat that was intense but there was no way of avoiding it as the boat offered no shade. After awhile, Ron slowed to a stop and took a break. This was after they had been 6 hours at sea without any sign of Killanak. After shutting down the engine, Ron opened a package of provisions and handed out food and drink, which Zatok had apparently prepared and stowed on board. Even during the brief snack there was little conversation if any.

Finally Ron dove overboard in order to refresh himself in the water. While he swam about in the neighbourhood of the boat, Larry kept a lookout to make sure that no Lidioks were around. Then the situation was reversed where Larry took a swim and Ron kept watch.

Finally they continued onward. Four more hours went by and Larry figured that by now they must be about 1300 km out from Killanak. Still he did not know what Ron had on his mind.

After awhile he could tell by Ron’s actions that they were getting close to their goal. He had stood up and was looking around, seeming to be fairly sure of himself yet a bit puzzled at not being able to discern his objective yet. He sat down again and pushed on for awhile, after which he got up again to observe the sea ahead of them. But by this time Larry had already spotted the indistinct object. It appeared to be just above the surface of the water, occasionally glistening as though it were made of metal and the sun was reflecting from it.

Ron grunted his satisfaction and pushed the throttle to maximum, steering directly toward the distant point on the horizon. For 5 minutes the boat churned ahead at top speed without causing the object ahead to grow appreciably in size. But then the relationships changed rapidly. The thing became a tiny ball which finally converted itself into a mighty sphere suspended over the water. It hung

there on a cushion of invisible forces and shimmered brightly in the sunlight.

It was the *Empress of Arkon*, their base supply ship. In a new state of bewilderment Larry realized that this was far beyond what he had imagined concerning their purpose and goal. What was the *Empress of Arkon* doing out here in the middle of the ocean, far from any known inhabited island?

Ron nudged his shoulder. "Here we are," he said superfluously. "Now you can keep your eyes open, OK?"

In his hand was a small transceiver device that was not any larger than an old-fashioned matchbox. Larry heard him say: "Is everything ready?"

And he could also catch the answer that came through: "Everything ready, sir."

"How does it look in the surrounding area?"

"All clear, sir. We were tracked during the approach flight but at present there's not a thing in sight anywhere within instrument range."

"Including straight *down*?" asked Ron with special emphasis.

"Yessir—clear to the bottom."

Ron Landry smiled. "Alright, then let's get the show on the road. My buddy here can hardly wait to see what you've brought with you!"

\* \* \* \*

Richard Silligan felt the hot, glowing beam of the thermo-gun as it hissed close past his skull. He threw himself to one side and fell as he did so, but he rolled once and then sprang to his feet. He wasn't far now from the door. The Springer had lost precious seconds since it was hard for him to believe that any of the Terrans would seriously attempt an escape. His first shot had been wild because of his surprise. The second one, however, would be closer and effective.

Richard knew that he was lost if the door turned out to be one with stubborn hinges that would take him more time to open than it would for the Springer to get a clear shot at him. Nevertheless he kept on going. He *had* to make it. He realized in the moment that the Ghamese and the Springer appeared in the square that no other Terrans would know about the crash of the lifeboat on Ghama if at least one of the survivors couldn't manage to get out of the submarine city and reach the Terran base. The Springers were enemies of Earth no matter how many treaties the two races had made with each other. For them any Terran falling into their hands was a valuable acquisition. By certain means they could obtain from them any number of details which Terra always strove to keep secret. Once in the hands of a Springer, a Terran could give up hope of ever being free again.

It was this knowledge that drove Richard onward. He spurred at top speed toward the door while behind him a clamour arose. The Ghamese who had remained silent thus far were now reacting. He could hear their hurried, pattering feet on the smooth stones of the plaza.

They were coming after him!

At once he perceived his opportunity. If the Ghamese took up the chase it would keep the Springer from firing. He wouldn't try it as long as the fishermen were crowding into his line of fire.

Richard did not slacken his pace when he reached the wall. He crashed hard against the stone masonry and instantly reached for the door bolt. With a determined grip he lifted it. He pushed hard and felt the door slowly move under his pressure.

Finally it opened enough to enable him to see behind it. It was not a room. He realized that the windows he had seen in the wall were not a part of this area. Instead, he was confronted with a dark, narrow passage that appeared to lead into the heart of the city—but goodness knew where.

He squeezed past the partially opened door into the corridor but in the same moment something banged hard against the door from the outside. He heard a plaintive, almost hysterical voice: "Dick, for the love of God—take me with you...!"

Richard froze in his tracks. It was easy to recognize that voice. Dynah Langmuir was out there rattling the door bolt.

He couldn't just leave her standing there, so he cracked the door open wide enough to grasp her by the arm and pull her through. As he pulled her with him into the passage he noted with a quick glance that the leading phalanx of the Ghamese was still about 10 meters away.

It was a stroke of luck that they moved clumsily on solid ground. Their method of running was more like an accelerated sort of waddling which seemed to exert them to the utmost. Richard knew he was safe as long as they restricted themselves to merely chasing behind him. But perhaps they or the Springer would soon get the idea that the city was honeycombed with other passages, some of which might offer a means of cutting him off.

Him and the crazy girl who had decided to come with him!

He ran on into the passage which had been plunged into darkness after the door was closed. But he had noticed that the corridor led straight ahead for at least 100 meters. He only had to keep a hand out as he progressed, in order to feel any obstruction in his path. With his other hand he held Dynah's arm and guided her after him, expecting at any moment to see a light in the way ahead. By this time he knew that the Ghamese must have reached the door and certainly they wouldn't hesitate to continue the pursuit.

But he finally reached the first turn without seeing any sign of the Ghamese and he began to think that either he had overestimated their mentalities or they had already found another way to reach him sooner than by direct pursuit.

