

Ravaging through the far reaches of space was a race of reptilian beings who compulsively destroyed every civilisation they found...and now they had heard of Earth.

Perry Rhodan and his Third Power were mankind's only hope against these marauders. With his Mutant Corps, Rhodan headed out into the distant besieged Vega system to fend off the aliens before they reached Earth...

But in the savage battle at the Vega sector, his ship damaged beyond repair, Rhodan is forced to crash-land on a Vega planet. And with Perry powerless, Earth is doomed to destruction by the slaughtering Topide reptiles...

CHAPTER 1

"Altitude?"

"Constant."

"Speed?"

"Constant but lousy," Bell mumbled.

"Destination range?"

"Twenty-five hundred."

"Course?"

"Set."

Perry Rhodan sighed and wiped the sweat from his brow. "Well, so much for that."

Some of the heat that boiled up from the sands of the Great Southern Desert a mile below them was transmitted to the control room of the *Good Hope*—and for good reason. The ship's air conditioning system was down because all available power from the still intact generators was being channelled into the propulsion system.

It had cost Rhodan a good hour's deliberation to decide whether to attempt flying the *Good Hope* to the desert fortress or to dismantle all weapons and take them with him. He had decided on the first alternative. Khrest and Thora had advised him against it, and now since he had not followed their counsel they both tended to stress their anxiety for the flight. But according to Reg Bell the two Arkonides had come along anyway, for the simple reason that they couldn't afford to lose face to anyone.

The *Good Hope*'s automatic pilot system and peripheral automatic gear were no longer functional. They were forced to go back to the Wright brother's method and fly virtually by the seat of their pants. Danger lurked in every moment. Those repairs which had been made were patchwork at best and failed to instil any modicum of confidence or feeling of safety.

However, Heklihar seemed unconcerned. With his deep, dark eyes he merely continued to scan the sandy wastelands ahead in the viewscreen. The Thort had summoned Heklihar, chief technologist of the secret desert fortification, to act as guide for the *Good Hope*. By Earth standards he was small, as were many of the members of his race. His skin colour was more turquoise than the normal blue, which he attributed to the desert sun. With his thick, copper coloured hair he presented a colourful spectacle in spite of his grey clothing.

Under present circumstances, Reginald Bell felt far removed from his official status as the Third Power's Security Minister. He was far too occupied managing his half of the control tasks and continuously watching and reading the related instruments and night indicators. From time to time he would glance at the screen and note that hour after hour there was no change in the desolate desert landscape below.

Several times he was forced to mutter. "Ye gods! The good Lord must have chosen this place to dump his wrath!"

Rofus, the ninth planet of the Vega system, was somewhat similar to Earth, but in comparison to the almost delicate formation of Earth's surface structure, Rofus appeared to have been left half finished by the creator. Basically there were two giant continents and two equally great oceans. The mountains were higher, and the co-ordinates were longer and wider. There was no Earth equivalent of the Great Southern Desert with its glaring red sands. The desert's glaring diameter was about 3,600 miles, which could be traversed in its entirety without encountering a single plant, a single living creature, or the tiniest drop of water.

The desert fortress that the Thort had placed at the *Good Hope*'s disposal lay in the most remote and inaccessible corner of the wilderness waste. Rhodan's survey of local maps had revealed that the place must be situated at least partially beneath the Snake Mountains. Heklihar proffered no information. He had been trained to divulge not the slightest word concerning the stronghold, and true to his Ferronian nature he adhered to the letter of his regulations even when it was a bit asinine to do so.

With a flight velocity of less than mach 1 the *Good Hope* arrived at its destination after a seven-hour journey. After Heklihar indicated the point toward which the ship must be guided, Bell heaved a sigh of relief.

"Next time I'd rather go it on foot than fly in this crate again!"

The Snake Mountains stretched out in a northeasterly-southwesterly direction. They were as barren as the desert, but with their 27,000 to 30,000 foot peaks they presented an imposing sight Rhodan stared uncertainly at the point that Heklihar had indicated. It was a gorgelike depression in the foothills of the Snake Mountains, and there was no way of telling how this point differed from many others like it in the vicinity. He turned to look at Heklihar, who responded to the querulous glance by stretching out both hands in the Ferronian signal of confirmation.

"Dead ahead!" Rhodan ordered.

Bell grumbled something incomprehensible. The Snake Mountains fell from sight beyond the visiscreen frame. In dead centre loomed the wide gorge into which Heklihar had pointed.

"Five hundred yards," announced Bell.

Rhodan peered down into the chasm. The bright light of Vega could not penetrate to its bottom; the shadows were so dark that details could not be made out with certainty.

"Three hundred yards."

Instinctively, Rhodan turned the control on the visiscreen that would give him a closer magnification of the scene before him. As he clicked the knob into a higher position he heard a loud, empty *clack!* He realized that the ship's power sources were so stringently programmed that not a spark could be spared even for such small incidentals as the optical equipment.

But as the *Good Hope* descended between the walls of the gorge, he suddenly perceived that there was no discernible bottom at all. A place was reached where the craggy walls of the abyss became smooth, and here a faint light was detected somewhere in the depths. Rhodan couldn't suppress his wonderment over this tremendous installation, which could undoubtedly have accommodated three ships the size of the *Good Hope*. The shaft proved to be of considerable depth. With a square measurement of about two hundred yards per side it penetrated about 1,500 feet below ground.

Heklihar noted Rhodan's reaction with pride. "It will do for a start, don't you think?" he asked, in his guttural tones.

"Startling is a better expression."

Heklihar's eyes glowed with pleasure. Like all Ferronians he was very receptive to compliments, and Rhodan's remark was a specific compliment, because Heklihar himself had constructed this entrance shaft.

The *Good Hope* settled in the middle of a tremendous chamber whose ceiling, 150 yards above them, was pierced by the shaft.

"Ship secure!" announced Bell.

Heklihar seemed to comprehend the gist of this. He got up and said in Ferron, "Come! Hopthmar will be waiting for us."

Rhodan didn't have the slightest idea who Hopthmar was, but he had no intention of keeping him waiting. When the Thort designated this new base for the *Good Hope* he had explained very little. Rhodan was going to have to learn on the spot whatever was to be learned about this place. He turned the ship's command over to Bell and advised Khrest that he was going with Heklihar to visit somebody called Hopthmar, who was probably the fort commander. Then he and the Ferronian technologist disembarked.

While he followed Heklihar he marvelled at the tremendous dimensions of the chamber. The walls were lost in the distance, and the evenly distributed illumination seemed to be designed to prevent a full orientation. The ceiling was cantevered, an engineering masterpiece that no one on Earth had dared to attempt. There were no support girders; an entire fleet of battle ready spaceships could have found room

here. But by the same token, in view of prevailing conditions on Rofus and in the entire Vega system, the Thort no longer possessed a great number of ships to hide away and preserve.

The chamber was empty.

Heklihar came to a halt before an indented line on the floor. He tapped the edge of the indentation with his toe. A few moments later a small, low personnel car shot into view like an arrow and stopped on the exact spot Heklihar had tapped. Automatically, its two doors opened to receive passengers. It was an eight seater with two wide seats arranged in tandem. It was equipped with a simple, easily mastered mechanism that enabled one to steer in any desired direction or to stop at any moment. The indented floor lines served as a sort of guide system. Rhodan observed that the long rills crossed the floor of the chamber, and Heklihar explained that their intersections could easily be used as switching points.

After a few minutes the wall of the chamber loomed up in front of the car. It shot into a well lighted corridor, in the walls of which a number of doors could be seen.

"Offices and labs," Heklihar explained.

At the far end of the passage he brought the car to a stop. The last door to the left bore an especially elaborate inscription, but Heklihar was in such a hurry that Rhodan had no time to decipher it. Khrest's recent short hypno training in the use of the Ferron's language had included reading, but Rhodan had thus far had opportunity to practice only the spoken word. The door rolled aside, revealing beyond it a large room that was richly furnished in true Ferronian style. Behind a piece of furniture that resembled a desk sat

a robust looking man who wore a more colourful uniform than that of Heklihar.

"Commander," Heklihar said with almost solemn formality, permit me to introduce to you Rhodan the Arkonide."

The commander got up and stretched out both hands to Rhodan. "Please accept my welcome, Rhodan! My name is Hophthmar. I am—that is, *Iwas* the commander of this base."

Rhodan heard Heklihar's quiet departure through the door behind him. "*Youwere?*" he said wonderingly.

Hophthmar nodded. "The Thort has granted you extraordinary powers of authority here, Rhodan. No one in this fortification is in a position to tell you what to do."

Rhodan's wonderment grew, and with it a strong desire to chide the Thort for being a scheming old rascal—sending a shipwrecked captain away on a journey and hiding from him the fact that at the end of it he would find bestowed upon him the absolute authority of a king! He tried in vain to fathom something in Hophthmar's expression. Only the devil himself could figure out these Ferrons! The other's small, sharp mouth was faintly distorted as though in a Ferronian smile; but no message was to be read in the shadowed depths of his eyes.

"You must know that I did not request this," he explained to Hophthmar. "I asked the Thort for a secure base to operate from, and he offered me this fort. There wasn't a single word about my being the head man around here."

Hophthmar made a minimizing gesture with his hands. "Don't worry about it," he said. "I know what you

mean—you think the matter is one of envy or jealousy." He sighed. "I'm a fairly old man, though it may not be apparent to you. I'm glad that someone has come here to lift the load from my shoulders."

Rhodan smiled. "I'm glad you look at it that way. Nevertheless, I prefer to work with you rather than direct you."

Hopthmar nodded. He pushed two comfortable chairs forward. "Let's be seated. What are your plans?"

Rhodan sat down facing him. "How do your transmitters function?"

Hopthmar's brows rose. "How *should* they function? Now and then I transmit some people locally, and from time to time a few are transmitted in. That's all."

"Have you any linkage with Ferrol?"

Hopthmar leaned quickly forward. "Ferrol? Ferrol has been occupied by the enemy!"

"No one knows that better than I, but the transmitters offer the only possibility of reaching Ferrol secretly, without detection."

Hopthmar seemed to snicker. "First you'd have to find a transmitter on Ferrol that the Topides have not yet discovered."

"Well, why not? In the Red Palace in Thorta there is a small secret installation. It would be a miracle if they have discovered that one too."

Hopthmar slowly opened his hand, palm forward in a gesture so similar to the human sign of resignation that he seemed no alien at all. "Do you wish to risk it?" he asked.

"If we can't think of anything else we'll *have* to risk it. What did you have in mind? Wait here until the Topides occupy this planet also?"

A definite smile became apparent on Hopthmar's face. "I perceive already, Rhodan, that you are considerably more the man of action than I am. It is good for this base to acquire an impatient and aggressive commander."

Rhodan analysed the other's tone carefully and was satisfied that the words were spoken sincerely and without scorn or disparagement. "How many transmitters do you have here?" he asked.

"Twenty-five—each with a capacity of at least five men."

"And you have never received a transmission from Ferrol—either men or material?"

"No, never... that is, since the planet was occupied by the enemy. From this I have presumed that there is no one left on Ferrol—outside of the enemy, of course, who is in possession of a transmitter."

The discussion wasn't very enlightening to Rhodan. The matter of transmitters was a complicated proposition. Without much effort he could have enumerated a number of reasons why a Ferron who was in possession of a transmitter wouldn't be able to make a connection with Ferrol. He didn't go into this, however. When the time came he would proceed in accordance with his own ideas.

They finally fell to discussing things of a more immediate nature. The base had ample quarters to accommodate the entire crew of the *Good Hope*. They would be allowed a full freedom of movement throughout the fortification.

When Rhodan said goodbye to Hophthmar he smiled. "I have a few unusual people with me, Commander. So don't be alarmed if some things happen which you have considered impossible until now."

Hophthmar returned the smile. "I have heard of them. I am anxiously awaiting the first surprise..."

All the transmitters had been installed together in one big chamber. It was the largest station of its kind that Rhodan had seen. However, Hophthmar indicated that in Thorta there was one that was even larger. Face to face with the transmitters Rhodan again examined the question of how a race of people like this had ever come into possession of equipment whose very working medium was hyperspace itself, when their mental capacity was still insufficient to comprehend and apply the problems of fifth dimensional physics. The paradox was all too obvious, but apparently only to himself and his own kind. The Ferrons harboured not the slightest suspicion that their technology wasn't capable of building transmitters or that they weren't capable of understanding the corresponding principles.

"So what do you want to do with this equipment?" asked Khrest.

Rhodan gave him a look. "Quite simple—I want to climb in, be transmitted to Ferrol, take the battleship away from the Topides, and then give them a battle such as they have never seen in their lives!"

Thora gasped in disagreement "You know as well as we do that that is impossible!" she exclaimed.

Reg Bell had been examining the transmitters, but now he turned at this and looked angrily at her. "With you I guess everything is impossible," he growled. "Didn't you ever in your life consider something to be possible unless it was already an established fact!"

"I'm waiting for news from Ferrol," Rhodan continued. "Somebody there must still have a transmitter, and given time he might be able to come up with the sending and reception data for a receiver on Rofus. I am keeping in contact with the Thort and will know immediately if any tie-in with Ferrol becomes available. We can't just sit here waiting to the end of our days, however—if we don't get a contact, I'll fly on my own hook to Ferrol. If only the transmitter in the Red Palace were set up to make a reception at this distance! I don't think the risk is too great."

Thora watched him pensively. "What would you call *areal* risk!" she asked quietly; but the question was merely rhetorical.

Tako Kakuta, the fourth member of the group, stood before the largest transmitter and examined it intently. Rhodan knew what his thoughts were—these machines made his own capacities comparable to a single stone in the Pyramid of Giza. After three years of intensive schooling, Tako's maximum teleportation distance was about 30,000 miles, but these machines transmitted over three, four, or five astronomical units. After a while he turned his smiling, childlike face to Rhodan.

"Don't feel bad, Tako," Rhodan told him. "Someday you'll be able to outjump the transmitters."

Hophthmar was more excited than Rhodan had observed him to be since their arrival at the fort. He must

have run all the way from his office, because he panted and gasped for breath and required several moments before he could speak.

"The transmitters...!"

Rhodan sprang to his feet.

"Transmission from Ferrol!" Hophthmar gasped.

Rhodan ran past him. Time was too precious to wait for the next personnel car. He sprinted through the corridor, darted to the left, then left again, and came to the transmitter room fifty yards ahead of Bell, who came racing and puffing after him.

Rhodan saw it immediately. It was a small metallic tube with glistening rings at each end, from which thin wires ran to the sending contacts. It still trembled as though just arrived.

He ran to the cage and deciphered the inscription on it. "Kekeler, Sic-Horum."

Bell stood panting beside him.

"Cut the power!" Rhodan told him.

Bell pulled down a lever that cut the flow of power to the transmitter. Rhodan opened the cage door and took out the cylinder. Bell looked at it curiously.

"What does that mean—'Kekeler, Sic-Horum'?"

"Sic-Horum is the main city of the Sichas, a mountain tribe on Ferrol. Kekeler is probably the name of the sender."

On one side of the cylinder was a circular access lid, which Rhodan unscrewed. He extracted a piece of writing foil, which was used in the Ferronian culture in place of paper. The page was crowded with written symbols, which were beautifully and regularly executed as though with some automatic writing instrument.

Rhodan began to read. Kekeler, elected ruler of Sic-Horum, to whomever receives this message: Ferrol has been occupied by the enemy. The people's will to resist has been broken. But only the Sicha tribe feels itself duty bound to alert the rest of our race that the battle is still far from being decided. As long as *one* Sicha lives, the enemy will not have won this war.

"But we need someone who can tell us what to do."

"Of course the letter bristles with heroic words," Rhodan admitted, "but I've heard that the mountain people *are* heroic. Who else would come up with the idea of launching a question out of a conquered world into the unknown, to ask for instructions on how to make it hot for the enemy?"

Khrest nodded agreement. "But how can we help him?" he asked.

"The message says they need information. The Topides have imposed a travel restriction everywhere on

Ferrol. Everyone has been registered in his hometown or district and may not travel more than thirty miles from that location. The Sichas might take the chance of slipping through the blockades, but they've got to know in what direction to go. After all, an active underground has got to have a point of reference or a goal."

"You are so right," Thora said scornfully. "And I suppose that you are planning to provide them with the information they need?"

"Exactly!" Rhodan retorted, and sat down.

Bell and Take looked at him expectantly. Thora was over-bearing, as though she knew that Rhodan could only suggest something crazy.

"What do the Sichas need?" Rhodan continued. "Information on troop movements, troop concentrations, and spaceports and other technical items concerning the Topidian fleet. I think we can furnish them all that quite easy."

Bell leaned forward querulously. "Klein and Deringhouse? The space fighter ships!"

Rhodan nodded. Khrest drew in a deep breath.

But—you can't do that!" protested Thora.

"Why not?"

"Think of the danger!"

Rhodan grinned cheerlessly at her. "Are you figuring that we can change the trend of this war without taking a risk?"

Thora became silent.

