

1/ DANGER: TERRA!

ETERNITY... the*Lotus* seemed to be hovering immobile in deep Galactic space as if waiting for the passage of endless eons.

A light cruiser, City Class, of the Terranian Spacefleet, the 100-meter sphere hung suspended motionlessly in space 4,300 light-years from Earth. It floated like a random fleck of stardust between the near and far suns which tried to do battle with the basic darkness of the universe, tried with their pitiful pinpoint points of light to illumine a black and hostile cosmos. Silent and cold, the coloured ray emanating from the closest sun was but a needle prick of wan luminescence, not even powerful enough to reflect from the polished skin of the interstellar traveller.

Inside the ship, the placid surface of the endless sea of ebon space—waveless, crestless, eternally silent as the grave—was mirrored on the panoramicon of the*Lotus* command centre.

The*Lotus* was in standby position. Its efficient anti-detection equipment precluded the possibility of any alien spaceship discovering it by a freak accident. Behind its protective veil life went on aboard the*Lotus*.

The cruiser was located within the confines of the region where the Great Empire of the Arkonides was dominant. The stellar realm controlled by Arkon was concentrated in the globular star-cluster M-13 but branched far out into space and ruled the solar system closest to the position of the *Lotus*.

Capt. Jim Markus, Commander of the*Lotus*, was deep in thought as he observed the area of the panoramic screen where the distant light of Hesperais was visible, 2.46 light-years farther out in space. Rather stockily built, Markus looked like a man of 40, though the hair at his temples was unusually white. Pleasant laugh wrinkles accented his bright eyes.

Hesperais was a star among many others, the centre of a planetary system similar to hundreds of millions of constellations in the same galaxy, but what interested the captain most about this solar system with 6 planets was the 2nd one. Inhabited, the Mars-sized globe was known to Arkonides and Galactic traders alike as Volat. In contrast to Mars, Volat was a warm humid world with rolling oceans and great primordial forests. Gravity 0.8G, considered normal by the Arkonides and Traders.

Volat's importance was not based on the fact that its capital, Kuklon, had a super modern spaceport serving as a transit station for merchandise shipped throughout the stars but that it was the official residence of the Arkonide Administrator. The Administrator had been ordered to the planet by the giant positronic Brain that ruled Arkon, to represent the newly reestablished power of the Great Empire on Volat.

Ralph Sikeron, audio-monitor, a 27-year-old member of Perry Rhodan's mutant corps, had been dispatched to Volat to study the situation and obtain information in order to make a total assessment of the prevailing conditions.

Capt. Markus deposited Ralph Sikeron on Volat and then was ordered by Perry Rhodan to retreat to a safe distance and stand by in case of an emergency in which the cosmic agent would need help. Rhodan had learned a lesson from some unfortunate experiences in the past!

Waiting for news from Ralph Sikeron for 12 days, the *Lotus* had remained at the same spot in space, 2.46 light-years from Volat.

Capt. Jim Markus' eyes wandered from the observation screen to the calendar and he read absentmindedly the date: July 12, standard time. He was alarmed by crackling noises emanating from the micro-loudspeaker of the hypercom-receiver.

A message came through!

The interference lasted only a few seconds. It was followed by a short call and all was silent again.

The shipboard positronic of the *Lotus* was automatically activated and the decoder of the computer unscrambled the message. Capt. Markus walked with anxious foreboding to the positronic computer and watched the slot from which the transcript appeared. He hastily took the plastic strip ejected by the machine. The message consisted of 2 words which the Ultra-Esper Ralph Sikeron had transmitted to the *Lotus* from the planet Volat: 3 BELLS!

Capt. Jim Markus pushed the alarm button.

Sound alarm, optical alarm, vibration alarm stirred up the cruiser at the same moment. The huge positronic centre of the *Lotus* was alerted and thousands of the ship's functions were activated from their zero position. All converters shot up to their maximum output and the power stations were switched on. The energy banks were charged to the limit and were ready for the moment when the load was needed. The members of the crew raced to their cannons on the speed conveyors and in the antigrav shafts. The *Lotus* gave the appearance of a stirred up anthill but instead of a panicky commotion it was a manoeuvre which had been proven a thousand times. All movements meshed and the light cruiser was ready for action at all posts within a minute.

Then came the ominous words over the communication system: "Radio connection with Ralph Sikeron broken off!"

For Capt. Jim Markus the news meant once more: 3 BELLS!

3 Bells was the highest state of alarm. The code word stood for Mortal Danger. The mission and the life of the agent were threatened and it warned that Earth was exposed to serious perils as well.

"Transition in 30 seconds!" the tinny voice of the positronic squeaked in all departments of the *Lotus*.

The memory bank of the computer brain stored—ready to be tapped—all data required for a jump of the *Lotus* through hyperspace across thousands of light-years in zero-time, a concept that could be understood only in mathematical terms. However a ship like the light cruiser, which was in standby position, still required half a minute to bring its machinery up to high gear in order, to perform a transition.

Jim Markus sat in the pilot and Bendler, the First Officer, was his co-pilot. Both listened to hear if the radio centre reported another message while X-time rapidly approached X minus zero.

The metallic voice of the, positronic computer called out each of the last 30 seconds. The countdown was a mental strain for Capt. Markus since he was aware that the transition jeopardized the audio-monitor Ralph Sikeron, if the cosmic agent was still alive.

But the radio centre reported no new connection with Ralph Sikeron although 2 dozen men tried

everything to reestablish communications.

X minus 10! Capt. Jim Markus' hand was at the switch which disconnected all functions of the *Lotus* from the positronic brain.

He still believed and hoped that Ralph Sikeron would call again in the final seconds before the transition.

However the radio centre announced at X minus 4: "The transmitter on Volat is silent."

Finally Jim Markus lost all hope. The machines of the spacesphere roared and the commander received the go sign from one section after the other and all control lamps turned green. The *Lotus* was ready to jump into hyperspace and flee!

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The *Lotus* was back in the Solar system after 3 transitions through hyperspace.

As the ship crossed Pluto's orbit, it was contacted by the automatic station on Pluto which permitted passage after checking the identification signal and it continued racing toward Earth at 0.6 SPEOL.

Mars emerged at Theta 56° 17 green and Venus stood in opposition. The stations on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn registered the light cruiser and then the space control on Mars took over, reporting the arrival to Terrania, Perry Rhodan's capital in the Gobi Desert which served as a springboard into the Galaxy.

The *Lotus* was rushed through for the landing. Capt. Markus handed over the control of the ship to the First Officer for the touchdown manoeuvre. Perry Rhodan had already been notified why the *Lotus* had returned and that Capt. Markus wished to talk with the Chief.

Markus stood at the hatch, waiting for it to open, when the radio centre sent him the message: "Perry Rhodan is at present on Venus. He has been advised of your return and requests you to make your report to Reggie."

To call Perry Rhodan's deputy Reginald Bell simply Reggie was not meant to be degrading him. Bell had seen to it himself that most people called him Reggie, so that few even knew his full name. The power Reginald Bell exercised as Rhodan's deputy never went to his head and he always remained human, showing frailties and strength which perhaps were the reasons that made him so popular.

The *Lotus* had touched down between heavy cruisers, spaceships of the Imperium class, destroyers and lesser armed merchant ships.

A car sent by Reginald Bell sped Jim Markus across the huge spaceport, passed through the electronic barrier surrounding the government district of Terrania and came to a halt before a high-rise building 10 minutes after the Commander of the *Lotus* had landed.

Everybody whom Markus had to pass on his way to get to Perry Rhodan's deputy was already informed of his arrival and he was in Bell's office 13 minutes after he had set foot on Terrania.

The man with the red hair bristles greeted Markus. "Hurry up, Markus. Take a seat. The Chief will be on screen in a moment. Rhodan won't mind dealing with a different matter instead of with Atlan. But he won't like the news you're bringing any better than I do. 3 Bells! And we don't have any idea why the bells toll!"

This was typical of Bell. He never was very particular with his expressions.

The picture screen began to flicker. The transmitter station was on Venus where Perry Rhodan had gone to learn the secret of Atlan's eternal life from "Time's Lonely One".

Rhodan's sharp profile appeared on the screen. His eyes radiated strength and calm. He smiled a little as he greeted his captain.

With Reginald Bell sitting at his side, the Commander of the *Lotus* gave his report to the Chief. At the same time the captain was also in communication with his ship and all data which Markus did not have at his fingertips were secured in seconds.

It would have been much simpler for Capt. Jim Markus to talk to Rhodan by hyperradio from his position in the Heperais system but it would have been against the strict order not to call the Solar System on hyperradio under any circumstances because it would have been very easy for any of the Arkonide or Springer spaceships to intercept the conversation. The Arkonides and the Springers, including the Aras, believed that Terra had been destroyed half a century ago and it would have put Earth in the middle of a disastrous fight.

Rhodan wanted to prevent this at all costs and for this reason he had placed his cosmic agents on several hundred worlds inhabited by the Arkonides or Springers. Rhodan was not interested in military or industrial espionage but did wish to keep himself informed re the intentions of the Springers and the robot Brain on Arkon.

Rhodan listened to Jim Markus' report without interrupting. Then he peppered the cruiser commander with questions, concentrating on the essential points. Markus had to ask his ship for the necessary information. After short reflection Rhodan gave his decision from Venus via the audio-visual communication system. "Capt. Markus, please get the *Lotus* ready to start at once. Wait for mutant Fellmer Lloyd to come aboard and fly back to the Heperais system. You'll have to take Lloyd to Volat without being seen. Then stand by for further developments. Keep in mind that our existence and the Solar System depend on finding out as quickly as possible why Ralph Sikeron had sent the warning '3 Bells'. Use your own judgment if it becomes necessary to take immediate action but remember that all our lives will be in your hands! Bon voyage, Captain!"

The picture screen turned grey and Perry Rhodan's head disappeared.

Reginald Bell had already contacted the Mutant Corps. "What's Fellmer Lloyd doing now?" he bellowed into the mike.

The reply came without delay. "He's on the 3rd planet of the Horgas system in the Arkon Empire."

"Good grief!" Bell groaned, giving the mike a dirty look as if it were its fault that the telepath Fellmer Lloyd was so far away from Earth. He looked at Capt. Markus and suggested: "I'm afraid the only thing you can do is to fly to the opposite corner of the Great Empire to pick up Fellmer Lloyd..."

The loudspeaker interrupted him. It was the headquarters of the Mutant Corps again. "Correction, sir!" said the man at the other end. "Fellmer Lloyd has completed his mission in the Horgas system and is expected to arrive at Terrania any hour in a heavy cruiser. This message has just been received by us."

"That's more like it," Bell commented. He winked at Jim Markus. "You've been lucky again and..."

He was interrupted once more. Trud, who screened all visitors who claimed they absolutely had to see Bell, entered and silently handed him a report.

Perry Rhodan had sent it from Venus. He had contacted Trud immediately after talking to Markus and given him instructions for the mutant Fellmer Lloyd.

Bell quickly glanced at the report and passed it on to Markus. "This is for your mutant, Captain!" Then he held the memo back for another moment. He was curious about one sentence. It contained a word which Perry Rhodan seldom used: imperative!

"...it is imperative that you determine as quickly as possible why Ralph Sikeron believed that Terra is in acute danger..."

2/ SHADOWED

Capt. Jim Markus entered the cabin which Fellmer Lloyd occupied on their trip to the Heperais system.

The mutant was relaxing on his bed, reading a book.

"I wish I had your nerves," Markus exclaimed, shaking his head over the composure of the agent. In an hour Fellmer Lloyd would be engaged in a hazardous mission and here he was reading instead of making preparations.

Fellmer Lloyd, an innocuous looking man, stocky and broad-shouldered, stroked his hair, grinned and replied: "I wish I had *yours*, Captain. It's no picnic either to elude the ships of the Arkonides and the Springers."

"Lloyd, the time is 16:52 and..."

"...and you think," the telepath completed with a chuckle, "that it's time for me to get up. But why? I can start on my job any minute. It's the same with us mutants as with your *Lotus*, Markus: either we're ready when necessary or we'll never have to get ready again! Your *Lotus* would be nothing but a cloud of gas and I'd have breathed my last breath. Sit down, Captain, I've still got an hour."

"Not I," Markus replied evasively. He never felt comfortable in the company of mind reading mutants and he ended his visit with the excuse that he was too busy to stay.

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The *Lotus* took up its standby position 10 light-years from the Heperais system.

At precisely 18:00 o'clock board-time the *Gazelle*, a disk-shaped reconnaissance craft with super-speol propulsion and a range of 500 light-years, was released from the hangar of the *Lotus*.

Fellmer Lloyd sat cosily in his seat as if he couldn't care less that he was on *his* mission.

The *Gazelle*, 35 meters in diameter and 18 meters from top to bottom, waited near the *Lotus* for the signal to start. Cerl Sandford, who piloted the craft, waited for the moment when a certain green light came on.

For 3 seconds the light cruiser *Lotus* was stripped of its protection screens including its anti-detection shield and the *Gazelle* shot forward with 3G from a dead start in the direction of a point of light—the sun Heperais.

Among all the other *Gazelles* in the hangar of the *Lotus* this was the only one equipped with a structure-compensator.

Cerl Sandford, who had received the transition data from the positronic brain of the ship, now started the countdown. The tinny voice of the mini-positronic called out the seconds and the power stations and drive engines of the little spacer grew louder. At zero they jumped into irreality where everything came to an end, all bodies dematerialised and returned to the normal universe without loss of time. The *Gazelle* had jumped a distance of 10 light-years and was 'at the door' of the Heperais system, 8.2 million kilometres away.

The structocomp had prevented the measuring of the enormous structure disturbance in the universe caused by the hypertransition and the monitoring stations on Volat were unable to register the approaching *Gazelle* and to give the alarm.

Cerl Sandford, 23 years old, was the best man Capt. Jim Markus had for the job of intruding on a planet without being detected. He performed his assigned missions with icy coolness and did not require a copilot. The panoramic observation screen was adjusted to the highest magnification. The positions of the 6 Heperais planets were fixed in his mind and he could have rattled off their space coördinates for the next 3 hours without mistake if necessary. He was familiar with the surface of the planet Volat and knew the spot where Ralph Sikeron's *Gazelle* was concealed under an energy dome.

That Ralph Sikeron's *Gazelle* still was intact was more than, mere speculation. After the *Lotus* had landed at Terrania the best positronic equipment available had been used to check the angle of the beam and the origin of Ralph Sikeron's message '3 Bells' from the planet Volat with the result that his warning was confirmed to have radiated from Kuklon. Therefore it was concluded that the *Gazelle* still existed but that there was little chance that the cosmic agent could still be found alive.

The phlegmatic attitude shown by Fellmer Lloyd was not a mask worn to hide anxiety. His telepathic ability to read other people's minds and his even more important gift of discerning mental patterns contributed to his imperturbable calm. He perceived the brainwaves of his fellow men, analysed them and was able to determine with virtual certainty before he even saw a person who he was, where he came from and what his intentions were.

He had probed Cerl Sandford and was satisfied that he was able to take him to Volat without being spotted by Arkonide monitoring stations and that they would touch down close to Ralph Sikeron's Gazelle which Sandford was to fly back to the *Lotus* .

The Solar Defence on Terra had prepared Fellmer Lloyd's mission to the last detail. Nothing was left to accident. Everything was 'genuine' and in perfect order. He carried a considerable amount of money which was another measure of the importance which Rhodan attached to his mission.

The Gazelle finished the last 300,000 kilometres with tremendous speed, although it did not exceed 0.2 *speol*. One third of the energy the craft could consume without depleting its supplies was used by Cerl Sandford to build up the anti-detection shield to the highest possible degree. However it would not have been sufficient to sneak in unobserved if Sandford had not used a certain path of approach to Volat which was barely one kilometre wide and not completely covered by the control stations of the Arkonides and Galactic traders.

It was the same course which he had earlier followed to smuggle Ralph Sikeron in.

Now the Gazelle sailed like a dry leaf to the ground, breaking through a gap between the huge strange-looking trees and coming to rest a few kilometres from the forest's edge in the protection of the twilight.

Cerl Sandford sent up a tiny rocket, a miracle of precision and efficiency. It soared into space with a hissing sound, too small to be spotted on the most sensitive, observation screens or detectors, its metallic surface too small to reflect waves, but it had a micro-transmitter strong enough to send the pre-arranged signal to the *Lotus* 10 light-years away from Volat informing them that they had arrived safely.

