

...And the hotspot is Venus.

Perry and the fugitive Arkonide woman, Thora, are on the planet of peril, a hot-house of horror, menaced not only by the unnatural monstrosities of the natural Venusian habitat but by deadly invaders from Earth. And the positronic brain, not programmed for certain unforeseen emergencies, has sealed off the planet!

An impenetrable envelope surrounds Venus!

Can Reginald Bell penetrate the barrier via the 5th dimension? If not, Rhodan must rely on his own resources to protect himself from man and monster alike, else perish in a primeval jungle far from his Mother World.

This is the stirring story of—

THE COSMIC DECOY

1/ A Shadow Without Substance

THE MOON was his doom and he was racing toward it at an angle of 45° and a speed of 6000 miles a second .

He was cadet Julian Tiffloor of the Space Academy.

They called such wild, seemingly insane manoeuvres "tactical training." *They* were so reckless that they made even the experienced pilots of the Space Force Commandos sweat.

They demanded all or nothing. They were, in a way, merciless, but when it was all over they became wonderful friends with a ready smile on their lips.

They were the training instructors of the Space Academy—the men who already many times before had left the Solar system in the service of the New Power to protect mankind far out in cosmic space.

They never indulged in sentimental feelings when it came to making men in their own image out of raw recruits. The New Power's astronauts had to be the best.

Cadet Julian Tiffloor had matter-of-factly been given the order to take command of a fast spaceship destroyer as part of his final exam.

For the purposes of his test he was instructed to consider the towering peak of a rugged Lunar mountain as a "hostile unit of a battlecruiser" which he was unable to evade due to his own excessive momentum.

In the course of the order's execution it was left solely up to him whether to miss the rocky cliffs by a hair on his flight or to deceive himself with the wishful thought that the massive obstacle would somehow miraculously turn into a soft cloud.

Julian Tiffloor, 20 years old, with a gentle and pleasant disposition and ire not easily aroused, indeed gave the impression that he innocently believed this rugged 10,000-foot-high peak would actually disintegrate into a harmless cloud.

His own disintegration seemed a much more logical and imminent outcome.

Sergeant Rous, the battle-tested pilot who had faced death a thousand times under terrifying conditions in the Vega sector, screamed in horror for the first time in his life as cadet Julian Tiffloor roared with a velocity of 6000 miles per second toward the looming mountains.

This was the moment when Sergeant Rous was reminded of his "witty" remark that a "smart guy" would simply fly through the mountaintop. It was also the moment when Sergeant Rous swore by all he held sacred that he hadn't meant it literally, particularly not at such a lethal speed.

Even if the destroyer had had dual controls it would have been utterly useless for him to intervene. But for the final test no training ships with dc's were used. The flight instructor no longer had any means of supracontrol.

The Lunar peak leapt 6000 miles closer with every passing second. Cadet Tiffloor was racing to his doom on the surface of the moon.

"You're mad—!" It was all Sergeant Rous was able to cry out for at that moment the impulse cannon mounted in Tiffloor's ship erupted and drowned him out.

Rous felt the violent shaking of his sleek three-seater craft. It was the violent vibration from the discharge of the tremendous power in the form of a violet thermo-beam—hot as the core of the sun—flashing from the cannon's muzzle through the protective shield.

Julian Tiffloor—Tiff for short—fired from a distance of 18,000 feet with the aid of the automatic micro-sensor. This was within the normal range for battles in space. The thermo-shot was almost as fast as light and it gave Tiff about three seconds to decide on his next action.

These few seconds became eternities for Sergeant Rous. The heavy impulse cannon kept roared without interruption and the destroyer didn't slow down a bit.

Rous yelled once more but the worst was already over. The vaporized matter flamed up in the mechano-gravitational shock absorption field of the destroyer. Before they could hear the screeching noise of the displaced particles, the machine already soared in a terrific deflecting curve out into the void, leaving behind a white-hot bubbling crater where the craggy peak had stood before.

The low-pitched roaring of the Arkonide energy weapon ceased. Only the powerful thundering of the impulse-drive engines could still be heard.

Julian Tiffloor's forehead was bathed in little beads of sweat. His voice sounded somewhat scratchy as he reported: "Order carried out, Sergeant." The "enemy unit" had to be destroyed as evasive action was no longer possible.

Rous wiped his cheeks with a fleeting gesture. With narrowed eyes he studied the lean but soft face of the cadet who was just beginning to relax his tension. It took a little while till Tiff's brown eyes showed their usual dreamy look. Moments ago they had been dark and cold and unfathomable.

"Do you always take your orders so literally?" Rous inquired with menacing mildness.

Tiff swallowed hard. Now he wasn't so sure of himself. "Yes, Sergeant," he replied with a swift glance to the back where Cadet Eberhardt was sitting in the place of the navigator.

Eberhardt's broad face resembled a washed out splotch of paint.

"Boy, oh boy!" he gasped. "I could see myself already as a cloud of gas. I..."

"Your opinions are irrelevant, Cadet Eberhardt," Rous barked. "O.K. Now you take over the machine. Change places!"

Tiff had a wan smile on his lips. He very seldom broke out in a hearty laugh like the other cadets of the Space Academy did in their frequent exuberant moods.

Awkwardly he wiggled out of the pilot seat and pushed himself back. Klaus Eberhardt suddenly began to perspire again. Now it was his turn!

Tiff squinted at Rous' fingers as he reached with his usual nerve-wracking fuss for his little "black book." It was only a regular pocket calendar but whatever was recorded there meant success or failure for the candidates of the Space Academy.

Sergeant Rous remained still. Neither Tiff nor Eberhardt could sense that the Sergeant was torn inside by conflicting feelings.

"What a nightmare," Rous kept thinking; "What a nightmare from hell!"

At this point Tiff was overcome by a wave of respect and boundless admiration.

Sergeant Rous, the skilled and death-defying space pilot, became stiff as a pillar of salt and Eberhardt uttered a shrill squeal.

The telecom clicked and the lean rugged face of a man appeared on the picture screen of the ultra-fast transceiver.

"Rous, is that you?" the voice reverberated loudly in the narrow cabin.

Rous found his tongue again. It was the Chief himself. What could have caused Perry Rhodan to call the little destroyer?

Rous reported his presence and the man they recognized on the observation screen nodded quickly. "Thank you, I know. Come back at once and report to me. Is Cadet Julian Tiff with you?"

This time Rous started to bite his lips. The cadet caught his look full of dark threats. Rous affirmed the question.

"Cadet Tiff will have to report to me at 11 o'clock standard time. You'll come a few minutes earlier,

Sergeant. Is that clear?"

This was typical of Rhodan, the man who had transformed the planet Earth into a galactic power of the first rank in the course of only 11 years.

"Yes, sir!" Rous stuttered in a turmoil. His eyes were bulging slightly.

"I beg your pardon, sir! You said, I shall send Cadet Tiffloor to you? To the palace?"

There was a hardly noticeable twinkle in Perry Rhodan's eyes. He seemed to be a little amused. "Yes, in the palace or, as you can also call it, my government office. By the way, was your test manoeuvre very risky? Who piloted the craft?"

"That same Tiffloor, sir," Rous murmured with dry lips.

"Oh, is that so? Very good. That will be all."

The picture screen was dim again. Only a hum in the loudspeaker remained.

Sergeant Rous turned very slowly around in his seat. His dark eyes looked cold as ice. He had lost his sense of humour.

"Tiffloor! What sort of mischief have you been up to? Out with it! You better start talking fast! What reason could the Chief possibly have to summon a lowly cadet like you to the government office? What's going on here?"

Tiff felt his eyes get moist and the palms of his hands became dry.

"I don't have the slightest idea, sergeant. Honest!"

"We'll see, fella. Heaven help you if you've ruined my test group with some stupidity. There'll be a miserable end for you at the Space Academy. Eberhardt, head for the Gobi airport and make it quick!"

A glistening flash plunged with undiminished speed toward the clearly visible crescent of the planet Earth. For the destroyer with the speed of light the trip to the moon was only a short hop. It was a fleeting moment, nothing more.

Cadet Julian Tiffloor had a lump in his throat. All he could think of was why in the world the Chief wanted to see him personally. What would the students of the Space Academy have to say about it?

He shuddered when he thought about their derisive remarks or their pity. Obviously, something must have gone awry. A fledgling astronaut wasn't called to the inner sanctum unless there was a serious reason. Tiffloor saw sombre clouds moving on the horizon of his imagination.

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The tall man switched off the telecom. Pensively, Perry Rhodan, the Head of the New Power, gazed at

the darkened screen.

"That boy will be close to a nervous breakdown," growled a sonorous voice. "You didn't have to clobber him with the news here and now. You should have picked a better occasion."

Rhodan lifted his head. Reginald Bell, his trusty friend, companion in countless adventures and Defence Minister of the New Power, looked puny and insignificant in the huge room. His mouth looked grim. He stared with dismay at his chief. Bell was one of those men who appeared implacable in the presence of the cadets. Yet when he talked about them he revealed the proverbial heart of gold.

Rhodan smiled faintly. It was apparent that he had looked once more right through the stocky, broad-shouldered man.

"Tiffloor is a man without nerves," Rhodan said quietly. "We know him from the action against the Mutant Master. He operated like a smart tactician. I have to put him to work again although it'll be hard on him."

Reggy Bell took a deep, loud breath. Sharp lines stood out on his broad face.

"I agree, but only if you let him know what is involved."

Rhodan frowned and got up slowly from behind the tremendous table that more resembled a complicated switch console than a writing desk. The eyes of the two men met as they confronted each other.

"Let's riot kid ourselves," Rhodan stressed. "The only time he's allowed to know all about his mission is when its over."

"You're pulling him out in the middle of his final exam."

"If he accomplishes his assigned task I'll be happy to sign his diploma."

Bell let his shoulders drop. He glanced with a vacant look at the numerous monitoring screens in the workroom. Here was the nerve centre of the New Power. He said haltingly: "Naturally you aren't very happy about the disappearance of three units from our space fleet."

Rhodan showed his famous and notorious smile. It was too mild to be convincing.

"You guessed it! Somebody we don't know is beginning to take an interest in us. The very thing I've tried to prevent for years has happened—the discovery of Terra and the Solar system by unknown intelligent beings. No arguments, please! It's already been proven that we're not dealing with the Mindsnatchers."

Bell was thinking about those peculiar individuals that had to be repulsed shortly after the establishment of the New Power. This time it looked more serious.

The big auxiliary ship K-1 of the *Good Hope* class was reported missing, as well as two brand new spaceship destroyers of the zero series. These facts alone were sufficient reasons for Rhodan to spring into action.

Strangers had very suddenly appeared and quickly vanished again. It was beyond doubt that they must have been well informed about Terra and its inhabitants, too.

Rhodan's radio monitoring service had intercepted some mysterious short signals transmitted in the supralight range. The efforts at decoding had not made them comprehensible. Apparently the mixed groups of symbols were put together for different concepts in an arbitrary manner.

Rhodan had come to the firm conclusion that alien agents were operating on Earth. Despite deployment of the very efficient mutants from the special corps, it had not been feasible to track down a single one of these spies by telepathic methods. It seemed like a jinxed situation. A shadow without substance had spread out over the Earth, a shadow that could neither be seen nor touched and its existence only suspected.

Rhodan walked slowly over to the nearest videophone. He dialed and Dr. Haggard appeared on the screen. Haggard was in charge of the world-famous Gobi Clinic where Arkonide medical science was applied as a general rule.

"Our man will be here in two hours," Rhodan said tersely. "Did Professor Karner already leave on his flight?"

"About three hours ago. I'll follow in 10 minutes. We'll get it done."

Rhodan without another word waved to the camera and cut off the connection.

"Have you decided to take the risk?" Bell inquired anxiously. "It's going to be tough, I think. You ought to ask him first whether he agrees with it."

"If the slightest inkling of the facts are imbedded in his memory, he'll be more endangered, not less. We're playing with cosmic stakes, old friend."

Bell flipped his cap on and stalked noisily toward the armoured hatch of the control centre. "I guess you don't care to consider my opinion," he grumbled. "O.K., go and play the game your way. I still think it's a crazy idea. Attack is always the best defence."

"Whom do you want to attack and where?" Rhodan inquired with a calm voice.

Bell bit his lips before he left the room, swearing under his breath.

This was the root of the problem. What was there to attack, if there was no tangible adversary?

On this day Rhodan moved the lever—after careful consideration of all available data—to set in motion an action of vital significance in the far reaches of the cosmos. Its ultimate effect couldn't be predicted by anyone except Rhodan himself. The hour was destined to be designated as one of the most important in the history of mankind, even though, at this time, there was no way of knowing that the chronicle would be written. The Earthlings were still weak and their science and technical knowledge inferior. But they possessed other qualities of which only very few other intelligent beings could boast: a tremendous urge for action, undaunted courage and a burning thirst for knowledge.

Rhodan reckoned with all of this and his hopes were not unjustified.

10/ The Egg That Laid An Egg

Tiff was brought back on board the K-7 with the intention of enticing him to engage in conversations with his friends that would divulge some information. Of course the cadets had noticed long ago that the videophones were recording everything and that virtually no place on the ship was safe from surveillance.

"How stupid!" Mildred Orsons exclaimed with a vibrant look full of ridicule when Tiff finally returned.

Organs had gone into the orbit he had announced earlier. Since one hour his ship *Orla XI* had been freely circling around a big planet about whose position the Earthlings knew practically nothing. They had merely been told by one of the numerous guards that this double star system had four planets with highly eccentric trajectories.

A few of the observation screens were left in operation so that the celestial bodies were plainly visible. But at the moment this was of secondary importance to the crew of the K-7.

Major Deringhouse, Sergeant Rous and the Space Academy students had used the time during Tiff's absence to plot their strategy.

When Tiff entered the large mess hall he could feel the tenseness in the air. The deliberately dull and meaningless conversation was so unusual that Tiff's curiosity was aroused.

He was asked to relate his story while they looked furtively at the dark videoscreens. This was enough to tip Tiff off. A special team of the traders was listening in on every word.

Tiff gave his report in the same boring way until an incident occurred. Hifield was just the man to provoke a brawl. It was unbelievable how he flew into a rage and started to punch a husky man of the regular crew. It was no clean fight but it served the purpose.

It took only seconds for the long barrels of the thermo-guns to appear in the opened hatch and the bulky figures of the guards behind the weapons. As soon as they had assured themselves that no revolt had been started they were satisfied.

Shouting with enthusiasm they egged the two fighters on with the result that Hifield's left eyebrow was laid open by a straight right from his brawny opponent.

Tiff was pulled behind another group of cheering onlookers. Deringhouse nodded quickly with urging eyes so that Tiff cooperated at once as Mildred threw herself into his arms amid tears and began to decry the folly of men. "Be careful, they're listening," she whispered. "Felice and I aren't closely watched. We're allowed to walk around in the ship. I was able to filch a microbomb from the ammunition store room at Airlock 3 without anybody noticing it. Take it and hide it before Hifield is knocked to the floor."

Tiff turned pale. He didn't know what to do first, help the distraught girl or conceal the micro-atom bomb. Finally he decided to take care of the atom bomb since it was positively incapable of slapping his face or punishing with devastating looks.

Deringhouse watched them unobtrusively and Rous stepped before the camera to cover the two young people with his bulky body.

The small egg-shaped bomb, no longer than the product of a chicken, found its way into the pocket of Tiffs pants.

At this point Sergeant Rous began to bark: "How dare you take such liberties with this girl, Cadet Tiffloor?" he raged, while winking an eye. "Miss Orsons, go at once to your cabin. I'll have to reprimand you for disorderly conduct while on duty. Break it up!"

Breathing fire, Milly disengaged herself from Tiffs arms, much to his regret. Never before had he been so close to her. At the same time Rous whispered quickly into his ear: "Listen, Tiff. This is a thermo-bomb with effective duration of 15 minutes. It releases only heat with an average of 250,00° in the inner ball of gas. Time fuse is set for exactly one hour. Deposit it somewhere during your next interrogation over there and note precise time. Then come back. Make excuses. Ask for time to think everything over in our surroundings. Is that clear? Any questions?"

This was on par for the audacious men of the space pursuit commando. Rous and Deringhouse had cooked up a daring scheme. Naturally the cadets and the girls, too, collaborated enthusiastically. The commander couldn't have wished for better teamwork.

Tiff went along spontaneously. Now he saw the reason Hifield had provoked the altercation. He had to give him credit: he certainly had put on a splendid show. This was right up his alley.

"O.K." Tiff said with a taut voice. "I'll have to go back soon. I'll find a way. What happens when the bomb explodes?"

"That'll be the signal for us to get into the act. There are exactly 23 guards on board. The girls have counted them. We'll be able to handle those. First we'll get back the Command Centre, then everything else will fall in place. Watch the long-barreled thermo-guns these goons have. Those things work with needle-thin impulse-beams, generating very little heat except on the spot they hit. Seem to be shielded from thermal side effects. Great guns. We're going to get ourselves some of them. We've got it all worked out. That's all. Hifield must stop it now."

It had taken only a few seconds. They could be certain that it was impossible to be overheard during their whispered exchange of information in the deafening racket.

Hifield received a barely noticeable sign. At the next blow he finally was knocked out and stayed down.

The guards were jubilant. The spectacle seemed to cater to their taste. A few minutes later calm had been restored in the mess hall. The crew was smilingly admonished by the Springers to let them know in time about any imminent fights so that they could get in on the fun.