"We know that our space fighters surpass Topidian ships in their acceleration rate and manoeuvrability. By human standards the two pilots will be taking only a minor risk—minor, that is, in comparison to the great advantage that their action will give to our plans." He motioned toward the door with a nod of his head. "Bell, go get Klein and Deringhouse and bring them in here..."

"Ready for takeoff?"

"Number one ready!"

"Number two ready!"

Rhodan gave the nod to Bell, who pulled back two switches on the large control panel.

Rhodan spoke into the microphone. "Shaft hatch opening!"

With a rapid movement the great hatch covering the flight entrance shaft of the fortress swung to one side. On the panel, a control light and a buzzer indicated that it had stopped at the chocks.

"Shaft free," said Rhodan. "Ships away! And make it good, boys!"

With singing drivers the two fighter ships shot upward and disappeared into the great shaft. A fraction of a second later the sound of their propulsion drives was blotted out. The fighters had left the base.

Bell took it upon himself to close the shaft cover again.

Klein and Deringhouse took a direct course for Ferrol. The distance was favourable, since Rofus and Ferrol were coming into close opposition. The plan was simple—information concerning important units of the Topidian fleet movements, photo reconnaissance, and harassment of Topidian troop movements with short-range weapons.

Klein and Deringhouse had not hesitated a second to agree to this plan. In view of their enthusiasm, Khrest and Thora had desisted from offering further counsel.

The fighters needed only a few minutes to get out of the gravitational pull of Rofus. Deringhouse observed his detector screen. "Nary a blip or a trace," he announced with a grin, speaking into the short-range telecom mike.

Klein grimly confirmed the information.

They used full power acceleration, which meant that with no untoward event they would be able to cover the distance from Rofus to Ferrol in a little more than one hour. As soon as they achieved light speed, causing space around them to be darkened down to just a fringe of multicoloured light that circled them like a giant wheel, they were out of any serious danger. Close formation flying for spaceships was possible only at slower velocities. Beyond three-quarters of the speed of light, each ship was on its own in space.

The hour passed uneventfully. Ferrol emerged from the darkness as the fighters reduced their velocity. Simultaneously, the detector screens showed the blip of a Topidian ship that was leaning into their course from the port side. Deringhouse switched his receiver on and heard harsh, croaking commands. He smiled grimly and looked across at Klein's fighter.

"You want to put the first burr under their saddle!"

"I'll buy that!"

"Maintain course! They'll run directly across us."

With a mechanical movement of his hand, Deringhouse activated the disintegrator to fire readiness. The lizard croakings faded in his receiver and the creeping blip on his screen indicated that the alien ship was suddenly in a hurry to inspect these two bogeys at close range. Finally the ship itself showed up on the visiscreen, looking, like all Topidian vessels, as if it were a flying pregnant sausage.

"Sixty thousand," announced Klein.

Deringhouse nodded to himself. "At 30,000 let them have it!"

However, the Topide had no intention of letting two dangerous looking objects approach him so closely. When the distance between them was still more than 40,000 miles, Deringhouse saw a glistening ray

beam shoot toward him. He felt his ship's frame vibrate but didn't change his course. The shot passed close by.

"Fire!" he said softly into the com mike.

The darting disintegrator rays reached out to the alien ship. On the visiscreen, Deringhouse saw the vessels outline blur. The shining point of light disappeared, to be replaced by a dull glowing cloud. Seconds later they shot past it and away.

"Bullseye!" he commented.

Klein countered with, "An clear!"

They pancaked into the upper layers of the Ferrol atmosphere. The dropping air speed indicators demonstrated the braking action of the air.

"Operating velocity, Mach 8," Deringhouse instructed.

It was the highest velocity that was sanely possible to fly at an altitude of six or seven miles. Ground to air defence rockets didn't normally travel any faster than that. It wouldn't be difficult for the fighters to dodge them under these conditions. Deringhouse regulated his drivers and peeled into a flat glide course at the indicated altitude. Klein joined him trimly at one hundred yards.

The region below was clear of clouds. They saw green forestland and a few mountain ranges, which from this altitude seemed unusually flat, and in the centre of their visiscreens a fairly large city was discernible. Circling the city in an unusual curving pattern was a river that served Deringhouse as a good landmark while checking his map.

"Khelar-Het, on the Great Ocean Isthmus," he reported to Klein. "The coast is about 320 miles to the south. There's about a 720 mile stretch of ocean between us and the northern coast of the central continent, where Thorta is located."

Klein answered back promptly. "I make it altogether about fifteen minutes"

Owing to its damp climate the Isthmus was a very thinly populated area. On the continent sized land mass there were only a few cities. The largest one was Khelar-Het, which was just slipping off the edge of their screens. There was no trace of opposition here. Deringhouse was aware of a growing sense of apprehension. Undoubtedly their destruction of the Topidian ship had been observed, and all Topidian bases on Ferrol had probably gone on alert. Therefore, this relative calm was getting to him.

In the same moment, Klein announced, "Ground to air rockets at two o'clock!"

Deringhouse saw them immediately—a swarm of tiny blips on his scanner screen, approaching with a very respectable velocity. Grimly, he pulled his ship up into a tight curve until he was shooting straight into the sky at top acceleration. The rocket missiles fell behind. Even if automatically guided—which they undoubtedly were—they were incapable of staying with an Arkonide fighter for more than a few seconds. Both ships reached an altitude of thirty miles before dipping back into horizontal flight and continuing toward the coast.

Skimming low over the sea was a line of giant aircraft. The Earthmen could not tell whether they were Ferronian freight transports or Topidian troop transports, so they left them in peace. The reconnaissance

cameras ran on uninterruptedly, so that much of the information that the two pilots had to bypass in the swiftness of their flight would be retrievable from the film records. The ocean raced away beneath them. The coast of the central continent appeared, and with it the giant city of Thorta, where the Thort had lived until the Topides drove him out.

The Red Palace alone constituted a small city, and Thorta was at least five times as large as any terrestrial metropolis. Joined to its southern extremity was the giant space launch and landing field. Its surface enclosed an area of some 3,600 square miles; however, the Topides had apparently decided to land their fleet in a less obvious location. Only a few of the rod shaped ships were to be seen—plus the giant ball of the stolen Arkonide spaceship.

The scanner screen came alive with moving traces. Deringhouse studied their pattern and direction of flight for a moment and came to the conclusion that none of them were hostile. After all, it was to be expected that there would be some kind of air traffic over a city such as Thorta.

"We've picked up enough recon data on the city, I think," suggested Klein. "What now?"

"Down below to the spaceport. Let's fry a few of those flying sausages!"

Klein responded at once. In close paired formation the two fighters shot in from the sea toward the southern edge of the city and the spaceport. Deringhouse's instruments locked onto the objectives, and when he was at firing altitude he let loose with the disintegrator. One of the Topidian ships burst into a swirling cloud of atomised particles, and sixty yards beyond it, a second ship met the same fate.

"Antiaircraft fire!" yelled Klein.

The ground to air missiles were dangerously close. Fired straight on from the eastern side of the field, they could be dodged only by overloading their propulsion drives beyond all safety factors. But it became apparent that the rocket bombardment was only a diversionary manoeuvre. While they were still observing the blips of the receding rockets, a pale disintegrator beam shot out at them from a battle station on board the giant battleship. The scanner screen left only a faint trace, and Deringhouse wasn't even aware the shot had been fired until the moment he sensed that his ship was not responding to the control.

"Your left wing!" yelled Klein.

"What's the matter?"

"It's been sliced in half!"

The two fighters climbed higher. Klein strove to follow Deringhouse's reeling ship as best he could. The unintentional manoeuvre meanwhile provided a priceless advantage, in that it was impossible for even the automatic beam lock on device of a super disintegrator to follow the weaving movements of a wounded space fighter. Deringhouse had to fly by wire. The loss of half a wing wasn't too disturbing to him. The fighter was only partially an aerodynamic craft; to a great extent it could dispense with airfoil assistance. He threw in full power and saw that the ship still didn't respond to control.

"Something else is on the fritz," he mumbled—and then suddenly he discovered it.

The drivers were sputtering out. He checked them several times and fought his controls until he had to believe the evidence. He stared at the velocity meter. The fighter was in free fall. When the gravitation of

Ferrol overcame his original momentum, he would fall back.

"Get going!" gasped Klein.

"I can't," answered Deringhouse, while regaining his calm. "Now listen—you fly back alone to Rofus. I'll stay here. My drivers are gone, I could never make it. Understood?"

"We could land somewhere, and I could take you on board!" said Klein.

"Don't be crazy!" Deringhouse growled at him. "You know that's impossible. Tell Rhodan that I'll attempt to fight it through. If possible I'll try not to fall into the hands of the Topides. I'll head south and get as close to Sicha country as I can."

"But—!"

"Get back to base!" Deringhouse bellowed. "No more arguments! That's an order, Captain Klein!"

After a choked pause, Klein answered, "Yes sir, Major!" And then, "Good luck!"

"Thanks!"

Deringhouse saw the undamaged fighter shoot vertically away. Seconds later it was only a blip on the scanner—then it disappeared. With a sigh he turned back to its own problem.

The crippled ship climbed to an altitude of forty-eight miles before the momentum gave out. At the proper moment, Deringhouse tipped it over and dived to regain a control momentum. At about nine miles of altitude he was able to stabilize with the help of the other wing.

Thorta lay far behind him. The countryside below was marked by a maze of wide highways. He saw a large number of small cities, great industrial plants, and far on the horizon the blue-shimmering line of the mountains where the Sichas lived. The distance amounted to more than 240 miles, and he wouldn't get that far. All he needed was to find an area where he could bail out without falling into the hands of a Topidian search party. The towns became fewer. Patches of forest began to appear, and the highways were fewer and farther apart, with less traffic.

Deringhouse gritted his teeth and nursed the flier carefully eastward. It looked good so far. The highways became scarcer, and the forested areas were larger. A small town passed beneath him. Then he switched on the timing fuse of the disintegrator and struck the releasing mechanism of the cockpit ejector with his fist. There was a murderous inertial jolt that the neutralizer could no longer absorb, and Deringhouse blacked out for a few seconds.

Then he stared at the visiscreen. The pilotless ship wobbled away from him. It turned nose down and would have taken a vertical plunge, but in the same moment the total energy of the disintegrator was released. A fine vapour of atomized particles was left, which at first continued almost at the same velocity as the ship but then dispersed itself gradually into the wind.

Deringhouse forced himself not to brood over the loss of the flier any more. Rhodan wasn't going to be happy to learn that one of his space fighters had gone down. Hopefully Klein would explain why, on the next trip, no one had better fly close to that battleship.

Beneath the ejected cockpit capsule lay parklike forested countryside that came at him with a hurtling

velocity. Then the parachute opened and transmitted to Deringhouse a second painful jolt. The area was not as practical for his purposes as he would have preferred, but at least no road or highway was visible in the vicinity. The little town he had just passed over was now eighteen miles behind him to the west.

The capsule burst through the trees with a loud cracking sound. There was a final rolling bounce to the ground, and when all was still and he clambered back onto his seat he was thankful that it was over with at last. He opened the plastic canopy and climbed out so hurriedly that he stumbled and fell to the ground. As he jumped to his feet, he held his neutron ray gun ready in his hand. But there was no one around to accommodate him.

In the same moment Deringhouse perceived that in the coming days his greatest problem would not be the Topides as much as the heavy gravitation of Ferrol. He had known all along that the gravity field here carried a force of 1.4 G; but at this moment it ceased to be an abstraction. Not that the muscles of a strong man couldn't cope with a weight of 1.4 G; the disadvantage was chiefly psychological. There was a certain demoralizing effect in having to carry around 217 pounds instead of his normal 155.

Deringhouse resigned himself and started out on his way, resolving to ignore the tugging sensation of the additional gravity. He wanted to move southward. The sparse forestland offered him little hindrance. Nevertheless, it would be some time before he reached the mountains.

CHAPTER TWO

If Rhodan was concerned about the loss of a pilot and a space fighter ship, he didn't show it. Thora watched him closely but could not tell whether he was struggling with his conscience.

The only observation concerning the case that he offered was, "This doesn't necessarily prove or disprove my theories about the versatility of a fighter ship. It's simply that in the future we'll have to be careful about that Arkonide battleship. Apparently its automatic lock on equipment one easily track a very rapidly moving target."

The nuisance attacks and reconnaissance flights on Ferrol would be continued. Since the other space fighters had been left on Earth and only two had been brought along, this task was now reserved for Captain Klein alone.

Evaluation of the film strips offered valuable information. From them it was determined that the Topides were in the process of establishing a large fleet base in the unsettled western part of the Great Ocean Isthmus. Rhodan did not doubt that the major number of the Topidian "hump backs," as he called the rod shaped vessels with their central bulges, would be stashed out there in some very inconspicuous spot. Other data yielded information concerning the balance of enemy small bases and deployed fleet commands. Out of this emerged a revelation that although the Topides were well spread out they were in fact thinly distributed. The individual commands were sufficient to suppress uprisings among the populace where they occurred, but their capacity to resist the full impact of a concerted attack was questionable.

The inference to be drawn from the analysis was startling. The Topides were concentrating their major forces on the Great Ocean Isthmus, and thus on the rest of the planet's surface they were leaving themselves open to attack. If one were forced to reject the idea that Topidian fleet strategy was merely

stupid and amateurish, then the only other inference remaining was—an all-out attack on the last Ferronian bastion on Rofus was imminent!

Rhodan had several conversations with the Thort over the telecom, and he evidence deep concern over this development. Apparently, he was helpless. Rhodan got the message that he himself was now expected to furnish the actual deliverance. He suppressed a smile when he recalled that he had come here to Rofus in the damaged *Good Hope* to ask for help. He comforted the Thort as best he could and then turned to cogitating how best to circumvent the grave destiny that now hung over the ninth planet of the Vega system. He took Khrest, Thora, and Tako Kakuta into consultation.

As a result of this conference they concluded that the recon and harassment flights of Captain Klein were not enough to deter the Topidian attack on Rofus. The only possibility remaining seemed to point to a defensive counter-attack in the Topides' own territory on Ferrol, through use of the transmitters and a powerful commando force.

The information gathered by Klein was transmitted to Kekeler in Sic-Horum, and his answering confirmation revealed that he was very pleased. However, when it was explained to him that a shock troop commando force of some forty men would shortly appear on Ferrol he returned a question as to whether the proper people had been selected for withstanding the gruelling hardships of their guerrilla war.

To this Reginald Bell snorted angrily, "I'll show that character a thing or two when I see him. Does he think that the Sichas are the only fighters in the whole world?"

Deringhouse's march to the south was finally interrupted by a very ordinary circumstance, which ultimately forced him to risk a rather foolhardy but nonetheless necessary side venture. The simple fact was that a man could walk only so far under an unaccustomed pall of gravity before becoming ravenously hungry. He had discovered only a few bluish berries, which seemed safe to eat because of evidence that birds had been pecking at them, but they were few and unsatisfying.

His former survival training under Pounder would call for going incognito into a town and foraging for food—but here, among Ferronians, it would be difficult for an Earthman to assume the appearance of a native. As far as the language was concerned, Khrest's recent hypno course had enabled him to speak and read both the international commercial language and many regional dialect. As far as physiology was concerned, on the several Ferronian worlds there were a variety of types, he had heard—and the fact that the Sichas were larger and lighter of skin complexion was of particular interest now.

He had found that the blue berries left a light bluish stain that, if evenly applied to his face and visible extremities, might help disguise him for a short period. Perhaps, then, the main ingredient would be native clothing and to bush up his hair a bit. Some Sichas and other more remote types he had seen pictured in Ferronian books ranged from orange heads to sandy, dark haired people. Now that Ferrol was in turmoil, the appearance of a remote type stranger might not be a suspicious event.

Soon a harmless Ferron native became a victim of this idea. While walking in the woods he was hit over the head from behind, and when he awoke he found himself naked.

After he had discarded his flier's uniform and concealed the neutron ray gun and other small weapons under his new flowing garments, Deringhouse experimented carefully with the blue berries and finally succeeded in acquiring a pastel complexion on his hands and face and neck. Then he made haste to put

distance between himself and the village his victim had come from. However, after putting eight or nine miles behind him he came out onto a forest highway with a growling stomach and a grim resolve to find something to eat in the next half hour—at any cost.

In view of the circumstances, their reception was grotesque to say the least.

In front of the transmitter cells in which they were arriving one after another, a horde of large, husky, colourfully dressed men was gathered, and they peered into the receiver cages with such a sombre attitude that it seemed the new arrivals were about to be taken prisoner. Rhodan held a thermo ray generator in the crook of his arm as he came through the cage door. He paused to look around. None of the husky guerrillas made any move toward him. They remained where they were and surveyed him with dark glances. Rhodan waited patiently.

Reginald Bell emerged directly after Rhodan. "Hey!" he grunted, suspiciously. "What have we gotten into!?" He looked along the line of Sichas and smirked back at them. They neither moved nor changed expression.

Then came Tako Kakuta. He smiled, as he always did. The Sichas began to show the first signs of surprise. Apparently they had never seen a person with Tako's hue of skin.

"If they don't break the ice soon," Bell muttered, "I'll take a rain check!"

