

## 1/ PSYCHO-FENCING

THE SOLAR EMPIRE. That was what the small interplanetary realm was called. And the man who had founded it called himself Perry Rhodan.

Rhodan's people acted nice and friendly toward me, even tolerant, but—it was a big but.

Although many of them were scientists in uniform, most were battle-proven veterans of the space fleet who—so they explained to me—had risked their lives for Terra.

To them I was a member of a related biological genus and a sociopolitical foreigner. They never applied the classification 'racially alien' to me, confirming my favourable opinion of the improved ethics of mankind. They were less intolerant than in the past when disbelievers were persecuted and political opponents executed.

But although they had matured morally, this did not prevent them from considering me an enemy. "We've got nothing against you personally, my dear fellow," Lt. Gen. Kosnow had jovially stated.

"So why don't you let me go my way unhindered?" I had made the logical rejoinder. When I thought back on Kosnow's bittersweet smile, it made my blood boil. Only in my rarer moments of serenity was I able to treat it with amusement.

Of course they were not justified in considering it nor inclined to release me unceremoniously after my appearing in their ken under such mysterious circumstances.

As yet they knew nothing of my bathysphere anchored in the deeps of the Atlantic Ocean and I had further concealed from them the fact that I had fled to its safety for fear of an atomic war which appeared on the verge of exploding 69 years ago.

When I was awakened from my 7-decade-long hibernation by the biomedical robot machines in my sub-oceanic shelter, I learned to my greatest chagrin that the atomic war I had expected had never taken place. Subsequently I had occasion to see how far mankind had progressed during my deepsleep interval.

I had managed to reach Terrania by various means at my disposal and there I met the most outstanding man of recent history: Perry Rhodan.

Nobody in the inhabited worlds of the Galaxy seemed to suspect what an audacious and resourceful force had made its entrance into the universal matrix in the person of Perry Rhodan.

It had been my intention to leave in a small space jet and return home to Arkon after I had waited a long long time till the technological development of the Terrans had achieved space travel.

When they finally succeeded in perfecting it, I had unfortunately retreated to the bottom of the ocean and slept through the first stages of their great leap into the future.

At the time Rhodan made his landing on the Moon and found the disabled research cruiser of the Arkonides, I had missed the best chance of my life by acting in a hasty and foolish manner.

While I had withdrawn for many decades into a bio-deepsleep, the erstwhile major of the Space Force had mastered the Arkonide knowledge and put it to work.

To cross the path of such a devoted man who had spent his life in a succession of various dangers and difficulties meant running the gravest of risks.

On my first attempt to escape from Earth I had boarded a spaceship piloted by Rhodan himself and we ended up in a duel on the desert of the planet Hellgate. I was the loser.

He had me arrested and taken away in handcuffs. During our bitter bout I passed up an opportunity to kill him. Why I had refrained from shooting him by deliberately missing the mark was the subject of my critical self-analysis.

Was I reluctant to take his life because he had spared my own when he helped me to escape from the burning spaceship?

No, this was no logical reason. A man who gives quarter to a determined enemy has no right to expect that his adversary would show mercy in similar circumstances.

Nevertheless I had felt grateful to him. Later on I had intentionally spared his life and told him by radio that my debt was paid. Only a few hours after that I had cause to regret my charity.

And still later when he made me look down the barrel of his blaster after saving me at the last moment, I realized that a strange love-hate relationship existed between us.

I couldn't help admiring him and he who was called immortal and was yet so vulnerable to violent death seemed to consider me a highly interesting subject for his studies.

Rhodan was too smart and worldlywise not to suspect that I was no ordinary Arkonide and this was the reason he sent me back to Earth on a light cruiser and why I was now confined as a prisoner of the Solar Defence.

My relationship to the members of the Solar Defence was a tragicomedy of the first rank. Of course they knew very well that I had held the life of their idol in my hands but they also realized that I was not a rabid enemy of mankind.

The men of the Defence were psychologists up against a wall since I alone held the key to the puzzle confronting them.

Being aware that I held this key, the thing uppermost in their mind was how to wrest it from me.

When they summoned me to the first interrogation I was very apprehensive about the temptation they might feel to revert to their old nasty methods.

I had expected to be grilled very roughly. As I came to the door of the interrogation room my imagination conjured up the methods used by the inhuman Earthlings in times not too far past.

However I was not mistreated at all. The scientists in uniform threatened me only with grim faces which failed to impress me very much after the initial shock.

For a few days we fenced with each other. They used every trick in the book of psychology and I had to be on my toes. But I always held the upper hand. They couldn't match my background and had no knowledge of the events which I had learned from firsthand experience in the course of time.

It was paradoxical that I, an Arkonide, knew more about Earthlings than they themselves and it was a source of amusement to me that they gave me frequent opportunities to amaze them with my knowledge about Terra.

This was the situation when I was brought in for the 2nd psycho-questioning at 8:00 o'clock in the morning on a fine summer day.

## **2/ UNKNOWN FACTOR, M.G.**

Lt. Tombe Gmuna was the officer escorting me. I was very fond of the frank and jolly African.

I had been given a small house close to the administration centre of Terrania. There were no barred windows or other conventional means of preventing escape.

3 robots had been assigned to me as personal servants but they were of no conceivable help in surmounting the energy barrier of my prison.

The radiating fence was 15 feet high and I could neither jump over it nor circumvent it by other methods. The energy control station was located outside the circular force field. I could easily see the little transformer building with its field projector but it was completely out of my reach.

Whenever I was led outside through an energy gap created in the structure at least 3 men of the Solar Defence crew accompanied me, carrying nerve weapons which were rather harmless but had an extremely painful effect. So far I had not taken any chances of coming in contact with the jolt of energy from these shockers.

This time Lt. Gmuna carried a regular service weapon in his belt. I recognized it beyond doubt as being a lethal thermo-impulse beamer. His candid face looked dismayed and a shadow darkened his eyes. When he saw my reproachful glance he said apologetically: "It's an order, Admiral!"

Since they had learned that I once had been in charge of an Arkonide fleet I was always addressed as Admiral. I had wondered for days whether this was supposed to be some psychological gimmick. Did they really believe they could win me over by this?

The title didn't mean that much to me. It was a long time since I commanded a powerful armada of the Colonization Space Force. I couldn't allow myself to dwell on these memories as they evoked considerable melancholy in me which I never completely overcame. "What order, Gmuna?" I inquired.

"This impulse weapon," he said with an angry gesture. "A new man took over and he wants your escorting officer to carry an impulse-beamer from now on."

He looked me up and down and it took some time before he relaxed his countenance. "Oh well, there's

nothing I can do about it. Just don't get any silly ideas of running away. You got away with that once."

"But I was invisible then," I emphasized.

"You made that quite clear, didn't you?"

I gave no answer and tried to hide my growing anxiety.

The lieutenant opened the door of the plain service vehicle. I sat down on the hard bench in the middle. Gmuna took his place next to the driver and the 2 soldiers threatened me with their painful shockers from the seat in the back. It was an escort worthy of an ex-admiral albeit one who had long ago given up thinking of his past glories.

In the course of the previous 21 interrogations it had been made abundantly clear to me that the reports in the *Encyclopaedia Terrania* were true to the facts inasmuch as my revered people had indeed mentally and physically degenerated to such a deplorable degree that they were no longer able to cope with life by themselves. But it remained a mystery to me how this could have happened in such a relatively short period.

The men from the Solar Defence had succeeded in breaking down my arrogance rooted in feelings of my people's superiority but they were unable to rob me of my pride. After all Perry Rhodan had learned his most essential knowledge from the scientists of my people. If our research cruiser had not crashed on their Moon there would be no interstellar space travel from Terra to this day.

This knowledge remained deeply ingrained in my mind and they did not try to deny that we had been their scientific mentors.

However they already surpassed the Arkonides in some respects. They had shown me some of the latest spaceships built on Earth and the details of their construction and equipment had taken my breath away.

This was one of the methods by which they tormented me. They were no longer so primitive as to press hot iron bars against my soles as had been their ancient custom, for instance.

Young Tombe Gmuna was a splendid specimen of the new and mature class of humans. Tolerant, clean living and always willing to respect the different traits of another being, he had exhibited such an unequivocal attitude toward me that I was compelled to regard him as the personification of a new generation.

He was like the bold conquerors that had been produced by my own people in their heyday. These times appeared to be a thing of the past and this realization plunged my soul into chaos. I had been away from Arkon too long to judge from personal experience how this had come about.

The biggest clout wielded by the Solar Defence was its constant harping on the alleged fact that the huge robot machine created by my ancestors now ruled the stellar empire.

Whenever I endeavoured to be completely honest with myself I asked myself the question why I longed so fervently to return to the 3 synchron planets of Arkon and did everything in my power to reach this goal.

Was it what human beings called nostalgia? Such unconscious feelings were rather difficult to

comprehend by people of my origin. From the day I had left my flagship and set foot on the soil of Terra I had never harboured such feelings.

Perhaps I had made too many good friends on Earth to indulge in temporary melancholic feelings of nostalgia.

My desire to return home at all costs was more likely the result of hurt pride. It had been a terrible shock to me to find after waking up from my deep bio-sleep that the little barbarians of the planet Earth had suddenly grown up. My spirit had gone from one extreme to the other.

I had the most ardent wish to see for myself whether the Solar Defence agents had told me the truth. Perhaps I would gladly return and offer my hand in friendship to Rhodan if they were right.

As the vehicle rolled down the road to the close by administration buildings I wondered about Perry Rhodan. He now had been gone for 4 weeks. Gmuna had dropped a few remarks, hinting that Rhodan was engaged in a perilous adventure again. In any case my worst adversary was absent from Earth at the present.

Adversary? I laughed softly as I contemplated the meaning of the word. Indeed he had been my foe up to the time when he let his robot give me water to drink. Then I knew that I could no longer bring myself to kill him in cold blood.

Gmuna took me to the nearest antigravitor. These young men treated such highly sophisticated inventions as casually as if they were steeped in the technological development of a thousand years. Everything was taken for granted. It never seemed to occur to them how long our own scientists had worked to harness the forces of gravity. The Terranians had simply taken it all over.

When I noticed such trivial manifestations I had to suppress my rising anger. They ought to show a little more deference to a person like me! How did they dare to have armed soldiers drag me off to be questioned like a common criminal? This was more than I could endure magnanimously.

If they had been exposed to a more decent civilization they would never have considered shackling or guarding a man of my standing. My word would have been all they needed to detain me. Evidently they knew nothing of the strict code of honour in the old Arkonide fleet.

They constantly made the mistake of undermining my desire to testify freely whenever I felt the urge. They always aroused my unconscious resistance and I disdained to enlighten them.

I paused for a minute on the 86th floor to listen to the roar of a super spaceship fading away in the distance. It was the most beautiful noise I could imagine. I looked at Gmuna, "A ship of the Imperium class?" I inquired with tense curiosity.

"The *Drusus*, Admiral. The boss has put in a call for it by hyperradio. If the chief gunner of the ship pushes the button then it's goodbye to the world."

His enthusiasm made me smile. It was very understandable that a gigantic sphere 1500 meters in diameter racing into space made the heart of a young man beat faster.

A few seconds later the armoured sliding doors opened up and I entered the office of the special Solar Defence department.

As usual 10 men were present and I knew them all.

Lt.-Gen. Kosnow took a special place in my esteem. As Gmuna had once whispered to me, this man was believed to be as old as the hills. He possibly belonged to that small group of highly meritorious officers who first had founded and then consolidated the former New Power.

It was rumoured that Rhodan had the privilege of conferring the biomedical extension of life to worthy people. How he accomplished it was an intriguing mystery to me. In my opinion I had so far not yet encountered a single person in his inner circle whose cells had been stabilized and undergone continual rejuvenation.

Nonetheless there seemed to be some substance to the rumours in view of the fact that Rhodan had not visibly aged.

The moment I saw the short, slender man I stopped abruptly.

He turned his remarkably smooth-skinned, virtually beardless face, which was dominated by 2 blue eyes, toward me. He looked harmless and very ordinary yet he aroused my instant suspicion. Was this the 'new man' of whom Gmuna had spoken?

If so, he was the one who had issued the order to the young officer to carry lethal arms forthwith. This didn't make me feel friendlier toward the stranger.

Lt.-Gen. Kosnow rose from behind his huge desk and greeted me. "How are you getting along, Admiral?"

I bowed my head ceremoniously, endeavouring to maintain my dignity.

"May I present Solar Marshal Allan D. Mercant, Admiral?"

Danger, caution! my extra-brain signalled. I could clearly feel the telepathic impulses emanating from the Grand Marshal.

Simultaneously my photographic memory began to work. Allan D. Mercant? I knew that name. I remembered having read in the *Encyclopaedia Terrania* that Mercant had been the chief of a worldwide secret organization called the International Intelligence Agency.

After Rhodan had returned from his trip to the Moon the IIA Chief had become an admirer of the Space Force major and subsequently went to work for Rhodan exclusively. Now the little man was the Solar Marshall and he was probably in charge of the entire Solar Defence. I was certain that Rhodan could not have found a better man for this job.

Mercant, who also seemed to possess a moderate gift of telepathy, rose and bowed a little awkwardly which, however, did not deceive me. Mercant was what my ancestors had called a dagger with a poison tip—looking harmless but delivering a deadly thrust.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," I said in a formal tone. "But don't bother trying to break my mono-screen. The best telepaths have failed to penetrate it. I'm perfectly able to guard the contents of my mind."

"Please excuse me!" Mercant said as if feeling embarrassed but his water-bright eyes spoke a different language.

His eyes made me acutely aware that I had judged him correctly. His ostensibly modest behaviour was a mask. He was certainly not suffering from an inferiority complex.

"Please sit down!" he said amiably, pointing to a comfortable chair in front of the desks which were arranged in the shape of a horseshoe.

Rarely had I watched myself as closely as now. Unless I was badly mistaken, Mercant's interrogation stratagem would drastically vary from that of his subordinate Defence agents.

He began abruptly, just as I had expected, with a pouncing attack. It was his forte not to waste words. "You've been at least 70 years on Earth, Admiral," he stated calmly.

I could hardly control myself. How could he claim to know this? I remained silent.

"I've made it my business to check the fides of the former International Intelligence Agency," he smiled. "70 years ago the scientific department head of a private research institute hired a man who signed a contract with the name of Olaf Peterson. You were that man! Only 4 months later you were put in charge of your own department and you developed in a remarkably short time a so-called structure field-projector for high energy compression force fields. In a technical article you advanced the theory that it could replace the customary atomic core chambers and the thermally inadequate jets in spaceships. 3 months after that you published your calculations for a compact reactor to generate power for spaceship aggregates. The new atomic pile improvement was an automatically controlled fusion device producing 500 kilowatts per hour. Amazing, don't you agree?"

Mercant studied me intensely. I realized that further denials would be quite useless. "Right," I admitted in a bored tone. "I called myself Olaf Peterson at the time. I was anxious to help you barbarians with your stumbling efforts to conquer space. It was painful to witness the trouble those problems caused your scientists and I used only data which are common knowledge among my people."

I was amused by the shock to the attentively listening men in the room who became transfixed by my revelations. Mercant seemed to be equally amused. "Thank you for your frankness, Admiral!"

"Not at all, sir. A man would be stupid to insist on lying when he's been found out."

The Security Chief couldn't agree more and he abruptly changed the subject. "We believe you're a cosmic agent with a self-appointed mission. Our Arkonide friends Khrest and Thora know nothing about you. Evidently you've come to Earth by some unexplained accident."

"Oh!" I exclaimed.

Kosnow suppressed a little chuckle. His eyes brightened with a touch of malicious pleasure. He seemed to enjoy it when Mercant was rebuffed.

"How old are you, Admiral?" the little man fired his next question.

"I'll let you guess!" This question came dangerously close to my secret. The Defence Chief had chosen a very different approach. His fingers were nervously playing with an old ivory letter opener.

"We'll find out," he promised affably. "You look remarkably young. I'd say about 35 years. How does this square with your long presence on Earth? Furthermore, according to our information, officers holding

your high rank in the Arkonide fleet were never younger than 40. Nobody gets to be an admiral at 30!"

"You're absolutely right," I said gravely.

He quietly put down the letter opener. I knew already what was to follow.

"You always carry a strange device on your body, Admiral. At your request we've refrained from opening your egg-shaped gadget. Do you still insist that it's not a weapon?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You've given us to understand that this device is necessary for safeguarding your health. Since we don't wish to harm you we've let you keep this instrument but we could change our mind about it, Admiral."

Nobody had tried to intimidate me before but now Mercant held a fearful threat over my head.

My thoughts turned to the mass of scars over my stomach which I owed to the cell-activator just referred to by Mercant. I shrouded myself in secrecy and the psychologists in the room seemed to feel uneasy about it.

The Defence Chief was undeterred. I had a good hunch what he was aiming at and I became very uncomfortable by his threat.

"I've conducted an investigation," he stated cursorily. "Assuming that this instrument is indeed essential to your life and must be continually carried on your body, it has been concluded that in the course of your stormy past you were several times compelled to swallow the micro-set. It is also a reasonable explanation for the surgical scars on your abdomen. This alone leads me to believe your claim that you cannot survive without your gadget. Of course this entails some momentous conclusions."

"Is that so?" I asked ironically.

"You've been on Earth much longer than you want to admit. We're going to investigate your history and under what other names you've lived in the past."

"Why don't you do that, sir? But, it'll do you little good."

He became a trifle impatient. "You ought to tell us the truth, Atlan. A man of your superior intelligence must know that it's perfectly senseless to balk at our inquiry. What do you expect to gain by it?"

"I wish to go home," I said simply.

"You know full well that we can't afford to grant your wish. Terra is considered to be destroyed and Perry Rhodan is presumed to be dead. If we permitted you to return to Arkon all mankind would be imperilled."

"If your stories about the decline of the Arkonide Empire are true, I'll not betray you."