With a sinister smile Deringhouse's eyes followed the bearded giants. "Please take care of Hifield," he asked the girls. Milly and Felicita Kergonen helped the moaning cadet get back on his feet. His opponent licked his lacerated lips.

"Since nobody got too badly hurt in this row, I'm willing to dispense with punishment in view of our present predicament," Deringhouse stated stiffly. A certain tone in his voice made everybody understand that Tiff had the Arkonide micro-bomb in his pocket. Nothing but a molten mass boiling away in a steaming cloud of gas would remain of the merchant ship as soon as it was set off.

Tiff could feel his forehead break out in sweat. Spasmodically he took part in the dragging conversation. After awhile the bell rang in the automatic kitchen. The prisoners were not deprived of all luxuries, only of

their freedom.

Deringhouse was firmly determined to remedy this situation very soon. He hoped desperately that Perry Rhodan, who was still waiting in space in the vicinity of Pluto's orbit, would find a way to get them out of their unfortunate dilemma.

Tiff began to relate in a monotonous voice what he had learned about the Springers while he was waiting for things to happen.

One hour after mealtime the hatch was opened again and Tiff was called for his second cross-examination.

He left quietly and composed. The pale face of a girl was lingering in his memory.

A pressure equalization energy field had been introduced between the two airlocks, enabling Tiff to float effortlessly across without his spacesuit. The artificially produced gravitation on either spaceship couldn't be felt between the two.

Expecting the worst, he boarded the other ship. The K-7 was still imprisoned in the powerful gravo-beam of the huge ship. Droning machines were proof of their unwillingness to let the swift K-7 escape from their clutches.

Organs was without question a fine businessman, if such a term could be applied to a galactic trader.

He was also an excellent tactician and psychologist. Less intelligent and strong-willed men than Tiff would soon have succumbed to his many temptations.

Perhaps Tiff was aided by the fact that he really didn't know anything about the economic plans of the New Power. Gradually his suspicion had grown that Perry Rhodan was using him as a decoy to seize the unknown conspirators.

Organs didn't seem overly concerned with the illusory economic plan. He was apparently smart enough to know that a man like Tiff could never carry it all in his head. Maybe some rough values but not the all-important details.

Therefore Organs didn't insist on questions pertaining to this matter. Instead he kept probing with increasing obstinacy the subject of the 'World of Immortal Life'. In doing so, he put Tiff on a grave spot, as he could not be convinced that the cadet had no real knowledge of the facts relating thereto.

He took two hours to conduct a pleasant tour of his ship for Tiff. However Julian was not very impressed by the armament. The weapons couldn't even stand comparison with those of the K-7. On the other hand *Orla XI* boasted very powerful and modern drive engines. There were a number of special installations that had been exclusively developed by the scientists of the Springers.

Organs pointed out in passing that this was only an armed merchant ship whose weapons were completely adequate for most of the primitive worlds they visited. For more recalcitrant cases they could always rely on the specialized armada of the Springers for help.

Tiff was unceremoniously pushed into the last room. When the captain entered the room he abruptly dropped every pretense of politeness and solicitous fatherly behaviour. After being treated as one of the family for hours, Julian suddenly looked into cold, ruthless eyes.

"We call this machine a psycho-dissolver," Orlgans explained menacingly. "The brain of any living being is destroyed in the process but all facts are extracted from its memory. We use this machine for insubordinate people withholding essential information from us. I'll give you three more hours by your own clock. If you haven't changed your mind by then, your head will be put into the hood of the machine. Now we can leave again, my dear young mikoa."

Suddenly Orlgans melted into profuse cordiality. He almost carried the teetering, brow-beaten cadet out of the room. He escorted him back to the first cabin, located near the forward end of the long ship close to the command centre. Before Orlgans left, Tiff took his chance. He implored Orlgans and stammered: "Sir, would you allow me to return to our ship to think this over? Please don't leave me in these strange surroundings. Here I don't feel so..."

"Of course, of course," Orlgans interrupted exuberantly. "Just a minute, my young friend, I'll call your escort."

Tiff began to sweat blood as the bearded giant walked out to the long hallway to shout for the guards posted outside.

Tiff took the micro-bomb out of his pocket. He felt that there was no point in concealing it somewhere else, since it would've been found anyway if he was searched. He pulled out the safety pin, depressed the trigger for the time-release until it sharply clicked into position and let the diabolical egg roll under a couch. It came to rest against the wall with a dull thud.

He had barely enough time to straighten up before the two guards came in.

"How pale you look," Orlgans said with pseudo-sympathy. "I'll see you again in three hours, young Terkoa."

This was a convenient reason for Tiff to look at his chronometer. It was exactly 17 hours and 58 minutes by the clock on board the K-7. The bomb was going to blow up at 18:58 o'clock. Or, to be precise, five seconds before that, when he had started the time release.

Following mechanically he was brought back by the two guards. When he entered the mess hall he sank ashen-faced into a chair. Deringhouse looked at him expectantly.

Tiff nodded imperceptibly and added naturally: "They've detained me exactly till 17:58 o'clock. Orlgans has given me three hours for reflection."

Rous' face relaxed and the men exchanged glances. Deringhouse began to figure out the next step. Five minutes before the critical time Hifield was to start another fracas.

Deringhouse laid his plans carefully. It wouldn't look suspicious to construe the second round of fisticuffs as revenge. Then they'd have to induce all four guards who were posted outside the mess hall to come into the room. The other Springers were stationed in other parts of the ship. It had to work.

Deringhouse walked slowly around the big room and stopped before one of the observation screens. "Isn't the weather beautiful out there?" he said broadly. The stars scintillated coldly. They gave no answer.

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It was exactly 18:53 o'clock when Hifield went on another rampage. His old nemesis had pestered him with inflaming taunts. The scuffle commenced on the second. The bomb was scheduled to be detonated in five minutes and the guards would be overpowered simultaneously.

The sentries appeared in the hatch about half a minute after the tumultuous noise had started. Again they watched the show with glee and didn't notice that 12 strong men got behind their backs. The group was carefully selected. Even these gigantic men were no match for them.

Deringhouse kept a wary eye on the thermo-weapons of the Springers. Meanwhile Hifield kept up the fight with well-aimed punches.

Tiff was also ready to jump into the fray. His eyes were glued to the chronometer.

Two more minutes to go. Rous came slowly closer. Hifield was swinging wildly and the Springers cheered loudly.

"Join my group," Tiff heard the Sergeant whisper. "We're going to take over the Command Centre."

Rous drew back again. The men behind the Springers were in position to jump them. It was co-ordinated with high precision. At the same instant as the four guards were overwhelmed and their weapons changed hands, an atomic cloud would mushroom inside Orla XI putting it out of action so that no help would be forthcoming for the guards. The subsequent rapid vaporization of all conductors would result without delay in the dissipation of the field they were fenced in.

Thirty seconds to zero. The roar of the crowd of spectators reached a fever pitch. It was their way of giving vent to their tension.

Fifteen seconds before zero the team of 12 men sprang into action, four to each guard. Metallic objects from the adjacent robot kitchen crashed down on the skulls of the bearded men. They collapsed instantly, almost without a sound.

Deringhouse rushed forward, Rous and Tiff followed him. They'd already grabbed the weapons at the opportune moment.

Everything was going as planned. The shouting continued but the squads raced out through the open hatch.

They spotted one of the sentries. Deringhouse fired while running. The hissing of the long-barreled weapon was followed by a cry. Then the giant keeled over.

"Spread out!" Deringhouse shouted. "Rous, up to the Command Centre!"

As they ran up the emergency stairs they heard a sharp wailing noise. It was not like the sound Tiff had expected to hear. The hull of the K-7 started to vibrate. It was 18:59 o'clock.

"What's the matter with your bomb?" Rous screamed, beside himself. His face was suddenly distorted.

"Damn it, why doesn't the thing blow up?"

Tiff could've cried. Up front Deringhouse was hit by an energy-shot and collapsed. Behind him appeared bearded figures firing wildly at everything that moved.

"Get back!" Deringhouse groaned, "for God's sake get back."

They dragged him back to the mess hall. Something had gone awry. Seconds later the ship began to sway more and more and the men began to feel the first effects on their bodies. Before they realized that their adversaries had enveloped the entire K-7 in a turbulent vibration zone despite the presence of their own men on board, they began to moan in pains.

Each single cell seemed to be bent on performing a wild dance under the ever-increasing amplitudes.

Hifield was the first to drop the weapon he had wrested from the Springers. Tiff, Rous and Martin came next.

When the wailing became more than their ears could stand, the men writhed on the floor in agony. The guards didn't fare much better but the crew of the K-7 had at last ceased their shooting.

"What went wrong with that confounded bomb?" Rous gasped before he lost consciousness.

Tiff was frantic. His head threatened to burst before he, too, sank into a coma. It had all been so futile. Something had fouled up their elaborate plans.

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This time Organs was brandishing a weapon. He stood before Major Deringhouse with his feet wide apart, staring coldly at him. The shot had gone right through Deringhouse's thigh but left nasty lumps in and around the wound.

Deringhouse didn't care to play the hero. Since everybody knew that he suffered intolerable pains it would have been senseless not to moan if it gave him only a second's relief.

The other men of the crew stood against the wall of the mess hall. More than 30 lethal weapons were trained on them.

When the men had regained consciousness, Organs was already in the room. "Who hatched out this hare-brained scheme?" the Captain demanded again. "You?"

Deringhouse grinned through his pain, grunting harshly: "Of course. Who else should but the Commander?"

Organs couldn't control his wrath. He kicked Deringhouse's cot. The injured man winced in pain.

Milly Orsons cried out in angry protest at this callous action. Organs ignored her and moved toward Tiff. Julian could feel the hot breath of the giant. Organs was boiling mad. Obviously he knew very

well that he had escaped total destruction by only a hair. But how?

The explanation turned out to be very simple and rather ridiculous.

"Your conniving hypocrite rolled a bomb under the couch. Well, you forgot that we're meticulously clean people. Each time after we use a cabin it's janitored by robots. Isn't it too bad they found your little surprise and deactivated it?"

Tiff uttered a tormented groan when he saw the huge shadow closing in on him. He collapsed under the terrible blow of Organs' fist. He wasn't conscious to witness the revolt that almost broke out.

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When he awoke, Tiff saw Deringhouse lying next to him in the sickbay. The commander's wound was neatly bandaged. The girls were busy with some chores. Deringhouse was awake and regarding Tiff. "Take it easy, kid. It's alright—we got off lucky this time."

"Sir, it wasn't my fault," Tiff stammered in dismay. "How was I to know that..."

"That those robots could just as well have started cleaning five minutes later," Deringhouse joked. "Not another word out of you. It was a great idea but it backfired. So—accidents happen. Go back to sleep. you've suffered a brain concussion. Lord, if that lout doesn't throw a mean punch!"

Tiff's tired eyes obediently started to close again but just before they did he mumbled, "What are we going to do now, sir?"

Deringhouse replied softly, don't worry, something will come up. Or do you think the Chief has gone into retirement with the *Stardust*? you've got to rest now—that's an order, cadet Tiff! "

Tiff saw red rings before his eyes and in one of them the vast outline of the super-battleship emerged. If it appeared on the scene for real, it would make the Springers stop laughing. In his heart, Tiff was sure of it.

At any rate, *his* mission was fulfilled. And he knew something else in his heart: Perry Rhodan would not fail.

2/ Danger In Cosmic Space

Cadet Julian Tifflo looked at his watch. It took a second until he properly attributed the quivering of its hands to his own unsteady eyes. He gulped convulsively as he stepped before the mirror to take a last look at his uniform.

Of course he wanted to appear before his Chief in an impeccable state with radio-helmet and handgun in high polish.

"A little jittery, aren't you?" somebody asked. Tiffloor winced. His brown eyes seemed to be on fire.

Humphry Hifield, a tow-headed type without inhibitions or overt hangups, lolled on his foam rubber couch. He knew exactly where his strength lay compared to Tiffloor. Whereas Tiff was a recognized mathematical genius, Hifield was proud of having emerged as boxing champion in the recent fights. To his mind cosmic math and fisticuffs ranked about the same. It was Tiff's misfortune that he had to share the same room with Hifield of all people.

"Take it easy, boys," Cadet Eberhardt warned sharply. He was the third occupant of the room. He went over to Tiffloor, who was panting and pulling on his tight belt. Tiff's momentary anger had already ebbed away. Now he looked helplessly at his classmate. "I'm sure I'll faint when I face the Chief," he groaned.

Hifield gave himself a shove and got up from the couch. With a rolling gait he approached Tiffloor, his hands, deep in the pockets of his trousers. He was as tall as Tiffloor and twice as broad.

With a smirk he appraised his perspiring classmate. "I always say that daydreamers are unfit to go into outer space. Before you leave, I need the shielding field equation on the relation between cosmic micromatter and a super-imposed gravitational field. How about it?" Hifield grinned hopefully and let his hands dangle at his sides.

"The hell with it! Why don't you look up the equation yourself?" Tiffloor shot back exasperated.

"Don't tell me it's too much work for you," Hifield said menacingly. "You've got a full hour. My class starts in 30 minutes."

"Wouldn't you love to push in the face of this poor mathematician?" Eberhardt broke in, swinging his stout body around. Hifield's eyes looked grim.

"You keep out of it, fatso!" Hifield threatened. "When I talk, you just listen! Is that clear?"

"Oh, come off it," Tiff interjected nervously. "I've got other troubles, damn it!"

"What do you know! The chicken is actually swearing. I can't believe it," Hifield exclaimed in astonishment.

Tiff closed his eyes in disgust. Hifield's scornful laughter upset him deeply.

"One of these days, somebody is going to shut your big mouth," Eberhardt said with unaccustomed coldness. "He'll do such a good job that you'll never open it again. Do me a favour, go look for your equation!"

"You wanna make something of it?" Hifield whispered. His shoulders hunched forward. But he loosened up instantaneously when somebody knocked at the door. Suddenly Hifield broke out in a jovial smile.

"Gutless wonder!" Eberhardt muttered, turning away. "Come in!"

The three cadets stood straight. But it was no superior officer.

"May I come in?" a high voice asked.

"That's 'verboten.' For heaven's sake don't get us into trouble!" Tiff admonished hastily. "Girls aren't allowed in here."

Mildred Orsons, cosmo-bacteriology student at the CB Institute of the Space Academy, tossed back her pitch-black hair with a typical gesture. She entered lithely.

Without a word she critically examined Tiff's appearance.

"Turn around!" she ordered. "Your belt is off-centre again. I just came to let you know that Deringhouse will inspect you personally. There's a dark spot on the handle of your weapon. You look terrible, dear, terrible! You live like cavemen here."

Tiff went from one embarrassment to the next. Was it a good or bad omen that much admired Milly Orsons took a personal interest in his affairs?

"I'll wipe it clean," he promised quickly. "But will you please leave now? If they catch you in the cadets quarters, you'll be very sorry."

In a spontaneous outburst Milly's exalted sense of justice got the better of her. She was one of those dedicated persons who would tear the world apart for a skinny dog.

Her dark eyes were aglow with fire. Tiff just stood there in motionless awe.

"It's an outrageous shame to treat a fellow like this!" she flared up. "Klaus has told me how they summoned you. The Chief doesn't seem to know what he's doing to you. Somebody has to care about your mental balance. We've managed to convince Sergeant Rous that your uniform must be checked. Look at your boots! They're smeared with chocolate!"

Tiff looked down and became furious, then turned abruptly to Hifield who grinned with delight.

"I just polished them. I saw you hypocritical sneak eat chocolate a minute ago. You smeared the stuff on my boots. I'll..."

"Quiet!" Milly cried before the enraged Tiff could lunge toward the waiting Hifield.

"Have you all gone mad! Hifield, did you really do this dirty trick? You must be a mean bully!"

"I can't stand that snitch," Hifield admitted with bated breath. "He's peddling it around that he'll see the Chief."

"I've got orders to report to him," Tiff shouted. "I don't know why..."

A click in the loudspeaker caused the cadet to break off. Hifield was the first to stand to attention. He looked rigidly at the screen of the videophone at the wall where Major Deringhouse's face had appeared. Deringhouse was Chief of the Space Training unit. The graduating class of the Space Academy was at this time almost exclusively under his supervision.

Milly fled with a wild leap out of the range of the camera, hiding behind the open closet door.

"Cadet Tiff, are you ready?" the loudspeaker crackled. Tiff stepped forward.

"Yes, sir," he acknowledged shakily.

"O.K. Come to my office at once. I expect your uniform to look snappy or you'll catch hell. Wasn't there someone else in the room?"

Tiff's eyeballs flipped around. "No... No, sir!" he fibbed.

"As you say. If the lady believes that she must attend to the spit and polish, she ought to be gracious enough to let me look at her. We'll talk about it, later, Tiff. That'll be all."

Deringhouse disappeared and Milly trembled as she came out from behind the door.

"Good grief," she groaned, "he saw me. Well, let's wait and see. Give me your boot. Klaus, I need a cleaning rag."

"I prefer to get out of here," Hifield exclaimed.

"What are you scared of?" Eberhardt asked contemptuously. "Are you afraid that an honourable student like you will be caught as a delinquent in the last semester? Man, get out of my sight!"

Hifield shrugged his shoulders and left the room.

Milly clamped the spherical radio-helmet under Tiff's left arm and said: "Let's go now and don't forget to breathe."

