

When Perry Rhodan discovers the home world of Khrest and Thora he finds that three planets are literally, better than one. For Perry has to confront not just Arkon I, but Arkon II and Arkon III. And each planet is dedicated to a purpose all its own: one of them... war!

The warrior planet supplies a super battleship of space **mile long** ... and Perry Rhodan and his mutant crew find themselves serving under Thora on a deadly mission.

Deadly... and violent, when the Peacelord and his allies are faced with hundreds of berserk battle-robots bent on destruction, in one of Perry Rhodan's greatest adventures.

This is the stirring story of—

REALM OF THE TRI-PLANETS

1/ THE SECRET OF ARKON

HORNETS, swarming down from the alien skies. Their stingers, heavy energy-cannons. Their innards, mechanical systems pulsing under a tough armoured shell in a precise rhythm whose perfection could never be achieved by an organically living conglomeration of cells.

The hornets from space were spaceships.

Aboard the *Ganymede*, current headquarters of the leader of Earth's New Power, sounds picked up from the exterior mikes were transmitted to the ship's loudspeakers. The interior of the ship vibrated to the low-pitched nerve-wracking song of the marching triclops outside.

The marching giants seemed unstoppable. They were an apathetic black-brown mass of bodies, reacting only to the bellowed commands of the officers as they flowed toward the landing spaceships. A thick flood of molasses, advancing sluggishly but virtually impossible to hold back.

*"March of the Triclops, Fifth Movement!*I should have been a composer," the tall man mocked in defiance of his vulnerable position. "I'd let the kettle-drums rattle and sound the blare of the trumpets."

Nobody laughed. The scene depicted on the observation screen was too strange, too fraught with

danger. The serious undertone of the events could not be disregarded.

The Naats, inhabitants of the planet Naat, had apparently been chosen to 'man' the spaceships landing on the port of Naatral although there was great reason to doubt that the 10 foot-high, bubble-headed giants were capable of understanding the complicated operations of an Arkonide battleship.

The three-eyed Naats, colonial subjects in the immediate sphere of influence of the seat of the Imperium, the planet Arkon, appeared to represent an ideal interim solution to the problems of the governing giant robot brain—assuming, that is, that a purely mechanical computer had any knowledge of such concepts. Quite likely the central brain of Arkon 'thought' along quite different lines.

The Arkonides themselves had become completely useless for such practical services because of the obvious fact of their degeneration. Therefore the Brain fell back on utilizing alien races whose unquestioned loyalty rated above mental faculties.

"It'll be a disaster!" Reginald Bell prophesied gloomily. "They'll trample everything down like a herd of elephants and empty the larder with their first meal!"

"Is that so?" Perry muttered laconically.

Bell frowned. He looked defiantly around, seeking support, but none of the thousand men aboard the *Ganymede* were in a very cheerful mood at the moment so the rambunctious redhead stalked off, muttering under his breath.

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The Command Centre of the second largest battleship in the space arsenal of the New Power, led by Perry Rhodan, was located 2500 feet above the ground. Only a few days earlier it had appeared that no power known could resist the abundant energy of the gigantic spacer. This belief was shockingly shattered when the 'invincible' *Ganymede* encountered an Arkonide robot ship, was captured and steered by remote control to the fifth world of the Arkon system. As a consequence the newest battleship of the Earthlings rested immobilized on the wide pads of its telescopic support legs whose hydraulic power strained to resist the heavy pull of Naat's gravity. This alien land of deserts exerted 2.8 G.

The landing field of the spaceport, empty for hours, now suddenly became as busy as a hill of ants. It gave the impression that the Great Empire was again on the verge of dealing a final mighty blow to the rebellious colonial races.

The mustering of the non-humanoid Naats was a clear sign that the billions of the Arkonide population were no longer capable of serving in the numerous spaceships as was taken for granted thousands of years ago.

It had been learned beyond a shadow of a doubt that the amazing new initiative had been taken not by organic beings but by the greatest robot brain in the known universe.

Perry Rhodan inwardly shuddered as he studied the deployment of the fleet with the aid of his optical instruments. The line-up of the smallest to the heaviest units was almost legendary.

They had counted more than 100 battleships of the Imperium class alone, each one of them as well-armed as the mighty *Stardust II* left behind in their own solar system as the backbone of the defence armada stationed there.

"If they want to, they could blow us sky high," Col. Freyt murmured in a choked voice. Freyt acted officially as Commander of the 2800-foot-high, 600-foot-wide *Ganymede* .

Rhodan slowly turned away from the observation screen. Freyt looked into a tense face.

He looks haggard, Freyt thought, feeling considerable apprehension. If Rhodan lost his nerve the hitherto relatively mild inconvenience of their imprisonment could change into a dire dilemma.

"Who are they?" Rhodan inquired.

The tip of Freyt's tongue flicked over his lips. He looked a little uncertain. "I mean of course the robot brain in control of Arkon, sir!" he confessed.

"Then you've used the wrong expression. Generally speaking, it seems to me there are still quite a few erroneous ideas around concerning the present situation. It's senseless to characterize the action of a gigantic machine by the concepts of right or wrong. How could a robot differentiate between them if it never makes a value judgment. Only logical and practical factors exist for it. But logical conclusions are very seldom—and then only by pure accident—identical with what is considered 'right' by humanity. Do you follow me?"

Rhodan looked around. No, they didn't quite understand it. However everybody aboard the *Ganymede* knew that they were held down by powerful energy fields on the spaceport of Naatral. The flight to the home of the Arkonides Khrest and Thora—begun with such hopeful promise—had ended in failure. They never managed to get beyond the orbital path of the fifth planet.

"Of course I don't wish to say I consider this desolate desert land our final destination," Rhodan added with a faint smile. "Look down there, gentlemen! The Naats are marching to the waiting ships where they'll be assigned by robots according to their abilities. We're witnessing the downfall of a highly civilized race, the people of Arkon. It's rare that wars are won by letting other people do your fighting. The Great Empire faces a battle of life and death. It's remarkable that the old Arkonides already foresaw this degeneration a few thousand years ago and took precautionary measures. They had the technical knowledge to build a gigantic machine and program it in such a manner that it began to act independently at the critical moment of acute peril. The Galactic Council of Arkon has been circumvented. What we're experiencing now has been originated by the machine. We've already learned enough about the noble families of Arkon to know that they've reached a point where they can do no more than get upset over a trampled flowerbed. As a result they've been written off by the robot brain."

"Do you realize what this means, sir?" a man from the math team interjected.

A shadow came over Rhodan's eyes. "I'm afraid I do. There are terrible times ahead. The robot will strike hard wherever it suspects a transgression of the Empire's laws. The programming of the machine is ancient and the data are based on anachronistic conditions. Thus the robot will try to intervene in the fate of the Galaxy with the outdated policies of expansionism and colonial rule. It could happen that entire worlds would be annihilated for trivial causes. The machine has all the requisite power. The fleet of the Imperium has been taken out of mothballs and practically overnight put back in action."

"So we arrived just at the right moment to get in on the fun," Reginald Bell snickered. "May we learn how you propose to get to the main planet of Arkon? This beastly machine can let us starve in midair."

"That's a matter of opinion," Rhodan murmured. "I... what is it?"

John Marshall, telepath and Chief of the Mutant Corps on board the *Ganymede* listened with closed eyes to impulses which only he and other mutants could understand. "Thora is coming back," he said in a muted voice. "She's in a state of great excitement... no, she's deeply disheartened."

Marshall opened his eyes and noticed Rhodan's intense look. "I could've predicted as much," the Commander said tersely. "OK, we're left to our own devices again. Khrest!"

The Arkonide standing in the background of the Command Centre was awakened from his lethargic attitude. His white hair fluoresced in the light of the observation screens which still depicted the frightful march of the triclops people. The Naats were running part of the way on all fours and became erect only when they got closer to the open air hatches of the spaceships, where they began to parade in their swaying gait.

Khrest, the Arkonide scientist and member of the Zoltral dynasty that had ruled in earlier days, betrayed his mood only by his impassive, vacant look. "This is the end," he said tonelessly. "When a machine takes over the rule it means the ruin of real life as we knew it. My family has been dismissed from all offices six years ago. Orcast XXI of the Orcast family has been installed as the new Emperor by the robot brain. Of course he exists only as a figurehead which is probably also true for the 128 members of the Galactic Council. Don't delude yourself, my friend! We'll be lucky if they let us fly back again."

Rhodan smiled grimly and gritted his teeth. "Khrest, we've never expected to take over or to save the Empire merely by putting in an appearance. We don't think we're that great or important."

"The human race is greater and stronger than most people know," replied Khrest. "You're like my ancestors were 10,000 years ago. You've got that terrific urge to plunge forward with bold leaps. I'm afraid the robot will correctly analyse the situation and put considerable obstacles in your path. Don't try to reach Arkon! Here comes Thora."

Rhodan looked at the videoscreen. An official vehicle of the Arkonide Administrator of Naat approached at high speed without the slightest regard for the safety of the native masses marching on the wide terrain.

Rhodan silently motioned to Bell, who went down the antigravitor to open an air hatch for the Arkonide woman.

They watched on the video as Thora stepped into one of the huge rear fins of the *Ganymede*. Ten minutes later she emerged in the Command Centre, greatly disturbed and near a nervous breakdown.

Her slim face was reddened. She wore once more the becoming uniform of an Arkonide battleship commander. On her left shoulder patch she displayed the symbols of Zoltral dynasty, before which all people would have bowed six years before. But today nobody turned a head.

Breathing heavily, Thora sank into an armchair. She finally opened her eyes when she felt Rhodan's hand on her arm.

"Alright, let's not talk about it," Rhodan said softly. "Try to forget it. I know you've been insulted and turned down by that dimwit who calls himself Administrator of Naat. Of course he's in no position to give us permission to start because the robot brain doesn't approve of it."

Thora's eyes became moist. Nobody had ever seen the proud Arkonide woman cry before. "That wasn't the worst," she confessed with unnatural calm. "That wretch dared give me, a Zoltral, to understand that my crew and I could possibly be very welcome."

"Oh?"

"Serving as auxiliary forces under the command of a robot!" she cried out. Her face was distorted. "Can you imagine that? We're supposed to wait on the decision of a robot! This means they even refuse to let us fly back. Perry, I beg you in the name of everything that is sacred to me, do something! There's no longer a Great Empire. I admit what I've always tried to deny: my people are weak, spoiled, depraved, not very smart and terribly tired."

"With some exceptions, young lady," Rhodan said with emphasis. "Indeed, some *very great* exceptions! I'm looking at one sitting before me right now. So they want to press us into their service? I guess they'd like to have the *Ganymede* too. Clever idea, isn't it?"

Rhodan turned on his heel. The men fell silent before his famous ironic smile which was too gentle and sweet to inspire calm confidence.

"Lt. Tiffloor!"

The young officer snapped to attention. He had recently graduated from the Space Academy and was already decorated with a Silver Comet for meritorious service in the Springer mission, when fresh out of school.

Tiff, as he was called for short, thought his last hour had come. He knew that expression of Rhodan's only too well. It was the same smile he had on his lips when Tiffloor was sent as secret agent on his most bewildering assignment.

"Sir?" the 20-year-old officer asked.

"Prepare a Gazelle reconnaissance ship for immediate start. Provide full armament and equipment for a long flight. The outer hatches must remain closed. Thank you!"

"Marshall! Select nine men with complementary capabilities from your Mutant Corps. I need 10 good men on board including you, thank you!"

"Bell! Assemble 40 experienced veterans of the old taskforce Vega Sector. Volunteers only, please. Lieutenant Tiffloor, take note that you'll have about 55 men aboard your Gazelle."

"Col. Freyt! You'll remain here with the *Ganymede*. Maintain full battle alert at all times! Let the men sleep and eat at their battle stations. You must be ready to take off within 10 seconds when you receive my signal. Can you do it?"

Freyt was puzzled. "Did you say take off, sir?" he gasped in astonishment. "With the *Ganymede*? We've already tried that before, sir! When we increased our thrust to two million tons the captive field-forces

went up to an absorption value of at least three million tons. How do you expect me to do it, sir?"

"Start up the moment you get my signal!" Rhodan repeated calmly. "It all depends on the success we have with our trip to Arkon. You know I resent dancing to the tune of a machine. According to my experience with robot brains of Arkonide design they all contain a safety factor which prevents them from going beyond certain limits. It's unlikely that the local brain will behave differently.

"You forget that that same machine has administered a paralysing shock to the Administrator Sergh," Khrest interjected excitedly.

"Sure, but it was our fault. I'd intruded into the palace with Bell and Tako. At any rate I'm going to take a look at that peculiar Emperor. You can bet on that!"

Thora stared at him admiringly with wide eyes. This was the same forceful man she had met for the first time 13 years ago on Terra's moon. He had begun to exert his dominance at the outset and little had changed his attitude ever since.

Tifflor rushed out and the Ganymede soon was caught up in a burst of frantic activity.

Finally Bell couldn't keep his question any longer and he asked with a growl, "Would you enlighten us, mastermind, how you figure you can escape with the Gazelle and land on Arkon? If I remember correctly we're sitting right in the middle of a battery of field projectors."

"Which however don't respond to five-dimensional energy frequencies," Rhodan stated dryly. "The prescription is simple: take a tele-transmitter and zoom away! You'll admit that not even the Arkonides have technical achievements like that in their bag of tricks."

Bell was dumbfounded. He closed his eyes and thought: *Of course, that fabulous machine from the planet Wanderer! What else!*

"Are you coming with us?" Thora and Khrest heard the question directed to them and exchanged a quick glance with each other. Rhodan observed Thora blanch.

The telepath John Marshall suddenly perked up and stood stiffly in front of the open door. Rhodan became apprehensive. Narrowing his eyes he tried to understand what Marshall had discovered.

"Do you plan to land directly on Arkon?" Khrest inquired hesitantly.

"Where else? I've got to talk to the right people. What's the matter?"

Marshall came slowly closer. Rhodan's brain received his warning impulse at the same moment Thora decided to reveal her last secret. "I've no reason to keep silent any longer," she said quietly. "Perry, if you want to land on Arkon you'll have to decide on which of the planets you can carry out your plans."

Rhodan became more relaxed again when Marshall confirmed that the truth was out. "On which planet?" he repeated helplessly. "I don't understand. Arkon is Arkon, or is it?"

"This is something which you've never been taught in your hypno-training, Perry," Khrest interjected. "Arkon consists of *three* worlds which are all named Arkon. Arkon #1, the Crystal World, is exclusively reserved for residential dwellings. #2 serves the Galactic trade, internal industries and agriculture. #3 is the planet of war where the fleet is stationed and the biggest munitions of the universe are located. It is

also the seat of the super-robot brain. It's the only secret of my race which we've kept from you till now."

Rhodan sat down thoughtfully in slow motion. He idly adjusted his belt while his thoughts were spinning around in his mind. "Three worlds?" he whispered. "Great Scot, how's that possible? Arkon is the third planet of your sun, isn't it? Where are the other segments of the planet?"

An unbearable expectant silence hung over the vast Command Centre as Khrest paused before he continued his explanation of the wonder in a choked voice: "The tri-planet system is made up of three bodies in identical orbits and at the same constant distance of 370 million miles from the sun. The position of these synchronized worlds, as they're also called, corresponds to an equilateral triangle. The seasons of the planets never vary since their axes have no inclination and their paths describe a perfect circle. The mean temperature is about 90° F on the terrestrial scale. Arkon is a unique phenomenon in the Galaxy. I've always been very proud of it until a few weeks ago."

Khrest lowered his eyes. Rhodan's face had lost a little of its colour. This was something he had not taken into account and his brain automatically began to make calculations. The extraordinary constellation of three synchronous celestial bodies represented enormous astronomical and mathematical problems.

Another thought suddenly occurred to him and the fleeting guess became a certainty after a few seconds. "Khrest, I hope you don't claim that this incredible coincidence of three planets with the same orbit, solar distance and correlated positions has come about as a natural development?"

Khrest's sombre face brightened. A spark of the lost pride in his race returned to his big eyes. His countenance became more dignified despite the fact that his situation had become pathetic. Khrest no longer harboured illusions. "You're quite right," he declared solemnly. "The Crystal World of Arkon, was the third planet of the sun 30,000 Terra years ago. Due to the enormous expansion of the Arkonide Empire it became too small and it was necessary to separate the economy, the residential areas, the space fleet and the industrial installations from each other. Since my ancestors endeavoured to centralize the most important organizations, the biggest impulse engines of all times were installed on the original planets #2 and #4. In the course of 3000 years they were very slowly pulled out of their natural orbits and aligned with extreme caution in the trajectory of the original Arkon. The entire operation and synchronization was performed with precise computation and the three co-ordinated planets were called Arkon. You must understand, Perry—this is Arkon! After their successful consolidation the three planets showed virtually no variation. Only very few Arkonides had knowledge of the secret which we now share with you. The dynasties that ruled in earlier times considered it psychologically preferable to pretend that this unique constellation was natural. They sought to promote a certain glorification of our race. Superior beings like ourselves were entitled to the distinction of living in a special environment, you see."

Rhodan took a deep breath before he replied in awe: "I must confess that I feel the greatest respect for your ancestors. And I'm very grateful to you for your decision to disclose these facts to me. Otherwise we would've run into some nasty surprise with our hytrans computations. But you could have told me about this a little earlier, couldn't you?"