"They won't respect your silence. Arkon is run by a robot autocrat. Moreover we find your promise of silence very hard to accept. How do you expect us to trust you if you stubbornly refuse to tell us the truth about yourself?"



Allan D. Mercant was a very clever operator but he failed to realize that my word was more than a promise and I tried to teach him something about our ethics.

"I regret that we don't know enough about the moral standards of Arkonide Fleet officers. At any rate, times have changed. If you tell us willingly who you are, where you came from, when you came and why, we can talk everything else over together. As it stands now we must consider you as an unknown factor that could be harmless or extremely hazardous."

I was deeply convinced that logic was on his side. Yet I was not ready to divulge my secret. I probably would simply have met with their disbelief and it would have further aggravated my situation.

Moreover this consideration was complicated by the fact that my deeply hurt pride prevented me from submitting to their demands. Just who did those Terranians think they were? My ancestors had known them as savages in the Stone Age and now they treated an Arkonide scientist and Fleet Commander like a criminal.

I felt I was trapped in a dilemma. I was unable to overcome the deeply rooted weakness of my race. My extrabrain kept calling the Terranians enemies but my memory reminded me of the many friends I had found among them.

"You're insulting me," I replied brusquely. "If you don't accept my word you'll have no other choice but to keep me in custody. I refuse to testify, which is my good right under your law."

"Point zero, sir!" Lt.-Gen. Kosnow interjected

I knew what he meant by this. The experienced agents of the Solar Defence had already learned from earlier questioning sessions that I clammed up emotionally at a certain point and Kosnow had always terminated the grilling when that point was reached.

Mercant followed his example. He got up and tilted his slim head. "As you wish, Admiral. We'll have another talk this afternoon. By that time I should have more evidence available concerning your person. If I can prove that you were engaged in hostile activities here on Earth I'll put you before a court.—You better come clean, Atlan!"

His abrupt change of tone made me wince. I could hardly blame him for becoming impolite and I seriously asked myself what I'd have done in his place. I probably would have treated a secretive alien with far less patience.

Mercant left the room as Kosnow followed him with his eyes, turning to me after the door clicked into the lock. His lips were pinched in a worried expression. "You don't know Mercant," he implored me. "Why don't you start talking, for heaven's sake? Okay, we'll give you a few hours to think it over. Do you wish to meet the students in their final semester today?"

I had trouble hiding my pleasure. During the past few weeks a custom had become established that I visited the large lecture hall of the Space Academy to answer questions of the young scientific community. I dealt mostly with problems of medical, biological, technical and colonial nature which had been encountered during the Arkonide policy of expansion.

The engineers among the students wanted to know what propulsion systems and machinery had been used by us during that period and the astronauts expected me to confirm the accuracy of long and complicated calculations of hypertransitions.

The building officers of the Strategic Space Fleet were anxious to learn how the Arkonide colonizers had handled alien populations.

The discussions were highly stimulating and I was pleased to witness the avid interest in the past of my esteemed people.

Therefore I assented to take part in today's lecture although I had other things in mind than using my photographic memory for the exclusive benefit of the Academy students.

Since last week another factor, which I regarded as yet as unknown, had entered into my calculations. It was a human factor in the person of a young girl whose positive or negative reactions could be the key to the solution of my own equation. The girl was Marlis Gentner, a cosmobiology student who was not born on Earth.

Marlis was the offspring of colonists who had come to Venus 60 years ago. Naturally she was proud of her forefathers who had to wrest from the jungles of Venus everything they needed for their existence.

I had already noticed that certain frictions existed between the new Venusians and the old Terranians. I considered such minor tensions normal and quite unavoidable. The history of my people had persistently shown that each colony strived for self-government after mastering its initial difficulties.

The consequences were unpleasant for both sides in every case. Whereas the sociopolitical and economic problems invariably yielded satisfactorily to bilateral negotiations, it necessarily promoted a divergence of opinions up to the point of final mutual agreement.

Marlis Gentner was a fervent advocate of justice. In her opinion the young state of Venus had been neglected in respect to its technological potentialities. I had not enlightened her that colonists were almost unalterably inclined to take this attitude. A perfectly satisfied colonist would have established an unthinkable precedent.

A few days after I had first met her during one of our discussions she had publicly declared how strongly she resented my detention as unworthy.

From then on we were drawn closer together and Marlis had shown signs of very human affection for me.

3 days ago I had staked everything on one card and explained to her in a whisper where I had hidden a cache of my special equipment.

When I arrived last month at Terrania, I had of course seen to it that I stashed away my vital equipment in a safe place but I had to leave a great part of my micro-aggregates behind when I was compelled to flee hastily in Rhodan's spaceship.

If I succeeded in laying my hands on one particular piece of my equipment my days in prison would be numbered. Everything had been carefully figured out by me. There was no possibility of failure provided the unknown factor Marlis Gentner reacted positive.

The 2 armoured guards returned and pointed to the door behind which the elevator ascended to the roofport of the high-rise building.

This was part of a routine I liked since it tended to lull—as all routines—the vigilance required of my guards. Even the eternally suspicious Tombe Gmuna didn't give it a second thought when he entered the forcefield next to me.

We floated weightlessly up to where the rotary machine of the Solar Defence waited for us.

The largest and most prestigious Space Academy of the Solar Imperium was located outside the spaceport.

The shining roofs of the towering buildings were visible far to the east. Terrania; the 60-year-old capital of Terra and the small state of Solar planets, was already inhabited by 14 million people.

It was an imposing city—I had to admit—which would take a ranking place in the Galaxy once it was known among the intelligent populace of the Milky Way. Up to now Perry Rhodan was still playing dead but this was bound to change very soon in my opinion.

His bold ventures would lead sooner or later to Terra's discovery and I didn't care to be on Earth when that happened. My place was in the Crystal Palace of Arkon I, the foremost world of the known universe.

As I climbed into the machine I had a fleeting thought of how valuable my discreet help could be for mankind. Should I have explained to the Defence agents that I, Atlan, had the honest intention to assist the ambitious Terranians on Arkon?

It would have fallen on deaf ears and nobody would have believed my assurances in view of the official dogma that all Arkonides were degenerated. I refused to adhere to such heresy. I had to go home, come what may!

### **3/ INVISIBLE QUARRY**

My discourse on Arkonide colonial policy and psychology of alien races had lasted 2 hours.

Afterwards many students of diverse science branches had joined the debate. This was an hour of relaxation and pure enjoyment for me.

Marlis Gentner, a tall willowy lass, who was normally so pert and eager, had failed to take part in the lively arguments and I had regarded her reticence as a positive sign. Of course I could have been wrong about this.

I had seen her face bob up now and then like a pale flower among the many other heads and on such occasions it seemed to me that she observed me with the critical eyes of a psychoanalyst.

When I thought of her I had a warm feeling of tenderness and I almost felt ashamed to make her betray her people.

She obviously suffered the growing pains of all pioneers and it bothered my conscience to leave her in

the dark. Moreover there could be no thought of an intimate relationship between us.

She was young, beautiful and intelligent. Compared to her I was ancient and I had no right to entangle the young Venusian on the threshold of life in my uncertain fate.

As I answered the debating points of the Academy scholars my logical extra-sense maintained that nothing had happened as yet and that I wouldn't take advantage of the help Marlis could give me by using it to the detriment of mankind. I merely wanted to return home and escape from my humiliating incarceration. No more and no less.

10 minutes after 12 o'clock Lt. Gmuna put an end to the endless deliberations. I stood in a throng of students who either silently listened or heatedly aired the problem of whether a scientifically and technologically superior nation had any right at all to subordinate the inhabitants of primitive worlds in a pattern of colonization.

The pro's and cons fired the controversy. It was stimulating to see how these Young people wrestled with a theme which had been the subject of investigation by the leading lights of the old Arkonide empire.

My growing restlessness made me nervous and jumpy. I had to pull myself together to answer all questions clearly and to the point. Otherwise Gmuna would have become suspicious.

Before long I noticed that Marlis had moved next to me. Of course Gmuna was unable to prevent my being frequently jostled in the course of the stormy conversation. It was the irrepressible habit of the students to get as close as possible to the fascinating stranger from the faraway Galaxy.

Suddenly my glance crossed Marlis' big dark eyes that looked like an unfathomable mountain lake with a fire burning deep inside. Her eyes were still searching and questioning. I could see she was struggling with herself and I took it as proof that she had the desired objects in her possession.

I could give her only a fleeting look. Gmuna was busy pushing the inquisitive students back again and the girl quickly used the opportunity. I heard her soft voice speaking in a subdued whisper. "Will you write to me?"

I nodded ever so slightly. The tension was almost unbearable. Mercant had insisted on interrogating me once more this afternoon and I was afraid that it might come to a very unpleasant showdown.

"Stand back or this will be the last lecture you get!" Gmuna shouted at the top of his voice.

"I'll get in touch with you," I replied quickly.

"Can I be sure that you won't fight against my people?"

"I give you my word, Marlis. Please understand that I must go home!"

"We'll meet in Port Venus. I'll break off my studies. Agreed?"

A lump formed in my throat and nearly choked me. Suddenly all tension left her and she openly smiled at me. A flat, 8-inch-long container protruded from under her briefcase. I seized it too hastily but nobody noticed what I had done.

I quickly slipped the flat case under my loose blouse and felt the 2 suction cups attach themselves

through my shirt to the skin.

I stood again with seeming indifference in the crowd which was slowly thinning out.

Lt. Gmuna came back. He was still furious and I gave him a quiet smile. Marlis had vanished. She probably had done more for mankind than she could conceive at the moment. Now I was determined not to go back inside my energy fence.

The possibilities my emergency equipment opened to me were still limited. Once I returned to the hermetically sealed house my light-wave deflector would be of no use to me.

"Please, let's go," Gmuna said rather loudly. "Starting tomorrow I'll block off your place. I can't allow this to go on like that."

When I started to laugh he expressed his annoyance. "You know exactly that everybody feels sympathy for you. Don't do anything foolish. I'll really have the hall locked up tomorrow."

Gmuna had no inkling that his decision had come too late. I looked around once more to see Marlis but she was nowhere to be found. She probably already suffered agonizing remorse. I regretted that I hadn't had a chance to boost her confidence in a frank and long conversation after her daring deed. She knew me only from our impersonal discussions.

Gmuna steered me to the exit where the 2 guards waited.

We entered the elevator behind the instrument panel of the well-equipped lecture hall. I glanced at the television cameras which relayed my lectures to the listeners outside the hall which seated only 1000 persons.

We went up to the roofport where Gmuna had parked the helicopter. I was very calm and planned the best way to escape.

"The students will ask you for your autograph on the roof," my extra-sense predicted. I almost nodded. This had always been the custom. The students were a very resourceful bunch and they usually found ways to outsmart the Defence agents.

When we stepped out of the elevator, all I could see on the concrete roofport was a mass of more than 1000 students who had come to get a glimpse of the famous mystery man.

They were the overflow of students who could not be admitted to the lecture hall. Naturally they were not content with watching me only on television since they were anxious to participate in the question and answer session. Now they would enable me to make my break.

Gmuna's guards shielded me with their shockguns held before them in their outstretched arms but they were unable to push back the crowd of young people who had come from all the continents of Terra and the populated planets. Before Gmuna could do anything about it, we were surrounded by an enthusiastic shouting mob.

I glanced at the entrance to the transport belt streets leading at various speeds to the road system which I wanted to reach.

Somebody handed me a big picture on which to my amazement I recognized myself. They shoved pens

into my hand, begging for autographs. Against my will I had become an idol. I realized that I who had always endeavoured to remain the most inconspicuous person on Earth was now a well-known celebrity. This was the last thing I wanted because it made my task so much more difficult.

Gmuna used his elbows to hold the crowd back until 2 big laughing youths grabbed both his arms.

I had already put the metal case, which I had stuck to my body, in the outside pocket of my blouse. It was easy to open the magnetic lock and I reached inside to feel the slim lightwave deflector.

When a few policemen rushed to Gmuna's aid and they finally managed to make a little room I saw my opportunity.

The elevator shafts were close behind me and virtually all of the protesting students were in front of me. The few who had gathered along the concrete wall at my back would have to be sidestepped in a fast dash.

I waited calmly until Gmuna blew his whistle again. At that moment I depressed the button of the set.

The light-deflector rendered me instantly invisible to all normal eyes. Whereas I retained my ability to see everything clearly, I completely vanished from the sight of all outsiders.

The deflection field shaped itself automatically to the contours of my body.

As I leaped back and ran past a few vexed students I saw Gmuna's dumbfounded face.

Although I had been utterly calm only a few seconds ago I now felt hounded by fear of the imminent events. Of course they would call a general alarm. If I had been at the spaceport it would have been impossible for me to escape. Now I had to find a way to submerge in the teeming crowds of the megalopolis Terrania.

I ran around the closely huddled groups of students and spied some gaps through which I darted forward.

A thunderous boom behind me made me stop in my tracks and whirl around in fear. Was it possible that Gmuna had become so panicked that he fired at the people? Not that, instead the sun drenched desert air was rent by glaring light fingers of liberated atomic forces.

Gmuna shot straight up, causing the frightened students to scatter in flight. This young Defence lieutenant knew how to handle the situation! I had hoped to gain a few minutes in the tumult. But he had succeeded in gaining control almost instantly, giving an unmistakable sign of alarm at the same time.

I muttered under my breath and resumed running after a quick look around.

I reached the entrance to the transport belts near the roof enclosure ahead of the retreating students. Here began the road network suspended on stylish arches and columns which extended all over Terrania.

Jumping in front of a screaming girl onto the first slow belt, I quickly changed over to the high-speed belt going 50 kilometres. Due to my haste I fell on the elastic surface where I remained and observed what was going on behind me.

The band moved me away from the focal point of the action at a higher clip than Gmuna would like.

Just before I was carried in a wide curve between the main building of the Academy and a huge office tower I saw several machines of the Aero-Police zooming down from the sky.

The big chase was underway! If I were caught again I would have lost the game for good.

I was very careful not to bump against any of the few people on the passenger belt. I had chosen the belt not only because it was fast but mostly because it provided a good guarantee against detection. The passengers on the high-speed belt seldom tried to walk along its surface. Once they had stepped on it they usually stood still, the better to withstand the pressure of the stiff air resistance. Many people never ventured out on the city's transit system.

Now I reverted again to a more relaxed state of mind. Let them try and find me! I was and would remain invisible as long as my micro-generator produced enough effective current.

I carefully watched the big illuminated street signs which informed the passengers of the stations they approached.

When I saw the sign Spaceport in the distance I changed my original plan at the last moment. Since Gmuna had reacted with such surprising speed, it would have been not only dangerous for me to set foot on the spaceport but also quite useless. If I had been in Kosnow's place I would have stopped all machines from taking off.

Consequently I travelled past the exit and headed for the main railway station although the trains were used by very few travellers. I hoped I would be able to leave town by catching a freight train.

I sat up, clasped my arms around my raised knees and laughed loudly into the onrushing wind.

The stream of air was warm and not very refreshing. The next rainfall had been predicted for tonight.

I pulled the case out of my pocket and took out my little psycho-beamer. It was a miniature version of the invaluable influence weapon whose rays disrupted the process of conscious decisions. The device was neither dangerous nor detrimental to the health of affected persons. I had no intention of killing or hurting these wild, yet very successful barbarians of Terra.

They had treated me very decently. One of their girls had even become infatuated with me. Why in the world didn't they trust me? I swore never to mention Terra, the Solar Imperium or the name Perry Rhodan after my return to Arkon.

This word of honour was given to myself in accordance with the sacred code of the Arkonide Space Fleet. I couldn't go back on my word no matter how much I might regret it later on. For this reason I decided to take the oath before any discordant feelings might arise in the future. I was bound by my promise.

Relieved of the burden of my pangs of conscience and with my tender thoughts dedicated to Marlis, I got ready to jump over to the next belt. I had to be careful most of all not to bump accidentally into another person.

The lighted sign Freight Station appeared far ahead.

Of course the area would also be blocked off but it was certainly not as closely watched as the

intercontinental airport. Hardly anybody in Terrania still used the old-fashioned atomic trains. They carried goods, that was all.

#### 4/ SUBSEA SHELTER

My journey on the freight train turned out to be an unending torture. I had recklessly yanked open a sliding door of the heavy atomic locomotive which happened to receive the signal to pull out at the time of my arrival. It made no difference whatsoever to me whether the train was consigned to a place in Asia or Europe, I was anxious to leave Terrania as quickly as possible to escape the spreading net thrown in a wide search.

In a state of weakness I concealed myself behind the transformers of the big locomotive's tender. Only 10 minutes after the train started it was made to stop. The Solar Defence operated with incredible speed.

Then the risky game began. The investigating police knew they had to find an invisible man. A problem of this nature obviously defied ordinary solutions. Therefore the freight train was held 2 hours in the open desert till a special detachment of the Defence arrived with detection instruments.

The tender with its transformers converting the 30,000 volt tension of the generator reactor into proper current for the elastic motors was still the best place for me to hide.

Since I was close to the unshielded current conductors, the powerful field created by them was superimposed on the slight radiation of my lightwave deflector, dwarfing it into insignificance. Detection of its minimal energy output was thus precluded.

However this advantage was bought at the price of constant danger to my life. I tiptoed between the uninsulated conductors in deadly fear, trying to figure out at what distance the spark of a discharge would char my body to cinders.

I went through several agonizing minutes but fortunately the tender was only perfunctorily inspected.

When the train resumed its movement again, I noticed that I travelled deeper into the desolate wastes of the central Gobi desert. The freight cars were empty, which meant that the train headed for someplace where it was to be loaded.

Hour after hour went by, racing 200 kilometres per hour through western China until the mountains of the Himalayan massif towered before us. There the locomotive's engineers were relieved by 2 new men. However the short stop did not help to alleviate my discomfort at all since I was afraid to use my psycho-beamer for the purpose of making them give me a sip of water or a bite of food. If they were to be questioned by Rhodan's mutants after we arrived at the point of destination, they would easily discover my hypno-block and notify the Defence Centre so that they would know the approximate area where to find me.