When he released his firm grip on the girl's arm he sensed that she staggered and leaned against the wall for support. Suddenly realizing her condition his initial anger subsided.

"What good did you really think this would do you?" he asked, but his tone was far less gruff than he had intended.



Dynah sobbed. “Nothing,” she answered. “Except that I didn’t want to have anything to do with that terrible man with the beard. You should have seen the look in his eyes when he saw me...!”

Richard had caught the Springer’s lecherous look and he knew the girl wasn’t exaggerating. “Alright,” he muttered somewhat helplessly, “we’ll manage this thing together then—but you’re really going to have to grit your teeth. How do you feel?”

“Miserable!” Dynah admitted. “My legs feel like lead, my shoulders hurt and I can hardly lift my arms.

He had to laugh in spite of himself. “That’s a great condition to be in when you’re running away from 10,000 enemies,” he said ironically. “But forget it: everything will work out.”

He was thinking the opposite but figured it wise to keep her spirits up as best he could. “Come on,” he said softly then, “we have to keep going!”

He took her by the hand and she submitted willingly to his guidance. When they negotiated the bend of the passage they found that it began to slant gradually back into the depths.

Richard forced a good-natured chuckle. “That’s where we came in!” he muttered.

They took no pains to move quietly. The passage was completely silent. There didn’t seem to be any pursuers anywhere, either ahead or behind them. Richard was wondering what kind of trick the enemy might have figured out.

He decided to take the first branch passage they could find. If the Ghamese tried to guess at what point he might leave the corridor they’d most likely presume he’d choose to stay as long as he could with a route that was closest at hand. He didn’t want to make things that easy for them. It was possible that they would pay less attention to the lateral passages than to this main one he was in.

It was a good idea—but there were no lateral passages. At least not during the first half hour. Richard’s confidence faded.

Then he had a new thought that gave him a fresh spurt of hope: this present corridor must have a specific purpose. Nobody would make such a passage merely to connect two points unless it led to some major outlet or thoroughfare. The Ghamese must have had some plan in mind when they laid this tunnel out. It had to lead somewhere other than just endlessly onward without any lateral passages.

Thus far they had progressed using a groping method whereby his left hand felt along one wall and Dynah’s right hand felt along the other. But Richard decided that wasn’t enough. It could be that the doors in this area were not as crudely designed as those they had seen in the wider passage coming up. It would be very easy to miss a narrow door crack as they went along, using this method.

He finally stopped.

“What’s the matter?” the girl asked, anxiously.

“We need light,” he answered. “I’m afraid we’re not going to find anything

with just our hands.”

“I have a lighter,” she said. “But it’s just a little one.”

“That’s a lot better than nothing,” he laughed. “Let me have it, please.”

He heard Dynah rummaging through her pockets. “Here!” she said, finally.

Richard held the lighter close to the wall and ignited it. The greenish spot of luminescence was no larger than his thumbnail. With that he figured it might take him more than an hour just to carefully go over one square meter of the wall—that is, if he really didn’t want to risk missing anything.

Then he discovered he could make the light more effective by cupping his hand around it, which served as a dim reflector, thus augmenting its feeble range slightly. The wall revealed nothing of any importance. The passage had been cut primitively through sheer native rock. The floor was not very even and the ceiling was so low that he wondered why they hadn’t struck their heads against it a number of times. But nowhere could he find a door or any other exit mechanism leading into a lateral passage.

Dynah asked him suddenly: “Do you think we’ll ever get out of here?”

He laughed. “I don’t intend to spend my life in this place.”

“You laugh too much,” she commented seriously. “You don’t have to, you know, just to keep my spirits up. At least all I need is to stay at whatever your own level of courage is. I’m always better off if I know exactly what the score is.”

Richard swallowed hard. “It’s a little painful to see how easily you can read me,” he said. “But anyway I’m certain that we’re not going to die in this tunnel. If nothing else happens we can go back and surrender to the Springer. That’s better than starving.”

Wherewith he turned his attention back to the wall again. And it was precisely then that he discovered what he had been searching for so long: a narrow, hair-fine crack that ran from the top to the bottom of the wall. It was far too straight to be a natural crevice.

With a new mounting tension he followed it with the feeble light. Tracing it upward he found the place where it made a right angle and crossed parallel to the ceiling to another right angle that again dropped a straight line toward the floor.

Dynah had not been able to see any of this.

When Richard turned to her with apparent nonchalance and said, “Here’s the door,” she whirled about and stared at the wall.

He gave her the lighter and asked her to hold it close to the special section he had discovered. Then he made an attempt to move the panel in one direction or another. There was no door handle so he braced himself against it and pressed back with all his might. But the door did not yield. He was about to give it up when he heard a soft clicking sound somewhere near the floor. Suddenly the obstruction moved so easily that he came within a hair of falling inside. The slab of stone receded inwardly as though it were sliding on well-oiled rollers. An opening appeared in the wall, offering two narrow passages to the right and left of

the slab.

Richard stepped back, not knowing why he suddenly felt proud of his accomplishment. Perhaps it was because of Dynah's presence here. At any rate he waved a hand toward the opening and looked at her as though to say: this I have found for you. Go in and have a look!

It was thus that Dynah made the discovery that was actually to his own credit. Hesitating slightly, and reaching her hand back as if she wanted him to hold it, she stepped into the opening in order to peer around the receded panel of stone. Richard saw her bend forward so that she could see what was inside.

As she seemed to stand there motionlessly, he asked himself what she could be looking at so long. He finally took hold of her hand and was about to pull her back when she suddenly turned to him. In the light coming from the interior he saw that her face was flushed with excitement.

"Down there!" she blurted out. "Dick—that glass...!"