Rhodan looked reproachfully at Thora, who responded with a faint but meaningful smile.

Meanwhile the men in the Command Centre engaged in an excited discussion. The programming by the astronomical computer brain had already begun. The thin plastic tapes with the punched symbols were swallowed up by the insatiable machine.

"Tough luck!" Bell muttered. "Arkon happens to be exactly on the opposite side of the sun. Is the tele-transmitter going to shove us through that white-hot ball of fire?"

"If a body is extraneous to a certain type of energy its matter can be considered as nonexistent in its effect," Rhodan said authoritatively. "Khrest, I need data about the inclination of the trajectory plane and the ecliptic, precise orbit velocities and gravitational conditions."

The Arkonide scientist went to work at once.

In the new nose section of the *Ganymede* an extremely nervous officer got ready for the start of the long-distance reconnaissance ship. The new ships of the Gazelle type were shaped like disks and measured 100 feet in diameter. They had impulse engines and were equipped with hypertransition field generators. As fighting machines they performed with respectable clout if the right man was at the controls. Julian Tiffloor admirably filled that bill.

The inner door of the compression chamber, was open. The fact that the outer hatch was to be kept closed at first seemed normal to the cadet. When he began to think about it—how Rhodan wanted to get the bulky Gazelle out of the forward hangar—he felt a little weak. It suddenly dawned on him when he saw the members of the technical team rush into the room containing the tele-transmitter Rhodan had taken from the *Stardust*.

"Great Jupiter!" he whispered breathlessly. "Not with that!"

10/ TERRANIA ANNEXES THE *TITAN*

Next to the super-battleship the half-mile-long *Ganymede* looked like a good size lifeboat. As the men of the reinforcement commando poured out of the air hatches to jump across the distance of 200 feet into the gaping gates of the mammoth, they had to make special efforts to keep from flipping their minds over the sheer mass of the monster.

"Detachment Tanner, second gate from left!" the command came over their helmet radios. "Turn the defence shield of your combat suit up to full strength after you enter the normal air pressure. Do not open your suit! You'll run into very high temperatures."

The 800 men boarding the vessel were armed with heavy duty disintegrators which despite their bulk could be operated with two hands.

Freyt had decided to use also the hatches at the lower pole for mounting his attack in an attempt to force the robots who were still intact and capable of reasonable actions to fight on a second front.

The *Ganymede* troops brought armament and equipment which was not available to Rhodan's taskforce. If there were any Arkonide combat suits with built-in energy sources and defence shields aboard the supership, they had not yet been found.

Tiffloor, standing close to the main antigrav elevator, showed the incoming troops the way.

The totally exhausted men pulled back from their holding positions which were immediately taken over by the fresh contingents. Only the mutants remained at their posts.

After half an hour some semblance of order returned to the fluid fighting lines. The defence shields of the combat suits were built to ward off a glancing blow. It was a different story, however, when they were hit by a direct blast from the robots' rayguns. Then the protective screens collapsed.

Rhodan, Khrest and Thora gave directions in the lower section. Undaunted, the 800 men pressed upward and downward with irresistible force.

An hour later the battle action concentrated among the installations on deck #32, where many of the larger machinery halls were situated.

"Attention, everybody!" Rhodan warned over the radio. "Avoid shooting at robots where they take cover behind valuable machines. Whenever you see a robot in such a place or have located him with your energy sensor, notify Lt. Marshall at once and he'll send in a mutant. Shoot only if you don't have to damage irreplaceable equipment."

Rhodan spun around when he noticed some small figures flitting by. They were medical robot teams of the *Ganymede* that were equipped with tracing cells by which they were able to detect the wounded more surely than the human eye.

Rhodan bit his lips as he saw the first victims of the unequal battle being carried out under the supervision of Drs. Haggard and Manoli.

"We'll fix them all up again as good as new," Haggard called to Rhodan. "We'll have to perform some amputations but it won't be a problem with the Arkonide bioplast technique. Sir, I'll need about 20 good men for the transport."

Rhodan gave the necessary instructions at once and the injured men were carefully transferred to the *Ganymede* where they received prompt medical treatment of the highest calibre.

"It was tough," Bell groaned, "Awfully tough." His red hair bristles were singed down to his brow. "These robots must be new models. They react much faster than ours. If we had taken 5000 of their ilk on board, it would have been goodbye."

With these words he fell asleep in a sitting position and didn't wake up when a robot medic gently picked him up with his antigrav-lifter and took him away.

It took four more hours before the last of the fighting machines were shot down or disabled by the mutants. Rhodan formed search teams that had the unattractive task of combing each section of the ship.

"Be careful and don't get panicky. Use your own judgment. It's not in the technical make-up of fighter robots to go into hiding as humans are prone to do. They'll attack whenever there's an opportunity. You can take almost for granted that you'll find no more active machines. If any of them were present they would have joined the fiery battle."

Rhodan turned around, utterly fatigued. Dr. Manoli looked into his weary, red-veined eyes, which mirrored all his cares and over-exertion. "You've got to take a rest," Manoli warned with deep concern. "Your body won't endure it much longer either."

"First my men and my ship! Where's Freyt?"

"Up in the Command Centre."

They floated up in the antigrav elevator, which was again functioning. When Rhodan entered the Command Centre, the men saluted. Thora was fast asleep in her pilot seat.

Rhodan stopped for a moment to look down at her softened face. Manoli began to breathe easier as he saw Rhodan relax his tightly pressed lips.

The panoramic observation screens were put back in operation. Highly trained specialists who were familiar with the controls of the *Stardust II* already manned the most vital posts.

Julian Tiffloor had forgotten all about his tiredness and gave helpful explanations wherever it was necessary.

The service of the Communication Centre was restored and a major power station worked with a minimal output.

The sensor antennas rotated on the pole cupola of the gigantic ship. The tracking and transceiver stations differed from those of the *Stardust* only by their impressive size.

Rhodan listened to the muffled rumbling originating in the activated structure sensors.

"They're searching frantically for us," Freyt said in a low voice. "Just listen to that intercom broadcasting! The Great Robot seems to be beside himself, you might say, if it weren't a machine."

Rhodan passed through the armoured hatch. A new transition shook the instruments. He listened for a few moments and cast a glance at the blank screens of the ultra-light-speed object sensor, flopping into an armchair. "I had a hunch that it would have been only by pure accident that the super-robot brain could track our transition among the numerous other transitions taking place at the same time. It seems that we chose the right moment. If we had jumped a little later, we'd have had their entire fleet on our necks in a minute."

"By the way, sir, where are we?"

Rhodan looked up at the huge, seamless panoramic screen. The big red sun stood clearly out from the fantastic, scintillating stars of cluster M-13.

"I've no idea. All I know is that we've covered a distance of three light-years. Thora has computed the second transition by herself. I imagine she picked a fairly remote spot in this crowded Galactic traffic centre. Freyt!"

The colonel came closer. "Sir?"

"Your warning came just in time. Otherwise I'd have waited at least two more hours. What brought that investigation on?"

"That weird administrator of Naat wanted to talk to you. I believe you were supposed to fly some kind of a mission for the Brain."

"Oh," Rhodan laughed grimly.

"Novaal came aboard and we began to sweat it out when he missed you and then Thora and Khrest. He made the entire crew line up outside the ship and the game was up. That's when I sent you the emergency message. It was only a matter of minutes, since Novaal advised the Brain at once. We intercepted his report."

Rhodan was pensive. Soon his eyes brightened and he looked around. At last he found time for reflection and he became conscious of how much the few men and women had accomplished.

Freyt's beaming face became clouded when he saw Rhodan's expression change once more. It suddenly revealed an aspect of Rhodan's character which had never changed.

He began an agonizing self-appraisal as Dr. Manoli had called it. "Don't start torturing yourself," the physician promptly admonished. "A certain amount of self-analysis may be a very good thing but not for a man in your condition who should be in a hospital."

Rhodan glanced amicably at his old companion from the time of the first fledgling ventures into outer space. They had flown together on the first atomic rocket to the moon.

Lost in thought, Rhodan smiled softly. Then he said without apparent connection: "I think we're going to call this beautiful spaceship *Titan*. Do you realize that Terra now possesses what is probably the mightiest battleship in the Milky Way?"

He saw the sceptical faces of his listeners and became amused. His old irony returned to his voice: "Oh no, think what you like, but I'm going to keep this ship. You can bet on that! I'll need four weeks to train a new crew. Then we'll see how the cards are stacked. Our trip to the Arkon System was a moral fiasco but it had one good result: we've learned something about the state of affairs in the so-called Great Empire. This knowledge is worth all the hardships we've suffered. Friends! If Terra were discovered today by a fleet of robots we'd face certain disaster. I believe the reason it didn't happen yet is only because the Galactic trader will not permit the permanent surrender of such a wealthy solar system to a robot brain."

The structure sensors registered another disturbance. For a few moments a bright blip appeared on the optical screens of the long distance tracker. Only after the foreign object vanished from the scanner did Rhodan relax his tense vigilance.

"A busy neighbourhood, sir!" Freyt commented nervously. "What do you intend to do?"

Rhodan slowly raised his eyes and directed his gaze toward the red sun. "Send me 700 men! You can easily operate the *Ganymede* with a crew of 300. I'd need at least 1500 trained men to handle the 40 auxiliary *Good Hope* class ships carried aboard the *Titan*. Our most urgent problem will be how to quickly slip away from the M-13 cluster without being noticed. That'll be all for now."

Freyt was about to ask another question but when he looked down at a dedicated man, drugged for sleep, eyes fighting to remain open, he quietly left the Communication Centre without speaking.

Outside in the vast nerve centre of the super-battleship he saw Julian Tiffior still performing his dues. "You're committed to sickbay," Freyt growled. "That's an order. You can leave everything to us. We'll manage to run things around here. Boy, you've got to get some rest!"

Tifflor was overcome by embarrassment when he felt Freyt's hand on his shoulder. "You did a great job!" was the last thing he heard before he passed out cold as an ice cube from the planet Snowman.

Far from the ships drifting in space hung a strange crimson sun. It resembled a blood-red teardrop. An ominous omen of events to come, both sorrowful and sanguinary?

The inscrutable future veiled the answer.

2/ THE CRYSTAL PLANET

They crouched, huddled close together. Trying to make the situation more comfortable, they revelled to excess in a biting, grim humour to fit the circumstances.

The old warriors from the battles in the Vega sector of an earlier day had gone through many privations and were used to being herded into quarters which resembled more a swarm of sardines caught in a net than a room with stable walls, or so they called it.

Rhodan had laughed in his infectious manner and had made them crack a smile. The members of the New Power's taskforce were highly intelligent and independently thinking men who were well aware what kind of a daring plan had been hatched again by their old man.

True to their temperaments they had—not surprisingly—engaged in heated debates about the chances of success for their mission. They didn't mince matters that the action was more than perilous. They came from almost every nation on Earth but out here—34,000 light-years from their common world—they were only humans risking their lives to serve their home planet.

Thus they were squashed together under much cussing and ridicule into the narrow storage hold of the little Gazelle. There was hardly another word to describe the way they had crammed themselves in.

Though there was only limited room in the pilot's cabin it barely accommodated the men in charge of the operation.

The hand of an ordinary shipboard clock ticked off the seconds. The observation screens of the scanner depicted the nondescript steel doors of the air compression chamber. Although the GZ-1 was poised for launching, the outer hatch remained closed as before and nobody had equalized the pressure.

Instead the peculiar orifice of an even more peculiar instrument was aimed at the small spaceship. The tele-transmitter obtained on the planet Wanderer was designed to immerse materially stable bodies into a dematerialisation field of a higher order and radiate it in the form of six-dimensional energy units to a predetermined goal.

It was the crowning achievement of a technological development whose most elementary concepts were known only to Perry Rhodan. The tele-transmitter didn't require a tuned-in receiver station of any kind at the opposite pole. It transformed the transmitted object back into a solid physical entity at the desired place.

Rhodan's eyes were glued to the second-hand. The mike of the telecom was at his lips. "Attention, everybody!" all loudspeakers on board blared. "Launch in 45 seconds! If everything works according to plan we'll emerge from hyperspace in the uppermost atmospheric strata of Arkon #1. We won't have to fear detection during the transition. Be prepared to feel the effect of a few Gs leaking through the absorbers at the landing. We've got to get down as quickly as possible. Keep that in mind."

A muffled whine broke out. The separate power station of the transmitter had started to operate. Not even Rhodan knew exactly what went on inside the apparatus. It was a technical process which was beyond human comprehension.

Bell had followed the countdown but he was unable to call out zero as the men were gripped by a terrific force and felt the severe pull of the preliminary dematerialisation.

Instead of the heretofore clearly-reflected picture of the GZ-1 on the observation screen of the *Ganymede*, a fluorescing energy spiral flickered on the panel for a moment and vanished without a trace.

The roaring engines of the *Ganymede* sputtered out into idling speed. Outside in the automatic control stations of Naatral's spaceport the impression was created that the Commander had once again made a senseless attempt to escape from the fetters of the magnetic field.

The chief engineer let the reactors run down. The *Gazelle* was up and gone.

"If it works I'll sleep on a bed of nails," Col. Freyt exclaimed, completely baffled. "Are they really off? The whole kit and caboodle?"

He looked around in vexation. The little *Gazelle*, which had suddenly loomed so large in his eyes, had disappeared from the hangar as if it had never been berthed in it.

"O.K." Freyt gritted his teeth with stirred emotions. "Prepare ship for battle action! If they ever come back we'll receive our signal. Get ready for an emergency start!"

* * * *

Their return into the physical reality of the normal world was performed more swiftly than in a regular spaceship transition. It was as if nothing had happened at all. The short painful strain in the area of the neck was little more than the passing aftermath of a nerve reflex which could not affect the alertness of the mind.

Julian Tiffloor listened on his helmet radio to the heavy breathing of the awakening men. Nobody screamed or moaned but they all saw the white-hot flames on the picture screens of the GZ-1.

The cadet's hand jerked forward. However the stepswitch of the impact-shield projector was already shoved into high position. It was one of the things that had been taken care of before the launching.

The outraged 'element' air engulfed the *Gazelle* in flames on its furious plunge to the depth. Far below the ship, but already clearly discernible, sketched the landscape of a planet which they had known only

from hearsay up to now.

"The Crystal World," Khrest's voice could be heard above the din of the machines. "We're above the equatorial continent. Fly across the sickle-shaped ocean and land in one of the gorges of the coastal mountains."

It was remarkable how unemotionally the Arkonide greeted his final return to his homeland.

Violet impulse rays flashed from the forward steering jets of the spaceship. Within seconds the speed of the GZ-1 was braked to the point where it came under the influence of the growing effect of the planet's gravity.

"If they spot us now we've had it," Bell said tonelessly. "They can't fail to see us. We're shining brighter than a comet."

"We're on day side," Rhodan interrupted. "Quiet on board! Cut the useless talk. Tiff, fly normal speed and act as if you were at home. Don't go higher than 15,000. Keep your speed at Mach 5. Arkonides wouldn't fly faster when they want to view their world from above."

"But there must be tracking stations here somewhere," Bell emphasized again.

"Sure, but we're outside their area of operations. Since we've already entered the atmosphere, the automatic scanners are no longer interested in us. The robot stations act strictly in accordance with their programming. Any object flying below the restricted altitudes is considered safe. If we had arrived in a regular flight through space, their heavy stuff would already be popping all around us.

Rhodan stopped speaking. He knew exactly what to expect on Arkon #1. It was unthinkable that anyone or anything would be aroused by an airship no matter how unexpectedly it appeared.

It had already been established that the three-part planet with the collective name of Arkon was surrounded by an outer and inner belt of fortifications. The outer ring was formed by approximately 5000 enormous platforms and space fortresses bristling with formidable firepower which the *Ganymede* had already felt.

The inner defence zone was identical with planets #5 6, 7 and 8 which under the embargo of spaceships now in effect also served as transit ports for the inter-Galactic trade.

Therefore the robot brain on Arkon #3 had drawn a logical conclusion if it considered airships inside its atmosphere to be non-suspect.

These were precisely the deliberations which had led Rhodan in the last consequence to venture on this mission.

Tiffloor had slowed down his re-entry speed and the *Gazelle* moved in aerodynamic flight along the shore of the small ocean.

All was quiet aboard the long-range reconnaissance patrol craft. The picture screens held the attention of the crew. Even in the storage room silence reigned.

They chose a course hugging the shoreline. Wherever they turned their eyes there were neither cities nor large habitations visible.

The terrain resembled a vast park without borders whose natural features had been eliminated and changed down to the smallest details.

There had been talented and creative and at some places obviously mentally deranged artists at work transforming the original wilderness according to their image of beauty and sensual desire.

Rhodan sighed when he caught sight of a three-mile-wide river. Near its estuary the magnificent flood of water rose in a bold curve into the cloudless sky, defying all laws of nature. It followed the path of a steep parabola, thus forming a dazzling arch of swirling and foaming masses of water whose myriad light reflexes painted their picture screens with a scintillating riot of colours.

"Circle a few times around the water-gate," Thora called impatiently. "Hurry up, Tiff. No Arkonide would neglect admiring the Arch of Zoltral on a pleasure trip."