I endured the next hours in total exhaustion. We traversed numerous mountain passes till we reached the riverbed of the mighty Brahmaputra.



The 2nd change of the train's crew exposed me to great danger since all railway cars were once more thoroughly searched. Apparently new orders had come from Terrania.

When we finally arrived at the big freight station in Calcutta, I staggered to the nearest water fountain with total disregard for the danger involved.

From then on my ordeal subsided. On the airport of the vast Indian metropolis I located an airtransport bound for Tel Aviv. This time I was compelled to use my psycho-beamer on the plane's personnel since I had to share the pressurized cabin with them. The machine flew only at 6 times the speed of sound but travelled at about 30 kilometres altitude and I would have been asphyxiated in its storage bay.

In Tel Aviv I noticed for the first time that the battery of my lightwave deflector was getting low and that it was high time to switch it off. Therefore I immediately looked around for another machine without leaving the airport but not without first stilling my nagging hunger at the cafeteria for the ground personnel.

Without being noticed I flew on a small transport plane to Tripoli where I found the private plane of a Lebanese official waiting at the airport.

When the man arrived in a helitaxi I learned from his conversation with the pilot that he intended to go to a conference of irrigation experts at Casablanca, which was called to negotiate the construction of a major pumping installation. This was all I wanted to know. Casablanca on the west coast of Africa was a place whose location fitted well into my plans.

We departed at nightfall. I sat next to the Lebanese who was completely under the influence of my psycho-beamer, the same as the pilot who carried out my wishes.

There was plenty of food and drink in the luxurious plane and I filled up while contemplating my next move.

The radio and TV announcements of my escape became more frequent by the hour. I had the news turned on and listened to the latest releases of the government.

I had never before heard such a thorough description of my person. Terra Television telecast a series of pictures which enabled anyone who wasn't half blind to recognize me.

The search was carried on by all available means, however all reports clearly indicated that they had lost track of me. Now I congratulated myself on my spontaneous decision to hop a freight train.

The mathematicians of the Defence organization had probably figured out every second from the time I absconded. Unless they were able to reconstruct my exact route of escape they were bound to arrive at wrong results. Apparently they had already discarded the idea that I had fled on a freight train since all checks with the most sensitive detectors had given negative readings. Everything pointed to the assumption that they still believed me to be in Terrania, which couldn't have suited me better.

"Landing in 10 minutes, sir," the pilot announced without being asked. I had earlier given him hypnotic instructions to this effect.

I cleaned up the cabin, putting back the food I had not consumed and ordered the 2 men to forget my presence.

In the faint glimmer of my psycho-beamer I saw their faces become more expressionless, indicating that

they had been put under a strict hypno-block.

The airfield of Casablanca was still shrouded in darkness. We had flown away from the rising sun. It was shortly after 2 o'clock at night, early enough for my next step.

When I began the pursuit of my task weeks ago I had concealed my deepsea pressure suit in a cave at the rocky shore. The spot was not far from the city of Tangier, which I should be able to reach before dawn.

Our pilot got ready to land. I observed that he rotated the jets of the 2 propulsion engines at the end of the wings to direct the particle stream downward.

We touched down as gently as a helicopter, rolled a few feet and came to a stop. I pushed the door open, jumped out and closed the door behind me before the plane started rolling again.

With wide leaps I disappeared in the dark and paused for a minute as soon as I had reached an empty hangar.

Farther back the Lebanese official left his small plane and I saw him met by a car. Everything seemed to be all right.

It took me another hour till I discovered the best chance to continue on my way. It was not my nature to be afraid of entering the lion's den. Therefore I prowled around till I spotted and got close to a gyrocopter of the Coast Police where I waited till the 2 officers of the patrol showed up.

When they climbed aboard I had already stowed away in the back of the copter. After the takeoff I quickly put them into the influence sphere of my psycho-beamer. Their rigid faces were proof that they no longer had a will of their own. I squeezed through the narrow door which separated us and sat down on the seat behind them.

Our flight took us north along the shimmering white surf of the southern Atlantic far below.

"Head straight for Tangier!" I firmly ordered the pilot. "If you're questioned by your control officer, radio back that you've sighted some suspicious cars on the coast speedway which you want to check in due course. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," the pilot acknowledged. The lieutenant sitting next to him kept staring ahead with a vacant look.

"Blanca Centre to Patrol #6, please report!"

"Patrol #6, Lt. el Habib speaking."

I flinched at the sound of the radio. If the gyrocopter received orders to change its course from my desired direction I could have difficulties.

"Patrol #6," the voice droned from the loudspeaker again, "fly down the coastline and look for a fast cabin cruiser on the way to Mechra el Hade. The name of the boat is Almeria. It sails under the Spanish flag. We're looking for a member of the crew. Please make a check!"

"Roger, Blanca Centre, we proceed along the shoreline."

The airpatrol officer switched off. I glanced at the illuminated relief map on the instrument panel.

The town of Mechra el Hade was located between Casablanca and Tangier, exactly in the direction I wanted to go. Tangier was only 300 kilometres away by air and we could easily reach it in no more than 30 minutes.

I gave the pilot my instructions. The transformer of the miniature fusion-reactor behind me began to hum louder. The idling rotor blades produced a high-pitched clatter which was quickly drowned out by the roar of the jet propulsion engines.

We flew at 600 kilometres per hour toward my destination. There were no more incidents until the lights of Tangier appeared in the distance.

I directed the pilot to a deserted beach between Tangier and the suburb Arcila where I left the jetcopter south of the Coast Speedway.

I followed the departing machine with apprehensive eyes till it was swallowed up by the darkness. I was concerned that complications might arise if the pilot were to be unable to answer possible questions why he had flown to Tangier. Hence I had to make sure that I could no longer be traced.

My thoughts were interrupted by a warning from my extra-brain:*you're getting too tired!*

Of course I was tired and exhausted. I had hardly been able to catnap in the various places I had to conceal myself. Now I'd have to spend the day hidden in a cave and wait for the night. I dreaded the unlucky possibility that the returning copter patrol would bring the Solar Defence down on my neck. If this happened it would jeopardize my flight in my transportsuit across the open sea to the Azores. It would be a mistake to underestimate the swift and decisive measures the Terranians were bound to take.

Shortly before daybreak I reached my cache. The cave was deep inside the rugged sun-warmed cliffs. It was possible to spot it from above.

I meticulously checked my outfit and the other supplies I had providently deposited; ate and drank and lied down to rest.

My deepsea pressure suit was in excellent condition and so was the flying apparatus. Before I fell into a leaden sleep full of unpleasant dreams, I recapitulated my plans in my mind.

My armoured sphere at the bottom of the ocean had never been discovered by anyone else. The machines and procedures which were available to me in my refuge permitted me to change the appearance of my person. This was a factor which the Solar Defence could not foresee.

Then I had to find a Terranian space traveller who resembled my figure and physiognomy as much as possible. Once I had such a man brought into my shelter it was a fairly simple matter for me to recreate his physical features. This would enable me to board a spaceship to Venus as a member of the crew in his place.

When my thoughts turned to Venus I believed I could see Marlis Gentner before my eyes. She was going to wait for me at Port Venus, the big spaceport of Sol's 2nd planet from which many huge intergalactic spaceships started. There I should be in a good position to find an opportunity to fly to the Vega system. Once I was beyond the immediate jurisdiction of Terra it would be much easier to figure

out other means and ways to get to Arkon.

Units of the Solar Space Fleet were regularly stationed in the Vega system and I had high hopes of capturing one of the super light-speed Gazelles which could take me home.

Home! The thought of Arkon and the Great Empire made me shudder. What was I to do if my venerable people really had become degenerated?

*Call Rhodan?my extra-sense suggested.Return to Earth!*

In dismay I rolled over on my side and closed my eyes. The logic of this advice was evident. If I were to return to Earth it was senseless to leave in the first place.

\* \* \* \*

It was a dark night without stars when I adjusted my gravity absorber to 0.1% of the Terra value.

The high-energy field of my heavy deepsea suit began to glow as soon as it touched the storm tossed waters of the dark Atlantic.

My flight had proceeded without a hitch. I had constantly kept so close to the surface of the water that my detection was virtually made impossible.

When I immersed myself in the ocean south of Sao Miguel Island, my locator dial registered the presence of short-wave radar impulses which seemed to be emitted by a high flying machine. After submerging below the waves the slight signal stopped.

I plunged down at the rate of 3G till the craggy bottom of the sea came into view.

Down here it was still and lonely. Only the hum of my transformer bank and the high crackling of my field projector disturbed the solemn quiet. Driven by the pressure from my wave vibrator I floated across the wide ravines of the trench of the Azores which began at this point and I sent my first identification signal from the underwater antenna.

The robot crew watching my refuge had always proved to be infallible. This time was no exception. After my 3rd call I received clear direction signals which put me on the right course. A few minutes later I recognized the deepsea gorge in which my shelter was anchored. I floated down and stopped at the crevice where the steel sphere was buried under a mountain of mud.

The infrared light of my helmet's searchlight again attracted the bizarrely shaped fish that had heretofore been my only friends down here.

I waited for the dynamic pressure ray to clear the small entrance chamber. The stirred-up bottom muck slowly settled down again and after visibility was restored I floated the last few hundred meters across to the open hatch.

Before entering the sluice chamber I took a look around. I was at a depth of 2,852 meters. This

prevented my detection except by special deepsea submarines which—according to my experience—hardly ever ventured into such narrow crevices.

4 months ago I had been mistaken for a fish. Today that incident looked amusing but at the time it was a ghastly experience.

I entered the chamber, locked the heavy armoured door made of Arkon steel and waited till the room was emptied of water. Powerful pumps forced out the water which was under very high pressure.

The high whining tone of air streaming into the chamber caused me to close my eyes contentedly. Now I was safe and could prepare for my final flight.

My protective energy-field, which had hold back the pressure of the water, automatically collapsed. Bright light shone through the inner door as it slid open.

As always, Rico's bioplast-face was wreathed in an obliging smile. My personal robot servant stood in the opening, eager and alert. "Welcome, master," he said in his metallic voice which we had failed to give a human modulation.

I was strangely affected by being suddenly addressed as 'master'. I felt I had transcended into another world. *That's exactly what you did*, my extra-sense quickly asserted.

I had slept in this sphere for untold years. It was older than the recorded history of mankind.

I had been on the verge of revealing my great secret after steadfastly having kept silent for weeks and enduring the mental torture of the psychological inquisition.

Rico helped me take off my bulky protective suit. "You're exhausted, master?" he asked. It was supposed to sound solicitous but as sophisticated as the machine was, it lacked the ability to express such sentiments adequately.

"No," I rebuffed him rather gruffly.

Rico smiled. His feelings couldn't be hurt. "I've prepared a bath for you, master."

"Not now."

I walked stiffly and erect through the narrow passageway to the antigravitor, floated up to the curved ceiling and stopped in front of a red steel door.

Rico was quiet. He seemed to sense that I was swayed by emotions which were beyond the comprehension of a robot.

The room behind the door contained my private museum. However it meant much more to me than a place to keep antique objects. The only times I had come up here in the past were when I felt compelled to seek retreat from my inner turmoil.

I caused the door to slide silently open by putting both hands on the impulse-lock. The indirect light in the ceiling went on as I hesitantly entered the large room which was subdivided by partitions.

Here I had collected the mute witnesses of times gone by which had aroused such burning interest in

Allan D. Mercant and which I had stubbornly withheld from him.

I paused before the 2-edged sword of Charles the Courageous of Burgundy and thoughtfully weighed it in my hand. One night when the duke had sat in his battlefield tent and was wracked by insufferable pain he had passionately begged me to administer the coup de grace with this sword.

I had proposed to operate on him although his stomach tumours had already become cancerous. The next day Charles had fallen in battle. I was present when the drunken hordes of his sworn enemies burned down his ornate tent.

I passed on, deeply lost in memories. Nobody on Earth knew the countless secrets of the past better than I and I also knew the falsifications of history.

I had learned exactly how Prince Eugene dealt the Turks a shattering defeat. There was Wallenstein's hat with the big plume of feathers. Next to it was the blunderbuss carried by Columbus himself, which was fired by a glimmering fuse.

A little farther away stood the suit of armour worn by Richard the Lion-Hearted. He once had called me the most faithful of his vassals and promised me a hereditary fiefdom in England.

I smiled unconsciously when I discovered the small mailed glove Joan of Arc had worn as she stormed the bastion of Orleans at my side.

I retreated more and more into the past as I walked through the room with its objects displayed at random. I had always relished being suddenly confronted by a token of ancient history and cared little for perfect order. I enjoyed being surprised.

There stood the primitive but quite effective rapid-fire cannon which I had built together with Leonardo da Vinci. I considered him a remarkable man and had taught him many prerequisites for his inventions.

Next to it lay the Navy Colt 44 whose butt I had used to knock down the murderer of Abraham Lincoln—a second too late unfortunately.

As in a dream I wandered among my souvenirs and artefacts.

Abruptly Rico called me back to reality. "The Brain is awaiting you, master."

Quietly I left the room filled with mementos of earlier times. Outside, before the red door, I searched my conscience.

No, I had never done anything to hurt mankind. On the contrary, I had always endeavoured to further the scientific and technological developments which would finally lead Earthmen to the achievement of space travel.

For centuries I had desired to return home and at the very moment when Perry Rhodan finally ventured deep into the Galaxy. I had succumbed to a panicky fear of a threatening atomic war and fled to my refuge under the sea. Thus I missed the most important epoch of the young barbarians' development.

10 minutes later I stood before the diagram scope of my shelter's Brain. It was waiting for my program instructions which I now presented: "I require a half-organic construction fitting my body. It must look exactly like the skeleton of an Earthman so that I can appear to be a true specimen of the native

population under X-rays. Reflectors simulating an unmistakable picture of the human organs of Terranians must be included. Is this possible?"

The huge automaton built by 5 generations of technicians began to hum. "I request more details, master," the Brain replied.

And so I knew that my next trip to the surface could not be foiled by an ordinary X-ray machine.

## 5/ VENUS BOUND

Nevada Spaceport was the biggest landing field of the 2 American continents. It was the point of departure for most spaceships destined for the planets and moons of the Solar System.

The largest long-distance spacers with hyper-propulsion engines, bridging light-years in seconds, took off from the even vaster port at Terrania in 99% of all cases.

Yet the Nevada Fields—as they were called—boasted of a proud tradition.

This was the place where Perry Rhodan made history by launching the first atomic rocket to the Moon where he encountered the stranded crew of an Arkonide exploration cruiser.

I gazed with great curiosity at the original rocket in which Rhodan had ventured on his most significant leap into space 69 years ago. Previously the *Stardust* had been exhibited in the Gobi Desert, so I was told, until Rhodan had it moved to the place where its rudimentary atomic engine first roared into the sky.

I was only one of many persons in the huge Space Museum of the Nevada Fields. There were 200 emigrants who were ready to leave Earth together with me.

I looked unobtrusively around. People were swarming all around me. I had given up my original plan of impersonating a spacepilot after making a few cautious inquiries. It would have been too difficult to delude the many friends and acquaintances of such a man. Instead I had noted with much interest the future settlers in space.

I had selected a husky blond fellow who was at most 38 years old and built as tall and broad as myself. Upon questioning I learned that he was the 6th son of a peasant from the north of Germany. His name was Hinrich Volkmar and he had come alone to ship out from Earth after he had made numerous requests for emigration.

Hinrich was my man! Now he rested in a deep bio-sleep at the bottom of the ocean where my robots took good care of him.

Rico had received my instructions to wake up the real Hinrich Volkmar not later than a year from now and to take him to Spain after giving him a present of gems worth 100,000 solars.

In addition I had written letters of explanation Hinrich could hand over to Perry Rhodan and the Solar Defence after his release.

Thus I had seen to it that the man could not be blamed for negligence, since he had acted under the influence of my psycho-beamer, and that he was well provided for even in case of my sudden death.

Following his hypno-grill in my shelter-sphere I had stored all his personal data in my photographic memory and my possession of his documents and emigration papers had enabled me to enter the restricted zone without trouble.

I had to disguise myself only very slightly. My robot specialists performed some superficial bioplastic surgery and removed the faint reddish tint from my eyes.

No other changes were required. I spoke English with a Low-German accent and behaved so naturally that so far nobody had become suspicious.

Hinrich's luggage consisted only of an elastic rucksack in which he had stuffed exactly 50 kilograms of his personal belongings. This was all the weight the emigrants were allowed because everything the future Venus farmers needed was already waiting for them on the 2nd Sol planet.

As I expected, Rhodan had made excellent provisions for the settlers. Hinrich's contract spelled out that the Solar Imperium put 125 acres at his disposal with out cost as well as the special machinery needed for clearing and planting the land.

Rhodan had devised a very generous social program. The establishment of each new Venus farm by a Terranian immigrant required an outlay of 150,000 solars by the government.

3 days ago I had become a young man with blond hair and smiling lips who had adventure in his blood. I wanted to turn my back on Mother Earth, journey into outer space and work, hoping that some day I could proudly write home that I had made it and that I was looking for a wife to share my life. I dreamed I could send home all the money they needed.

This was the stuff the cherished expectations held by the real Hinrich Volkmar were made of and they were shared by the other pioneers who had come from all comers of the Earth.

The transporter was scheduled to leave today. It was July and 3½ weeks had passed since my flight from Terrania. I had been able to finish my preparations with speed and circumspection.

The search for me was still underway. They obviously had underestimated the means at my disposal. It was a great satisfaction to me that I had adamantly refused to buckle under their pressure and thereby prevented the detection of my undersea refuge.

From the Solar Defence point of view it should have been impossible for me to slip through its tight security net and this would undoubtedly have been the case if I could not have availed myself of the excellent special devices whose existence remained unknown to my pursuers.