200 ADVENTURES FROM NOW  
you'll find yourself inside  
*Death's Labyrinth*

## 8/ CRACK IN THE WALL

*Relay 14 to Ghama Station: Terra advises raw material only is of interest. Plenty of finished product samples on hand. The top order is to proceed with caution. Over...*

*Ghama Station to Relay 14: Thanks for advice. So far not possible to proceed. Over and out...*

\* \* \* \*

Ron Landry would have preferred very much to send another kind of answer but the intergalactic hyper-communications channels were not intended for the mere transmission of emotions.

When Larry Randall got to see the dispatch he laughed bitterly. “They don’t have any idea of how things look down here,” he declared.

“How could they?” muttered Ron. “If I ever get hold of this Silligan character he’ll learn a thing or two! I’ve seldom seen anybody pull such a crazy stunt as he did.”

Larry shrugged. “I don’t know. In his place I’d probably have done the same thing.”

Ron turned slowly and irritably. “That’s just it,” he grumbled. “Everybody thinks he has to be his own hero. He ought to know that Terra never leaves its people in the lurch—so far, not in a single instance.”

Larry looked at him in wonderment. “Hey now, that sounds pretty solemn, like scout’s honour and cross my heart! But I still don’t know if I’d bet on it if the chips were down.”

Ron made an impatient gesture. “It’s one of the keystones of our politics. For the least solitary Terran caught in a space emergency, if necessary an entire rescue expedition would be sent out. That’s Perry Rhodan’s personal policy. He thinks that’s the only way to make the Springers keep their hands off our ships—or anybody else who might be against us. Rhodan’s serious about it and I think the whole idea is excellent. It makes any such situation quite simple: if you get into a bind somewhere, just don’t do anything more than you have to, to stay alive. You just wait and rest assured that at some time or another a Terran ship is going to show up to get you out of the jam.”

Larry nodded but was still disconcerted. “You know you’re pretty convinced of all that.”

“Completely.”

Larry thought about it for awhile and then shrugged. “Well, OK—but a man has to get used to such a setup. So far, Terrans have always had a habit of taking care of themselves directly, to the best of their ability. I can’t condemn Silligan for his actions.”

Ron stood at the window with a glass in his hand. “Frankly, I can’t either,” he admitted. “But that big hero move may cost him his life... as well as that of the girl he took along with him. I can’t leave Warren Teller and his men swimming around down there for the rest of eternity. Sooner or later they’ll have to attack. And if by that time Silligan and the girl haven’t shown up it may be L.S.T. (curtains) for them.”

Larry pondered this for a moment. “Alboolal is also down there, isn’t he?” he asked. Ron nodded. “Yes. According to the description, it must be him.”

“Well, what’s to be done with him?”

Ron shrugged. “Teller’s been instructed to keep an eye out for him,” he answered. “If Silligan and the girl still show up in time there’ll be no room for Alboolal and he can lie in the bed he’s made for himself. And even if the other two can’t be found, Teller and his crew are going to have their hands full just getting the rest of the prisoners out of there when the city starts to break up. So there’ll be no time to go chasing after Alboolal.”

“But you can find out before that where he’s hiding, can’t you?”

“Only if he’s in our line of vision. The whole city isn’t under glass, you know.”

“Well, the same would go for the prisoners. If Teller can’t see where they are he won’t be able to rescue them.”

Ron smiled. “Quite right. That’s why, when Teller gets a clear signal to make his thrust, hell only wait until he catches sight of the main group of prisoners.

\* \* \* \*

Richard’s first impression when he looked beyond the stone slab was one of blinding brightness and terrible heat. But then his eyes began to get accustomed to the brilliance and he could make out a few details. He was looking down into a vast chamber and could now see that the light and heat were being generated by a sluggish stream of molten material that emerged from an opening in the wall and was apparently pouring into a carefully engineered circular basin in the foreground. There it apparently cooled down and lost its brilliance. And finally the stream came to a kind of water-filled trough, into which it flowed with a loud hissing and boiling. Richard couldn’t quite make out whether it was really a trough down there. He had an impression that the Ghamese had bored a hole in the side wall and permitted a small quantity of sea water to enter. But that part

wasn't important. Of prime importance was the fact that the hot-glowing mass of molten fluid was going through an amazing process. Although it only cooled down to a dull red colour in the water, when it came out on the near side of the trough it was no longer molten but merely emerged in a plastic state and pushed out onto the dry floor. At that point it gradually broke into pieces which then ceased to move. The whole effect made it seem as if the strange mass of material had some kind of life of its own.

Moreover the pieces that had cooled down were glassy and transparent—in fact they became increasingly transparent in proportion to their proximity to Richard's point of observation. It was amazing to see how indistinct the outlines of the individual pieces were which were closest to his position. In fact, finally he was not sure whether some of them could be seen at all. Richard was convinced that there were probably more pieces somewhere in the foreground that were completely invisible.

He was sure that Dynah was right. They had chanced upon the secret production workroom where the famous Ghamese glass was made. It was the same glass they used to protect their city from the sea, so transparent that outsiders could not detect the presence of it.

A couple of Ghamese natives were running about down below, apparently oblivious to the heat. They monitored the process of the molten flow through the water trough. Beyond that it seemed that they had nothing to watch out for. What emerged on this side of the trough was finished, perfect glass.

Richard started counting. Down below were 11 Ghamese natives, altogether. From his position he couldn't quite see the entire room. It could be that more of the natives might be in the vicinity, which would of course be a disadvantage. It was bad enough to have to face the 11 fishmen that he could see. He had no weapons and although they didn't either, this made little difference since they were numerically superior.