Tiff walked out to the antigrav elevator on wobbly legs. He fell in so awkwardly that he landed flat on his stomach down in the hall.

Sergeant Rous nearly cried. "Man, get up and start running. I can't look at you any more without getting a fit," he groaned.

Tiff got moving on his long legs. In a mad rush he scurried down the hall to Deringhouse's office.

"Your gun!" Rous howled after him. "What the devil is he doing? He left his gun in the elevator!"

Tiff turned into an acrobat. He whirled around in mid-air, raced back and snatched the impulse-beamer from the hand of the flight instructor while mumbling something completely unintelligible.

Rous stared after the cadet in a state of shock. What sort of mischief would he be getting into next!

* * * *

At the moment that the Arkonide robot-fighter led him through the small ray-shielded entrance chamber in the field of the powerful energy-sphere, Julian Tiff began to feel as if the world were coming to an end.

The government palace of the New Power was situated in the middle of a complex covered by the protective E-field. Close to the palace was the armoured dome housing the positronic brain, stationed in the Gobi Desert.

Tiff was numb and he passed like a somnambulist through the strict control points. Now he stood in the huge room where the man who had landed the first atomic rocket on the moon many years ago conducted his operations.

That historic feat alone made Tiff feel like a babe in the woods by comparison. And when he started to ponder the difficulties under which Perry Rhodan laboured to apply usefully for all mankind the knowledge of the Arkonides discovered on the moon, he was struck by such awe that he was almost paralysed.

Now he stood before the man who had become a legendary idol, a man who—as it was claimed in whispers—had been granted eternal life by a mysterious power.

On the other hand, Tiff was fully informed about the galacto-political and military enterprises of his famous boss. This knowledge sufficed to make his forehead break out in sweat.

His posture resembled more a bent corkscrew than a cadet at attention. His legs quavered peculiarly below his knees but a sensation of panic welled up in him that made him fear that the moment of his final collapse was near.

Other cadets would certainly have made a better show. Hifield would probably have stood like a rock in front of the Chief without blinking an eyelash and without suffering from an inferiority complex.

Perry Rhodan studied the 20-year-old Space Academy student very thoroughly for a long time. At one time he himself had stood just like that before the commander of the Space Force—trembling inside and with tense muscles. It was in the first years when the Space Force was formed under Colonel Pounder.

Rhodan suppressed a smile and continued keeping a straight face, when John Marshall, the telepath who was also present, gave a silent warning. "He is about to bowl over, Chief. You're like a little god to him."

Rhodan understood the telepathic message faultlessly. Therefore, he cleared his throat and said: "Mr. Tiff, this is a private visit. Please take a seat."

Tiff tottered to the chair. As he dropped into the seat, his radio-helmet became separated and promptly followed the pull of gravity. The impact droned like a thunderclap in Tiff's ears.

"The beautiful hat!" Rhodan said dryly. "Don't you like it?"

Tiff stammered fervent protestations that of course he had nothing against service helmets. On the contrary, he thought that the built-in audio-visual set provided excellent communications.

Rhodan listened patiently to Tiff's nervous outburst.

John Marshall retreated unobtrusively. His short nod was all that Rhodan needed. He found no objections as far as Julian Tiff was concerned. There was not a thing in his mind that he would have to hide from Rhodan.

"Well," Rhodan finally interrupted, "we both agree on this. Thank you for your exhaustive explanations. I

suppose you know why I've asked you to come here?"

Tiff had calmed down a little. He denied the question. Rhodan gave no indication of his thought. His impassive face might have caused others to be apprehensive. Tiff felt his pulse racing. Now the catastrophe was about to befall him!

Rhodan extracted a folded piece of paper from a stack of documents. "Your father shows remarkable determination. It isn't every day that the President of the New Power receives a private telegram. You'll be furloughed as of now, Mr. Tiff."

Tiff's tenseness gave way to boundless amazement. "A telegram?" he stammered, perplexed.

Rhodan nodded nonchalantly. However there was no convincing reason why the Chief was prepared to show the cadet a special favour. Tiff was quite aware of this. Rhodan registered the sudden alertness of the fledgeling astronaut out of the corner of his eye. The young man seemed to have changed. He was no longer plagued by uncertainties.

"Your sister is getting married today. This is the reason for the rush."

"Eileen, getting married?"

"At 18 o'clock, Eastern Standard Time. You'll fly toward the sun in one hour. You'll take a one-seat space fightership. The machine is now being made ready for you. Do you think you can fly this ultra-speed pursuitship safely to New York?"

Tiff's face was beaming. Holy smoke! Flying a space-interceptor of the New Power to New York! This was stunning news. Tiff nodded silently as he failed to find words.

Rhodan observed him carefully. He pushed the telegram across the table. It was indeed a very unusual message. "Ordinarily I wouldn't have been informed of its contents," Rhodan remarked. "But I've got a special mission for you in mind. Your sister's wedding comes very conveniently at this time. It presents a most inconspicuous way of sending a special courier to New York. You're to remain at your father's home until you receive a message under the code name 'Heavenly Gate.' Then you'll report to Homer G. Adams, the president of the General Cosmic Company. Does the name Adams mean anything to you?"

Tiff whispered his "Yes, sir." Of course he was familiar with the name of the renowned personality.

"Very well. You'll be issued a diplomatic pass of the New Power as well as an official letter with a special permit, authorizing you to make full use of your service weapon in case of danger. Notification of your flight will be given at the point of your arrival. You may disregard all else and simply cross the borders of the United States. You'll land at the new space-flight base of New York City where our servicemen will take care of your machine. Go at once to see your family and attend the wedding ceremony. Any questions?"

"None, sir," Tiff replied very calmly and composed. His slim face looked earnest.

Rhodan narrowed his eyes. "Excellent, Cadet Tiff. Take this little metal cylinder and keep it safe. Hand it over to Mr. Adams only, nobody else. If any other people get interested in it, remember that you've orders to shoot. You'll receive all further instructions from Homer G. Adams. You're under his command in Now York. Major Deringhouse will assign your spacefighter to you. He'll also furnish you combat weapons. That'll be all. Thank you very much."

Julian Tifflor asked no more questions. He secured the hand-long metal cylinder in the inside pocket of his uniform, saluted smartly and walked to the noiselessly opening hatch door. Before he passed through it, Rhodan's last words reached him. "Tifflor, this is a special mission. Don't let anything surprise you. If you consider the task too risky, I'll give you an opportunity to refuse the assignment after your arrival in New York."

Tiff walked as in a dream. Thirty feet before the first control station he was given a loaded impulse-beamer by an Arkonide robot-fighter. His regular weapon changed hands.

He picked up his special papers in an office and returned 15 minutes later to his quarters where he had another 15 minutes to pack his personal effects. Cadet Klaus Eberhardt was dying of curiosity. "What happened?" he asked excitedly. "Come on, why don't you tell me?"

"Show-off!" Hifield scoffed in the background. "Mysterious silence makes it look more interesting, doesn't it? Hey, what are you hiding there in your pocket? Let me see!"

Tiff closed the magnetic lock of his dress uniform. The capsule received from Rhodan was safely concealed.

Hifield approached slowly. His wide face looked grim. "What have you got there? I want to see it. I'll make you..."

Hifield scarcely noticed the swish of Tiff's hand but he saw distinctly the reddish glimmer in the spiralling muzzle of the Arkonide weapon.

"One more step, Hifield," Tiff warned quietly, "and it'll be your last one!"

"Are you crazy?" Eberhardt gulped, turning pale. "Where did you get that hot blaster, man?"

"No comment. Don't ask superfluous questions. Out of my way, Hifield!"

Hifield retreated hastily. He sensed that Tifflor was in dead earnest as never before. His nervous laughter sounded hollow behind Cadet Tifflor as he strode away.

A few miles away Rhodan switched off the v'phone. The picture of the three-man room dissolved.

"He reacts quickly and resolutely," Rhodan reflected. He turned to the officers of the New Power waiting in the room. "Bell, take care of the flight entrance permit. Allan D. Mercant will arrange it. Mr. Freyt, advise Adams that Tifflor is ready to take off. Marshall, see to it that it'll become known on the campus why Tifflor is flying to New York. Strictly for the wedding, make that clear. Tifflor's father is one of the best known criminal defence lawyers in the States. It won't look unusual that I've given a furlough to the son of such a distinguished man. Everything else remains to be seen. Is Dr. Haggard on the way?"

Yes, the physician had departed long ago.

"O.K. Captain McClears, you take over the command of the heavy space cruiser *Terra* immediately. Major Deringhouse will be assigned another duty. Inspect the crew at once and get the vessel ready to start as soon as possible. Major Nyssen, hold your ship *Solar System* ready for an emergency take-off. I'll take over the super-battleship *Stardust II* personally. Reg, please go on board right away. I'll follow later. Captain Klein, you remain at your post in the radio monitoring service. I want to know if Tifflor's

undisguised flight from a secret base will be reported to a station in outer space. If I'm not mistaken, it's the last thing those clever connivers will believe: that I'd allow the interruption of a cadet's final exam by a furlough for a rather unimportant wedding. The wheels have started to roll, gentlemen."

Rhodan got up from his seat. The monitoring screen of the Spaceport Control displayed a tiny body. It shot almost vertically into the blue sky of the Gobi Desert. Minutes later the muffled thunder of the engines rolled in. Julian Tifflor had flown away according to plan.

Rhodan's project had entered the first phase. The avalanche was loosed.

"We should have given him all pertinent information," Reginald Bell grumbled. "It's possible that hell wind up in a nasty situation."

"It's not only possible but he'll definitely become embroiled," Rhodan stated. "We've already thoroughly discussed this matter. Now let's wait and see. Lieutenant Everson, you'll start in exactly four hours for the Vega system in your auxiliary ship. The 27 light-years will be traversed in the normal routine. You'll carry the usual consignment of merchandise to the trading station on Ferrol. We'll take the necessary measures so that you'll be suspected of acting as the bearer of very important documents. If our plan works out, this ruse will be disregarded and Tifflor will be presumed to be the real messenger. That's what I'd like to find out. Your Guppy must be on battle alert at all times. I don't intend to lose another ultra-light-speed spaceship in the same peculiar manner.

Marcus Everson saluted silently. His task was clearly prescribed. If he was attacked in the void, they'd caught on to Rhodan's game, If he got safely through the transition, the first obstacle had been hurdled.

Rhodan's brow was wrinkled in thought. Tifflor was on his way. Now it all depended on how the unknown adversary reacted.

Seconds later the first radio report from Cadet Tifflor came in. His start had been faultless. The interceptor raced toward the American west coast at an altitude of 180 miles and would reach it in five minutes.

"It's crazy to send this kid in a spaceship on such a short trip," Bell muttered. His face looked angry. "If this goes well, I'll eat a box of rusty nails."

"You'll have trouble finding them here," Rhodan gently pointed out. "Rusty nails are definitely outmoded in the bailiwick of the New Power."

John Marshall couldn't suppress a grin. Then he took up listening—together with the other mutants of the special corps—to the brain-waves of those people who were informed about the true nature of Tiff's mission.

He failed to perceive any surreptitious thoughts. If there were any secret agents in the realm of the New Power, they were perfectly able to mask their identity. But the secret radio monitoring service intercepted 20 minutes later a brief signal on a hyperspace wave. It was a condensed message of one-tenth of a second's duration. Deciphering was well-nigh impossible. It had been attempted before but even the positronicon was unable to cope with it since it consisted of a completely dissimilar type of symbols which were highly coded to boot.

Rhodan nodded grimly. It was precisely what he expected. "Look, Marshall! How come you and the other telepaths can't detect those agents? These people think and must radiate certain impulses that can

be transmitted telepathically. Why don't you receive them?"

John Marshall looked helplessly to Betty Toufry and shrugged his shoulders. "Sir, it's a puzzle to me. However, I can assure you that there are no traitors among the people you've trusted with the information."

Colonel Freyt, Rhodan's deputy, cleared his throat. "That's pleasant! I wonder if they wear thought-screens? Is there such a thing?"

Rhodan began to whistle softly. Perhaps he had the right idea!

Life went on as usual on the service base of the New Power. Only a few people knew that a new danger loomed out there in cosmic space. Even fewer were aware of the decisive steps Rhodan had taken when he responded to the ordinary telegram of a New York attorney.

In the annals of mankind the telegraphic request for a furlough of Cadet Julian Tiffloor was classified as a 'document of utmost importance.'

3/ The Astounding Operation

The wedding ceremony was a protracted torture for Julian Tiffloor. As soon as the rites ended he virtually fled for it was contrary to his conscience and ingrained habits to take lethal weapons into church. He found the atomic impulse-beamer and his special belt untouched behind the thick hedge of roses. He breathed easier again and strapped his weapon on according to the service rules. He touched his pocket with the concealed metal container and got back in time for the reception.

James Frederick Tiffloor, a distinguished-looking man in his 50s, threw an abhorrent look at his son. Tiff's sister, who had just now become a bride, uttered a shrill frightened cry and the eyes of several old ladies suddenly looked glazed.

There was no denying that an Arkonide thermo-beamer not only had a devastating effect but also looked extremely menacing, particularly because the gun was carried in an open bolster.

"Is this really necessary?" his father asked icily. Julian experienced for the first time how difficult it could be to reconcile good manners with military orders.

"Regulations, dad," he answered with a throaty voice and stiff attitude.

He suffered even worse embarrassment on the way back, as he had to ride in a car with an elderly aunt.

Some unflattering remarks were bandied around on this occasion about the famed and notorious Perry Rhodan.

They drove to Tiffloor's spacious country home on Long Island. A man like Tiffloor could well afford such luxury.

Four hours after the wedding, shortly before dusk, Tiff still sat in his room. Nobody was able to induce him to put down his dangerous gun.

"I'd prefer if you'd come some day to work in my office," his father said tersely. "I don't think much of this so called reaching for the stars. May I inquire why you're putting on this act?"

Julian was in no position to give his father any explanations. By the time the sun went down he felt like an outcast. He had disposed with a few harsh words of the silly questions of his former friends and evaded the lively curiosity of the young girls. Tiff was not one of those Space Academy cadets who enjoyed circulating and bragging with their superior knowledge. So it turned out to be a social disaster.

Julian was exasperated and stepped out onto the tiny balcony of his room. The first stars appeared in the evening sky. They seemed to, call and enthral him with their mysterious and breathtaking splendour.

Thus he remained till about 23 o'clock. Then the moment he had waited for arrived, but not as he had imagined it.

The mental attack struck a sudden blow. An unseen force reached for his conscious mind.

Tiff reeled back and groaned. He was familiar with the effect. Instantaneously he reacted like the Space Academy cadet who had been specially trained for such occurrences.

He made an effort to defend himself and to block the extraneous thought impulses. It took awhile till he realized that the purpose of the encroachment was the transmission of a message.

Tiff forgot where he was. Suddenly everything had changed completely. His familiar surroundings etherealized. Now the vexing phenomenon began to gain the upperhand. He listened acutely.

"Very good, now it's getting easier for me," the message came through. "Your code word is Heavenly Gate. Take an air taxi at once and go to the General Cosmic Company building. Be careful, you're being watched by some unknown persons. I'll be sticking around. Don't say goodbye just write a note and leave through the garden. Keep your eyes open."

The mental pressure subsided. His mind was free again. Breathing easier, he scribbled a few lines on a piece of paper.

He walked across the extensive grounds of the garden. There wasn't a corner in the garden he hadn't visited many times. Near the wrought-iron side door he received the next message.

"Marshall speaking. I'm hovering in a gravo-glider above the property. Go out in the street and call an air taxi."

"Danger?" Tiff's thought expressed concern.

The answer came hesitantly. "I'm not sure. I'm getting confused impressions. There are too many people in the house. Try it!"

Tiff cocked his gun. The little red light started to glow on the hand guard. The door was only seldom used. As he was about to pull the bolt out of the latch, he received a strong warning impulse from the invisible telepath. Tiff rolled around.

Behind the old oaks in the garden appeared the shadowy outlines of two figures. The faces were unrecognizable but he noticed the running legs.

He heard himself shout. Contrary to his explicit orders he couldn't get himself to open fire without first giving a warning.

"*Shoot!*" the command reverberated in his mind. Marshall seemed to be gripped by panic.

Tiffior jumped with his drawn gun behind the solid stone pillar of the gate. As he hit the ground painfully on his right knee, he heard a high whistle followed by a thump.

In a fraction of a second he recognized the vapours rising from the cracked plastic container. The bluish fluorescent light illuminated the darkness under the old trees of the garden. A deep voice shouted something.

At this point he distinguished two masked faces in the eerie light. Tiffs next breath brought him close to fainting.

As everything began to wobble before his eyes, he pulled the trigger with his last ounce of strength.

A white-hot stream of fire roared from the barrel of his weapon. Fanning his gun he caught the two figures in the blast and in the process set the wooded area on fire.

It was a burst of only short duration. Tiff still heard the deep roar of the impulse-weapon and the crashing of a huge tree which seemed to blaze up as it toppled over.

He was too groggy to escape before his next breath of the fluorescing cloud of gas. Moaning, he fell back. A million steel crystals seemed to sear his throat. He no longer saw the gravo-glider coming down from the red-lit sky of the night.

The dry wood was burning along the line of his fire. It was a small inferno created by a young man with a flick of his finger.