Then Cerl Sandford shut everything down, left the pilot seat and said goodbye to Fellmer Lloyd, shaking his hand. "The other Gazelle is 200 meters to the right. I've already located its energy dome."

"Very good," Lloyd answered. "You may wish me luck, Sandford. I've got a feeling I'll really need it this time."

Fellmer Lloyd waited until morning before he started out.

He left the Gazelle well screened in a little clearing of the forest which was far away from the roads.

After walking for an hour through the matted luxuriant growth of the forest full of unfamiliar trees, he reached the open country.

2 hours later he came to a road but decided to avoid it because any excuse that his vehicle broke down would only arouse suspicion anywhere in the Arkonide Empire.

He didn't complain when it was noon and he hadn't yet reached the little town of Esgun. A swamp had forced him to make a long detour and there he became embroiled in an unexpected battle with a salamander-like monster.

He pondered the fact that his first encounter on Volat involved the most dangerous reptile of the planet and he kept thinking of Ralph Sikeron. He had been his friend and he knew the audio-monitor to have been an extremely circumspect man. His life probably had been snuffed out and it was a hundred times more dangerous to walk in the footsteps of an eliminated agent than to build his own operation from the ground up.

The Heperais sun made the planet. Volat act like a sauna the closer it came to noon. Fellmer Lloyd trod his way unflaggingly through long-stemmed ferns and carefully avoided some reddish lichen which squirted a caustic liquid around at the slightest touch and kept even the salamander-like monsters at a respectful distance.

It was 3-pm local time when he reached Esgun. The place was a typical small town and Fellmer Lloyd was only too glad that an express aircoach left for Kuklon 5 minutes after he reached the station.

Nevertheless he was accosted by a Springer before he could leave. The man stopped, studied him dubiously and asked in the drawling dialect of the Galactic traders: "How come you're so wet? When did it rain today?"

Fellmer Lloyd read his mind. Thanks to Rhodan's training he did not flinch when he realized that the Springer was not merely curious but decidedly suspicious.

But Lloyd managed to smile and with a gesture toward his clothes he replied in the unmistakable accent of a Prebonian: "Rain? This is no rain, it's sweat. And all for nothing, too. I only caught a glimpse of that Dugerun bug and then I was foolish enough to chase the damn beast for 3 hours."

The Springer smirked when he heard what the perspiring Prebonian had been pursuing but was still suspicious because Lloyd did not carry the customary bag used by all collectors of this rare bug. Lloyd forestalled his question by pointing to his muddy shoes, which were stiff dirty from the swamp, and complaining bitterly about the inhospitable environment of Esgun.

At this moment the tractor-beam transit landed on the magnetic tract. The mutant departed quickly and left the Springer standing at the station as the vehicle lifted off the track and raced the last 230 kilometres to Kuklon.

As he sped away Lloyd examined the thoughts of the Springer. The Springer was still undecided whether to report him to the authorities in Kuklon.

While his fellow passengers were engaged in their conversations, the telepath concentrated his mind on the Springer. The clarity of his perception was not impaired by the rapidly growing distance. Then Fellmer Lloyd suddenly leaned back in his seat. The Springer had made up his mind and was on his way to call the Arkonide administration in Kuklon to draw its attention to the Prebonian who had aroused his suspicion.

That's a fine start, the mutant thought with dismay as he casually looked down at the landscape rolling by like a film below the aircoach flying at top velocity.

10 minutes later the vast sea of Kuklon's buildings came into view. The airborne coach lost altitude and speed, wended its way through the high-rise buildings and set down vertically on the magnetic track of Kuklon.

Fellmer Lloyd stood at the exit door and was waiting for it to open when he noticed 3 Arkonides coming along the tract. Their uniforms could not be mistaken. He picked up the thoughts of the tall men without difficulty and quickly found out what they were up to.

He stepped back from the door and let 3 other travellers go ahead. Then he engaged an elderly lady who had 3 pieces of luggage, in a friendly conversation and offered to assist her.

He put the baggage on his shoulders and walked out with the old lady, chatting amiably as he passed the 3 Arkonides who looked above his head in their search for the Prebonian.

He was gone before the old lady could thank him and he walked in the direction of Thator Square in the Galactic section of Kuklon which was named after the most successful explorer of the Arkonides and where Ralph Sikeron had set up an office front.

Lloyd paid no attention to the traffic snarl of the metropolis. Kuklon was a turntable in the Great Empire and a trading centre of the Galactic Traders. How firmly they were entrenched was evidenced by the pompous edifices which bore the names of the clans that had erected them. The farther he went the more he saw of the magnificent office buildings of the Springers.

Suddenly the street widened and he had reached his destination. Thator Square covered a 2-kilometre-wide area surrounded by buildings which towered 500 meters into the sky.

Thator Square was a focal point for all the races of the Milky Way. Lloyd saw beings for the first time of which he never heard before. Some dragged along pressure suits while others leaped 10 meters with each step as they apparently came from worlds with much greater gravity. He saw monsters that made his flesh creep although he was a trained mutant. There were small creatures which reminded him of dachshunds although they had no fur or tails. But their shape and their heads looked so similar to the lovable animals of Earth that Lloyd felt like whistling at them.

Ralph Sikeron's office was located in the house of the Uxlad clan. Lloyd watched the building cautiously and walked across the square to sniff out dangers. But his mental sensor ascertained nothing.

The big portal looked pretentious. The Uxlad clan had adorned the electronically controlled doors with precious metals but had failed to make it look pleasing. The directory panel next to the door was no thing of beauty either. Fellmer Lloyd picked out the name of GETLOX ASARGUD TRANSPORTS. This was the name Ralph Sikeron had used to establish himself in the office building of the Uxlad clan.

Lloyd checked his appearance. His clothes were dry again but his shoes were still muddy and he decided to change his clothes so that his task would not be frustrated by such trivial reasons.

An hour later he was back, dressed like an elegant Arkonide. He searched again for any dangers that might be present around the Uxlad House, found none and walked through the ostentatious-looking portal into the reception hall.

A robot rushed up and inquired after his wishes. The Asargud office was on the 212th floor.

The antigrav elevator took him up in a few minutes. He noticed a great deal of traffic in the shaft. All the races of the Milky Way were represented and seemed to conduct their business with the Springer clan of the Uxlads.

Fellmer Lloyd reached the 212th floor undisturbed. It was just below the landing area for the airtaxis and small spaceships.

The wide corridor was as ornate as the reception hall below and everything was pleasantly quiet. But the mutant had no eyes for the splendour and the wealth, he was only interested in his job. He had to get in touch with Ralph Sikeron if he was still among the living and find out the significance of the message '3 Bells'.

The Solar Defence on Terra had given careful thought to Fellmer Lloyd's mission before it decided to have him represent a Prebonian. This Arkonide race of colonists had been a faithful member of the Great Empire for thousands of years. Their bodies resembled Fellmer Lloyd's figure and Rhodan's mutants had learned from experience that a natural appearance was the best disguise.

A door opened a short distance from Lloyd. A young girl walked into the corridor and looked at the mutant with curiosity. The girl had no inkling that her mind was read like an open book by him. He greeted her affably and said: "I'm looking for Asargud Transports on the 212th floor." As soon as he mentioned Sikeron's pseudonym, he noticed a hostile attitude in the Springer girl. Although her charming face with a hint of Mongolian features remained friendly, her voice sounded aloof. 3rd door to the right. You're the 8th person today who wants to visit Asargud's office." Her dark eyes, which were an attractive contrast to her reddish skin, showed no more interest. With a gesture of rejection common to all young girls, she tossed her head back and walked off toward the antigravitor.

Fellmer Lloyd refrained from looking at her. One of the girl's thoughts had made him apprehensive: *another Arkonide snooper!*

Since he was anxious not to arouse suspicion, he went to the door she had pointed out to him. As expected, he found it locked but his trained eyes didn't fail to notice that it had been opened by force, although it must have been done very skilfully.

Then he floated down again in the antigrav. He had not assumed that his first attempt to make contact with Sikeron would be successful but he was unable to dismiss the thought of the pretty young girl from his mind: *another Arkonide snooper!*

In the lobby he was almost ran over by 3 loudly talking men of the Mounder race who weighed about three quarters of a ton and could afford to bump into a man of normal weight. As he walked around them, his mental sensor warned him that he was being watched.

Fellmer Lloyd, who gave the outward impression of being apathetic and awkward, was inwardly the exact opposite.

Looking like a man who was contemplating a business deal, he left the Uxlad House, sharply observing everything around him, one hand in his pocket gripping his trusty shock-beamer.

He pushed slowly through the crowd of multifarious races that still milled in great numbers around Thator Square.

His mental sensor kept him alerted. There could be no doubt that a person followed him but the signals were poor and confused. It was a phenomenon Fellmer Lloyd had not experienced before.

Two Arkonide space soldiers stood near the artistic representation of the famous explorer's spaceship for whom Thator Square was named. The 2 tall Arkonides in uniform stared so unabashedly at the mutant that Fellmer Lloyd could not ignore it. He accosted the 2 men calmly. "I beg your pardon," he said in the dialect of the Prebonians, challenging the 2 Arkonides. Before they could answer him Lloyd quickly informed himself of their thoughts. He was surprised by the fact that these 2 Arkonides who were nothing but simple soldiers had been given orders by the Kuklon Administration to look out for a certain man.

And he was the man they were after!

He noticed that the soldiers carried little 2-way radios, in their breast pockets and he concluded that his situation was much more precarious than he had so far believed.

But where was the other man who had watched him as he left the Uxlad offices?

Now the older of the Arkonides spoke up: "We didn't say anything to you." The men kept staring at his shoes. Fellmer Lloyd began to understand that the men were too confused to convey a precise thought. The only impulse he could get was: *muddy shoes!*

"No," Lloyd grumbled, "you didn't talk to me but it's very strange the way you're staring at me. You'd think I'm walking around naked."

"The Administration has instructed us to arrest a suspect," the 2nd soldier explained. "The man wears dirty clothes and muddy shoes. You look like him but..."

Fellmer Lloyd began to laugh. "Don't let the robot Brain of Arkon boss you around! Why do you have to be on duty when you're here on city leave? Don't become sticks-in-the-mud of Kuklon!" He left the 2 men with a genial nod and disappeared in the crowd of pedestrians.

He had no intention of leaving Thator Square. The puzzling search for his person—on such a grand scale—did not fit into the normal frame of procedure. Although the gigantic positronic Brain on Arkon, that ruled the Great Empire for almost a century, incessantly tried to shake up the Arkonides who had become lethargic, the coldly calculating machine had not been able to achieve complete success. For this reason Fellmer Lloyd's assumption that the Galactic Traders were behind the alarm was not too farfetched.

As he circled around Thator Square he passed the Uxlad House again. The pretentious office building attracted him like a magnet. Suddenly he became tense as he picked up a distinct brainwave pattern.

He was under observation again as he walked past the building.

Lloyd quickly analysed the brainwave pattern. He determined the direction from which it came and was not surprised to find that it originated in the Uxlad House portal.

The huge doors were open and hundreds of Springers left the premises. They scurried down the wide steps and joined the throng in the street.

All of a sudden it dawned on Fellmer Lloyd and his lips formed 2 words: "The girl!"

She was watching him!

The young Springer girl he had met on the 212th floor stood at the left side of the door and looked at him.

Fellmer gave no sign that he had noticed her stare. He continued to probe her thoughts by telepathy and he became certain that she had followed him upon leaving Uxlad House.

The subject that occupied her mind most intensively was *Ralph Sikeron!*

3/ MYSTERY OF THE DEAD MAN

Fellmer Lloyd spent his first night on Volat at the Plana Hotel. He slept undisturbed and his thoughts immediately returned in the morning to the tall girl with the Mongolian cheekbones whose reddish skin identified her as a daughter of the Galactic Traders.

The girl had constantly thought of Ralph Sikeron as she watched him but they had made no further contact. Fellmer Lloyd was not in favour of hasty actions although Perry Rhodan had urged him to clear up as quickly as possible why Terra was under such severe threat from Volat.

Fellmer Lloyd secreted his 'defensive arsenal' on his body. He was pleased that nothing pointed to his Terrestrial origin. Everything, including the most unimportant objects, were genuine products of Prebon, although the construction of his 3 different handguns might baffle the Arkonides if they were not familiar with their place of manufacture in the Galaxy.

He breakfasted leisurely, as behooved a man with a calm conscience, gave instructions to retain his room and proceeded again in the direction of Thator Square.

Something drew him inexorably to Uxlad House. He had no clear idea what it was. Could it have been the girl?

Once more he went up to the 212th floor but decided on the way up to look first at the roofport. He found it empty except for a small high-performance spaceship. However he noticed that a cylindrical Springer ship zoomed in from the south on a course toward the roof.

Lloyd acted as if he belonged to the crew of the parked craft. He had already inspected it and knew that it was empty.

He leaned comfortably against a telescopic support and watched the cylindrical ship touch down 60 feet from him.

3 Springers clad in spacesuits left the ship. They quickly glanced at Fellmer and walked to the antigrav elevator.

To be on the safe side, Lloyd examined their thoughts with his telepathic concentration. The Springers were part of a crew of a space observation station which they had just left. They discussed the flight of a mysterious spacecraft which must have slipped through the rays of their rangefinders and their optical instruments. But a routine check of the positronic computer had indicated that a tiny spaceship landed on Volat two nights ago.

Fellmer Lloyd was dismayed to learn by his surveillance that the positronic had calculated the landing place of his Gazelle within the accuracy of 20 kilometres. Furthermore the 3 Springers had been advised by the tron that a similar occurrence had taken place 2 weeks before.

Ralph Sikeron had arrived 2 weeks ago on Volat!

Fine prospects! Lloyd thought grimly. *A full-scale search by the Arkonides is all I need. By tonight*

half of Volat will be on my heels!

He had no illusions and expected that all of Volat would be alerted before evening but he still wondered why the 3 Springers who were in the service of Arkon had come to Uxlad House.

He investigated their thoughts once more although they had already reached the 35th floor. They mentioned something about Springer 'bosses' and referred to the town of Esgun. When Lloyd hoped to find out some more details, their conversation and thoughts shifted to small talk.

The landing of an airtaxi startled him. The whirl of the engine interrupted his telepathic concentration and his mental sensor alerted him.

He perceived the brainwave pattern before the girl got out and then her thoughts. She was late for work but wasn't thinking about her job. Ralph Sikeron was on her mind again or, more precisely, Asargud.

She noticed him after she left the airtaxi and stared at him. She vacillated, thinking about Arkonide informers and comparing the stranger she had met yesterday for the first time in the corridor with Asargud.

Fellmer Lloyd stepped out of the little spaceship's shadow and walked toward the antigravitor where the two would meet as he sensed she wanted to. They descended one floor together without saying a word and as she walked across the corridor, he broke the ice by asking her: "You knew Asargud well, didn't you? We're both from Prebon and I stopped here in town to see him before I go on tomorrow. Could you tell me where I could find Asargud?"

She was still afraid he might be an Arkon spy. She looked straight ahead and walked more stiffly. Lloyd shared her inner struggle almost physically. It became clear to him that the girl had liked Ralph Sikeron and had been quite friendly with the agent. "I'm a friend of Asargud's," Lloyd tried to encourage her. "I don't belong to those 7 who've inquired about him yesterday." The implication should be obvious to her.

She turned her head and looked at him questioningly with her expressive dark eyes.

* * * *

Ralph Sikeron, Perry Rhodan's cosmic agent, had lost his life on his mission to Volat. He had been murdered and his body had disappeared.

Fellmer Lloyd could give up all attempts to get in touch with the audio-monitor. Ralph Sikeron no longer existed.

Kuri Onere the young girl of the Springer race working for the Uxlad clan, didn't implore him to keep the secret nor did she beg him to avenge Ralph Sikeron's death. She merely looked at him with her dark eyes and waited for his response to the revelation.

"Why do you do this for Asargud, Kuri?" Lloyd inquired, although, he already knew her thoughts by telepathy.

Her eyes flashed and she answered with great determination and pale lips: "Because he was a decent man, a Prebonian... not one of those rotten Springers!" Her face expressed strong despise.

"But Kuri, you're a..."