He subjected the place to a critical inspection. Beyond the stone slab the way led downward rather steeply while at the same time expanding outwards and with a rising ceiling. It opened outward into the chamber something like the large end of a funnel. The chamber itself was empty except for the 11 Ghamese, the trough in the ground and the molten flow of the glass. There was no possibility of finding concealment anywhere.

But in spite of this they had to go down there. There was only one way to gain freedom and that was to capture one of the Ghamese and force him to tell them where they could find a submarine lock and a boat. In Richard's mind a plan was forming. It was simple because it was born of necessity rather than strategy. He had no time for protracted thinking just now and besides the plan seemed to offer a reasonable chance of success.

He stepped back and looked at Dynah. Even as he was searching for words to say, however, she anticipated him.

“Don't try to give me the news that I'm to stay here and watch, Dick. I'm going

with you!”

He tried to tell her, anyway. That is, he was about to but she still cut him off.

She pointed around the slab into the chamber. “Now we’re going to go down there together and if anybody gives us trouble he’ll catch it from us—OK?”

\* \* \* \*

Ron Landry looked at his watch.

As if that meant anything, thought Larry dejectedly. They’ve disappeared and will never show up again—unless their corpses float to the surface.

Ron extracted the compact micro-transceiver from his pocket and flipped it on. “Barsch to Forelle,” he said while calmly using the code names. “Come in, Forelle.”

There was a small period of waiting until the usual crackling was heard in the receiver and then a very distant-sounding voice answered: “Forelle to Barsch. I can hear you.”

“What’s the story an Silligan and the girl?”

“Haven’t the foggiest, Barsch. No sign of them yet.”

“And the others?”

“Not visible at the moment. But I know where they’re hiding.”

“Good! Now listen carefully, Forelle. You may attack as soon as you see fit. We can’t hold off any longer because of Silligan and the girl. That gives you room for two more. Watch out for the Springer and bring him along if you can.”

“Roger! I’ll attack as soon as possible and bring the Springer with us.”

“Good. That is all...”

\* \* \* \*

Warren Teller observed his surroundings thru one of the giant eyes. At first he had been forced to grin at the idea of making such practical use of these eyes; in other words, actually using them for what they were normally intended: vision.

But by now his grin had faded. He knew that if he were to make the attack according to orders he would be depriving two humans of their last chance of rescue, as long as any possibility remained of their survival. Teller had second thoughts about the principles behind Terran politics. Actually there was nothing basically wrong with waiting until Silligan and the girl could show up somewhere. That way all five of the castaways could be rescued all at one time and nobody would be hurt by the action except for the bearded Springer. Because the Ghamese were accustomed to the water. If their city should crumble to pieces around them they would be able to get to safety by merely swimming away.

But no—it was not permitted to wait that long. *Operation Ghama* had to be

accelerated. It was necessary to prevent the Springers from getting a firm foothold on Ghama and to provide that on the other hand the Terran representation here would become more solidly established. And all this must be accomplished without causing the natives to become stirred up or uneasy. They would have to know as little as possible about the procedures and events involved.

Necessarily, to fulfil such a requirement, certain sacrifices would have to be made—even if it meant two human beings. Warren Teller had no doubts at all that the people who had set up these ground rules knew what they were about. It was clear to him, therefore, that something of paramount importance was involved in this operation, some kind of advancement which could not simply be bypassed for the sake of a lieutenant and a girl.

Nonetheless he was sorry for the two of them, wherever they might be, and although he could have attacked at once because he knew precisely where the other prisoners were located, he still waited until the latter could be spotted again.

He had turned on the infra-red indicator and the interior of the city took visible form on his receiver screen. He could see the Ghamese waddling around in that strange plaza-like chamber and he could also make out the 5 native guards standing in front of the door where the prisoners were being held. At the moment the bearded Springer was in there with the Earthmen because he probably was trying to get information from them. He could also see the 20 or 25 Ghamese who stood on guard around another door, armed with clubs and similar implements. It was the door thin which Silligan and the girl had disappeared. The fishmen were obviously waiting for the two to return thin this exit again but they had also most likely posted guards at a number of other places.

Teller asked himself what would happen when he and his 4 companions attacked the city. Certainly it would fill the Ghamese with such terror that not even a command from the Springer would be able to keep them from seeking salvation in flight.

Teller was interrupted in the midst of such thoughts by a movement on the viewscreen. The 5 sentinels in front of the prisoners' cell suddenly stepped aside as the door opened and 4 figures emerged. The attention of all the Ghamese in the plaza turned to these four. Principally by the size of the physique, Teller could make out which one was the bearded Springer. According to the *Carolina's* passenger list, the three Terrans were: Lyn Trenton, an Earth-liaison official on Arkon; Ez Rykher, an Oregon farmer who had won a trip to Arkon in a contest; and Tony Laughlin, crew member of the *Carolina*.

Warren could identify them clearly although at present he was more than a kilometre removed from them, in fact one km down in the depths of the sea where his dark surroundings could hardly be reached by the light of day.

He knew that this was the moment that his orders were meant for. Now he was compelled to attack!

He picked up his microphone and issued orders for a forward thrust.



\* \* \* \*

For some unknown reason, Ez Rykher was the first one to see the giant fish. The attention of the Ghamese was concentrated completely on the small assemblage consisting of the Springer, the 5 guards and 3 prisoners who were just now crossing the plaza chamber. The Springer named Alboolal had threatened to transfer the prisoners into the darkest dungeon hole in Guluch if they didn't tell him of their own accord the things he wanted to know. He was particularly keen on getting information with regard to a certain new kind of translight spacedrive he had heard about. It was apparently something that had been developed in Terran shipyards during the past few years. Nobody could tell him anything about it. Of course Lyn Trenton and Ez Rykher knew nothing about the secret at all. Tony Laughlin had naturally heard about it but he was unable to go into any of the details because he knew very little and understood even less about them.