* * * *

The room was neither very large nor very high. However it displayed such uncommon furnishings that only a man like Homer G. Adams could have been comfortable with them.

A large picture screen on the wall showed the clear-cut—although a little weary—face of a man in uniform. It was Perry Rhodan, Chief of the New Power.

"What did you find out?" the low voices came from the concealed loudspeaker.

Homer G. Adams, the stout president of GCC with a reputation as the greatest financial genius of the century, stroked his large head with his remarkably fine hand. Blinking his eyes—lately he'd become a little nearsighted—he studied the image of the man who had provided, him with the opportunity of establishing a gigantic consortium on an interstellar scale.

The General Cosmic Company already extended to the stars. The first trade monopoly with the humanoid Ferrons earned profits which almost equalled the entire tax yield of all the big states on planet Earth combined. There was no doubt that Homer G. Adams controlled the greatest economic power of all times.

"This is a question I can't answer so easily, sir," Adams replied cautiously. "If you allow me, I'd like to pay you a short visit. I can use my matter-transmitter."

Adams looked at the peculiar apparatus in the secret room. Many times before he'd entered unseen and unnoticed the governmental palace of the New Power.

"I'm sorry, but I'm in the middle of preparations for leaving," his plea was denied. "How did the assailants react? Who are they?"

"The men shot by Tiffloor could no longer be identified, unfortunately. However we managed to save a tiny trace of the strange gas. The analysis should provide some clues. John Marshall carried Tiffloor out of the vapours at the last moment and almost passed out himself doing so. It's diabolical stuff."

"Is it of Terrestrial origin?"

Adams raised his shoulders. "We aren't sure yet, sir. It's all very mysterious. I've contacted our Secret Service. The newspapers haven't been informed about the true facts of the case since Mercant's agents succeeded in apprehending other suspects. They turned out to be well-known New York gangsters who stated that they had a contract from an anonymous party to lay Julian Tiffloor low with a gas grenade. We've been unable to learn more. It is certain that these arrested hoodlums are not the real suspects we seek. Our hypnotic interrogation produced no clues. Nobody knows who put out the contract for murder."

"How's Tiffloor?"

"Satisfactory. Because of his unconscious state, we were relieved of our worry how to put him under narcosis and avoid attention. Professor Karner has postponed the operation for five hours in order to wait for the probable side effects of the gas inhaled by Tiffloor. However he exhibited no organic or psychic disturbances. We've anaesthetized him before he woke up. The operation is now under way."

Perry Rhodan's face looked serious. Now they'd reached a crucial stage.

"Adams, I fully depend on you. If the micro-device functions in accordance with the assurance I've been given, Tiffloor will become a signal transmitter of unprecedented potency. Telepaths like Marshall will be able to utilize it as a foolproof method of locating him anywhere up to a distance of two light-years without any delay at all, as if they were standing next to him. Please conduct these experiments after the conclusion of the operation."

Homer G. Adams was breathing loudly. His highdomed forehead was covered with beads of sweat. "Sir, that gadget is a diabolical contraption. Although I'm certainly no telepath I found it difficult to stay in its proximity. It's sending out supra-dimensional frequencies of the highest intensity. Where did you get it from?"

Rhodan saw the face of his conversation partner growing larger. Adams was moving closer to the videophone.

"Please keep quiet about these confidential matters. A few days ago I returned from Wanderer, the world of eternal life. The incredibly intelligent beings living there are no gods but they know the last secrets of nature. It's the source where I obtained this device. They've created it in the shortest time according to my specifications as if it were a simple toy. The microcell activator will change the frequency of each single cell in Tiffloor. The cadet will virtually be converted into a galactic transmitter. Now I hope that he'll be captured by the unknown infiltrators. The ambush indicates that they already suspect him to be the secret courier. Please continue to keep up this pretense, Adams! Especially with regard to Tiffloor. His memory must not contain anything that could lead to an involuntary betrayal in hypnotic interrogations he might be subjected to. He is and must remain unburdened with vulnerable information. Is that clear?"

Adams nodded silently. His face looked fatigued.

"Please, connect me with the surgery room," Rhodan requested firmly.

Adams' fingers pushed a few buttons. The GCC clinic which was also housed in the same huge office building appeared on another videoscreen.

Professor Karner, the gifted surgeon, was in charge of the operation. Dr. Haggard and Dr. Eric Manoli assisted him. Other physicians who had undergone the Arkonide hypno-training in medicine were also present.

The applied method of surgery would have baffled any other doctor. Even the anaesthetic apparatus was a marvel of micro-positronic refinement.

Tiffloor's pelvic cavity had already been opened. The Arkonide anti-body serum assured the completely safe assimilation of foreign substances. As Adams switched on the picture, Professor Karner was about to implant a thimble-sized object surrounded by a multitude of sensory filaments.

The heavy breathing of the Arkon-trained surgeon was audible in the loudspeaker as the half organic and half mechanical device began to join its sensors with the nerve tissue close to the lower spinal column. The connection with the circulatory system of the patient's blood was also accomplished without the aid of the physicians. The entire process took less than five minutes. From there on the imbedded artifice was an integral part of Tiff's body.

"Done," somebody said haltingly. "Do we begin?"

Homer G. Adams switched the picture off. He looked pale as he turned back to the other screen. "An uncanny object, sir," he whispered. "It dizzies the mind. It seems to have a brain of its own."

Rhodan laughed half-heartedly. His expression seemed reserved. "Don't ask me. Apparently everything is possible on Wanderer. How long will it take for the wound to heal?"

"A maximum of 12 hours. At least that's what Haggard claims. The Arkonide tissue plasma will leave no visible scars and the job might even be finished sooner."

"O.K. It's better if you wait 12 hours. When he wakes up, tell him that the mysterious gas was the cause of his prolonged coma. Adams, don't lose your head! Lieutenant Everson has departed some time ago. He is now in the vicinity of the Pluto orbit and is preparing his transition to the Vega system. So far he has neither been detected nor attacked. It looks to me like they've taken Tiffloor's bait. Send him on his way to the Lunar base as soon as he's fit again. Major Deringhouse is waiting for him there with the K-7. Is

everything clear now?"

Adams confirmed the question. With somewhat mysterious remarks the conversation was concluded.

Cadet Julian Tiffloor, Space Academy student in his last semester, which was equal to 20 regular semesters due to the utilization of hypnotic training, thus began to play an extremely important role in the history of mankind.

He was as yet unaware of it. Nobody knew exactly what Rhodan's intentions were with regard to Tiffloor's mission. All Adams could learn was that the Chief had done only enough to arouse the merest suspicion about Tiffloor's activities. Anything more than this slight hint would doubtlessly have brought about a quick failure.

Adams, ingenious and decisive in all financial matters, felt badly shaken. He thought about the message the cadet was supposed to deliver in space. The positronic super-brain on the Venus base had required three weeks of Terrestrial time to compute the convincing data contained on the micro-tape. Considering the calculating capacity of the machine, three weeks was an enormous length of time.

Rhodan's face had disappeared. It became very quiet in the unique room where no other man except Rhodan was allowed to enter. The small control centre in the administrative offices of the GCC actually was one of a string of minor support bases.

Adams got up from his swivel chair. He took another look at the surgery room. The operation was not quite finished. Karner and Haggard were busy treating the wound with the Arkonide bioplasma that prevented the formation of scars. The healing process took place with incredible speed. It virtually started the moment the plasma was sprayed on.

Adams was startled when he heard moaning coming from the loudspeaker. He quickly zoomed to the wide angle field. John Marshall, the telepath who had quietly observed the implant, was hastily carried out of the operating room by two physicians. He was uttering the pained noises. His face was contorted under the surgical mouth cover.

By this token Adams knew that the cell-activator had commenced to function. Julian Tiffloor had turned into a transmitter. However, the impulses emanating from his body could only be perceived by skilled telepaths and exclusively by those who were attuned to Tiffloor's frequency.

It was all part of a grandiose multifaceted plan by Perry Rhodan to venture into the world of the stars. He had become an invisible power in the background to be reckoned with.

Adams stepped into the five-dimensional identification field of the secret room. Recognized as having authority for admittance, the concrete wall in the basement of the highrise became materially unstable and opened in front of him.

He stepped through the dematerialised field out into the open. Behind him the wall changed its form into solid matter again. As Adams went up to the 108th floor in the rapid elevator the still unconscious cadet Julian Tiffloor was wheeled out of the operating room. The most astounding operation in human history had been achieved.

4/ Destination: Transplutonia

The office looked quite ordinary and innocuous. Except for the numerous employees servicing the highly technical communications equipment, the room could have been in any other office building.

This impression changed radically as Julian Tiffloor was escorted to the normal-looking sliding door.

It opened very silently but the sound of sliding Arkonide steel was not eliminated. There were two robots stationed to the left and right of the entrance. The movable weapon arms of the machines looked less innocuous.

Tiff entered calmly. He was used to such security measures. Homer G. Adams was seated in an imposing chair behind an immense work table which didn't deserve to be called a desk.

It was the first time that Tiffloor met the man who was known as the Minister of Economy of the New Power. The odd thing about him was that this high official performed his functions in New York.

"Please sit down," asked the friendly voice.

Adams smiled. Tiff knew that the man with the twisted spine before him was a so called semi-mutant. This was about the extent of his information. He was unaware of Adams' photographic memory and his capability of predetermining economic trends.

"I'm sorry to have you exposed to such hazards," Adams began, maintaining his reserve. "Of course I could have let Marshall call you back as soon as you had attended to your social obligations. However, I considered it preferable to remain in your parents' home until the suspected attackers showed up. You may regard it as a certain test I've conducted."

Tiffloor gulped audibly. The opening remarks were rather surprising. "Of course, sir," he replied lamely.

"At any rate you've survived the incident quite well according to the opinions of the physicians. How do you feel?"

Tiff was drawn to the big burning eyes of the hunchback. He made an effort to tear himself away and express his troubled mind. "Sir, I've probably killed two men."

Adams looked down at his slim hands. He felt sympathy for the young man who reproached himself. "Don't let it worry you. You've acted in self-defence beyond any doubt. There will be no legal trial. Furthermore, the case has been taken over by the Terrestrial Defence Federation. I have instructions to send you at once to the moon where the training ship K-7 is waiting for your arrival. Your final tests are not to be further interrupted."

Julian Tiffloor was overcome by a feeling of abysmal disappointment. He had seemed to be on the threshold of a mysterious and exciting adventure—and now he was relegated back to his exam. "Yes, sir," was all he could say.

Adams tried to force a smile. He wasn't quite successful. Slowly he added: "Well, there's one more thing I'd like you to take care of for me, Mr. Tiffloor. I've been required to point out to you that you may refuse my request any time. Nobody, least of all Perry Rhodan, will force you to carry out this task."

Tiff was all ears. Suddenly all thought of the dreaded final exam in tactical training vanished. "Please," he said with a throaty voice.

Adams held a small metal cylinder in his hand. It hardly differed from the one Rhodan had given him a few hours earlier.

"We consider it essential to forward these secret data about the economic planning of the New Power in this somewhat unusual manner to the Vega system 27 light-years away. This capsule contains a micro-tape that must not be allowed under any circumstances to come into the possession of unauthorized persons. I'm sure you understand that a long range economic plan is vital for all mankind. The data arrived at cannot be changed from one day to the next, since there are numerous projects, such as the building of new ships and so on, which must be co-ordinated within the general framework of the plan. You have orders to hand over this roll personally to the Governor of the New Power on Ferrol in the Vega system. That's all you are required to do. Are you willing to take on this secret mission?"

Tiff was disappointed again. His commonsense told him that the training ship K-7 was bound for the Vega system. He asked about this.

"Of course your flight is charted to land in the Vega system," Adams confirmed expressionlessly. "Major Deringhouse has received instructions to this effect. We are very anxious to deliver this message safely to Ferrol. You're forbidden to mention it to anybody."

Tiff gave his assurance. The little metal capsule changed hands. Before Adams sat down behind his monstrous work and switch control centre, he admonished him: "In case you should get into trouble, a touch of the self-destruct button is enough to dissolve the container with the message. Please check this safety feature."

Tiff examined the position of the switch very carefully. At that moment it began to dawn on him that he was not embarking on a harmless trip as a courier. There was more involved in this affair than met the eye. He probably was not being told the whole story.

Adams noticed with satisfaction the growing suspicion of the cadet. The transformation took place exactly as Rhodan had intended. He wanted Tiff to be suspicious but not to such a degree that his conjectures would become identical with certain knowledge.

Tiff stowed the cartridge away. Motionlessly he stood before the elderly man with the sparse pale blond hair.

"Do you accept this assignment?" Adams wanted to make sure that he agreed. Tiff almost had the impression that his eyes pleaded: "Don't do it!"

He shook off the fleeting thought. "Of course, sir. With pleasure."

"Then come with me," Adams said, coughing slightly behind his hand. "No, we'll take my private elevator. Are you familiar with the principle of a matter-transmitter?"

Tiff was thrilled with the greatest excitement. A matter-transmitter! One of those fabulous machines Perry Rhodan had found in a strange world and learned to master. With a dry throat he stammered, "Yes, in principle. But I've no practical experience."

"So you'll get some now. Please, follow me."

The small elevator sped down. Tiff swallowed hard as Adams operated the five-dimensional transformer by means of his individually programmed vibrations. The thick basement wall became at one place a glimmering spiral.

"A supra-dimensional dematerialisation field," Adams explained matter-of-factly. "Matter turns into penetrable energy. No, these are no gases, if that's what you mean. The passage is not as short as you might be inclined to believe. The control room is located more than half a mile away inside the rocks of Manhattan. Follow me. I've identified you at the mechanical guidance."

Tiff stepped reluctantly into the mysterious field. He felt nothing except a small pull in the back of his neck. It was far less strenuous than a transition in cosmic space.

He found it hard to believe that the distance was no greater than Adams had stated. At any rate, Tiff couldn't remember having covered the distance of half a mile with one step. Neither could he conceive the fact that, for an instant, he was no longer a bodily reality. It was a physical impossibility to traverse a five-dimensional dematerialisation field in a normal stable form.

His mathematically-oriented mind became active. A few moments later he had found the probable solution of the applicable equations. His schooled mind was accustomed to deal in a methodical manner with the true facts and to realize their existence despite their unlikely appearances. This was a superior attainment that was specifically taught at the Space Academy of the New Power.

He looked with fascination at the cage-like apparatus and the enclosed circular platform that appeared to be the transmitter. Adams was already manipulating the adjustment control panel.

Somewhere heavy machines began to hum.

"A separate, self-contained energy source," Adams explained in conformance with Rhodan's directions emphasizing the necessity to make Tiff familiar with such technical installations. "Naturally I cannot depend on the questionable supply of current from the city's power stations. You'll be rematerialised with the velocity of thought in the synchronized transmitter on Luna. Be prepared to go through some minor pains. You may compare it with a spaceship transition."

Tiff approached the uncanny machine with glazed eyes and unstable steps. A violet light had begun to shine inside the circle of bars.

"No danger," Adams assured him calmly. "The machine is attuned to you. But I wouldn't advise any unauthorized person to risk the transportation of his body. Have you got your message capsule?"

Tiff nodded. Then he stepped on the platform and gripped the poles in his hands. Before he could ask another question he suffered the jabbing pain of the dematerialisation. Adams saw a swirling eddy form between the two field pole rods that vanished again in seconds. Immediately thereafter the transmitter shut down with a fading low buzz. Julian Tiff, the future astronaut, was gone.

* * * *

When Tiff returned to his real state again, he thought for a fraction of a second that he had dreamed. There was no recollection of the ultra-light fast transport through the higher dimension in which the laws of the normal universe were invalid.

The view before his eyes became clear. He stood in an identical transmitter but he was no longer in the little room deep in the rocks of Manhattan.

"Hello," Major Deringhouse greeted him dryly. "How do you feel? Don't bother with that nonsense! A man who has just rematerialised doesn't have to salute. First get out of that cage."

Tiff stepped across the red danger line. Then he looked around, still disconcerted. The transmitter was located in a bare room with stone walls, one of which was decorated with a large switch panel. Somewhere in the background a machine was winding down with a low whir. He guessed that it was the atomic energy power station supplying the local current. Obviously, it wasn't very big. The makers of these uncanny transporting sets had regarded it as desirable to limit the size of the power generators. He was told that there were transmitters with energy generators built into the thick platform.

Tiff tipped the cap of his dress-uniform anyway. Deringhouse inspected him thoroughly before he inquired: "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, sir. It was a breathtaking experience."

"I didn't ask you that but I believe you. O.K. Come with me."

Tiff had expected more questions. Deringhouse avoided any reference that could somehow be connected with Tiff's assignment. Nevertheless the major seemed to be more or less informed about the nature of his task. His searching look at Tiff's breast pocket was a clear indication.

Before the rough stone wall a dematerializer rose up high. Here, too, they were sluiced through a D-field out into the open.

"You're now far below the support base near the south pole of Luna," Deringhouse explained. "When we arrive above, don't waste any unnecessary words. We'll depart at once to go on a training flight where you take your regular seat as candidate. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Tiff whispered disconsolately. The affair grew more baffling all the time.

Deringhouse's slim face showed a hint of a laugh. The young officer was known to have a sense of humour.