She tossed her head back in a gesture of pride. "Yes, I do belong to the Galactic Traders. Until 8 years ago my clan was rich and respected. My father owned 28 spaceships before the Uxlad clan became powerful and cheated us out of our Skog monopoly. My father was ruined after a year and I have to earn my bread from this despicable Uxlad clan." Her eyes were aflame with irreconcilable hate and a turmoil of implacable thoughts had been aroused behind the beautiful high forehead of the girl. Kuri Onere had been left alone without parents and family. That she was alone could have been. The reason she befriended Ralph Sikeron. However this was all she knew about him and could tell Lloyd.

Guardedly he asked further questions, hinting at the Arkonide administration of the planet Volat and pointing out that murder was strictly punished under the jurisdiction of the Great Empire. "Did Asargud ever mention that he had enemies, Kuri?"

"Never! But the last time I saw him, he gave me the impression that he had discovered something terrible. He was very upset although he didn't want to show it. We hardly had time to talk and he must have been aware that he was to die soon. I didn't take it very seriously and I'd have given it no further thought but now that you ask, I remember that he said to send his friend to the Omniscient Mother if he vanishes without return. That's exactly what he told me the last time we met."

"Omniscient Mother?" Fellmer Lloyd was careful not to smirk. The title could refer only to the natives of Volat. He had encountered and observed a few of them yesterday for the first time.

These natives originated from a rare of insects and had enjoyed a peaceful existence prior to the colonization of their planet by the Arkonides. The Volatians looked grotesque to people who were not used to dealing with non-humanoid races. The thin sections of their bodies had a partially horny scale and insect legs. They had extra-large facet eyes with feelers extending above them. Despite their 6-foot height they not only looked harmless and placid but also behaved like it. They were, moreover, very intelligent. Their contempt for the Arkonides and Springers did not stem from false pride. It was a result of their attitude toward life which was filled with spiritual values and strange customs and rites.

When Fellmer Lloyd reiterated "Omniscient Mother," Kuri Onere confirmed it and commented: "I'm not in the habit of ridiculing the curious customs of the Volatians. Asargud must've been a wonderful person if he succeeded where every Springer failed and was able to communicate with the Volatians in the wild forests."

At this moment a Springer left the antigrav shaft and walked into the corridor. Fellmer Lloyd almost could feel in his bones that danger approached in the person of the Galactic Trader but it was already too late for them to leave or avoid him.

A burly Springer passed them, eyeing the pair suspiciously. He sniggered when he recognized Kuri Onere and made a nasty remark.

When he was 2 steps ahead of them he suddenly turned around, stared inquisitively at Fellmer Lloyd and asked in a sharp tone: "Are you going to the Asargud Company?"

The mutant chose an offensive tactic. The chaotic thoughts of the Springer were influenced by suspicion, anger and insolence and the reference to the 'bosses' cropped up again. It all was poorly defined and

coordinated, proving to Lloyd that he dealt with a man who was stupid and arrogant.

Fellmer Lloyd, looking complacent as usual, kept his cool. With exaggerated awkwardness he looked up at the Galactic Trader and said slowly with great deliberation: "Do you have to make suggestive remarks to every girl you see, Springer?"

The trader, who was a head and a half taller than Fellmer, came menacingly close. "How dare you...?"

Kuri Onere stopped him with a hard slap across his mouth but her threat to report the annoyance to the administration was more effective.

The Springer jumped back in cold fury. He muttered a curse and disappeared behind one of the doors.

His thoughts were vicious and Fellmer hinted at one of them: "I don't think you have to go back to your job. How much does this Springer have to say around here, Kuri?"

"Not only does he belong to the Uxlad clan but he's Aser Uxlad's youngest and most spoiled son—a loafer, a know nothing and girl chaser."

"Does he have more than one boss, Kuri?" Lloyd inquired.

Without hesitation Kuri blurted out: "Aser Uxlad is the uncrowned king of his clan. There is no other boss but him!"

* * * *

Fellmer Lloyd's parapsychological sense organ was suddenly struck by a signal beam.

He was born with this phenomenal gift and had acquired his telepathic abilities only later in life. The mental sensor was part of his nature. He didn't have to concentrate and 'reach' for it. It came to him, warned or informed him about the brainwave patterns of people or other intelligent beings around him who came with good or evil intentions.

4 Springers were speeding up the antigrav shaft to the 212th floor!

Aser Uxlad's youngest son had been aroused by feelings of vengeance and the fact that Kuri Onere had talked in the corridor to a total stranger like a good friend had caused him to take some countermeasures.

The action of the Springers had been started without a clear aim. When they emerged from the elevator and saw only Kuri Onere in the corridor and no trace of the Prebonian, they became apprehensive.

Jidif, a spindly Springer with shifty eyes, reacted at once while his 3 companions tried to pressure the girl. With his pocket transmitter he notified another accomplice in the lobby, who summoned 3 robots and programmed them quickly with his instructions. The machines were turned into lethal menaces for Lloyd from which there was virtually no escape.

There was only one antigravitor in the entire office building of the Uxlad clan. It measured 30 meters in diameter and went from the basement to the roofport. During office hours it was usually crowded with hundreds of people and humanoid beings going up and down so that Fellmer Lloyd preferred not to use it. When he explained to the amazed Kuri Onere that a gang of Springers would soon be on his heels, she gave him a magnetic key without another word.

He didn't have to read her mind to know which door it fitted: 3rd door left in the corridor, Ralph Sikeron's office rooms. After entering the offices Lloyd locked the door again and inspected the 4 rooms with the efficiency of a cosmic agent.

Ralph Sikeron had camouflaged his activities with the greatest skill and he pretended to run a company which conducted a transport service between stars. Fellmer Lloyd abstained from rummaging through the drawers. Often it was better to hide something in plain sight where nobody would think of looking.

So he didn't touch any of the numerous papers lying about, checking them only with his eyes. He was in the 2nd room when he heard a noise at the entrance door.

His pursuers tried to break in by force. Jidif had concluded that the Prebonian was still on the 212th floor.

Fellmer Lloyd, looking as sluggish as ever, didn't lose his composure. He analysed the 4 brainwave patterns while his eyes searched for a clue which Sikeron might have written down somewhere.

The sound outside the door grew louder. Lloyd drew his hypno-beamer and adjusted it to full force. If he was compelled to knock out the Springers and Kuri Onere was with them, it was unavoidable that she, too, would be put under hypnosis for several hours.

Lloyd turned back a leaf of the datebook lying on the desk and read the notations:

July 8

23,000 Dexresitik, bundled, SSog-6, arriving from Migf.

51,365 Klodexal, 100%, arriving on Derr-KL18 from Zalit, shipped on

Klo-22 to Orro, Mutant Master.

Mutant Master?

This time Fellmer Lloyd was visibly jolted. It was the clue which he had instinctively tried to find. Ralph Sikeron was still alive on the 8th of July, the day he made his first important discovery.

But why "Mutant Master"? He had died already half a century ago and nobody even remembered Perry Rhodan's dangerous old enemy.

Why did he write the ominous name of the Mutant Master after the entries of fictitious space transports? What did he mean by referring to a dead man?

The magnetic lock was demolished by a blast from a thermo-beamer and the door swung open in a cloud of foul-smelling gas.

It brought Fellmer Lloyd instantly back to the present. He pointed his hypno-weapon to the exit with a steady hand, pulled the trigger, fanning from side to side and immediately received the hypnotized brainwave patterns.

He ordered the 4 Springers to go down to the lobby at once and to tell their accomplice that the Prebonian had escaped in an airtaxi.

But Fellmer Lloyd had made a tiny mistake: he had failed to calculate exactly the angle by which he scattered his hypnobeam so that not only his 4 pursuers and Kuri Onere were affected by his weapon but also 3 innocent men who were working on the other side of the corridor. As the 3 bystanders were not prepared for inner resistance like his attackers, they obeyed the mental command of the cosmic agent faster and arrived at the lobby a few seconds before the 4 Springers.

The eyes of the co-conspirator at the reception desk nearly popped out when the wrong Springer surprised him with the story that a Prebonian had gotten away from the roofport. He was even more amazed when the lanky Jidif gave him the same report without wondering about the other man.

When Jidif's companions tried to tell him the same story again in identical words, he realized what had happened to the men.

He was on the verge of pushing the alarm button and locking up the building like a prison when he remembered that the Arkon Administration was bound to hear about it and would order an embarrassing investigation. He cursed under his breath and withdrew his hand from the button.

4/ OUTSIDE THE REALM OF NORMALCY

Fellmer Lloyd had indeed fled Uxlad House in an airtaxi and taken the hypnotized Kuri Onere with him.

The words 'Mutant Master' were harrowing his mind and the longer he pondered the more it troubled him.

Mutant Master and 3 Bells!

The combination had meaningful implications. Half a century ago when the Mutant Master contested Perry Rhodan's power with his misguided mutants, 3 Bells rang disaster for Terra and brought it to the brink of the abyss. But the Mutant Master was dead and most of his men had perished with him.

Fellmer Lloyd's worried mind gravitated more and more toward the possible existence of a secret organization whose aims imperilled Earth.

It was not inconceivable that the Galactic Traders had accidentally come across the Solar system and found Terra while cruising the length and breadth of the Galaxy. This could have put an end to the fallacy believed by the Arkonides and Aras that Terra had been destroyed.

He recalled that Uxlad's youngest son had thought about 'bosses'.

Did some of the Springer clans know the position of Terra and prepare for an independent surprise attack of their own fleets in the hope of pulling off a successful invasion?

Such an organization would be as detrimental to Earth and Perry Rhodan's plans as the conspiracy of the Mutant Master had been many years ago.

After dropping Kuri off at her apartment Lloyd returned to the Plana Hotel. He was already near the reception desk when he received a warning.

Officers of the Arkon Administration were waiting in his room to arrest him. Simultaneously he recognized 3 other agents of the administration sitting near a pillar—Springers.

They had failed to notice him because he had entered the hotel together with a group of travellers. Unable to turn back, he stayed in the middle of the crowd that moved toward the robot reception clerk. It was not very difficult to hide among the people who were much taller than he but then the travellers were separated into 3 smaller groups who entered the 3 antigrav elevators to reach their rooms at the various locations without unnecessary waiting.

Lloyd peered between a gap at the Springers near the pillar. One of them got up and craned his neck, looking in his direction. Fellmer could easily guess without telepathy why the Springer, held his right hand in a pocket.

At this moment the Springers' thoughts concerned a Prebonian who had to be apprehended. Fellmer Lloyd must have had an astonishing resemblance to a murderer from Prebon!

That's all I need, he thought but at the same time he was relieved because he now understood the puzzling activities of the Arkonides.

Suddenly one of the travellers became annoyed because another one had pushed him roughly into the antigravitor. "You..." was as far as the jostled man got when Lloyd silently discharged his hypno-weapon and sent out a mental command: "Everybody into the elevator!"

5 victims obeyed. Fellmer joined his hypnotized subjects and almost reached the safety of the elevator when the Springer shouted across the spacious lobby: "There he is!"

Lloyd had already sensed the Springer's intentions before he shouted and was ready to take his countermeasures. He was aware that it was a simple matter to change the information automaton into a fighter robot. As 3 of the hypnotized tourists jumped out of the way, a thermo-beam flashed from Lloyd's weapon and instantly vaporized the positronic of the information robot that stood near the elevator.

Leaping past the staggering men, Lloyd, who now looked anything but clumsy, managed to get safely into the elevator. The travellers moved up behind him and obstructed the view of the Springers. The shot had created a panic in the lobby and the mad scramble of the crowd blocked the way of the Springers.

Fellmer Lloyd gained a few precious seconds as he descended to the 5th level below the basement. He dashed out and ran around 2 robot workers who paid no attention to him. Then he jumped into a freight elevator, disregarding a warning to keep out and went down 4 more levels. He sprinted along a lit but empty corridor with the speed of a pro.

As he raced through the corridor, he figured out his chances and kept his eyes open for the antigrav

trash chute. The thought made him shudder and twisted his face in a grimace. He could smell the odoriferous refuse as he approached the chute despite the air filter meant to nullify the offensive odours.

The antigrav chute was wide enough to admit a big Springer and there was more than enough room for the somewhat smaller Lloyd. Before taking his way out with the refuse of the Plana Hotel, Lloyd looked back and saw his first pursuer emerge from the antigravitor at the end of the corridor.

He dropped backwards down the chute and sank into an ocean of nauseating stench. He fought hard to suppress his urge to regurgitate as he floated down by controlled gravity.

Lloyd turned on a searchlight he had carried in his pocket but switched it off after a moment, preferring the darkness. He descended at a rate of 2 meters per second on his way to the sewer system of Kuklon.

Gurgling sounds warned him that he was getting to the end of the chute and he had to turn on his searchlight again as he feared he would choke or drown in the filth.

He saw that the tube ended just below him in an oval-shaped canal. He pressed his knees and his back against the walls of the tube and peered down. More by instinct than circumspection he tried to look up again and when he pointed his lamp upward he saw an enormous load of refuse coming down at 2 meters per second.

This forced him to move on. The retarding effect of the antigravity in the chute kept him from falling straight down into the dirty mess and he landed close to the side of the canal's wall, sinking up to his knees in the morass. He ignored the foul stench and looked desperately in both directions for a cross-canal.

The refuse poured down beside him. He shielded his eyes with his hands and momentarily held his breath but not without a satisfied grin on his face. This load of dirt was the best assurance for his escape.

Gritting his teeth, Fellmer Lloyd continued on his way. Half an hour later he found an exit from the stinking underworld but had to wait several hours underneath a manhole cover till nightfall when he could leave.

His appearance presented a disgusting mess and he stank to high heaven. He had to sneak like a thief through the hotel district of Kuklon until he managed to leave the elegant section of the city and found the shadier part of town.

Finally he somehow located a public bath and enjoyed the pleasure of washing the dirt off his skin. As he recovered from his ordeal in the warm tub, his clothes were cleaned and pressed with utmost care. They were ready and waiting for him in his cabin when he emerged with a shiny red skin and smelling pleasantly from the scented soap.

Before he could finish dressing he received a mental warning when 2 Arkonide agents entered the baths. As they were shown to his cabin by the man at the service desk, Lloyd got away unnoticed through another exit, leaving the agents empty-handed.

* * * *

Using tricks he had learned from the Arkonides, Fellmer Lloyd disguised his face so well that not even Perry Rhodan would have recognized him at first glance. In addition he put on other clothes which made him look like a spaceport worker, as he was anxious to take a closer look at Kuklon's landing field.

He kept wondering about Ralph Sikeron's entry in his calendar on July 8! ...shipped on *Klo-22* to Orro, Mutant Master.

An airtaxi took him to the spaceport. The huge administration building was illuminated by a flood of light and large areas of the landing pads were lit bright as day. Spherical Arkonide spaceships took off and landed but the cylindrical ships of the rich Springer clans were preponderant on the scene. Here and there spaceships of different construction from other worlds could be seen between them. A colourful variety of alien races arrived here at Volat or departed the planet with the warm and humid tropical climate.

The Galactic traders occupied at least one third of the administration building. The section of the Aras, the galactic medical specialists, was almost inconspicuous, whereas the Arkonides had arranged their departments with military utility.

Fellmer Lloyd went to the office floor of the Arkonides. A tall Arkonide girl took his request for information and passed it on. She scrutinized him unabashedly while they waited for the answer from the archives. "Do you speak the Arkonide language, Prebonian?" she asked after awhile.

The mutant quickly analysed her thoughts and what he learned was rather unpleasant. The girl doubted that he was a Prebonian and believed he was one of the degenerate Tregglians who were suspected by Arkon of conspiring against the Great Empire and to be in cahoots with some unknown shrewd connivers.

Lloyd answered in excellent Arkonide, radiating friendliness and showing the greatest interest. Her behaviour changed at once when she heard her mother tongue. She was utterly surprised by his perfect command of the language and that he spoke without an accent. "A few days ago I spoke to another Prebonian," she said. "He asked... Wait a minute, didn't you also inquire about the *Klo-22*?"

"Yes of course. I'm waiting for the answer from the archives concerning the same vessel but this is no coincidence. My friend from Prebon has disappeared in Kuklon. The last entry in his notebook referred to the *Klo-22* which was to take a cargo to Orro."

"I seem to recall a ship by that name," the girl reflected. "I believe it stopped here for a few hours last week. Now it comes back to me. Your friend inquired about the *Klo-22* and when he received the information and left, he was followed by 3 mean-looking Springers. Later a rumour was heard that a man was murdered between the spaceport and the city and that his body had vanished." The Arkonide girl realized for the first time that there could be a connection between the murder and the incident last week that she had described.