Bell began to swear mightily and Rhodan wiped the sweat from his brow without a word. Tiffior rolled his eyes mournfully and went into a curve while slowing down his speed.

Rhodan gave a few short instructions. The taskforce still reckoned with the possibility of an ambush out of the blue.

However nothing untoward happened. All vessels they encountered glided quietly and smoothly through the air as if the Terranian reconnaissance craft were part and parcel of this planet.

The eastern coast of the sickle-shaped ocean came into view. The outlying islands served as completely isolated retreats. No cities existed on Arkon #1. It baffled Rhodan where the 10 billion Arkonides lived. The great size of the planet and the fact that its surface was exclusively dedicated to homes and recreation could explain its apparent emptiness.

They flew over some of the old buildings which—seen from outside—resembled large conical champagne glasses anchored in the ground by their slender stems. The walls slanted outward with imposing elegance, a testimony to the ingenious mastery of statics.

Again the devotion to privacy was in evidence. It was an obvious principle to place the gardens and terraces inside the enclosure of the cone-shaped walls. Rhodan had already had the opportunity to inspect a similar palace on the fifth world of the solar system.

There were few noteworthy variations of the outer form which was an outright contradiction to the theory of destandardization. The buildings on the islands were apparently for the use of the general masses of the people. The individualization could not be realized to such a degree that each family occupied a home of its own characteristic design.

Rhodan quietly shook his head. Something seemed not quite right in this world. Arkon #1 reminded him vividly of the planet Wanderer, whose inhabitants had even gone further: they didn't set out to change an existing planet to suit their fancy.

"The shape of the Gazelle will make us conspicuous," Marshall warned. "Thora, are you sure you're doing the right thing?"

"This flying disk won't attract harmful attention. At the most they'll marvel at its futuristic inventive construction. Nobody is going to get excited. You don't know Arkon, John!"

The three-mile-wide arch of water was more than 10,000 feet high and below its apex rose a funnel-shaped palace with fanciful gardens and a floating viewing platform which seemed to soar weightlessly out of the inner courtyard as they came closer.

Somebody down there seemed to go out of his way to greet the slowly flying patrol craft.

Tiff took the risk of diving under the watergate. Rhodan instinctively pulled in his head when the blinding light of the white Arkon sun was suddenly split and radiated in a thousand eerie hues.

Thora had fallen silent. She looked quietly down until she said in a trembling voice: "This is my home, Perry. I grew up in this palace. It's the ancestral seat of the Zoltrals."

Rhodan had already assumed as much when she mentioned the technical marvel in connection with her dynasty.

Tiff pulled the machine up again while Rhodan tried to distract Thora. "I suppose that this arch of water is created by a carefully co-ordinated antigrav field."

"If that field collapses, the people in the funnel underneath will drown like rats," Bell muttered his unfeeling if accurate comment.

"You barbarian!" Thora lashed out with scorn. "Can't you understand that a highly cultured race like ours is on a never-ending search for new beauty?" The style of standardization which is so common on Earth has been abandoned by us 8000 years ago. We don't want to press everything into the same mould. This is particularly true of our private homes. It'll never occur to anyone to imitate this unique Portal of Zoltral. It would be considered an affront to unwritten customs. No park looks like another one and nobody would keep the same pet as his neighbour."

The showpiece of an overdeveloped civilization was left behind. Tiff calmly resumed his previous course and Bell grinned maliciously. Rhodan's imploring look came too late.

"Does that also mean that your surgeons will never remove an inflamed appendix by the same method of operation? If I were to proceed with style in an absolutely unorthodox manner I'd start my incision at the sole of the foot. Crazy!"

"Arkonides don't have an appendix," Khrest said with a trace of a smile. "However it's quite true that the medical scientists are also inclined to vary their routines. An individual surgeon might at least choose different back ground music for identical operations. Lieutenant Tiff, would you please fly to the primitive wilderness preserve over there. That's where I hunted my first saurian as a young science student."

Tiff pulled the machine around in a tight curve to a large peninsula which resembled the steaming jungles of Venus. Fearsome creatures flew against an invisible energy dome which restricted the Rapping animals to their assigned realm.

"It's an artificial landscape, too," Bell snorted contemptuously. "I must be slowly going mad. How do I recognize my own symptoms?"

"Don't you have protected wildlife areas on Earth?" Thora flared up, deeply annoyed. "Why does it seem so peculiar to you if cultured people endeavour to shape their natural surroundings according to

their personal wishes? There's hardly a rock left on Arkon remaining at the spot where nature deposited it."

Bell refrained from answering. He looked around helplessly but he saw only faces showing more or less consternation. The impressions were overwhelming. What seemed to disturb their feelings most was the fact that nobody paid the slightest attention to their presence. It looked as if Arkon had never conducted a single war, let alone conquered a whole galaxy. Arkon #1, the Crystal World, was the secluded sacrosanct domicile of people who for 10,000 years had considered it undignified and a perversion to build their own residences next to industrial factories.

Tifflor got in line with the increasing air traffic. They noticed the first express ways down below. The glittering graceful ribbons spanned the water as if nature had created them. They were not supported by pillars, proving again that they were cradled in a force-field.

Bell perched silently on his seat in front of the weapons control panel. of the Gazelle. Each time an airship came within range of his target screen his thumb moved automatically to the red buttons.

They flew inland over the coast. The mountain Khrest had pointed out was not a natural range of peaks since the massive rocks had long ago been transformed to the taste of the Arkonides. They had carved gigantic heads and torsos of stone. The crowning adornment was a milelong sculpture of abstract form which topped the ridge of the highest mountain chain.

The slowly-approaching Gazelle was inundated in a flood of reflected light. Rhodan closed his eyes before the radiant brilliance.

"It's the symbolic representation of the conquest of the Galaxy," Khrest declared solemnly. "It was created by the most important artist of his time, Eukolard, who spent his life working with an ordinary energy-beamer to mould the various scenes. He never used jet attachments as other artists will do. When the work was finished he required the entire energy output of the planet Arkon for 8.3 hours to transform the minerals by an intricate process so that now the sculpture is a pure diamond. The robot brain designed the grinding for the most brilliant effect and the vibration guns of the fleet finished this testimonial to our history under the guidance of Eukolard."

"Diamond!" Tifflor involuntarily exclaimed with a sigh.

"It's a common substance here although pure carbon is considered very precious on Terra," Khrest explained.

"Let's go on! We don't want to get sidetracked," Rhodan ordered curtly. "Khrest, where's a good spot for landing?"

They found a place 150 miles farther east. When Tifflor set down his machine in a rocky gorge they were only 200 miles away from the Arkonide government centre. The narrow gorge was bridged by a crystal road.

Rhodan was the first to leave the ship. The coral-red water of a babbling brook flowed at his feet. A ledge protruding from the cliffs could serve as an excellent cover for the small spaceship.

Rhodan looked around to examine the place. It was a lonely spot where no Arkonide was likely to stray. He slowly relaxed his tense, vigilant attitude to breathe the pure fragrant air to the fullest.

The men of the taskforce climbed out in a strangely subdued mood. It was warm but the heat was not humid. The ravine was in a cooling shade and the ship's instruments registered 80° F. at the bottom.

An auto road of converted energy glistened 300 feet above them. Thora explained: "We love to go places in ground vehicles which enable us to enjoy the beauty of the land so much better. The network of road was designed purely for the purposes of relaxation and recreation. They won't be used by anybody who's in a hurry."

Perry Rhodan swallowed hard. He got the feeling that his brain was beginning to swiftly rotate. He had long known the facts. The hypno-training he had received had given him detailed information about life on Arkon. However, theoretical knowledge and physical observation were two different things.

Rhodan's nerves were overwrought. He was reminded of the problems on Earth. There arguments continued to rage about the construction of speedways while here equivalent countless billions had been spent on roads for the sole purpose of providing an occasional pleasure ride in old-fashioned vehicles.

The contrast was too great to be quickly assimilated by the human mind.

Rhodan decided on the spot on the one correct approach. "The government centre, the so-called Hills of the sages, is about 200 miles away from here. The sun will go down in four hours. Take a rest and try to sort out your impressions. I can't use people who suffer from inferiority complexes. You may move freely around in this canyon but keep your weapons handy. You never know if we'll be detected here although it's highly unlikely. Don't forget that this peaceful, serene world represents only a part of a greater domain. Two similar planets are circling about the same glaring white sun at a scant cosmic distance where entirely different conditions prevail. It would have been quite impossible for us to fly around there as we please. But don't assume that we're already out of danger! We can return to the *Ganymede* only if we can obtain an official permit. In a few hours I'll be on my way to try to talk with the Emperor personally. Khrest and Thora will accompany me. And..." here Rhodan hesitated for a second, "...and don't believe for a second that an unauthorized start will succeed as well as our landing on Arkon! If we poke our nose into outer space against the will of the robot brain we'll be turned into ashes by hundreds of guns firing simultaneously from their interceptors. If our negotiations are not successful our goose is cooked. O.K., that's about all there is to say. Sleep, talk or take a walk, but keep in mind what's ahead of us!"

Rhodan stripped off the spacesuit which restricted his movements. The shadows in the canyon grew longer. A strange vehicle flitted along the shining ribbon of the road far above the heads of the quiet men. Its occupants never stopped. With all the miracles everywhere in abundance, this gorge wasn't worth a second look.

3/ HIS IMPERIAL GLORIFICENCE

"His Million-Eyed, All-Seeing, Omniscient Illustrious Highness, Ruler of Arkon and the World of the Bleak Island; His Imperial Glorificence, Orcast XXI, Diety of the Most Ancient Generation of the Universe; decrees that the Dance of the Singing Waters shall begin."

Imperator Orcast XXI, witty critic of his times, known as affable cynic, delightful conversationalist and

creator of sublime works of art, decided to extend his raised right arm with the edge of the hand pointed forward, which caused the robot-guided individual sensor of the automatic water display to shift a shade from its mechanical setting.

The Emperor wrinkled his painstakingly groomed eyebrows with studied irony as the Chief of Protocol winced in desperation. "The palm of the hand forward, Your Supreme Highness! The positronic sensor requires the total impulse emanations from the palm of your Supreme Highness."

Orcast desisted as he was wont to do on urgent requests or categorical orders. His right arm dropped down and the lowpitched roar inside the suspended water sphere diminished to a rhythmic hum which seconds later faded away in countless harmonically modulated cadences.

The water sphere, measuring 3000 feet in diameter, began to diffuse in sprays under the pull of the antigrav composition. Splendiferous colour reflexes were created in the surging and undulating element which began to take new shape in geometrical figures true to the latest masterwork.

The attention of the crowd of invited guests was drawn to the artistic treat offered. They decided to change their position, enabling them to look upwards at the magnificent show unfolding over the inner courtyard of the Crystal Palace.

"Overwhelming," Orcast admitted to his favourite guests. "However I must seriously question why the Deity from the Most Ancient Generation of the Universe is not permitted to stretch out his hand as he pleases. It seems to me that my much praised Divine Status leaves something to be desired."

Modest laughter applauded the reflections of the ruler. With a sardonic smile Orcast took delight in the embarrassment of his Chief of Protocol. "Be that as it may," Orcast continued, "my omniscient mind seems to be unable to suppress the barbaric pangs of hunger of its apparently less spiritual organism in accordance with the rules of decorum. Greetings, Offentur. Your composition will go down in history as a major achievement of modern art."

Orcast rose from his pulsating couch. His eyes roamed over the wide. expanse of the park. Far above him the tamed masses of water were suddenly transformed into fluorescent vapours by the sudden flare of an atomic sun.

The festival had already lasted three hours. His guests understood that the Emperor wished to be alone. The younger philosophers nowadays advocated the opinion that the ingestion and mastication of food by so-called gourmets was just as repulsive and offensive to good manners as the organic digestion in the entire alimentary canal. According to Ephrantin the Elder both processes were so closely related that a truly aesthetic mind could not help but consider comparisons and draw conclusions from the ritual of feeding.

Orcast was an adherent of the new philosophy. Thus he departed with measured steps and entered his glider, which carried him high up above the crowd hailing him loudly.

Orcast's customary smile faded. Greatly troubled he looked down at his palace grounds measuring 5000 feet across. Life was still pulsating in the most beautiful park of Arkon. They still carried on animated conversations about the most trivial things. How much longer could this go on?

Orcast felt tired and exhausted. A four-hour-long celebration was too demanding for his body and soul. He owed it to his reputation to act clever and sophisticated.

His devoted personal slave, who belonged to the Triclopean race of the Naats, took the ruler in his strong arms. A transparent energy screen gave way under the body impulses of the approaching men.

Orcast was now far away from the merry festivities. Without a word he let the three-eyed titan divest him of his attire and clothe him in soft fragrant robes.

Then he relished with great pleasure the stimulating vibrations of his divan. "It was very boring, Tranto," he complained ruefully. "Isn't it one of your duties to keep dilettantish composers like Offentur away from me? He insults my senses with his feeble gift—if you can call it a gift, which is very debatable. I'll allow myself to take a little rest now. This appears to be the only thing the Imperial Glorificence can still permit. A sad fact with which only a man who keeps a sense of humour about himself can cope or he would be totally bereft of his energies."

The Triclopean slave left quietly. He knew that no answer was expected of him.

Through the open wall offering a view to the outside, he could see robots scurrying from terrace to terrace with trays full of the most exquisite drinks from all over the Galaxy. Peals of gay laughter filtered into the room where he rested.

For a moment Orcast was puzzled by the strange behaviour of his slave. Since when did he butt against the door as if possessed?

Orcast trailed off in weary thoughts about the purpose of life or the lack of it but he became wide awake when a little furry animal appeared in front of him. Pucky, the creature from a far distant world, grinned amiably with his single incisor. "Hello, old boy!" the mouse-beaver squeaked in flawless Intercosmo. "With your permission: Lt. Puck, member of the Special Commando of the New Power."

Pucky slid closer on his broad hindquarters. His mouse face was a picture of sheer delight. Orcast managed to keep his composure despite the fearsome surprise. He simply cleared his throat and said with the usual mask of smile on his face: "That's precious! I believe I can recognize in you an intelligent being from one of my planets."

"Wrong!" the mouse-beaver regretted very unconventionally. "With your permission!"

For a fraction of a second he concentrated his eyes on the switch panel of the room hidden behind a beautiful plant. For the first time Orcast experienced a threatening danger as the switch for the control of the protective energy-field was tipped down.

"O.K.," the alien creature said, using an expression unknown to him.

Orcast tried to get up. But he was held down on his divan by invisible forces.

"I'm Lt. Puck of the Mutant Corps," the mouse-beaver reiterated. "Oh, you never heard of it? How I managed to get in, you wonder? Gara,*Gobo*. Simple, old boy. I'm... I guess I shouldn't repeat myself. Anyway, I also happen to be *afarmoov*—teleporter. You won't get excited, will you? I'm forbidden to agitate you."

Pucky's grin became still friendlier. He wrinkled his nose all the way up and his dainty forepaws with the little grappling fingers gesticulated through the air.

Orcast fought to keep his self-control. He knew enough about parapsychological science to understand

a phenomenon such as the sudden emergence of the little being. Here were forces at work which could not be contained by his highly elaborate security installations.

Pucky loosened his mental grip on Orcast and the supreme Arkonide began to breathe deeply. His mind was now extremely alert, a fact which was instantly grasped by the telepathic mouse-beaver. "Don't do anything rash, *Gobo!*" he pleaded with him. "We've waited almost four hours to get you alone. All we want is a little talk. The Chief isn't going to collar you. Do these sheets have a collar?"

Pucky inspected the aromatic habits with his big eyes. "Apparently not," he stated. "You think too much, old boy. You certainly won't be able to push that button on the wall behind you."

Orcast XXI gave up. He sensed the vast potentialities of the intruder confronting him. His taste for the new, abnormal and the abstract was whetted. Who dared to startle the Emperor with such a surprise?

Pucky perceived the thoughts of the man stretched supinely before him. Orcast shuddered once again as the air began to vibrate close to him and a slight figure with yellow skin materialized.

Tako Kakuta, another teleporter, bowed with a smile. A heavy impulse weapon dangled from his hand and was quickly hidden under his wide shoulder cape. Orcast took notice that the stranger was garbed in the uniform of his palace servants. Orcast was aware that the lavish festival offered convenient opportunities for a stranger to slip in. His curiosity became more and more aroused.

"His Excellency Prime Minister Perry Rhodan, governing the planet Terra, asks your indulgence," the slim man announced in lieu of a greeting. "His Excellency has encountered some difficulties with respect to your highly efficient robot guards. He has instructed me to assure you that we're not contemplating a show of force against your person. We're merely desirous of initiating an exchange of opinions which will be carried out with all due respect and in polite reverence. His Excellency requests your Supreme Highness to grant him your consideration."

Orcast pondered the message. As yet he wasn't sure what attitude to assume toward these extraordinary people. They didn't fit into a known pattern. There was something very unusual about them which had little to do with their obviously supernatural gifts.

"You'll find me full of expectations," he smiled hesitantly. "What was the name of His Excellency? Rhodan?"

Tako noted with satisfaction that he had used the third person for his inquiry about Rhodan. This was a sign of courtesy which boded well. He affirmed Orcast's question, whereupon the attitude of the Emperor became more relaxed.