"You're certain to be asked questions by the other cadets that will have to be ignored by you. I'm the only man on board who is informed about your mission as courier. In case you run into any difficulties, come to me for help. That's about all there is to say with regard to this matter except for one other piece of information I'm to give you. I want to let you know that your doppelganger will be flying back to Gobi in one hour. The make-up men seem to have done an excellent job. Your substitute is probably busy staging a heartbreaking goodbye in your parents' home. We thought it necessary to arrange a little show for the spies who are probably watching it."

Tiff could feel his throat getting even tighter. He had trouble swallowing the lump. "A double?" he stammered.

Deringhouse grinned widely. "Exactly," he confirmed. "But we've told the fellow that he's not permitted to kiss your sister."

Tiff suddenly realized very clearly with how much foresight the Chief had laid his plans. The training ship K-7 had obviously started without him from the Gobi airport. If his double returned there soon, only the devil himself would be up to seeing through the hoax.

At least this was Tiff's opinion. But he didn't do justice to the cool logic of the man who was not prone to underestimate the intellect of others who might not be so easily fooled by the manoeuvre. In this case, his role as messenger had to look genuine.

"A little commotion ahead, sir," Tiff remarked respectfully.

"A little commotion!" Deringhouse mocked. "It'll be more like jumping into the vortex of a whirlwind. O.K. Get in—and not another word about your task."

The commander of the K-7 followed the cadet into the transportation field. When they arrived at the top they entered a room with bright lights. It was the office of the security chief. The officer hardly glanced at them as they walked by his desk.

A spherical auxiliary ship of the *Good Hope* class, measuring 200 feet in diameter, was stationed under the huge energy dome of the Lunar base. Super-battleships like the *Stardust II* carried 12 of these units on board.

Silently they walked over to the ship which was ready for the take-off. The lower pole elevator was still extended to the ground between the stable landing legs. They floated up in the antigrav shaft and went at once to the command centre.

"Attention!" somebody bellowed at the top of his voice.

Tiff shuddered as he recognized Hifield's voice. He looked rather pale as he eyed the cadets lined up in a file. They stood straight as ramrods before the entering commander.

Sergeant Rous was also present. He served as Second Astronaut on board the FTL Guppy, a faster-than-light ship.

Tiff counted 11 cadets. There were in addition two girls of whom he recognized Mildred Orsons at once. He was also acquainted with the slender, fine-featured Felicita Kergonen. Felicita was only 18 years old. She had two more semesters in galacto-botany to attend. What was she doing on the final test ship?

Tiff felt his pulse beat faster as he met Milly's eyes. Evidently, Deringhouse had chosen not to reprimand her little digression in visiting the cadets' quarters.

"Cadet Tiffloor has returned from his special furlough. We'll take off at once. Take your seats," Deringhouse stated rather curtly. This was only a feeble clue to the bewildering reappearance of Tiff that failed to satisfy the young men with taut nerves who were on the verge of becoming full-fledged astronauts.

Klaus Eberhardt seemed about ready to burst. Hifield didn't blink an eyelash. He never did when an

officer was around.

As Deringhouse went through the transparent security gate to the radio room to perform some operations personally, Rous growled in his charming manner: "Get moving! We don't need frozen dummies on board. How long do I have to wait till you sit down? The ladies are requested to retire to their cabin. Come on!"

Rous' bark was worse than his bite. As Milly Orsons walked past him with a devastating look, he stifled some strong albeit well-meaning language.

Blond Felicita Kergonen demurely walked behind her one-year-older friend and co-student. The hatch closed again. Rous' breath sounded like the hissing of a boiler letting off steam. "Damn it," he clenched his teeth with an irate look. "What's there to snicker at? These aren't girls, they're students at the Space Academy, remember that! I insist that they be treated like any other man on board. The girls will have to show what they've learned about cosmo-bacteriology and galacto-botany. Cadet Tiffloor!"

Tiff winced. Rous, his old tormenter, acted like a real fireeater again. "You take over the weapon control in the first interval. You're such a hotshot, aren't you? Don't fancy the idea that you can slam through the next planet with the K-7. Eberhardt and Hifield, you supervise the techno-section. The other men to their regular stations. Start in five minutes!"

That was First Sergeant Rous! One had to grin and bear it.

"Hey, you're still dressed to go to a ball," the darkhaired man sneered. "Man, get your service uniform and be back in 12 seconds flat!"

Tiffloor dashed away without seeing Rous' wide grin. Eberhardt and Hifield went to their swivel chairs next to the two pilot seats.

"Big wheel," Eberhardt muttered. "How did our little boy get here? Did you see a ship land? He's still carrying that hot blaster in his belt."

"We're going to get them, too, after the start. Be quiet now!"

Inside the huge body of the K-7 its machines began to run. The automatic controls responded to Rous' guidance much more accurately and with greater dependability than any human could have done. This was a spaceship that had not been built on Earth. The Arkonide super-technology manifested itself in every little detail. The energy curve of the impulse-converter rose steeply. Eberhardt reported that the energy for the thrust neutralizers was at the required level. The hitherto quiet ship was now bursting with activity.

Rous was in contact with the base commander via v'phone. Behind the protective energy curtain lay the void of space. It was crucial for the start of the K-7 to open the energy dome for a fraction of a second at the launching pad.

"Ready for blastoff. Request column field," Rous asked on the video.

Outside the Guppy the field-projectors of the Lunar spaceport began to work. A shining column of energy shot upwards joining the curvature of the large dome and enveloping the ship at the same time.

It formed an ample and perfect passage chamber that still amazed the scientists on Terra. On distant

Arkon, spaceships had started and landed in this manner for more than 10,000 years. The method was primarily applicable for spaceports situated on celestial bodies that were either airless or had a poisonous atmosphere.

Rous looked through the transparent bullet-proof wall to the radio centre. The commander was still sitting before the telecom screen. The person shown on the screen could not be recognized from the command centre.

* * * *

"All clear on board," Deringhouse murmured softly into the tiny microphone of the ultra-light telecom set.

Rhodan nodded. The major was unable to see the person at whom Rhodan threw a side glance. Evidently Rhodan was highly satisfied.

Deringhouse had no inkling that he'd taken aboard with Tiffloor a supra-dimensional organically living transmitter. Deringhouse hadn't been told everything either.

Rhodan had acknowledged the affirmative nodding of the telepaths from the Mutant Corps who were present. It was proof enough for him that Tiffloor had arrived at the Lunar base in good shape.

"Thank you. You're free to start. Please comply fully with your instructions. Any questions?"

Deringhouse hesitated till he hastily asked:

"Did Everson get through?"

"Yes, he went through the transition without hindrance. Anything else?"

Deringhouse said no, although he would have liked to ask whether Tiffloor's double had come back. This probably was the case, anyway.

"Good luck!" Rhodan concluded. "Take good care of the cadets and the final tests. They'll be the starfighters of tomorrow."

Deringhouse understood only too well the odd smile of the Chief. At this moment a veritable tumult must have been reigning at the spaceport of the New Power.

Perry Rhodan's three mighty ship units had been standing ready for an emergency start for some time. Deringhouse's thoughts lingered longingly on the heavy cruiser *Terra* which he normally commanded. Now Captain McClears was in charge of the gigantic vessel, built on Earth and measuring more than 600 feet in diameter.

Thinking about his cruiser Deringhouse got the vague feeling that its powerful ray-cannons could come in very handy before long. Big as the K-7 was, compared to *Terra* it was an impotent dwarf.

Rhodan's picture faded. Deringhouse rose slowly before he walked over to the command centre. Rous

rattled his report. The two men knew and respected each other.

The commander looked meaningfully at the sergeant.

"All clear, Rous? No hijackers on board?"

"Nope," the burly sergeant drawled, his tongue briefly licking his dry lips.

"O.K. Let's blast off! Are you done with your operations, Tifflo?"

Tiff, who had just reentered the command centre after hastily changing uniforms, tensely gave his confirmation. If none of the others had the faintest notion that they were on the brink of a deadly serious contest—he was sensing it.

* * * *

Exactly 30 minutes earlier the little K-7 was shot into free space through the field of the funnel in the energy dome. The monitoring station on Mars reported that Deringhouse accelerated at 300 miles per second according to plan bringing him in 10 minutes time close to the velocity of light.

When the first report of the automatic sensor station on Jupiter's moon Callisto came in, he had already reached that speed.

Rhodan had taken the seat of the First Astronaut. Far below him vibrated the titanic machines of the superbattleship *Stardust II* of the Arkonide Imperium class, the sphere of which measured half a mile. There were never bigger or more powerful battleships built in the stellar empire of the planet Arkon. It was a story in itself how Rhodan had succeeded in capturing the spaceship. "Start in 20 seconds," he announced on the telecom.

On the large screen of the circular observation system gleamed the hulls of the two heavy cruisers *Terra* and *Solar System*.

On the dot the three mightiest spaceships of the New Power lifted off the ground. Despite the fact that Rhodan ordered minimal acceleration until they reached the ionosphere, the city of Terrania not far from the spaceport was shaken in its foundations as if its last hour had come. It had never happened before that the three giants had blasted off together into the sky.

Beyond the Earth's atmosphere the formation went full speed ahead. It followed exactly the course taken by Deringhouse.

"Battle alert for all units!" This command was issued after they crossed the orbit of Mars. The highly specialized men of the crew looked at each other. The "old man" had spoken in such an impassive tone.

"If the fireworks don't begin to pop in 15 hours latest, I'll walk home on foot," one of the engineers in the machine control centre of the cruiser *Solar System* swore.

One thousand feet above him Perry Rhodan turned to the mutant John Marshall. "Did you make contact,

John?" he inquired tersely.

Marshall twisted his face into a smile. "Terrible!" he groaned. "The kid is radiating like an atomic superbomb. I can hardly block out his vibrations."

"Nevertheless you've got to keep tuned in on him. It's essential that we can locate Tiffloor any time without any other technical means. I hope you'll soon get used to these para-impulses. It's an absolute must."

Reginald Bell occupied the seat of the Second Astronaut as usual. He made a wry mouth. Before him on the immense observation screen Jupiter came into view as a narrow crescent. They were to pass the planet at a close distance.

"I feel like a heel," he reproached himself. "It would've been our duty to inform him about the implant."

Rhodan's face looked earnest. Sombre thoughts furrowed his brow. Intercosmic space began beyond the orbit of the transplutonian planet. If anything happened it must take place soon.

"A knowledge of these matters would cost him his life. Perhaps I should say, *could* cost his life."

"Are you expecting an attack from strangers?"

Rhodan nodded silently. When Pluto was clearly discernible, the Chief of the New Power concluded:

"I've got a premonition that they'll seize the K-7 because they suspect Tiffloor to be there. Our hints were very slight but keen observers and clever brains will be able to follow through. Everson hasn't been molested. He's already in the Vega system."

"A bold guess," Bell laughed cheerlessly. "What if our unknown enemies don't have the logic you're crediting them with? Then your little scheme will fall through and our cosmic decoy will lure them in vain."

"Wait and see! We'll face it after we pass Pluto. It'll be our responsibility to show up at the right time. Pass the word that we must be ready for our manoeuvres after we reach the path of Uranus. If necessary we'll perform a short transition. I want to know who's after us. Tiffloor will give a good account of himself. I'm convinced that I haven't chosen a weakling. That'll be all."

Bell closed his mouth, which he'd already opened. He knew the expression on Rhodan's face only too well.

Perry glanced at the lean tall figure of the man who was born far from Terra. Khrest, the incomparable scientist from the Arkonide empire, had brought mankind not only superior technology but also true knowledge. His nearly white hair shone in the light of the numerous picture screens. He nodded quietly and solemnly. If anyone was in a position to find out who it was they were searching for in deep space, it was Khrest, the descendant of an age-old ruling dynasty.

The Arkonides had already established their stellar empire at a time when the Earthlings still dwelled in caves. Now man had grown up. With his innate energy and daring confidence he ventured into faraway domains that would have remained forbidden to him for many hundreds of years without the superlative knowledge of the Arkonides.

Rhodan waved quickly to the man who so much resembled a Terranian. In the meantime the three ship

units underwent preparations for a short but vehement manoeuvre. "I'm going to nail them down, you can depend on that," Rhodan whispered. "I'll never allow them to ruin what we've build up with so much hard work. I won't be afraid to take the greatest risks, for the sake of mankind."

5/ The Ship From—Outside

The sun had become a pale spot. Pluto, the next to outermost planet of the solar system, didn't receive very much light from the life-giving source.

The frozen world of the planet could not be seen on the observation screens of the K-7 racing by with nearly the speed of light. At this time Pluto's position was on the other side of the sun. Therefore, Conrad Deringhouse had to forego making contact with the automatic station located there.

Fifteen minutes before the stereo compensators had run through the comparative measurements required for the transition.

The 12 cadets on board in addition to the regular crew had performed all the operations that were normally executed by experienced astronauts and technicians. The candidates were, of course, under close supervision and the strictest control was exercised. The final test required everything a graduate astronaut had to know and the instructors of the New Power never tolerated reckless behaviour.

This was especially true in the case of an FTL jump where the slightest miscalculation could lead to a catastrophe.

None of the men on board except two had an inkling that this particular transition was not exactly critical. Naturally the commander desired to jump with precision, if he had to jump at all. In this case it was only necessary that they actually reach the Vega system.

Deringhouse and Rous were the two people whose tension was growing by the minute. They went through the entire range of emotions, which found expression in their faces despite their self-control.

Julian Tiffloor was perhaps the only other man—beside the two who were in on the secret—who suspected the anxious thoughts behind the raised brow of Deringhouse.

Cadets like Eberhardt and Hifield took it for granted that the growing disquietude of the commander was caused by the transition to be executed by the students. Indeed it was nerveracking for experienced space pilots to let such young men take the fate of valuable ships in their hands.

Although they had taken part in many supra-light-speed leaps, they never had the responsibility of transacting it by themselves. This made a little difference; even Hifield admitted that much. It was comparable to the first solo-flight of bygone times. Such tests could fray their nerves no matter how perfectly they mastered the subject.

Considering the relatively small distance to the Vegan sun a direct jump on the basis of optical observations was feasible. The velocity of the star itself was negligible in relation to the short time of the transition.

Tiffloor, undisputedly the best mathematician of the Space Academy, was assigned to operate during the last hour the astronomical computer which had to determine the final corrections for the departure data. The necessary input data were obtained from the upper pole cupola where comparative measurements were continually recorded automatically.

The large central computer brain on vessels like the *Good Hope* had the function of transmitting the semi-automatic programming of corrections to the drive engines that finally had to actuate the course corrections.

The K-7 reverberated from the deep roar of the impulse-converter. The power generators were running at a much lower sound level.

"Ready for maximum thrust! Ready for injection of booster fuel mass!" Deringhouse advised the technical control centre.

There skilled men were supervising the controls. Only after all figures had been checked with utmost precision were the engineering candidates permitted to activate the crucial impulse.

"All clear in the Technical Centre!" the voice came back from the depths of the hull. "Booster mass five seconds before transition manoeuvre."

Tiffloor listened to the various reports. He didn't know exactly why Deringhouse and Rous became more apprehensive all the time but he had noticed with surprise that the highly efficient range-finder section of the K-7 had received orders two hours ago to double its guard.

There the telecom sensors and structural change instruments were attended by some of the most outstanding radio-technicians of the fleet. The aggregates functioned with speeds surpassing light which was indispensable due to the extremely rapid flight acceleration of the K-7.

Any traditional method of locating objects was totally inadequate.

Tiff listened to the muffled thunder of the drive engines installed in the bulge around the equatorial circumference. This was a typical method of construction on Arkon that had considerable advantages over other arrangements. Primarily the volume of the main module was more efficiently utilized. Furthermore, the reversal of the jets in braking manoeuvres proved to be much less complicated than in vehicles with engines at the rear.

These and many other thoughts flitted through Tiff's mind. He performed his calculations in a virtually somnambulant state.

When the red lamp began to light up he reported via telecom.

"Thirteen minutes to go to manoeuvre. Counter is running."

Deringhouse turned his head and studied the illuminated diagram screen of the cosmo-robot. The data were right on.

It was odd that Rous glanced at his plain wristwatch, which was pitifully inaccurate for the purpose. Tiff was seized by a vague creeping feeling.

Spellbound, he stared at the two pilots. Deringhouse had not yet unlocked the red contact switch in the right armrest of his chair. As long as it was protected by the transparent cover, there could be no thought of giving the decisive impulse for the transition.

Of course it was unnecessary and it would've been careless to remove the safety cover 13 minutes before the actual manoeuvre. Nevertheless Tiff couldn't help an inexplicable feeling that it would have been better in the interest of the K-7 to release the safety lock.

Mulling over his thoughts pro and con, the counter showed that the 13th minute had elapsed. There were 12 minutes left to the transition. The millisecond countdown was to begin at 60 seconds when every fraction of a second mattered. A minuscule shift of the push impulse could have disastrous and uncontrollable consequences. More than one Arkonide vessel had vanished without a trace in hyperspace.

At exactly 6.53 seconds after the count of 12 minutes a report came through that jarred Major Deringhouse's body into tension. Rous' head whirled around.

"Range-finder Section!" it burst from the loudspeaker. "Unidentified object in green sector 45.3 degrees, vertical displacement green 18.6 degrees. Distance zero point eight by body-sensors. Velocity of foreign body close to light barrier. Structure analysis inconclusive, probably metal alloy."

Deringhouse didn't say a word. This was quite unusual. His attitude was extremely objective despite the wide grin on his lips. At such times the young major showed a certain resemblance to Perry Rhodan. They were in that envied class of men who were without nerves at the moment they faced danger.