Lloyd followed her thoughts telepathically and put her mind at ease with his sympathetic expression. He continued using the Arkonide language and suggested: "Your conclusions could be close to the truth. Would I be asking too much or could you tell me what these 3 obnoxious Springers looked like?"

He had a faint hope that the girl might have one of those photographic memories which would enable her to remember faces regardless of how fleetingly she had seen them.

Then he saw a bright look on the girl's face. "Wait a minute, Prebonian," she said and left the room.

In the meantime he received the information from the Record Department that on the 8th of July the cargo ship Klo22 had arrived from the Mgt system and went on after 3 hours to the planet Orro with a load of 51,365 Klodexal. Before leaving, the captain of the spaceship had tried to reach the broker in vain.

Fellmer Lloyd was amazed that Ralph Sikeron had actually been able to make a transport deal in a few days and that the entry in his calendar was not fictitious. However it was now clear to him that the cue 'Mutant Master' had nothing to do with this business but was the result of an important discovery by the mutant.

The pretty Arkonide girl, who was so happy to be able to talk with a stranger in her own language, returned. She had impulsively broken the rules and thereby revealed a secret of the Arkonide surveillance methods: Every person who visited an Arkon office inside the spaceport was unknowingly photographed.

"Is he the one?" she asked Fellmer Lloyd and showed him the picture of the missing mutant. And when he acknowledged it, she continued: "And here, in the right corner, are those 3 unpleasant Springers. Do you know them?"

Fellmer Lloyd recognized one of them. It was the spindly Jidif!

As he tried to control his excitement, he felt a strange emptiness in his head. Why was his mental sensor not functioning?

Before he fully realized the danger of this symptom, the feeling of emptiness vanished again but the tiny second brought home to the cosmic agent that there were things going on on Volat which were outside the realm of normalcy.

5/ SUPRANATURAL POWERS

With undisguised disappointment the friendly Arkonide girl followed the Prebonian with her eyes as he suddenly left, barely thanking her for her kindness.

Fellmer Lloyd was in a high state of alarm. An unknown force had tried to take possession of his mind.

He ruled out the Arkonide agents who pursued him as they assumed he was the Prebonian murderer they were looking for and he eliminated the Galactic traders with whom he had clashed at Uxlad House. A person with telepathic or other supranatural abilities was after him!

And now it struck again and with ever more significant force: *Mutant Master!*

Was that what Ralph Sikeron had meant? Could this supranatural power be present in Volat? Due to the discipline learned in Rhodan's school, Lloyd didn't obey his impulse to return to his Gazelle and flee from Volat in panic.

Instead he drew the inevitable conclusions from the existence of this supernatural power on Volat which obviously had resulted in the murder of his colleague Ralph Sikeron but not before the unknown mentalist had extracted all the knowledge he was interested in from the victim's brain. Now the true facts were known to some one on Volat. Rhodan was no longer presumed to have perished with the *Titan* in space. They knew that Terra still was intact and they had learned the secret of the Solar System's location in the Galaxy!

This explained the warning 3 Bells and now Mutant Master.

Ralph Sikeron must have had a premonition of his death and it must have been the reason he carried his miniature hyper-transmitter which enabled him to send his coded warning signal only seconds before his death.

* * * *

Fellmer Lloyd had returned for a quick visit to his Gazelle. He had changed his equipment and was now on his way to the wild forest after completing his preparations.

Ralph Sikeron had given him an urgent hint through Kuri Onere to get in touch with the Omniscient Mother and he decided to make every effort to meet these people who had developed from a race of insects to highly intelligent beings even though they still looked like insects.

He had already learned many essential facts about the Volatians by hypno-training and he knew that they had no language in the usual sense. They communicated with each other using ultra-high frequencies far above 100,000 Hertz which could not be heard by human or Arkonide ears. The Volatians produced these frequencies in the 100,000 Hz range with their feelers which they thus used not only as tactile organs but also for the purpose of transmitting and receiving communication signals.

Without asking, Lloyd had borrowed a fast little craft at the spaceport and landed it a few miles from the edge of the forest in a swamp. Now he struggled through the forest on foot, his formidable thermo-gun in one hand and his shock-beamer in the other. He had not forgotten his encounter with the monstrous salamander.

When night fell he had barely penetrated 30 kilometres deep into the primordial forest.

Volat was as big as Mars. The continent on which Kuklon was situated was about 4 times the size of Europe. Two-thirds of it was covered by a jungle-like forest in which the peculiar towns of the Volatians and the abode of the Omniscient Mother was supposed to be located.

Lloyd dozed all through the night in a state that did not impair his ability to react instantly. He flicked his searchlight on 3 times during his rest in order to fight off 2 attacks by meter-long nocturnal insects.

At dawn he breakfasted on concentrated food pills and continued his trek. During the next hour he walked 5 kilometres but then the forest became a badly matted jungle and Lloyd would have been unable to penetrate it further without his thermo-beamer.

He kept a worried eye on the energy consumption of the weapon but the little converter in the stock of

the energy-gun was so efficient that the mark showed the highest value.

A huge maggot blocked his way and he raised his beamer to shoot when he noticed that an arrow was impaled in the 10-foot-long body of the black-green maggot. It dragged itself on by means of 30 pairs of stunted legs, wheezing like a whistle.

Lloyd didn't move. He observed the arrow, noticed its unusual construction but couldn't remember having seen anything similar before.

Suddenly he picked up alien brainwave patterns. Volatians!

He waited to discern them, turning around on his spot but all he could see was the twilight of the jungle, the dark ground and a few rays of light piercing the roof of dense leaves.

The forest remained silent. The Volatians whom he had sensed from a distance of 30 meters also failed to make the slightest move.

Lloyd intensified his sensing efforts. He realized he was at a disadvantage compared to the audio-monitor Ralph Sikeron who was able to hear the speech of the Volatians by perceiving directly their 100,000 Hertzian frequencies. The best he could do was decipher the brainwave patterns and interpret their meaning.

Then he muttered in dismay as he noticed that the Volatians retreated deeper into the forest, abstaining from making contact with him.

Lloyd had so far only determined their presence but now he tried desperately to get in touch with them by telepathic methods and he was astounded to discover that the Volatians had thoughts resembling human concepts.

Unfortunately his connection with the aborigines of Volat broke off almost immediately after they had been established. They silently withdrew about 3 times faster than he could proceed and they neglected to recover their game.

The enormous, repulsive-looking maggot was killed by a poisonous dart and expired a few steps behind Lloyd.

* * * *

One hour later, the airspace above the forest was in a turbulent uproar and Lloyd was forced to crawl into the stinking burrow of a large animal in order to protect himself temporarily from the searchlights of the Arkonide reconnaissance planes. He could guess why the Arkon Administration and the Springers with the support of other colonial populations on Volat had become so active in this sector. The arrival of his Gazelle had not been observed on optical screens nor detected by their other rangefinders directly. However minute deviations disturbing the monitors had caused the positronic Brain to perform a routine evaluation of all data, leading to the conclusion that a spaceship of undetermined origin had landed on Volat and the location had been calculated with a minor tolerance.

Lloyd listened to the whine of the Arkon engines and he could only hope that they would find neither him nor his Gazelle.

Meanwhile his thoughts reverted again to the source of supranatural power and he was troubled by the recurring reference to the Mutant Master.

The search of the area around him had lasted for 3 hours. The agent had probed the thoughts of the crews half a dozen times telepathically. His satisfaction grew when they failed to locate the Gazelle and the idea that he might be concealed in the jungle apparently never occurred to them.

Lloyd considered this as new evidence that whoever the supranatural power might be, it had no connection with the Arkonide Administration of Volat. As he sat immobilized in the burrow permeated by the pungent animal odours, he relived again the attempt to seize his brain.

It had lasted only a fraction of a second but it had been enough to make him realize the full extent of the danger. It was an inherent part of his biological nature as a mutant that he reacted with a feeling of emptiness in his head when an extraneous encroachment was perpetrated in the realm of his thoughts without his permission.

"Mutant Master, aren't you dead? For heaven's sake! Can the deceased throw their shadows from the beyond?" he asked himself, murmuring in a low whisper. It was an indication of the dark fears the cosmic agent felt about the unknown enemy.

* * * *

Lloyd's 4th morning in the forest dawned. Again he swallowed 3 concentrated food tablets and began to break a path through the tangled undergrowth of the tropical forest.

He had already gained some experience with the flora. The little clearing he had just crossed had been a devil's meadow.

Ferns had grown there but now they were gone. They had looked harmless as he approached without heeding them. However when he tried to wend his way between the ferns, their leaves suddenly became inflated like balloons. They quickly turned their dark sides toward him and sprayed him with gas.

Other ferns close to him folded down their leg-sized stems and erected a wall of giant leaves on the ground. The sides of the leaves facing the light excreted a sticky slime in such incredible quantities that it spread a foot high over the ground.

A rigorous training had quickened his reflexes and it enabled him to stop his breathing at the first whiff of gas. He whipped out his thermo-beamer and saved his life by eradicating the deathly trap.

He gave one last look at the slowly hardening glassy flow in the clearing he had created. No plants would grow there this season.

After resuming his way through the jungle he suddenly stopped in his tracks.

He was surrounded by Volatians! Wherever there was a tiny gap in the maze of plants and tree trunks, they stood and stared at him with their hostile faceted eyes. The feelers above their eyes were in a highly excited state of continuous oscillation.

The insect-headed Volatians stood motionless, their long insect-arms so thin it seemed they would break at the slightest touch. Their legs were not much stronger and the slender segments of their brown-black bodies looked extremely fragile as well.

Lloyd received a flood of brainwave patterns and he realized at the same time that the Volatians could not be identified unless they desired it. But their combined efforts had the effect of a jamming station suppressing all normal broadcasts and he was inundated by their mental vibrations—which were all hostile.

They forbade him to intrude farther into the forest. *Go back!* was the message they transmitted uninterruptedly from all sides.

He slowly raised his hands and spread all fingers, trying to express his peaceful intentions.

Go back!

Fellmer Lloyd shook his head and concentrated on thinking: *I'm staying! and I wish to see the Omniscient Mother.*

The Volatians started to move forward as if by command. They came closer and locked him in a tight ring. Their protruding facet eyes became more belligerent. Each of the Volatians raised his right arm holding a blow-tube which they used to shoot a Poison dart. This was the principal weapon of the Volatians.

Damn! he thought, angered by his failure to start a conversation with the natives, *how did Ralph Sikeron manage to make contact with them?*

Ralph Sikeron? The question swelled like a telepathic chorus from all directions.

Getlox Asargud, Lloyd thought, adding: *Ralph Sikeron is Getlox Asargud!*

The bellicosity vanished from their eyes as if flicked off by a switch and the oppressive emanations from all those many Volatian brains ceased.

He tried to impress on the creatures with increased urgency that he belonged to the same gender as Ralph Sikeron and that his trusted friend had told him to go and see the Omniscient Mother.

He was certain of his success when he observed that a change came over the Volatians the moment he referred to the Omniscient Mother. They moved their heads in an almost human gesture of reverence and bowed their bodies.

I must first ask my mother whether I have permission to show you the way to the Omniscient Mother!

Fellmer didn't regard it as amusing to get this message. The society of the Volatians was matriarchal. The Omniscient Mother ruled her harmless and friendly people as hereditary queen. They lived contentedly in the wild forest, had never shown the ambition to develop a technology of their own and

were happy to pursue their manifold intellectual arts and sciences.

Fellmer Lloyd had to wait 2 days for the return of the Volat man. He used the time to assess his progress. He was not particularly satisfied with his achievements. There were few tangible results he could have reported to the waiting Lotus by radio, since the explanation for the reference to the Mutant Master in Ralph Sikeron's datebook still eluded him.

And who was the Arkonide or Springer who had supranatural powers that made him the most terrifying opponent of the cosmic agent?

Was the Omniscient Mother of the Volatians in a position to shed light on the secret?

6/ MEETING WITH THE OMNISCIENT MOTHER

The huge rocky plateau rose like a blunted pyramid from the bottom of the primordial forest. Its perimeter was lined with gigantic trees growing high into the sky.

The male Volatians led Fellmer Lloyd to the residence of the Omniscient Mother in the main city of their people which was situated at the centre of the plateau. Here they lived undisturbed and untouched by the influence of the technology which dominated the parts of Volat settled by the Arkonides.

There were no houses, in the customary form, to be seen. They were shaped like beehives and their access holes were difficult to enter.

The Volatians had lost some of the features which had been typical for them as insects, such as their ability to fly, while others remained unchanged. The female was the mistress who tolerated the males and deprived them of all authority in public and private life. However 3 times a year all adult Volatians bestirred themselves in a great commotion and all differences of their community disappeared. Then they became equals and at midnight the primordial forest was transformed into a temple where hallowed rites changed the lives of these intelligent beings for a short time.

Fellmer Lloyd slowly followed the Volatians to the centre of the city where a honeycomb structure rose like a monument on a wide square. The building was lofty, about 50 meters high and was, in contrast to the other structures, adorned with ornamental designs which aroused Lloyd's admiration.

Finally he met the first Volatian women. They were as tall as the men but daintier and more graceful. They exuded something resembling female charm. Their skins favoured the brown colour and only the thin horn-like ridges looked black. Their feelers were twice as long and considerably thicker. They greeted him and the magnitude of their thoughts also proved to be twice as strong.

The Volat men who had accompanied him withdrew and the women took him into their midst to lead him into the residence of the Omniscient Mother.

The entrance hole was high enough to let him enter without stooping. Tallow candles illuminated the interior. The first room to which he was admitted was shaped in a honeycomb design and so were all the others in the building. Lloyd had the impression of being among industrious bees and his experience

seemed very unreal. A footpath wound upward in spirals, another sign that the Volatians were no longer able to fly.

Then he stood before the Omniscient Mother and before he received her first thought he knew that he was in the presence of a queen.

Her thoughts startled him so much that he stepped back against his will. *Come closer, stranger. You carry the same sign of long life on your forehead as Sikeron. You're much older than you look. I know that you're Sikeron's friend!*

Fellmer Lloyd was stunned. No stranger had ever told him this. What sign on his forehead was the Omniscient Mother talking about? How could she tell by looking at him that his cells—as those of Ralph Sikeron and other mutants—had been treated on Wanderer, the planet of eternal life, so that he would not age for 6 decades?

He begged her for an explanation but the Omniscient Mother of the Volatians appeared to show a wise and human smile as she refused to enlighten him.

She awed him more and more as a queen. She radiated sagacity, serenity, and the wisdom of age. The longer he looked at her the more she lost the appearance of an insect and their mental contact grew steadily more intense.

She was seated in the same manner as he on a weave of organic fibres. Her royal chambers were embellished by evergreen leaves. They were many times larger than the other rooms.

The Omniscient Mother brooked no interference and devoted her full time to him. She was more than a ruler, she was the immovable pole of the Volatians, their idol who assumed their responsibilities and who was overburdened with work.

Lloyd refrained from pressing her to talk about Ralph Sikeron. She touched upon the subject herself. *He was twice before in this room, Fellmer Lloyd. He concealed his origin the same as you do. He was no more a Prebonian than you can pretend to be. Both of you came from a faraway star. He wanted to return but he died although he wore the mark of eternal life on his forehead. You two resemble each other very much yet he was different from you. He was able to hear us talk but your ears are deaf. However you can understand us as well as he did, albeit in a different way. I believe that the world where you and Ralph Sikeron were at home must be as beautiful as the land of Volat.*

He was deeply moved by her thoughts and felt very fortunate to have found the Omniscient Mother. His respect for alien races grew enormously.

She continued to relate Ralph Sikeron's discoveries. *There's a dark power lurking in the shadows of the Arkonides and Springers on Volat. Sikeron fled to me after the first time he felt the manifestation of its might. He sought my advice but I was unable to counsel him.*

He came once more to request my help after 2 Springers who were apparently in the service of his sinister antagonist with supernatural powers had traced him. On his 2nd visit he asked my permission to leave a message to his successor directing him to me.

And what happened after Ralph Sikeron returned to Kuklon, Omniscient Mother? Lloyd asked in his thoughts.