They waited till the energy-field at the entrance portal was lifted. After a few minutes a tall figure stepped into the diffuse light of the indirect illumination.

Rhodan threw off the bright-red shoulder cape of the non-Arkonide servants and exposed the simple uniform of the New Power he was wearing.

André Noir, the stout and congenial Frenchman with powerful hypnotic capabilities, found it unnecessary to force the Emperor, who was already restrained by Pucky, under his mental influence. The man was as harmless as a child, provided it was possible to circumvent the security precautions.

"Stay in the anteroom, Noir!" Rhodan whispered quickly. "Keep the slave under control. I'll need 10

minutes. Where's Kitai Ishibashi?"

"He's with Marshall and Anne Sloane at the big control complex, sir! They're watching the guards."

Thora and Khrest stood behind Rhodan, waiting impatiently. It had been a relatively simple matter to enter the palace after the teleporter had reconnoitred the layout. It had been considerably easier to outwit the entrance barrier system than on the fifth world of the Arkonide constellation. There were no conspirators or hostile members of other races present on the Crystal Planet.

Rhodan studied the resting Emperor with a critical look. Though Orcast was a fairly young Arkonide his bearing was already tainted by the decadence of his race. He was obviously fatigued, which was confirmed by a telepathic impulse from Pucky.

Tako Kakuta stood at attention. Rhodan tried to mask the emotions welling up in him by an outward display of impersonal coldness. So this was the fabled ruler of the Great Empire!

Rhodan felt his face become taut. The aura of the alien surroundings and the imminent perils cast its spell over him. Orcast embodied, despite his rather unfortunate predicaments, the rise and fall of an admirable people. Rhodan had to force himself to shake off an instinctive shyness and a subconscious inclination toward humility.

He saluted briefly and correctly. Then the eyes of the two men met for the first time Orcast cast one long glance at the tall and erect figure and he sensed that this stranger was endowed with all the qualities which he never possessed himself. Rhodan's bursting energy and his determined resolution threatened to overpower the Emperor. He slowly raised himself up on his elbows as Pucky relented his hold on him.

Rhodan came quickly to the point. His apology for his unauthorized entrance did not absolve him of the breach of etiquette but he made it clear that he was aware of his unseemly behaviour. Orcast nodded silently. His customary perfunctory smile had faded. He scrutinized the features of the unknown man with increasing anxiety.

"I regret to inconvenience you at this hour," Rhodan emphasized again. "Unfortunately I saw no other alternative."

"You could have requested an audience," Orcast admonished, casting a sidelong glance at Pucky.

"My people are not in the habit of attempting the impossible, Your Supreme Highness. Unfortunately I'm not a creator of aquatic spectacles and it would have been quite hopeless to importune the officials at your court."

Rhodan's mild sarcasm wasn't lost on Orcast. He reclined on his divan with a sigh. "Not this!" he groaned. "Spare me your caustic scorn in the privacy of my room. I'm a ruler whose power doesn't reach beyond these four walls. I believe I understand the exceptional nature of your wishes but the empire is governed by an automaton. How do you intend to accomplish your goals if I can give you no assistance whatsoever in spite of my fervent desire?"

Rhodan shuddered inwardly. He sensed the abject resignation of the Emperor.

Pucky emitted an impulse of shock. *He feels like a grain of dust in a storm*, was the telepathic message Rhodan received.

Rhodan regained his composure and his smile expressed regret. As he motioned to the waiting Arkonides he slowly became more convinced that the dangerous foray into Orcast's private quarters was in vain. The man had no power to sway the decisions of the robot brain.

Thora and Khrest entered the room. She walked proud and erect, he quiet and slightly shuffling his feet. Orcast sat up again. Genuine surprise was reflected on his young yet strangely old-looking face.

"We know each other, Orcast," Thora began coldly. "This palace belongs to my family. I've come to demand my rights although Khrest, First Scientist of the Council, has advised me of the futility of my request. I insist on an immediate answer. We don't have time to waste."

Rhodan followed the heated discussion very attentively till a sense of weariness overcame him.

Orcast spoke the truth as Pucky continually affirmed. This pseudo-ruler of the mightiest empire in history didn't even know that Thora and Khrest had been sent 13 years of Terranian time ago on an expedition to search for the Planet of Eternal Life.

Nor was Orcast informed about the fact that Rhodan's spaceship was held on Naat. He deeply regretted with frank sincerity that he was completely unable to intervene on their behalf.

Thora's hopes were smashed. She fell silent and collapsed on another divan.

Orcast was extremely disturbed. The revelation of Thora's emergency landing on the Earth's moon and the eventual return aboard a Terranian spaceship had come as too much of a surprise. More than ever the Emperor felt how helpless he was. This was also expressed in his words. "I'd be happy to grant you permission for the landing and to let you set the time of your departure at your own convenience. I'm deeply grateful to you for the rescue of my two esteemed compatriots. To my great sorrow I'm unable to lend you a hand unless you consider it helpful if I can provide for your safe escort from the palace. It's not my prerogative to countermand the decisions of the robot brain."

"Issue a decree for a more reasonable programming!" Rhodan interjected a little impetuously.

Orcast smiled wanly. "You who haven't lost the vigour of your ancestors can probably not imagine what the facts of life on Arkon #3 are."

"Summon the Galactic Council to a session," Thora proposed. "The robot brain is obligated to submit to a unanimous decision."

"It won't even accept its ruling for recording in its memory data bank," Orcast dismissed the suggestion.

Rhodan looked at Pucky, who verified the truth of the statement. The situation became unreal. Despair threatened to get the better of Rhodan's thoughts. He had reckoned that the Emperor exercised a certain degree of power, at least with respect to such measures which were less than vital for the existence of the Great Empire.

The evaluation aboard the *Ganymede* of the basic situation had led Rhodan to believe that the ruler had the option of receiving official state visits and of attending to international formalities having no overriding importance with the ceremonial pomp of his court. He had no way of knowing that this was no longer the case. Otherwise he wouldn't have decided to fly to the Crystal Planet and to seek an audience. Suddenly he faced an unsurmountable wall.

"I demand a meeting of the Great Council," Thora urged once more.

"It's useless and fraught with danger," Rhodan flared. "Don't indulge in such fruitless mental exercises. As soon as the Council hears that you and Khrest are here the robot brain will automatically learn that we have left the Ganymede in violation of its instructions. That would be the end of everything."

He turned around to the Emperor. "Your Supreme Highness! Is it really beyond your authority to give us permission for the return flight to the fifth planet? Please consider our dilemma!"

Orcast threw up his hands in a helpless gesture. "When you leave—and you must leave—you'll take with you the proof that you have dealt with a sham of a ruler. I promise you that I'll keep your visit a secret. Since it's my opinion that your mission is not detrimental to the interest of the Empire, I'll be glad to make a suggestion to you."

Orcast began to smile. In his eyes was a spark of interest and repressed tension. He sought Thora's glance. "There are still a few men here of your breed. Do you remember Admiral Kenos, member of the Council and victor in the last battle of the Empire? Kenos has not responded to my invitation to the celebration we have today. It may be important for you to know that Kenos has been appointed Coordinator for Martial Service by the robot brain. It's his duty to draft Aliens and those Arkonides who are still capable of training for the defence forces on Arkon #3."

Rhodan with uncertain steps came slowly closer to the ruler and said in a harsh voice: "Your Highness, do I understand that you're hinting at a possible solution to my problems? Please give me your honest advice!"

"I'm always honest if I'm given the chance," Orcast gently enlightened him. "Go to him and explain your plight. Kenos served under Emperor Zoltral. The Empire never had a better Commander of the Fleet. This is all I can do for you. You must leave now. My guests are expecting me."

Rhodan hesitated no longer. He brushed off Thora's objections and Khrest's anxious questions with a gesture of his hand. Orcast followed the quick reactions of his uninvited guest with amazement.

Pucky transmitted Rhodan's orders by telepathy. Within a few moments the men of the task force who waited outside were informed. "Withdraw at once and join us at the place you were told," was the gist of the message.

Before departing, Rhodan felt obliged to advise Orcast of the security measure he had to take. "I hope you'll understand my concern for safety and I'm asking your consent. I'm forced to impose a hypno-block on you because an accidental remark could betray everything that happened. Your permission would make it much easier for me to have recourse to such an unpleasant expedience."

Orcast XXI looked long and quietly at the slim, striking face of the trim man. With a slight, painful smile he remarked: "You deprive me of the rare pleasure of being able to think in my meaningless days about your appearance. However I understand and have only one condition: I wish to receive you with all honours if and when a change of conditions will permit it."

Rhodan bowed briefly. This Arkonide who had been considered a foe prior to their landing, had become a friend. The hypno André Noir did his job and Orcast's mind surrendered to the willpower of the mutant.

When they stepped into the anteroom the Emperor had drifted off into a short sleep. Upon awakening

he would've forgotten that he'd ever had alien visitors in his private quarters.

Rhodan and his companions withdrew unmolested to the control complex of the huge palace. The party was nearing its end. More and more guests left the lavish estate.

Rhodan passed the sentry of the ruler's own Guard of Naats who had been put under a suggestion block and had earlier given him the glowing admission tab. Rhodan returned it because he was certain that a check would be made.

The wide portal in the base of the largest funnel-shaped building in Arkon stood open. The men disappeared in the dark.

The big cross-country glider of the public vehicle pool waited at the prearranged spot. Bell and the other mutants were already there. At their approach the door slid open with a hissing sound.

The vehicle had been put at Thora's disposal upon her request via the public communication network. All Arkonides were entitled to obtain such vehicles anytime free of charge.

Rhodan for a moment looked down the barrel of a raygun with a shimmering energy field at the muzzle.

"Here at last," Bell's rough voice boomed from inside. "It'll soon be light. What happened?"

"Come out at once!" Rhodan ordered curtly. "Hurry up, get out of there! We've got to cover too far a distance. No questions, please! Marshall, pass the word to Betty that Lt. Tiffloor's taskforce is to remain in hiding. Make a short report on the failure of our conference. Thora, return the vehicle to its station!"

She nervously set the controls of the vehicle and after a buzzing signal it started to move, gained speed and disappeared in the night.

"Failure?" Bell repeated slowly stretching the word. "How come?"

In the meantime Khrest went back along the outer wall. The ribbons of oldly arched highways were brilliantly illuminated.

Rhodan explained the purpose of the forthcoming visit and concluded: "Khrest will call for a bigger airplane from one of the public hangars. We've no other choice. We must reach Admiral Kenos before daybreak. He's our last hope."

Thora quietly gazed at the star-studded sky of Arkon. Countless clusters of suns veiled the band of the Galaxy. The mass of constellation M13 seemed to be a galaxy in its own right.

A few minutes later Khrest arrived with the airglider. The craft was built in the classical Arkonide style. The team of 10 climbed aboard. Khrest was at the controls.

Rhodan quickly familiarized himself with the operation and switched off the automatic pilot. "O.K. Fly away! You know where to find Kenos' home."

"It's a long way off. We'll have to circle around half the planet. Kenos lives like a hermit. His house is situated on top of a mountain. He loves to be as close to the stars as possible."

"A very appealing trait. Please tell me more about the man."

The glider lifted off with its engine humming and gathered speed. They got a last bird's-eye view of the hilly terrain. The flood of light from the palaces of the government complex illuminated Arkon's night. Then they were swallowed up by the darkness which became deeper and more impenetrable the farther they advanced to the west. They flew away from the rising sun.

4/ GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH KENOS

The taskforce led by Julian Tiffloor had arrived 10 minutes earlier. The landing approach had not been easy for the machine because they had to do without the normal guidance signals. It was Pucky who had homed in Tiffloor with uncanny precision.

Thora had entered alone Kenos' palace, which resembled a feudal citadel, and had been gone for almost four hours.

On Rhodan's orders the men of the taskforce were dispersed throughout the surroundings. With alert senses and their weapons at the ready they watched the huge funnel-shaped castle which had been embedded in a steep promontory on a narrow pedestal. It was a bizarre sight fitting into the grandiose scenery.

The mountain was wild and rugged and seemed to be uninhabited. Here no effort had been made to slough off the natural wilderness. If anything, they had endeavoured to heighten the impressive stark setting.

Kenos' abode was situated on an altitude of 12,000 feet. The atmosphere of Arkon I, which was about the size of Terra, was already rather thin.

The telepaths tried to perceive Thora's mental vibrations. However they received only occasional weak impulses. *She's blocking her thoughts*, Marshall had angrily explained.

After about four and a half hours came a warning. A sentry had detected a flying object in the infra-red viewfinder of his impulse weapon.

"Don't shoot!" Rhodan passed on the word from man to man. "Wait!"

The machine touched down on a nearby rocky bluff where the access road ended. Whoever wanted to enter Kenos' palace had to go by air.

An elderly Arkonide woman got out. Rhodan heard her asking for him in a deep alto voice.

A moment later he was there saluting her. "I'm Perry Rhodan, ma'am. May we enter?"

"My husband requests your visit. Did you already call in your men?"

"Have you spotted my machine?" Rhodan countered her question.

"Of course!" the matron smiled. "Please use my craft! Welcome, my old friend Khrest! Our door is always open to a member of the Zoltral family."

Khrest quietly bowed. Marshall gave a barely perceptible nod. Everything was on the level.

"Tiff, follow me with the Gazelle," Rhodan softly ordered. "Have all men get aboard at once! It's getting light here, too."

The little airglider of their host ascended along the majestic mountain wall soaring vertically into the sky. As they neared the palatial cone Rhodan recognized the bristling energy cannons in the armoured gun turrets. Kenos seemed to be a lone vestige of the Empire's heroic past.

They flew over the round crenellated wall arching outward and gently set down in the inner courtyard. Here the customary resplendence of the noble Arkonides was in evidence except for the usual illumination which had been neglected.

Tiffloor landed the Gazelle on a cantilevered platform and his commandos popped out like weasels.

"Lt. Tiffloor, have the men fall in! Nothing will warm the heart of an old warrior more than the sight of disciplined troops. Marshall, let your specialists form a line at right angles. Tiff, make the report!"

"Don't you require reconnaissance?" Ras Tschubai, the teleporter, apprehensively inquired.

"No, suspicion ill befits a guest. Bell, come with me!"

The men lined up. Orders were given in undertone. The Arkonide woman watched intently. She caught Rhodan's eye and waved. "Please come! My husband is expecting you. It won't be necessary to give lengthy explanations. Thora has already thoroughly informed us, going into great details."

This was as Rhodan had assumed. With a great sense of relief he followed the Arkonide noblewoman. It was a good omen that the admiral had sent his lady.

As they approached the wide portal a flood of bright lights blazed up and Rhodan saw a tall Arkonide clad in the splendid uniform of the empire's fleet. Perry had seldom beheld such an impressive face. He looked ancient and his skin was leathery. Snow-white hair fell down over his forehead under which big eyes glowed in unbroken fire.

Rhodan saluted and Thora presented him to the admiral. The lady of the house retired discreetly.

Kenos came toward Rhodan with firm steps. The Earthman felt his heart beat faster as their eyes met. This was a man who showed no trace of decadence despite his advanced age.

The old man silently studied him for almost a minute. Then he spoke in a deep resounding voice. "I wish to welcome you, Excellency. I know you're in a difficult situation and I don't want to waste our time talking. I'll see what I can do for you. Allow me to inspect your men!"

Rhodan took a deep breath. His old vigour was suddenly restored. As a practical man he understood words like these much better than the aesthetic declarations of the Emperor.

He quietly stepped aside and Kenos strode over to the shock troops. Rhodan checked the formation with a glance. It was flawless, just as expected from the members of an elite unit.

Tiffloor's commanding voice shattered the quiet. More than 100 arms moved as one, and 50 heavy impulse-beamers gleamed in the light. Then they stood like statues in front of an alien admiral whose lined face was frozen in an impenetrable mask.

Tiffloor's report was made in fluent Arkonide. As Kenos began to pace off the line, Rhodan barely suppressed a smile. This seemed to be a universal custom wherever there were disciplined cadres.

Reginald coughed flippantly. His whole attitude made it all plain. Rhodan gave him a devastating look loaded with terrible threats. A foolish remark could have upset or even insulted the man they now needed most on Arkon.

Kenos greeted with a clap of his right hand on the left side of his chest. When he turned away, Tiff shouted his commands again.

Breathing heavily Kenos stood at the railing of the platform and stared with a vacant look into the darkness of his garden. "Twenty million men like these and the revolutions in the farthest corners of our realm would be quelled in three years," he blurted out passionately.

"A very small matter for us, sir!" Rhodan stated calmly. "Terra alone can muster 100 million soldiers. Give me a part of your battlefleet, put a few inter-Galactic bases and equipment at my disposal and we'll prove to you that we can surpass your highest expectations."

Kenos whirled around, his eyes aflame. "Fine words, Earthling! And who would rule the Empire! Your people or ours?"

"Ours, of course," Rhodan coolly admitted. It would have been senseless to deceive this experienced tactician.

Kenos burst out in a laugh much to the surprise of Rhodan who would never have suspected an Arkonide of it.

"Didn't I tell you so?" Thora interjected with a sidelong ironic glance at Rhodan. "They want to set the world on fire. They're really very brazen and impolite, these little barbarians!"