Alboolal had taken their reticence to be a ruse and he was now proceeding to make good his threat. The prisoners were about to be transferred to a deeper part of the city.

Ez Rykher was just pondering over their dismal prospects when he spotted the fish monster. He came to a stop, causing Lyn Trenton to bump into him, and this in turn brought the latter's attention to what was out there. He looked through the glass wall of the plaza and also espied the beast.

"Glord!" he exclaimed.

The guards behind them noted that two of the prisoners had come to a stop, so they tried to prod them forward. It was purely curiosity that caused them to turn and also behold what lurked beyond the glass.

"Li-i-idi-o-o-ok...!" came their wild, lilting cry.

The whole place was alerted. All of the Ghamese whirled around to look. Nobody paid any more attention to the prisoners. Ez Rykher was still rooted to the spot as he stared at the beast and now he noticed suddenly that 4 more of the monsters came shooting from the right and left to take up a position beyond the large window.

An instinctive panic spread thin the ranks of the Ghamese. With a clamorous yelling and shrieking they fled to the exits of the plaza and even the guards forgot their duties. They gave the Springer one last fearful glance and then they too began to run. At the exits a hopeless confusion developed.

The Springer had grasped the situation immediately. He had also come to a stop but he aimed his energy weapon at the prisoners. "Don't any of you get the idea that this is a chance for a break," he warned them menacingly. "Get going now! Those Lidioks don't mean a thing to us!"

But the Lidioks appeared to be of another opinion. In unison they thrust forward toward the glass wall and rammed against it with incredible force. Under the impact the heavy glass surface produced a tone as of a mighty bell that tolled in the deeps of the sea. The whole city trembled under the shock. The cries of the

Ghamese who were crowding the exits cut off abruptly for a few seconds, only to break out more clamourously and more panicked than before.

The Springer moved faster, appearing now not to be quite so sure of himself.

The five Lidioks turned around to withdraw some distance from the glass but then they turned back and made a new concerted attack. Ez Rykher remained where he was even though Alboolal threatened him with his weapon. Forgetting to breathe, he watched the second attack. A shock ran through him as the monsters came thundering against the glass. He breathed again in relief when they swam away again. But then he noticed the big crack in the glass wall that ran sharply downward from ceiling to floor. Water was shooting in at various places, sending sharp, hissing streams far into the plaza.

The Springer began to run. He didn't care any more about his prisoners. All of a sudden new spacedrives and other secrets mattered far less to him than his life, because that was now what it had come to.

The Lidioks assembled for a third attack.

*This time they'll make it through,* thought Ez Rykher. *And behind that wall are 20 atmospheres of pressure!*

300 ADVENTURES FROM NOW  
you'll encounter the  
*Galactic Mystery Ships*

## 9/ JONAH AND THE WHALE

*Ghama Station to Relay 14: Forward operation in process. Silligan and Langmuir apparently lost. Over...*

*Relay 14 to Ghama Station: Welfare of Earth takes precedence over private emotions. Over and out...*

\* \* \* \*

When this answering dispatch came into Ron Landry's hands he uttered a curse in bitterest anger, even though he had to admit that basically the men on board relay ship 14 were right.

\* \* \* \*

Side by side they walked down into the chamber. The heat that met them became more and more unbearable. So far their footsteps had been inaudible above the hissing of the water and the Ghamese had not paid any attention to them.

Richard looked askance at Dynah and saw that although her expression was grave she was not freezing up yet in fear.

When they came near the water trough, Richard turned to the right. He figured that the two Ghamese standing on the edge of the trough were as good as any others here for his experiment. They would be the first to hear the frightening news that Richard had invented for them. He began to run as though impelled by terror and Dynah ran beside him. Their footsteps were still inaudible. The two Ghamese only became aware of the fugitives when they were practically on top of them.

Richard felt that he might not be able to take the heat from the molten glass much longer, since it was only 10 meters away at this point His state of exhaustion was only partially an act when he let out his yell.

“Lidioks... a whole pack of them... attacking city...! We'll be lost if we don't get out of here...!”

He spoke Interkosmo, which was the language of the Galactic Traders. He was not sure that he had remembered the name of the giant fish correctly or not but the

Ghamese seemed to understand what he meant. One of the two turned to one side and let out the olden call of his kind, the ancient alert to fear and terror.

“Li-i-i-di-o-o-ok...!”

The cry could be heard above the hissing of the molten glass and the other Ghamese looked up from their work. Richard tensed his muscles. This was the moment of truth. He would see if his trick was to be successful or not.

But it was also a moment in which something occurred that was beyond his wildest imaginings. A muted, far-echoing ringing sound ran thin the rock foundation of the city. It was a deep bell tone that acted to freeze Richard’s blood in his veins and which the Ghamese seemed to recognize. The eerie sound stirred them to action. It was all Richard could do just to grasp one of the nearer two by the shoulder and hold him. He recognized the expression of naked fear that was in the fish-man’s face.

“Where are boats... water locks...?” he yelled at him. “We cannot swim!”

He had to repeat the question. At first the Ghamese had been too frightened to understand him and fought his grip. “There...” he finally stammered. “Same direction... we go...!”

It sounded logical. If the Ghamese were about to get out of the city because of their fear of the Lidioks, then even though they could swim out they still needed the sea-locks. They couldn’t get out through a solid wall. Richard let go of the Ghamese.

“Run behind him!” he called out to Dynah.

Following a sudden hunch, he crouched down in a swift movement to pick up one of the smaller glass pieces lying on his side of the trough. He miscalculated the temperature of the material and burned his fingers but it made no difference to him. He shoved the sample into his pocket and then ran after Dynah and the fleeing Ghamese.