The transmitter spilled out the newcomers in an unbroken procession. Ralf Marten stumbled through the cage door, followed by the boisterous Wuriu Sengu. When Marshall came through, he was a bit dazed at first; he was followed by Betty Toufry, sad and solemn eyed as usual. She barely smiled when Rhodan gave her an encouraging nod.

As they observed the small girl, the wonderment of the Sichas intensified.

"I'm not concerned with this group," Rhodan advised his companions. "The city is out there somewhere nearby. So let's go!"

The transmitter processing was not finished yet, but those who were still "en route," including the fighter robots, would easily be able to follow their predecessors. Rhodan walked toward the Sichas, and as they made no move to get out of his way he went around them. He had not yet passed the last of the hulking brutes before a deep voice spoke behind him in the Ferronian commercial language.

"All of here bid you welcome!"

Rhodan halted and turned around. One of the Sichas—an older man apparently, because of the whiteness of his hair had stepped out of the group and now approached Rhodan. He stretched out both his hands, and Rhodan returned the gesture with reservations.

"I am Rhodan," he told him. "And you?"

"My name is Kekeler. You have heard of me."

Rhodan confirmed that he had.

In that moment the transmitter emitted a loud buzzing sound to signify that its operation was at an end and that the energy input of the sending station had been switched off. Rhodan inspected his small battle force, and Kekeler followed his gaze.

Altogether there were forty men—if you could include little Betty Toufry as a "man"—and forty-five robots. Eighty-five fighters who had been selected to give a hotfoot to a vastly superior enemy.

"Yours must be a gallant people, if you dare to venture into the battle with so few," Kekeler said in his pleasantly deep voice.

"Well, *we* are counting on a little assistance from you," Rhodan answered promptly. It was obviously important to clarify this point at the outset.

Kekeler made a sign of agreement. "We have that in mind," he said earnestly. "But we have only a very few usable weapons. I don't know just how much help we can offer."

Rhodan smiled. "Don't worry about weapons. We can supply you with those."

With a broad change of expression, Kekeler's face revealed a friendlier and much more hopeful attitude. "In that case you will see that we are a valiant people!" he said in impressively deep tones.

As Deringhouse arrived at a fork in the road where a smaller avenue branched from the highway toward a village that was half hidden in the forest, an old man approached him. He appeared to be taking a walk, and to judge from his clothing he was not among the wealthiest of the inhabitants.

Deringhouse remained where he was and spoke to him. "Greetings, old man. I'm a hungry wanderer and I'd be very grateful to you if you could tell me where to get something to eat. Of course, I haven't any money."

The old man listened thoughtfully, then looked up at him. "My son, you must come from far away, is that not so?" he asked.

"Yes," Deringhouse answered. "Very far away."

"How have you managed not to fall into the hands of the enemy?"

Deringhouse forced a smile. "Well, when you know..." he said, and left the rest to the imagination.

The oldster suddenly narrowed his eyes and poured forth a stream of words totally incomprehensible to Deringhouse. The Earthman knew that there were many different regional languages in the Ferronian Empire, but normally the standard commercial language was used. This tongue he did not understand in the slightest, and he became wary when it appeared that the old man was putting him to a test.

"I can't understand a single word," he admitted.

The oldster nodded. "When one is as tall as you, my son, he would ordinarily have to be a Sicha," he explained laconically. "But you are no Sicha. You must be from a very far place. What did you want?"

Something to eat?"

Bewildered, Deringhouse could only nod affirmatively. The old man turned and pointed to the village toward which the small road led.

"Go there. My son owns a tavern there. If you will tell him that Perk'la sent you, he will give you more than you can eat at one sitting. But do not forget the name—Perk'la."

Deringhouse expressed his gratitude. The emphasis the old man placed on the name was disconcerting, and when the other left him he considered the advisability of enduring his hunger a while longer instead of falling into a trap. But there was no proof that this was a trap, and the old man had made a friendly and trustworthy impression, in spite of his apparent habit of secretiveness.

It was about noon of the thirty-eight hour Ferrol day. The glaring sunlight lay oppressively on the meadows and woodlands, and the high humidity generated a sweat. Deringhouse knew that he couldn't have kept on walking much longer. The village streets were empty. He realized that he had forgotten to ask the man the name of his son's tavern, but that difficulty soon resolved itself by virtue of the fact that there was only one such establishment in town.

Deringhouse unlatched the door and allowed it to swing open; then he stepped inside the equivalent of a taproom, or bar. It looked like the dining room of an expensive hotel. There were black plastic wood tables, clean tablecloths, and comfortable chairs. However, there were no guests in sight. He sat down at a table and waited until the service automat in the centre of the table popped open and produced writing foil and a stylus.

A mechanical voice rattled at him in the Ferronian commercial language, "Your order, please."

Deringhouse took the sheet of foil and wrote, "Am looking for the proprietor, please. I have been sent by Perk'la." He replaced the foil and stylus in the tiny compartment and said, "Thank you."

In response, the apparatus folded back into its slot; there was a moment of buzzing and then all was silence. Suddenly, he heard footsteps behind him. Before he ventured to look up, someone spoke to him.

"Are you the man that Perk'la sent here?"

Deringhouse looked up and scrutinized the small, broad-shouldered Ferronian who stood near his table. "As you can see," he answered. "Or are there several he has sent?"

The man apologized. "I am a bit confused. You know, it isn't very often that Perk'la sends someone here in his name."

Deringhouse laughed. "To top it off, he made a poor choice. I told him I was hungry but was without funds. In spite of that, he sent me here."

The Ferron made a sign of agreement. "Naturally. What would you like to eat?"

"Anything," Deringhouse told him wearily. "But soon, or I'll die of hunger. And then tell me what favour I can return to you, since I can't pay with money."

The Ferron smiled artfully. "Let's talk about that afterward."

He turned to go but stopped after a moment and turned around "Incidentally, my name is Teel."

Deringhouse suddenly realized he should introduce himself, and he scrambled in his mind for a name that would not sound too alien. "My name is Deri," he offered without too much delay.

Teel nodded and smiled acknowledgement.

Deringhouse received a generous spread of food that made his mouth water. Teel was tactful enough to leave him alone with his appetite. He reappeared in the room only after Deringhouse had wolfed down the entire serving.

"Deri, I've ordered a drink prepared for you. Do you want to come with me?"

Something to drink was the ticket for complete satisfaction. He got up and followed Teel willingly. They went through a door, behind which was an escalator that led into the basement Deringhouse was familiar with the Ferronian custom of arranging a part of their living space under the ground, in view of the unusual heat of their native planet. If it had been comfortably cool upstairs in the dining room, here it began to be actually cold, which increased as they went deeper. The escalator terminated within two yards of a door that now swung open as Teel came off the moving stairs. He stepped to one side to permit Deringhouse to precede him.

The room behind the door was only dimly lighted. Deringhouse opened his eyes wide for better visibility. What he finally made out was a row of men posted along the walls on either side, men who held weapons in their hands and pointed every barrel directly at his midriff. He whirled around and discovered that Teel stood in the doorway with the same kind of weapon trained on him. He swallowed hard and felt an involuntary tensing of his stomach muscles, because he expected to be shot on the spot.

But as no one made a move to use his weapon, he relaxed slightly and said with a smile, "Well, here I am. What can I do for you?"

The first order of the day was to procure the Arkonide transportation suits. Although the Ferrol gravity was only forty percent greater than on Earth and strong men wouldn't find it burdensome in the first hour or so, longer exposure to it represented a strain that Rhodan didn't care to have his people exposed to.

Kekeler had brought them all down into Sic-Horum. This had been a problem, since the city was overcrowded. It was the only town where the Topides hadn't established a military post, so a crowd of inhabitants from other mountain towns had come here to seek refuge. Because of this, Sic-Horum had become a provisional capital of the Sichas; but there was little hope that this fact would remain long concealed from the Topides.

Finally, however, everyone found quarters. In the case of the robots it was a simpler matter. They were spotted around in any suitable location and ordered to remain there until needed again. The humans slept four, five, and six in a room. Rhodan and Bell took quarters in Kekeler's house, and they did not squander any time trying to make themselves comfortable. Instead, they got together immediately with Kekeler and his advisers in order to come up with a battle plan.

This energetic objectivity made an impression on Kekeler. "I think this war might have taken another

course if all of our people had been like you," he said.

Rhodan explained to him the top priority he was depending upon. "The Topidian fleet possesses a spaceship that they have captured from another race. This ship is the backbone of the Topidian fleet. We *must* get our hands on it—and if we do, the war will be over."

Kekeler looked at him attentively. "That sounds good," he answered after a pause. "We have heard of this spaceship. It is as big as a mountain and its armament is very frightening."

The difficulty lay in the task of getting enough people transported from Sic-Horum to Thorta in order to give some chance of success to the project. Kekeler explained that it wouldn't be too difficult to bypass the first and even the second military post along the way, but the probability of advancing undetected from post to post beyond that would grow proportionately slimmer, and an advance from here to the capital was completely improbable.

"All right," Rhodan said finally: "In order to increase our chances we'll wipe a few of these military posts out of the way. The question is, how do we do it without revealing to the Topides who their attackers are?"

Kekeler brought out a map and spread it on the table. "We don't have to take on the whole post," he said. "Look here. The next post en route to Thorta is located in Helakar, a small city, a little over a hundred miles from here. Helakar lies in the middle of a square area that measures 120 miles on a side, or 14,400 square miles all told, which the post there has to guard. This area is proportioned into sixteen smaller squares which are 30 miles on a side, or 900 square miles each, and the Topidian military establishment in Helakar must see to it that no one travels out of his own square, or district. This is the basis of the present travel restriction."

Kekeler folded up the map and put it away. "So you see, the only thing we have to do is to let the first patrol come after us and overcome it. With the weapons we now have, that shouldn't be a difficult task."

Rhodan nodded his agreement. "That is acceptable. Do you know at what time intervals the patrols have to report to their headquarters in Helakar?"

Kekeler shook his head. "All that I know is that shortly after the post was established in Helakar and the first patrol came here to Sic-Horum, we were a very uncircumspect bunch. We didn't like the flat headed lizards, and when one of them violated our own concepts of comportment by being coarse and brutal, we gave him a thrashing.

"After that it was about an hour before the first airship appeared over our district. Apparently they didn't know where to look, because they cruised around aimlessly. It took about two hours after the thrashing episode for them to land here in Sic-Horum and find their two patrolmen." He laughed. "All that happened was that we had to pay a fine."

Rhodan considered all this. Finally he said, "From that we can presume that the patrols are required to send a routine report every hour to Helakar, and if a report fails to come in on time, they send out a search detail, which makes a check in the area where the last report originated. If things haven't changed, then it shouldn't be difficult to make some reasonably fast progress here."

There was a general agreement to make a test of the alertness of the Topidian fleet command post in Helakar, before committing their entire fighting force to Thorta.

"If you are really the man we've been expecting, you have nothing to fear," Teel said from his position at the door.

"Sorry to disappoint you," Deringhouse retorted grimly. "My presence in this area is a matter of sheer coincidence."

"That's of no consequence. You said, however, that Perk'la sent you."

"So?"

"What did he ask you about?"

Deringhouse explained it exactly as it had happened.

"All right," Teel replied, "then where do you really come from?"

Deringhouse watched him narrowly as he said, "Listen, kid—it wouldn't make a bit of difference to anyone here where I come from. So I'll tell you—I am from *Arkon!*"

Teel was obviously nonplussed. "Where?"

"From a world that is farther away from here than any of you can imagine."

Teel shook his head, bewildered. "Are you trying to tell us that you are not a Ferronian?" he asked uncertainly.

For answer, Deringhouse pulled back his clothing to reveal to everyone present that his bluish hue was artificial. It elicited a general gasp of astonishment.

"What are you, then?"

"An Arkonide."

One of the men present stepped forward. "I remember something!" he said excitedly. "Shortly before Thorta fell to the enemy there were some vague reports coming in about a strange spaceship that had landed on Rofus. It was supposed to have come from a fairly distant solar System. I think it was attacked by the big Topidian battleship and was badly damaged. It made an emergency landing on Rofus, and since then nothing has been heard about it."

"That figures," Deringhouse grunted. "We went into hiding."

Teel asked, "Then...you belong to the crew of this ship?"

"Yes."

Teel continued with a series of questions that seemed to Deringhouse to be irrelevant, so he finally lost patience.

"By your gods!" he yelled. "I've had enough of this! I want to know, once and for all, what this is all

about. What have I fallen into here?"

Instead of standing along the walls, the other men now surrounded Deringhouse, but their weapons were pointed downward now.

Teel answered him gravely, "That we can tell you. We are a group who are determined to maintain the resistance against the enemy. This isn't easy, as you know, so we always try to enlist everybody we can. On the other hand, all new-comers have to be checked out from backbone to gizzard, my friend, so that we don't make it too easy for the enemy to smuggle in spies."

Deringhouse let out an audible sigh, "You could have told me that in the first place!"

He sat down with the men and explained, within the limitations established by Perry Rhodan, how he had come to Ferrol. Reports had reached this village concerning a spaceship that generally outclassed the Topidian ships in its surprise attacks on them. No one now doubted Deringhouse's story.

"Have you fellows given any thought to how you can become effective?" asked Deringhouse. "Or have you restricted yourselves to holding regular secret meetings so that you can keep your hate the Topides fever alive?"

Teel opened his arms in a gesture of resignation. "We don't have any weapons. What could we have done?"

Deringhouse had to admit that this was a point.

"What is your own plan?" asked Teel.

"I wanted to get to the Sichas."

"Why there?"

"If my own people come to Ferrol, that's where they will land."

Teel thought this over. Finally he said, "I don't believe that you can ever get to that location. The Sichas are deep in the mountains, and the Topides haven't established posts there for nothing. Think of the difficulties a lone man would have to face, to fight his way through to the Sichas under the eyes of the Topidian command posts!"

Deringhouse looked closely at Teel. "Maybe you've got another suggestion?"

"I don't have any," Teel admitted. "But now that you've dropped into our midst maybe we can make a new start and put our heads together as to what we should do."

Deringhouse got to his feet. "That, I will buy!" he said grimly.

Kehaler said, "The border is just about here." He was Kekeler's son.

"This isn't exactly open terrain," observed Rhodan.

He had flown up here from Sic-Horum with Bell, Tako, and the young Sicha to test the alertness of the Topidian patrols. The Arkonide transport suits had arrived through the transmitters, and these they had put to use in order to reduce the time and distance. Kehaler had proved to be practically a technical genius, in that he had learned the operation of the technical gear in the shortest possible time.

Away to the north, in the direction of the city, the terrain sloped gently downward. It was covered with all shapes and sizes of boulders and sparsely distributed underbrush. The southern extremity of this gentle plain was closed off by a wall of rock about fifty yards high that stretched from east to west as far as the eye could see. Kehaler maintained that this wall marked the southern boundary of the Sic-Horum quadrangle, which appeared to be a very significant assumption.

In essence the area didn't suit Rhodan. If they were going to carry out their test, they would have to make sure they would be seen, and here the chances of being conspicuous were slim. But Kehaler didn't agree.

"They always fly along the border of the quadrangle," he said. "They fly low and keep their eyes wide open, so if we don't scuttle behind any bushes they will very probably spot us."

As a matter of fact, to crawl under a bush might have been the most reasonable course, since the sun glared down mercilessly on them. Rhodan took a reading of 136 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade. The transport suit air conditioners were functioning, but everyone's face was completely exposed to the heat.

Bell lay down on the ground. "So? We wait!" he grumbled, on edge. "There's nothing else we can do."

Rhodan also stretched out on the ground. If his own opinion was valid, the Topides were a suspicious lot and wouldn't keep them waiting long. If they were serious about their travel restrictions they'd be checking their control zone more often than once or twice a day.

About an hour passed before a distant humming sound was heard. In a purely Ferronian gesture, Kehaler placed his hands behind his large ears and pressed them forward toward the approaching sound.

"They are coming," he said, and got to his feet.

Rhodan searched the indicated area of the horizon. After a moment or so he discovered a black moving point, which progressed through the air just above the rock wall boundary, approaching at moderate speed. They were all standing in a circular open area not far from the wall. Only Tako had concealed himself, as he was their backup man.

The black point resolved itself into a wingless, propellerless craft that appeared to operate on the principle of an opposed field of artificial gravity. Compared with the Arkonide gravity technique, that of the Topides seemed to be still in its infancy. The strident clamour generated by the ship's grav engines became nearly intolerable as it approached.

The grav glider, or whatever one might call such a vessel, came to a hovering position over the rock wall, as obviously the Topides on board had observed them. Then it lowered down in front of the wall and landed within about ten paces of Rhodan and his companions. Rhodan saw two Topides in the control seats. Although he had seen Topides at close range before, he could never repress an instinctive revulsion at sight of them.

The Topide who emerged from the ship was about as tall as Rhodan. His skull was broad and hairless, the lips thin, and the grotesquely wide mouth giving the impression of a frog, with the added

monstrousness of the great chameleon eyes, which turned independently in their sockets. His skin was covered with brownish black scales, and he had six fingers on each hand. All in all the aspect of an adult Topide was capable of awakening in a human being a terrifying instinctive awareness of utter and complete alienness.