He knew that he went to his death. I believe he determined the source of the uncanny power that my people had heretofore not noticed on Volat. He was aware that somebody was waiting for him in Kuklon. When he said goodbye to me he wished the people, of my world good luck with his last words. Are they also waiting for you in Kuklon, Fellmer Lloyd?

When the Volat men joined him again at the border of the broad square where the queen's residence stood, he glanced back for the last time with grave foreboding.

3 days later he was back at his Gazelle which had escaped detection by the search of the Arkonides.

7/ ACTION IN THE AIR

Kuri Onere was not in the least surprised when the Prebonian appeared at her door. The pretty Springer girl brought him up-to-date about some interesting details.

First she surprised him with the news that the Prebonian murderer whom he happened to resemble so much had been apprehended 2 days earlier in the slums of Kuklon and had been taken to Prebon. Then she related the less agreeable news that she had received a visit from Jidif the day after Lloyd's departure.

She paused in the middle of her story and looked with amazement at the Prebonian who had a vacant expression in his eyes. She was afraid to disturb him as he appeared to look inward.

Lloyd put his hand into his pocket. He had changed his clothes again and was once more dressed in the latest style of the Arkonides. His suit had pockets big enough to conceal 2 compact rayguns.

The Arkonide Administration of Volat was not in favour of letting the population arm themselves with lethal weapons and imposed a prohibitive fine for the carrying of unlicensed guns. Ever since the impersonal gigantic positronic Brain had taken over the rule of Arkon, its edicts were enforced in the far-flung borders of the Great Empire.

Belying his sluggish appearance Lloyd suddenly bounced Eke a tennis ball behind the door which was at the same moment pushed open from outside. Before Kuri understood what the 3 strange men wanted, the Preboner had triggered his shock-beamer and 2 of the unannounced visitors crashed to the floor of her room while the 3rd fell backward into the hall.

A stem look from Lloyd's eyes warned the girl not to move. His mental sensor screamed:*danger!*

Putting the 3 Springers out of action was not the end of the incident. A 4th man was staked out near the antigrav and waited for the right sign from his accomplices. Unfortunately Lloyd had been unable to recognize the sign and now the brains of the stunned Springers could not release it since their functions were paralysed.

Why can't I help you? Lloyd gathered the thoughts of the girl. He discovered that Kuri was not only courageous but had kept her calm.

"Run outside and try to distract their partner waiting outside!" he instructed her. "Scream a little when you run out of the apartment but don't alarm the whole house!"

A fleeting smile crossed Lloyd's face as he watched Kuri disarray her hair and dash out of the room. She began yelling in a voice which was neither too loud nor too soft as she Red into the corridor to the antigrav elevator.

What did they do to this girl? were the terrified and outraged thoughts of the 4th man waiting at the elevator. He leaped forward and tried to hold her mouth. *Everybody'll be here in a minute if she doesn't stop shouting!*

At this moment Lloyd came rushing out the door, stepped over the unconscious man lying in the hall and fired his 2nd shot from the shock-beamer. The burly ruffian collapsed at Kuri's feet. "Throw him into the antigrav!" Lloyd whispered to the girl. He bent down, picked up the other Springer at the door, throwing him over his shoulder like a sack, ran to the antigrav and pitched him into the shaft.

The gravity was regulated to flow upwards and the limp body of the intruder ascended behind the man the girl had pushed in. The 3rd one followed in a few seconds and when he went to get the last of the men who had barged in and seen his face, he gave a low whistle. "Kuri!" he called. "Come back and lock the door!"

He put the 4th man down on a chair and the girl exclaimed angrily when she recognized the Springer: "Jidif! Do you know, Fellmer, that he's a crony of Uxlad's youngest son Tirr?"

"Okay!" Lloyd made a slip of the tongue in English and he hoped that Kuri would pay no attention to the foreign-sounding word.

He was taken aback when she picked it up at once and questioned him: "*Okay?* I've heard Asargud say that word several times. What does it mean? Okay isn't a Prebonian word."

"Later!" Lloyd tried to put her off in the hope she would forget about it. He fished a hypodermic needle out of his deep pockets. It was a marvel of Ferronian technology whose precision and manifold applications would have delighted the Aras.

He injected Jidif with a drug counteracting his shock. The effect was startling. He jumped up at once and stared, terrified and furious, at the Prebonian who calmly stood his ground without showing that he was a man possessing unusual mental powers. Lloyd read Jidif's mind like an open book. He thought about 'bosses' and about the 2 Galactic Springers who had pursued Ralph Sikeron and had been unmasked by him here in Kuklon.

However Jidif's thoughts did not present a clear picture of his bosses to Lloyd. No matter how hard he tried to focus on them, things became more confused instead of clearer.

Suddenly Lloyd's chain of thoughts was broken. Something had cropped up in his memory. He had a flash about the *Mutant Master!*

Many years before when Perry Rhodan and his mutants had to fight another mysterious enemy that inflicted painful blows on the New Power, it had proved at first to be impossible to make any of the captured hostile mutants reveal the identity of the Mutant Master. He had imposed a hypno-block on his mutants which was stronger than their lives.

But the Mutant Master had died more than half a century ago on his flight from Perry Rhodan in outer space. *I must ignore the memory of the Mutant Master*, Lloyd concluded eventually. Ralph Sikeron's reference to the Mutant Master could not be understood literally. He must have hinted at some enigmatic connection. Jidif was under a similar hypnoblack that forbade him to betray his bosses.

"Get out, Jidif!" Lloyd ordered energetically, pointing to the door. Kuri was at a loss to understand his motives.

The spindly Springer got up suspiciously. His face was a mirror of his vicious thoughts of revenge.

The cosmic agent raised his shock-beamer. He had no other choice but to use it again on Jidif. He and Kuri had to have a few hours respite in order to submerge unnoticed somewhere in Kuklon's masses.

"I'll make you pay for this," Jidif grunted on his way to the antigrav shaft as Fellmer Lloyd aimed his shock-beamer at him. And in his thoughts the Springer added to his threat: *...you damn Terranian!* Lloyd pulled the trigger the moment he grasped that Jidif had knowledge of Terra. Now he knew why Ralph Sikeron had sent the warning signal *3 Bells!*

2 Springers had exposed Ralph Sikeron as Perry Rhodan's agent and learned from him the cosmic position of Earth by parapsychological probing.

Now it was his turn to radio *3 Bells for Terra*. Terra had to call a state of a high alarm!

* * * *

Kuklon had grown into one city from 3 separate towns which were more than 30 kilometres apart at the time they were founded. It had 3 old quarters with narrow twisted lanes which formed an intricate labyrinth of streets.

Lloyd and Kuri had changed their airtaxis 8 times and started to walk through the crowds of many different races as soon as they reached Kuklon-Psor, the old town of Psor.

There were rows of stores and shops which offered everything in the Galaxy for sale. Most of the trade was conducted for the convenience of space travellers.

Suddenly Lloyd pulled the girl aside. Kuri didn't resist him. They fled in a special store which sold nothing but Frubi-Kar, the indestructible luminous material.

The Galactic trader and his 2 sales girls feared a robbery when they saw the 2 people barge into the store. The owner's first thought concerned the alarm button for the security system and he thereby unknowingly revealed the location of the switch to Lloyd who pressed the button before the shopkeeper could reach it himself.

An energy screen was instantly drawn in front of the shop window and the entrance door as the little converter in the ceiling started to him.

A shot from a raygun, fired from across the street, slammed with a shower of sparks into the stable energy screen, shutting the mouth of the protesting shopkeeper.

The wall of energy was completely transparent and they could see the crowds before the store scatter in all directions as 3 more shots were fired at the spot of the shield behind which Kuri Onere and Fellmer Lloyd were standing.

"Where is the backdoor?" Lloyd barked at the Frubi-Kar seller, raising his hypno-beamer to show he meant business.

"I must call the Administration..."

"Not now!" Lloyd growled. "Don't keep me waiting if you don't want me to get, unpleasant..." The concentrated fire of 5 thermo-beamers hit the energy screen again, pelting it with a glowing shower of sparks. The load exceeded its capacity, causing the converter in the ceiling to labour and whine in protest.

The young sales girl began to scream hysterically and ran out of the room, shouting: "Follow me!"

Fellmer and Kuri rushed out behind her. The houses of the older parts of Kuklon-Psor were not equipped with antigrav elevators. They raced down well-worn stairs and through the living-quarters of frightened Arkonides or Springers, came to some more stairs and finally reached a half-deserted alley. Kuri and the agent ran to the corner of the next street and joined the crowd like a couple of leisurely sightseers who had some time to while away in Kuklon.

"We've nothing to fear for the time being," Fellmer reassured the girl, hoping to make her feel at ease.

"What makes you think so, Fellmer? How did you know that they'd break into my apartment? And what about the attack at the Frubi-Kar shop?" the girl asked excitedly and with good reason. The uncanny reactions of the Prebonian baffled her. Was he able to look into the future?

"I could feel it, Kuri," he replied. This was not far from the truth but it was not a satisfactory answer for an Arkonide or a Springer.

"How is it possible to...?" With great apprehension Kuri fell silent in the middle of her sentence. Her companion looked so weird again although different than he did before in the apartment.

Now he broke out in a sweat and stopped walking. His face twisted and he turned pale. What was the matter with him? She looked around and was about to shout for help when Lloyd groaned and regained his normal appearance.

Kuri Onere was a good sport. She controlled her curiosity and suppressed the questions which were burning on her tongue. She didn't want to bother him with disturbing questions and waited till the Prebonian was ready to speak.

They had reached a little square. Over to the left an airtaxi discharged its passengers. Fellmer Lloyd took Kuri by the hand and started to run. "Hurry up!"

He pushed her so hard that she almost fell down when he helped her into the taxi. He jumped in behind her and slammed the starting lever down as far as it would go. The unleashed antigravity forces made the airtaxi soar abruptly above the roofs, causing the compressed air to howl wildly. Then Lloyd pushed the

machine in horizontal thrust and it shot forward.

The roof ridge below him disintegrated under the bombardment of a thermo-beamer as the taxi scraped the rooftops and disappeared safely in the protection of the houses.

They had foiled the 4th attack within an hour and as the airtaxi raced over the mass of Kuklon's houses, Lloyd waited for the 5th assault which was sure to come. The enemy had dropped his mask. He had come out of hiding and had gone over to a straight attack.

After the stealthy assassination attempt at the Frubi-Kar shop where 5 men with thermo-beamers tried to bump him off, someone had applied enormous hypnotic power to force him under his will. Only his thorough training had prevented him from falling victim to the first attack of the stranger. He could understand better how Ralph Sikeron had been murdered.

He kept a close watch on the traffic around him, suspecting his foe in every airtaxi. "I've got to radio a message," he murmured, disregarding the presence of Kuri. The girl would soon find out anyway whom he and Asargud really represented although she could not be allowed to know that their base of operation was Terra.

The largest building of Kuklon appeared in the distance: the Arkon Administration and the seat of the Administrator, the most powerful official of Volat.

Kuri Onere gazed at Lloyd with her beautiful dark eyes. She had recovered from the horror of the repeated attacks in remarkably short time.

"Wouldn't you prefer to leave my side? There's danger wherever I go and..." Lloyd broke off.

Danger! his extra-sensor shouted. *Danger from left. Danger from the 3rd taxi!*

"Jidif is on our heels again, Kuri." With these words he voluntarily revealed the secret of his capability. With a sideways glance he noticed that the girl was rather relieved to hear his words.

Fellmer Lloyd had climbed fairly high on his hasty flight his airtaxi. This higher altitude which was out of bounds for airtaxis was now a good vantage spot for his dodging the 5th raid.

He banked steeply and dived toward the roofport of the Administration building. The engine roared at top speed and the compressed air buffeted the vehicle and made it weave in its swirling wake. Fellmer Lloyd didn't move a muscle in his face. Kuri looked grim as she kept turning her head to look at their pursuer, who was gaining on them. When Kuri wanted to tell Fellmer that the other craft was catching up with them, she noticed that his face was contorted again in a terrible grimace.

Hypnotic forces tried to overpower his will. Someone was at work erecting a block in his brain in order to destroy his resistance and to seize his mental control.

His aim, the Arkon Administration building, became blurred and he floundered dangerously. He was unaware that Kuri Onere had pushed him aside and taken over the controls of the overburdened taxi.

Inarticulate groaning broke through Lloyd's gritted teeth. With his last ounce of strength his mind rebelled against the despotic hypnotic forces.

There came another hypnotic order: *Give up, Fellmer Lloyd!*

Unconsciously the cosmic agent cried for help in his desperation he called Perry Rhodan in his thoughts! He thus unwittingly betrayed Rhodan's existence, unless Ralph Sikeron had already given away this secret previously.

Give up, Lloyd! Rhodan can't help you now. Give up! The hypnotic wave that threatened to inundate his last ounce of willpower surged over him in a flood of hate.

Kuri Onere noticed the sudden drop in the Prebonian's resistance. She didn't know against what he fought but she felt that a deadly peril threatened to engulf her companion.

She acted strictly on impulse. The pursuing airship had caught up within 200 meters of them. It was still more than 3 kilometres to the Arkonide Administration building when she suddenly braked her considerable speed.

She was violently thrown against the armature panel of her ship as the braking forces took sudden effect. Then she switched to reverse with utmost acceleration in an attempt to ram their pursuer.

The other taxi had noticed her braking manoeuvre much too late. Kuri raced back under full power and seemed to smash into her opponent when he veered away in a defensive movement at the last moment. She heard a crash behind her. Her taxi began to vibrate violently and spiralled down in tight curves.

But the hostile aircraft plunged straight down toward the ground with screaming engines after it overturned and lost a door with a man tumbling out behind it.

Kuri's wrists were seized by 2 hands. She was forced away from the controls by Fellmer Lloyd who was suddenly his old self again. With skilful manipulations he counteracted the wild gyrations of the taxi and stopped its dangerous dive. After regaining control he steered it back on the old course. "Thank you, Kuri!" he said softly and added: "Don't get your hopes up, the others aren't going to crash. They'll soon have their airplane straightened out again."

"Fellmer..."

He shook his head. "I'll explain later. Wait! Jidif just died. I can't sense him any more." Kuri looked at him with astonished eyes. Suddenly she realized that the man at her side was no Prebonian and that Asargud had only pretended to be one.

Lloyd's tired face was bathed in sweat. He turned to the girl and admitted: "No, Kuri, I'm no Prebonian and neither was Asargud. Do you understand now that I can read thoughts?"

The superb Arkonide Aerial Control organization had not failed to observe the wild dogfight of the 2 taxis. I clearly marked police craft stopped the fleeing taxis and forced them to land on the Administration building.

Fellmer Lloyd made no further attempt to escape but he didn't know what to expect from the police after he landed.

"The thermo-beamer!" Kuri reminded him of the weapon.

He was amused by her concern. He pulled out a paper from his pocket and showed her a license, a flawless duplicate produced by the Solar Defence.

After the landing he presented the license to the haughty Arkonide who had gingerly removed his thermo-beamer and retained it. The Arkonide eagerly looked at the license which he had been unexpectedly handed. "Check it!" he said gruffly to the Springer dozing next to him.

The Arkonide and the Springer intended to make a hyperradio inquiry to the planet Prebon, 794 light-years distant from Arkon. Lloyd, who read the mind of the 2 men, knew that he wouldn't leave this office as a free man if the Solar Defence had made the slightest mistake in faking the license.

Kuri remained in the background during the investigation. The girl was not considered to be under suspicion. Then the Arkonide received a report from the city. He was the only one who could hear the message but Lloyd learned its contents from him by telepathy. The Arkonide Police had found the 2nd taxi which had fled. It was equipped with an extremely powerful engine and had a converter which was used to supply energy to rayguns. However there was no trace of the occupants to be found.

The Arkonide studied the Prebonian thoughtfully. The report he had been given confirmed many of the details the arrested man had stated.

Lloyd waited with a little apprehension for the result of the hyperradio call to Prebon. He had to be patient for another 10 minutes. Then he knew the answer when the Springer returned to the office with the license in his hand. The Solar Defence had worked meticulously.

"The license is in order, lord," the Galactic trader announced servilely to the Arkonide. However the latter's suspicions were not yet allayed.

"How can Prebon issue a license for Volat and...?"

The Springer interrupted him: "The license shows the seal of the Arkon Administration of Prebon and it's registered under #666 748 54/KR by the robot-brain government on Arkon."