"Hey, take it easy!" Bell finally spouted. "Was this an insult or did I detect a certain expression of tenderness?"

"He's getting sensitive," Thora said in surprise and with a trace of a smile. Her gaze at Rhodan caused the Chief of the New Power the deepest embarrassment.

"Yet they're honest," Kenos commented thoughtfully. "I've always admired such people even when they were my adversaries and I had to destroy them. Moreover, it's futile to play a hiding game. Only fools can still be impressed by the Great Empire. What's your opinion of our intelligent weakling or, as he's sometimes also called, the Imperator?"

Rhodan couldn't stifle a soft laugh. In his way, Kenos was hearty and refreshing. "Culturally burnt out, I'd say. In any case he's incapable of ruling a mighty state. He lacks the firm hand that is required now and then as well as the right instinct for compromise which will bring success."

Kenos remained silent for awhile till he finally said with a growl: "You're a dangerous breed, Earthling!"

It's really taking a great risk to offer you help. If that machine had not taken over the power, I'd have destroyed you as a peril to the Empire. But now I hope to have your support and friendship. I'd like to see the Arkonides venture into space again in my lifetime."

"He's only 187 years old, Terra-time," Thora whispered reproachfully.

Kenos said no more. The way he twisted his lips would have been interpreted as an indulgent smile on far away Earth. Subsequently he regarded the men of the Mutant Corps with great interest and asked for proof of their special capabilities.

Pucky put on a brilliant display of imaginative tricks which—among other feats—propelled the venerable admiral like a swift arrow through the air high above the courtyard. He remained speechless after he was gently set down on the ground again. Bell grinned kindly at him and the admiral started to walk in the direction of the portal. "Come with me!" he muttered. "I've already prepared quarters for you. Can you operate a battleship of the Imperium class? Smooth transitions?"

"We can do that half asleep," Bell modestly claimed.

"Oh, hypno-training, right? Tomorrow you'll go to enlist in the fleet. I'll arrange to have you signed on in Class One of our affiliated nations. The robot brain is at pains to find real live intelligent crews for the large units of the fleet. The robots can't do everything."

An undertone of implacable hate hung in his last words. Rhodan began to understand why Admiral Kenos took a chance of fortifying the power of Terra more than he relished.

"We're at your disposal, sir," Rhodan said with emphasis.

"Very good. You'll have to pass yourselves off as descendants of earlier Arkon emigrants. Other intelligences won't be recognized as IQ One. Since you probably want to keep the location of your own world secret we have to choose a sector in the inner area. There are people resembling you on Zeklon. I'll pretend that I've picked you and your men from the guard of Zoltral. It is known that the old dynasty that ruled before still privately employs outstanding fighters in their service. Is this alright with you or do you consider it unreasonable?"

Rhodan gave the old man an appreciative look before he stretched out his hand to him in the custom of the Earth. "It can only be considered an honour to be compared with Arkonides. Doesn't your remarkable past still survive despite the prevailing decline? This isn't meant as flattery."

Kenos simply smiled.

"Will the family of the Zoltrals agree with our plot? It's possible that the robot brain will make investigations."

"Let me take care of that. Have your men attend a briefing at sunrise. We don't have time to lose."

"At last there's someone on Arkon who doesn't have time," Bell murmured. "He's got my greatest respect. I wouldn't have liked to tangle with him in the heyday of the Arkonides. Would you?"

"I'd have avoided it by all means," Rhodan admitted. "O.K., let the men fall out. They can rest for three hours. Then we'll be really in for it."

5/ THE MOST GIGANTIC WAR MACHINE OF THE GALAXY

"Transport 18, fall in!" the unmodulated voice crackled from the loudspeaker of the armoured weapons dome on top of the mechanized recruiting station.

Fifty-three pairs of legs in knee-high boots of darkred finely tooled leather began to march to the beat of martial music.

The registration check was over. After the men had received their identification tags from Kenos they were transported in airgliders to the large military spaceport on the Crystal Planet. It was the only place on Arkon which was not reserved for recreation and the fine arts. Here a cold utilitarian style prevailed and thus the closest residential buildings had been moved 200 miles away.

Kenos stood with the Arkonides of his staff behind the energy curtain. He was not permitted to enter the gigantic spaceport. Only Thora and Khrest, who had been designated as commander and chief engineer respectively by Kenos, were allowed to pass through the control gate. However, not even the robot brain expected them to join the formation of the newly enrolled men from the colonial planet Zeklon V. The two aristocratic Arkonides who ranked miles above the Zeklonides followed in a small official car.

Including Rhodan, Bell and Tifflor there were exactly 53 living organic beings who walked across the seamless metal surface of the spaceport.

Ivan Goratschin, the green-skinned, two-headed mutant who was able to set off the nuclear reaction of calcium and carbon compounds by sheer willpower, was the last of the file, clumsily wobbling on his heavy legs and carrying Pucky on his strong arms. The mouse-beaver couldn't keep up the fast pace with his short hindpaws.

The animal was the only creature who was not made to don the fancy uniform of the Zoltrals' own guard. Kenos had also preferred not to sling over the sloping shoulders of the three-foot-high mouse-beaver an equally long energy-beamer.

Goratschin and Pucky had been accepted by the robot brain as unique creatures with special gifts. It had been considered best to recommend Pucky for his extraordinary telepathic talents and Goratschin as a data bank since his two heads were capable of retaining the memory of considerable factual details.

Rhodan marched up front to the left of his men. He wore pale-green, skin-tight pants over his red boots and a loose blouse gathered by a holster belt. The sleeves were adorned by exotic symbols. His head was protected by a helmet with built-in transceiver.

After a few steps they began to break out in a sweat and were soaked in perspiration after a few minutes of marching under the burning Arkon sun.

The curses grew louder as their blood boiled and their exhaustion increased on their way to transporter #18 whose hatch was already open to admit them.

"Quiet in the ranks!" Rhodan sounded off. "Pull yourselves together for heaven's sake! Of course it's no

fun to walk on glowing metal plates."

"These boots have thin soles that act like a shortwave grid," Bell fumed under his breath. "Five more minutes and I'll be dancing!"

Rhodan showed a fleeting grin. He knew he could depend on his men.

Arkonide fighter robots appeared at the waiting ship. It was an auxiliary craft of the familiar *Good Hope* class.

Rhodan's orders rang out over the terrain which was devoid of any other people. The column came to a halt near the hatch.

Thora stepped out of the car with elegant poise and looked with a touch of malice at Rhodan that made him swelter even more. He gave her a furious look.

"I'll make her fly through the air at the next opportunity," Anne Sloane, the telekin, promised.

"Quiet!" Marshall growled. "So far so good, but the future is veiled in mystery for me."

Thora made her report and disappeared with Khrest inside the vessel.

"Enter single file. ID tags in left hands!" a mechanical voice rasped.

They passed the second control check, man after man. Each of the sensitized tags was examined before the barrier was raised.

Rhodan's face became tense when it was Ivan's turn. However the automated control didn't hesitate for a second. It was entirely irrelevant what the mutant looked like. He had his tag and that was all that mattered. Rhodan followed as the last man.

He quickly glanced at the waiting Arkonides. Admiral Kenos was the only one among them who knew about their ruse and they probably congratulated each other that they had managed to pry such excellently trained men loose from the Zoltral family on Zeklon V.

Rhodan glided up in the antigrav elevator. A robot directed the men to the big mess hall where they had to wait. The ship started a few moments later.

"Where's Thora?" Rhodan whispered. "Take a look!"

The eyes of Wuriu Sengu, the seer, lost their clear expression and stared as though glazed at the massive steel walls which presented not the slightest obstacle to his special gift. Vivid pictures formed before his mental eye. "In the command centre, sir! Khrest is with her. The ship is being steered by remote control."

"Alright, listen everybody! When we're among ourselves we'll speak English. This ship is going to Arkon #3, the war planet. We've been assigned to a battleship as Class I crew. If we can pass the next controls, we won't have to wait much longer. We'll have to inform them about our hypno-training. It's the only way to explain our superior IQ, which is in some respects too high anyway. The testing machine might get suspicious in some cases. You'll have to cope with such critical moments by spontaneous decisions and quick answers. As soon as we get aboard a spaceship of the *Stardust* class our chances will be much better. Since there was no possibility of gaining access to such a vessel on Arkon #1 we

had to make our way somehow to #3. It gives me great pleasure that the robot brain itself has provided transportation for us. Our ship *Gazelle* is in safe hands with the admiral. We'll take it back at the first opportunity. Memorize all your instructions and act accordingly. Don't forget your new names which are noted on the tags. We were stationed at the Zoltral Palace as guards. Any questions?"

Bell's face was pale as he muttered, "You're showing great moderation again! Does it have to be a spacer of the Imperium class? We couldn't even man a single gun turret. Why not a smaller one?"

Rhodan cast a questioning glance at Sengu. The mutant shook his head which meant that they were not under electronic surveillance.

"You seem to underestimate Arkon #3 to a dangerous degree. If we can escape at all it'll only be possible in one of the heavier ships. I don't see why we should be satisfied with anything less."

"And the *Ganymede*, sir?" Marshall interjected short and to the point.

Rhodan furrowed his brow. Marshall had put his finger on a most troublesome problem. "We'll have to wait and see," Perry decided. "Freyt has his instructions. If we can make it back to Arkon #5 we're sure to arrive with a big bang. It won't do the technical installations there much good if a gigantic ship comes roaring in from hyperspace in close proximity. Besides, Freyt has got his tele-transmitter. Planning too far ahead with preconceived ideas has a nasty habit of going awry in 99 out of 100 cases. Let's see what kind of a ship we're entrusted with on Arkon #3. If we can't at least lay our hands on a heavy cruiser, then..."

"...then we'll give up," Bell interrupted.

"...then we'll see from there," Rhodan finished his sentence. "A smart man once said, 'Nothing is easier than deceiving a machine, provided one knows how the mechanism of the robot functions.' We're going to take a good look at it."

A videoscreen lit up. It was Thora. "We'll land in 15 minutes," she announced with the cool remoteness of an Arkonide command. "Tan Ro, you'll lead your men outside. Further instructions will follow later."

Rhodan, whose name was Tan Ro according to his ID tag, correctly saluted in the Terranian manner. From now on they were likely to be watched by distant observers.

The screen went dark again and silence reigned in the mess hall. In Rhodan's eyes was a searching look. He noticed the growing tension on all faces.

"Well, well, let's have another go at it!" the commander twitted them. "Long live the Empire which we're serving now! Ivan, don't start quarrelling now, O.K.?"

The two heads of the eight-foot mutant faced each other. "Agreed, my beloved brother," Ivan the younger said in a high-pitched voice.

"I'm willing to forget that it was you whose mind awakened half a second after mine."

"I thought we had agreed that it was only a third of a second," the second head snorted. "Besides I've got new proof that I woke up before you. O.K., let's stop arguing now. We'll talk about it some other time."

The burly body that was under the influence of both heads remained still.

"Man, are we going to have fun!" Pucky exulted in anticipation. His spoon-shaped beavertail smacked the floor in staccato. "We'll have a ball, Chief! I'm waiting for your sign."

"Show-off!" Bell whispered. "As if it were that simple."

Pucky bared his big tooth.

"Cut it out!" Rhodan tried to stay the ensuing discussion. "Wuriu, can you see anything?"

"The sickle of a planet is growing larger. We ought to be there pretty soon."

Rhodan picked up his impulse-beamer without a word. They had to leave the lighter handguns behind since they were not a part of their outfit. Instead they had been issued the latest model of the Arkonide weapons industry.

"This stuff is a little too hot for close combat," Rhodan murmured with a grim smile. "Oh, here we are!"

The mounting roar of the field projectors which had been started up shook the vessel. They could hear the shrill howling and hissing as the auxiliary ship plunged at high speed into the atmosphere of the globe.

Seconds later all observation screens lit up and caused the passengers to turn abruptly around.

"You've been granted permission to view Arkon #3," Thora's voice explained. "I've made contact with the Great Cöordinator. It bids you welcome."

Thora's message was ended. The men looked at each other in astonishment. Now they knew what the robot brain on the war planet called itself: "Great Cöordinator!" Rhodan echoed. "Hmm, I wonder if that thing has ambitions. Keep quiet, no discussions! Look around. Great Scot..."

Rhodan stopped in the middle of the sentence. He stared incredulously at the observation panels. As the auxiliary ship hurtled down, landscapes were flitting by which were no real landscapes at all. There were rows upon rows of factories and huge plants followed each other in uninterrupted succession. No vegetation could be seen anywhere and the ground never rose to a height that could be called a hill.

It was a completely levelled surface which totally consisted of steel, plastic and other artificial materials. Only the oceans had been left in their original state.

They had been told that there were 25,000 spaceship yards on Arkon #3. The entire planet was devoted to the construction of spacefleets. It looked as if the entire globe was completely paved over with one vast city.

Only the numerous spaceports with their powerful transmitters relieved the monotonous sight of technical installations. In addition Arkon #3 was for the greater part honeycombed with subterranean hangars for the spaceship industry and many manufacturing plants, as for instance those for engines were located 15,000 feet underground. It was truly the most gigantic war machine of the Galaxy.

Here and there the fluorescent hemispheres of enormous energy shields were visible. Arkon #3 was somewhat bigger than Earth and its average gravitation 1.3G.

The spaceports swarmed with spherical vessels of all sizes. A fleet had been assembled here whose power was limitless.

"I'm slowly beginning to understand what it takes to consolidate an Empire," Rhodan mused. "We're hopelessly dwarfed by comparison. How could we ever dream of taking over these stupendous resources?"

He looked around almost helplessly. There was no answer. Far ahead emerged the largest energy shield they had so far sighted. It covered an area which was too wide to be seen in its entirety from the low altitude they had reached meanwhile. The upper limit of the protective dome stretched into the highest layers of the atmosphere.

Rhodan realized that they skirted the seat of the central brain that called itself The Great Cöordinator. Kenos had told him that the switch installations covered an area of 2500 square miles and that the most advanced Arkonide micro-technique had been used throughout.

Generations of technicians had worked on its construction for more than 8000 years. Section upon section had been added and interconnected till there was nothing left of facts and know-how that could be added for instant recall. How deeply the brain was imbedded in the ground nobody knew. It was completely self-sufficient and its energy stations could run for millions of years.

"We can hardly wait that long," Rhodan murmured.

The auxiliary ship flew around the energy dome in a wide curve till it came to another spaceport.

Minutes later they touched down. The engines stopped and the safety hatches of the crew's quarters slid open with a sucking sound.

"Disembark and get in formation!" a robot's instruction came through the amplifier.

The men pressed outside. There was no further check this time. They lined up near the telescopic landing gear of the 200 foot sphere and waited till Thora and Khrest arrived.

Any desire they had felt for exchanging their thoughts was stifled by their environment which was not inductive to airing their hopes and plans.

Before them, at both sides and behind them, ships and ships were lined up in long strings. A little farther to the right more than 50 giants towered under the cloudless sky and the scorching white Arkon sun.

Mammoth spheres of the familiar Imperium class, measuring 2500 feet in diameter, were assembled in squadrons. Yet this was not what took Rhodan's breath away although these colossal spaceships in such abundant numbers could indeed give the human astronauts a sinking feeling full of inferiority complexes.

"No!" Rhodan softly stammered. "No!"

He could hear the deep breathing of Thora, who was also fascinated by the sight before her eyes.

Not far behind the ships of the Imperium class, two other vessels of identical spherical shape soared into the sky. If the Imperium-spacers were enormous, these other two units were super-monsters. The latter's bulging rings around the equators of the spheres, which no doubt housed the propulsion engines, were at the same height where the upper pole cupola of the Imperium class battleships ended. This facilitated an

estimate of their size.

It was well-nigh impossible to behold a full view of these two mountains despite the considerable distance. Overwhelmed, Rhodan closed his eyes, only to open them wide again. "I thought the immense Imperium class represented your most powerful ships," Rhodan said in a halting voice. "Thora, for heaven's sake, what's all this? These two giants must be nearly a mile high! Who built them?"

Thora's face was pale as she hastily replied: "There were some plans during the rule of our dynasty for the construction of ships of this size called Universe class, I believe. However, nothing ever came of it, at least not 13 years ago when I left. But a lot of things have happened during my absence."

Rhodan couldn't take his eyes off the super-battleships. He was unaware that his men watched him with burning interest till Bell groaned: "I'm going to flip my mind! Buddy, don't you get any big ideas! You'll never get a tub like that!"

"At least 5000 feet," Rhodan pensively whispered; "5000 feet without the support legs. I guess they must have a hundred times more fighting power than our *Stardust II*. Simply incredible! O.K., well talk about it later, not now."

Meanwhile Thora got into a car which hovered close above the ground, cushioned by an electric field.

The sudden blast of strident rhythmic music broke Rhodan's train of thought. His brain was already working feverishly on a new scheme. He couldn't help glancing back at those two mountains of Arkonide steel which made the ships of the Imperium class look like cute little toys.

"I bid the defenders of the Empire welcome to Arkon #3!" a voice reverberated. Then the music started blasting again. Soon they saw a big vehicle coming their way. It had enough room for more than 50 men. This time they were not forced to march under the broiling sun.

"Chat with each other!" Rhodan passed the word. "Pretend to be happy and curious. Laugh. It's all part of the game. Show 'em that we're alive. Don't act as if you were drugged. You've got to get over your surprise sometime!"