Rhodan noted that the penetrating racket of the grav engines had not been cut off. The Topidian pilot inside seemed to consider it prudent to be ready for takeoff at a second's notice. The other held his ground in front of Rhodan with his weapon pointed at his chest.

With one free arm the alien made an imperious gesture and croaked, "Border here! Go away! Otherwise shoot!" The Ferron language he spoke could hardly be understood.

"What's his problem?" queried Bell, ready for action.

Rhodan did not answer. Instead, he uttered one word: "*Tako!*"

The armed Topide made another sweeping gesture and was about to speak again. In the same moment, however, Take appeared on the opposite side of the grey ship. As Rhodan had instructed him, he took no chances. The beam from the thermo pulse weapon struck the second Topide and killed him. The other, who was about to speak, suddenly whirled around. Rhodan had planned on that. The second or two of shocked immobility on the part of the remaining Topide was all he needed to draw his neutron ray gun and slay him.

"Well, so much for that!" Bell commented dryly, but his face was white.

Rhodan only nodded agreement. He reassembled his little group, and they broke away from the place, leaving the strange ship and the two aliens behind. A few minutes later they were back in Sic-Horum. meanwhile, Kekeler had established an observation post in the highest tower of the city, where a high powered telescope was put into use for a close surveillance of the region. In contrast to his usual solemnity, Kekeler was cheerful. He appeared to be overjoyed at the smooth success of the undertaking; however, he didn't waste a word on it.

After about three-quarters of an hour the observation post reported that a formation of Topidian grav ships was searching the area. A while later it appeared that the attack location and the two dead aliens had been discovered. The ships disappeared for a while; then they reappeared and were seen approaching the city.

"Now the pot is boiling," Rhodan commented. "What do you plan to do?"

Kekeler stretched out his right hand, palm up. Bell had called this typically Ferronian gesture a near equivalent to a "merchant marine's salute."

"It's hard to tell," Kekeler answered. "They can't prove anything, and we don't have the kind of armament that killed those Topides. I think it would be advisable for you and your people to get under cover while the search detail is in the city."

Rhodan acted accordingly, concealing his group in a place that gave him a good view of the main city square. The Topides landed in three ships while three more remained aloft and circled the town. Some of the tension was relieved when Kekeler was merely summoned into a cross examination, and Rhodan, of course, caught only the loudly croaking Topidian part of the conversation. They bluntly accused rather than questioned, but Kekeler maintained a beautiful innocence. He affirmed that he knew absolutely

nothing about it. Finally he was confronted with the two dead bodies. Rhodan could see him inspecting the wounds and he presumed that the wily Sicha was resting his case on the evidence of weapons he could not have possessed.

Apparently, the Topides accepted this as a valid point. Their voices lowered in volume. Rhodan perceived that they were now asking Kekeler for information as to where the perpetrators might have been able to conceal themselves. Kekeler was gravely cooperative, evidencing by his broad gestures that he was giving a detailed description of some area. The patrol boarded their ships, and with howling grav generators the three ships rose up in front of the walls of the buildings and joined the other three circling sentinel craft. Seconds later they had all disappeared.

Rhodan and Bell came out of the building. Kekeler met them and laughed for the first time.

"Well done!" Rhodan complimented him.

"Did you understand everything?"

"Most of it. At least we know now that the Topides don't maintain a continuous contact with their command post. The way we see it, it doesn't make any difference either way; we have plenty of time to take cover after we hit a patrol. By the way—where did you send them off to?"

Kekeler exhibited an unmistakable smirk. "To the south-east into the underbrush—over 3,000 square miles of nothing but bushes and thorn thickets. That will keep them tied up for a couple of days."

Taliko was an unusually attractive girl. She was somewhat taller than her brother Teel and consequently less bony and more lithe. She had a pretty face, actually. Her features harmonized so well that her deepset eyes were not in the least offensive to the senses.

So far she had been an important member of the local conspiracy, inasmuch as she lived in the neighbouring town of Hopther, where a Topidian command post had been established. Deringhouse hadn't been able to determine whether she was married or why she remained otherwise separated from her family. At any rate, in Hopther she was known to be somewhat in the Topides' confidence, more or less as a trusty. This was rare, inasmuch as the Topides relied almost exclusively on their own resources and refused to depend on any assistance from their conquered subjects.

"I think it would make quite an uproar if we were to wipe out the entire command post in Hopther," Deringhouse said to her one day. "Don't you think so?"

Taliko bobbed her head. "Naturally, but the Topides are very strange. They would come to Hopther and set up a great big hearing. They're so convinced of their superiority that they believe there isn't any offender who could escape them, so they always take their time about such matters. I don't know if it's a complex of theirs or if it's a concept of their military psychology. Anyway, they like to pose as if they were the champions of justice. They take punitive action only when they have complete evidence or when they think they have it. While they are going through all that kind of ceremony, we could already be in Thorta."

The discussion ended with the decision to move the entire group to Thorta right under the noses of the Topides. Supplied with the few weapons Deringhouse had brought, possibly a more significant impact could be made there than would be possible in this insignificant village.

Taliko and Deringhouse were chosen to be the vanguard. Teel and his companions followed consecutively at favourable time intervals. The timing was arranged, so that between a possible scuffle with overcurious Topidian patrols and a washoff of the excitement there would be a maximum of time to continue the trek toward Thorta.

Taliko had valid reasons for believing that there were resistance groups in Thorta of the same kind that Teel had organized. If they succeeded in making contact with one of these organizations, the problem of acquiring a secret refuge in the big city might not be insurmountable. But Taliko's idea of completely reducing the command post in Hopther was entirely unacceptable to Deringhouse. He argued that it would attract too much attention, and since they still had to bypass two more posts en route to Thorta the action would throw a monkey wrench into the machinery. He finally agreed with her that they would bypass Hopther and strike the enemy only if a patrol should cross their path.

"We can start out early in the morning," he concluded.

CHAPTER THREE

The first skirmish was almost a failure. But once they had it behind them they knew what to watch out for the next time.

On the day of their decision, Taliko and Deringhouse had left the village on foot. The highways, although sparsely travelled now, were under heaviest enemy patrol surveillance, so they followed only the general course of the roadways while remaining under cover, and toward afternoon they came within sight of Hopther. They entered the town and spent the night in the house where Taliko had been accustomed to stay.

The next morning they travelled farther and arrived near the border of the quadrangle in which lay both the village and Hopther. Again they had kept a distance of about a half mile between themselves and the main highway. Toward noon they found themselves with about a mile and a half of the borderline. They paused to rest, because the Ferrol gravity had had its effect on Deringhouse.

While they were resting, they heard the loud humming racket of a patrol craft. It glided close by overhead, then described a long arc and returned. It landed some twenty yards from them, piloted by two Topides. One of them emerged and came toward them with pointed weapon.

"Take it easy!" Taliko whispered. "It's Epr-Thon—I know him!"

In spite of the danger of the situation, Deringhouse wondered how the devil you could tell one of these monstrosities from another, but apparently Taliko could. When Epr-Thon recognized the girl, he lowered his weapon and drew his already wide frog mouth into what could be taken for a grin.

"Friend?" he croaked.

"Yes," Taliko answered. "We're just on a hike."

"Border there," warned Epr-Thon, while turning and pointing toward the north. "Not go farther—dangerous!"

Taliko agreed. "We'll stay here," she said. "We like this place."

Epr-Thon grunted. Deringhouse got up leisurely as though to stretch his legs. The Topide paid him little attention, since he was conversing with the girl.

"When come to us again?" he wanted to know.

Taliko stretched out her open palm in the well known Ferronian gesture. "I don't know. Maybe tomorrow."

"We like," croaked Epr-Thon.

It's the same for every sailor in the universe, thought Deringhouse grimly. In a foreign port, even for these salamanders the natives keep getting more attractive. He stood within two yards of Epr-Thon and slightly to one side of him. Without attracting the Topide's attention, he drew out his small neutron ray gun and aimed it at the lizard.

"Drop your weapon!" he said calmly.

Perplexed, Epr-Thon looked from Deringhouse to Taliko.

"Do what he says," Taliko ordered.

Epr-Thon's great chameleon eyes rolled in their sockets. His frog mouth became a knife sharp slit in his serpentine face.

"Go back!" Deringhouse commanded, pointing to the flier. "I'll be right behind you, and may the gods help you if you say one word or try any tricks!"

Taliko also got up. She tried to make herself look less suspicious by going along, accompanying Epr-Thon on the opposite side. Together, the two of them walked to the flier. Meanwhile, the pilot had recognized Taliko and shouted something to for that Deringhouse did not understand. She answered him curtly.

At least she's got guts, Deringhouse thought appreciatively.

Then the "botch" happened. In spite of the neutron gun in his back, Epr-Thon dived to one side, calling out a stream of hisses and gurgling sounds to the pilot in the Topidian tongue. Then Deringhouse shot him. The grav machine took off immediately. At ten yards' distance, Deringhouse was at a disadvantage with his small calibre weapon. He shot up at the underside of the ship, but it had no effect. The craft soared steeply upward and disappeared over the trees with clattering grav engines.

Taliko had turned a becoming pastel blue.

"He escaped!" shouted Deringhouse angrily. "Let's go. In a couple of minutes the whole command post will be on our necks!"

"Where will we go?" cried Taliko.

It was, in fact, a skull cracker of a question. An alarm signal from the escaped pilot would alert everyone at the command headquarters that someone was trying to get over the border into the next control district. So that direction was eliminated for the time being.

"We'll go to the west," Deringhouse decided. "Better yet, maybe toward the south for a while. That's the last place they'll look."

Each of them carried a microtransmitter with which to keep in touch with Teel and his group. In view of the danger of being intercepted in their communications, they had agreed on a restricted number of code signals. A single beep tone meant, "Proceed according to plan"; two beeps, "Stop—we have a problem"; three beeps, "Danger." There were a few other combinations, but what Deringhouse used now was a straight three beep tone.

After transmitting the signal, they crossed the highway and walked in a westerly direction. After a half hour they reached a small forest. At the same time, they heard the clamouring sound of approaching patrol ships, and they ducked for cover in the underbrush.

The march to the north was practically pure child's play. They passed through two control districts without the slightest sign of detection. In two other districts they had to take care of the enemy patrol guards, which they accomplished without difficulty.

However, after that they observed that an element of agitation and apprehension began to spread through the Topidian commands. Abruptly the number of patrol reconnaissance ships became doubled and tripled. Rhodan divided this group and placed the second half under the leadership of Gloktor, a Sicha. He had left the larger part of his manpower behind in Sic-Horum. Accompanying him were Reginald Bell, Tako Kakuta, Marshall, Marten, Sengu, little Betty, and a string of Sichas who had been carefully selected by Kekeler. The balance of the force left behind constituted a sort of reserve pool, from which reinforcements could be procured. Just as soon as Rhodan laid his hands on a transmitter in Thorta.

Gloktor, the leader of the second half, was one of Kekeler's advisers. By Earthly standards he was about forty-five years old. Kekeler placed special confidence in him, and on the basis of what Rhodan had seen of him, he was satisfied.

The method of communication with Rhodan's people in Sic-Horum was via the telecom. Since the only available equipment in the hands of the Topides was on board the captured Arkonide battleship, it was a moot point whether they were capable in general of making a direction tracer on telecom transmissions. For security reasons, however, Rhodan worked with a scrambled multiplexing code, so that a communication that might take a quarter hour in normal format was transmitted in a matter of milliseconds.

Rhodan calculated that by Ferronian reckoning it would normally be a week and a half, or ten times thirty-eight Earth hours, before they arrived in Thorta. This time span included use of the Arkonide transport suits, which concealed the flowing Sicha robes, but only when they were certain that they were completely unobserved.

The patrol ships left no doubt of their intent. They circled the small forest several times and then prepared to land. Deringhouse gritted his teeth. He had not expected that the Topides would pick up their trail so quickly. He placed a hand on the girl's shoulder and felt her trembling.

"Keep your chin up!" he said softly, but in the strange language it sounded slightly ridiculous.

Then something happened that Deringhouse, after a careful reexamination of details later, could only refer to as a miracle. The patrol ships enclosed the forest area in a horse-shoe formation from the east. Only a single Topide craft lowered itself into the woods in a westerly direction. Deringhouse had just stuck his head out of the underbrush to see if any of the aliens had got out of their ships, when he heard a high pitched whining sound emerge as though from the sky. At first he thought that his ears were playing tricks on him, for this was a sound that should never have been heard on Ferrol. But then the sound crescendoed from a slow whine to an infernal scream and seemed to be coming down directly on top of them.

"Take cover!" he shouted, at once frightened and delighted.

The rest was a sort of Armageddon of destruction. There came a stifling, roaring detonation and a blast of lightning that penetrated through closed eyelids. A hurricane shock wave shrieked above them and toppled trees in its path. Shattered objects came whistling through the air and struck the ground with thunderous impact.

Then—silence...

Deringhouse was instantly on his feet. He cocked his head on one side and listened. In spite of a residual ringing in his ears, he heard the unmistakable howl of hypergolic jets, which faded swiftly.

"Klein!" he muttered incredulously. Then, with a dry, feverish zeal, "Man! He almost got us, too!"

He pulled himself together. He looked eastward and saw a cloud of mixed vapours and dust rise slowly upward and spread over the land. Just behind him was an object that had practically fallen at his feet—a fragment of a seat from

a Topidian patrol ship. It gave a slight idea of what had happened to the patrol formation.

But the flier in the western sector of the woods could still be heard, somewhere near, as though it had landed. He heard the confused, hissing, gurgling speech of several Topides, and he pulled Taliko to her feet.

"Come on!" he said.

With her head still spinning she stumbled after him through the woods. She had lost all sense of what was going on around her. When he put an arm around her neck at the edge of the woods and pulled her down, she submitted passively. She heard him gasp beside her, but she didn't know what was happening.

"Stay here and keep down!" he whispered to her.

The last Topidian patrol ship stood a few yards from the edge of the forest. One of the lizard men had

run to the other edge of the small glade to inspect the area, while the other sat in the ship and, Judging by his activities, was transmitting a radio report. Deringhouse waited for him to finish and climb down from the ship; then he shot him. The remaining Topide came running by as he saw his comrade fall, and as soon as he was in point-blank range, Deringhouse cut him down, as well.

Then he pulled Taliko out of hiding and shoved her into the flier. "Do you know how this thing operates?" he asked her.

Taliko examined the instrument panel, which was relatively simple. "This is the takeoff control," she said, and pulled the knob all the way out.

The effect was felt immediately. The craft shot into the air so swiftly that Deringhouse had to push Taliko's hand off the control and set the knob at half power.

After he had further familiarized himself with the control panel, he was pleased. "Now we'll cover some real distance," he said. "Before they recover from the scare that Klein gave them, we'll be practically in Thorta."

"Klein?"

"You don't know about him, do you? He is one of our pilots who has been harassing this whole area with his space fighter. I figure that when he saw that Topidian patrol formation so close to the ground he decided to use conventional weapons on them, which was lucky for us since he couldn't have known we were hiding in the woods. If he had used those disintegrators that whole area would have been a smoking crater."

Taliko laughed, now quickly recovered from the terrible ordeal. "Well, that was a double order of salvation at the most crucial time, I'd say!"

"Yes, and you are quite a valiant young woman," he told her.

She looked at him in some surprise, but his thoughts were already on other things.

He had learned a lesson from his first mistake against the enemy, and he would not forget it. The Topides' military discipline was so rigid that a Topide would risk his life to give his own kind a warning. This fact must always be considered.

After they had flown across the control district's borderline, Deringhouse transmitted a single tone signal to Teel: Proceed according to plan.

Things developed faster than anticipated. Klein continued his strafings and harassing attacks incessantly, and the whole land was in an uproar so that no one had time to supervise the effectiveness of the travel restriction system. In only eight Ferrol days the skyline of the Thorta metropolis emerged into view.

Of course, there was less favourable news from other quarters. Either alarmed by Klein's attacks on them, or in accordance with a previously established plan, the Topides had begun to bombard cities on Rofus. The attack barrage of the ninth planet had started. The Thort was at the brink of despair. Rhodan sent Khrest to him with the message that the Arkonide battleship should be in his possession within a few more days, and then the Topidian invasion would collapse.

From all appearances it was evident that the battleship was still berthed at the spaceflight centre of Thorta. It could be seen from a distance of eighteen or twenty miles, and Rhodan was deeply frustrated over not being able to simply march out there and take it. But he knew that the most direct route to the ship was through the Red Palace in the heart of the city.

Coinciding with their arrival, Klein covered them with an attack against the harbour area, thus providing Rhodan a chance to move his people into the city without hindrance. Somewhere behind or ahead of him was the second group under Gloktor. They had agreed to rendezvous at an inn on the Avenue of the Union, which belonged to an emigrated Sicha.

The march through the city was not, however, without incident. Meanwhile Klein's attack on the harbour let up and order was gradually reestablished. Before they reached the Avenue of the Union they noticed an intersection on their route where a large throng of people was gathered. Tako was sent ahead on one of his teleportation jumps and came back to report that the Topides had set up a check station there to inspect citizen permits. And that, of course, was bad news.