Tiff held his breath. He thought that the metal capsule hidden in his breast pocket would crush his ribs.

Eberhardt's mouth was agape as he wondered about the strange reaction of the commander. Hifield had turned pale. His eyes wandered back and forth between the two men in authority.

After the second report of the sensors was related with improved accuracy and further details despite the great distance, Deringhouse slowly rose from his pilot seat as if he were only getting a cup of coffee from the dispenser. Everybody watched him as he switched on the radio transceiver in his bulging helmet.

"Sergeant Rous, take over the ship!" he said crisply through the mike of the radio helmet. "All men on board activate own transceivers! Technical Control! Abandon manoeuvre stations. Cancel injection of booster mass. Make ship ready for battle action!"

Rous knifed down the main switch of the automatic transition control. The central computer brain whirred to standstill. The laborious calculations for the impending manoeuvre had become superfluous with one stroke. The counter in Tiff's cosmo-automatic was arrested. It switched instantaneously over to the positronic fire control. As soon as the battle alarm was sounded the ship became a beehive of activity. The crew hurried to put on their spacesuits which were mandatory in such a case.

Tiff's fingers worked with dreamlike perfection. He didn't remember how often they had practiced getting quickly into the protective suits that were always kept within reach.

The magnetic locks snapped shut. Control lights signalled the activation of the life-supporting systems. Suddenly Tiff thought he knew why the commander had ordered the replacement of their harmless training weapons with the real thing back when they traversed the orbit of Mars. Something was in the wind and—to all appearances—it had been expected all along.

Tiff dashed to his station. Automatically controlled gun-turrets rose through the heretofore smooth and spotless outer hull of the K-7. Separate energy sources started up in the unmanned armoured mounts. The energy-field projectors began to work with a muffled din. They consumed almost all the energy of the ship's power stations.

The spaceship that had just now been on the verge of a peaceful hypertransition had turned into a fighting machine with sharp teeth and studded with guns.

The K-7 could not be compared with the heavy cruiser of the fleet, let alone the super-battleship *Stardust II*. Nevertheless, Perry Rhodan had attacked an entire space armada with a 200-foot ship of this class and created appalling havoc among his opponents. Deringhouse fleetingly remembered breaking through the battle lines of the reptilian Topides. There the old *Good Hope* had proved its mettle, belying its relatively moderate size.

Deringhouse gave instructions to refrain from closing the spherical helmets at this time. In case of pressure loss they would automatically shut tight anyway.

His helmet dangled on his backpack with the oxygen and power supply. The robot fighter commando marched into the control centre. From the airlocks came the all-clear for the special Arkonide task-force machines.

Deringhouse had firmly planted his feet behind the empty seat of the first pilot. Sergeant Rous had taken over the controls.

Tiff noticed the questioning look of Cadet Klaus Eberhardt whose pale face protruded from the collaring of his protective suit.

Tiff shrugged his shoulders almost imperceptibly. A blunt curse coming from Hifield was audible in radio helmets.

"Attention! This is not an exercise, I repeat—this is not an exercise!" the commander announced. "The transition has been postponed. New calculations will be required later for your test. I want to make clear that the sudden appearance of a spaceship in the vicinity of the solar system is—because it doesn't belong to the New Power—sufficient reason to delay a hyperjump that can be repeated any time. The K-7 has twice its regular complement on board. The cadets will have an opportunity to demonstrate their aptitude during the imminent action. I'm interested in finding out what the foreign object is."

"A meteor or a comet?" a high voice piped up.

"Such bodies usually don't move with a speed approaching light," Deringhouse lectured without asking who had spoken.

Tiff was one of the few on board who failed to be amused. Something was going on here that Deringhouse couldn't or wouldn't mention.

The major threw up his left hand and gave a signal with his fingers for which the man at the hyper-radio seemed to have waited. The co-ordinated bars of light on the adjustment scale indicated clearly that the powerful directional antenna on top of the upper pole cupola was pointing to Terra.

Tiff observed that the radio technician quickly transmitted an evidently pre-arranged signal. He noted

that any verbal communication—though it would have been feasible—was avoided. The short message was probably also strictly coded.

There seemed to be no reply coming back but Tiffnor assumed that the trained specialists had impatiently waited for the signal. His throat began to feel dry again, a sure sign of the high degree of his excitement.

Deringhouse caught the desperate look of the young cadet. He stared at him till one of his eyelids twitched. Tiff was finally able to swallow again. He had a premonition of what was in the offing although he had not been informed of the emergence of unknown intelligent beings. However he was acutely aware that a serious game was about to enter a decisive phase.

Why didn't Deringhouse call the Chief? Rhodan could have arrived in no time with heavy battleships. The whole matter seemed baffling.

Deringhouse shooed away one of the other cadets of the final class from the massive swivel chair of the fire control officer. The entire firepower of the K-7 was here concentrated in a few buttons and levers.

Now even the men of the regular crew were astounded. What could impel the commander to assume personally the duty of the gunner?

Deringhouse was ready for the crucial operation which never failed to cause mild apprehension even in experienced spacefighters. The targeting mechanism was coupled with the range-finder. Woe to the hostile ship that was caught in the telecom sensors! There was no room left for mistakes in the superb automatic fire control of the Arkonides. All experimental malfunctions of the construction had been completely eliminated 10,000 years ago.

"Distance constant, velocity constant," the range-finder section reported. "No change of flight direction or velocity. Evaluation by positronicon determined that the unidentified object consists of an elongated metallic body about 1000 feet long. Tolerance value plus or minus 5%."

Deringhouse could be heard whistling through his teeth. If the unknown ship was a thousand feet long and had the shape of a cylinder, it was definitely not built on Earth.

"Nice little buggy," Rous whispered into the radio.

"I'd feel better if the *Solar System* were around..."

A roar drowned out Rous' words. The range-finder section visible behind the transparent bulletproof wall was flooded with a bluish light. After a short moment the roar subsided.

Immediately the voice of an excited range-finder officer came through: "Foreign object has transitioned. Object has disappeared from range of telecom. Structure sensor magnitude at 23, very high. Structure disturbance at zero point eight distance. Caution!"

Sergeant Rous punched the release of the safety belts. The flexible magnetic straps sprang from the backrest of all seats. Tiff felt himself irresistibly lashed to his seat.

Rous manipulated his controls with nimble fingers. As a pilot he was second to none. Moreover, he seemed to know exactly what the situation required.

Tiff heard the deep rumbling of the large electric generators. Rous saturated the hypergravo shock

repulsion field to the overload mark at the very last moment.

Tifflor gripped the armrests of his chair as blue-white flashes streaked through the navigation department. The two high-grade structure sensors for the measurement of major disturbances of the space-continuum conked out.

Burning debris hissed through the big room. The shrill tones pouring out of the loudspeakers lasted only a few seconds. Then they too gave up their mechanical ghosts.

Deringhouse bellowed something nobody could understand. Tiff was only able to see that he snapped the contact of his space-helmet. He followed his example just before the fearsome shaking began.

On the encompassing observation screen of the K-7 a star seemed to explode in close proximity. The glaring light effect couldn't have originated more than 300,000 miles away—less than two seconds. The ghastly eddies of pure energy in the vicinity of an emerging spaceship could only be felt but never seen. An unprotected body, regardless of its size, was hopelessly lost at most times when it was caught in the wake of a super-spaceship coming too close.

This certainly was a super-spaceship. Tiff observed on the videoscreen a gigantic cylindrical body with semispherical bow and stem.

Taking into account the duration of an ordinary light-ray the unknown vessel must have rematerialised two minutes earlier.

The optical magnification brought the foreign object so close that its outside was clearly recognizable.

At the stem of the ship fiery outbursts appeared. They were violet, strangely fluorescing energy bundles that clearly proved that high-powered impulse-drive engines of the Arkonide type were at work over there.

All these impressions were instantaneously digested by Tifflor. Then he was seized by the terrifying oscillations of the ship's hull that reverberated like a bell and reduced him to a pitiful substance of flesh and blood. Tiff screamed bloody murder and so did all the other men on board as their heads throbbed with pains that made seconds feel like eternities.

The roaring and jolting continued. Below the command centre the generators of the power stations whined furiously. If they failed to meet the energy demands of the all-important protective field, the first to perish would be the weakest links on board—its people.

"Oh no, brother, not that!" Tiff shouted in torment.

6/ Unforeseen Events

Although the structure sensors in the range-finder sections of the heavy units didn't blow out, they were strained to the limit of their capacity.

Perry Rhodan didn't wait for the report from the r.f. section. He knew from sad experience gained on prior flight actions that this was more than a bad joke.

The emergence of the alien ship after its manoeuvre in space didn't otherwise affect Rhodan's fleet of battleships. Only the structure sensors had been severely strained.

The three vessels were aligned in a widely staggered formation near the orbit of Uranus. The distance between the K-7 launched earlier and Rhodan's team was approximately two billion miles. This distance was really too short for a transition but too far for normal flight below the speed of light.

Rhodan, who had been loath to consider the possibility of a swift attack by the unknown foe by means of such a co-ordinated transition, now had to face the fact that this very thing had indeed happened.

He ignored the wild cursing of his First Officer. Reginald Bell was beside himself. The occurrence the structure sensors had so strongly registered was merely proof of what he had considered a foregone conclusion in contrast to Rhodan's opinion.

The secret opponent didn't risk pursuing the equally fast K-7 in normal flight. Such a manoeuvre would've been madness especially as it had been shown before that space-battles near the barrier of light were extremely difficult and almost impossible to conduct.

"What are we going to do now?" he shouted. "They jumped in close. If we do the same, it'll tear the K-7 apart. She won't take another shock like that. Even one of the cruisers would create too much disturbance."

Rhodan had grasped the situation long before Bell finished his loud laments. He made contact by telecom with the two heavy cruisers *Terra* and *Solar System*, located on the same plane in red and green at a distance of three light-minutes.

"Rhodan to McClears and Nyssen. Follow in normal flight after visual evaluation. Chart your course precisely for K-7. I'll go first into transition with the *Stardust*. Wait for my orders before you follow me in a short distance leap. Don't start simultaneously under any conditions. I'll return from hyperspace two light-minutes away from the K-7. She should be able to withstand this without damage. Watch all developments in the situation carefully!"

Bell was impressed. This was the instantaneous problem-solving for which Rhodan was famous. In these lightning fast decisions, making the most of all possibilities evolving from the circumstances, lay the secret of Rhodan's success.

Indeed the K-7 wouldn't be jeopardized if the superbattleship emerged from a higher plane of space into the normal universe. Two light-minutes—this was approximately tantamount to 22 million miles.

Rhodan could have easily aimed for a distance of half a light-minute. This was well within the safe tolerance of stress for the K-7.

But here too Rhodan had promptly calculated and weighed the conditions. A small margin for error had to be taken into account. There was no such infallible brain in the universe nor such a perfect computer as one which could program the highly complicated transition manoeuvre to the last mile. The unavoidable tolerance variations of drive engines and fluctuations of structure fields precluded such accuracy. Rhodan was forced to make an educated guess and his best choice was two light-minutes.

He had to rule out travelling at the speed of light to reach the battleground since such a delay could have proved fatal. An attack had definitely taken place there.

The crew of the half-a-mile-wide super-giant went feverishly to work. The preliminary rough figures were adjusted to the finest degree in accordance with the available data. This was accomplished with uncanny speed thanks to the incomparable positronic brain on board the mighty battleship.

Nevertheless, it took about six minutes before the final results could be transmitted to the automatic guidance for the transition. Now *Stardust II* was ready for action.

"Commander to crew!" all loudspeakers blared. "Transition in 42 seconds. Try to pull immediately out of the transition shock. No shooting unless ordered by me. I'm taking over direct command. Technical Control to proceed at once with booster mass injection. We'll have to be faster than the other ships. Attention! Go!"

The severe, molecule-splitting jolt of the transition struck abruptly. Rhodan's last word faded into something the Arkonide hyper-physicists called 'destandardized structure form,' a concept that could only be utilized for calculations by people who excelled in Arkonide science—and the disciples of the New Power had it at their fingertips.

The mighty *Stardust II* vanished like a shimmering spot of light from the normal space-time-continuum. The heavy cruisers were careful not to register the jump-off on its structure sensors. When a vessel with the *Stardust*'s gigantic proportions was thrust into hyperspace, it created the upheaval of an entire space sector.

* * * *

The Arkonide robots were said to have exceptionally sensitive mechano-brains. This reputation seemed to be wrong since the robots were the first to overcome the tremendous shock of the transition.

Men like Conrad Deringhouse and Sergeant Rous were still hanging half unconscious in their safety belts when the mechanical members of the crew started to operate again.

The enemy was close—much too close. A cursory check revealed that they had already approached the alien ship within about one light-second. This was still almost 200,000 miles but it was a ridiculously small distance for Rhodan's astronauts.

The distance of 200,000 miles could be leaped by an impulse-ray in 1.3 seconds. This could hardly be called keeping one's distance; on the contrary, it was more like an accosting attempt as it left practically no time for manoeuvres.

To make things worse, their opponent kept abreast at the same velocity. Naturally he had also emerged from hyperspace near the speed of light.

Major Deringhouse was jarred from his painfully clouded state of mind by the deep roar of fire spewing from a gun turret. When he was able to see clearly again, he observed on the control screen panel of turret *Caesar* that they had scored a smashing hit on the hostile target.

The K-7 turned leeward from the fire by the recoiling cannon. The gyroscopes compensated for the deviation at once but they found it necessary to correct the minute shift of less than a thousandth of a degree by rotating the turrets.

Due to this tiny delay Deringhouse was unable to push the firing buttons instantly. The positronic brain had not yet given the green light.

He watched the effect of his hit with fascination. The strange ship, magnified to the size of a hand on the picture screen, reacted with great vehemence.

Its protective screen flared up in a searing glow. Its stern was burred around by the impact even though the thermo-beam evidently didn't penetrate the defence shield. Nevertheless it was a telling blow as Deringhouse noted with great interest and satisfaction.

Then his eyes narrowed again. The fire control reported all clear.

The commander could have pressed all buttons with 10 fingers. Nobody had to tell such an experienced veteran as Deringhouse that nothing would've remained of the enemy ship.

Tiffior loudly expressed his bitter disappointment when the commander touched only one of the firing buttons. This time he didn't even shoot from the extra-heavy impulse beamer mounted at the lower pole.

He fired a single paltry gun from the ring of batteries in the mid-bulge. Notwithstanding its murderous noise, its sting was not enough to harm their hulking adversary.

A cannon like that was commonly used only as a polite warning signal to a stranger who was requested to identify himself.

Major Deringhouse grinned delightedly at the protesting cadet as if he were blissfully unaware that they confronted a fighting ship of enormous dimensions.

The answer came promptly and unmistakably.

A blinding burst of energy lunged so rapidly toward the K7 that it became visible only at the last moment.

The men pulled in their heads. A muffled groan spread out through the helmet speakers.

Then pandemonium followed. The inside of the protective barrier was engulfed by a scorching heat-wave with solar temperature. Energy storms frazzled the structure fields and the impact of the hit strained the shock absorbers to the limit of their capacity.

Once again the spherical hull turned into a swinging, resounding gong. It took several long seconds before the vibrations died down and the fiery light grew dim on the hypergravo-screen.

"They must have good intentions," Rous groaned into the microphone. "Heaven help us if they let go with a salvo. That'll be the end of us."

"Shoot! Why don't you shoot?" somebody cried in anguish. Tiff looked back. Hifield, who always acted so arrogantly and superior, was now hanging in his safety belts, trembling and screaming hysterically.

All hell had broken loose on board the K-7. Tiffior was firmly convinced that all Deringhouse had to do to destroy the enemy was to loose a full-scale barrage.

Why in the world did he fiddle around with the toy cannon in the ring battery? After all their opponent had made no secret that he meant business.

When the second shot slammed into the defence shield of the K-7 Tiff became even more desperate. They were deadly serious. There could be no doubt about it after the radio officer reported that he had received no answer to his call to end the hostilities.

Deringhouse blanched a little till the effect of the bombardment had worn off. He merely nodded to Rous. That was all, but it clearly implied that the two men had an understanding between them. Otherwise the crazy idea of manipulating the fairly massive K-7 like a tiny one-man pursuitship would never have occurred to the Sergeant. He switched over to manual steering, leaving only the thrust absorbers under automatic control. He even took the operation of the drive engines over himself and began what he called 'evasion manoeuvres.'

If Tiff had known that Perry Rhodan was waiting not too far away with a powerful battle formation, he could have understood the purpose of Rous' turbulent tactics. The Sergeant was out to gain time.

Since Deringhouse didn't shoot to kill, Tiff came to the conclusion that Deringhouse never attempted to demolish the ship in the encounter. One couldn't very well shoot people dead if one wanted to ask them questions. It was as simple as that.

Deringhouse's voice rose above the whine of the drive engines running with stupendous acceleration: "Keep your belts fastened! A few G's will be coming through the absorbers. Sit tight!"

The stars visible on the observation screens turned into rotating streaks. Rous flew a course not even the best computer could have devised. Such feats could be performed only by thinking, organic beings.

Glistening thermo-streams shot past the dancing K-7. If she took any hit now it would be a pure accident.

Tiffior watched Sergeant Rous' taut face. He made a mental note to remind the Sergeant occasionally that his own flight manoeuvre on the Moon was harmless compared to this.