A boisterous, chattering mob climbed into the low vehicle. Before it started to move Rhodan took a last look at the battleships of the super-class. Then his eyes turned to their distant destination at the end of the vast spaceport.

6/ MORE ABOUT THE WAR WORLD

The axis rotation of the third synchronized planet in the inner Arkon system corresponded to a value of 28.4 hours Terranian time.

By contrast to all celestial bodies in the universe where nights occur, or at least twilight sets in, this was not the case with this extraordinary planet.

Robots required no sleep, no rest and no recreation. The constant pounding of fully automatic machines

and assembly lines clanked a rhythm in a world where the concept of darkness was unknown.

Atomic suns substituted for the light of the natural pivotal star whenever night reigned on the hemisphere. Billions of stationary relay stations and mobile robot repair crews were constantly at work.

Arkon #3, where before the take-over of the all-embracing central control brain the deadly calm of expired activity had remained in its last gasps, now—since six years Terranian time—was throbbing with new vigour.

The most prolific war industry of the Galaxy had undertaken the mass production of spaceships with a vengeance such as if the days of yore—of annexation and conquest by power—had to be resurrected over night from the abyss of melancholy memories.

Rhodan tried to envision the problem of providing raw materials for example.

The natural resources of Arkon #3 itself were completely exhausted. There was not an ounce of ore left which was worth mining.

A well-directed mercantile fleet was continually plying the trade routes of the universe to haul in the necessary goods. At authorized trans-shipment wharves on planets 5, 6, 7 and 8 merchandise coming from the farthest recesses of the Galaxy was stored and transferred to Arkon #3.

The mills on Arkon, #2, devoted to the manufacturing of high-grade industrial products, had started to roll again as well in order to insure the well-being of the Empire.

Rhodan quickly gave up his attempt to grasp even a partial problem of this truly gigantic organization. It was beyond comprehension.

But he had thereby come to realize the real reason for the establishment of such a colossal robot brain. Even the old, still-active Arkonides had no longer been capable of supervising the myriads of tasks. It could only be handled by a machine which had taken on fantastic dimensions due to the countless numbers of highly specialized and intricate circuits.

Meanwhile the taskforce had spent 32 hours on this world of total mechanization. There was hardly an Arkonide in sight but many people from all corners of the Galaxy ruled by the Empire.

The robot colossus was on the verge of administering the rapid hypno-training even to underdeveloped races in order to man its spaceships.

Almost hourly numerous squadrons zoomed into space and they heard rumours that one of the most gruesome military actions in the history of the Empire raged in the vicinity of stellar cluster M-13.

Rebellious colonial nations that had shaken off the weakening bonds of the ancient dominion in the course of 500 years and were suddenly faced with an alternative: unconditional surrender or ruthless extermination. The robot brain acted logically, without scruples, and didn't ask questions as to how many lives were snuffed out or what cruel injustice was committed.

Rhodan's mind was shaken to the core when he thought of the possibility of an accidental discovery of Earth.

The hall was flat, spacious and without a personal note. Here the newly recruited men came and went.

Each race was assigned its own quarters where they were confined to the most practical degree. Food and drink were promptly served.

There were mostly the Triclopan Naats who had gathered here. Their area was next to the one reserved for Rhodan's men.

The mutants were more than usually watchful. An incredible din pervaded the large room. Quarrels were rampant everywhere. The mentalities of the various people clashed. Especially the Naats were picking fights. It was one of their more prominent traits.

Behind them blue-skinned figures with huge beads squatted on the floor. Non-humanoid beings were not present. It was known that the robot brain followed the principles of the old Arkonide conquerors.

Non-humanoid and non-oxygen-breathing beings always proved to be the most irreconcilable enemies of the state and they were the prime targets of their battleship expeditions.

The zone of the humans was furnished with comfortable armchairs. The robot brain endeavoured in every respect to keep its crews as happy as possible.

Bell squinted, full of suspicion, at the three-eyed Naats. They got into another brawl until they were separated by the suddenly-appearing fighter robots who treated them by no means with kid gloves.

The untrammelled yelling of the 10-foot giants gave way to a muffled growl.

"If somebody had told me 13 years ago that I'd spend my hours at this place, I'd have had a screaming fit," Bell comment despondently. "I'm slowly beginning to understand why they've given us such an awfully friendly welcome."

A husky European of the commando team shrilly whistled through his fingers. With a broad grin he watched the service robot scurrying to him to dutifully take his orders.

"Don't overdo it," Rhodan apprehensively admonished. "I've got a feeling as if they're already holding a knife at our throats. Tiff, did you recover from your examination?"

Tiffior touched his head with a doleful grin where two bluish pressure spots were visible at his temples. "I don't want to go through this again," he groaned. "The machine wanted to know why all of us have such an exceedingly high IQ. I'm afraid, sir, it's suspicious of us."

The tight circle of men had become a little quieter.

"Stick together!" Rhodan murmured. "When Kakuta returns, get up and drink a toast. Start dancing, for all I care, but keep him out of sight!"

"Sir, I've got a hunch you'll be subjected again to the brainwave detector," Sgt. Rous said with anxiety. "We've all been through it but they took more time with you. Each one of us has been questioned how it's possible that a man from Zeklon #5 has twice as high an IQ as a top scientist from Arkon."

Rhodan's face remained impassive. He also had an inkling that he would be required once more to undergo another brain-wave pattern test. Of course the automaton had made use of its facilities for checking the mental faculties of the people sent by Admiral Kenos. This had taken place 12 hours after their arrival.

Rhodan felt his hands get moist when he thought of the hall of gleaming metal where rows of detectors were lined up. Bell looked at him with quizzical eyes. His unusually high IQ had also drawn attention.

"We'll have to wait," Rhodan said with determination. "We'll need more time. Thora will do everything to be put in charge of a big ship. Since the robot brain acts only in accordance with logical and practical considerations without regard to emotions, it should be clear that it would assign the most outstanding crew to the best ship. Tako, don't get out of line! Where's Tako?"

Marshall lowered his head in concentration. "No impulses, sir," he softly replied. "There are too many energy screens and they prevent a good contact."

Rhodan remained calm. But his example failed to quiet the fears of his men who were more than ever keyed up and alert for trouble. Something was in the air!

* * * *

Tako Kakuta, the Japanese teleporter, quickly jumped back into the luxuriously furnished bedroom when the service robot entered the livingroom.

Thora exercised perfect self-control. She didn't say a word to the machine and waited till the positronically steered, permanently smiling imitation of an Arkonide left the room again.

"You can come back!" she softly called. Tako slipped through the opened crack of the door. He tucked his little disintegrator from the stockpile of weapons aboard the *Gazelle* under his loose tunic.

"If they catch you with that, the game will be up," she stated matter-of-factly. "Go back to Rhodan and give him my instructions that he must maintain under all circumstances that he received the most extensive hypno-training from me personally. I've been recognized as Commander of the Zoltral dynasty. There's very little probability that I'll be identified as Thora. My credentials are immaculate."

Tako waved to her before he vanished in a short light-effect.

* * * *

They flinched back from the empty armchair which was suddenly occupied by Tako. Rhodan jumped up, raising his glass, and all his men responded as if on command by leaping to their feet with their drinks and crowding around Tako, keeping him safe from prying eyes.

"You're late," Rhodan hastily whispered. "What happened? Any trouble?"

"Thora has been interrogated today for a second time and she doesn't understand why. At any rate she has been appointed to command the *Veast Ark*. We're supposed to ship in tomorrow. Our training will

be conducted by Khrest, who's now going through hypno-schooling.

"What kind of ship?" Rhodan was anxious to know. "A cruiser? Or perhaps an Imperium spacer?"

Tako's little childlike face showed signs of dread and uncertainty. "Worse than that, sir! The *Veast Ark* is one of the new supergiants. What you predicted has happened. Our superior IQs and our first-rate expertise have caused the brain to assign us to their newest contraption."

Rhodan closed his eyes tightly. So it has come true! "I knew it," he murmured. "I knew it. It had to be or the Brain would have been unable to make a logical decision strictly based on pertinent facts. The only reason which could've kept us from boarding the vessel would've been the availability of another equally qualified crew. But what makes you think it's so terrible?"

"Thora is very disturbed. The new super-battleships of the Universe class utilize the latest discoveries of Arkonide science. They're equipped with machines about which we know nothing. Furthermore, a fully automatic positronic safety system has been installed which maintains direct contact with the robot brain at any distance. It would be hardly feasible to get it off the ground with only 50 men."

"If necessary I can do it with no more than 30 men," Rhodan stated tersely. "If it has an emergency back-up system like the *Stardust*, which is directly controlled from the Command Centre, I'll operate all engines myself. It can be done!"

He rose abruptly and picked up his helmet. The Naats watched him curiously.

His men had become very quiet. Their eyes expressed it all. If they knew their old man, he had spontaneously made a decision which would bring surprising success or dismal failure.

They left the hall in small groups to go to their sleeping quarters under the blinding light of the high-up atomic sun. A remote-controlled antigrav-glider brought a huge impulse-generator to a nearby repair shop.

"Get a good sleep and give your nerves a rest," Rhodan advised. "We'll all stay on board as long as possible. Time doesn't matter unless something unforeseen happens when a single second could make all the difference in the world. Marshall, make sure your men are ready at a moment's notice. If we want to get out of here we'll have to keep all our wits together."

They let a formation of roaring armoured tanks roll by. The mighty monsters serving for land bound operations were on their way to the battleships of the *Stardust* class in the distance.

"The Great Cöordinator is showing its goodwill toward us," Bell scoffed. "Now I'm curious whom they'll put over us on board."

Rhodan glanced at the immense energy dome which housed a mechanical monstrosity that boggled the human mind.

The energy bubble glared coldly and menacingly. There was no power in the Galaxy strong enough to subdue it—except one!

"We'll see, Great Cöordinator," Rhodan whispered. "We'll see!"

7/ A DESPERATE PLAN

It was a labyrinth of many thousands of corridors, little rooms and cavernous halls which had been embodied by the most experienced engineers of the Galaxy in the seamless outer structure of the 5000-foot sphere.

There was no comer, no spot which didn't serve some useful purpose.

Only the big central elevator which extended in a straight line from pole to pole through the sphere furnished an unmistakable reference for orientation. It was a battleship where a crew of thousands could simply be swallowed up in the vastness. The enormous halls of the power stations were subdivided again in various planes on which a man was apt to lose his way.

Rhodan was up against a problem which doubtlessly required a certain amount of time. It was in the nature of his quandary that it couldn't be fully grasped at the first effort.

Now they had spent four Arkon days on board the *Veast Ark*. Khrest, who was known here by another name, had tried his best to teach the astronauts and technicians of the taskforce all about the intricate operations.

They had meanwhile become familiar with the most important rooms but they were careful not to stray too far from the central elevator in order to avoid the chance of getting lost.

Rhodan's hypno-training had turned out to be somewhat inadequate here. There were rooms and chambers of such peculiar functional shape that a quick recognition was out of the question.

Under the pressure of a premonition that their ruse would soon fail to work they had arduously endeavoured to identify at least the most vital control stations and to inspect the array of their instruments.

The steering system was almost identical with that of *Stardust II*. The synchronized, fully positronic complex which was located at the exact centre of the vessel was of such perfection that the control of the propulsion engines, energy stations and auxiliary machinery could doubtlessly be exercised from this one spot, provided the master-control aggregate—also placed inside the Command Centre—didn't intervene.

The heavily-armoured master-control aggregate was equipped with several optical screens and topped by a semispheric cupola. The colossal piece was mounted behind the curved row of switch consoles of the pilot.

It was a relay station for the great robot brain. Cautious examinations by the mutants had established the fact that this small mechanical brain was especially related to all functions of the ship's operations. It could at any time interrupt the normal conduct of the vessel, change calculations and cut off the engines.

The Great Cöordinator had made certain that it never lost control and Rhodan realized that any act of force could be effectively thwarted as long as this efficient master-control brain functioned.

The men and women of the taskforce were no more than a few grains of sand in the desert of the

super-battleship. They went constantly astray and had to use their radios to find their way back to the Command Centre.

In this respect the gigantic ship proved to be a real handicap despite its enormous fighting power which was so alluring.

Thora had requested an hour ago permission to stage the first tryout of the 18 propulsion engines. It was granted only after Khrest and Rhodan confirmed that they had learned to operate the controls.

At present all 18 jets blasted flames out of the equatorial bulge where the propulsion system was housed in accordance with Arkonide construction methods.

The thrust of the machines in idling position was only 5% below the weight which kept the massive vessel on the ground under the prevailing gravity conditions.

The result was that the landing pads under the towering legs were dragged across the smooth metal surface of the spaceport, causing considerable vibrations of the ship's body.

Rhodan occupied the seat of the second astronaut and was totally concentrated on his job. He had the same control panel before him as the one Thora manipulated. It constituted a backup and emergency system which permitted a two-man control for a limited time. Naturally it resulted in unavoidably high tolerance values which could not be left uncompensated for on a long flight.

At any rate Rhodan had learned from it that it was quite feasible to launch the *Veast Ark* into space in this manner. However the readings of the countless corrective instruments could never be performed by two persons alone. Flying by means of the emergency system afforded only inexact manoeuvring in situations which called for total control of a well-trained co-ordinated team.

Rhodan had been startled shortly after the initial blast of the engine reactors. The moment ignition took place he noticed a bright flash of light behind him causing him to whirl around. The armoured monster which concealed the auxiliary automaton of the central robot brain had enveloped itself, to his surprise, in an apparently very powerful energy field.

Five minutes had elapsed since ignition. The main stepswitch for the automatic synchronization of the thrust output stood one mark above zero value.

Nevertheless the colossal ship edged more and more away from its original position under the pull of the vibration.

Khrest had posted 15 technicians in the main engine control room for which highly satisfactory test results were tidily issued.

"Number 1 to 18 performing faultlessly," Bell's crisp voice was heard over the loudspeaker. "Good coördination, tolerance plus or minus 0.0001%. Thrust equalizers cut in at 0.002 deviation. Propulsion system check: all functions positive."

Bell's face on the videoscreen looked like a question mark. Rhodan shook his head almost unnoticeably. It was much too early for a break into space.

Bell tightened his lips and clicked off without a word.

"Test concluded. Stop all systems!" Thora's voice rang out over the telecom.

Rhodan switched off. The deep rumbling thunder in the circular bulge of the super-battleship died down. In spite of the particle-absorbing deflection fields the ground 2500 feet below the jets was aglow.

It was now quiet in the Command Centre. Only the automatic controls continued their functions. Thora cast a furtive glance at Rhodan.

As Thora swivelled around on her seat and got up, Rhodan searched the eyes of the seer Wuriu Sengu and caught a quick wink from the mutant.

The test run had served its purpose. Sengu, whose gift allowed him to see through inches of steel and highly compact energy fields, had been given instructions to determine the technical details of the circuit switches maintaining the contact between the on-shipboard surveillance station and the central robot brain.

Tanaka Seiko, the mutant who was sensitive to all types of electronic waves, was also present. He seemed to have finished his investigations as well.

Rhodan turned around, keeping his face expressionless as the metallic voice of the Great Cöordinator began to drone: "Commander, keep outside the red danger line!"

Thora stopped in her tracks. The towering contraption in the middle of the Command Centre had not yet turned off its protective mantle. Rhodan noticed the flickering diagram impulse on a tiny oscilloscope. He looked closer and realized that somewhere in the vast interior of the battleship a power station was running with 80,000 kilowatt hours. The slight humming was barely audible. It was almost drowned out by many other noises.

Obviously the surveillance station drew its current from a bank of generators somewhere aboard the ship. Rhodan's interest grew intensely. He took note of the number under the little diagram screen. It was possible that it referred to a small auxiliary power station. The major energy reactors operated with much higher values.

Tifflor, whose attention had also been aroused, stared at Rhodan with a pale face.

"We've finished the test run," Thora spoke calmly into the invisible sound recorder of the automaton. "I'll be ready to make the first start in about 10 days. My crew has performed excellently as I expected it from the hypno-trained Zeklonides of the old Emperor's guard. I request your permission for my next test: checking the performance of the power stations."

She waited for the answer. There was a slight hum in the steel cupola. "Permission granted," the brain decided in its terse, unequivocal manner.

Thora returned and Rhodan contacted via telecom the second technical team which had taken over the main energy control centre under the supervision of Sgt. Rous.

Thus the most important stations had been manned. The sergeant reported: "Power stations #1 to #8 activated and going through pre-heating phase."

Seconds later the Arkonide atomic reactors began the highly complicated nuclear process based on carbon catalysis as in solar bodies. Artificial stars were created in the towering reactors whose energy

flowed to interconnected transformers where it was converted into wireless current.

Stations #1 to #8 started up in intervals of 10 seconds till the super-battleship resembled a monster brimming over with energy.

Rhodan received confirmation of a report directing the *Veast Ark* to stand by fully equipped and ready to start on the spaceport. However he was disturbed by the news that a powerful fighter robot detachment was said to board the ship together with the humans.

Rhodan exchanged quick glances with Thora. She blanched when he activated the gravitation absorbers causing a wild roar to penetrate the Command Centre. The measurements indicated that the output to the projectors was pegged to a value of 1.3G by the automatic regulator.