When I arrived at the Nevada Fields in the mask of Hinrich Volkmar I was immediately subjected to an X-ray examination. Nobody was admitted to the restricted zone without first passing through a test screen.

It was perfectly clear to me that the test was designed to identify me and to prevent my escape. My extremely complicated bioplast-skeleton had concealed my actual bone structure from the doctor examining my picture and he passed me without objections as a true Terranian.



I carried an identification card embossed with my individual data. The imbedded magnetic wires contained a collection of coded impulses relating to my person such as degrees and examinations passed by me. Everything was in perfect order.

I was given number 211. The spaceship which was to take me and the other pioneers to Venus was named *Gloria*. We were temporarily housed in a long low building which the employees of the Emigration Office called with sarcastic humour 'Aroma Alley'. The pungent odour of abundantly supplied disinfectant substances smelled up my clothes which were fashioned of durable weatherproof synthetic textiles, very plain in style.

The Venus settlers were outfitted extremely well but elegance was not one of the things considered necessary. The no-nonsense approach of the Colonial Office permitted no superfluous luxuries.

I was already familiar with our ship. It was a small spherical vessel of the Planet series, measuring only 50 meters in diameter. Completely unarmed and lacking super light-speed engines, it served exclusively as a transport between the Solar worlds.

The flight to Venus was scheduled to take 8 hours. This was a relatively long time, particularly because the few large compartments were only equipped with narrow rows of seats. Beds and other comforts were regarded as unessential frills because of the official opinion that the emigrants could just as well sit up through the 8 hours of the trip.

The 30-year-old *Gloria* regularly plied the route between Venus and Terra. It took off into space every 2nd day with a new load of passengers and carried goods of all descriptions as well.

The crews of these commuting ships were not treated with the same respect as the highly trained men of the super light-speed spacers, who were apt to look down on them.

These planet service ships occupied about the same place and low esteem as the old riverboats compared to swift ocean clippers.

I was greatly amused by this old-fashioned rivalry. But in this respect my own people acted little different from the Terranians. It was only a few score years ago that these barbarians hailed with the most enthusiastic admiration the first ridiculously little trip to the Moon of the Earth. They had come far in a short time, I had to admit. Now the men of the huge hyper-spaceships snorted contemptuously when they met one of these so-called 'planet snails'. They forgot that even these 'snails' approached the speed of light, racing through the Solar void.

At noon I walked into the large dining room which was crowded with laughing and loudly talking people. I went to a table in a corner, downed a big steak with French fries and baked beans and leisurely studied the people around me.

These young hopefuls were pretty much alike in their desire to find a new world in the jungles of Venus which they pictured as a paradise despite all teachings to the contrary.

I saw whole families who were eager to take the big leap. They dreamed of adventures and wealth, of independence and joyous festivals at the edge of primitive forests.

As yet they had learned nothing about the stinging insects of Venus and the voracious saurians that trampled down entire fields with a few steps. And they had fallacious ideas about the poisonous smaller

reptiles and the terrific hothouse temperatures.

I felt great pity for them although I expected them to establish a satisfying existence once they succeeded in making the undoubtedly tough adjustments. Rhodan knew very well what sort of people to choose for the trip to another world.

At 12:30 the big amplifiers made the loud announcement: "Pioneers for Venus flight 118 assemble at the south entrance to the mess hall. Pick up your luggage and have all transport documents ready. Please report at the earliest!"

It was all very informal. About 250 people jumped up from their chairs. In the confusion some ran to the northern exit where they were sent in the right direction by the unruffled attendants and smirking spacepilots.

There was a tremendous turmoil of shoving and shouting people as if all hell had broken loose. I decided to join the rush and soon began to yell just like the others in order to avoid undue attention.

Outside we were greeted by a detachment of the Security Police standing under the hot July sun.

I found the warmth of the sun very pleasant, more so than the men of the security contingent. Behind them, big transport buses were waiting for us. They had apparently decided to carry out one more control check before taking us to the departing spaceship.

Women and children were allowed to board the buses at once. Only the men were compelled to wait in a line. I stood in the queue of perspiring aspirants who were complaining impatiently. Now the inspection started all over again.

I had put my special miniature gadgets deep into the knapsack required by the regulations. If they opened it they would have to scrutinize it thoroughly in order to find the small devices. I had even taken off my most precious possession, the cell-frequency activator, including the chain by which I carried it. I would soon have to hang it around my neck again to forestall great difficulties.

"What's going on there?" a brown-skinned stocky man asked. I turned around and shrugged my shoulders.

It was a young Mexican who wanted to escape the crowded Earth with his family of 5. His name was Miguel Hosta and we had met a couple of times before. Perhaps it was better to engage in a conversation with this bright Terranian. "I don't have the faintest idea," I laughed, "but I know they're not going to send me back. They're supposed to have rejected somebody recently just before the start. They claimed the boy had a fever."

"Merciful heavens!" the dark-haired man exclaimed in mock desperation. "I feel a fever coming on. Where do they stick a thermometer into you?"

The people behind us began to snicker noisily. The jokes and remarks about the investigating police became more acerbic the closer we got to the table they had temporarily set up.

What disturbed me most was the portable X-ray machine before which all emigrants had to pass. A medical officer of the Solar Defence stood next to it. He made each of the colonists move on to the waiting bus by a wave of his hand. The pretense of checking the emigrants against a passenger list was obvious nonsense. All this had been taken care of earlier.

They were looking only for an Arkonide admiral whose bone structure was known to be different from the Earthlings.

I could feel my eyes become moist, a sign of my high state of excitement. If the physician at the X-ray machine was unusually observant, he could perhaps notice the minute differences in the changes incorporated in my organs.

*Keep calm*, my extra-sense admonished me. At this moment I hated the logic sector of my brain.

The man in line in front of me was a huge Terranian from the African Federation. He stepped in front of the X-ray machine with his legs far apart, pulled open his shirt over his chest with both hands and pointed his finger to his heart. "Right here, grenadiers!" he bellowed with a stentorian voice.

He startled the medical officer and caused the lieutenant at the table to break out in a wide grin. I wondered if the black giant had ever heard of the 11 officers of Schill's regiment who had been shot in a summary court-martial by Napoleon's soldiers in the town of Wesel.

The physician waved him on and the laughing African ambled over to the bus. Then it was my turn.

"Vaccination papers, please," the weary security officer demanded. When he raised his eyes, he became at once alert. His hand quickly touched his service revolver.

He gave me a penetrating look and the shadow of a doubt crossed his face as he turned around to his comrades. "Name?" he inquired sharply.

I looked at him with a guileless smile. "Heinrich Volkmar, Lieutenant," I announced in a crisp tone, "son of Pieter Volkmar, the dike-warden."

The young officer settled back in his chair again. Wordlessly he pointed his thumb to the screen although he was well aware that I had already been X-rayed.

"Confounding resemblance, sir," I heard one of the soldiers quickly say under his breath.

I faced the machine and this time the physician inspected the picture very closely. Then he stated with a motion of his hand. "Unmistakable ribs, Tom," and added with a dry throat: "Let's get it done, boys, before I get a heat stroke."

It was a stroke of luck for me that the man suffered so much under the heat and therefore had failed to study my picture adequately.

The lieutenant once more stared suspiciously at me but finally affixed his stamp of approval to the prescribed form with a sigh. "Here, take this and hang on to it. You look very much like somebody with whom we'd like to have a little talk. Go on. Next!"

I waited for the short Mexican who, to his greatest relief, passed the inspection.

The black Terranian greeted us at the bus and called out to me with a chuckle: "Hey, brother, what did they want of you? Come to my heart!" He embraced me cordially and pushed me into an empty seat. Miguel Hosta squeezed himself between us.

*Fine fellows!* my extra-sense commented and this time I had to admit that it was right. Rhodan could well depend on them to build a new world in the stars.

"I've got 2 bars of chocolate left in my pocket," I said. "Any takers? I've lost my appetite. They're trying to nail someone who looks like me."

Miguel declined the candy in shocked horror but my newfound black friend took it with a grin. "Don't take it so hard, brother. Once we're on Venus we'll start a new life, anyway. Are you good in agronomy? What do you intend to plant first?"

"That remains to be seen after I get there. I've learned something about agronomy, didn't you?"

He made a grimace and a doubtful gesture.

"Okay, let's become neighbours," I proposed. "I wish I knew a little more about soil chemistry, though. What do you know about that?"

"That stuff I know. I can do the soil analysis and you can decide the best crop to plant. Okay?"

I had to use plenty of muscle to withstand his powerful handshake and I wondered why I risked my life to return home.

There was Arkonide blood running in this young human race. I myself had encouraged more than one marriage with Terranians among the Arkonide people under my command. Who could really tell where my home was now?

## **6/ DESTINATION: WEAPON SHOP**

Port Venus was an ultra-modern city whose architecture was designed to adapt itself harmoniously to the hot stormy climate.

Venus rotated only slowly about its polar axis. The vast twilight zones on the border between the day and night hemispheres were continually ravaged by horrible hurricanes. When the new towns of the population entered the stormy zone of the time change, the streets became compression funnels through which the wild forces of nature conducted a diabolical pipe organ concert.

It was far from easy to live on this planet close to the sun and the existence of a settler was even more precarious. When the cloud decks of the 2nd Sol world burst, they poured water down like bathtubs and the gushing floods could quickly inundate a man unless he could scramble to higher ground.

Port Venus was situated on a high and wide rocky plateau at the precipitous shores of the equatorial ocean. It was in the same area where the mountain was located in which my people had built the great robot brain eons ago.

Rhodan had taken possession of the gigantic installations and operated them for his purposes although he had no right to do so.

At this stage I was inclined to give him my belated permission in view of the admirable transformation of the jungle he had already accomplished.

About 800 meters below the plateau began the steaming fever-infested primordial forest. It was no wonder at all that the Cosmic Institute for Infectious Diseases occupied the biggest and most prominent building in the city. There the tough and tenacious battle against the cruel and pervasive scourges of nature was carried on unrelentingly.

Nearly every week new and hitherto unknown afflictions were discovered. The immigrants who had come with me had already received more than 30 vaccinations on Terra.

I had achieved perfect immunity myself since I was well provided with Arkonide serum.

5 days ago the little spaceship *Gloria* had descended into the dense atmosphere of Venus with fire-spitting engines. The landing field of Port Venus was located only 50 meters above sea level and we received our first lesson on the atrocious Venusian climate the moment we touched down.

Embros Tscheda, who wanted to be the first man to leave the ship, was almost drowned by the sheets of water raining down from the heavens and turning the vast spaceport into a raging sea.

We were barely able to grab him before the swirling masses of water tossed him into the glowing particle stream of a starting spaceship.

This had been our very first impression but 10 minutes later the sky was as 'clear' again as was typical for Venus. The unbroken ceiling of clouds seldom allowed a peek at the sun.

Stifling hot water vapours steamed up from the armourplast ground and it looked as if we had landed in an outsized laundry room.

The temperature was 128°. When we disembarked through the door batch 2 women fainted although our group consisted of the healthiest individuals who had passed the most thorough tests. The heat was not unbearable but the excessive humidity made the climate murderous.

The primordial forest spread on the horizon. I was familiar with its hazards from previous journeys and didn't suffer the illusions still held by the pioneers.

2 hours later we were taken by powerful helicopters to Port Venus. The city was 850 meters above sea level but the rocky plain on which it was built didn't have room enough for the huge spaceport.

However the climate was more tolerable at the higher altitude and for this reason the newcomers were housed up here.

Now the Venusian authorities were busy with the distribution of land to the new settlers and I had to join my companions lest I provoked their amazement and suspicion.

The inspection of our immigration documents was a dreary ritual. High officials and seasoned jungle experts had made either pompous or tough speeches which were liberally sprinkled with menacing words like diseases, jungle beasts, poisonous reptiles, clearing of virgin soil and so forth. My friends of the old *Gloria* faced a bleaker future than they had visualized.

\* \* \* \*

Today I was given my first furlough. After my arrival I had immediately dashed off a few lines to Marlis Gentner and mailed them through the well-functioning Venus post office.

As a precaution I addressed the letter to General Delivery. If Marlis Gentner had arrived in the meantime she was sure to inquire every day at the post office.

My 'good old friend' Gunter Viesspahn, who had arrived on Venus long before me, had invited me for a jaunt through town.

When I picked up the letter at the mail call, the sergeant of the Security Police questioned me about our connection.

I showed him the letter and my explanation that he was an old school chum satisfied him. Why shouldn't I know somebody on Venus who had lived here for some time?

Now I sat in the monorail car which connected the upper administration building with the centre of town. Although the vehicle was air-conditioned I began to perspire. My skin-tight bioplast skeleton prevented my pores from breathing. It was time to take off that disguise manufactured in my robot shop. So far I had not been X-rayed again on Venus.

My extra-sense kept insisting on warning me about the nosy police sergeant. Why was he so interested in a harmless letter?

I had to find out as soon as possible if the search for me also extended to Venus. It was possible that the control officer at the Nevada Spaceport had second thoughts about me after my departure. Perhaps he had radioed a warning to his colleagues on Venus.

I put aside my gnawing apprehensions. If Marlis had done her job I needn't worry. I could go into the jungle like a settler and simply wait until an opportunity for the escape from Venus in a spaceship presented itself. Maybe I would be lucky enough to find a super light-speed Gazelle to take me from Venus straight to the Arkon system. The latest model of this spaceship had a range which was limited only by the requirement of a periodic overhaul of its engines.

I got off the train at the subway station and went up on the escalator. The street was crowded with people. I had seldom seen so many differently dressed Terranians together in one spot.

The centre of town was named Tomisenkow Square after the Russian division commander who had tried to conquer Venus for his own country.

The spacious and solidly built government edifices surrounded the square. A thoroughfare named New York Street, where big stores offered the products of all nations in the Solar system for sale, cut the modern city practically in two halves.

Contrary to the long held belief that this hot world contained no oxygen in its atmosphere, one could breathe easily on Venus, which seemed to hide itself from its central star in a permanent cloud.

An altercation had broken out outside the subway station. 2 bearded pale-skinned fellows who had not seen a ray of sun in years fiercely traded punches over some trivial matter.

Police rushed in and sternly broke up their fisticuffs. They threatened the brawlers with their electric shock guns and fire 2 shots into the air, quickly bringing the 2 hotheads to their senses.

These pioneers seemed to be a rough bunch who knew how to handle weapons. I saw many settlers walk in the streets with energy-beamers slung over their shoulders. When I thought of the ferocious beasts that roamed the wild forests beginning at the outskirts of the city, I could very well understand why these visitors from the jungle were so heavily armed.

An antiquated taxi with a gas-turbine motor brought me to a quieter section of the city, away from the milling crowds. I memorized the layout of the streets till, we stopped at an impressive building housing the Terra Museum.

Before leaving the taxi I checked the components of my special equipment. I now carried everything I had carefully hidden before on my person. If I were suddenly forced to flee I would have no time to return to the camp of the immigrants. But it was dangerous to carry weapons since I had not yet been issued a license.

My life-giving activator hung on my chest. I put the light-wave deflector, now powered by a miniature generator, into the pocket of my plain jacket and slipped by psycho-beamer rod into my pants. The nerve-weapon had a range of 2 kilometres. This was all I was able to take with me.

I paid my fare and left the taxi. I sauntered leisurely toward the wide armourplast doors where I was supposed to meet 'my old friend'.

Many people were coming and leaving. I noticed a great number of settlers whose simple sturdy clothes were in marked contrast to the elegant duds worn by the government employees in the city.

2 lackadaisical policemen lolled in front of the broad portals. Men I passed them I heard one of them chuckle: "Hey, greenhorn, are you already homesick for Earth?"

I turned around and looked at the 2 men. They carried heavy shock-weapons and bulky radio-helmets. Evidently they were in constant communication with their central station.

"Greenhorn," they had called me! This seemed to be the nickname for the newcomers.

"Is it always so hot here?" I asked plaintively.

They loudly laughed in glee. I went on without another word until I noticed a stocky dark-haired man with a flowing beard. He was dressed like a settler and lugged an awfully big energy-beamer around.

He recognized me at once. A gaping hole opened between his wild whiskers and let out a rip-roaring laughter.

I was taken aback! What kind of a mad fellow had Marlis sent me here?

He gave me such a strong bear hug that I could still feel it days later and he shouted wishes of welcome and pet names into my ear that made me fear for my hearing. "I'm Gunter Viesspahn," he then announced

under his breath. "We've got to leave here right away!"

He took me by the arm and led me noisily to the entrance. "Comes a real man, you 2 good-for-nothing city loafers better make room!" my new friend bellowed at the policemen.

They countered with a foul oath, typical of the coarse manner of speech prevailing in the outposts of young colonial planets.

My hirsute pal dragged me into the museum and on to the basement where, he said, there was a fine cool restaurant. "Did they spot you?" he asked in a subdued tone.

I don't know. They read your letter. I had no choice," I replied hastily.

"That's bad, my boy. What did you tell those snoopers?"

He appeared to be satisfied with my explanation. I had followed the coded instructions between the lines of his letter in which he had told me that he had landed 2 years ago on Venus and that we had first met on the Frisian island from which he came.

The 'fine cool restaurant' in the basement turned out to be a dingy hangout crowded with colonists, who relished bragging with all sorts of fantastic tales. I felt out of place.

"We'll drink a beer and get out. Quit looking around so suspiciously," Viesspahn advised me. "Everything is fine. Marlis is waiting for you. We were very careful."

Of this I was not very much convinced. These 2 innocents were too unfamiliar with the methods of the Solar Defence. I inquired quickly: "Does anybody know you're connected with Marlis?"

"Man," he chuckled, "she happens to be my half-sister!"

I could visualize the maddening complications as I thought of the Computer Department on Terrania where the efficient members of the Solar Defence were at work compiling such information.