\* \* \* \*

The way Ez Rykher sized up the situation, things were taking a sudden and bloodcurdling turn for the worst. His grass-rooted instincts told him that running was not going to do a bit of good as he saw the Lidioks make their third combined attack. But all the same he ran, following Tony Laughlin and Lyn Trenton. By now the greater part of the plaza was empty, with only a few Ghamese still crowding through the exits.

Even as he ran he stared entranced at the broken glass wall and the onrushing monster fish. He knew that this time the glass would break completely and the water would come bursting in upon them. And with the water would come the Lidioks to harvest the fruit of their efforts—in the form of several dozen Ghamese who had not gotten away fast enough. Maybe they’d even gobble up one Ezekiel Dunlop Rykher in the process but it made little difference to him whether he went by drowning or the Jonah route. To be swallowed by a ‘whale’...

Such were the thoughts shooting through Rykher's head. Then the Lidioks struck the glass with their tank-like skulls and the catastrophe began.

It took about one second for the big crack in the glass to leap across the entire wall, after which it collapsed inward. At first it seemed to lean inward slowly as an entire partition but then it crumbled with startling swiftness. A green wall of water came plunging in over the remaining debris and began to fill the plaza with breathtaking speed.

Ez Rykher had ceased running. It was over with. There was no sense now in trying to outrun the disaster that was upon them. A sweeping flood of water shot in around him and tore him from his feet. Suddenly there was nothing but water above and below him. His air was shut off and he started flailing about him instinctively. He bobbed to the surface just once but in that instant he was confronted by the looming, tooth-lined maw of a Lidiok that rushed upon him as big as the door of a barn. The monster's gullet seemed to generate a suction current and Ez was simply catapulted along with many cubic meters of water into the dark opening.

Ez was slammed around back and forth inside with his eyes tightly shut in his natural reaction of abject fear.

A sense of wondering amazement began to grow in him as time passed and nothing more happened except this swishing back and forth with the water and all the while the water itself seemed to be draining away somewhere. He got the crazy notion that maybe all the Lidiok wanted was a drink and that later it would spit him out!

He was vaguely aware of gradually coming to rest. The last jolt he remembered was one that seemed to throw him onto a kind of couch or bed that felt dry and soft. At any rate, Ez never expected to find such a place in the belly of Leviathan.

In wonderment he opened his eyes.

He was fairly astonished to see a modern glo-lamp close overhead, which illuminated a small, square cubicle.

Jonah, he reflected, never had it so good!

\* \* \* \*

The sea-lock was not far from the glass-processing chamber. But meanwhile two succeeding shocks of dull thunder had shaken the city and since Richard had only invented the story of the Lidioks in order to activate the natives, he now wondered if he had really invoked the devil, more or less, with such a bald-faced lie. At any rate the Ghamese inhabitants appeared to definitely interpret these cataclysmic sounds as proof of the fact that the city was in truth being attacked by Lidioks.

All of which altered the situation. Now Richard was really in a hurry. He knew he couldn't let the Ghamese fishermen simply swim off toward the surface and assume that he could master the controls of a submersible craft in the short time

available.

The lock basin turned out to be of tremendous size, containing about 50 undersea vessels of various classes. Richard and Dynah tried to stay close to the natives as they ran but when they saw the frightened little fellows plunge head over heels into the basin itself and start swimming for the outer-lock door they grabbed the one closest behind them and pointed to the boats.

It was hard to get the idea through to him because of his fear but finally he appeared to understand what was being demanded of him. Nevertheless, Richard kept an eye on him as they all jumped from the mooring rim of the basin onto the deck of one of the submarines. The Ghamese opened the outer hatch with trembling hands. He had barely gotten it open before he tried to enter the vessel alone but Richard held him back. Dynah was the first to clamber down inside, followed by Richard. He then pulled the Ghamese in with him and made sure that he properly secured the sea hatch.

The last thing they heard before the hatch closed was a crashing and roaring sound from above them somewhere. Evidently it had been caused by intruding waters that were flooding the city.

Once in the safety of the boat the Ghamese appeared to lose some of his state of panic. In the small control room he began to work swiftly and confidently. The motor came to life and the undersea craft glided through the basin toward the exit gate. The gate was already open and the boat glided into a dark tunnel that led to the outer floodgate. Richard had remained in the main room of the vessel and had tried to observe through the ports whether or not the disaster was beginning to have any effect on the sea-lock chamber itself. But he couldn't detect any such signs before the boat swept onward and disappeared into the outlet tunnel.

The small submersible moved calmly and swiftly to the floodgate. It took a little while to activate the latter so that it finally opened before them. Then the vessel glided out into the greenish twilight of the ocean depths and this time when Richard looked through the small portholes he could see the spreading cloud of debris and mud that emanated from the place where the city of Guluch had been.

The water was swarming with the Ghamese fishmen.

Evidently the catastrophe had come upon them slowly enough to enable them to save themselves.

\* \* \* \*

Ez got to his feet. A blur of confused thoughts whirled through his head. Until he finally heard the voice. It came from a speaker in the ceiling.

“This is Warren Teller. At present I am at the controls of this vessel which has the appearance of a Lidiok. I presume that you are Ez Rykher. Try to hang on to your sanity—I know it's hard in a case like this. We are going to bring you to safety on board a Terran spaceship. That is all.”

Ez Rykher tried experimentally to convince himself that there was nothing

special about being gobbled up by a Lidiok only to end up in its belly and find out that it was an imitation monster that had been created on Earth for the purpose of snatching five Terrans from a very unusual fix.