He became absorbed in these break-neck capers to the point of being distracted from their perilous situation till he was alarmed again by a high screeching noise. The ship quavered ominously. The engines continued to roar but they were subjected to such tremendous G-forces that the older men were reminded of the early days of primitive space trips.

The intensity escalated in quick spurts to three, six and eight G's. At this point the pilot's manual steering was terminated by the automatic safety control.

All drive engines were shut down by the positronic brain and the energy thus gained flowed into the thrust-absorbers. The terrible pressure decreased immediately and soon disappeared completely.

Groaning softly, Deringhouse lifted himself up in his seat. Several cadets had lost consciousness.

When Tiff's blood-filled eyes became normal again, he could only moan. The alien ship was poised close

to the helpless K-7.

"A pull-ray, damn it!" Deringhouse shouted. "They've caught us. Rous, turn the engines on to full power. Give it all you've got to get out of this field or we'll be finished."

Sergeant Rous' desperate efforts to get the ship moving were in vain. The automatic controls failed to react. Whoever was in that other ship was using his brains. He seemed to know that the safety regulator was merely insuring the stability of the thrust neutralization field. Keeping his pull-ray just below its highest magnitude insured that the machines of the K-7 were unable to start up.

Bursts of light flooded the picture screens with the brightness of the Sun as the two defence fields collided. The safety devices on the K-7 blew up, proving beyond doubt that the other much larger vessel was equipped with more powerful machines.

Deringhouse withdrew his fingers at the last moment from the firing buttons. If he'd started shooting now, the Guppy would have been blown to smithereens too.

The alignment manoeuvre of the strangers was performed with admirable skill. Over there were experienced pilots at the controls. The long hull soon blanketed all observation screens on the starboard side. There was a lot of shouting going on in the captured sphere.

Deringhouse ran to the radio room. The K-7 was still locked on to the powerful pull-ray of the strangers. There was no way of escaping as long as the other side maintained their control.

"Enemy is speeding up," somebody bellowed. "He's dragging us along at a fast clip. Caution!"

Tiff saw that Deringhouse hastily talked into the mike of the main telecom. The light-marks of the directional antenna coincided precisely. A violet signal indicated that it was aligned with Terra.

Now the pressure forces were on the increase again. The acceleration must have reached more than 300 miles per second. It was simply impossible to start the machines of the K-7. Rous worked like mad. The positronicon was impervious to his attempts to interfere with the emergency measures. It was programmed to prevent a catastrophe and safeguarding human life on board had the highest priority. Therefore, the last available watt was fed into the shock-absorber field and no energy was left for power consumed by the main drive engines and auxiliary aggregates.

Deringhouse had barely time enough to throw himself on a reclining seat before the G-forces became dangerous.

Tiff gasped with great difficulty for breath. Rous' face before him was distorted into a painful grimace in the typical manner facial muscles changed their shape under such stresses.

Tiff estimated that they were exposed to 10 G's over the tolerable amount when the structure sensors reacted violently. A tremendous ship must have emerged from hyperspace.

The still-functioning telecom sensors showed the huge glistening sphere of an Imperium class battleship. *Stardust II* had arrived!

Tiff heard the rasping laugh of the Commander. Suddenly he realized that Conrad Deringhouse had this up his sleeve all along. The *Stardust* was his trump. But the question was whether Perry Rhodan had come in time.

The alien spaceship accelerated at a fantastic rate, which was made easier due to the high velocity it had attained in the meantime.

The pressure reached 11 G's. Then came the stupefying dematerialisation shock for which Tiffloor had subconsciously waited.

Evidently the large ship had performed this manoeuvre together with the locked on K-7 by injecting the booster mass.

Rous' face became blurred. It had faded into a pale hazy spot without recognizable contours. The soft rustling noise accompanying the transition was also audible.

Unforeseen events had taken them by surprise.

7/ The Secret Weapon

Perry Rhodan, always distinguished by his ability to shift his attention spontaneously, grasped the situation intuitively.

As the *Stardust* returned to the normal universe, the alien ship was immediately detected and projected on the observation screen.

It took Rhodan only a second to shake off the materialization shock and be alert again.

The range-finder registered the distance between the two ships as 1.9356 light-minutes. The transition had been executed with high precision but they emerged about a minute too late from hyperspace.

The awesome roar of the gigantic drive engines broke into Rhodan's deliberations. Chief Engineer Manuel Garand had quickly and accurately complied with the instructions given before the transition.

The super-battleship surged forward. Within a few moments it reached the absolute maximum for travel below the speed of light. This limit was at .6% of the speed of light in accordance with the physical laws of normal space.

The crew also came back to life again. The observation officer reported:

"Unidentified ship accelerating at extreme rate. Transition appears likely."

Rhodan heard the voluble curses of his First Officer. Reginald Bell realized that they came a moment too late because of the time-consuming calculations.

"They probably hold the K-7 in an enormously strong retaining field," the observation officer reported again. "A bombardment is inadvisable."

Rhodan knew this too. Quickly, without wasting words, he tried his last chance.

The rolled out gun-turrets of the gigantic ship remained silent. Instead the power stations were abruptly switched over to howling transformers and through wireless conductors. Almost simultaneously the upper tractor-ray was activated by the combined energy-sources of the *Stardust*. A lightning-fast gravitation beam measuring 60 feet shot from the projector. Where this highly concentrated field was applied, a small planet could be blasted out of its orbit. If the alien spaceship was caught in its beam, there was not the slightest chance of escape for it, including the mass of the K-7.

The heated discussions on board the battleship stopped. The pale shimmer of the tractor-ray swishing away was clearly visible. It was even faster than the *Stardust*'s own considerable speed.

Unfortunately its running time was still too long. Rhodan was the first to realize that he was labouring under an illusion.

Before the desired goal could be reached, the structure sensors reacted vigorously. The strange vessel vanished in a flicker of light.

Rhodan punched the button of the power switch. The tractor-ray projector went out like a light.

"Quiet on board!" Rhodan's voice resounded from all the loudspeakers in a cool, steely tone that caused even Bell to remain silent. "As you can see, we've come too late. The K-7 was corralled by a substantially bigger ship. It's amazing that the aliens have been able to go into transition with our ship in tow outside. Attention, range-finder section! Be on alert with structure sensors. Make sure you locate where the unknown ship emerges from hyperspace. It's unlikely they'll leap very far. I assume it's merely an emergency transition without a special target undertaken for the sole purpose of a quick escape. It's essential that you determine at once the approximate position after their re-appearance."

After the range-finder section confirmed the instructions, the commanders of the two heavy cruisers *Terra* and *Solar System* were ordered to advance in half an hour to the orbit of Pluto.

Major Nyssen and Captain McClears acknowledged the order.

"You aren't ready yet to give up?" a sonorous voice asked.

Rhodan turned his head. Khrest, the Arkonide, stood tall and erect behind him.

"I wouldn't think of it. If we succeed in spotting the ship on its return into space, we'll be able to calculate its approximate position. I've another question. Were you able to tell from the shape of the unknown ship whom we're dealing with?"

Khrest shook his high-domed head. "I'm sorry but I've been unable to come to a conclusion. There are many space travellers who build their ships like that. I'd have to see more details."

Rhodan was disappointed and turned back to his controls. A few moments later a weak rumble was heard in the r.f. section.

"Re-materialization has occurred, at a considerable distance," the observation officer reported. "It'll be very difficult, sir, to compute the exact position."

"Thank you, I'm aware of the margin of errors involved," Rhodan interrupted. "Give me the rough figures. I'll have the mathematical group take care of the precise results. Khrest, may I ask you to help

me?"

Twenty minutes later both heavy cruisers arrived simultaneously. They approached at high speed and skilfully lined up in formation.

Rhodan joined the circle of his mutants who were all present. The telepaths among them concentrated on the intensive vibrations they had received so painfully a short time ago.

"How about it?" Rhodan inquired. His face looked slim and impassive.

Marshall was the spokesman for the special corps. He slowly raised his shoulders. "Chief, if it's really possible to hear Tiffloor two light-years away, he must be farther than that at this time. We can receive nothing at all."

"Does the presence of the ship's crew interfere with your perception? If so, I can take you a few light-hours out into intercosmic space."

"The emissions from the men don't disturb us. We're used to them. Cadet Tiffloor is of no help to us now. We can't make contact with him."

Rhodan walked slowly toward the hatch. The three ships were in the process of braking. Now it was crucial to compute the re-entry position of the escaped ship precisely. Rhodan knew that this would be a formidable task.

The mutants eyed their commander silently. Up to now everything had worked out according to his plans but the mysterious strangers had reacted expertly and too fast to suit Rhodan under the circumstances. It had been clear from the beginning that it wouldn't be practical to show up earlier since it would've been self-defeating to follow the decoy ship too closely.

Nevertheless, Rhodan was so far satisfied with the result. He had already determined beyond doubt that a first-class spy organization existed in the territory of the New Power. The allegedly highly important mission of Cadet Tiffloor had been discovered.

However, Rhodan was for the moment very little concerned with the elimination of the agents. He considered it more urgent to find out who professed such a burning interest in Terra. Only after this had been determined could Rhodan come to more definite conclusions as to their proficiency and technical equipment as well as to their intentions.

Rhodan brooded for a minute before the big antigrav elevator in the central axis of the ship. A few men saluted. The lean man looked right through them as if they didn't even exist.

Rhodan's thoughts dwelled on the best weapon he deployed in this contest, namely Julian Tiffloor. Tiffloor's implanted transmitter was working continuously. If Rhodan succeeded in getting within a distance of two light-years, it would be an easy matter to pinpoint his location.

It wouldn't help his adversaries one whit to hide in the deepest burrows under the mountains of unknown worlds, where they would have been safe from detection by technical means but nonetheless exposed to probings via all-pervasive telepathy.

Now it was necessary to bring the 'secret weapon Tiffloor' back into play and to do this they had to perform some intricate calculations.

Rhodan found some solace in the thought that he had allowed himself at least two light-years leeway. This was a considerable margin of tolerance.

Before riding up to the Command Centre he checked in at the Machine Control room of the super-battleship.

The technical team under Manuel Garand had done exemplary work. The bewildering array of installations for the mechanical guidance held no more secrets for the team.

Garand's cherubic face lit up when he recognized the Chief. "What can I do for you? Any special wishes?" he inquired, sounding like a pleased child who had just received some presents.

Rhodan was cheered up again by Garand who was one of those good-natured characters who talked in the most cordial manner when conditions were at their worst. When Chief Engineer Garand began to beam it meant that stormy weather was brewing.

"None," Rhodan exclaimed. "Just keep everything shipshape. You understand that we'll soon be in the thick of things. It'd be ridiculous if we couldn't corner these kidnapers."

"We'll do our part," the corpulent engineer promised happily. "By the way, sir, I've given some thought to the retaining field we've observed. Would you like to take a look at the data?"

Rhodan grinned with real pleasure. "Well," he said broadly, "I knew I could get something out of you."

As Rhodan walked over to the computer, *Stardust II* was losing the last of its speed. The ship came to a complete stop about 180 miles beyond the orbit of Pluto. The familiar Sun was only a pale little disk that could hardly be suspected of making a burning hell out of a planet like Mercury.

In the Command Centre Reginald Bell switched his controls over to standby and grumbled as he got up from his seat. "I wonder what the devil we're getting into," he mumbled. "I'd love to get these hijackers before a cannon. That would simplify our questioning, don't you think?"

The robot he addressed didn't react and Bell saved himself some very abusive and very useless words. Disgustedly he trotted over to the drink dispenser.

In spite of his state of gloom he had the feeling that Rhodan would persevere in the end no matter what setbacks he encountered.

8/ Enter: The Springers

They were painfully familiar with the pangs of rematerialisation and knew that the transition had ended.

The temporary derangement of the senses and the bloodred surge before the eyes indicated that they had made a long leap. Such effects were produced only in jumps of over 200 light-years.

Deringhouse struggled to get out of his reclining seat. The other men in the Command Centre were slowly coming to. The cadets—not being used to such extreme stress—took a few more minutes to recover.

Tiffloor saw the Commander stagger from the radio room. Deringhouse's breathing was heard as shrill, whistling noises in the closed helmets. Apparently he had to gather all his strength to overcome his exhaustion.

Rous, too, was up again. Tiff's first feeble effort was to touch the metal cylinder in his breast-pocket. As long as his spacesuit remained closed, he was unable to trigger the built-in self-destruct device.

He was gripped by panic. Nobody had to tell him what the unknown skipper had done with the K-7. He didn't have the haziest notion whether their pursuers were merely intent on intercepting his secret message or capturing their spacesphere, though in the final analysis it made very little difference to him.

He was fully convinced that the explicit orders he had received required him to destroy at once the capsule containing the secret micro-tapes.

The observation screens had become unobstructed again. Tiff quickly glanced at the front panel. Not far from the ship, still moving close to the speed of light, a clearly recognizable double-star was shining.

The larger, orange-coloured sun seemed to stand much closer than its blue companion.

Tiff tried for a moment to search his memory for the names of such double-stars but he quickly gave up since there were too many in the universe. It was much more important that he follow his orders regarding the message.

After a few seconds he also got up on his feet. It was at the same moment that the strangers began to open the large freight airlock above the circular bulge.

The warning lights flashed in the Command Centre. Sergeant Rous cursed dreadfully. Farther back the roar of a firing impulse-beamer sprang up. Tiff spun around in horror. Who could be so stupid as to blast away in the narrow confines of the K-7 with an energy-weapon releasing bursts as hot as the sun?

"Disintegrators only!" the commander shouted into the microphone. "Cease thermo's at once! Do you want to vaporize the ship?"

The answer came in the form of shrill warning sirens from the climate control. In some departments of the vessel the temperature must have reached intolerable levels.

Tiffloor stopped watching the events. It was obvious the little crew of the K-7 didn't stand a chance.

Defly he caught the weapon Eberhardt threw to him. It was a heavy disintegrator, shooting rays that dissolved solid matter.

An infernal din broke out in the radio-helmets that forced the men to tone them down to nearly zero. Everybody was screaming and yelling in unison. The mingled cries of pain made Deringhouse fear the worst. The deep-toned explosions from unknown weapons was unmistakable.

"Run to the range-finder section!" the Commander called out to the cadet. "Hurry!"

Tiff took the risk of opening his helmet inside the hermetically sealed section room. Now the din of the battle grew much louder. It was getting closer. Several of the picture screens in the department had stopped functioning. Then the electric current was shut off and the lights went out as all other screens also became dark.

"They've taken over the Machine Control room," Rous said dispiritedly. "They must be pretty tough. They broke in when we were still half-unconscious. Otherwise this wouldn't have happened, you can take my word for that."

Rous could have been right but it was now already highly irrelevant. As the noise outside the closed hatch rose to a fever pitch and a white-hot spot appeared on the armoured steel panel, Tiff pulled the spacesuit from his body. He became desperate when the magnetic lock on his collar jammed and stubbornly refused to give way under his impatient tugging.

The room was empty of people. Whoever could hold a gun had taken cover behind heavy pieces of equipment.

The collar lock finally broke open when the hatch began to melt under the tremendous heat applied. A painful gust of hot air was blown against Tiff's unprotected face and the hatch disintegrated.

There was a blinding light outside. As Tiff tore open his uniform, the Command Centre was raked by flashing bursts. They shot into the room with unfamiliar shock-weapons and Deringhouse suddenly realized why he'd heard those cries of pain before.

Cadet Eberhardt was the first to collapse. He was followed by Rous, Martin and Hifield. Deringhouse managed to get off a shot into the hallway before he too was felled by one of the lightning flashes. He crashed moaning to the floor, stiff as a board.

Disregarding the battle, Julian Tiffloor paid only attention to the task at hand. He didn't touch his weapon and wasted no time looking for cover.

When the giant figures stormed into the Command Centre and the lamps flared up again, Tiff stood calmly in the middle of the room with the transparent armoured walls which had repulsed the rays from the enemy guns.

With fascination he watched the metal capsule go up in bright cold flames on the radio set where he'd placed it for all to see.

Tiffloor, the youth constantly plagued by self-doubts and insecurity, had in a moment become a man without nerves.

With an ironical smile he faced the approaching intruders, who looked like intelligent humanoid beings. When the first one reached him, Tiffloor was still smiling.

The six and a half foot tall, extremely robust stranger stopped in his tracks. He wore a light spacesuit of the Arkonide pattern, yet he was no Arkonide.

Tiff first noticed the red short-trimmed beard, the big menacing eyes in a broad face and the fiery red hair. He looked like a veritable giant as he planted himself in front of the slim young man from the planet Terra.

More figures of the same huge size came in. Their raucous voices fell silent. They stared threateningly at Tiff, whose quiet smile was probably more effective than senseless resistance.

Tiff surpassed himself in a remarkable performance. In his most charming manner, without a trace of trepidation, he began speaking in Intercosmo: "Pero! Hello! May I welcome you on behalf of the indisposed Commander on board the Terra spaceship K-7? Although your entry was a little stormy, I'm going to bring out the champagne right away. I beg your pardon, if you're not acquainted with the customs of our civilization that has produced such a delicious drink. Would you like to sit down?"

One of the red-bearded men raised a hand that looked more like a paw. He snarled something as if he were in charge. His eyes flitted from Tiff to the scorched spot on the radio set, where not even a speck of ash remained.