In order to enforce their travel ban, the Topides had issued new ID certificates that precisely identified the address and control district of each permit bearer. Neither Rhodan nor any of his people carried a Thorta zone certificate. As unobtrusively as possible, they turned about and sought another route to the Avenue of the Union. Since Kehaler had been to Thorta many times, he led the way. They were confronted by two other points where check stations had been set up, and they skirted the areas without being noticed. Altogether it required an hour longer than expected to reach the inn.

Gloktor and his contingent were not there yet. The proprietor was astonished at the arrival of so many guests all at one time. Since the advent of the Topides and the subsequent travel restrictions, his establishment had always been empty. Kehaler took him to one side and briefed him. The result was that their host, named Tihamér became an enthusiastic co-conspirator.

Gloktor's unit arrived two hours later. Bell entered the place in a fighting mood, and Rhodan could see that something had happened.

"Something go wrong?" he asked.

"They wanted our ID proofs at one of those intersection points."

"And?"

"Naturally, we didn't have any. We were already at the check station, so we couldn't turn away without being obvious. Fortunately there were only two of them and they didn't give us much trouble, but the Topides will be rattling their brains to figure out who had the gall to knock out two of their guards right in the middle of the city."

"And the passersby?"

"They were passive," interjected Gloktor. "We made everything as inconspicuous as possible. We closed up both of the check stations so that nothing might be noticed for the time being. When we left, the two Topides were lying on the ground inside. Nobody seemed to take exception, and we didn't have any trouble getting here after that."

They began then to organize themselves in the basement of the tavern. Tihamér was in agreement that his

house had now been converted into a point of departure for all ensuing actions.

When Deringhouse and Taliko crossed over into the Thorta control district, they landed the flier and continued on foot. Deringhouse was elated that they had made it so far. Taliko had numerous friends and acquaintances in Thorta, and they resolved to take refuge with one of them. They penetrated comparatively far into the city before they encountered a check station. Discovering it in time, they were able to bypass it by walking down an adjacent street. Deringhouse insisted that they should press forward to one of Taliko's acquaintances who lived in the most aristocratic quarter of the city directly next to the Red Palace, no matter what difficulties they might encounter. Although they succeeded in getting there, Taliko's courage was nearly exhausted when they approached the house.

The family that lived there was called Calan. Taliko was given a cordial welcome, along with her companion. The cordiality did not diminish when Taliko explained why they had come and that Teel was following them with a troop of fighting men.

The only comment that Calan made concerning this was, "You'll have to be very careful. Of all the people who were former residents of this area, there now remain only ourselves and a few other families. The Topides have confiscated most of the houses for their own use. I don't know why they haven't evicted us," he added with a smile. "Maybe my house is a bit old-fashioned for them."

Deringhouse figured it would take Teel and his men at least five more days to reach Thorta, so he decided in the meantime to make a local search for other adherents to the underground cause.

Calan was well informed. "I'm afraid you'll have to move about extensively," he said regretfully, "and the continued pass control will make that difficult. But should you succeed in reaching the Inn of Thirteen Casks, located on Street Eighty-Seven, then I am sure you will find a person or two who would like to hear what you have to say."

He provided Deringhouse with a map of the city, which the major set out to memorize within the next few days...

"The problem is this," Rhodan said pensively. We have to get into the Red Palace first of all, and without attracting attention. Most important, *all* of us are needed there, because with so many Topides in one place complications can develop that one person couldn't handle. Above all, keep in mind that we will be able to make only one attempt. If it fails, the Topides will be alerted. I propose that we should see if we can't pirate a transmitter. Tihamér ought to have an idea where some of them used to be, and we can investigate whether or not they are still there.

"Meanwhile I've obtained a sample of one of the citizen ID certificates that are presently used in Thorta, and I've transmitted it to Rofus on video wave. Khrest should be able to produce some facsimiles of it. With a transmitter in our hands we can receive those forged permits and that will make things a bit easier."

Tihamér then told what he knew about transmitter locations. Tako made teleport excursions to survey the possibilities. When he returned he was quite discouraged.

"They guard them like an Arabian harem," he reported despondently. "There wouldn't be the slightest

chance of hauling one out."

Tihamér was almost at his wits' end, but he suggested one more possibility. "There used to be a small installation in a post office building on Street Twenty-Five. That's just around the corner from here, but the Topides have established a large suite of offices there. I don't know if it would be easier to gain access there than in the larger stations."

Nevertheless it was worth a try, Rhodan decided, and he had Tako investigate the post office building. Tako took a close look at the place, making a number of jumps to various floors of the building. No one was aware of his presence. He took his time and observed the total operation there, and when he returned he reported that although the chances were still slim they were considerably greater than in the main transmitter stations.

Rhodan started making a plan for getting into the building and taking out one intact transmitter. Gloktor, who was somewhat familiar with the apparatus, assured him that they could tap power for it from municipal conduits that ran beneath the cellar of the inn. This narrowed the task to merely procuring a transmitter chamber. The Topides could keep the corresponding power source.

Deringhouse and Taliko took separate routes. Moving singly it was easier to slip past the check stations without being noticed. Although they took different streets they arrived at the Inn of the Thirteen Casks almost simultaneously. They entered together. The tavern room was gloomy, but at least it was comfortably furnished. The service automats were not working. Deringhouse hailed one of the people there who seemed to be an employee, and Taliko took care of the ordering.

"I make a poor conspirator," Deringhouse commented ruefully after he had made a visual survey of the room and the people there. "What's the next step? Maybe we just ask somebody if they happen to have a gripe against Topides!"

Taliko laughed. "Let's wait a little while," she suggested. "Then perhaps we could question the proprietor."

However, the situation developed differently than expected. They had hardly sampled their drinks before the door swung inward with a bang and a crowd of jubilant men came stamping in.

"They knocked out two check stations!" shouted one of the them. "At Avenue of the Union and Twenty-Fifth Street!"

There was a moment of stunned silence among the patrons; then the reaction came, and a standing, shouting enthusiasm broke out. Everyone wanted to know who did it, but the newcomers made the Ferronian open palm gesture of helplessness.

"We haven't the slightest idea. No details are available. Anyhow, it must have been a beautiful blow to the Topides."

Deringhouse glanced significantly at Taliko. They waited for the confusion to subside; then Deringhouse got up and went over to one of the men who had brought the good news.

"I'd like to speak with you a moment," he said quietly. "Would you mind joining us at our table?"

The other hesitated a moment, looking closely at Deringhouse's somewhat alien features. Then he said, "My name is Vafal. I'd be interested to hear what you have to say."

He joined Deringhouse and Taliko at their table, and Deringhouse began, ignoring the usual amenities.

"We both come from the south—in fact, I'm from a place that is much more distant. A contingent of men is following us who are ready to support your cause and help get rid of the Topides as quickly as possible. Do you have any advice or information to give us?"

Vafal watched him pensively for a moment. "How can I know that you are not an alien spy?"

Deringhouse shrugged, then caught himself, remembering that this was not a Ferronian gesture. Instead, he stretched out his open palms. "You can't," he said. "But you can put me to the test. And I have something to offer."

"What is that?"

"Two or three weapons that you probably do not have."

In sudden excitement, Vafal's eyes seemed to grow larger. "Is that so? Let's see them!"

Deringhouse drew out the small pulse ray gun. He aimed it at his glass in front of him and fired at lowest intensity. The glass hissed, and a hole appeared in it. Molten glass ran down and made a puddle on the table. Deringhouse aimed at the puddle and turned it to steam while sweeping the beam back and forth in order not to damage the table. Vafal looked on with gaping mouth. When the demonstration was completed and Deringhouse had concealed the weapon again under his clothes, Vafal was decided.

"Come with me!" he said.

Rhodan looked at the small cubicle where the doorman of the post office must have sat before, but now a Topide was posted there. It was slightly before sunset.

"Let's go!" he ordered.

He was alone with Tako and Bell. They traversed the street and approached the cubicle, and the Topide looked toward them. While Bell readied his psychic ray for firing, Rhodan stopped deliberately in front of the Topide.

"What want?" croaked the lizard creature.

"In!" answered Rhodan, and he pointed at the wide entrance door of the building.

The Topide was about to say something, but in the same moment Bell closed the contact of the ray generator. The reptile mouth of the alien twisted, and it croaked, "Go!"

Rhodan gave him a friendly nod. He let Tako get past him and took the psychoradiator from Bell, who followed Tako. The Topide activated the entrance door's locking contact, and the portals swung open. Tako and Bell entered.

"You will forget everything you have seen, my friend."

"Yes," the Topide replied.

Once inside the building, Rhodan waited until the portals had closed behind him; then he turned off the psychic ray. It was notably quiet in the building. They knew that the Topides had their regulated work periods, even as soldiers. At this time of day no more than a hundred men would be expected to be in the giant building. They walked along a wide corridor. Tako pointed to a series of doors in the left wall.

"Elevators," he said. "We have to take one and go down."

The transmitter was in the basement. The elevator responded to button control.

The rooms in the basement were brightly lighted. The transmitter stood in a small side room where the dust gathered on the floor indicated that the place had not been entered for a long time. The transmitter cage, or sender receiver module, measured about seven feet high and had a diameter of exactly forty inches. Rhodan and Bell disconnected the power leads swiftly and then attempted to lift the apparatus. It must have weighed more than two hundred pounds and was not a comfortable load for two men to transport; but no one had anticipated that the undertaking would be comfortable or convenient.

"Tako, make a diversion upstairs!" said Rhodan.

Tako disappeared on the spot Bell and Rhodan slid the apparatus through the corridor to the elevator, towed it into the spacious lift cage, and rose up to the ground floor. As they exited the elevator, the building seemed to be in an uproar. Somewhere in one of the upper levels, all hell seemed to have broken loose. There were shouting and hissing and whistling that must have been heard on the street. Bell grinned knowingly, and Rhodan fervently hoped that the Topides up there would be too stupid to recognize Tako's manoeuvrings as a diversionary action.

Unmolested, they dragged the transmitter module to the entrance. From inside, they could open the door themselves. In accordance with the hypnotic command, the Topide in the cubicle was unaware of them. They dragged the transmitter past him, but his gaze only followed them hypnotically.

Tihamér was waiting for them at the curb with his delivery van. They loaded the transmitter onto the vehicle, pulled down the freight cover, and got up into the cab with Tihamér. A few seconds later the van was shaken by an unexpected jolt.

Tako's voice gasped a greeting from the cargo section. "Everything is secure! It's me!"

Tihamér drove away. It was the time between sunset and night, when the last glimmer of light still made it too early for the street lamps to come on. In the deep canyon of Street Twenty-Five a shadow of twilight had arrived. There was little traffic, and Rhodan was convinced that practically no one had observed them.

They arrived at Tihamér's establishment without unusual incident. The transmitter was unloaded and brought inside. Gloktor was waiting for them. While they were gone he had used the rest of the men to tap the city's power conduits, and after the transmitter was transported into the basement it required only a few more minutes to install the necessary connections.

"Provided this thing is in working order," said Rhodan, "our next task is to set up the secret transmitter in the Red Palace so that we can transport ourselves there at any time. Tako, that's in your department!"

And as Take nodded, he added, in English, "You'd better turn in some overtime." Reverting to Ferronian, he smiled at everyone present. "All in all, I think we can be pretty satisfied with our success so far."

Deringhouse would never have believed that it could be so easy to get into the Red Palace. The Topides had followed the same pattern that any other occupational force in the universe would have adopted—they employed Ferrons as servants, selected from those whom they considered trustworthy. In addition to the highly complicated method of selection there were also daily checks, so that the Topides had good reason to believe that they were safe from betrayal by their non-Topidian employees.

However, they had not counted on Vafal and his like. The resistance fighters had found the crack into which to thrust their wrecking bar. They were able to qualify in the somewhat naive selective examinations with innocent eyes and virtuous oath taking, and the daily check routines were surmountable by means of forged passes. There was hardly a single servant in the Red Palace who was not a member of the resistance organization.

The missing ingredient was that Vafal and his people didn't know what to do with their organization now that they had it. They were shrewd enough not to try any move against the commanding admiral, because they knew that the effective striking force of an intelligently organized fleet could not be impaired by the death of its commander. They had considered taking over the battleship out at the spaceport, but in the final analysis they also didn't know what to do even if they possessed the giant ship. It appeared that they had only been waiting for a man like Deringhouse. Deringhouse was the one being who knew exactly what he wanted to do.

So it was that he found himself in a hallway on the thirty-eighth floor of the massive building, furnished with a forged permit that had got him into the place, and muddling over a cleaning machine whose control mechanism defied him. He carried his weapons with him. While he drove the whizzing and intermittently operating machine as energetically as possible through the corridor, he reviewed his plan to see if there were any weak points in it.

At the next able opportunity, he planned to find a way into the secret room where the Thort had made an emergency exit through the one man transmitter. This room was also on the thirty-eighth floor, but it was several corridor intersections away, in an area assigned to another servant, of whose sympathies Deringhouse wasn't quite certain.

His idea was to adjust the transmitter in frequency with one of the similar apparatuses in the desert fortress on Rofus and thus bring in some help. If he could get that far, then there wouldn't be much difficulty in convincing the fleet admiral with a psychic ray that he'd better hand over his super spaceship. That was it, and what he had arranged and set up so far was good.

Suddenly he was shaken by a movement directly in front of him. Instinctively he let the cleaning machine travel on by itself, and he grasped his pulse ray gun.

Emerging out of nothingness, a man stood before him. He smiled at him amiably out of a round, childlike face. It was Tako Kakuta.

CHAPTER FOUR

"So you wanted to hog the whole show for yourself, eh?" Bell was overjoyed, but he kept some malice in his tone. And the question was strictly in English.

"Why not?" replied Deringhouse, with a mock show of modesty. "Given time, I'd have made it. Of course, not as fast as you fellows."

"Well, for a while there you were ahead of us by a nose," laughed Rhodan.

The news that Tako brought from the Red Palace was at first not believed. No one thought that it was possible that Deringhouse, if he had lived through his crash, could still be free. But that evening after the close of the workday, Deringhouse himself appeared. He had given Rhodan a report on his activities up to that time and had furnished a penetrating perspective of the underground organisation's activities in the city.

This had all been vital to Rhodan, because now he was able to simplify his plans for conquering the battleship. Vafal and his people—including Teel's group if they arrived in time—could attend to the general revolt and diversionary action in the city as long as necessary. That would help Rhodan to keep his own forces together.

The transmitter in the basement of Tihamér's inn was installed, and the other equivalent machine in the Red Palace was set at the correct reception frequency. It was known that the admiral of the Topidian fleet was called Chrekt-Orn and that he had his offices somewhere on the thirty-first floor of the Red Palace. Such was the state of affairs when Rhodan announced that the moment for attack would be at hand as soon as Vafal, using Deringhouse as liaison, could report that his people were standing ready.

Each day there was intense activity in the west wing of the Red Palace. Fleet Admiral Chrekt-Orn was an entity who wasted only the smallest fraction of his time in sleeping, and he demanded the same degree of initiative as a matter of course from his staff officers. The admiral felt that his situation was a bit unfortunate. He would much rather have been long since with his fleet at the main base that had been established on the Oceanic Isthmus; but a conquered planet must be administered, and the business of administration could be more efficiently conducted from a centrally situated desk than from a distant spaceship command station.

Rofus was a source of worry to the admiral. As long as he had Rofus in such a precarious grip, as well as having to put up with that pilot who kept the land in an uproar every day with his tiny fighter ship, he would deny himself the comfort of sleep even more than before, because he didn't have the peace of mind for it anyway.

Chrekt-Orn had been selected for this mission because Topid had intercepted a distress signal from an Arkonide spaceship. Wherever a distress signal came from, a ship had to be there, and if it had to transmit a distress signal there had to be people there to have placed the ship in such a state of distress—people who could perhaps be subjugated so as to provide their world as another bastion in the Topidian line of defence. And defence lines were something that the Topides couldn't get enough of. Whoever rose up against the almighty empire and chose to be independent was in need of strongholds—the more, the better.

It seemed that the Topides were well on their way toward establishing a new defence base here.

Chrekt-Orn calculated that Rofus would not be able to hold out even ten days, by Topidian reckoning, against the mass attack of his fleet. His opponent was demoralized.

But he had not been able to discover a single molecule of the Arkonide ship that had emitted the distress signal. What made it worse, not one of the prisoners interrogated had been willing to admit that he had even heard of the appearance of an Arkonide ship in this region of space. Not that Chrekt-Orn fretted over not getting hold of the ship itself; ships that sent out automatic distress signals were normally only a matter of salvage, anyway. But the circumstance should have some logic to it, and this element was missing as long as the distressed vessel remained undiscovered.

All this only added uncertainty and suspicion to Chrekt-Orn's already overburdened cares and responsibilities. For his own part, he would be glad when this war was at an end. He occupied himself once daily with these considerations, and now that he had finished exercising such thoughts for the day, he summoned Verth-Han.

Verth-Han was the equivalent of a lieutenant commander. He was Chrekt-Orn's special aide and was at the moment engaged in forming a type of intelligence liaison. The admiral received him at once. Verth-Han greeted him with due respect and waited until the admiral addressed him.