But then he thought of Richard Silligan and Dynah Langmuir. A shock ran through him. These simulated Lidioks would not be able to save them! Somewhere in the crumbling city they must have been crushed by collapsing debris or else they had drowned! The grief of this realization was ironically the stabilizing factor that helped him get over the dangerous few minutes in which his confused mind might have lost its reason. Dick and Dynah—dear God! By this time they must be dead!

Ez didn't know how much time had passed when a section of the wall slid back and a man in the uniform of the Terran Fleet suddenly stepped into the small cubicle. The latter smiled at him reassuringly but Ez was in no mood for smiles. Before the man could speak, Ez was at him with the obvious question. "What happened to Dick Silligan and the girl? Were you able to save them, too?"

The man's expression became grave as he shook his head. "No, we couldn't wait any longer. We had to go into action and we didn't have any idea where they might be hiding."

Rykher's head sank in dejection. After a moment he muttered: "I guess nobody can blame you for what you had to do. So you're Warren Teller?"

The man nodded.

"So what happens now?" asked Ez. But his voice revealed that he no longer took much interest in anything.

"We are at our destination. Nearby is the *Urania*, a heavy Fleet cruiser. You will be requested to go on board. They'll take you home by the shortest route. And by the way: your two other companions are also safe and we have captured the Springer."

\* \* \* \*

There was a hard and unrelenting tone in Ron Landry's voice. "Have you taken my advice?" he asked. "Did you make your will and appoint another clan chief to be your successor?"

Alboolal stiffened. He was still in confusion as a result of the events of the past few minutes. But he sensed that he would be lost if he didn't pull himself together and defy this Terran.

"I protest!" he shouted, so loudly that the words resounded like a cannon shot in the small cabin.

But it failed to impress the Terran in the least. "Against what?" he asked, smiling. "The fact that we've just rescued you from a collapsing city?"

"It's through your own machinations that the city was destroyed!" yelled Alboolal but Ron interrupted him calmly.

“Yes, of course. But as far as we know the Ghamese natives have not suffered any casualties in the process. And above all, you will never have a chance to tell anybody about it.”

This announcement was like an electric shock to Alboolal. “Why not?”

“Because you are going to be taken to Terra and brought before the courts.”

Alboolal gasped aloud. “Why that’s...!” he began, snorting in rage. “You can’t do that to me. I am a free—”

“You *were* a free Springer,” Ron interrupted him. “But then you took a hand in attacking a Terran merchant ship and destroying it. That changes the situation. Or did you really believe that a skarf like you could get away with shooting up Terran ships and simply carry on without any repercussions?”

“You—you can’t pin that one on me!” gasped Alboolal.

“You forget that this is a case of major political magnitude,” was the calm reply. “Terra has the completely legal means at its disposal to force a suspect to reveal the truth.”

“I’ll protest!” shouted Alboolal. “I’ll tell the whole galaxy what methods Terra uses!”

Ron Landry’s smile held firm. “As a matter of fact, that’s exactly what you’ll do,” he answered. “We’ll place every means of communication at your disposal. Because you know we’re also interested in having the public be informed about what kind of pirate gangs some of the Springer clans happen to be. I’m quite sure you can imagine what kind of reaction this will create throughout the galaxy.”

And indeed Alboolal could imagine it. Suddenly he saw his future and that of his clan in total clarity. The Terrans would obtain the truth from him, of that there could be no doubt. And it was equally certain that they would inform the galactic community. It made little difference what his own lot would be now. The Terrans would imprison him or execute him in accordance with the sentence of their courts—but his clan would be discredited for all time! Nobody would have anything to do with them again. They would have to give up their stronghold on Ghama.

Yes, Alboolal knew what was descending upon him and his clan. He broke then. He broke down so completely that a doctor had to be called in order to even get him on his feet again.

\* \* \* \*

Considering everything involved, the *Urania* had not wasted much time on Ghama. The commander had been instructed to take the rescued survivors on board along with Larry Randall and Capt. Ron Landry. Also he was to load on the five Lidiok monstrosities that had been prepared by Earth scientists so that no trace would remain of the swift and secret operation on Ghama. He was then to make a fast exit from the planet so that, above all, the local inhabitants would not



have an opportunity to ponder much over the mysterious activities that had transpired on their water world.

Nevertheless the take-off of the *Urania* was delayed. A native submarine emerged from the sea and as soon as it caught sight of the spaceship still poised above the surface of the water it set a course for it. The *Urania* refrained from taking off in order to see what the people on board the undersea craft had in mind.

As the vessel drew alongside, the first one to appear on the round, smooth deck was Lt. Dick Silligan, formerly attached to the crew of the freighter *Carolina*. He appeared to be somewhat fatigued and as far as the state of his clothing was concerned he was not as spruce-looking as he might be. Otherwise he was unharmed and in good spirits.

He was followed by the girl, Dynah Langmuir, who had stirred up so much discussion in the past few hours. She too looked as if life hadn't been very easy for her recently. When she was brought on board the spaceship she broke into tears of joy and exhaustion.

The Ghamese pilot of the submarine decided not to board the *Urania* but preferred instead to stay with his craft and keep a lookout for his countrymen. Since the simulated Lidioks had long since been loaded into the cargo holds he could not suspect in any way that there was some connection here between the presence of Terrans and the destruction of the city of Guluch.

The *Urania* finally took off but not before communicating by radio with Killanak Island where Larry Randall's successor had meanwhile taken over. The latter had confirmed that everything was back to normal on Killanak and meanwhile the Springer base was maintaining a waiting silence.

The enemy's stronghold, however, would not be kept waiting for long before being informed of what had truly happened.

\* \* \* \*

This was the day that Larry Randall got to meet Col. Nike Quinto for the first time and he seemed to be just as disagreeable as he had been to Ron Landry in the beginning. But Ron had prepared him for this impression and so he held onto his patience and waited to find out how Quinto's genius might reveal itself.