The next moment the operating noise of the power stations faded out. The silence which followed was again broken by the shrill signal of a bell. Bright red lines jiggled on the optical screen of the control automaton.

"You weren't authorized to use the absorbers," the machine announced.

There was no hint of an explanation and it didn't sound like a strict warning but the fact of the sudden interruption alone clearly proved the incredible degree of vigilance exercised by the Brain, considering that it was constantly busy with millions of other problems requiring its attention.

Thora reported the end of the day's program of experiments.

"Approved," was the stereotyped decision. "Attention! Evaluation of your trial: as a result of the exemplary performance of your service crew you're advised of the immediate assignment of military support troops to your command. 1500 specially trained Naats will board your ship in four hours. The theoretical instruction of your Zeklonides is to be continued."

Rhodan couldn't suppress a loud curse. He looked in consternation at the 30-foot-wide subsidiary automaton which had transmitted the orders of the chief executive robot with unfailing efficiency.

"They're just what we needed," Rhodan snorted. "Can't you do something about them, Thora?"

Thora helplessly shrugged her shoulders. It was a rather human gesture for an Arkonide.

The shouting of Tifflo's commands muffled their short exchange. The 20 people in the Command Centre rose from their seats. Marshall squinted hopefully at the Communication Centre from which they were separated by a transparent armoured enclosure.

They had no business there as yet. The training was so far restricted to the most important departments.

Thora walked past the saluting men. The glowing energy screen around the monitor station collapsed. Rhodan risked a quick glance at the indicator of the small power station. The curve was gone.

The heavy security hatches of Arkonide steel slid back and they stepped into the mechanized interior of the ship opened before them.

Two robot guards saluted by abruptly flipping up their weapon arms. Wuriu Sengu. sidled up to Rhodan. This was a clue for the other men. They engaged in lively discussions about the various events and grew

louder and louder.

"It's strange, sir," the husky mutant said excitedly. "I've looked at that thing from top to bottom and from all sides and there's not one cable leading to it."

"No cable connections?" Rhodan wondered. His ceaselessly working brain sought an answer. "How come? I've noticed that the robot is drawing power from the ship."

"There's not a single cable, sir," the seer insisted. "I've seen that the machine also has its own source of power. A small scale generator was clearly visible."

Rhodan swallowed a curse. His nerves were getting strained.

"I've got the explanation, sir," Tanaka Seiko whispered as he came closer. "When the protective screen was formed I registered a wireless flow of energy which came from below. The cut-off of the absorbers was done by a telecom radio impulse with a very unusual frequency. It was a hyper-modulated oscillation which ranged at high interval values across the frequency scale but didn't match a well-defined pattern."

Rhodan stood still in astonishment. So that's how it was! "And what about the built-in energy station? Was it functioning?" Rhodan tensely queried.

"No, sir, I'm sure it wasn't. I believe it's only for use in case of emergency."

Rhodan and his men entered the spacious corridor encircling the Command Centre in a wide curve. From there other hallways radiated throughout the middle deck which was large enough to accommodate the quarters for the entire crew.

They passed the faintly shimmering antigrav shaft of the central elevator. When Rhodan was surrounded by all his men he quickly said in a low voice: "Listen! It's useless to cut off the power transmission. The monitor robot has its own emergency generator. Ivan, you go back to the Command Centre after dinner and find yourself a hiding place out of sight of the telecom screen. You'll have to remain there from then on because the room would be immediately sealed off if anything goes wrong. Take a micro-transceiver with you and when I give the order you must destroy the whole subsidiary control brain. But be careful not to damage any other installations."

The two-headed mutant raised both hands. He was the only one who was capable of blasting the control automaton apart at one fell swoop.

By the time they reached the mess hall each man had been informed and knew his place to report.

Rhodan entered the large comfortable ball and saw Pucky gloomily sitting on the floor near the counter. During the last four Arkon days the mouse-beaver had been busy investigating as many rooms as possible, especially the weapons storage places. Rhodan scooped the little fellow up and put him on his arm. Pucky squealed with delight.

Babbling nonsense, he managed to whisper in between: "Fully equipped with all armaments, Chief! Arkon bombs, impulse-beamers and disintegrators. Only the stock of foods is incomplete. I've been practically everywhere."

"Where did they put the fighter robots?"

"On deck #2, far down just above the bottom batch. I've counted 300 of them in addition to the 25 that are posted as guards up here. Big machines, Chief!"

Rhodan sat down at the large table with the other officers. Thora and Khrest had gone to their own dining room. It was not proper for them to dine in the same room with the Zeklonides.

Rhodan ate his food mechanically. His thoughts were far away. Before long he sent out an impulse:
Marshall?

The telepath acknowledged his call.

Watch for my thoughts. I've not yet learned to send messages flawlessly. Do you understand me?

Marshall raised his hand unobtrusively and Rhodan kept quietly eating.

Send out your three teleporters and have them hold three portable disintegrator guns in readiness. When the action starts we'll have to forestall an attack by the robots. The teleporters and telekins have got to beat them to the punch. You must keep the Command Centre deck clear till we get inside. Can you do it?

Again the telepath gave a little sign.

The talk grew more stilted and meaningless. False laughter rippled from some of the tables. Nobody could have failed to notice the mute conversation and they all had heard that 1500 Naats would embark in four hours.

It was obvious that this meant trouble which was too much to handle.

Thora called on the telecom. As before her message took the form of official directions. "Tan-Ro, I've just been advised of the imminent arrival of 5000 heavy fighter robots of the new series. The Great Cöordinator deems it necessary to warn the Naats, who are due to get in shortly thereafter, that any altercations will be severely punished at once. It is your responsibility as Deputy Commander to see to it that the robots will be housed in the appropriate locations. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, Illustrious One," Rhodan replied, expressionless yet pale. It was impossible to fail to notice the shadow of desperation in Thora's eyes. "Furthermore," she added in a brittle voice, "you are required to appear at the Hall of Examiners after completion of the embarkation. Your brain is slated to be probed in a special analysis. It won't be painful and you'll be able to return at once for another machinery test which I have scheduled."

Her picture blanked out on the screen. Rhodan sat down very slowly. For a few seconds it had become very quiet in the large room which accommodated more than 500 men.

"This means that the robots are due to arrive in three hours at the latest. Finish your dinner and get ready!"

Sgt. Rous was the first to put his dishes aside. He ostentatiously cleared his throat and summoned the members of his technical team. Anne Sloane's face was white as frost. It was obvious that they could even less afford to wait for the 5000 heavy fighting machines to show up than for the 1500 Naats. They might have been able to cope with the latter if necessary but never with so many machines that promptly followed each order of the central.

Bell touched the inside pocket of his colourful tunic. It was a sign that the data for the short transition to the fifth planet had been programmed. He had done it by using an electronic micro-calculator which he had taken along, despite the risk it involved, from the supplies of the *Gazelle* they had left behind.

They couldn't have taken the chance of using one of the numerous sets on board. It was a desperate plan which was all the more daring as the time element grew shorter.

"Faster!" Rhodan urged. "Let's give them a worthy welcome!"

8/ DRAGON'S TEETH

They had barely set foot in the wide corridor leading to the Command Centre when something happened which neither Rhodan nor the other men had expected, especially not at this critical point in time.

The micro-intercom set inside Rhodan's tunic gave off a shrill buzz. Since it was tuned in to a certain frequency, it could hardly have been an accident. The buzz sounded three times, then came a short pause and again five more times. Rhodan hastily tore open his uniform and took out the little set. "This is the New Power speaking," he quickly answered.

Nobody except Col. Freyt on board the far-off *Ganymede* had knowledge of the pre-arranged call signal. He was given strict orders to use the powerful transmitters of his ship only in case of extreme emergency or danger.

Col. Freyt's face appeared on the tiny screen. "I'm glad to see that you're still alive, sir," his voice came through the micro-speaker. "Situation 'dusk' has occurred. A search commando lead by the Naat Novaal has discovered that you, Khrest and Thora are no longer aboard. Novaal is going to make a report. My directional antennas are set for Arkon #1, 2 and 3. I hoped to find you somewhere, sir, because we're in serious danger. The robot brain will inevitably draw the logical conclusions and then we'll be done for."

Rhodan imperceptibly twisted his face. "Thank you," he panted. "I'll be there in about 30 minutes but it could get a little later. We're coming with a super-battleship. Prepare plan Vesuvius. Risk everything!"

The men were ready for action. Suddenly weapons appeared from the depots and were thrown from hand to hand.

"This is it, hop to it!" Rhodan called out. "Every man at his post. Ivan, get going! You must get inside the Command Centre at any cost. The brain will have found out in a few moments who we really are. Our high IQ will tip it off and cause it to check up on us. It'll make the robot suspicious that 55 people like ourselves have disappeared there. Pucky, jump with the other teleporters to the munitions depot. Reg, give the programming data to Tifflor. He'll make the transition. Run, Ivan, run!"

Pucky, Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta suddenly dissolved. They knew exactly which weapons were needed to repulse an attack by the robots.

The other men took off in a hurry without wasting words. It was a race against time. If the Naat had already handed in his report the robot brain was bound to act unerringly. Especially the strange furry animal was sure to be recognized at once.

Rhodan dashed away. He ran with heaving lungs and pounding feet toward the distant Command Centre. Thora and Khrest came rushing out of a side corridor. It was the moment of the alarm. Somewhere a warning whistle began to shrill and others joined in.

As Rhodan darted past the main elevator the armoured door hatches of the Command Centre slid shut before him. In addition a protective energy shield enveloped the centre in a loud detonation and its bluish glow made the normal lights look dim beside it.

"Get back!" Thora shouted, terrified. Rhodan barely stopped before leaping.

"Ivan's already inside," Wuriu Sengu called from the background. "I can see him."

Panting heavily, Rhodan pushed his men back to the elevator. The warbling of the alarm still pervaded the wide halls of the super-battleship.

Ivan Goratschin was hurled to the ground by the hatch doors as they slammed shut. The two heads coördinated each other with a nod. About 120 feet ahead of them the separate protective curtain of the control automaton flared up. A high-pitched whine issued from its interior. The machine had switched over to emergency power.

Both heads concentrated with wide eyes transfixed on the control station. Invisible, supernatural mind-impulses penetrated the energy structure of the protective shield with the greatest of ease.

The first carbon compounds were detected in the armoured shell itself. Ivan refrained from attacking this overabundant source of concentrated atomic energy. It would have unleashed an explosion of devastating proportions.

In the soldered connection of a circuit they discovered minute traces of calcium.

"There!" the left head panted. "It's not too much. Ready?"

A powerful impulse pierced the energy barrier and the armoured cupola.

The younger of the two heads screamed fiercely. Both arms of the mutant were jerked up before the blinded eyes against the will of the other head and the hulking body helplessly toppled over.

White hot flames shot from the exploding automaton. The jet of fire lunged upward to the arched ceiling of the Command Centre and engulfed the full length of the gallery containing the apparatus for astronomical analysis, spreading severe havoc.

The armoured cupola of Arkonide steel did not dissolve its matter. It merely showed a fissure the size of a man's leg and the furious holocaust raging inside. The energy curtain flickered and collapsed as the automatic fire-fighting system went into operation.

The shrill signals of the alarm whistles ceased abruptly and the red lamps above the armoured doors of the Command Centre lit up again. All normal operations of the ship were restored, being no longer under the control of the destroyed auxiliary robot brain.

Ivan cried out. His brother was barely able to pull the heavy body out of the path of the retracting inner door.

Rhodan leaped in, brandishing his weapon. The opening mechanism had functioned perfectly after the sudden elimination of the energy curtain.

Burning flashes were still spewing forth from the cracked dome and a searing wave of heat met the men rushing into the room. The stench of blistering insulation caused the climate control system to switch to emergency measures.

Rhodan shielded his face with his hands and ran to the high-backed pilot seat. Not far behind him followed harmless repair robots who worked only under the direction of the ship's own automatic control centre of technical functions.

The sprays from the jets of the fire extinguishers hissed as they iced the hot spots, rapidly cooling off the temperature in the Command Centre.

"Thora, take over the energy stations!" Rhodan shouted. "Activate the protective fields. Hurry!"

The beautiful Arkonide operated the controls with nimble fingers. Sgt. Rous reported that all was clear. He had already reached the Engine Control room. The first rumbling sounds of high-energy blasts droned out of the loudspeakers.

Marshall and Sengu pulled the huge moaning mutant back up to his feet again. Ivan was urgently needed.

The vast panoramic observation screens lit up again in front of Rhodan. Simultaneously power stations #1 to 4 went back into service, rapidly climbing with a howl to maximum output.

As the extra heavy field projectors received the influx of energy, pandemonium seemed to spread across the gigantic spaceport.

A tremendous flood of energy flashed around the spherical hull of the battleship.

The heavy steel plates covering the spaceport were vaporized and blown away with brutal force by the hyper-magnetic defence field.

The H-field for the repulsion of materially stable bodies shot out two miles. Spaceships standing close were thrust away by invisible forces with such power as if they had started under full blast of their engines.

An area four miles in diameter had been laid waste. Nothing was left in place. Where the energy touched the ground mile long discharges flashed into Arkon's sky. Showers of flaming debris streaked back to the soil. Farther away a small cruiser exploded in a blinding cloud. It was a spontaneous atomic reaction which could only have been caused by the detonation of a nuclear bomb.

A firestorm swept the terrain, consuming buildings and spaceships, blasting more wreckage into the upper atmosphere.

Power stations #5 to 8 were now running too. Rous recklessly pushed up the titanic reactors. A sea of lava boiled all around the spaceship, yet no pressure wave came through.

Rhodan could hear himself scream but he didn't know what he bellowed as he was carried away in a frenzy of ecstasy, giving vent to the excitement of the last few days.

Thora reported that the antigrav field and the thrust absorbers worked properly. The full power of the energy stations was finally available.

However the engines started only slowly. Bell and Khrest called from the Engine Control room in a flurry of excitement. Engine #16 sputtered and lagged behind. The fusion ignition had taken place before the appropriate temperature had been reached.

But seconds later this totally self-contained aggregate joined in the droning of the machines running at idling speed.

Rhodan switched over to manual emergency steering and hit the starter.

The vivid green light of the emergency controls indicated that the main automatic system had been activated. From now on the highly efficient positronic correlation governor functioned on its own. For whatever operation Rhodan started the related output of all essential secondary machines would be adjusted continually to the right level, as for instance in the particular case of neutralization of the inertia forces to be overcome at the start.

"Why don't you start?" Thora cried anxiously. "Start up!"

Rhodan saw nothing but a white hot blaze all around him on the observation screen. It was sheer lunacy to set up the stupendous energy shields of the battleship in a dense atmosphere and such madness was even surpassed by shrouding an object at rest in it.

Terrible walls of fire raced all over the ground, hotter, more violent and destructive than the pressure waves of heavy nuclear bombs.

The air around the energy screens was burning up. The resulting vacuum became more and more perilous as the heating process proceeded and Arkon #3 seemed to be threatened. to perish in the inferno.

"And all I did was activate the defence screen," Rhodan briefly reflected. Then he shifted the coupled lever for all engines into the starting position.

It took three seconds to show the green light for the synchronized thrust.

With a muffled roar the gigantic sphere lifted off from the boiling, steaming lake of Metal where once had been the surface of the spaceport.

Weightless due to the perfectly coordinated antigrav field, the engines had to move only the mass of the tremendous vessel and overcome the resistance of the air.

The landing field receded and the ship climbed to an altitude of 20,000 feet in two seconds.

"Look out!" Tiffloor yelled as he instantaneously ducked behind a console for safety.

A bright and blinding thermo-ray shot from the energy dome of the Great Robot. No sooner was it

caught by the eye than it was already at its goal.

There was a brilliant flash at the outer screen of the *Veast Ark* and thunder blended in with the droning of the engines. The super-battleship had rendered the deadly thermo-ray innocuous with so much ease that the hit had barely been registered.

"What a ship! What a ship!" Rhodan shouted. "Tifflor, set the automatic transition! I'm getting ready to make the jump."

Rhodan's second acceleration was sufficient to turn the spaceship into a veritable flash of lightning. He started to accelerate at 60 miles per square second, causing the turbulent displacement of masses of air and raising another storm.

They left a flaming landscape behind where only the energy dome of the robot brain remained intact to show where once lofty buildings and vast factories had stood.

The bright glow of the protective mantle suddenly disappeared after two more seconds. The *Veast Ark* had passed through the upper strata of air and entered the empty space.

Rhodan threw all caution aside and raised the thrust to the limit. He had never before heard such a mighty howl of engines.

By radiating powerful impulses at the speed of light the super-battleship forged ahead by leaps and bounds until it raced through space at 400 miles per second.

Tifflor feverishly worked out the programming of the transition, now that it could finally be done.

Next to him Thora inserted the pre-calculated astrogation course into the positronic automatic pilot. At present the ship hurled through space in a random direction.

"When will you get the data?" Rhodan shouted to the frantically working man and woman.

All of a sudden Rhodan noticed some moving objects on the observation screen. The sensors immediately identified them as two battleships of the Imperium class.

The spaceships opened fire with all their guns and scored five simultaneous hits which would have obliterated any other ship. They smashed against the defence screen and nothing but a short quiver of the hull's resonant vibration gave evidence of the pitiful failure.