Marlis was among the students who had attended my last lecture on the day of my escape. Undoubtedly the Defence had investigated who had been near me in the jostling crowd. Marlis had been there that particular day and then broken off her studies and returned to Venus. She was known to be a protagonist of Venusian rights and had publicly declared in our discussions that she disapproved of my shameful imprisonment.

This was a clue which could not be overlooked by Lt.-Gen. Kosnow.

Subsequently a blond man had aroused some suspicion at the Nevada Fields although he proved to have a skeleton like Earthlings. And this same man had written a letter shortly after his arrival on Venus to which he had received an answer.

If they checked whether the 2 settlers Volkmar and Viesspahn had known each other on Terra, the result had to be negative.

To top it all, the half-brother of student Marlis Gentner had waited for me on Venus. It couldn't take them more than an hour to coordinate this information and take immediate action.



My instinct told me that they already were waiting for me back at the immigrants' lodgings. My bioplast-skeleton could not stand a rigorous medical examination.

I had to think of the policemen with the radio-helmets. Did the Venusian Defence Agency already know that I had met Viesspahn? Had they followed me on my ride to the museum? If so, why didn't they arrest me?

*They must first identify your connections, my extra-sense pointed out very logically. They want to keep them from helping you later on.*

I became more apprehensive every second and told Gunter I was anxious to leave at once.

"Nonsense!" he growled. "When 2 old friends meet on Venus they first go to the nearest saloon. This is the Place where all settlers get together because they've developed the habit of visiting the Terra Museum once in awhile. They didn't tail you, did they?"

He glanced at me warily. I shook my head and sipped my beer.

"So what's all the fuss?" Gunter said, assuaged. "By the way, why were you in trouble down there? Marlis hasn't told me a thing." He pointed his thumb downward as if the Earth were directly below his feet.

"Nothing of importance," I said evasively.

"It's important to me. I'm really sticking my neck out if you've done something dirty. There's a limit to brotherly love, right? Marlis seems to be stuck on you. There was a new flicker of suspicion in his eyes.

"Where were you born?" I asked.

My worst fears were confirmed. Gunter Viesspahn was a native Venusian and I had told the inquisitive sergeant in accordance with his previous story that we had gone to school together on Earth.

I winced in desperation. Marlis—why didn't you use your head? Everything had been misunderstood and bungled. However I was careful not to antagonize my bearded companion since he would undoubtedly beat a fast retreat if he felt he was in serious trouble. I could not afford to lose my connection. My cautious reminder concerning our "old friendship" made him disdainfully shrug his shoulders. "So what? How should they know? You came with false papers, didn't you?"

"Yes, of course. But there are a few points which..."

"Nuts! We'll handle that. You're coming with me to my farm. It's at the Hondo River, 8 miles upstream from the Marshall Falls where the river drops 3 miles deep and 3 miles wide. You can't miss it. It's good country, 114 miles north from Port Venus. You'll be safe there till Marlis finds the right spaceship for you."

When I heard him blurt out my plans I was about ready to drop the matter then and there. If she was so careless as to tell her half-brother about my intended trip to the Vega system, I might as well give up.

I changed my plan abruptly. Under the circumstances it was a senseless hope to find a hyperspacer to Vega but I had to get out of town as quickly as possible.

I fished one of my large pearls out of my pocket and his eyes lit up instantly. He knew that I held a treasure in the palm of my hand. "This is a real pearl. It's worth 5000 solars," I said with studied calm. "Now listen, my friend! Tell me exactly where Marlis is waiting for me. I want to go there alone. Meanwhile you can leave in your own machine. You've got a machine, haven't you?"

"Sure, everybody does."

"Very good. You'll fly some place where I can easily reach you and you'll wait for me. I don't want to be seen together with you and Marlis."

He tried to raise objections but the pearl tempted him too much. Finally he described a remote place at the edge of town where one of his friends owned a little tavern near the jungle. I would have no trouble finding him there.

Right now my main concern was to keep Gunter Viesspahn in the background so that I could contact him again if I needed him. In order to accomplish this I had to send him away and say goodbye to him in public, hoping that he could leave unmolested.

He gave me Marlis' address. She stayed with an old aunt whose deceased husband had opened a gun shop. The shop was still run by the very capable old lady. Marlis had been brought up by her ever since her parents had lost their lives in the jungle many years ago.

I paid for the drinks and we left. Outside the museum I looked prudently around. The pair of policemen was still there but apparently had received no other assistance. However this proved little since they could summon reinforcements on the spot by radio.

I said goodbye to my old friend in a loud but normal tone as it was now time for me to go back to the other immigrants.

He kept demurring until I hailed a taxi. The 2 policemen seemed to pay no attention to us.

I entered the cab, which was one of the more modern models. Before I closed the door I told the driver where to take me in a voice loud enough to be heard.

The car drove off and Gunter Viesspahn walked to the helicopter pad next to the museum.

As soon as we had rounded the next corner and were out of the guards' sight, I took action. It would have been stupid to leave my fate to good luck.

A touch on the switch of my light-deflector made me invisible and before the driver could suspect anything he was already under the influence of my psycho-beamers rays. His posture stiffened.

"Drive to the next corner and pull up to a quick stop. Make believe you're furious about the sudden disappearance of your passenger. Open all doors and ask people around you whether they saw somebody jump out of the cab."

"Yes sir," he replied tonelessly.

I opened the lock and let the door swing open. The driver promptly screeched to a halt at the next intersection and went into his act which could cost my neck.

He ran around his vehicle and looked into the empty inside, shouting to some laughing passerbys whether they had seen the crook who wanted to gyp him of his fare.

Meanwhile I slipped outside and noiselessly clambered to the roof of the taxi where I lay down flat.

Moments later, the very thing I had expected took place: a dark, highly modern vehicle with antigrav-drive instead of old-fashioned wheels stopped alongside the cab. 2 men jumped out and flashed their identification badges to the driver.

Obviously I had been followed. Marlis' little ruse, which was meant so well but had been carried out so badly, proved to be too transparent. The Solar Defence was snapping at my heels again.

They asked the driver only a few quick questions and began to feel every corner of the seats and the floor with their hands, a convincing sign they were looking for an invisible man.

Then they drove away and simply left the excited cab owner standing in the street.

With a great feeling of relief I slipped back into the taxi and ordered the driver to take me to Tokyo Street in the old part of the town. When we approached my destination I instructed him to let me out and to go to the nearest taxi stand and to forget all about the incident.

Cloaked in my shield of invisibility I proceeded on my way to Mrs. Gentner, whose little gunshop could not be very far from here.

*Don't be a fool!* My extra-sense warned as usual when I was about to commit a blunder.

Of course Marlis must have been trailed for some time. She probably had already been investigated on Earth by a telepath from Rhodan's Mutant Corps who thus had found out that she had given me those special devices hidden by me.

Rhodan, who must have returned long ago, abstained from interfering with her and I could very well understand his clever reasoning.

Marlis didn't know when and how I would arrive on Venus. Now I was glad that I had not even known myself how I would go about it when I started my flight from Earth.

Therefore Rhodan simply waited. At this moment he might already have received the information that the fugitive vanished from a Venusian cab.

I paused in an archway and considered my situation. I concluded that it had not been such a bad move after all to come to Venus. It would be much easier for me to lay low on Venus than on the densely populated Earth with its tight net of communications and connections. The Venus jungle was enormously big and almost impenetrable. But I knew how to cope with the dangers lurking out there.

The assumption of my extra-brain, according to which Rhodan had refrained from apprehending me because he wanted to learn the identity of my co-conspirators, was false: it was precisely the other way around. He was already aware of Marlis Gentner's indiscretion and perhaps her half-brother was by now also undergoing an interrogation by the Mutant Corps.

Rhodan had only to wait till Marlis picked up my letter at the post office. Then the machinery for arresting me would be set in motion again.

Due to the fact that I had used a false name to write my letter, the Defence Agency had not been able to trace it immediately to the sender. Even the letter I had received from Gunter Viesspahn didn't arouse too much suspicion since there was nothing unusual about a newcomer receiving such mail.

I figured I would have sprung the trap then and there if I had been in Rhodan's place but on 2nd thought it occurred to me that I could have been wrong about my conjecture that the security officer at the Nevada Fields had reported my flight to Venus. Consequently I must have walked into the trap myself. Nobody really knew who had come to Venus under the disguise of Hinrich Volkmar. Only when I got in touch with Marlis' half-brother did the Solar Defence get on my track again.

If that rambunctious fellow was already under observation by Rhodan's men, it was all very simple for them. But the question why they had failed to nab me sooner still remained an unanswered puzzle.

I could merely assume that they must have been very certain I would not see so quickly through their shrewd game.

I began to feel more at ease again. A soft laugh startled me until I realized that I made the noise myself.

I would now have hated to be in the shoes of the local Defence Chief. If I knew Rhodan, he was already on his way to Venus.

I continued walking slowly and cautiously, taking pains to maintain my monoscreen against all telepathic probes. If I permitted an impulse of my thoughts to emanate from my mind, I could be spotted by a mutant.

This time they were liable to shoot to kill. Rhodan could not afford the risk of losing me in the Venus jungle. Their vigilance at the spaceport would be subject to occasional lapses and I would be there to try it again.

He knew this as well as I. That grey-eyed barbarian's mind was too sharp to overlook any loopholes.

It was utter folly to keep my rendezvous with Marlis. She was under surveillance as sure as my name was Atlan.

I mollified my growing fear for my survival by telling myself that it would be very unwise to go into the jungle without a powerful and deadly energy-weapon. The gigantic saurians of the Venusian forests could hardly be controlled by my shock-beamer and where could I find the necessary guns more conveniently than in a special shop?

Hence I kept walking until I saw the store sign in a little side street.

There was nobody hanging around the store in plain sight, which didn't surprise me. I felt a deep desire to see Marlis again, to catch a glimpse of her dark eyes and a smile from her bittersweet lips. She had shown wonderful courage and I could not blame her for committing serious mistakes. After all she was not a trained agent but an impulsive young girl with an enthusiastic spirit.

Undoubtedly she was totally unaware that her mind had been probed by the mutants and she was above reproach for thinking that my safety was assured. If she had not been firmly convinced of this, she would never have asked for my mail at the post office.

Too bad I had also lost my precious pearl since I could no longer avail myself of Gunter Viesspahn's help. Thus I found myself in a most unenviable position.

## 7/ UNSEEN EYES WATCHING

*His*sudden appearance came as a violent shock to me. I had racked my aching brain to come up with a satisfactory solution.

But now I felt an unknown force paralysing the paths to my nerve centres. I was one of those people who could love and hate unsparingly and feel joy or melancholy as long as their mental balance was unshaken.

However Perry Rhodan's presence had the effect of an acid shower on me. I struggled to maintain my composure. An irritating sensation tingled the back of my neck and it took awhile before I mastered my moral defeat.

I stood behind a cluster of bushes which would have kept me out of his sight even if my light-deflector had not worked so perfectly. Nevertheless I could not get rid of the feeling that his grey eyes had scrutinized me icily."

It was not possible to locate me by the energy output of my deflector as the powerful energy-weapons of the team accompanying him and the flying machines he had brought in produced considerably stronger fields.

I had arrived only 10 minutes earlier. I had been fortunate to see Marlis Gentner when I had dared to enter the gun shop and found her at the office in the rear.

She had failed to notice that I came in after I had passed unseen through the staked out police forces of the Venusian Security Service keeping their eyes on the place.

She had no inkling that she had already been under surveillance on Earth. It disturbed me greatly that I kept this information from her but I had to observe the strictest silence to guard my safety.

When I revealed my presence she paused abruptly at the small window and stood motionlessly. "Is it you?" she asked with a faint quiver of her lips, keeping her composure admirably without regard to the real danger to which she exposed herself. I could only hope I would be able to persuade Perry Rhodan to go easy on her and to spare her any punishment.

I had whispered to her that I had to flee into the jungle because I ran into some trouble and that it was out of the question that I could meet her half-brother again as I had the impression that he was being watched.

I added also that I planned to get in touch with one of my friends from the spaceship *Gloria* without mentioning a name. Let the wizards of the Solar Defence beat their brains out, I thought.

It was a deliberate manoeuvre on my part not to give her any information that would further implicate her

and I told her only what I wanted the Defence Agency to learn. I didn't doubt that the telepaths kept watching her closely and therefore I could not allow her to become aware that I was wise to their scheme.

I had taken a serious chance when I entered the old house and my presence would have been immediately found out if a telepathic probe of the girl were in progress at this particular time.

But luck had been with me. She let me use her key to open the vault containing the heavy energy-beamers which were suitable for killing the dangerous behemoths on Venus. The weapons were sturdily constructed and emitted powerful directional fields from highly efficient nuclear fusion type micro-reactors. They fired beams which were hotter than the sun and easily brought down the most ferocious beasts.

I left unnoticed and Marlis was convinced that nobody else knew anything about my short visit.

Subsequently I proceeded to do exactly what I had denied to her I would: I went straight to the beer saloon on the outskirts of the city where Viesspahn said he would wait for me.

I had to change my course of action continually since I desired to keep my movements flexible and totally unpredictable to a logical and schematic pattern recognition process. Moreover I was titillated once again by the challenge of going into the lion's den.

I spotted Viesspahn the moment I came in. He leaned against the bar, chewing the fat with the grizzled settlers who had come to shop in the nearby jungle stores.

Viesspahn had not yet been arrested and he didn't have the faintest notion of what had taken place in the meantime.

I had the greatest respect for the intelligence of my opponents. Nevertheless I felt that I successfully led the Defence Agency to believe after my hasty departure from the museum without Viesspahn that I would never return to a friend whom they considered suspect.

It almost looked as if I had reckoned correctly. The Security Service didn't seem to bother my bearded crony and I harboured these pleasant illusions up to the moment a big helicopter of the Solar Defence appeared and landed. I was almost bowled over by the astonishment of seeing Perry Rhodan alight in person.

If he had taken over the search himself I had to be doubly careful. He was accompanied by a handful of men and acted as if he had no interest in Viesspahn.

He greeted the settlers and engaged in some friendly chitchat, pretending he happened to pass through and wanted to visit the neighbourhood where he almost lost his life on his first trip to Venus.

He delighted the hardy pioneers with some fictitious story about lightning-fast snakes in the swamps.

My crafty adversary had given a convenient explanation for showing up in surprise. He soon left the bar again and stopped behind the building. One member of the crew had flown away in the helicopter. Everything looked very peaceful. The settlers remained in the bar. They were stunned in awe and respect.

In my distress I kept standing behind the broad leaves of the bushes which I had sought out as cover

before Rhodan had arrived. I didn't dare to move for fear that I might make an accidental noise. The jam-packed tavern was more than 150 feet away. The laughter and singing of the inebriated jungle pioneers formed a muffled backdrop of noise and I was afraid to disturb it by a rustling of leaves. I was in a nasty spot since my invisible barrier was no deterrent to the swarms of insects who, in a quite literal sense, were bugging me!

These pesky swarms flew blindly into me and I became the bloody object of their vicious stingers. To increase my discomfort, the metallic tip of the exhaust ring at the end of my energy-beamer's fusion core chamber made my right shoulder blade extremely sore as I held it tightly pressed to my body.

I waited impatiently and hoped that I would not get caught in one of those furious Venusian storms.

However I got off the hook much quicker than I expected. But I came within a hair of betraying my presence as I could not have imagined a more astonishing sight: Only 15 feet away from me the moist air began to flicker and a creature took shape out of the void. I gazed at it with utter disbelief and mounting anxiety.

The animal resembled an outsized field mouse with an overgrown rear end and the broad tail of a Terrestrial beaver.

The strange creature stood on 2 short hindlegs that enabled it to walk erect like a human being.

The thin arms with the delicately formed prehensile extremities were folded over its chest. It wore some kind of a uniform. What kind of an animal was it?

The closer I looked at it the more, difficulty I had to make up my mind about this peculiar individual. Animals don't carry energy-beamers! The pointed head of the mouse with the cute spoon-shaped ears would normally have elicited my amused smile but instead the furry little being aroused terrible consternation in me.

Where did it come from? It took awhile before I could recall in my usually reliable memory that Rhodan's Mutant Corps boasted of such an extraordinary but very intelligent creature in its ranks. I had heard more than one rumour about it.

Rhodan called the furball, Pucky. The thinking animal must have come from a planet unknown to me and he seemed to be not only a whimsical little runt but also a teleporter. It was the only explanation I could think of for his sudden materialization.

I tightened my grip of my energy-weapon as I got over my first shock.

"Come on," the oversize mouse chirped in a shrill voice. "You can wait here forever. He visited the girl and whispered into her ear that he's going to the farm of his new friend in the jungle. That's how little the local Security Service know their business. They ought to jump into the nearest lake."

Rhodan emerged somewhat hesitantly from behind the low storage shed. His face showed no expression. Only the tiny wrinkles around his eyes seemed to be deeper. He walked so closely past me that I was afraid he would discover me.

The little wise-guy bared a big incisor, causing a colonel of the Security Service to drop his chin in trepidation.

A young lieutenant who apparently had never before met Pucky sputtered in an exasperating coughing spell.

The glinting incisor of the little squirt disappeared behind his wrinkled nose. "You screwballs!" he squeaked with utter disrespect. "Why didn't you call me sooner? You knew I was here on Venus. Why didn't you arrest him on the spot when he received that letter from Viesspahn?"

Rhodan frowned ominously and the colonel suddenly looked very awkward as he stood there in great embarrassment.

"Well, why didn't you?" the Chief of the Solar Imperium repeated the question of his odd friend.

"Sir, please keep in mind that everybody on the *Gloria* had an impeccable record. The man who purported to be Hinrich Volkmar was X-rayed twice on Earth."

"But you should've known that the girl asked her half-brother to meet the Arkonide after his arrival. This fact was established beyond doubt by our telepathic mind readers. It should've been obvious that you take him into custody as soon as he got that letter from Viesspahn in the immigration camp."

"We couldn't be sure," the perspiring colonel replied. "The fugitive showed the letter to a Security Service sergeant and the message was completely innocuous. As I said before, the man was..."