The explanation of the Springer satisfied the Arkonide. He reluctantly returned the gun and the license to Lloyd and growled: "But you won't get away without paying a stiff fine for your violation of the airspace law!"

Half an hour later Lloyd was found guilty. The court slapped a high fine on him and he had barely enough money with him to pay the penalty. The pitiful sum he had left wasn't even enough to pay the automaton of, an airtaxi.

Kuri had neglected to take money with her when they were forced to depart so hastily from her apartment. Lloyd remembered the Arkonide girl at the administration of the spaceport. "Where is a videophone booth?" he asked Kuri.

Before she could point it out to him, Lloyd's extra-sensor raised a new alarm. The adversary from the region of the supranatural attacked him again!

Someone tried to take possession of the cosmic agent's thoughts and Lloyd felt the alarming emptiness in his brain again.

However he was able to rebuff the telepathic compulsion with his mental powers. With his extrasensory organ he determined the direction from which he was assailed and he perceived a brainwave pattern that was rife with hate.

Lloyd fought back with all his might while Kuri looked around with frantic eyes, suspicious she might see the enemy of her companion in any person.

Just as Lloyd broke through to his opponent with a concentrated telepathic effort, the brain of the intruder was shielded by a strong hypno-block, so that he lunged into a void with his mental counter thrust.

A hypno and an esper had joined their vicious forces against him! "Thebosses?" he wondered out loud.

At this moment Lloyd was animated by a single desire: flight! He knew he was in no condition to withstand a 3rd hypnotic whirlwind attack. He was still physically shaken by the hypnotic onslaught against his will on his flight with Kuri in the airtaxi and the tormented part of his brain felt burned out.

They took the antigrav elevator and went up to the roofport although it was useless to put distance between him and the hypno for whom a few kilometres more or less made no difference. His enemy was only a few floors farther below in the building.

"Nothing is coming as yet," Kuri heard her companion whisper. He displayed an eerie calm in the face of danger. Only once had Fellmer Lloyd acted irresponsibly and rashly but he had never again committed a serious mistake. 60 years ago on the planet Vagabond he had jeopardized the lives of Rhodan and many of his comrades by his carelessness but now the lives of billions of people on Earth depended on him!

After they reached the roofport Fellmer saw a 2-man police craft. The hatch was open and the engine in idling position. The Springer pilot lolled around the telescopic support leg of another high-speed spaceship, talking to a girl.

"Quick!" Fellmer Lloyd pushed Kuri into the police craft. They repeated the routine they had already practiced before when they seized the airtaxi on the little square in Kuklon. Kuri fell back into her seat and Lloyd took the other one. The hatch slammed shut and the automatic lock snapped in.

The pilot standing at the speed spacer heard the click, looked inadvertently back and saw his craft soar straight up into the sky. His shouts of alarm were not heard by Lloyd.

Lloyd put his hypno-beamer into Kuri's hand, saying: "Give me a shot when you see my face contort again. Don't ask questions and don't hesitate a second. It's better to do it unnecessarily than a moment too late. Can you fly this craft?"

She looked speechlessly at the weapon in her hand.

Lloyd searched the airspace intensively and he picked the Chief Radio Officer of the Arkon Building for his telepathic probe. However the man had no knowledge of the police craft's theft.

The mutant did 3 things simultaneously: he gave Kuri instructions where to fly in case he became incapacitated by the hypno-weapon; he showed her how to operate the ship, keeping his eyes peeled for pursuers who might appear in the sky before long; and he maintained his telepathic control of the Arkon Administration's radio centre.

The police craft had quickly reached its top speed and they were a few hundred kilometres away from Kuklon. when he received the first warning shot from a concealed ground battery with an order to land.

Lloyd dived toward the ground in a breathtaking steep curve in an attempt to escape close above the surface since he knew that the Arkonide ray-cannons could not fire below an angle of 15°.

He levelled his ship out again when enormous hypnotic forces reached once more for his will. He moaned with a twisted face and was thrown into convulsions.

Without batting an eyelash, Kuri let him have the full force of the hypno-beamer. Under the 3-second beam his body became a human shell without a mind.

With the weapon in her lap, Kuri took over the controls. Although the Arkonide ship handled as easy as a toy, it required some experience to fly it. But what Kuri lacked in experience she made up by her determination to conquer the invisible danger with her companion.

In a daring manoeuvre she streaked through the air almost at ground level and the glaring energy stream from the battery position behind her was unable to harm her. It shot at a 15° angle into the sky and was lost in the sunlight of Hesperais.

The dark line of the forest belt became visible in the distance at the same time a tiny flashing point appeared on her right. With calm perseverance Kuri pushed her engine to the limit. It had to run only a few more seconds before reaching her goal. However the pressure absorbers failed to resist the enormous deceleration forces. Kuri was thrown with 5 or 6G against the instrument panel as the ship zoomed over the forest and drifted close to the vast deck of leaves. Suddenly her engine was struck by a grazing shot from the pursuing ship.

Before Kuri could prevent it, the tiny vehicle crashed into a huge treetop. The bouncing branches and the action of the absorber eased the impact. The ship turned around its axis, slipped off the branches and fell into the jungle below the dense cover of leaves.

The power generator of the ship and the converter still functioned. The young woman watched the instruments and did exactly what Lloyd had showed her.

After dropping 70 meters out of the tree, she hit the antigrav lever and the ship settled gently on the ground.

Kuri freed Lloyd, who had slid under the instrument panel. With one hand she opened the hatch and dragged Lloyd behind her with the other. She knew that the threat was still hanging over them. The young Springer girl hoisted the unconscious man on her strong shoulders and headed deeper into the jungle.

The police craft of the Arkonides kept circling over their heads in vain.

8/ THE SHADOW SOLIDIFIES

Fellmer Lloyd grinned with delight. He had every reason to be pleased. The Arkonide Administration was exasperated because it had no definite clues as to who had spirited away their police craft. The main positronic computer had decided with an allowance of 5.32% that the Prebonian who had just been sentenced to a high fine would not commit a 2nd violation by logical standards.

At least Kuri Onere accepted his word for this evaluation although her companion had not been back in Kuklon.

"I must leaf through the thoughts of the Arkonides," he had said 10 minutes earlier and then became transfixed in a state which Kuri described as 'looking inward'.

Now he quietly smiled at her. His admiration for the girl kept growing steadily. Finally he sighed: "Why can't all Galactic Traders be as inspiring as you? How beautiful and peaceful life could be in the Galaxy!"

She felt embarrassed and tried to change the subject. "Are our 2 unseen persecutors Galactic Traders too?"

Lloyd no longer suffered from the shot of the hypno-weapon. The last side effects had subsided an hour ago. He hesitated with his answer because he was not sure of the facts. "Probably, Kuri, but they could also be Arkonides. One of them can do the same thing you can accomplish with the hypno-beamer—he can rob everybody he chooses of his will and impose another one on him. In one respect the natural hypno-power is stronger and less hazardous to one's health, as well as longer lasting than the most efficient dose jolt from a hypno-beamer. The other Springer or Arkonide tried to read my thoughts but he's not particularly good at it. Nevertheless he represents a real menace due to the collaboration with the hypno. The problem is how to defeat their sinister intrigues. Have I told you already that they're probably guilty of murdering Getlof Asargud?"

* * * *

During the last days of July by the Terrestrial calendar—but 4342 light-years from Earth—Lloyd finished assembling his small private army on Volat. Without the help of the sympathetic insect people he could not have managed to put together such a staunch force. He would have been unable to hire such dependable mercenaries with all the lavish financial means at his disposal.

The Volatians, who were only seldom to be seen in Kuklon, nevertheless enjoyed excellent connections inside the city. Lloyd was never able to get to the bottom of their relations. Whenever he raised the question it was suggested to him to ask the Omniscient Mother and they always intimated that he stood in great favour with the queen.

Lloyd had twice dared to sneak into Kuklon. Kuri had returned to the city since his first visit. She had hired the Springers Ghal, Zintz, Oslag and Ulmin, who for a price would have abducted the Arkon Administrator Mansrin himself and dragged him from his bed to Thator Square.

3 Volatians, who continually travelled back & forth between their queen's residence and Kuklon, enlisted an inhabitant of the planet Haspro and 3 nose-giants from the Gfirtio system in Fellmer Lloyd's cause. The nose-giants even aroused the amusement of the most cosmopolitan colonial officials of Arkon. With their hairy furs, and 3 legs and arms, the creatures looked at first glance comical and dumb. However they didn't take 2nd place to the Springers in their acumen for big business and they had a fine nose for a profitable deal. Furthermore they could boast of enormous physical strength and their

fearlessness was proverbial.

The creatures from the planet Haspro resembled the fauns of the Greek myths in their shaggy appearance. They had an unusual talent for arithmetic and were in great demand wherever positronic brains were too expensive. That they also had a photographic memory and never forgot anything no matter how briefly they had seen it was something that Lloyd learned only later by coincidence.

Lloyd had been careful not to make a 'mail drop' out of Kuri's address. All his information concerning his private army was channelled through O-offtu-O, who was the only Volatian to have an apartment at Kuklon between the spaceport and the city. Lloyd was afraid to ask whether his name had been spelled correctly in the written foreign language.

The cosmic agent had established his headquarters in the forest 80 kilometres west of the Gazelle's landing place. His little transceiver was silent. The other station was in O-offtu-O's apartment. An hour earlier a Volatian had left the mutant again, going in the direction of the capital, and Lloyd was still occupied with sorting out the information which had been delivered to him when his receiver sounded a short beep.

Lloyd glanced thoughtfully at the transceiver and sighed. He used the next 15 minutes to obliterate every trace of his forest headquarters. The beep had been the arranged signal that his presence was urgently required at Kuklon.

As soon as Hesperais had set, he climbed into the somewhat outmoded Xun model which the Springer Ulmin had secured for him and flew to Kuklon.

The showdown with the 2 Arkonides or Springers—the hypno and the telepath—commenced.

* * * *

At O-offtu-O's place he met the Springers Ghal and Oslag, the being from Haspro and one of the nose-giants. Lloyd studied them discreetly. He knew they were much more interested in finding out who he was than in trailing the unscrupulous TIRR Uxlad and discovering through him where the 2 bosses were hiding.

Kuri Onere had never learned either that Lloyd's home was Terra, which was said to have been transformed into a sun about 60 years ago under the concentrated attack of the Galactic Traders and the Mounders, whereas this fate had actually befallen a dead planet in the Betelgeuse system.

Oslag had an important message. "I've seen both bosses," he claimed, giving a detailed description. Lloyd sharply scrutinized the young man to check his veracity. The Springer spoke truthfully yet the mutant shook his head incredulously. According to his description neither one of the 2 bosses could be an Arkonide or a Springer. But Oslag stuck to his story and now the inhabitant of Haspro supported his claim. He revealed his photographic memory and recalled having seen the 2 bosses also.

Fellmer Lloyd didn't permit his excitement to become visible. His whole theory collapsed beneath the fact that his opponents were neither Arkonides nor Galactic Traders. Where could these 2 bosses come from?

The others awaited his decision with utmost interest. Fellmer Lloyd wouldn't have been Rhodan's pupil if he hadn't known that offence is the best defence. He was anxious to have Kuri in the vicinity when the action unfolded near the spaceport at the Springer offices. His assistant had determined beyond doubt that the bosses had chosen that building as their base of operations.

One hour later Kuri arrived, almost at midnight, at O-offtu-O's apartment. The 2 Springers, the nose-giant and his friend from Haspro had already left and taken up their positions.

* * * *

On the expressway between Kuklon and the spaceport the heavy traffic of the metropolis rushed by without regard to the midnight hour.

The vast spaceport—the springboard to the Galaxy which lay beyond the ramparts of the Great Empire—was swarming with thousands of passengers scurrying back and forth. Huge spaceships arrived and departed in an unbroken stream.

The expressway was lined on both sides by rows of high rise buildings. They were not as big and pompous as the edifices around Thator Square but they fully showed the wealth of each of the Springer clans conducting their transactions here.

The Galactic traders were by nature gypsies who preferred to roam between the stars. Entire clans, sometimes comprising as many as 10,000 members, with very few exceptions made the cylinder-shaped spaceships their home where they lived and died.

The small minority that had become more sedentary had not broken its ties with the clans. The invisible bonds between the migratory and stationary Galactic Traders seemed to survive eternities.

These reflections passed through Lloyd's mind before he stopped and left the vehicle with Kuri and the Volatian O-offtu-O 100 meters from the Springers' office building whose colourful illumination stood out against the night of Volat.

Inside were the 2 culprits—the hypno and the telepath—who had murdered Ralph Sikeron and had tried more than once to slay Fellmer Lloyd.

Lloyd took a little radio set out of his pocket and handed it to Kuri. Pointing to the restaurant where thousands of different people were eating as they waited for the departure of their spaceships, Lloyd said: "Wait for me in there, Kuri! Don't do anything until you hear from me. I don't know yet what my message will be. Here! Take this too!"

With a look of surprise in her dark eyes she involuntarily took a step back, precariously close to the highway where the traffic roared by. Then she reluctantly accepted the thermo-beamer.

"And this just in case, Kuri," he said with a faint smile, handing her a license. She didn't have to ask whether the license would pass a possible inspection by the authorities if she had to prove that she was duly permitted to carry such a weapon—she already *knew* that the license issued in the name of Kuri

Oneré was genuine as far as the Arkonides were concerned. She hid the thermo-beamer and the radio set on her body.

"If I should fail to come back, Kuri, my friends will come to Volat and look for me. You'll know how to recognize my friends. Tell them: '*3 Bells and Shadow of the Mutant Master!*' Kuri, you're a marvellous girl!"

And for the first time he saw tears in the eyes of a Springer.

He pensively followed the girl with his eyes as she ran across the highway between the fast-moving vehicles and entered the restaurant where tireless robot waiters hurried to and fro, serving the host of travellers.

O-offtu-O had silently watched his friends and 'listened' to Lloyd's telepathic emanations. His antennae quivered excitedly and Lloyd 'heard' the aborigine of Volat ask: "Who are you?"

With great sincerity the cosmic agent answered simply: "I was born on a faraway star, O-offtu-O, and I've only one desire: I want to see the people of all worlds live in peace!"

No Arkonide or Springer—or Terranian—would have been satisfied with this answer. But the Volatian didn't question him; he merely said: "The Omniscient Mother wants you to know she's praying for your success."

And Lloyd, who had gone through Rhodan's hard school and had fought many battles for the Solar Imperium in scores of years that had made him tough, was touched by emotions.

In his action at the Springer building near the highway Lloyd was assisted by 20 men whom he divided in 3 groups. The Springer Ghal was in charge of the first group and Zintz led the second. 5 men were held back as reserve.

The *Dure 5*, a cylindrical freighter which was loaded with 43,600 Gech-skins in its huge holds, was waiting on the spaceport. Its captain Dure-an had left the office building a few minutes ago. The Springer was in a very unfriendly mood, cursing in his thoughts the greedy broker who had arranged the transport and now had haggled for hours, demanding 15% from the sale of the merchandise.

Capt. Dure-an kept thinking about the luxurious office of his broker and began to rave about all the Springers who had become city-dwellers, condemning the whole lot of them as avaricious hogs. Lloyd left the boiling mad trader to his thoughts and proceeded to look for the broker whose office was located on the 46th floor according to the information from the captain.

As soon as Lloyd concentrated his thoughts on the occupants of the office, he perceived a succession of various brainwave patterns, one of which seemed to be familiar. He focused once more on it with increased intensity and was suddenly as thunderstruck as if the whole planet Volat had been blown apart. He recognized the person by his brainwave pattern!

It was not an Arkonide nor a Springer—it was a man from Earth!

That hypno was none other than Gregor Tropnow—the man who had once worked for Perry Rhodan!

Tropnow was unaware that someone else intruded on his thoughts. He was busy increasing his hold on the broker of the Galactic Trader and turning him into a helpless slave. Gregor Tropnow's thoughts were

dominated by greed and hate.

A cold shudder ran down Lloyd's spine as he stood 46 floors below outside the huge Springer building. The mutant was consumed with hate for Perry Rhodan!

Lloyd paused a moment in order to collect his thoughts. First of all he had to grasp the horrendous discovery that Terra was menaced by one of its own sons.

"Mutant Master..." he moaned like a man awaking from a nightmare. He wiped his brow.