"Well, what do you have to report?"

"Uprisings in the city, sir!" Verth-Han blurted out, as though he couldn't have suppressed the news a moment longer.

"Uprisings?" Chrekt-Orn's globular eyes appeared to bulge outward.

"Yes, sir. One of our military vehicles was stopped, turned over, and the troops in it were killed..."

"What have you done with the insurgents?"

"Nothing, sir!"

"Nothing?"

Verth-Han's scales began to vibrate from fear. "We couldn't catch them, sir," he attempted to explain. "At the time we didn't have any other vehicle in the area. When we received the news we had to send in a search patrol. They found the dead troops and the overturned car and arrested a few onlookers. The cross examination revealed that the onlookers knew nothing. They hadn't even witnessed the event. The conspirators must have struck like lightning and disappeared as quickly."

"I hope that the significance of this has not escaped you," Chrekt-Orn said with calm gravity. "This act was not spontaneous if the perpetrators were able to disappear without being noticed. It was a planned project I'll be glad, Verth-Han, when you finally get your intelligence operation up on its feet. I hope that you won't force me to conclude that you are unsuitable."

Verth-Han's scales produced a soft humming sound as he saw his rank and his honour endangered. A Topidian officer could experience no greater disgrace than this. "No, sir," he answered in anguish. "I shall do my best!"

"Keep me well posted."

Verth-Han backed out of the room and saluted in the doorway.

The door had hardly closed before Chrekt-Orn contacted his liaison officer. He received the same data concerning the surprise attack and marked the time and place on a city map that covered one wall of his office from floor to ceiling. Someone had had the gall to attack a well armed military vehicle within only a mile of the Red Palace.

Chrekt-Orn asked himself where these belly skinned people had suddenly found such courage.

At about this same time, Wuriu Sengu stepped out of the receiver of the one man secret transmitter on the thirty-eighth floor and joined Rhodan. He stared at the wall as though something were visible to him there; then he let his glance wander. He gave the impression of a man who had lost his senses. However, such an impression would have been quickly changed for anyone familiar with his capability of seeing through solid matter, to any distance he chose.

Wuriu required a considerable time for his observations, but finally he gave signs of excitement. "I see him! He is not far from our horizontal position, but seven stories below us."

Rhodan nodded to Ralf Marten. "Lock on to Wuriu's mind and transfer his impressions. Double check to see if it's really our man."

Marten nodded compliance. Rhodan turned to Marshall, who had stepped out of the transmitter a few moments before. "Do you have contact with Betty?"

Marshall did not answer. His stare was blank, as though he were gripped by an urgent thought. Then he nodded suddenly. "Yes, she's reporting in."

"Ask her how Vafal's activities are going."

No sound was heard as Marshall formulated the mental question, nor when Betty returned an answer from her remote position outside the palace.

"Favourable," said Marshall after a while. "They have attacked a patrol car and killed its occupants. They escaped capture. They are proceeding further according to plan."

"Good. Tell Betty to watch out for herself."

Marshall also telepathed that message.

Meanwhile, Ralf Marten had succeeded in locking in with Chrekt-Orn's visual and aural faculties. With his own eyes tightly shut and with hands pressed over his ears, he could see through Chrekt-Orn's eyes and hear with the other's ears. Without knowing what was involved, he was visually aware of Chrekt-Orn going to the city map and marking a spot on it in the vicinity of the palace. He could hear only the faint whistling sound of Chrekt-Orn's breathing, and the noise made by his boots on the floor. But he knew it was Chrekt-Orn, who wore the most dazzling uniform he had ever seen.

"Okay," said Marten, after he had finished his unobserved visit. "It's him all right."

Rhodan summoned Tako to him. "Tako, now it's your turn."

Tako nodded. With safety switch open, he carried the psychic ray generator in his hand.

"Tale no chances!" Rhodan warned him. "The admiral might be fast enough to hit the alarm before you get him in focus."

Tako smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry, sir. I won't be careless."

Chrekt-Orn turned back pensively toward his desk. What had interested him also—

Chrekt-Orn heard a slight noise and looked up. In front of the desk stood such a man as he had never seen before. He was not any taller than a Ferron, but his skin colour was notably yellow, and his eyes were slanted slits. Chrekt-Orn leaned forward and stared at the stranger. His right hand crept across the desktop in an attempt to reach the alarm button. How had this fellow got in? He saw that the stranger was turning a weapon on him, and he strove in panic to reach the alarm. But before he succeeded, he began to sense that he was someone else.

Why should he fear this stranger? True, he was smooth skinned and apparently one of the Ferrons, but Chrekt-Orn suddenly found him to be likable. Even unusually likable. Perhaps he was a petitioner who had succeeded in stealing into the admiralty office here. Whatever petition he might be seeking, it should of course be granted.

The stranger opened his mouth and said, something that Chrekt-Orn knew was a completely foreign language, yet to his surprise he was able to comprehend the meaning of what this slant eyes was saying. "Upstairs on the thirty-eighth floor, a man is standing in the hall of the west wing who would like very much to talk to you," was the gist of it. "Send a guard tip there to fetch him. He will be treated with proper respect because he is a friend."

Chrekt-Orn did not have the slightest objection. It was in fact a pleasure to have the friend of this man brought here—or was it his own friend? he wondered, amazed. Over the intercom, he gave instructions to an orderly.

Tako Kakuta watched the proceeding critically. With these reptilian aliens it was difficult to determine to what extent they were under the effect of the psychic ray. There was never any play of expression in their features that made their thoughts obvious to the eye. Minutes passed. Finally, the door buzzer sounded, and there appeared in the scanner screen the orderly and, next to him, Perry Rhodan's towering figure.

Chrekt-Orn opened the door in such a manner that Tako could not be seen, and he dismissed the orderly. Then Rhodan entered and took over the psychic ray generator from Tako, as he stood before the admiral.

"We need your battleship," he said.

"By all means!" Chrekt-Orn answered immediately in his hissing language.

Rhodan couldn't understand the words, but the other's head movement was an affirmative gesture.

"I am going to give you some instructions," he continued, "so that the transfer of the vessel can be accomplished without difficulties."

"Agreed," said Chrekt-Orn in the Ferron language. "Proceed!"

"Have your crew leave the ship. Explain that the reason is that the ship is going to have a general overhaul."

"That won't work," Chrekt-Orn interrupted emphatically.

"What? I don't understand."

"It Just won't work!" repeated Chrekt-Orn. "It was overhauled only a few days ago."

"Damn!" Rhodan seldom swore, but this was an occasion for it.

Even considering the power of the psychic ray, he knew he must not give any illogical orders with it. It was impossible to put the whole Topidian fleet under hypnotic suggestion, and anyone would get suspicious if the greatest ship of all were to be overhauled twice in such a ridiculously short period.

"Have you received any shipments from your home planet in the past few days?" he asked the admiral.

Chrekt-Orn made a gesture of affirmation again.

"Weapons?"

"Yes."

"Have the ship brought to a berth on the edge of the spaceport and hint that new weapons have to be installed. Understood?"

"Yes."

Rhodan sat down opposite Chrekt-Orn. "Let's go the details," he said. "You will give the order to have the crew disembark from the ship immediately. Permit no questioning of your command." He turned to the wall map of the city on which three ship docks were indicated along the northernmost sector of the spaceport. "The ship is to be flown into the centre dock—is that clear?"

Chrekt-Orn indicated that this was clear.

"It must be there within five hours."

"As you wish."

Rhodan leaned across the desk. "We are going to leave you now. As soon as we have gone, you will have forgotten our visit. But you will remember that you wanted to have a few new weapons installed in the ship and that this will be facilitated by not having the crew on board. I hope that we have understood each other."

"Oh, absolutely!" Chrekt-Orn answered, and he was extremely happy that he had understood everything so clearly.

"Your orderly will escort me back to where I was," Rhodan directed.

Chrekt-Orn called the orderly, and Rhodan exited with him. Tako took over the psychic ray and waited long enough to hear Chrekt-Orn transmit orders to have the ship evacuated and to have it moved over to the dock. Then he disappeared on the spot.

Chrekt-Orn scratched his forehead. "Now where did those people get the courage to attack a patrol car in broad daylight and so brazenly close to the palace?"

For the first time in his life, Trker-Hon doubted the soundness of a superior officer's judgment, and to top it all his suspicions involved an admiral. He was thinking that the ship had just been overhauled within the past week. Why hadn't anybody known at the time that these new weapons were coming? Here they were on the eve of a major fleet engagement—and he wanted the crew out of the ship!

He didn't dare to question Chrekt-Orn directly on the matter, so he contacted the liaison officer in the Red Palace.

The latter knew nothing about it. "When did you receive this order?" he asked.

"Just a few minutes ago," answered Trker-Hon. "My crew is already making preparations for disembarkation."

In the screen of the visicom receiver, the liaison officer revealed his uncertainty. He held the same rank as Trker-Hon. "I could make an inquiry for you," he said. "Did the admiral contact you directly?"

"Yes," replied Trker-Hon with some rancour. "He must not be in his right mind."

"The liaison officer's face reflected disapproval. "I hope you are not venturing to suspect the mental competence of the admiral!"

"Of course not!" Trker-Hon retorted quickly. "Nevertheless, I would appreciate it if you would confirm that order for me."

"I'll call you back."

"Thank you."

Trker-Hon hung up and continued his reflections. He was a comparatively young officer and by special selection of the despot himself, he had acquired the command of the largest ship in the fleet. Trker-Hon was bold and shrewd. It seemed to him not impossible that treason was entering the picture from some quarter. For the time being of course, he restricted himself to the belief that it was someone disguised as the admiral who had called. He wondered if he shouldn't go into the city himself and question the admiral, but first he would wait for an answer from the liaison officer. That reply came rather quickly. "The order is valid. You are to evacuate the ship. It is to be moved to the central north dock, where it is to be outfitted with new weapons."

"Very well," said Trker-Hon resignedly. "There's probably a reason for it."

He hung up, convinced that in reality there was no logical reason at all for the order. It was a difficult decision to bring his suspicions personally to the admiral, but no other recourse remained. He delegated command of the ship to his first officer, got into an air commuter, and flew into the city.

The transmitter in the basement of Tihamér's tavern was working at full capacity. Perry Rhodan was now in the final phase of preparations for taking over the spaceship. For the time being the safest means of communication with both the desert base under the Snake Mountains and the group in Sic-Horum was the transmission of written messages.

Rhodan instructed Thora and Khrest, "Take over our entire contingent of people in Sic-Horum and give them your blitz training in the operation of an Arkonide battleship of the class that we will have in our hands in the near future. Also, activate the special robots who can be assigned to the ship's navigation. And hurry! There is no time to spare!"

The group in Sic-Horum received equivalent instructions. A half hour after they had received the message they were already back on Rofus, where the two Arkonides applied to each of them the electrodes of the hypno training machine.

Reginald Bell was the only one who could see through Rhodan's outer mask of optimism, under which he was concealing his concern. Bell knew as well as Perry the difficulties involved in operating a super spaceship such as that which sat out there on the spaceport.

When he found the chance, he put his hand on Rhodan's shoulder and looked at him closely. "Just to limber up the old abacus, Chief—what's the full crew compliment for a ship like that, I mean to man it for full action?"

"Three hundred," Rhodan answered instantly.

Bell nodded. "And we have forty-seven."

"You can add a few more to that, because we'll be using the special robots, but there's no chance of us pooling together more than a maximum of seventy hands, all told. I know what you're getting at."

Bell rocked on his heels a bit and stared at the floor. "So? How do you have it doped out?"

"We won't be able to man the battle stations, or at the most maybe only one of them. We won't be able to squander much time trying to defend ourselves—the strategy will be to make a run for it until we've found a safe place to get ourselves organized."

"That'll be a pretty tight squeeze, won't it?"

"It looks like it, but I don't think we ever had the idea that this caper wasn't going to need a rabbit's foot as well as guts and horse sense."

The door flew open, and Teel stormed in, his face beaming as Rhodan had never seen a Ferronian face beam before. "The ship is in the north dock!" he shouted. "There's not a soul on board!"

Trker-Hon made a few further investigations before requesting an audience with the admiral. One item of information appeared to be especially significant—it was true that a large shipment of weapons had just been received from Topid, but among them was not a single one that was not already on board the battleship. Trker-Hon considered that some sort of secret weapon had not been registered in the ordinance inventory, but he didn't think it probable. His suspicions increased proportionately.

With his scales vibrating, he announced himself at Chrekt-Orn's office and was admitted. He expressed what he had to say very carefully, but not carefully enough to avoid the admiral's rising anger. It would take only a few more words in the wrong direction, and Trker-Hon would be relieved of his command.

Then, however, his words began to take effect. Chrekt-Orn became pensive. He permitted an examination of the ordnance inventory lists, as well as classified tabulations to which only he and a few security officers had access. It was obvious that there wasn't a single Topidian weapon on Ferrol that had not been installed long since on board the ship.

The admiral fell to brooding. *Now, what ever made me give such an order?* he mused.

Rhodan was fairly certain that neither Gloktor nor Teel and Vafal were very put out about not being taken along in The spaceship. He did not intend to initiate any Ferron into the secrets of an Arkonide battleship. However, he persuaded the three leaders that any of their followers who would not be needed during the next penetration of the Red Palace should be brought on a standby basis to the edge of the spaceport.

He had not failed to notice that especially Vafal's people, presumably stirred up by Vafal himself, were in a state of restlessness over the way things were going. He took Vafal aside and appealed to his conscience.

"Admittedly it would appear that we are the only ones to benefit by this undertaking, Vafal," he told him. "But you have to consider that just as soon as the battleship is in our hands the Topides will have lost the greater part of their superiority, and we are the only ones who can operate it. Don't think we are ungrateful. We will do everything in our power to ensure that the Topides withdraw from your area of the universe."

Whether or not Vafal was convinced was not quite discernible, but no time was left for hand holding.

Gloktor was more reasonable. "Wait at the edge of the dock area," Rhodan instructed him. "If we run into any trouble I'll inform you by radio."

Teel was in agreement with his portion of the action, which was to have his people create a series of incidents that would set the city—and especially the Topides—into turmoil."

Tihamér joined Gloktor. He was one of the most important men because he had a truck at his disposal and was able to transport the transmitter, without which it would have been impossible for Rhodan to plot a takeover of the captured battleship.

For Rhodan's own group, he retained Bell, Wuriu Sengu, and Tako Kakuta. It appeared that he would not need Marshall, Marten, and Betty Toufry for the front action—but above all he was concerned that Betty should be in company of reliable people when they marched out to the docking and berthing yards.

He waited until Tihamér's tavern was empty. It was agreed with Gloktor that his group along with the mutants would have their positions established in the vicinity of the dock no later than 1800 hours Ferronian time. It was now 1240. It was felt that it would not be wise to push the action before all was set, as a dry run for only part of the organisation would be dangerous.

Bell was heard to reflect, "I wish we were a few hours older."

Rhodan shut him off with: "If that wish could come true, without careful planning, you could be pushing up daisies, my friend."

Perry Rhodan looked through the window out onto the street. There was nothing there to indicate that in the course of the next few hours a comparative handful of people were planing to carry out the most daring coup of the entire war.

He glanced at the clock. Another half hour...

"Rescind the order!" said Chrekt-Orn, bewildered. "I mean—I will rescind it! You are right—it is completely nonsensical. "I'd certainly like to know what made me issue it in the first place."

For Trker-Hon, this still did not take care of the matter entirely. The lurking enemy had not yet been discovered. If he was left free to act he could strike a second and a third time. Judging by the very competent shrewdness he had displayed with this first coup, it could well be feared that he might achieve even greater success in other places. Trker-Hon concluded that it wasn't particularly necessary to press Chrekt-Orn with these further suspicions. There were other ways to attack the problem.

"We use the same method as before," Rhodan said gravely. "Tako will take the psychic ray and make the admiral issue an order to have us brought to him."

They were standing in the Red Palace square, not close enough to the colossal edifice to attract the attention of the guards, yet close enough to make a reasonable teleport jump for Tako.

"Okay, go!" Rhodan ordered.

Practically in the same instant, Tako disappeared.

Everything happened exactly as before. Trker-Hon had just gone out, and Chrekt-Orn was still wondering how he had ever been brought to the point of issuing such an asinine order. When Tako appeared before him out of emptiness, he was instantly startled and again reached for the alarm. But Tako brought him under hypnotic control, and in the same moment the admiral sensed the same inexplicable upsurge of friendship for the strange little man as he had on the first occasion.

Tako instructed him to have an orderly fetch Rhodan, Bell, and Sengu, and the admiral complied immediately. With military stride, the orderly marched pompously across the square in front of the royal residence of the Thort, saluted Rhodan and his two companions, and said something to them that none of them understood. Then he turned on his heel and marched back. Rhodan and company followed.

For reasons he could not fathom, Rhodan sensed a greater element of uncertainty about this try than he had on the former occasion. He traced it in his mind to the possible fact that it is in the nature of man not to trust in luck alone; but the logic behind this reasoning failed to alleviate his gnawing premonitions. The palace corridors were filled with human traffic. Uniformed and nonuniformed Topides were scurrying to and fro, but none of them paid any attention to them. They were taken upstairs in a regally furnished elevator, and in the corridor of the thirty-first floor Rhodan became aware of the first Topide who took an interest in their presence here—in fact, an extremely obvious interest.