"...already twice examined!" Rhodan broke in sarcastically. "A fine job you did, I must say!"

"Sir, I was on the verge of nabbing him after his meeting with Viesspahn in the museum!"

The ridiculous little shrimp laughed, loud and shrill. Suddenly he spun around on his short hindlegs and shrieked sharply: "Who thinks I'm a ridiculous little shrimp? Which one of you is it?"

His question startled me and I quickly restored my monoscreen which I had neglected to keep up for a fraction of a second due to my fleeting amusement. That big mouse was a telepath as well! He must have pried into the mind of Marlis after I had left her.

The young lieutenant was suddenly catapulted high into the air. The little furball laughed hilariously as he watched the officer screaming in horror. "I'll drop you head first into the morass if you don't apologize," Pucky shouted.

"Cut it out at once!" Rhodan commanded gruffly. The big mouse in uniform pulled in its neck under his icy stare. The lieutenant landed roughly on the rotor hub of the helicopter parked nearby.

Rhodan lost no more time. "Colonel, find out at once whom the fugitive has befriended in the pioneer camp. Order everybody to remain at the camp. Those who have already been assigned to their farms by the government are to be visited by special search commandos. That'll be all for now. Call the helicopter down!"

Rhodan tapped his cap with his fingers, adjusted his belt with the heavy energy-beamer and walked stiffly to the little landing pad. I felt the deepest admiration for him. He was a tough opponent.

"Sir, what do you want me to do about Viesspahn?"

Rhodan answered without looking back. His voice almost exploded with anger. "Can't you figure that



out by yourself, Colonel? Leave him alone, understand! You got me all wrong if you think he'll still try to get in touch with Viesspahn. You don't know this man!

Rhodan turned around on his heel. "I've fought this man in a desperate battle and I had to strain every fibre in my body to the limit in order to defeat him. Don't think for a moment he's an idiot!"

I was so deeply shaken and confused by his words that I couldn't think clearly. I came close to switching off my deflector screen and surrendering myself to Rhodan.

I controlled my emotions at the last moment and stared with burning eyes at my determined adversary. Why didn't I shoot at him? It would have been easy for me to escape in the nearby jungle.

I saw the lieutenant pointing to a bright-red helicopter. It was Viesspahn's machine. Apparently Rhodan had inquired about it.

Moments later he climbed into his big military craft. It was the latest type with an impulse propulsion engine and an energy-cannon mounted in the fuselage. I noticed that Rhodan sat down in the pilot seat.

After he finally took off and disappeared in the misty horizon I dared to leave my hiding place behind the bushes and walked over to the jetcopter. I had accomplished what I had set out to do with my hazardous venture. Rhodan no longer believed that I had any intention of joining Marlis' half-brother

I paused for a minute at the hatch of the storage compartment and looked across to the tavern. I couldn't see Viesspahn but I heard his raucous laughter.

I calmly opened the hatch and put my foot on the access ladder. Just when I was about to squeeze myself into the small compartment I heard a noise which sounded like an impulse jet going into a dive.

The faint whine rapidly grew into a shrill howl. The descending machine must have been close to the sonic barrier.

Pulling my head back from the storage compartment I looked up to the sky and recognized a flashing object. It roared over the edge of the forest in a daring manoeuvre and pointed its long nose down in a straight course on the spot where I happened to be.

It was my extra-sense that sent my legs pounding the ground in a wild dash. I ran like never before. With a last desperate leap I tumbled into a ditch with foul-smelling water.

Simultaneously the horrible growl of the energy-cannon split the air. The whine of the machine which now exceeded the speed of sound was momentarily cut out but I heard the tremendous crash of violently dislodged air masses as they brightly flared up under the infernal heat of the energy beam.

The unleashed atomic forces smashed 150 feet from me into the ground and made it instantly boil up. Gunter Viesspahn's gaudily coloured machine was struck and turned in a split second in an exploding ball of fire. The murky Venus day was suddenly illuminated by the burst of a small sun—the ominous blinding light generated by the energy-cannon.

I was almost sucked out of my water ditch in the wake of the ship racing over my head. The ground bubbled a mere 30 feet away from me.

Rhodan had drawn a straight lava trench through the soil.

The sound waves rolled in moments later and their roar and thunder created the sensation of the whole planet blowing up. I pressed the palm of my hands against my tortured ears and staggered blindly to the storage shed where I dropped to the ground in utter exhaustion.

I was close to sobbing but my throat was too choked up. I was in the throes of a senseless rage and would have liked to scream to vent my feeling of abject humiliation.

Rhodan had departed and then returned to take Viesspahn's machine under fire in cold blood.

This confounded grey-eyed barbarian had foreseen the possibility that I would have the audacity to renew my former contact. When he earlier berated the hapless colonel, his lacing down was really meant for the ears of the invisible man somewhere in the vicinity.

Had he waited only half a minute longer with his return I would already have been inside the storage room and couldn't have so instinctively reacted with my instantaneous escape.

I had to use all my willpower to restrain myself when Rhodan's machine landed again. He jumped out of the cockpit and walked over to the smouldering lump of metal as closely as the heat permitted.

I was anxious to hear what he had to say. I got up in spite of my reluctance and walked over to him, getting so closely in the way of the settlers running out of the bar that I almost brushed against one of them.

Gunter Viesspahn stood pale as death before the mightiest man in the Solar Imperium. The colonel was already at the side of Rhodan.

"Was this machine yours, Mr. Viesspahn?" the dark-blond giant inquired calmly.

My 'friend' nodded disconcerted, looking fearfully at the officers of the Security Service.

"I'm very sorry," Rhodan said tongue in cheek. "A little mishap, you see. I regret I can't give you any explanations. Of course the government will replace your helicopter with a new one. Tell the officer what supplies you had loaded in the vehicle. You'll be completely indemnified within an hour. Take care of this matter, Col. Fasting!"

Viesspahn smiled uneasily but it seemed to me that he felt greatly relieved.

Rhodan dismissed him with a gesture and looked again at the burned-out wreck of the copter. "Colonel!"

The colonel who was already on his way stopped and stood at attention. Rhodan's voice had an extremely impersonal ring.

"Sir?" the colonel asked.

"Please have the wreck thoroughly examined by scientific experts as soon as it cools down. Its possible you'll find the remains of a humanoid being inside. I wish to be informed of your investigation's result at once. Thank you!"

He left after reassuring the bewildered Viesspahn again that he would receive a brand new machine in an

hour.

I stood in the open terrain, trembling all over like a leaf. Rhodan's back appeared in the luminous sight of my gun. I only had to squeeze the trigger to do to him what he had tried to inflict on me.

However I let the heavy weapon in my hand sink down. I felt unable to shoot him in the back.

I ran back to the storage shed with wide leaps. The settlers were talking excitedly. Nobody knew what was behind the mysterious events. Only Gunter Viesspahn had an inkling but he preferred to keep his mouth shut.

I watched Rhodan getting in his machine again. But this time he did not take the pilot seat

This barbarian had no compunctions about destroying a perfectly good aircraft if he considered it a tactical necessity. He didn't even know for certain whether I was inside the ship or not and he had therefore given me time to get aboard the helicopter.

He had thought of all eventualities and had taken a calculated risk rather than staying on the safe side.

I could have kicked myself because of my nearly fatal mistake. I should have noticed that Rhodan left one of his men behind in the tavern.

Of course that officer must have had orders to keep everybody off the landing pad. Rhodan wanted to have a free firezone. I was the only target he was interested in.

I had a great deal of trouble regaining my badly shaken composure.

This tall barbarian could have been only a few hours on Venus and he had already given me more trouble than the entire Venusian Security Service in 6 days of Terra-time. Now the game would get rough. This man was too smart and methodical to slip up in his decisions. I could be sure of that.

\* \* \* \*

After one hour and 15 minutes a new aircraft landed on the pad near the tavern. Rhodan had kept his word. It was remarkable how quickly he could act even here on the threshold of the wilderness.

The pilot was none other than that abominable big mouse. He looked preposterous in his uniform which had a hole cut out to allow his broad beavertail to touch the ground. Now his head was enclosed in a radio-helmet under which the grinning incisor protruded from his pointed snout.

The 3-foot high pipsqueak planted himself before the smirking Viesspahn and lectured the black beard in a high-pitched voice about his duties and rights as a settler.

Although I must have known deep inside me that my ire against the uniformed creature was unjustified, I was seized by the most repulsive feelings against this ludicrous brat who was even more alien to the Solar system than myself. How could he behave so presumptuously in this world?

In blind fury I picked up a half-rotten piece of wood and hurled it with all my might against the snout of the little braggart.

By the ancient gods of Terra—I shouldn't have done it! My wrath quickly evaporated after my ill-conceived pitch. I took to my heels and was lucky that the enraged mouse was unable to see me or spot me by telepathy.

What he did to the innocent pioneers was downright awful. This creature from another world had fantastic telekinetic powers. He managed to throw the wildly screaming colonists into a swampy pond and to send them flying to the highest treetops of the jungle.

Then the little beast rolled on the concrete landing pad bursting with frenetic laughter in a way no other intelligent being in the Galaxy would have done.

Only Viesspahn was spared his scandalous treatment since the little monster apparently knew that he was not the culprit who had thrown the piece of wood at him. At least I found out what to expect from Rhodan's 'friend'.

Dumbfounded, Viesspahn bowed as the little squirt vanished from the scene as if he had never been there after shouting: "I'll show you guys! You've seen nothing yet!"

I saw Viesspahn gathering up his stuff. The vehicle destroyed by Rhodan had been empty.

I walked calmly to the new aircraft and when Viesspahn took off in haste I was already on the seat behind him. I had the feeling that Rhodan would not attack us a 2nd time.

I surmised that he was busy mobilizing a few more mutants from his secret corps. But who of these people could be dangerous to me? Telepaths were no threat to me and therefore didn't faze me; this much had already become obvious. Who else could Rhodan use to detect me when I had the protection of my thought-screen and light-deflector?

I was in no position to answer this question as I didn't know what other aces Rhodan had up his sleeve.

Now I rued again the fact that I had failed to get rid of him when I had the chance to shoot him. How would I ever make it to the Arkon system? It didn't make much sense. Was he a deadly enemy of my beloved land or not?

## **8/ SECRET MENTOR OF MANKIND**

The storm seemed to drive the beasts crazy. 2 mountains of flesh and bones as big and strong as trees had come 5 minutes ago out of the primordial forest to perform a strange dance on Viesspahn's carefully cultivated fields.

They were 2 sprinter dragon-lizards, as they were called on Venus. Their shape roughly resembled a Terrestrial kangaroo but their long-stretched flat-snouted skulls reached 100 feet high through the hazy air.

These sprinter-lizards were the most ferocious denizens of the untamed jungle. Their horny armour was as much as 18" thick in some places. They could move at terrifying speed and before man arrived on Venus they were the uncontested rulers of the planet.

A trampler in wild flight had first appeared on the scene before them. That 4-legged vegetarian' had devastated Viesspahn fields in a few moments. Wherever it had put down its colossal footprints it left deep muddy troughs.

When the sprinter-dragons reached the broad clearing at the precipitous banks of the Hondo River they suddenly gave up chasing the trampler.

They stood for several minutes upright to their full lengths high above the river before they began their dance.

Viesspahn had rushed to the control station of the newfangled farm in the jungle. He was busy calling back his remote-controlled robot tractors before the beasts discovered and destroyed them.

I could hear him swearing like a trooper in the power station where I had sought refuge. For the last 3 days I had been on his farm without him knowing anything about it. I had no intention of disclosing my whereabouts to him as he was much too unreliable. In time, however, he was bound to start wondering about his diminishing supply of victuals. By that time I would have to find a solution.

A 500-amp fuse blew behind me, it was in the circuit of the southern high-tension fence which proved to be an ineffective obstacle in the path of the trampler as it broke through.

The red control lamps blinked faster and faster until their light became steady. 3 times the switch of the automatic fuse was thrown back into contact position and it flipped 3 times out again with a loud crack. The circuit was shorted out and the high-tension screen no longer functioned.

Viesspahn cursed with increased passion. I retreated to the isolation chamber of the power station where I could hear the transformer bank of the energy reactor hum behind a heavy steel door.

Viesspahn was equipped with a modern type of fusion breeder putting out a maximum of 1000 kilowatt-hours which was sufficient to supply his power requirements for the farm. The multi-purpose tractors drew their energy from a separate power source.

I looked out of the control station through the armourplast panes which were as thick as the width of my hand.

The storm had reached its peak in a few seconds. I knew that the long night of Venus was just beginning and that we would be immersed in total darkness for a period of 12 Terrestrial days. Now the planet's rotation approached the tempestuous twilight zone which was neither light nor dark and which was long extended due to the slow rotation.

As the night slowly fell, a storm blew up and it rained buckets. Yet the sudden drop in temperature brought no relief.

Viesspahn's epithets were drowned out by the howling hurricane but he seemed to be successful in bringing back his valuable machines to the subterranean bunkers.

I began to feel very uncomfortable in the narrow confines of the isolation chamber which was built into the base of a rugged tower. Such towers had been installed on all Venusian farms. They were topped by transparent armourplast domes which provided an excellent view of the cultivated fields and the nearby living quarters.

These constructions were an absolute must on the 2nd Solar planet because they alone were adequate to repulse the gigantic animals as soon as they emerged from the jungle.

The twilight zone was particularly notorious. The abrupt change of climate seemed to provoke a state of frenzy in the saurians. They became even more vicious, surpassing the bounds of their habitual aggression.

The bearded farmer scurried past my temporary hideout. I instinctively sought cover when his fist hit the lever of the little energy-cannon which was swivel-mounted in the transparent cupola. A special government license was mandatory for the possession and operation of such heavy weapons. They were provided only for stationary positions and were regularly checked by inspectors from Port Venus.

Viesspahn was already climbing up the steep metallic spiral stairs when I cautiously left the cramped isolation chamber. I could hear the trampling of his heavy boots above me as he went to the small firing stand from which the whole field could be swept by the blaster.

I observed him as he adjusted his dual target system. It consisted of an infrared scope coupled to a radio-sensor. This method enabled him to pinpoint his target in the dark of the night with utmost precision. I wondered whether adequate precautions had been taken in providing such formidable means of destruction to the eternally rebellious colonists. How simple it would be to remove these little cannons from their fixed positions and use them for other undesirable purposes.

I sat down on the swivel chair in front of the remote steering controls of the tractors and waited for the next turn of events. It was almost dark outside. Cascades of water, driven by the gale, pelted the armourplast panes of the dome. This new world was in danger of being inundated again.

The anemometer measured a wind velocity of 180 kilometres per hour, a magnitude making it inadvisable to leave the protection of my present surroundings.

Viesspahn was perched on the edge of his seat behind his impulse-weapon, concentrating his eyes on the 2 sprinter lizards which were about 200 meters away. Despite the distance they had the frightening effect of moving towers. Their horny tails whipped up tons of the hard gained newly tilled soil which was turned into a swamp.

The tornado didn't seem to hurt the 100-foot behemoths in the slightest. They rampaged through the fields, reared up against the wind and roared so menacingly that I tightly gripped my gun.

I never put down this lifesaver in the hell of the jungle for more than a minute. Although I had appropriated from Viesspahn's armoury another more handy and very powerful shock-beamer it would have failed miserably against these gargantuan creatures. Only the enormous firepower of an impulse-weapon could be expected to destroy a sprinter lizard.

When the beasts came closer Viesspahn opened fire. As a precaution I turned my face away from the wide muzzle of the rectifier barrel but the hot blast blinded my eyes anyway. The stream of fire created a fascinating effect. It drew a path like a tunnel through the mass of water gushing down from the clouds and turned it into dense steam which swirled and sizzled along the track till it was ripped apart and

carried away by the raging storm.

Viesspahn was right on target. A brightly glowing spot developed between the shorter forelegs of the lizard and exploded in a flash of lightning. The excess energy which was not absorbed by the body of the mammoth beast shot out through its dorsal armour in the form of a sunburst.

I could see the colossal body collapse. The dragon had received a lethal blow but its reflexes had not yet ceased. It was horrible to watch the deadly fury with which it dug up and scattered the softened ground.

The second saurian broke away and ran screeching toward the jungle, disappearing behind the sheets of water coming down from the skies.

Viesspahn disconcerted me. When I looked at him again, his beard quivered around his mouth. He seemed to launch a new string of his more profane invectives. This was a feature I disliked in the man.

I wanted to go into the adjacent storage room when a thunderstorm broke out. The stupefying bolts and thunderclaps made me cover my ears with my hands. This was not a world which could be conquered by peaceful characters. Obviously it took men like Gunter Viesspahn to tame this forbidding planet.

Not far from the tower several trees caught fire and burned fiercely notwithstanding the torrential rain and the succulent vegetation. There was no thunderstorm on Earth which could be compared with this spectacle.

Viesspahn still crouched behind his energy-cannon. I gained the impression that he was drunk with the power he held in his hands.

Just when I was ready to leave I noticed a shimmer. A body materialized behind the agitated settler out of nowhere. After the contours had emerged more clearly I realized that not one but 2 individuals had appeared.

This time I was spared the panic which had overcome me before. I knew already about this confounded mouse with the beavertail. I remained transfixed on the spot although no other sound could be heard in the noise of the thunderstorm.

Almost unconsciously I reached for the shock-beamer in the holster. My extra-sense seemed to react with derision. Why was I so reluctant to attack Rhodan's friend with a deadly weapon even when the circumstances clearly required it? It was a nagging paradox that opposed my logic impulses.

The 2nd individual was unquestionably a Terranian. He got off the back of the extra-terrestrial creature who apparently had transported the husky man. I noted with concern that I had again underestimated the capabilities of this non-humanoid being. If he was able to carry a 2nd body through his state of dematerialisation his supranatural powers must be extraordinarily strong.