Gregor Tropnow was a hypno from the followers of the Mutant Master. After that evil genius had been destroyed by Perry Rhodan, Tropnow had offered his services to the New Power. Rhodan had deployed him several times in the Mutant Corps but he was considered to be highly unreliable and to have an unrestrained temper. One of his worst faults was his inability to judge his talent wisely.

Now Gregor Tropnow had fled to Volat! He had murdered Ralph Sikeron—he and his accomplice. But who was the other one?

While Lloyd's teammates wondered why they were given no further instructions, he racked his brain about the identity of the 2nd conspirator. Lloyd kept pondering the description of the person his helper from Haspro had given him.

Nobody saw how his hands were clenched into fists!

Gregor Tropnow's cohort, the telepath, had detected him and tried to take over his mind. However for the first time in his life the mutant succeeded with a momentous mental struggle to erect a barrier around his thoughts. At the same time he noticed the strangely formed hand of the Volatian touch his shoulder and additional power flow into him. His resistance grew and swiftly became so strong that his own telepathic powers came into play and enabled him to recognize—Nomo Yatuhin!

This time he was not amazed to discover that the 2nd traitor was also an Earthling. Now he was anxious to hide his track which Nomo Yatuhin had picked up as quickly as possible.

He wondered whether he would be able again to put a shield around his thoughts. And would the Volatian lend him fresh powers again? It was a phenomenon which puzzled him and which he later found impossible to explain.

Lloyd made an attempt and then changed his mind and quickly called off all further moves against the office.

It had suddenly dawned on him that to go on with his plans at this point would mean almost certain death for him and his comrades. First he would have to determine the extent of the organization Tropnow and Yatuhin had established here and what purposes they pursued with it.

It was sheer luck that Tropnow was occupied on the 46th floor with the intense hypnotic treatment of the broker and had therefore given orders not to be disturbed under any circumstances.

When the badly shaken Nomo Yatuhin finally managed to talk to Tropnow after 2 hours and reported about his 2 short and fruitless contacts with Fellmer Lloyd, the hypno-mutant swore horribly.

9/ INCREDIBLE CONFUSION

Gregor Tropnow did not seem to be severely troubled the next morning by Fellmer Lloyd's latest appearance. He stretched out in his chair and condescendingly eyed the nervous Japanese Nomo Yatuhin who was biting his fingernails. Despite his rebellious character Yatuhin was a very vacillating person who had to be led and preferred to be submissive as long as his associates corresponded to his mentality.

Gregor Tropnow was a perfect match for him. Both hated Perry Rhodan for the same reason: Rhodan had failed to take them to the planet of eternal life, Wanderer, to receive the biological cell shower which interrupted the aging process of the human body for more than 6 decades.

Rhodan knew why he had excluded Yatuhin and Tropnow from this gift but he had not considered the devastating consequences his decision eventually would evoke.

The hypno Tropnow was 88 years old and Yatuhin was one year older. However they didn't look their age and they didn't feel like old men. Biomedical drugs which in the meantime had become part of Terrestrial medicine had accomplished this miracle of rejuvenation but they could not completely arrest the deterioration of the body, merely slow it down, whereas the cell shower treatment provided by the mysterious being on Wanderer effectively stopped any aging process for the duration. By contrast the biomedical drugs in time lost their efficacy because the cells became too old to react to the therapy.

Gregor Tropnow slouched in his chair and admonished the telepath: "Stop running around and sit down, Yatuhin. You can make even the most phlegmatic Springer nervous. Better do something about finding Lloyd. He'll be a tougher nut to crack than Sikeron. I bet he's already snooping around us and..."

Yatuhin gazed at Tropnow with frightened eyes. Tropnow sniggered maliciously. "This is already the 2nd time that you let Lloyd get away from me, Nomo..." He suddenly leaned forward and whispered: "I'm going to force Rhodan to let me have the cell shower—or his Solar Imperium will be destroyed! But heaven knows whether you'll ever get the cell shower. You're such a coward you're ready to faint. What are you going to do once we've caught Rhodan and have him in our power?"

"So far we couldn't even lay our hands on Fellmer Lloyd," the Japanese telepath defended himself, bringing Tropnow from the land of fantasies back to reality.

However his remark made little impression on the hypno. "You bet I'm going to get him—and I'll tie up your hands when I've got him. You're not going to bash in his head as you did Sikeron! Yatuhin, don't you understand that our time is limited? The Springers won't cooperate forever. One of these days we won't be able to put them off any longer with promises and they'll insist that we tell them where the planet is that's bursting with treasures. On that day we'll have gambled our best card against Rhodan. Can't you even think one day ahead and..."

Nomo Yatuhin was a telepath and although he was a cantankerous coward, he was not as stupid as Tropnow insinuated. He interrupted his partner in an icy tone: "Tropnow, don't get any ideas of booting me out and trying to win Fellmer Lloyd over to your side. You know I can dish it out too!"

"Damn mind reader?" Tropnow snorted, half-frightened and half-amused. "Let's not forget while we're

bickering that TIRR Uxlad will be here any moment. I want him to pay a little closer attention to Kuri Onere."

"You better cure him first of making offensive remarks to all the girls!" Yatuhi objected vigorously. "If you had done this at the first treatment you gave him, he wouldn't have pulled such a boner with Kuri Onere and we could've used her to lead Fellmer Lloyd into a trap."

The hypno ignored his remonstrations. He was already busy thinking about something else and said in a low voice: "Leave Lloyd to me, Nomo, but try to find out what significance the code words *3 Bells* have for Earth. I must know it before I take the next steps."

* * * *

"I can do it from now on whenever it's necessary," Lloyd said to Kuri, his eyes radiant. He slowly, turned around to O-offtu-O and nodded to him gratefully. He owed it to this aborigine of Volat that he had found the way to block his brain against any unwanted foreign trespass.

Last night he had accomplished it twice with the help of the Volatian. Each time O-offtu-O had put his peculiarly formed hand on his shoulder, and an invisible energy had flowed to him.

For 3 hours Lloyd had practiced to achieve it alone and now he was confident. "As long as the hypno doesn't get to me..." was all he said but the way he shook his head was explicit enough.

For this reason Kuri sat across from him with the hypno-beamer in her hand ready to shoot at him the moment Lloyd's face became contorted.

* * * *

Toward noon the Springer Zintz arrived. He had adopted the cause of the Prebonian as his own and seemed concerned. He blurted excitedly: "I still can't believe what happened to me in that office building. I ran into TIRR Uxlad, Aser Uxlad's youngest son, who claims space travelling doesn't agree with him, which nobody believes. I started to talk to him because I was surprised to see him there and not at the Uxlad House on Thator Square but TIRR failed to respond to me. I turned around and caught up with him in the lobby, where I spoke to him again. Nothing happened this time either. He simply didn't recognize me and so I decided to follow him."

Zintz related some important and some irrelevant facts. He had followed TIRR Uxlad to the landing field of the spaceport and entered the *Re-9* behind him. He managed to get as far as the Control Centre without much trouble. Although the hatch was open he had been afraid to walk in because of an unwritten law of the Great Empire forbidding admittance to spaceship control centres for strangers without special permission.

"Then," Zintz continued, "I observed that some coördinates and transition data were inserted into the

memory bank. This was the end of TIRR's visit to the *Re-9*. I left before he came out of the Control Centre. The officers in the spaceship didn't seem to notice anything unusual about TIRR's behaviour. At least I didn't hear them ask any questions."

When Zintz had come to this point in his report, Lloyd was seized by the most fearful misgivings. He controlled himself with a colossal effort and applied his telepathy to probe Zintz' thoughts.

His Springer didn't understand what he was saying. The coördinates which he now repeated were just another place in the Galaxy to him. How could he suspect that the positions described the space sector of the Milky Way where the Solar system was located?

Lloyd let Zintz keep talking without listening to him. The most important question he had to decide now was whether to inform the waiting *Lotus* of his discovery or take action on his own.

He had trouble making up his mind but the longer he reflected the less he liked the idea of calling the *Lotus* by hyperradio. Even the shortest code message entailed the danger of being picked up by the Arkonide monitoring stations which would start a new search for his *Gazelle*. At worst it could also jeopardize the *Lotus* and compel a retreat in flight.

Zintz was already on his way again to pay the office of the Springers a visit when it became clear to Lloyd what he had to do.

* * * *

Nomo Yatuhi, the feeble telepath with the unstable character, elided his inner concentration. He was no longer able to find Fellmer Lloyd. Although his telepathic probing told him Rhodan's agent was somewhere in the neighbourhood, he could not succeed in invading his thoughts and several times he observed that his efforts were sidetracked when he believed he had located his subject.

Gregor Tropnow was furious at his accomplice. He was more ruthless than the Japanese and never wavered in his determination to blackmail Perry Rhodan for the prize of gaining the life-giving cell shower for himself. Yatuhi's efforts had been frustrated for hours but the hypno realized that the failure of the Japanese was not all his fault, because he had worked until recently, albeit reluctantly, for Rhodan. Tropnow came to the conclusion that Lloyd had succeeded by some natural or artificial means to shield his thoughts against telepathic intrusions. He had experienced it himself during his latest attack at the time when he pursued Lloyd as he fled in the police craft. He had gotten hold of him only to lose him immediately because Kuri put Lloyd in a lethargic state with a shot from the hypno-beamer.

Suddenly he noticed Yatuhi making a warning gesture. The telepath was receiving thoughts. His face expressed amazement and then fear. The hypno didn't dare disturb his partner. He breathlessly followed the changes on Yatuhi's face.

"They're in the house," Nomo whispered. "A Springer by the name of Zintz came to see Killi. He inquired about TIRR Uxlad and claims to have seen him here in the house. Now he wants to know if Jidif was here during the last few days while he thinks: *I'll find out what tricks you boys are up to and what you did with TIRR Uxlad!* Now that fool Killi tells him the truth, that Jidif died when he fell out of an airtaxi."

As soon as Nomo Yatuhin told Tropnow where the snooping Springer was and with whom he talked, he took over and imposed his will on Zintz with his hypnotic power. As Zintz was speaking to their employee Killi, he was put under the hypno's thrall with such thorough and unnoticeable finesse that he kept believing he acted on his own free will and he had no inkling of being the slave of a hypno.

"Well, I've already told you all I know about them," Killi replied in a friendly tone, thinking that Zintz's change of attitude was due to a normal change of mind. "You must admit that I can't tell you what I don't know."

Zintz, who now was the helpless victim of Tropnow, made a nonchalant gesture. "Sure, but I want to go upstairs. Are they in, yet?"

"Who, Zintz?"

"The bosses," Zintz replied with a faint smile. "I'll find my way. See you later!"

He left the desk of Killi, who stared at him in astonishment. "Since when is he one of us?" he wondered. "Funny, why did he behave so aggressively at first?"

* * * *

Gregor Tropnow looked thoughtfully at his telepathic partner.

Zintz, one of the 19 members of Lloyd's band, had just left the office on the 46th floor to return to Lloyd in O-offtu-O's apartment. The door softly clicked into its lock behind him.

"And now, Nomo?" the hypno, tried to elicit his accomplice's opinion with his question.

"Now you must take care of Lloyd!" Yatuhin demanded.

"Oh, you'll never learn to act with that certain aplomb," Tropnow replied disconsolately. "Didn't you hear my orders to Zintz before I dismissed him? You saw that I gave him a neat little thermo-beamer. He's going to plug Fellmer Lloyd with it. Without him his team will be worthless. But if they should give us any trouble, I have only to give a little hint to the Administration." He chortled and rubbed his hands.

"Aren't you going to warn the *Re-9*?" Nomo Yatuhin asked, perplexed. "The ship must be warned in case something goes haywire and Zintz fails to eliminate Rhodan's agent. Why don't you get Lloyd under your control?" Yatuhin sputtered with obvious excitement.

"The *Re-9* will not be warned!" Tropnow growled. "Do I have to explain everything to you, Nomo? If I warn the *Re-9*, I'd draw the attention of Re-ganz and his officers to the coordinates and transition data which Turr Uxlad has inserted in the memory bank of the shipboard positronic and we'd take the unnecessary risk that Re-ganz would discover the secret of the Earth's position. And speaking of Earth—you still owe me an explanation! How did Jidif know that you and I are Terranians? And who told him that Lloyd is a Terranian and no Prebonian? Who else of the greedy Springers did you take into your confidence at the risk of our lives?"

Squirming under Tropnow's merciless stare, he scanned the thoughts of the hypno. At this moment Tropnow was ready to turn his accomplice into a servile tool that only obeyed the orders given by his irresistible suggestion.

"Well?" Tropnow threatened, bearing down on Yatuhin.

The Japanese answered truthfully: "I've never confided in anybody except Jidif. It happened one night when we were all drunk..." Suddenly he had a burning suspicion. "Is this the reason why Jidif was thrown out the door of the careening airtaxi?"

"The spinning of the aircraft had nothing to do with it," the hypno admitted frostily. "Jidif jumped out voluntarily." His vile grin made it plain that Jidif had fallen victim to his hypnotic powers. "And Zintz is going to rub out Lloyd with his thermo-beamer with the same calm indifference that Jidif showed when he stepped out of the taxi at an altitude of 2000 meters."

Gregor Tropnow was a man determined to attain his goal at all costs. His energy never failed to inspire the Japanese who was easily influenced even though he was extremely rambunctious. Nomo's gullibility was one of his most serious shortcomings and it had made it very easy for Tropnow to talk him into deserting Rhodan's Mutant Corps. Subsequently they sneaked away from Gefir, one of the planets in the Great Empire 3,759 light-years away, in order to organize their conspiracy with one of the powerful Springer clans on Volat.

Ordinarily this would have been an almost insurmountable problem but due to Tropnow's uncanny talents it became a rather simple enterprise. By promising the money-grubbing Galactic traders the precise coordinates of an opulent planet heretofore unknown to them, he whetted their appetite for the priceless treasures which could be acquired by a concentrated attack and the traitors soon seemed to have the victory in their pockets.

However Gregor Tropnow and Nomo Yatuhin never intended to let the Springers conquer Terra. All their efforts were strictly aimed at one goal. They wanted to force Rhodan to lead them to the cell-shower that would extend their lives. Of course they had never been able to understand that the only reason they had been denied this gift of long life was their inability to control the serious defects of their character.

Now the telepath concentrated his thoughts on the task at hand. He located Zintz and followed him on his way, checking up on the thoughts which had been suggested to him. "Now he had reached the apartment house where the Volatian lives," he informed Tropnow. "He's entering the antigrav and is going up. The Volatian opens the door and Zintz steps into the apartment. Now he sees Fellmer Lloyd..."

At this moment a huge Springer rushed into the office of the 2 traitors and interrupted the concentration of the telepath.

"Keep out!" the hypno bellowed.

The young man resented the uncalled for order and yelled back in the same loud tone: "Some people have knocked out 5 of our men in the lobby!" With these words the Springer ran out again and slammed the door behind him.

Neither of the 2 rebellious mutants was a great strategist. They acted strictly on the spur of the moment.

Gregor Tropnow swore angrily and dashed out of the room, calling out to the hesitant Japanese: "Come with me! They must be Fellmer Lloyd's men!"

* * * *

Lloyd had pulled off something that the hypno considered to be impossible: he had breached Tropnow's thoughts! He knew that he waited for Zintz's return and he also knew that Zintz was under hypnosis and was armed with a thermo-beamer to kill him.

Zintz never made it past O-ofttu-O. The Volatian hit him on the head with his insect-fist and the Springer fell to the floor. He seemed to have amazing power in his fists. O-ofttu-O quickly removed the thermo-beamer from the pocket of the Springer sprawled out on the floor and tied him up.

A few minutes later Lloyd, Kuri and the Volatian left the apartment. They were forced to abandon their meeting place since the 2 traitorous mutants had discovered it and they had to leave the unconscious Zintz behind in the apartment.

As they descended in the antigrav, Lloyd briefed his companions on his plan. The diversionary manoeuvre started in the lobby of the Springer building by 6 members of his group was still in full swing. His helpers had gone into action on the exact minute with fierce ardour. Lloyd had given his men strict orders not to fire their thermo-beamers under any circumstances and to be careful not to strike lethal blows with the butt of their weapons. Lloyd still hoped to be able to crush the secret organization of the 2 mutants without shedding blood and he had planned his entire strategy with this in mind.

Now he gave Kuri and O-ofttu-O his final instructions. They were to wait in front of the spaceport's administration building for his return, which would take at least one hour. He wanted to blow up the positronic of the Springer ship Re9 in broad daylight!