He whispered to Bell, "Take a look at that lizard!"

Bell cautiously took a look. "Yea. What's with him?"

"He's checking us over. Put his face in your files."

"Right!"

Later, Trker-Hon himself could not explain why it was that the first sight of the strangers had excited so much suspicion in him. Perhaps it could be attributed to the fact that one of them was taller—in fact, much taller—than the normal run of the planet's inhabitants. However, he really quivered his scales when the orderly disappeared with the strangers into Chrekt-Orn's reception room. He waited until the orderly emerged again and questioned him. The answer was not very informative, but Trker-Hon decided to wait. Perhaps there was still something to be learned.

"You will accompany us," said Rhodan. "You will requisition a surface commuter and take us out to the docking area."

Chrekt-Orn was in agreement with this. It was a pleasure for him to leave this room for a while.

"So—order a car at once!" demanded Rhodan.

Chrekt-Orn spoke briefly over the intercom. Then he stood up and said, "We can go now."

Rhodan did not understand him, but his gesture was unequivocal. "Just a minute," he said, and contacted Gloktor on his radio. "How does everything look?" he asked.

"All in order," came the answer.

"Good! We're on our way."

He nodded to the admiral, and the latter led the way. They traversed the reception chamber and came out into the corridor. Rhodan walked closely behind the admiral, attempting to make the psychic ray generator as inconspicuous as possible.

The first to discover it was the Topide to whom Rhodan had drawn Bell's attention moments before. He stood on the left side of the passage with several uniformed personnel and watched Chrekt-Orn in amazement. The admiral noticed him also. For a fraction of a second he halted, and the other Topide took advantage of the pause to step into the path of his commander. Although Rhodan couldn't fathom the reptilian creature's gestures and play of expressions, he could see the subservience with which the act was accomplished.

"Excuse me, sir!" Trker-Hon pleaded. "Please permit me to ask a question!"

Chrekt-Orn finally stood there waiting. Rhodan did not prod him, in order not to make things more suspicious. If only, for the love of God, he could understand their language!"

"Yes, go on," said the admiral.

"Sir, do these strangers have something to do with my ship!"

Chrekt-Orn flared up. "I see no reason for explaining my visitors to you!"

Trker-Hon bowed obsequiously. "Please, sir, give me an answer! You are perhaps unaware—"

"Enough!" shouted Chrekt-Orn in a transport of anger. "Guards! Arrest this man and place him in irons!"

Two guards hurried into the scene and attempted to arrest Trker-Hon, but when the captain realized that the trick was being turned against him, he started to resist.

Rhodan spoke softly to the admiral. "Get going!"

Chrekt-Orn set himself in motion. He marched stiffly, like a puppet. Rhodan cursed his unfavourable situation. Since his weapons training dictated that he must work as closely as possible behind a subject, he was able to use the psychic ray only on the admiral. It would have been child's play to put the other Topide under hypnosis, but then he could have released the admiral from its influence. Behind him he heard the hissing, tooting voice of the prisoner and couldn't understand a word. But Bell turned in time to see the other point at the psychic ray gun.

"Rev it up!" he said. "He's seen the gun!"

Chrekt-Orn was an old man, or reptile, as the case might be, and could not be hurried too swiftly without attracting attention. Rhodan started to sweat. It seemed to take an intolerably long time to reach the elevator and excruciatingly longer before the lift reached the ground floor. The car was waiting. The greatest moment of danger appeared to be behind them, as they clambered aboard and set the vehicle in motion at the greatest possible acceleration.

"Can't you see that they have him covered with a weapon?" grunted Trker-Hon. "In the name of the gods, you dumbheads! He is going to hand over my ship, the mightiest of the fleet, because there's nothing else he can do!"

The guards hesitated.

"Let me go!" he demanded. "Let loose and do something? Give instructions to have the ship moved to another spaceport!"

He shouted and yelled at them so vociferously that they finally released him and started moving. They, too, had seen the weapon with which the aliens were threatening the admiral, and that fact finally broke the spell. They rushed from the scene and generated an alarm throughout the entire spaceport.

"Something is going on there," grumbled Ralf Marten. "I don't like it."

Directly in front of them lay the massive complex of the north yards—a conglomeration of hangars and

sheds, test stations and berths and repair docks. Until a few minutes before, the area had presented the leisurely, customary scene of a shipyard that one could expect to see with only one ship in the docks. Suddenly, however, the area was swarming with Topidian troops. Heavily armed, they took up stations surrounding the mighty sphere of the battleship.

Gloktor made a cautious survey of the situation.

"You'd better report this to Rhodan," said Marten.

Gloktor complied at once. He received an answer and nodded agreement. "He says we should start a diversionary commotion. He'll be here in a few minutes."

"What is Teel doing?"

Gloktor made a second communication. "He's in the vicinity of the harbour but a little mystified. Rhodan has told him he will *know* when to strike. That makes me wonder also. If he were to strike at once the effect of the diversion wouldn't reach us for half hour or so. What do you suppose...?"

Marten pondered this for a moment as Gloktor spoke, then smiled and interrupted him. "Rhodan must have contacted Klein."

"Klein?"

"Never mind—Teel *will* know when to strike with his forces at the harbour. What about Vafal?"

Gloktor tried to reach Vafal on the radio, but there was no answer. He looked at Marten significantly. Both knew that Vafal had withdrawn his support.

Marten grumbled angrily in English, then explained. "I don't know what your Ferronian word for him is, but in my language the word is 'fink'"

Betty Toufry, standing beside them, had absorbed their conversation. When Marten looked at her he saw that she was smiling and staring strangely at a test stand that stood in the vicinity of the spaceship.

"Betty! What—" In the next moment, he saw what she was doing.

The giant test stand, consisted of an arching framework of metal girders over an adjustable platform, began to sway. Betty's smile was replaced by a drawn grimace of concentration. The girders began to groan as though under some great burden. One of them tore loose from its welding and plunged groundward with a great rumbling. The Topidian troop deployment stopped and the soldiers gathered in groups about the test stand to stare at the fallen metal beam.

Betty relaxed with a tremulous sigh. "I hope Mr. Rhodan will arrive soon," she said softly.

Trker-Hon directed the action from the Red Palace. He did not venture to go out to the spaceport in person, for fear that everything could be over with before he could get there.

At first his counteraction seemed to progress according to plan. But then a metal girder tore loose from its framework at a test stand and came within a hair of killing some of his men. Several moments later a

hangar tipped over without any visible cause. Shortly after that one of the officers was thrown against a pillar with such force that it knocked him out instantly. The dock area was small enough so that these events were seen and commented on swiftly, causing a rising wave of bewilderment and confusion.

Trker-Hon himself was gripped with a sense of dread when he realized that the enemy might be employing this kind of fearful weapon. But he refused to give up. He ordered two battalions of infantry to strengthen the troops at the dock area.

"All right, let's go!" said Rhodan. "Attack! Tako, do what you can!"

There was one other mutant, Ras Tschubai, whom he should have brought along, he realized now. One teleporter could take the place of half an army in a situation like this; but Tako alone couldn't handle the show under the circumstances.

It was a strange procession that now set itself in motion toward the ship. At the head of it marched Chrekt-Orn, followed closely by Perry Rhodan, who kept the psychic ray on the admiral with undiminished power. Behind him came Gloktor and his people, flanked by Rhodan's own crew, and at the tail end was Tihamér's delivery truck containing the transmitter.

Trker-Hon issued a new order: "No one is to pay any attention whatsoever to the admiral's instructions. Everybody can see that he is under some sort of alien influence, and you will not allow yourselves to be bound by his commands!"

There was a general reaction of surprise but a general acceptance of the order. Trker-Hon was one of the highest ranking officers, and besides, he was the commander of the flagship of the Topidian fleet.

When they crossed the borderline of the spaceport and neared the central dock area they were stopped by guards. Chrekt-Orn, in his sharpest and most official tones, gave some sort of order; but even to Rhodan, who couldn't understand the Topidian language, it was easily seen that the guard officer was not going to obey.

He made a rapid survey. Before him stood one officer and two guards. The rest of the troops, in view of the disturbances of the last few minutes, had been deployed into specific defence stations close to the battleship. Bell was ready, and at a signal from Rhodan he cut down the officer and his two men with his own weapon.

"On the double!" yelled Rhodan.

They left the admiral standing where he was. Rhodan had intended to take him along as a prisoner of war, but in this moment the advantage of being free to move outweighed the prospects of holding any hostage or prisoner, no matter how important he was.

Tako disappeared into thin air. On the opposite side of the ship a wild confusion occurred as an indescribable man materialised and proceeded to fire at the troops with deadly effect. After disabling half a company of men, he disappeared before anyone could lay a hand on him.

From the midst of her protectors, Betty provided a further commotion. Weapons jumped out of their

owners' hands and flew away. Uniforms ripped apart. Shots misfired without triggers being pressed.

Panic gripped the guard troops. Confused and shooting wildly off target, they retreated in a line back to the underside of the ship. Rhodan and his people pressed forward from under cover of the hangars and test stands.

Tako suddenly appeared again.

"Into the ship!" grunted Rhodan. "Try to find a battle station that you can handle!"

It was none too soon. Over the mirror smooth surface of the spaceport from the south came a string of military vehicles, and it could hardly be assumed that they were approaching with peaceful intent.

"Charge!"

The last opposition of the guard troops broke down when one of the officers, under influence of the psychic ray, shouted at his men, "Get out of here and make yourselves scarce!" Word for word, this was the hypnotic command that Rhodan had given him.

The row of guards fell back beyond the ship, both bewildered and confused by the conflicting order and hard driven by the massed fire power of the now organized attackers. They weren't able to check their retreat until within a few hundred yards of the approaching motorized column of reinforcements.

Rhodan made good use of the sliver of time this bought him. "Through the entrance lock!" he shouted to his people.

He had to rely on them to follow his orders. For the moment his immediate concern was Tihamér and his delivery truck. Gloktor helped him unload the transmitter. Meanwhile, the personnel entrance lock of the ship had been opened up, and those who were to go with Rhodan had disappeared inside. With a mighty heave, the transmitter was lifted to the threshold of the lock and shoved inside. Both men sighed their relief.

"I hope you understand," said Rhodan. "Here's where we part.

Gloktor nodded. "There'd be no logic in my joining you. Besides..." He pointed to the line of vehicles approaching from the south. "The enemy will have enough to do in trying to detain you; in the meantime, our people will be able to slip away undetected."

Rhodan shook his hand. "Thanks very much, Gloktor."

"We have *you* to thank. Best of luck!"

Rhodan gripped the hull rungs and swung up into the lock. He took one last look at Gloktor's retreating figure, then checked his watch. It was just about time for a signal to Klein. He touched the closure button, and the outer lock hatch closed tight. Then he turned to find his crew.

It was a very unique situation. True, they were now on board the ship, but they were in the company of a Topidian guard detail that Trker-Hon must have ordered on board at the last moment when he began to see through the chicanery going on. The point of the basic question was at hand—which side would succeed? The crucial moment was now. Rhodan placed all his hopes on the conviction that he and Bell, with their Arkonide hypno training knowledge of the ship's versatility, would be in a better position to use

the vessel to advantage than a hurriedly assembled Topidian skeleton crew. Moreover, each of the mutants was worth ten Topides now.

Nevertheless, the final question of victory still hung in the balance. Since Trker-Hon's support battalions outside were certainly going to influence that question in their own favour if they could, Rhodan moved toward the battleship's control centre as fast as his legs could carry him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Rhodan found his people further along in the inner gangway. They stood before the shaft opening of a grav lift, and when Wuriu Sengu saw Rhodan, he lifted up his hand.

"Careful!" he said softly. "There are at least a hundred men on board."

"Where?"

Sengu pointed toward the ceiling of the passageway, in various directions.

"How does it look in the control room?"

"Only two Topides."

"Do you see Tako?"

Sengu nodded eagerly. "He's standing at the hatch entrance of a battle station. It is manned by five of them."

Rhodan glanced around him. "Good," he said. "Let's go up!"

They traversed the lift shaft without being menaced, while Sengu kept up a running account of Tako's activities. Tako had sprung into the weapons module and, taking advantage of the element of complete surprise, despatched the five-man crew. With a sigh of relief, Rhodan contacted Tako on radio and instructed him to bring the advancing motor column under fire as soon as they came within five hundred yards of the ship.

It took only moments to take over the control room. The two Topidian guards had not considered it necessary to lock the bulkhead hatch. Rhodan opened it and held the two aliens at bay with his weapon, while Marten tied them up. Meanwhile, Rhodan took a look at the room's control installations, which he had known only in theory until now. From all appearances it seemed that there would be no difficulty in putting the ship to the best possible use of himself and his people.

He could not suppress a grim smile of satisfaction when he recognized those specific controls which would make it easy for him to overcome the alien guard detail on board. Every commander of an Arkonide battleship had an air conditioning system at his disposal that could be CO₂operated, in case of fire, and any desired room of the colossal ship could be flooded in seconds with the unbreathable gas. In case anyone was in such a room, he would of course be put out of action.

Rhodan decided against making use of the ship's telecom system to determine which rooms were occupied by Topides. Each telecom set, even though turned on from another area, issued a faint hum when activated, and in this situation it was obviously not tactical to give the enemy a single second of advance warning.

Wuriu Sengu indicated the occupied areas. Rhodan manipulated remote controls that caused the required bulkhead doors to close and lock, at the same time operating the locks of the entrance hatches, thus sealing the ship. Then he released the CO₂ into the designated rooms through the air conditioning system. After a while, Sengu assured him that all Topides present had been put out of action.

At the same moment, Tako Kakuta announced, "I had to disintegrate half of that column outside because they got too close. The rest don't seem to know what they should do."

The fight for the ship seemed to have been won. Rhodan sent some of the men below to fetch the transmitter. It was now time to transmit Khrest, Thora, and the rest of the crew on board.

Trker-Hon squandered precious moments wrestling with the question of whether he had the right to issue the last and most bitter command of all. Finally he went into a hasty communication with the fleet base on the Oceanic Isthmus. It took some time before anyone there could even comprehend him and still several minutes more to convince the base commander that he was not out of his head.

"The enemy has taken my ship!" he shouted angrily into the microphone. "Apparently our guard detail has been wiped out! The ship is lost to us, so it has to be scuttled. First, send a light squadron of bombers here with tactical explosives, and give your pilots instructions that the battleship must be destroyed at any cost. If this attack should fail, then the enemy must be stopped in outer space. So launch at least three squadrons of destroyers into a wide orbit around the planet. And remember this—the battleship must *not* get through—otherwise, the war will be finished for us, and the despot will make us spend the rest of our lives devoted to menial positions. Is that clear?"

The transmitter was installed. The carrier frequency was adjusted to the waveband of the transmitter station in the desert fortress on Rofus. Rhodan sent a curt command to start sending the rest of the crew. Then he switched the gear to reception. He was fully aware that the transfer had to be accomplished in a very few minutes if the ship was not to be exposed to unnecessary danger.

The first to arrive were the special robots. Then came the mutants. Counting the robots, the ship's crew finally consisted of seventy-two hands. Rhodan saw to it that the most important posts were manned. He was able to spare two men to operate the superdisintegrator station, so that the ship could at least defend itself in one direction.

Bell also fretted over the time factor. "We can expect Topidian fleet units to intercept us if we don't hurry," he warned.

With his hand on the lever of the defence screen, Rhodan waited for Khrest and Thora, who had supervised the crew transmission until the last moment.

"Give Klein his signal," he ordered. "His attack on the harbour will trigger Teel's forces to provide further diversion there, and that should help to confuse the opposition."

During the moment in which Khrest and Thora were being received, Bell and Deringhouse both communicated the situation to Klein.

Khrest's expression was indescribable in general, but he looked like a man who had just unexpectedly popped into fairyland and who was trying to tell himself that such place did not exist. Thora, who followed him closely, wore the faint sarcastic smile that he had expected of her.

"Well, I'm pleased to see that you have succeeded in accomplishing another impossibility," she said.

Almost in the same moment, Marten announced, "I have a sighting here! Rockets at zero one eight degrees!"

Rhodan whirled around. "Transmitter off!"

Someone answered, "Transmitter secured, sir!"

Rhodan shoved home the defence screen lever. For the fraction of a second the visiscreens revealed a pale shadow; then all was normal again.

Marten gave another report. "Have picked up Klein, bearing in fast on harbour area."

"Ship ready for takeoff!" Rhodan announced sharply. "Twenty seconds!"

"What is our course?" asked Thora, after the titanic ship had lifted from the ground and shot into the blue sky of Ferrol.

"Rofus," Rhodan answered. "What did you think?"

Thora's eyes widened. "Rofus! Are you out of your mind?"

"Can you imagine what the Topides will do next? We're going to have to break through a few squadrons of opposition somewhere in an outer orbit, and if we succeed then even the dumbest Topidian officer must realize that he must do everything possible immediately if he wants to win this war."