I stood slightly stooped behind the switch console of the tractor's remote control. It was big enough to hide a man and they couldn't have seen me even if I hadn't made myself invisible with my light-deflector.

Viesspahn had evidently failed to notice the arrival of the intruders. He kept up his vigil and vented his disgust by voluble outbursts.

The ludicrous little creature whom Rhodan called Pucky seemed to concentrate on reading the mind of the pioneer farmer. Evidently a surprise investigation had been undertaken by Rhodan and I considered

myself fortunate not to have taken Viesspahn into my confidence. As long as he was not aware of my presence he couldn't betray me knowingly or unknowingly.

I could feel a gloating smile on my lips as I looked calmly up to the small firing platform. I was tempted to laugh when I saw Pucky making an angry gesture. The big mouse had determined that Viesspahn had no knowledge of my whereabouts.

The Terranian who accompanied Pucky shrugged his shoulders and made a sign which seemed to indicate that he was ready to leave again.

At this moment the unexpected happened!

The Terranian, who was unknown to me, suddenly stretched out his arm and pointed exactly to the place where I stood. Simultaneously his lips opened for what seemed to be a loud shout which, however, I was unable to hear due to the howling storm. All I knew was that the unknown man had seen me notwithstanding my deflector shield and right through my opaque cover.

Seen me! It was incredible! Was he capable of looking through solid walls and light-deflector screens?

All my blood seemed bent on flowing up to my brain contrary to the laws of nature. The shock of surprise affected my mental equilibrium and came close to inhibiting my ability to take action. However an impulse from my extra-brain came to my rescue: the little one!

I trained my stun gun on the big mouse as he spun around with remarkable agility and turned his face toward me. Once I had been discovered, the extra-terrestrial creature was undoubtedly the greater threat to me. I had witnessed already what he had done to the pioneers.

The Terranian again shouted something and reached for his blaster. At that moment I pulled the trigger.

I heard the sharp crack of the nerve-debilitating discharge although I could barely see the flash since my eyesight was still impaired by the surge of blood to my head.

Up above on the platform the body of the outlandish animal was engulfed in my shock-ray. I saw his mouth open to cry out before he fell down with paralysed muscles and malfunctioning nerve reflexes. He would be knocked out of action for the better part of an hour.

My 2nd shot was fired simultaneously with the blast of the Terranian who was set to kill me.

I felt the heatwave from the needle-thin thermo-beam which struck the high back of the swivel chair less than 6 feet from me and set it ablaze.

The unknown's shot had been fired too hastily whereas my beam found its mark again. His body crumpled as he fell down.

As his strength failed him he made a last effort to discharge his weapon. The thin energy-beam pierced the metallic floor of the platform and demolished the fuse box of the electric grid circuit guarding the farm and set off a shower of sparks.

I had recovered from the danger of my first anxious moments. When the sparks flashed from the metal box I crouched already in the open door of the isolation chamber.



Gunter Viesspahn stared with his mouth agape at the 2 motionless bodies. It took him awhile till he finally climbed down to fight the smouldering fire with a portable extinguisher.

He was flabbergasted and looked around with frightened eyes trying to figure out where the 2 crippling shots had come from.

I quietly retreated from the smoke-filled room. The left arm of the paralysed Terranian dangled from the firing platform and I noticed that the tiny signal lamp of the micro-radio set on his wrist flickered.

Somebody apparently tried to make contact with him. I had to assume that the 2 agents had not come alone and I had a hunch that Perry Rhodan was somewhere in the background. He probably had deployed a full defence team. A man like Rhodan either organized such a surprise action properly or not at all.

I realized that I didn't have a second to lose.

With deliberate calm I went back to the storage room where I had slept the last few days. I picked up the bag with food I had previously prepared and hung it over my shoulder making sure it was inside my deflector field.

I checked my heavy arm-long impulse weapon and the rest of my equipment. Then I lifted the cover of the emergency shaft under the floor which Viesspahn had excavated underneath a year ago by using an atomic blaster.

The shaft went down at a steep angle till it reached a level tunnel which led straight to the bank of the Hondo River.

A 2nd subterranean passageway connected the reactor chamber in the energy tower to the nearby living quarters.

If Rhodan planned to ambush me there, that route of escape was liable to be already closed to me and it was therefore my logical conclusion that it would be safer to get away through the narrow tunnel to the river.

I stopped to listen inside before closing the massive cover over my head and locking the heavy bolt. Although the cover could be destroyed with one short blast of a gun, I figured it would take at least 15 minutes until the molten entrance would have cooled off enough to allow access to the shaft.

The tunnel was circular and little more than 3 feet high. I had to bend down very low and hold the bulky energy-weapon in front of me. The light of my lamp was reflected a thousand times from the glazed walls.

I had gone through the shaft several times and I knew that it was about 600 meters long. But this time I didn't stop to lie down and rest my aching back. I didn't think Rhodan would waste a single second in a critical situation.

Pucky was an extraordinary telepath. Rhodan possessed the same gift although to a lesser degree. But he was sure to know already that his little friend was incapacitated.

As I kept plodding forward I tried to analyse with critical and cool detachment how the Terranian had been able to see me. Apparently he was a member of Rhodan's Mutant Corps. If the man really was able to see through my deflector screen he also must be capable of visually penetrating solid matter with

his unique mental powers.

However he did not seem to be endowed with other extrasensory features and I had therefore acted correctly by putting the big mouse out of action before him.

I saw a picture of the mutant's broad face in my mind. He had become my most perilous enemy after Rhodan's telepaths: had been frustrated by my thought screen.

From now on Rhodan was likely to send his seer into the breach and as soon as he detected me his comrades could open fire on me or attack me by some extrasensory power play.

*You should've killed him, fool!* my extra-brain reminded me.

I took a deep breath and pressed on with tightened lips. It was torture to keep going for such a long time without a pause but I could not afford to take a break.

When I finally reached the widened place before the steel door I could hear the water of the Hondo River rushing by outside. The storm was still going strong. Such winds could last a long time in the twilight zone.

I opened a door and warily looked down a pit whose bottom was covered with water. There Viesspahn's armourplast boat rocked on the waves.

It was a very stable, unsinkable and completely enclosed vessel. Its machine worked on the reaction principle, taking in water with a powerful turbo-pump and discharging it under high pressure through a movable jet, eliminating the normal rudder.

I had already taken the precaution of becoming familiar with the boat and this foresight now paid off.

A narrow ladder led down to a stone landing. When I opened the wide watertight boat-hatch a lamp lit up over the steering wheel.

Everything was in working condition. I lifted the cover of the engine compartment and made sure that the one-man flying machine I had stashed away inside 2 days ago was still there. Viesspahn had not been near the boat in the meantime.

I put my weapon on the forward bench, switched on the bottle-sized miniature reactor and pushed the step switch of the powerful pump-motor to the right.

The boat lurched forward and gained speed. It responded perfectly to the steering manoeuvres of the rear jet.

The Hondo River was 3 miles wide at this spot and I had already anticipated that it would look more like a gale-whipped ocean. However I had no other choice for leaving the dangerous trap than by this route.

I propped my feet against the forward bulkhead and flipped the switch to full speed. The boat pulled sharply ahead, tore through the growth proliferating at the embankment and raced into the wide bay.

I was received by the howling fury of the hurricane. Evil demons seemed to battle for the rule of the jungle above the towering riverbanks.

As long as I stayed in the protected bay I encountered little difficulties but they began when I reached the open waters. Suddenly my little sturdy turbo-boat was pounded by wild waves. It was as if I had been abruptly thrust into a storm-tossed ocean. Before I realized it the armourplated deck was awash with foaming floods.

I dared the furious elements. The wind came from the left and it required the full power of my motor to prevent the boat from drifting in the wind. I wanted to get away as far as possible from the shores in order to reach the middle of the river which was shrouded in darkness. There it was less likely that I could be detected by radar.

As soon as I was out far enough to lose the protection of the steep banks against the thrashing wind, the boat began to pitch and roll. It was impossible for me to see where I was going. The usually calm waters of the Hondo River churned and swirled as if invisible monsters were trying to tear the riverbed asunder.

After a few minutes I began to hope that I had escaped my tenacious pursuers. However, no sooner had I come to this conclusion than all hell broke loose behind me.

Due to the incessant howling of the hurricane I was unable to hear the roar of the cannon fire but I saw the sun-bright energy tracks which ripped into the water left and right of the dancing boat, creating steaming, sizzling geysers.

I remained undisturbed. I had reckoned with the possibility of an attack and there was no cause for panic. I simply endeavoured to make the boat which was already nearly out of my control dance even wilder.

Seconds later the shots were aimed farther away. The automatic targeters must have made the mistake of picking up some floating tree trunks.

At the last burst of light I could see that I was more or less at the centre of the river. I let the torrent carry the boat and hoped that the stormy wind blowing from behind would drive me out of the danger zone in no time. It was difficult to judge my course. Now and then the keel of my boat scraped over some obstacles. The riverbed had many shoals and I couldn't expect to avoid them all.

I switched on my infrared viewer in order to see what little I could of my surroundings. The stream resembled a huge boiling pot. I considered myself fairly safe now because Rhodan probably realized that his airborne craft were useless in this weather. Thus I hoped that the hurricane would keep raging with undiminished force although the squalls became more intermittent and the end of the storm was in sight as the forces of nature were on the downswing again.

The famous Marshall Falls were supposed to be 8 miles downstream. There the waters of the Hondo gushed almost 3 miles straight down into the valley. Obviously such a jump through the air was the last thing I wanted to do.

I had underestimated the speed of the boat. Before I had decided where to turn I already heard the swelling roar of the falls emerging through the slowly fading sounds of the storm.

Sharp rocks jutting out of the river's surface came into view and the mass of water hurtled to the depth close behind them. The drift of the boat increased dangerously and I began to steer at once toward the distant shore.

I succeeded in breaking out of the river's maelstrom at the last moment. The keel rammed hard aground with an ominous-sounding burst. Apparently I happened to land on a rocky shore.

I turned off the engine and tried to listen outside. The sky was getting a little brighter in the east as much as this was possible in the twilight zone. It was high time for me to get out if I wanted to take advantage of the dim light and the last gusts of wind.

Before I opened the cabin hatch I put my flying machine on my back. It consisted of 2 counter-rotating hubs each with a set of 3 small blades which were unfolded by the centrifugal forces of the revolving rotors.

Now the highly elastic rotor blades still formed a plain little package which was attached to the backpack containing the minuscule reactor drive unit.

When I climbed out of the boat I was greeted by a whirlwind. The storm was much more violent than I had realized in my protected cabin. I turned the boat's bow down stream, leaned inside and switched on its water jets to full force, making it shoot down the river.

Thoughtfully following the speeding boat with my eyes I watched it as it was swept away by the swift current. A few moments later it disappeared in the frothy waves, hiding from my view its plunge over the wall of cliffs and water.

Now I pondered the question whether Rhodan would be fooled by my staged 'accident'.

*Never mind! You've got to gain time,* my inner voice said with undeniable logic.

I nodded mechanically. Of course gaining time was extremely important. Rhodan would certainly go over the wrecked boat with a fine tooth comb and make a thorough search for my body. It was inescapable that his thoughts would eventually turn to the turbulent waterfall and he would not exclude the probability that I had plunged to my death in the abyss.

As I was a stranger to these parts and engaged in a mad flight while a hurricane was on a rampage, the most likely inference was indeed that an accident had taken my life.

I waited in the protection of the steep slope for the wind to slacken. As soon as its fury had dwindled sufficiently, I pulled out the telescoped steering and energy controls of my outfit. My little backpack was now converted into a flying machine.

The hum of the motor built into the hub of the rotors was drowned out by the high-pitched whine of the unfolding rotor blades. I floated gently upward into the misty air but I stayed below the broad treetops which offered me the necessary cover in case of emergency.

Moments later the greatest waterfall so far discovered on Venus tumbled and seethed below me. A shudder overcame me at the thought of how close I had come to getting smashed at its bottom.

I followed the course of the river flying at 150 kilometres per hour and floating so close above the surface of the water that I had to be careful not to hit the rocks which frequently loomed up unexpectedly.

I headed back to Port Venus, having given up in resignation my attempt to play the role of a missing person. It was not that easy to deceive Perry Rhodan I had found out.

Only a few hours earlier I had toyed with the idea of bringing the big robot brain of Venus under my control. I was familiar with the installations and knew exactly how to gain access to the interior of the mountain cave through the various subterranean passages.

But now that Rhodan had managed to track me down, this plan of mine had come to naught. That grey-eyed barbarian was bound to be prepared for my attempt to penetrate into the positronic base and I had to presume that the valuable Brain was now extremely well guarded.

My best chance was to return to Port Venus, the hub of the most important events on the planet. I had come to the conclusion that it would be easier for me to bide in the teeming crowds of the big city. I would find a refuge somewhere and sooner or later would have the opportunity to hijack a super light-speed spaceship at the cosmic airport or stow away unnoticed on a big spacecraft.

I had not used my light-deflector for a few days in order to conserve its power. Now I activated it again because I was afraid I could be detected.

Rhodan's airplanes were nowhere to be seen or heard. The lord of the Solar system was presumably still occupied with his investigation although Viesspahn was in no position to reveal anything regarding my present whereabouts.

I was buoyed by renewed hope. The situation looked far less discouraging once I had reached Port Venus.

"Where can I go?" I asked myself. "To Marlis?"

No, I had to give a wide berth to the girl. At best I could catch a glimpse of her from a respectable distance.

As I flew along the river and took advantage of whatever cover I could find on the way, I decided to write a letter to Rhodan imploring him to show leniency to the girl. That clever barbarian had probably already realized that she had played only a very minor role in my escape.

*Whereto in Port Venus?* my extra-brain inquired.

I mulled over various possibilities till I remembered the Terra Museum. Of course—why couldn't I hide in there?

Its many rooms were large and difficult to watch. If that mutant with the unusual visual phenomenon showed up again I would have a fair chance of dodging him. At any rate I would be in a much better position to strike back at him unexpectedly. I would probably have to kill him though. If he required a minimum of time for his mental concentration, he would give me an opportunity to defend myself. We Arkonides were not easily intimidated by parapsychological modes of operation. Rhodan's mutants were only humans with weaknesses and faults.

The more I thought about the Terra Museum the better I liked the idea, although I was aware that I was more motivated by my feelings than by reason.

Nobody knew the history of Earth better than I. I was already there when the first Roman traders came to the Germanic tribes to exchange wrought-iron weapons for gold and amber. I urged Leif Erikson to sail west till he finally reached the North American coast.

I was attracted and fascinated by the numerous objects this museum exhibited. Moreover there was a restaurant in the basement of the building where I could obtain my nourishment.

The very idea appealed to my peace of mind. My extra-brain remained mute. Apparently it respected the fact that I had reached a certain state of fatigue.

Perhaps there was already an emotional undertow deep inside me which tried to make me vaguely cognizant of the futility of my plan to escape. Although I had remained physically and mentally young I could not simply set aside the experience of past centuries.

I had accumulated a treasure of pleasant memories as well as disappointments. My knowledge of suffering and reluctantly abandoned joys had tied me much closer to mankind than I could have dreamed.

What was the real reason I tried to escape from these lovable barbarians? Was it intransigence, pride, tradition? Perhaps a certain conceit about my noble descent? For 10 centuries I had been a mentor of mankind. I had guided its leading masters and made things happen which the annals of history described as so astounding as to be almost unbelievable. The historians still tried to answer the question of how Hannibal's elephants were able to cross the Alps. I had shattered the might of Rome because I didn't believe in preserving a decaying empire.

I was lost in my thoughts and almost smashed into an overhanging branch. I had better pull myself together. I still was drawn to my home where my place should be. My venerable people needed my help.

## **9/ SECRET MENTOR OF MANKIND**

At dusk velvet-black layers of clouds had spread out over Port Venus. All activities in the Terra Museum had slowed down and finally come to a complete halt.

The long nights of Venus kept the pioneers on their farms where they had to repulse the monsters awakening in the darkness.

After the last visitors had left and the lights went on over Port Venus I had regretfully activated my deflector screen. It was time to take precautions against the intruders who appeared so unpredictably and could be seen only after they materialized.

Thus I had become invisible again and I succumbed to the temptation of wandering through the large exposition halls. Many of the displayed objects from the Earth's past were not genuine but no effort was spared to make true replicas of the artefacts although it did not always meet with success.

The room where the early Teutonic and Nordic weapons were exhibited was especially disappointing. The 2-edged swords, for example, were often much too big and heavy. One would have thought that only giants and huge heroes had populated the Earth, whereas in truth the ancient warriors were generally smaller and slither than their contemporary descendants.

I encountered historical falsifications virtually everywhere. Yet there were also many beautiful and awe

inspiring mementos of the past and I feasted my eyes on the silent witnesses of many a stormy period.

It had been 20 hours since I saw the last person in the museum. The doors had been locked and the main lights doused. But there was still enough light to inspect and touch the array of articles with care.

Port Venus was now asleep. The people had not changed their habits. Since sleep was conditioned on biological factors they had not been able to adjust themselves to the prolonged equinox of nights and days in the alien world. They worked and slept at regular intervals regardless of the light of its absence.

For some time now I was plagued by a nagging anxiety. I had arrived at the museum 4 times 24 hours ago and there had not been the slightest sign of trouble.

I had fed myself from the automatic food dispenser in the cellar and the only thing I purloined was a hand-blaster which I took from the holster of an inebriated settler. Later, I found out to my chagrin that the state furnished such items without cost to each farmer.

This was fraught with danger because the man was bound to report his loss. But it had been very inconvenient for me to carry the unwieldy energy-weapon around constantly. I didn't consider it wise to be unarmed and I could hardly regard my shock-beamer as a weapon in the true sense of the word.

After the big doors were closed I became dismayed by a feeling of loneliness. I was too nervous to stay put and got up from the ornamental bed which was a duplication of the one owned by Louis XIV.

I began to stroll once more through the various departments, pausing here and there to reflect on my memories till I ended up again in the section with the Nordic relics.