At first there was certainly not much to be seen of it.

Nike Quinto was sweating as usual. His face had reddened considerably in rather unpleasant contrast to his sparse and almost colourless hair.

"This air-conditioning is cratchy!" he complained in his high-pitched whine. "Completely inadequate on a hot day like this. One of these days they're going to kill me. My blood-pressure keeps getting worse."

He appeared to be searching for something on his desk, or perhaps it was merely a nervous habit with him. Anyway, after a pause he continued. "And you know you've managed to add to my poor condition."

Ron Landry intervened politely. “May I ask, sir, in what way?”

“Yes, of course you may ask. Those 5 giant fish of yours have made a whale of a hole in my budget. How much do you think 5 navigable Lidioks cost? 10 million Solars when they have to be rigged up for a normal simulation and double that on such a hyped-up schedule!”

Ron suppressed a smile. He knew from reliable sources that Division 3’s budget was unlimited. A loss of 20 million Solars would hardly make a dent. “That phase was necessary, sir,” Ron countered. “There wasn’t any other way to stop the Springers and still keep the native inhabitants from knowing what was going on.”

“Hm-m-m-m...” The hint of a smile touched Quinto’s red face. “That figures. But why do you suppose we want to keep the natives quiet and peaceful? Why were we so determined to have them regard us as friends? Can you answer that?”

“No, sir—you’ve succeeded brilliantly in keeping that part a secret from me.”

Nike Quinto nodded emphatically. “I tried! If I couldn’t at least have managed that much I wouldn’t have deserved my assignment here. Alright, I’ll tell you: what’s involved is an item of raw material.” He stated this in such a tone that one might infer the whole secret in all its details had suddenly been revealed.

“Oh?” It was all Ron could reply.

“Oh?” Quinto mocked him. “That doesn’t bring anything to mind to you?”

Ron shook his head.

“Alright, then here it is. You’re familiar with the remarkable glass the Ghamese make use of, right? It’s completely transparent. And I mean 100%! There’s no dispersion effect in the visible light range. An unbelievably low angle of incidence for total reflection. In brief, it’s the ideal material for anything that’s to be made invisible. And it also has outstanding characteristics in other frequency ranges. It’s perfect for an infra-red laser, for example. And so on and so on...”

Ron Landry had to admit that this made things a bit more understandable.

“We didn’t quite know what the raw material was,” Quinto continued. “We were able to make tests of the finished material but our scientists couldn’t find out how the stuff was prepared. They knew that some manufacturing process unknown to our technology was involved. We figured that we could learn more if we could get a test sample of the raw material itself, or better yet if we could become friendly enough with the Ghamese that they would finally reveal the whole secret to us. Because we need this material badly. The infra-red laser can become a weapon such as the galaxy has never seen before. Moreover, the Springers were on the same trail as we were and that made the situation more difficult. So now maybe you can see why this whole business had to be handled so quietly and inconspicuously, right?”

Ron nodded. “Certainly, sir,” he answered. “And that’s why I’m at a loss to explain why you consider the outlay for the navigable Lidioks to be so unbearable.”

Nike Quinto appeared to explode. “Why?” he almost screamed. “Because the

whole problem's been solved without them! Through the pluck and ingenuity of a certain young lieutenant—who is a captain now, by the way—a man who knew what to do at the right moment and was able to get out of the city on his own without any need for a steerable Lidiok.”

Ron furrowed his brow. “From what I can gather, sir, you are speaking of Dick Silligan.”

“Indeed I'm talking about Dick Silligan! It was this young man who revealed the secret to us. He was there where the Ghamese manufacture this miracle substance and he managed to bring along a semi-processed sample.”

Ron Landry remained silent.

Quinto continued. “The raw material, some kind of silicate, is melted down in an oven. Then the molten material is quick-cooled in sea water at normal temperature. Probably that's all the Ghamese understand, themselves, about the process. But from Silligan's sample we were able to recognize that there was more than the cooling technique involved. The sea water they keep replenishing in their cooling trough by an ingenious method turns out to contain a type of algae that bring about a chemical conversion within the glass. Without the algae the glass would be regular old-fashioned window-pane material. It's the algae that reveal the whole principle. Dick Silligan brought us a piece of glass that hadn't been fully processed yet, or at least it still contained traces of the algae. That was enough for our scientists to unravel the whole mystery. Now we can produce the Ghama glass ourselves!” Having concluded at last, he leaned back in his chair with such an air of satisfaction that it appeared he considered the whole thing to be his personal contribution.

Ron Landry grinned. “And now, sir,” he asked, “are we free to deal with the Ghamese as we please?”

Immediately Nike Quinto shot forward in his chair. “You get one thing straight!” he bellowed at high pitch. “The inhabitants of Ghama are our friends and we're going to deal with them as genuine friends!” Suddenly and unexpectedly, he stood up. “Now get out of here! These senseless questions are too much of a strain on my heart. What's to become of my blood-pressure? And tomorrow report to Personnel. Personally, do you understand? They've got something for both of you. If I gather correctly it seems that it has something to do with either a demotion or a promotion. Now get—both of you!”

Ron and Larry got to their feet. They saluted and went out. Once they were in the hallway and at a safe distance from Nike Quinto's office door, they came to a stop and grinned at each other.

“Do you think we could go for a glass, *Captain?*” asked Ron Landry, pointedly.

Larry Randall sighed. “I'm not sure that my blood-pressure could stand it, *Major!*”

\* \* \* \*

*Relay 14 to Ghama Station: Have observed 23 transitions from Ghama area. Close formation. Assume Springer base in retreat. Confirmation requested. Over...*

*Ghama Station to Relay 14: Confirmed. No Springers left on Ghama. Things pretty dull around here. Over and out...*

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