"So?" Thora still did not understand. "They will probably attack Rofus, in an attempt to end the war, before we can bring the battleship into action. And you want to fly to Rofus under those conditions?"

Rhodan looked at her. "Thora," he said in low, flat tones. "I don't know what it would mean to you to leave an entire world to its destruction. To me, it means so much that I'm going to make every attempt possible to help the people on Rofus."

Thora started to make a caustic reply, but when she noted his tautly drawn features she became silent. Khrest stood nearby and merely looked on pensively.

Meanwhile, a report came through that Klein's attack and Teel's response had created enough havoc to divert a squadron of bombers from an attempted interception of the space sphere.

Rhodan contacted Deringhouse. "Tell Klein he's done his work. He is to rendezvous with us at the desert fort."

"Picking up space bogies out here!" announced Marten. "Fifteen objects of medium battle class, dead ahead. Destroyers!"

"Range?"

"Seventy-five thousand miles!"

"Ship stand by for hyperjump!"

Rows of panel lights flickered on, signifying that all systems were "go."

"Look out!" yelled Marten. "We're under fire!"

"Jump!"

In the same moment the visiscreens blanked out, to reveal pale grey streaks, and then cleared up again. But the picture they were receiving had changed. The grey blue, cloud flocked celestial body that revolved beneath the ship was Rofus. Ferrol now appeared as a bright point of light in the starboard screen.

Khrest's forehead gleamed perspiration. "No Arkonide would have dared to carry out such a reckless manoeuvre in so restricted a space!"

Rhodan gave him a slow grin. "We made it, didn't we? Besides, I'd like you to know that we didn't have any other choice. You can't defend yourself against a whole fleet with only one disintegrator." He turned about to the others and gave an order. "Start landing operation—we will set down at the desert fort."

In the time that remained to him, Rhodan communicated with the Thort. He reposted their situation and recommended that the Thort come to the fort as fast as possible. He was not by any means certain that the Topidian scanners hadn't been able to pick up his trace after the hyperjump.

Trker-Hon received the bad news without revealing a sign of emotion. In the meantime he had assembled about him the entire garrison staff of the city, and it seemed appropriate to remain optimistic just as long as there remained the slightest fragment of hope.

"Our next move is clear," he said gravely. "The enemy has escaped from us with our most valuable ship. We don't know where he has gone. Presumably he got out of this system in the fastest manner possible. And if this is the case it seems advisable that we should make a conclusive attack on Rofus at once. We have to end this war as soon as possible.

"If the battleship did not fly out of this solar system, then the need for such action is even more urgent. With that ship the enemy can inflict terrible damage on us. Therefore, we must destroy his bases and hiding pieces before he has time to acquaint himself with the full operation of the vessel."

Trker-Hon stood up. "Notify all units to be ready for takeoff in three hours."

Even the great entrance shaft of the desert fort was too small to permit passage of the Arkonide battleship's giant bulk. Rhodan set it down in a deep canyon above the shaft and adjusted the transmitter so that the Thort could use it to get to him.

The Thort was a different man than the one Rhodan remembered. The proud self-confidence he had

displayed even at the time of his headlong flight from Ferrol had now disappeared. Even the sight of the stolen battleship elicited only a weak smile from him. As was prudent for a defeated Thort, his accompanying entourage was small.

Rhodan described the situation briefly and impressively. "I figure the final ground attack of the Topides will hit us in about twenty to thirty hours. I don't think it will come sooner, but in any case we'll keep our eyes open. It's obviously an advantage to have forced the enemy into an attack. I don't think it's possible for us to destroy the enemy fleet with a single blow, but at least we're going to increase their losses considerably. The Topides will need time to recover from this blow, and that will give *us* time to return to our own base and complete the full crew complement for this ship. We—"

"You are going to leave us alone to face them?" asked the Thort with widened eyes filled with concern.

"Only a few days," Rhodan answered, trying to be reassuring. "This ship is crippled as long as it is not completely manned."

"Use my own people!" the Thort proposed.

Rhodan shook his head. "That would take longer. We are not prepared to teach your people fast enough. In order to program the data into hypno templates suitable for your people, it would take us several weeks just to get ready."

He watched the Thort carefully for the effect of his words. Actually he had no other choice but to refuse, in order to prevent aliens from comprehending the equipment and operating principles of the battleship. Whatever happened, the main goal must not be lost sight of—to make mankind the leading race in the universe. Earthmen thus had to take care that their secrets remained *their* secrets.

The Thort seemed not to have become suspicious. He meditated a moment on his situation and then said, "We will be glad when you are back with us again. I don't think that we can hold out too long by ourselves."

"We will do what we can," Rhodan assured him.

The Thort made a gesture of agreement. "We are very indebted to you. Without your help thus far, I don't know what would have become of us." He smiled faintly. "You came to us as shipwrecked castaways, and now you have in your hands the mightiest ship that has ever existed in this system. I don't know how to thank you."

Rhodan had been waiting for this moment. As long as the Thort was at a loss for a means of demonstrating his appreciation, it was only appropriate to help him out with a suggestion.

"You know, sir, there is a request I'd like to make," he said casually.

"Speak!" the Thort demanded. "Nothing that we can do will be left undone!"

"It has to do with something that far transcends my own interests. I'm thinking mainly of the future course of this war. We could end it rather quickly and without any losses. What I have in mind is the installation of a battery of new transmitter stations."

He looked at the Thort expectantly. The latter's face displayed a tortured grimace.

"Well... I'll try to do what I can. Unfortunately, the manufacture of transmitters is a small and meagrely developed branch of our industry. I don't believe we can produce very quickly the number of transmitters you would need."

"Oh, that's no problem," Rhodan said helpfully. "In my world we have the means of manufacturing anything and everything in whatever time or quantity desire. The only thing you have to do is just give me the plans and schematics for a transmitter. Back home, during the five days we need for the training of our people, enough transmitters can be produced for installing a dozen stations."

The Thort's face clouded over with dismay. It was easy to see that he considered this proposal as anything but convenient.

He said hesitantly, "I don't know whether your people are actually in a position to duplicate such an extremely complex and incomprehensible device. Moreover, the danger that your ship could fall into the hands of the enemy, along with the schematics. Don't you think it's too dangerous?"

Rhodan denied this with a positive conviction. "Absolutely not. There is no enemy in the universe who would be able to take this ship unscathed—there is hardly any who would even be able to keep up with it in pursuit. On that question you can rest assured. And as for the technical capability of my people—leave the proof of that to me."

The Thort glanced at his two advisers, though it was evident that their function in this area of discussion was nil. Neither of them answered other than to turn their palms up in the Ferronian gesture of resignation or uncertainty.

The Thort required some time before he could struggle through with an answer. "I will put it to the test," he sighed. "I want you to know that I do this thing with deep misgivings, but my degree of indebtedness to you outweighs the possible loss of a technical secret."

Rhodan made a slight bow. It was difficult for him to suppress the wave of triumph that surged within him. "I am sure that we will be able to use this secret also to the benefit of your empire."

The preparations were completed, and the construction plans for the transmitters were on board. Rhodan felt no qualms of conscience in having more or less extorted the principles of the transmitter. The transmitter was a top drawer political prize, and in regard to such matters the laws of propriety permitted other interpretations. He had been prepared, without hesitation, to threaten the Thort with a complete withdrawal from his system if the plans had not been turned over to him. Fortunately, however, it had not come to that.

Rhodan doubted that he would be able to make good his promise to bring back in a few days enough new transmitters for a dozen large stations; but that was of secondary importance. Whether he succeeded or not, the Earth was now in possession of a technical secret that even the Arkonides didn't have, and in case the new equipment couldn't be built fast enough on Earth, all that was needed would be a plausible excuse.

Thora and Khrest both knew what Rhodan was up to. Khrest made no comment, but later, when Thora was alone for a few minutes with Rhodan in the control room, she spoke to him with a mixture of sarcasm and admiration.

"One of these days you're going to convince me that you could become dangerous to Arkon itself—in which case I'll probably put some hemlock in your wine!"

A few hours later the approach of the Topidian fleet was reported. The battleship rose upward with the remainder of the Ferronian defence fleet deployed to a depth of 3,000 miles in its wake, as their final effort. Rhodan himself was at the helm of the colossus, which had not yet acquired a name. Marten again manned the scanner console. When the ship had come within about 5 million miles of the rapidly approaching enemy fleet, Rhodan instructed the Ferronian captains to take their positions. Then he made a short distance hyperjump with his own ship.

"Enemy spacecraft!" announced the observation officer of the flagship. "Approximately two hundred units of the enemy fleet, dead ahead. Range, four hundred radians."

Trker-Hon stared at the visiscreens. He had not counted on Rofus offering any real resistance, but apparently these two hundred enemy ships were bent on that purpose.

"This will cost us another two hours," he said angrily.

He had intended to carry out the attack on Rofus in the fastest possible manner. This would have reduced to a minimum the disadvantage of having to remove all defensive forces from Ferrol for the duration of the expedition. However, if he was going to have to spar around with the remnants of the Ferronian fleet for a couple of hours, then the whole operation would be too risky.

He ordered the second and third squadrons to break out of formation and clear the enemy out of the way, while the main fleet continued straight on toward Rofus without any change of course.

Meanwhile the detector station had located a new object that was unidentifiable to the observation officer. The apparatus that gave him the indication was similar to the Arkonide hyperspace sensors. It reacted to distortions occurring in the four dimensional space time continuum at close distance—such distortions as might be caused by the hypertransition of a space ship.

Ordinarily, the apparatus could be interpreted quite easily, but the image it registered now jerked and flashed continuously so that no sense could be made of it at all. The officer contacted Trker-Hon about it, and the latter came to observe the phenomenon for himself. He could not make any more meaning out of it than the scanner crew. He was about to return to the control room, when someone behind him began to shout.

"The ship! The battleship!"

Trker-Hon turned around. Apparently out of nowhere, the mighty outlines of his former ship took form on the optical screens. It was apparently only about thirty or forty miles distant. It hung there motionlessly, and from its weapon cupolas sprang the pale deadly rays of the mighty disintegrators. Under the impact of this fire the right wing of the Topidian formation suddenly resolved itself into hurtling streamers of gas.

"Fire!" shouted Trker-Hon, who was seized with panic. Again, after he had activated the joint fleet communication system he gave the order to all remaining ships: "Fire!"

A few seconds later the flagship received a mighty blow that sent it wobbling and tore it from the formation. The shipboard electronic systems were instantly put out of commission. The accidental jolt had come from a fleeing cruiser of their own fleet, and it cost the lives of more than a hundred crew members,

leaving the rest wounded and unconscious.

Precious minutes passed before Trker-Hon's second in command in the first squadron realised that the responsibility for leading the fleet had passed over to him. Meanwhile, the battleship had disappeared without having received a single countershot. Behind it drifted the gaseous remains of a fifth of the Topidian fleet.

In the meantime, Rhodan and Bell worked with the precision of two computer robots.

"Hypercoordinates?"

"Zero straight across!"

"Hyper energy?"

"Minimal."

"Ready?"

"Set."

"Attention all hands—jump! All stations fire!"

Another three or four minutes of storming bombardment followed, costing the Topides another fifth of their fleet. This time a few defensive shots were fired and a few hits were registered, but the mighty defence screen of the spaceship was not overtaxed in a single instance."

"Cease fire!"

Then: "Co-ordinates?"

"All zero."

"Energy?"

"Minimal."

"Ready?"

"Set."

"Stand by—jump!"

The amorphous grey of hyperspace appeared on the visiscreens. The ship did not move. Even in terms of fifth dimensional co-ordinates it remained motionless. Rhodan and Bell glanced at each other, while wiping the sweat from their brows. Khrest stood behind them, unable to control his reactions to the unorthodox manoeuvring.

When the ship emerged five minutes later from hyperspace, the remainder of the Topidian fleet was found to be in a panic. A series of quick salvos sufficed to plunge the enemy into headlong flight. The two squadrons that had peeled off earlier to attack the Ferronian ships also joined the retreat.

"*Finis!*" murmured Rhodan, somewhat exhausted.

He then instructed the commanders of the Ferronian ships to return to Rofus. The battleship remained for a while in its present position, to search for survivors. However, nothing was to be found except the swirling derelict of the Topidian flagship, which now drifted away toward the glowing sphere of Vega. Visiscreen magnification showed plainly that the ship had been ripped open along its entire length.

"It may be that our game of hyperspace leaping isn't a particularly classical battle tactic," said Reginald Bell, "but it sure as hell served the purpose. "I'd hate to think what might have happened to our defence screen if the Topidian fleet had managed to concentrate its total fire power on us."

Rhodan nodded. "That was just why we did it that way. The next time around, we will know how to operate."

In a single hyperjump the battleship reached a location far out near the orbit of Vega's twenty-eighth planet. The battle stations that had required so much manpower during the strange hyperjump battle were now empty. The crew had taken over their normal operational posts. As for the Topides who had invaded this system, Rhodan was of the opinion that in the coming days they would have too much else to do to concern themselves with the whereabouts of the forbiddingly dangerous battleship.

Rhodan thought that the time was favourable for creating a provisional operations base inside the Vega system—one that the enemy would know nothing about. Iridul, a frozen moon of the twenty-eighth planet, appeared to offer the most suitable area for the base. The planet itself, which was a Jupiterlike world of methane ammonia gas, could not be considered because of the condition of its surface. However, its single satellite had the approximate diameter of Pluto and in all other respects was very similar to the solar system's outermost planet. Its gravity was just under normal Earth gravity.

With the battleship's titanic reserves of power and its correspondingly ample equipment, it was a comparatively easy task to melt out a cave deep within a circular cavity of the polar region, which was made wide and deep enough to receive the giant hull of the ship in such a manner that it could offer no landmark for any enemy observers. Rhodan had a lateral ice chamber melted out, and he arranged to deposit therein a number of pieces of equipment and gear that, though superfluous to the present cargo, might prove very useful in the future for anyone wishing to come to the hideout for repairs. He had not forgotten for one moment that his task in the Vega system was still far from completed.

During the work on the ice cave there was opportunity to cross examine the Topidian prisoners who had been brought along from Thorta. They had been disarmed and locked in an empty cargo hold. The hearing was fruitless because the highest ranking officer was equivalent to a lieutenant, and the stringent policy of the Topidian fleet provided that no important secrets reached the ears of the subordinate ranks.

However, Rhodan learned one thing that, although he had expected it, he considered of grave importance when the lieutenant told the story to him. He discussed the matter only with Bell.

"They actually did believe that Earth was in the Vega system. That is, they intercepted the distress signal from the Arkonide cruiser on the moon and started an expedition at once. But they must have been fooled by an error in calculation. Of course, since Topid is 815 light-years from here, a twenty-seven light-year error isn't greater than 3.4 percent. So far they haven't the slightest suspicion that they have reached the wrong target. The lieutenant is quite convinced that they will one day discover the wreck of

the cruiser within this system."

Bell gave Rhodan a slow grin. "Well, you can't say the old rabbit's foot wasn't working!"

By means of hyperband communication, the Earth was given a brief report of the main developments. Freyt was instructed to get everything ready, especially trained crews, so that the sojourn at home base to prepare for the return to Ferrol action would be held to a minimum. Rhodan no longer believed it possible to accomplish the turnaround within five days as he had promised the Thort, but he was prepared to make every effort to come back here as soon as possible.

He had originally planned to spend a few weeks in the region of Iridul in order to give the Topides the impression that he had long since disappeared with the ship. But Marten, who had left the detector station only long enough each day to get two or three hours of sleep, reported that there was no space traffic going on in the entire system.

As Rhodan had suspected, their defeat in battle had thrown the Topides into a deep state of depression. All data indicated now that the enemy was adjusting to remaining on Ferrol for an indefinite period and would probably not venture into space again until he was sure that the population of Ferrol had ceased to present further problems and until supplies and equipment from his home planet had compensated for losses to the fleet.

The time for the takeoff to Earth was favourable. Rhodan accelerated the training of his people to its completion. Special precautions were necessary for a hypertransition across twenty-seven light-years.

Twenty hours later the ship was ready for takeoff. Rhodan hoped that all necessary technical knowledge was now in the hands of his people, so they could master the hyperjump.

"I expect all of you to keep your eyes open," he told them earnestly. "A single false manipulation of the controls, and we might never emerge again from hyperspace." He turned to Bell. "We take off in thirty minutes."

Bell made a last visual survey, looking at the tremendous spectacle of the Vega system and its twenty-eight planets with affection. Before him the illuminated numerals of the digital clock clicked toward the last minute before takeoff.

"X minus sixty seconds," Rhodan announced with calm finality.

Bell muttered to himself, "It's too beautiful a region to leave to the lizards. We'll be coming back!"

In spite of an insufficient number of crewman, Perry Rhodan dares to make a hyperspace jump to Earth in his new ship, the giant space vessel captured from the Topides. Rhodan takes a great risk but with good reason. Only on Earth can he find the personnel he requires in order to defeat the Topides—and he has promised the Thort that he would do so.

In the next Perry Rhodan book, you will accompany him on his *return* to Vega! Don't miss—THE SECRET OF THE TIME VAULT.

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MUTANTS IN ACTION

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