A Viking boat was on display in the background. The boat was only 50 feet long, which was in conflict with the equipment shown in the boat. Actually these boats dating back to the 9th century were much bigger.

The figures represented Norwegian Vikings. The costumes and the armour were shown correctly with one exception: the peaked helmets, adorned with horns, were provided with nose protectors and ear covers but I had only once seen similar helmets and they had come out of Charlemagne's workshop.

I stopped in front of a magnificent Viking figure who held a two-edged sword in his right hand and a buckled shield in his left.

He looked very much like the tough fearless men from the far north. I stepped back to get a better view of the whole figure.

I heard the sharp crack of the spear's impact before I noticed the quivering shaft of the missile which had been hurled with uncanny force.

The tip was buried in the chest of the figure which began to waver and slowly toppled over. The spear broke loose and clattered to the floor.

I stood still, stunned. The muffled beat of a drum droned in my ears. It took awhile before I recognized it as the pounding of my own heart.

When I cautiously turned my head, carefully avoiding moving my feet, I could see nobody. My view was unobstructed but the hall looked as empty as it had been for hours.

Somebody was present though but I didn't know where. Who had beaten me at my own game?

Still trusting my deflector screen, I was reluctant to change my position. If a mutant had slipped in, it could hardly have been the seer who didn't have the faculty of teleportation. But who else could it be and why did he throw a spear?

"If I were you, I wouldn't stay put, Arkonide!" a voice said scornfully.

I pressed both hands to my mouth to stifle a gasp. For a second my feet seemed to be paralysed and when I wanted to move they failed to obey me.

The voice was unmistakable. "I know what you're thinking, Arkonide," Rhodan's voice spoke up again, reverberating through the huge hall. The ironic undertone made my blood boil. By now I had overcome my initial shock and I was in full control of myself. I didn't dare make a move for fear of betraying my position by a noise. It could have been just by accident that the spear came so close to me before it impaled the figure of the Viking.

I didn't answer. Silence reigned for a moment until I heard Rhodan laughing softly. His supercilious attitude aroused my ire.

"I could've killed you, immortal one!" my invisible antagonist said. "This sounds quite absurd, doesn't it? Immortal and yet so vulnerable! I found out what the purpose of the object is which you're constantly wearing on your chest. I've seen a manuscript written in the 17th century which describes an extremely strange operation performed by the personal physician of Gustav Adolf, King of Sweden. A blond stately man from the north had given him precise instructions for the surgery. The doctor mentions a polished container with a sharp needle at the end which the blond officer had used to prick his skin whereupon he was impervious to all pain. The surgeon was asked to remove an egg-shaped shining red object from the man's stomach. That man was you, Arkonide! Or do you want to deny it?"

I refused to answer. So what if he had discovered my secret? My mind had become so dulled that I could no longer get upset about this fact.

"You might as well talk to me," the voice demanded again. "I've got your picture clearly on the screen of my special rangefinder. As you know, we've obtained your body frequency. Naturally we took the obvious next step and constructed a special instrument. Your cell oscillations are partially 5-dimensional and are therefore not completely absorbed by your deflector screen. Clever, isn't it?"

*Too clever!* my extra-brain chimed in.

Oh yes, Rhodan had made a mistake. I knew the characteristics of my radiation. It was minute and could be spotted only by the closest calibration of a finely tuned receiver. A few steps sufficed to take me out of his rangefinder's focus. Then let that cold-eyed barbarian try and find me!

So I leaped away suddenly. With a desperate effort I scrambled over the boat and threw myself to the floor behind it. Lying flat under its hull I peered out to, find a target for my weapon.

I strained to pick up Rhodan's breathing. Sooner or later I would get my chance to locate him even if he used a light-deflector like myself. I guessed that he had taken the device out of an Arkonide commando suit. Why didn't I think of it sooner?



"What's the use?" he called out. The sound seemed to come from the vicinity of the door but I could have been mistaken. The soundwaves bounced too much around the room.

"It's really useless," Rhodan emphasized. "This hall has only one door and my men are waiting behind it. I've come in alone to show you that the power you believe you represent is not as awesome as it was a 1000 years ago. You should surrender, Arkonide!"

I almost gave myself away. Rhodan had embarked on a psychological campaign and he was probably trying to get me back into his rangefinder screen. The reason he had come alone was that he lacked other alternatives. I surmised that he had been transported to the door by one of his mutants and I doubted that there was anybody else posted at the door. Rhodan was the sort of man who preferred to tackle the most difficult tasks himself. The longer I hesitated the more I increased his opportunity to really seal off the museum hermetically.

Suddenly he seemed to have lost his friendly attraction for me. He had a knack of constantly turning up as the obstacle in the path of my ambitions.

The silence became oppressive. My instinct told me that he was fascinated by the game he played with me. I knew people like Rhodan. They often disdain to take advantage of the odds in their favour when it flatters their ego. He would have done better to at least wound me with his spear when I was still unaware of his presence.

I was looking around for another place to hide when the 2nd spear was hurled through the air. Even before it crashed into the splintering planks of the boat I had already determined the direction of its flight. He must have stood to the right of the door.

My hand holding the impulse-beamer shot up but I held my fire at the last moment when it struck me that it might set the hall ablaze. Would I have a chance to leave the room in the flames?

Reluctantly and gnashing my teeth in anger I put down the weapon and reached for my more harmless shock-beamer. Rhodan seemed to know why he was throwing spears.

Once again I could hear him laughing softly. He had looked right through me.

"You're sentimental about the past, aren't you? It would be a real shame to make all these pretty things burn up. I've spotted you again on my screen, Arkonide. You're crouching behind the Viking boat. You must realize that I could kill you with an energy shot."

I lost my last restraint, Rhodan's calm and the studied superiority exuding from his words aroused my irrational and obstinate pride which wanted to assert itself above everything else.

These emotions were deeply ingrained in my Arkonide heritage and it had often led me into perilous situations in the past.

I stepped forward, abandoning my cover, because I was eager to demonstrate that I rejected his mercy.

"How heroic!" my adversary called out. "Listen, don't do anything foolish! My men are really outside. Wuriu Sengu will see you at once even if you manage to get as far as the door."

I knew that he tried to bluff me. Nobody was out there!

Stubborn pride and hurt vanity caused me to react in a way that looked like sheer folly at the moment but I considered it my last chance nevertheless.

I would never be able to hit him with a shot because he was quick to change his position after throwing a spear. I had to coax him out from his cover before anybody really came to his assistance. Of course I risked my life by acting in this manner but I gambled that he would have scruples about shooting down a defenceless person. Taking up his challenge, I declared a psychological war in my mind.

My 2 weapons clanged on the floor as I threw them down. He laughed!

Then I taunted him in the same ironic tone he had used himself. "Go ahead and shoot, barbarian! You've no trouble seeing me, right?" I regret the mistake I made a few days ago when I neglected to shoot you. I had my finger on the trigger and I held you in my target sight when you had that bright idea of annihilating Viesspahn's red helicopter. Or did you think I didn't know what you were up to? I stood right next to you when you gave the order to search the wreck for my body."

This time it was my turn to laugh. My explanation seemed to have made him speechless. Now I found the game exciting and I went one step further by switching off my deflector screen, making myself visible again.

As I bent down to snatch the broad sword from the plastic hand of the Viking figure, I hoped that Rhodan didn't have a shock-beamer handy. I had never seen him carry such a weapon and I was confident that he would refrain from using his deadly energy-blaster.

By cold-bloodedly calculating his weaknesses I carefully tried to increase the qualms of his conscience. If he was reckless enough to accept my dare...!

Lifting up the sword and weighing it in my right hand, I slowly walked the 100 feet to the door.

I kept silent. I seemed to be devoid of all feelings now. My extra-sense appeared to be in a state of painless somnolence. Not a single impulse came through.

With measured steps I slowly advanced across the glossy floor. My stiff boots made squeaky noises on the floor covering as I withdrew farther and farther from my trusty weapons.

In the reflection of a highly polished panel I could see that my face was wreathed in a sarcastic grin. I was the personification of challenge. Only the worst villain could have been low enough to shoot me down from a safe ambush.

By the time I got to the middle of the room I knew that he had no shock-beamer in his possession. Undoubtedly he now feverishly tried to figure out a way to stop me.

If his agents had really been outside the door, this would have been the time to call them in, now that I was visible again. I couldn't believe that his pride or his charity would become so preponderant as to grant a dangerous enemy a decisive edge.

"Stay where you are!" Rhodan warned. "3 more steps and you'll force me to kill you. Make no mistake about it, I won't let you get away after I've finally discovered you again. You blundered when you returned to the museum. My psychologists predicted you'd be attracted to this place. Besides, you've taken a blaster from one of the settlers and we found your fingerprints on his holster when we checked it after he reported the theft."

He spoke faster with each sentence. He was caught in a dilemma and had to make up his mind in a hurry. I assumed that the pioneer had reported his loss only after he had first tried to recover the precious weapon by his own efforts. Who knows how many people he had accused before he had notified the authorities after a long delay?

"That was a smart move, caveman! And then you came running here right away, didn't you?"

Listening to my own words I kept walking toward the door and wondered whether he sensed my inner tension.

Was he aware—or did he have at least an inkling—that I had fought the best swordsmen in antiquity as a gladiator in a Roman arena?

If so, he would never allow himself to be trapped in a sword fight with me. How much had he really learned about my past life? Had he delved into my history before Gustav Adolf? At that period they already duelled with sabres. Did he have so much haughty confidence as to think he could stand up against me, crossing blades? If—on the other hand—he had learned the skill of fencing, he could very well respond to my swashbuckling challenge.

What was the extent of his training? Did they teach fencing as part of his education at the Space Academy? I didn't know the answer to this question but I would soon find out by his actions.

When I had approached the door within 20 steps, I observed that a long Germanic spear moved from its rack next to the display of Alemannic weapons.

The shaft disappeared halfway into Rhodan's deflector shield, leaving the broad tip in full view as it was raised up, ready to be thrown.

"Not another step!" Rhodan repeated. His voice vibrated. My psycho-strategy had worked! This man could not bring himself to attack me with such an infinitely superior atomic weapon as an energy-beamer. I had not misjudged him. "You can thrust a spear mighty well, barbarian!" I grinned.

Then it became deadly serious. I saw the shiny spear tip being pulled back abruptly as he lanced his projectile. When the missile swished through the air I sidestepped it with a quick jump, mocking his miss with loud laughter.

As I kept advancing toward the door, Rhodan suddenly became also visible, just as I expected. He wore a simple uniform and stood slightly crouched near the Alemannic collection. His eyes flashed. He obviously was in a severe quandary.

"If I were you, I'd have fired long ago, barbarian," I said in a subdued voice.

He uttered a deep angry sigh of frustration and shoved his blaster back into the holster. Then he swiftly seized an Alemannic sword from the rack. "You arrogant son of Arkon!" he exclaimed. "If you think I—"

"I only think I'd have shot sooner. I'm sorry I didn't use your back as a target when I had the chance." I interrupted him with a renewed hint that I had spared his life too. This was aimed at unbalancing him morally but the meaning of my remark escaped him in the excitement.

A second later we stood facing each other. He had thrust his sword forward, assuming the stance of a

fencer but forgetting completely how foolish it was to deploy such a heavy weapon in this form.

He lunged his weapon like a light rapier. That way he couldn't last more than 2 minutes before his arm weakened.

With nimble footwork I easily parried his jabs. After my first blow, which slashed his upper arm superficially and drew some blood, he realized that he had committed a fatal blunder.

I could read it in his taut face. Wordlessly he flung his sword against me in the style of mediocre movies frequently shown on Terra. Again and again I blocked his furious blows until I dropped down in a thrust against his right leg.

At the last moment I turned the sharp blade around and hit his ankle with the broad blunt side of my sword. He cried out and fell to the floor. I was on top of him before he could suppress his groaning and I lightly touched his throat with the tip of my sword while I removed his blaster from its open holster with my foot.

He lay silent. His face looked grey and worn and his hair hung tangled over his forehead.

Our eyes met and I slightly increased my pressure. "You poor barbarian," I said in a low, toneless voice. "You can handle a raygun better than this."

"I hate you, Arkonide!" he rasped, not daring to move a finger.

"That's exactly what the Roman gladiator Marcus Vinicus told me when I held my sword against his throat. Vinicus had incurred Nero's disfavour when he made some unflattering remarks about the Divine Emperor and so Nero turned his thumb down. You see? Who will give us the sign now, barbarian? How could you fall into such a trap? Where are your men?"

He closed his eyes and held his breath. I pressed a little harder until the first drops of blood seeped from his throat and his hands began to tremble in an instinctive fear of death. Then I withdrew my weapon.

All my excitement came to a climax in a shrill outburst of hysterical laughter. I still was shaken by crazy convulsions when Rhodan sat up on the floor and fingered his bruised ankle.

My desire to flee had suddenly left me. I felt terribly tired and my victory over Rhodan had changed everything I had resented so much before. I knew I had wasted precious time. His agents could arrive any moment to rescue him. It had been my original intention to draw him into a sword fight and to vanish again in my invisible cloak.

Yet I had lost my incentives. Everything had become so terribly senseless. Even if I managed to elude the Venusian Defence agents once more, they would soon use hundreds of the individual rangefinders with my frequency and I would never be able to board an interplanetary spaceship without being detected. Indeed I must have realized already some time ago that my escape had become hopeless. Now I saw everything in a different light.

I threw my sword down and examined his foot. He remained silent but his lips twitched slightly.

"It'll have to be X-rayed," I said quietly. "I was forced to strike you down. The bone might be fractured."

Then we sat side by side on the floor and gazed at each other. It took awhile before he softly replied: "I'd have been loath to meet you in the heyday of the Arkonide empire, Atlan. How old are you?"

"More than 10,000 Terrestrial years," I answered just as softly. "The Robot Brain on Venus was constructed under my supervision."

I noticed with elation that his eyes were aglow with respect. Why did we want to kill each other?

"Do you still wish to go home?" he asked.

I slowly shook my head. I had already given up this desire. There was nothing I could accomplish on the planets of Arkon.

"I've never tried to deceive you. It's the truth that the once great Empire has now fallen in decline. Help me overthrow the Regent. We of Earth need men like you."

He looked at me with a hopeful smile. This ambitious barbarian sought my aid, now as before.

I felt Rhodan's hand touching my shoulder. It still rested there when that confounded overgrown mouse suddenly materialized in the exhibition hall. I saw that the little beast held an energy-blaster in his paws. He stared at us with a flabbergasted grimace as we sat peacefully together on the floor before him.

"Hi!" the curious creature exclaimed in a shrill voice. "Wow! Some show you're putting on here!"

"Out with you!" Rhodan ordered calmly. "Remove yourself before he throws something else at your head. Call in a couple of robot medics. I think I've busted my ankle. Do you hear me? I want you to leave without asking questions!"

I didn't believe my ears when the rodent from outer space began to lambaste me with the most abusive invectives. Rhodan admired with undisguised amusement the choice vocabulary of his peculiar little friend.

"I'll get even with you!" the feisty furball fumed before he teleported himself from the scene.

Rhodan chuckled despite his pain. Now I was sorry that I had hurt him and I tried to apologize, feeling overcome with remorse.

"Oh, forget it," he said with a nonchalant gesture. "Pandemonium is brewing in the universe. I'm afraid the report of my alleged demise will soon be revealed as the elaborately planned hoax it was. —I've an important mission for you, Admiral."

An odd feeling washed over me. I slowly turned my head. "You're willing to trust me with a spaceship?"

He nodded affirmatively. "With a whole fleet, if necessary. If you have the welfare of your own people at heart, you must work together with us Terranians. —Where the devil are those robot medics?"

The mechmen appeared on the scene a few minutes later and put Rhodan on a stretcher. A Defence officer saluted his chief. The officer was a man I recognized: Lt.-Gen. Kosnow himself.

With head held high I walked past the detachment of Terranian commandos that had arrived in the meantime. Lt. Gmuna was among them and smiled at me with friendly eyes.

After Rhodan had been carried into the ambulance helicopter I followed him aboard the ship.

"There's a girl waiting for you in the Commandant's office," Gmuna whispered in my ear. "It's Marlis Gentner. She came yesterday to appeal for leniency toward you. Did you have to act as you did?"

"No, my friend, not really," I said quietly. "But some people seem to need a boost for their self-confidence. And I'm one. I don't quite understand myself."

The ship lifted. I sat next to a man whose lips showed signs of pain but who nevertheless managed an infectious smile. Frank, sincere, Perry Rhodan was a human being worthy of my admiration. And I knew to be true now what I had always secretly felt: that he was my friend.

"I'm sure you can tell us many amazing stories," he broke my reverie.

Truer words were never spoken. Given time, I shall. For thousands of years have filled my life to overflowing with countless thrilling adventures.

THE END

## CONTENTS

[1/ PSYCHO-FENCING](#)

[2/ UNKNOWN FACTOR, M.G.](#)

[3/ INVISIBLE QUARRY](#)

[4/ SUBSEA SHELTER](#)

[5/ VENUS BOUND](#)

6/ DESTINATION: WEAPON SHOP

7/ UNSEEN EYES WATCHING

8/ SECRET MENTOR OF MANKIND

9/ SECRET MENTOR OF MANKIND

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

AGAIN: ATLAN

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

ATLAN the Ageless, Time's Lonely One has made his peace with the Peacelord.

No longer does the ancient Arkonide constitute a danger to the Solar Imperium because he has clearly realized that further resistance to Rhodan would not only be detrimental to his own interests but . . . futile.

Furthermore, he has come to genuinely admire his former adversary.

All seems to be going well.

But—!

Something nobody could have foreseen:

Perry Rhodan's wife disappears!

*Thora kidnapped!*

And, as if that weren't bad enough, the mutants mutiny!

These incredible events occur in—

SHADOW OF THE MUTANT MASTER

by

Kurt Brand

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