The next moment they were already out of sight. The Imperium spacers could only accelerate at 300 miles per square second whereas the super-battleship reached 400 miles per square second.

At last the observation screens became clear and the deep blackness of space came into view. Soon their blinded eyes were able to recognize the brilliant sparkling of closely clustered suns.

"Automatic set," Thora called. She was near collapse. Rhodan waited for the green sign of the autopilot. When it came he disconnected the manual steering with the push of a button.

A tremendous roar shook the *Veast Ark*. The sphere was roughly pulled out of its course, almost too roughly for the pressure absorbers operating at maximum level.

At the next coördination, manoeuvre four G's came through and Thora was thrown to the floor by the sudden effect. Tiffloor's knees were shaking.

"It's all over," Rhodan panted. His tense face relaxed with a smile for the first time. "All over!"

A last thrust correction followed. The indicator needle slowly veered toward the programmed coördinates. The super-battleship of the Universum class was strictly on course.

Rhodan was about to wipe the sweat from his brow when he got a call from below. It was Bell, who had left his station. He acted as if nothing much had happened. He said in an almost perfunctory manner: "We're up, eh? Splendid; the only question is how long. Our four-armed friends react badly to our shooting. They're coming up through the ceilings. Every other moment one of them pops up where you least expect him. I've closed down the antigrav elevators. It would be nice if you could spare a few men."

Rhodan knew his deliberately lackadaisical manner. When Bell expressed himself in this fashion he faced disaster.

Rhodan sent all available men down and important posts were left unattended. The mutants were already engaged in a desperate fight against the soulless robots who obviously had no concept of death.

"Let them put on their spacesuits," Bell quickly advised. He had flipped back his helmet, exposing his blackened face. "We've got temperatures here up to 500 despite the climate control going full blast."

Rhodan's orders followed each other fast and furious. He had four minutes before the transition. Tiff had reported all systems go. The programming worked out by Bell had been fed to the hyperjump apparatus.

"Thora, please give Col. Freyt a radio signal. Send the word 'dragon' four times and let him confirm it."

When Thora had the transmitter ready to function she beamed the codeword three times and Freyt answered with three beeps for 1/10th of a second. This told Freyt that Rhodan planned to go into a transition in three minutes.

On the lower decks raged a grim battle with robots. Almost 40 men and the mouse-beaver were in mortal combat with the lightning-fast fighting machines whose greatest ambition seemed to be to turn all organic beings into ashes.

It was a tough struggle and possibly even too tough for the veterans of the Vega wars.

The teleporters and telekins performed the most crucial feats. Ivan Goratschin single-handedly blasted one machine after the other to oblivion. He knew exactly at which juncture of the directing brain tiny traces of carbon were present. He had made it his business to determine their location beforehand.

"30 seconds till transition," Rhodan announced via the helmet radios of the spacesuits.

"Twelve... seven... one... go!"

The instantaneously created structure-field surrounded the spaceship. The closely following units of the robot fleet were roughly shaken by the matrix metamorphosis taking place in their proximity and some of the smaller vessels suffered severe damage.

The brand new *Yeast Ark*, which had never been flight tested, went into its first transition.

Rhodan felt the painful strain in his neck. Then an eerie murmuring and whispering seemed to fill the hyperspace which had swallowed up the completely dematerialised energy unit. Here the laws of normal space were no longer valid.

Rhodan saw uncanny light-effects as in a limbo.

For a few moments the furious clash between the antagonists aboard the super-battleship was in abeyance.

9/ MANOEUVRE "VESUVIUS" ERUPTS

Col. Freyt's angular face had oddly changed. It looked like the absurd grimace of a mediocre clown. "He's coming with a super-battleship," he repeated the information of the radio officer.

"With a super-battleship?"

"That's right, sir," the man gasped. He too seemed utterly flabbergasted.

"I'll be damned!" Freyt grunted deeply and felt around for a chair to sit down in.

It took him several seconds to digest the baffling news. If the boss had told a lesser man than Freyt that he came back in a super-battleship after leaving in a tiny Gazelle he would have been alarmed in the extreme. But Freyt had known Rhodan long enough to realize that nothing was impossible as far as he was concerned.

After he recovered from his surprise he whipped around in his swivel chair. "Could the radio message have been some kind of a trick?" he asked tentatively.

"No, sir! I'm positive it was the Chief himself."

Freyt whizzed back from the radio room to the Command Centre and moments later the men dozing at their battle stations were startled by his bellowing. Freyt's hectic red face appeared on the telecom screens. "Attention, everybody!" his voice boomed from the amplifiers. "Full battle alert. Weapon turrets to be ready for action. Plan Vesuvius is in force as of now. Close your spacesuits and switch to helmet radios. Breakout will take place in 30 minutes. Engine Control, prepare for emergency start. Fire Control Officer, level energy guns at designated targets. When the turrets roll out you'll have to shoot your guns all at once. Unless we can knock out the retaining field projectors in one blow we'll never get off the ground. Teletrans crew, home in on the remote control tower south of the spaceport. One 20,000 ton fusion bomb should do it if it explodes inside. Power station, start all generators. When the Chief arrives all protective screens must be activated within a second. He'll come barrelling in from hyperspace in a transition and will probably emerge close to the planet. You know what will happen to us if we don't have our protective screens. The Chief has informed me that he'll arrive in a super-battleship I take this to mean that we must expect at least a spacer of the Imperium class. So don't let it throw you no matter what kind of a monstrous surprise you get. Report back to me!"

Not since the Ganymede had been occupied by human beings had there been such frantic activity.

Playing cards were pitched into a corner and half-eaten rations dropped to the floor. Due to the precautionary measures that had already been in effect all stations reported within three minutes after the command was issued that they were ready for battle action.

Disintegrator cannons turned in their turrets. There was no need to adjust the aim after they were rolled out.

The First Artillery Officer ran his fingertips over the firing buttons of his "pipe organ" of cannons. More and more green lights lit up.

The tele-transmitter crew worked separately. The simple looking target screen was focused on the 1500-foot-high remote control and communication tower from whence the detonation field projectors were operated.

Before Rhodan's departure the mutants had pinpointed where these projectors had been installed in the ground forming a circle in which the huge Ganymede stood on its rear fins.

Machines began to hum. Ten minutes after Rhodan's intercom message nothing more could be done or done better.

Almost a thousand men tensely waited for the decisive moment, listening to their helmet radios. Freyt had the intercom receiver connected to the shipboard communication system so that each man could hear the crucial signal.

Freyt fully expected to receive further instructions from Rhodan before he went into transition. Time seemed to drag and seconds grew into eternities. Just at that moment the liaison officer of the planet Naat came on the special line.

Freyt hastily fled into a corner and motioned to the suave Lt. Tanner who calmly stepped before the screen. The round-headed, three-eyed face of the Naat Novaal appeared on the screen. He again wore the uniform of a battleship commander. "Did your Commander Perry Rhodan return from his mysterious trip in the meantime?" the alien ironically inquired.

"He'll be back in about an hour, sir!" Tanner answered nonchalantly. "Believe me, the Commander only wanted to take a walk. He was unable to stand it any longer aboard the ship."

"We'll see about that. Where's Rhodan's deputy? Why doesn't he come to talk to me?"

"He's taking a bath, sir!"

"A what?"

"He's washing himself. Cleaning the dirt off his skin. We always do this with soap and water."

"Mad!" marvelled the Naat, inhabitant of a bone-dry world. "Water is for drinking! You've started up all machines. Why?"

"To maintain them in shipshape condition. And the crew has to be kept busy too. A question, sir: where are you?"

"At the control tower. Why do you ask?"

"It's nothing, sir," Tanner smiled very amiably. "I always like to know where the party I'm talking to is at. Shall I tell the Commander you want to speak to him?"

The Naat switched off without an answer.

"He doesn't know that his luck has run out," Tanner murmured grimly.

A few minutes later the next intercom message came through. "Triple 'dragon'," the radio officer shouted.

Freyt waved to him and watched the clock. Three minutes later the structure sensors registered a nearby transition and Freyt simultaneously pressed all buttons within reach. The power stations started with a roar and a highly compact energy field spread over the outer hull of the *Ganymede* with a loud boom.

Gun turrets sprang forth from the retracted hatches and the Gun Control Officer opened fire before the thunderous crash of re-entry from hyperspace in close proximity shook the structure sensors.

A barrage of impulse-rays flashed through the air and where the infernally hot beams struck the ground, it began to boil. Craters bubbled everywhere the field projectors lay anchored.

The massed energy of an Arkonide bomb shot like a streak of lightning to a battleship of the Imperium class which had landed not far away. The totally unprotected gigantic sphere vanished in a shimmering light effect.

At the same moment a white hot column of fire spewed forth from the massive control tower. The tele-transmitter had broken through the defence shield with ease and deposited the bomb in the middle of the building.

Glowing debris was sucked up into the sky by the typical mushroom cloud of the atomic explosion. The hot turbulence of the pressure-wave made little impact on the *Ganymede* because of the effect from much greater forces which were released in the same fraction of a second as the 20,000 ton bomb.

A veritable monster returned into normal space close above the atmosphere of the fifth Arkon planet.

"Freyt, are you free?" blared a familiar voice which was still strained from the transition shock. "Take off! I'll be over the spaceport in 10 seconds."

Freyt slammed the step switch down. The holocaust around the *Ganymede* had served its purpose. The heretofore insurmountable field had ceased to exist.

As the battleship rose from the ground with flaring rear jets and slowly began to gain height, another catastrophe befell the airbase of Naatral.

A glowing ball of fire of gigantic proportions suddenly zoomed out of the East. The *Ganymede* quickly accelerated at maximum speed and shot into the sky, barely avoiding the pressure wave from the terrible hurricane created by the new super-battleship coming in at an altitude of six miles and leaving a trail of devastation in its wake.

Never before had the fifth world experienced such a hurricane. Heavy spaceships were torn loose from their moorings and technical installations collapsed like cardboard.

Then it was already gone. A tiny glimmer of light raced far away. The glow that flickered around the *Veast Ark* in a wide aura faded away as soon as the vessel left the atmosphere.

A few seconds later Rhodan made out the *Ganymede*. At the same time the supergiant appeared on the sensor screen of the Terranian ship.

"For heaven's sake!" the Commander gasped. "What's that?"

The picture screen lit up and showed Rhodan's distorted face. "Freyt, I've got only 10 men to fly this big ship since all the others are locked in a fight with robots. Don't ask questions now. Thora will give you the coords. Switch over to the autopilot, follow our course and proceed with maximum acceleration. We'll make a transition into the centre of the star cluster in about 11 minutes. You'll get the transition data after we've correlated our course. Hurry up! I need reinforcements in the worst way."

The crew of the *Ganymede* acted with unerring precision. Rhodan didn't have to explain to them how difficult it was to pilot such a tremendous ship under emergency conditions.

Freyt received the correlating data and the *Ganymede* changed its course with its engines running full blast. After the final correction they found themselves practically in the jetstream of the *Veast Ark*.

The transition coordinates were fed directly into the automatic pilot, thus eliminating laborious programming.

"Objects registered in green 32°, approximately 100 ships," the rangefinder section reported. "50 additional units in red. Transitions taking place continuously."

Freyt activated the structure compensator. When he entered hyperspace he was not likely to be located. However this could easily happen to Rhodan's ship. Freyt began to sweat blood. The boss staked everything on one card again. He probably counted on the utter confusion in the Arkon sector.

"20 minutes to go," Rhodan called in a voice which was hardly recognizable. "Ten... six... one... go!"

Two huge spheres vanished in glaring light effects. At the same moment the structural upheaval of space around the fifth planet began. More than 200 battleships and heavy cruisers almost simultaneously

plunged into the normal space.

Rhodan's transition was short. While in the throes of the re-materialization pains he was barely able to move.

Close to the super-battleship the *Ganymede* broke into the normal dimensions at the same re-entry speed of 11% less than light.

"Hurry up, Freyt, or we'll be finished in half an hour!" Rhodan called into the mike. "Do you register transitions?"

"Incessantly," Freyt excitedly replied. "Weren't we lucky, sir! I'm sure they won't be able to tell where we emerged in this terrific hubbub. There's a big red sun ahead of us. No identification as yet. Can you haul me in with your tractor-beam?"

"Sorry, I've got nobody available for that," Rhodan whispered, almost exhausted. "I'm going to switch off the protective screens. Try to catch up with me!"

Rhodan performed the necessary manipulations himself. Thora still drooped unconsciously in her pilot seat.

One power station after the other stopped running and the 18 engines discontinued their operation at once. Only the smaller aggregates for the internal power requirements remained working.

Defenceless and in freefall the super-battleship raced through the void toward the still-distant red sun.

Rhodan staggered up from his chair and helped Tifflor to get on his feet.

"I'm okay again, sir," Tifflor smiled weakly. "Two transitions in quick succession were a little bit too much."

"Stay here!" Rhodan ordered with surprising calm. "Open the hatch at the upper pole as soon as Freyt's men are ready for the transfer. I'll take a look down below."

"Sir, don't!" the young man cried out with wide frightened eyes.

Rhodan merely waved his hand. As he stepped into the circular corridor outside the Command Centre he heard the thunder of fire arms and the jarring boom of frequent detonations. Ivan, Perry thought with reawakening vigour.

He found the first combatants two decks farther down. Sergeant Rous had taken charge of the defence squad. A scorching heat had spread through all rooms. Rhodan was forced to close his helmet tightly.

"We're doing alright, so far, sir! We're holding them at bay," Rous said over the helmet radio. "We've shot down about 250 of them. The credit for most of those goes to Ivan and Pucky. It wouldn't be so bad if the robots didn't shoot holes in the ceilings to get up to the higher decks."

"Try to hold the central elevator! Where's Bell?"

Rhodan was gripped by a sudden fear for the life of his friend. He shouted louder and with increasing desperation for his companion.

"Deck #32, at the hatch of a machinery hall!" he finally heard Bell's raspy voice. "They're attacking here like savages. Did you get the *Ganymede*? We've noticed only two transitions."

"We'll have about 800 men here to reinforce us in 20 minutes at the latest. Freyt is manoeuvring now to get alongside our ship. Keep your chins up, boys! You can do it!"

Rhodan slithered down steep emergency stairs. The lower he went the more insufferable became the heat.

The construction material of the ship was impervious to the appalling temperatures. There was not a door nor a brace on the ship which wasn't made of Arkonide steel. The material was good for more than 50,000°F.

Rhodan came across six of Bell's men crouching behind the support columns of a large room. They had two portable disintegrator guns and heavy impulse-beamers with which they held a strategic position.

"Look out!" somebody yelled.

Rhodan jumped behind the nearest cover. A white heat spot blistered where he had stood and hissing metal sprayed over the floor.

Rhodan shot spontaneously. The brilliant beam of his impulse weapon made the defence screen of the robot burst into flames. He scored a second hit on the fighting machine that had suddenly appeared from a side corridor. The figure was sent crashing to the floor where it writhed furiously. Bright flames licked from the opening in the molten breastplate.

It was a weird, nerve-wracking battle. Nobody could say for certain where the remaining 100 robots were prowling around. They moved with a swiftness which was typical for them and the men had to be on their guard when they suddenly appeared at their back. Once the robots began firing their heavy weapons there was no stopping them. The men had to prove they could match the superior mechanical speed of the soulless machines against the agility of the human mind.

Up to now they had held their own. Rhodan didn't want to think about the fate of the men who had been surprised nevertheless.

Pucky popped up momentarily. He and the two teleporters were virtually the only impregnable living beings and the mouse-beaver had the advantage that he also was the master of the art of the telekinetics in addition to teleportation.

The furry creature had seen the fleeting metallic figure faster than Bell's men could swing around their guns.

Rhodan heard himself laugh hilariously as the robot was suddenly lifted up and hurled against the ceiling with such force that its well-nigh shockproof micro-brain was rendered completely useless. Then it was twice more flung so hard against the floor that its metallic limbs crazily flailed around in circles.

"Wow, this is fun!" the mouse-beaver squealed with delight and was gone again.

Rhodan kept laughing hysterically till he suddenly stopped with a shrill cry. "Well, men, I've got nerves like everybody else," he muttered into the helmet transceiver. "Each man report to me if you can!"

Where's Khrest?"

"In the Engine Control room, Perry," he heard the voice of the Arkonide. "We're caught in a very strong drag-field. It seems that..."

A blast from a disintegrator drowned out his words. The man at the portable cannon chewed an automatically dispensed food concentrate behind the faceplate of his helmet. "I always insist on good table manners," he said sarcastically.

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

REALM OF THE TRI-PLANETS

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

KIDNAPPED by mysterious forces!

Pinned down on the 4th planet of the Voga system.

Problem: to free the Titan, mightiest battleship of the Arkonide Empire, from the tractor beams that hold Perry and his people at an alien spaceport against their will.

34,000 light-years from Earth, among the coppery skinned, green-haired Zalites and the gelatinous mystery creatures, the Mooffs, the New Power people must try everything in their power to determine who, behind the Zart (ruler) of Zalit and his subjects, is the Unknown Power that controls the Zalites like puppets on a string and is making them plot against the

Great Robot.

Clark Darlton keeps you on tenterhooks in —

CHALLENGE OF THE UNKNOWN