Nevertheless, Tiff subsequently came close to fainting. The man with the red beard folded his hands in front of his belly, bent over backwards and let go such a bellowing laugh that Tiff thought his eardrums were going to burst.

Tiff couldn't help being reminded of the old fire siren he had found as a boy in a junkyard and fixed up again together with a friend. Now he understood why his father was apoplectic with rage the first time they tested it. He, Tiff, was now in a similar situation.

As nervous as he felt inside, this outbreak of laughter tended to put his mind at ease. The other dangerous looking brutes joined in the howling laughter of their chief. These people appeared to distinguish themselves by their capacity for boundless laughter.

On the other hand it might also be a sign of anger. Tiff's face grew a little paler. The reactions of alien beings could be the exact reverse. At least that's what they'd been taught in the Space Academy.

It took a few minutes before the man with the deeply lined face had calmed down again. Now Tiff made his second mistake by saying politely: "Anyway, I'm happy I'm not confronted by bug-eyed monsters with suction cups on the soles of their feet."

The ensuing laughter shook the K-7. Julian Tiff, resolved firmly not to provoke humour in these apparently excitable people.

"He's precious!" the red-haired man groaned after a while. "We want to keep him. Tell me, *mikoa*, how come that you speak the trade language of the great archipelago?"

Tiff was relieved to bear himself addressed as a 'mikoa'—friend. "You mean the Galaxy?" He inquired hesitantly. Deeply worried, he kept glancing at his unconscious comrades.

"They'll soon wake up again," the stranger assured him jovially. "We're peaceful traders, not pirates. My name is Orlans, Captain and owner of the commercial ship *Orla XI*. We like and respect the intelligent races of the great archipelago. We never interfere with their internal squabbles unless somebody dares to meddle with our trade monopoly. I apologize for the somewhat rough treatment I've meted out but nobody has come to grief. However I can't fail to mention that your Terranian Commander has tried to attack my ship and that I've escaped at the last moment."

Tiff stopped wondering and was no longer afraid. Although he was only 20 years old he'd become a man with a cool mind. This wasn't really so surprising since he was one of the few carefully selected students at the Academy using the training methods of an ancient race to prepare them for a life of

adventure.

Tiff was circumspect and merely bided his time. All his former inferiority complexes were now completely suppressed. He sensed that the fate of Terra was at stake in this game, the home of mankind and his ideals. The welfare of the many people on Earth justified every sacrifice. Never before had Tiff felt so clearly that everybody born on Earth was simply human, regardless of the colour of his skin or belief.

This awareness turned the young man into an incisive tactician. Orlgans was dangerous! His joviality was a mask and his raucous laughter was a characteristic peculiarity of his race.

Tiff no longer smiled politely. Some of the bearded men were busy in the Command Centre dragging away his unconscious companions like weightless manikins.

"I thank you for the rather humane treatment," Tiff said. "Be that as it may, Captain Orlgans, you've come exactly 10 seconds too late, in which time I've destroyed the container. You know about that, don't you?"

Of course Orlgans was informed about it. For a moment a shadow crossed his wide face.

"You're a good negotiating partner," he stated with a searching look. "Frank when you know your strength but secretive if you suspect your own weakness. Empires were built by clever men like that. Yes, I know about the message. Why do you think I've ambushed your ship?"

It was on the tip of Tiff's tongue to tell him how easy it would have been for them to blow the *Orla XI* to kingdom come with one salvo, but he refrained.

"What do you intend to do now?" he asked tersely. "Where are we?"

"Never mind that. By the way, I must compliment on your excellent knowledge of the intergalactic language."

"Our battleships are even more excellent," Tiff replied bitingly.

Orlgans' face became tense. Coldly he answered: "I've a Terranian on board my ship by the name of Jean-Pierre Mouselet. He has told us the whole story of how your backward world accidentally came into possession of one single battleship. Mind you, one lone battleship is all you've got. You are, or were, the carrier of a message which specially concerns my sphere of interest. Long term trading plans on a cosmic scale are no laughing matter for our people. We're peaceful, as I said before. However we reserve the right to defend our old privileges. Long ago the Great Imperium gave us full authority to act in any manner we see fit to maintain our monopoly. We're going to settle this with you, Julian Tiff!"

"You know my name?"

"What do you take us for? Did you think you could deceive us?"

Once again they roared with laughter. Tiff felt a little humiliated. As he never was initiated in Rhodan's master plan, he was firmly convinced that he served as bearer of very important news and he therefore accepted Orlgans' explanations as valid. Men like Deringhouse would have ridiculed it since the so called secret message was nothing but a ruse.

Tiff was led away roughly but not unfriendly. Orlgans commented with a grin: "We belong to related breeds of man, Tiff. We ought to get along. I don't see why this shouldn't be possible. You've probably never heard about my people. We, the Springers, are mightier than the Great Imperium itself. I'm constantly making agreements with radically different races. There's no reason why I can't do the same with you. I want you to know that my ancestors were Arkonides just like your tutor called Khrest."

Tiff was shaken but didn't show it. This stranger knew really much, indeed much too much. And who was Jean Pierre Mouselet? Probably a Frenchman.

Tiff had never heard the name but he believed that Orlgans' detailed information could only be furnished by a man from Earth of great intellect who was well versed in scientific practices. It was the only explanation for Orlgans' knowledge.

Tiff noticed in passing that the unconscious men of the crew had been taken to the mess hall of the auxiliary ship. All important stations were guarded by people who looked like Orlgans.

When he reached the loading dock above the peripheral bulge he had to put on his spacesuit again. About 60 feet away he saw the curved hull of the foreign ship. The huge bodies of his captors floated across and Tiff noted that they were in freefall. The double star was still too far away to necessitate a braking manoeuvre.

Tiff was hauled over with a rope. When he entered the airlock he felt that his last hour had come.

These *Springers* —as Orlgans called them—were extremely dangerous. It was clear that they felt menaced by the New Power under Perry Rhodan. Apparently they were afraid to lose their unrestricted trade monopoly. The only time they were likely to become vicious was when their sacred right was challenged.

Perry Rhodan had probably done this unknowingly. Tiff could have bet his life that his Chief had no inkling of the Springers' existence.

Orlgans patted Tiff in a fatherly fashion on the back as they went through the pressure equalizer.

"Our air is fit to breathe for you," he said patronizingly. "How about telling us a few more of your delightful jokes?"

"Jokes?" Tiff stammered. When did he make jokes? This was taken by the traders as just another funny remark. They were bowled over with wild hilarity.

9/ "We Can Conquer The Earth!"

The slender dark-haired man with the restless eyes and nervous fingers was positively an Earthling. The other bearded individuals were about three times as heavy as the man who was approximately 50 and had a twitching face. He appeared to be a nervous wreck on the way to a final breakdown.

"Jean-Pierre Mouselet, former manager of a European industrial corporation," the emaciated man

introduced himself. Tiffloor simply stared at him icily.

"Don't you have any cigarettes?" Mouselet begged, edging closer.

"I don't smoke," Tiff replied tersely. "If I did, I'd gladly give you a whole pack."

Mouselet acted surprised at this seemingly friendly gesture. But the gesture was anything but. Tiff made that perfectly clear with his next words. "I'd gladly give you a whole carton—it's fine by me if a traitor to Terra wants to ride the Cancer Express to his own funeral."

Mouselet, a pathetic ruin of a man, couldn't bring himself to swear nor even manage a reproachful look. His flickering eyes mirrored such deep despair that Tiff almost began to feel a vague pity for him.

"Please forgive me," Mouselet said hastily. "I smoke excessively and my last pack..."

"Get to the point," the cadet interrupted impassively. "I presume that Orlgans has sent you to loosen my tongue. Let me assure you that there's nothing to pry loose from me. I wasn't informed about the contents of the message I've destroyed. Or do you believe that I could carry such complex plans in my head?"

Mouselet's eyes looked suddenly piercing. "Why not? Rhodan is familiar with the method of implanting a tremendous amount of information in a person's brain. Perhaps you don't know yourself that you've been given a post-hypnotic block. But such information can be retrieved easily. The microtapes could have been used as a ruse for you. You better start talking, young man. The Springers know very well how to make a helpless babbling lunatic out of a man. If this happens to you, you'll be insane for the rest of your life. It would be smarter to tell us why you were sent to your base on Vega."

"Did they promise you cigarettes if you make me talk?" Tiff sneered, although he had turned pale. The situation was fraught with horrendous dangers.

Mouselet now cursed viciously. Then he got up abruptly and began to pace the floor of the little cabin. Two Springers were posted outside the door.

"Before I say anything, I'd like to know how you got mixed up with these characters," Tiff added quickly.

Mouselet shrugged his shoulders. It was a gesture of resignation. "Why not? I was a member of the leading staff of the supermutants and I had at that time occasion to investigate the New Power thoroughly. All secret documents were made available to me. Don't try to delude the traders. They know exactly how Rhodan obtained his knowledge and his battleships. If it hadn't run counter to their ancient traditions, Orlgans would have subjugated the whole Earth."

"Informer!" Tiff said contemptuously. Once more he suppressed the urge to tell him how easily Deringhouse could have demolished their spaceship.

"Don't let these people fool you," Mouselet continued excitedly. "There was a time when I also believed them to be amiable and harmless. When Rhodan was pursuing the Supermutant, the latter sent an S.O.S. out into space. Orlgans happened to be in the vicinity. He came to my rescue. Of course I had to pay the price by telling him all I knew. A Springer does nothing for free. Are you sure that you've got no cigarettes? Look again!"

"Take your hands off my pockets," Tiff snorted angrily. "If I were you, I'd put a bullet through my head. You're a traitor to Terra! You've committed treason against mankind. This is the worst of crimes."

"Mankind has condemned and banished me," Mouselet said feebly. "I no longer owe allegiance to mankind."

"You've probably committed heinous crimes and were justly sentenced under the law. Don't expect any sympathy from me. You're as guilty as the Supermutant who was stopped by us."

Breathing heavily and wetting his lips with his tongue, Mouselet faced the cadet:

"You'll be interrogated," he declared tonelessly. "You don't realize that you're dealing with one of the great powers in the universe. These interstellar traders are ruling the Galaxy. They're subdivided into castes and family clans. No Springer takes orders from another Springer. Freedom of trade is a 10,000-year-old tradition. They suspect and spy on each other but woe to the stranger who interferes with their monopoly! You'll be amazed how quickly the numerous clans and kinships rally together. They call themselves Springers because they spring with their ships from planet to planet to buy and sell. Their commercial fleet is estimated to consist of more than 300,000 big vessels including many of the largest ships. In case of emergency every clan is headed by a patriarch who is assisted by all free captains and shipowners. The powerful organization of the traders maintains a huge battlefleet that is supported by contributions from the profits of each captain. The Springers own many planets where they've constructed gigantic docks and military bases. Their technology surpasses in some respects even that of the Great Imperium under the Arkonides. They're descendants of the old Arkonides but have developed many racial variations due to manifold environmental influences. However they're all Springers, independent, proud, strong and richer than the Great Imperium. If the need arises they act as one. Do you understand what this means? As traders they never intervene in wars or other quarrels. They supply all parties and everybody is on the best terms with them. Concessions must be distributed by them alone to those who wish to do business on a cosmic scale. Now comes your Perry Rhodan with the ludicrous idea to set up trading bases in the Vega system. It's preposterous. He must be crazy!"

Mouselet laughed shrilly. He had trouble keeping his composure. Tiff's attitude became more and more apprehensive. Slowly he began to understand the scope of the campaign he had embarked upon. Organs was only a tiny cog in a colossal ancient machine. Tiff considered it now his most urgent task to inform his Chief as quickly as possible.

"You must realize that it's senseless for you to remain silent. It's only natural for such mercenary people to claim each newly discovered planet as their private domain. Nobody would dream of calling in his own clan, let alone other clans. This is the reason why Organs came alone to the solar system. He has created a net of spies in the proven manner and has thereby soon found out that you were sent out as a secret courier. This was to be expected after Organs captured one of your spaceships and two interceptors for the purpose of studying them."

Tiff jumped up as if he'd been stung by a hornet. "What?"

"Oh, you don't know about that," Mouselet wondered. "It's about time you find out that Rhodan has misled you. With your K-7 four of your spaceships have vanished. That should have made Rhodan suspicious, don't you think?"

Tiff slowly leaned back in his strangely shaped seat. Gradually it became clearer to him why the Chief had selected him under such mysterious circumstances as a secret messenger. Tiff came fairly close to the full truth but he was still unaware that he acted as a cosmic decoy with very special potentials. At any rate

Rhodan already seemed to know about the threat from outer space. Now Tiff understood also why Deringhouse didn't shoot to kill and why *Stardust II* had so quickly appeared on the spot. He tried to suppress a triumphant smile.

A yellow light started to blink from the videophone on the wall. It was almost identical with the sets on the K-7. Mouselet looked anxiously around.

"Your lord and master is calling you," Tiff said scornfully. "Naturally they're eavesdropping on us. Well, Orlgans, listen to me! You might as well know that I'm not impressed by your mercantile superpower. Racketeers and war profiteers who do business with both parties and never take sides until they get paid are notorious throughout history on Earth. You merchants of death are no better, only more proficient in your dirty business. You make money from the decline of the Great Imperium of the Arkonides and remain neutral until your interests are contested. Then you turn into a pack of howling wolves who band together to tear apart any undesirable outsiders who threaten your selfish interests. This traitor has informed you about Terra. Beware, Orlgans, or we'll show you the stuff we're made of!"

Somebody snorted into the v'phone and then Orlgans' voice broke in: "You talk big, Vikoa, but you've little power. We can conquer the Earth but first I want to try single-handedly to exercise my prerogative of discovery. I want you to tell me what the cosmic planning of the New Power entails. Furthermore, I want to know what fortunes that little fellow Perry Rhodan has found in the legendary world of immortal life. I know the reports are true that he was there contrary to all expectations."

Tiff replied with acid sarcasm. His words revealed unusual maturity for a 20-year-old youth. "This ought to prove to you that you're up against a superior intellect and if you consider yourself intelligent you'd do well to respect him. Your dictatorial demand is barbarian power politics."

Mouselet looked horrified. After a silent pause a rob licking laughter came from the loudspeaker. That Springer captain had a peculiar sense of humour! "Very good, very good," Orlgans repeated. "You couldn't have given me any better proof that Rhodan picked a very adroit man for this special mission. I'm going to be busy for a while getting into orbit, my friend. I'll wait here till the situation has cleared up. If necessary I won't hesitate to call in the battlefleet of our dynasty. Has Mouselet told you already that the free captains are empowered to summon an armada of battleships for our protection? One radio call is all it takes, Terkoa, to bring 500 first class battleships out of hyperspace. Think about it. You've got time to make up your mind."

A sharp click in the videophone indicated that Orlgans actually switched off the set.

"Don't ruin my life," Mouselet implored Tiff with a trembling voice. "Start talking or we'll both perish. Trust me, I'm a human being."

"I doubt that you ever were one in the true sense of the word," Tiff rejected his plea. "I suppose you only looked like a human being ever since you started using your evil brain."

The cabin door slid open and two bearded giants appeared. Tiff had learned that the numerous members of the crew all belonged to Orlgans' clan. The honour of captain and shipowner seemed to be hereditary.

Meanwhile it had become quite clear to Tiff that he had fallen into the hands of the major power in the Galaxy. These people ruled not just a single solar system but the entire Galaxy which they manipulated for their special purposes by the methods of warring trading companies.

Such companies used to exist on Earth too but they never attained such far-flung powers.

Tiff began to suspect that the Springers presented the most blatant threat the New Power had had to face so far.

These were no mind-usurpers or reptilian Topides who had been defeated with comparative ease by Perry Rhodan. Now a real superpower had appeared on the scene.

However it eluded Tiff why Perry Rhodan had kept silent about all these problems. If some ships of the fleet had vanished without a trace the government must have been informed about it long ago.

"Come with us," one of the bearded men said smilingly. "No, not you. We want the little one."

Tiff got up wordlessly. Mouselet remained behind—a quivering bundle of misery. He had failed utterly. It was questionable whether the cold-blooded Organs would still consider him useful. If not, Mouselet's life wasn't worth a plugged franc.

Tiff got the idea how hard and merciless these lustily laughing people could be. Perry Rhodan had become a disturbance in their eyes.

They probably hadn't yet realized that Rhodan wasn't merely a nuisance but a formidable antagonist because of Mouselet's embellishing tales. In general they seemed to underestimate the people of Earth. They didn't reckon with their sharp minds, their incredible ambition and their unrelenting stubbornness.

CONTENTS

[1/ A Shadow Without Substance](#)

[2/ Danger In Cosmic Space](#)

[3/ The Astounding Operation](#)

[4/ Destination: Transplutonia](#)

[5/ The Ship From—Outside](#)

[6/ Unforeseen Events](#)

[7/ The Secret Weapon](#)

[8/ Enter: The Springers](#)

[9/ "We Can Conquer The Earth!"](#)

[10/ The Egg That Laid An Egg](#)

[The Ship Of Things To Come](#)

THE COSMIC DECOY

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

Cadet Julian Tifflor has had his baptism of fire.

Graduating from the Space Academy of the New Power, he has been signally honoured by being personally chosen by the Peacelord to play the role of unwitting cosmic decoy.

He fell into the trap as planned. And when Perry Rhodan rushes to his aid with the Stardust, dangerous trouble ensues during the encounter with the—

FLEET OF THE SPRINGERS

By

Kurt Mahr