Kuri looked at him with desperate and imploring eyes but Lloyd didn't respond to her mute pleas. The Volatian followed them inconspicuously without letting on that he belonged to the man and the girl. Heretofore no Arkonide or Galactic trader had experienced any contacts between the Volatians and alien races. The distant reserve of the natives of Volat was proverbial.

They preferred not to use the public transportation since they didn't have very far to walk to the administration building.

"Do you have to go through with it?" Kuri begged him without hope in a final bid.

"It's the only way, Kuri. I've already had to sacrifice 6 of my commandos. They won't be able to hold back the whole gang for more than 30 minutes. I'll have to have done my part by then—before the bosses have time to think. Wait here for me..." He didn't finish his sentence. He gazed fondly at Kuri. Then he cast a last cautious glance at the Volatian.

"The Omniscient Mother is praying for you!" was the message he received from O-ofttu-O.

Lloyd calmly sat down in one of the express-cars which scooted between the administration building and the distant berths of the spaceships and called "*Re-9*" into the phonomatic.

The positronically controlled vehicle was set in motion, went around 2 others and steered between several alien humanoids till it reached the vast landing field and drove in the direction of the cylindrical ship of the Re-ganz clan.

Fellmer Lloyd knew only too well his imminent action should be called 'Mission Kamikaze'.

10/ INCREDIBLE CONFUSION

The *Re-9* was a 300-meter-long ship in excellent condition. It was stationed behind 2 spherical Arkon ships and between a couple of cargo vessels.

Lloyd made his driverless taxi stop in front of the Arkon ships. However the door remained locked until he remembered to put the correct amount in the charge register. At that he was able to leave the car.

The 2 Arkonide spheres stood on enormous telescopic supports. The loading ramps were extended between the legs and he could see some robots working behind the hatches.

As he passed the spaceships the cosmic agent thought about the mammoth Brain on Arkon that was holding the empire together, instead of concentrating on his imminent task. Without robots the Arkonide Empire would have been broken up, long ago as both Galactic Traders and Aras, the medical specialists, considered it a bone of contention.

He didn't go straight to the *Re-9*. A small auxiliary ship near the cargo vessel attracted his attention. He walked along the side where the cockpit was invitingly ajar and peered furtively inside, admiring the interior with a faint smile. The little ship was a super fast craft with a powerful engine capable of 5G acceleration.

Lloyd suddenly changed his direction, like a man who had become aware that he walked the wrong way. On his way to the loading ramp of the *Re-9* in the forward 3rd of the ship, he passed 3 Arkonides and 2 Springers who paid no attention to him.

Between the spaceships he could see the administration building at a distance of 10 kilometres from where 3 vehicles raced across the field. Lloyd quickly ascertained that his helpers were inside and a check of his watch revealed that his 10 commandos moved into their positions at the precise time.

The car in which Ulmin and 2 others sat stopped close behind him, pretending to take part in the normal daily activities around the spaceships.

Lloyd transmitted his last concise instructions through Ulmin. The eyes of the Galactic trader grew wider the more Lloyd talked to him. Finally he broke in: "And all we're supposed to do is cover you with our fire? Against whom? What if you have to fight half the crew of the *Re-9*?"

Lloyd silenced him with a wave of his hand. The mutant was not a man of many words and grand gestures. "You'll soon have plenty to do. Watch out for the Springers from the office building and especially for 2 men who look like Prebonians. They are very dangerous and you must blast them at once

with your hypno-beamer. Also keep an eye on the crew of these 2 Arkonide ships. You don't have to worry about the crew of the *Re-9* : The men are on leave in the city for the day. There are only 8 Springers left behind on board."

"By all the stars in the firmament!" Ulmin interrupted him again, "how do you know all this? Can you read thoughts or how do you do it?"

"I know how to figure out what actions our opponents are most likely to take, Ulmin. That isn't much of an art." His answer left the Springer confounded. He didn't know what to say anymore and went back in a dubious mood.

* * * *

Because everybody was coming and going on the spaceport of Kuklon as if they were at home, Lloyd had no trouble entering the *Re-9* . He casually walked up the forward loading ramp, stepped through the wide-open hatch and reached the intermediate deck of the ship.

He had determined by a somewhat cursory probe that only 8 Springers manned the ship. The fact that there were really 10 crewmembers left aboard he still had to learn by an unpleasant surprise.

The main corridor of the cylindrical ship looked wide and empty. Aided by his telepathic faculties he embarked on a concentrated investigation of all rooms. His mental sensor was activated. It was almost automatically on the alert but so far had produced no results.

Suddenly he picked up a thought and a brainwave pattern together. A Springer whose duties had kept him aboard the *Re-9* while his friends visited the amusement centres of Kuklon uttered a curse because the time passed so slowly. He decided to go to the Control Centre of the ship where he could kill time in a game of chance with 2 of his comrades.

Lloyd quickened his step and pulled his hypno-beamer out of his pocket without undue haste. He wanted to get to the door of the Springer's cabin at the same time he left his room.

He was only 2 steps away from the door when it opened. He fired a silent shot from his hypno-weapon and concentrated on the mind of the Springer with a firm command to continue on his way to the Control Centre and to start the game with his comrades.

The young Springer never winced nor did he find it peculiar that the stranger accompanied him to the Control Centre. He had no inkling that he was under the influence of another person.

Lloyd quickly calculated his chances of success. To his knowledge there were 8 men on guard duty aboard the *Re-9* and 3 of them were officers who were now in their cabins. As soon as, he had gained hypnotic control of the 2 men in the Control Room and made them follow his orders like his first hypnotic victim, he would have to face only 2 more Galactic Traders.

Through his extra-sensor he locked on to the brainwave patterns of the 2 crewmen and observed their thoughts. They were talking about girls as they sat in front of the hypercom.

"Go in and start a game of Circir with your shipmates!" Lloyd mentally ordered his victim. He stayed back and let the Springer walk ahead.

He approached the open door of the Control Room within 10 steps and tiptoed behind the hypnotized Springer who entered the room. He caught a glimpse of the pilot and copilot seats just as he received an extrasensory signal.

Not far behind him something appeared from a cabin. It didn't startle the mutant. The warped brainwave pattern indicated that it was a robot. Nevertheless Lloyd changed the weapon in his pocket. The ribbed butt of his thermo-weapon made a mistake quite impossible.

He heard the typical sound of a walking mechman. The metallic steps came closer. The robot was catching up with him.

"Is his program set for surveillance?" the cosmic agent asked himself. There was something weird about the robot. He knew from long experience how easy it was to change the program of an Arkonide robot.

Now the robot passed him and turned his head. Lloyd was scrutinized by a cold shining lens.

The automaton continued on his way but Lloyd stopped and followed it with his eyes as the robot disappeared in the Control Centre. The stare of the machine's optical lens had prodded his instincts and the mutant could rely as much on them as on his parapsychological capabilities.

Had the robot given an alarm signal?

If so, the 2 Springers on duty in the Control Centre were not aware of it. They had enthusiastically accepted the suggestion of their buddy to play Circir.

Next Lloyd scrutinized the thoughts of the 3 officers. No danger threatened from there either. Then he turned to the Springer assigned to the radio room, who was dozing peacefully. The 8th member of the crew was below in the power station, inspecting the magneto-equalizer. He was the only one who did any work.

Again Lloyd's control had been too superficial to detect the 2 additional Springers!

He looked at his watch. There were only 10 minutes left to finish his job. Unless he was able to blow up the positronic in that period his chances for escape from the *Re-9* looked dim.

Because time was getting short the mutant decided to violate a cardinal rule of Rhodan's training for his agents by putting everything on one throw of the dice.

The positronic of the *Re-9* had to be exploded or the existence of Earth would soon be known to the Great Empire—and Lloyd shuddered to think of the consequences.

* * * *

The hypno Gregor Tropnow was a raw bundle of nerves. He raged in cold fury and came close to the

breaking point. Nomo Yatuhin was terrified by the cruel ravings possessing the mind of his accomplice and went out of his way to avoid him.

The huge office complex of the Springers resembled a stirred-up swarm of wasps. The Galactic traders who didn't belong to the secret organization of the 2 mutants were unable to understand the reason for the attack on the building since there was no valuable loot on the premises that could attract robbers. But those Springers who had been lured by the traitorous masterminds with promises of enormous treasures from an unknown world outside the Empire believed they knew the motive for the attack.

However Gregor Tropnow and Nomo, Yatuhin could see beyond the mistaken beliefs of the hoodwinked Springers.

It had taken them 45 minutes to pulverize Lloyd's battle team and for 45 minutes they had been prevented from adopting crucial measures which they finally had time to consider now as the fight inside the building was terminated. The excitement slowly abated and the Arkonide police were called to the scene.

The people working in the other offices remained puzzled why the police had not been alarmed when the raid started and Gregor Tropnow was not anxious to enlighten them. He wanted to avoid at all costs that the dangerous Arkonide police might get wind of his clandestine organization and consequently had given his brutal hypnotic orders to murder Lloyd's commandos to the last man.

Neither Tropnow nor Yatuhin had physically intervened in the fighting but the hypno was a murderer nonetheless because he had abused his powers and ruthlessly driven the Galactic Traders to kill their opponents. His men were unable to understand why they had fired their thermo-weapons although the intruders had refrained from using them and they awaited the arrival of the police with great apprehension.

The treasonous pair lost no further time. Nomo had used his telepathy to find the unconscious Zintz left behind in the abandoned apartment of the Volatian and concluded that Lloyd had foiled their ruse. "I can't get a hold of Lloyd," Yatuhin replied despairingly to the nervous prodding of Tropnow after they had left the building and run to the car, followed by a combat team of 30 men.

"Then try to locate Lloyd's men!" Gregor snarled at his partner. "Hurry up or...!" He paused. He was gripped by a terrible suspicion. "Search the surroundings of the *Re-9*, Nomo!"

The telepath made out the Springer Ulmin the moment they reached their vehicle. They stopped for a second and Yatuhin whispered unnoticed to the ashen-faced Tropnow what he had read in Ulmin's mind.

Gregor Tropnow, who had followed in the footsteps of the criminal Mutant Master before he joined Perry Rhodan, now proved to be the true "Shadow of the Mutant Master". In cold blood he gave his combat team the callous hypnotic command again: *Be ready to shoot your thermo-beamers! Everybody to the Re-9!*

He glanced at his watch as the car raced away. The action against the office complex had started 58 minutes ago and it would take them 7 minutes to reach the *Re-9*, a total of 65 minutes. And Fellmer Lloyd had based his calculations on 55 minutes!

* * * *

Kuri Onere had observed 7 fast cars leaving from the Springer building and racing out to the landing field. She tried to contact Lloyd with the little transceiver he had given her but failed to reach him. She quickly switched to Ulmin's wavelength and the Springer responded at once. Ulmin was breathing audibly when she reported her observation. "Okay!" he answered and Kuri was confined to her impatient waiting again.

* * * *

Only a molten puddle was left of the robot in the Control Centre and the air was filled with foul-smelling metallic gases.

Next Lloyd went to work on the recalcitrant protective cover with his thermo-beamer and it dissolved it in a cloud.

"Damn!" He had damaged the cross-junction element. But did he really need it? Rhodan's agents had been constantly trained for more than half a century, not as specialists but as the best jacks-of-all-trades and the positronic of a Springer ship was as familiar to them as that of an Arkonide vessel. If he couldn't use the ruined element for his intended short circuit he would find another way.

Another warning signal of approaching danger! 2 of the officers stormed through the corridor toward the Control Centre. The dense smoke billowing from the door spurred them on to their utmost speed.

The cosmic agent welcomed the smoke screen as the best protection he could have hoped for. Standing in the open door and shrouded by the heavy flames, he blasted the officers with his hypno-beamer while giving them his directives: "Leave the ship at once! Go to the Arkonide spaceships and reassure their captains that it's not necessary for them to intervene. Make sure they stay away!"

Then he turned his attention again to the shipboard positronic. It would have presented no problem whatsoever with a bomb. However the energy output of his small raygun was insufficient to melt the huge computer brain.

He connected phase 'Jut' to data-sector V-Zt and 'Jut' to 'Haz' on the opposite side. Lloyd was thinking in Arkonide terms. He worked like an Arkonide technician. Now he was ready for the final connection with the main energy conduit.

He spun around abruptly. The hatch was cleared of the smoke. Several clear and some warped brainwave patterns reached him. 3 robot fighting machines and 3 Springers charged down the corridor to the Control Centre.

Fellmer Lloyd gambled with his life in cool determination. He had 10 seconds before the fighting machines reached the Control Centre. In 10 seconds he had to hook up the main energy source with his short circuit design.

Arkonide technology no longer used wired connections. The modular block system was much simpler.

2 more operations!

He heard the pounding steps of the robots behind him. As he reached out for the main current switch to turn on the energy from the transformer banks in the ship's stern, he was driven back by a blinding blue streak.

Fellmer Lloyd broke out in an atavistic scream but he didn't hear himself. The positronic brain of the first robot splattered and disintegrated in the thermo-beam of his handgun. Man proved to be faster than machine!

Main switch on!

With the thermo-gun in one hand the hypno-beamer in the other he blasted away at the 2nd robot and shot off its metal leg. The 3rd automaton stumbled over the damaged machine and they crashed together to the floor where Lloyd vaporized them with a steady stream from his thermo-weapon. Simultaneously he raked the 3 Springers with a sweep of the hypno-beamer. "Leave the ship and..." was all he could order before The inferno exploded and shattered his further thoughts.

The same energy, which could ram the *Re-9* out into space, was unleashed inside the positronic and tamed the intricate brain into liquid metal in one bright flash.

The infernal heat seared the intrepid mutant. He didn't know how he escaped the lethal discharges of the short-circuited power. With a desperate leap he jumped over the glowing lumps of metal in the corridor, which were all that was left of the 3 fighting machines.

Farther ahead the 3 Springers ran outside under their hypnotic spell. Lloyd was not slow in following them.

Suddenly a thunderous blow shook the spaceship. It must have come from the Control Centre. Lloyd looked back over his shoulder. He was aghast at what he saw: the nose of the ship dissolved! Surely now the entire spaceport would be in a state of uproar.

The Springer who had worked in the power station appeared on the deck, dazed by the explosion. Lloyd aimed his hypno-beam at him and aided him out of the trap, then darted down the loading ramp onto the landing field, where he was astounded to find a fog spreading out in all directions. Someone must have thrown a smoke bomb. The shroud surged toward the *Re-9* and obstructed his view.

He tried to make telepathic contact with Ulmin but Ulmin was gone.

Lloyd ran alongside the *Re-9* toward the little auxiliary ship whose hatch was still open. He kept trying to make contact with his commando team and was horrified when he received the last thoughts of a dying Springer.

He was already past the stern of the *Re-9*, the small craft with the powerful engine, and saw it being swallowed up by the fog behind him, when he received a terrible shock. *Paralysis!* pounded his brain.

He writhed under the tremendous mental blow. He trembled, shook, then felt his face become a rigid mask. His muscles lost all strength.

Paralysis—but I mustn't give in! he commanded himself grimly.

The shot from an unknown weapon had come from the *Re-9*. He sensed the brainwave patterns of a pair of Springers and then he was engulfed by the artificial fog.

Lloyd stumbled and struck a wall. The auxiliary craft! With his last ounce of strength he forced himself to climb in. He fell into the seat and groaned as he tried to close the hatch. His limbs obeyed him less and less as the effect of the paralysis increased.

Got to get... to the... Gazelle! He blindly manoeuvred the small ship through the fogbank in his desperate flight.

He could hardly move his lips any longer. "Not this!" he squirmed as his ship roared at dangerous speed toward the primordial forest that concealed his *Gazelle*.

Jim Markus, commander of the *Lotus*, standing by in space 10 light-years from Volat, was jolted when he read the message which had been unscrambled 10 seconds earlier:

3 BELLS! MUTANTS TROPNOW & YATUHIN WANT BETRAY EARTH BECAUSE DENIED CELL SHOWER. FELLMER LLOYD.

The officers stared at Markus. His face was bone-white, his eyes wide in horror.

* * * *

The pair of Volatians made their way through the alien jungle toward the Omniscient Mother. They had started out at the edge of the forest and were now deep inside, continuing to move day and night without respite.

They proceeded in silence; their antennae were at rest. There was no need to communicate their compassion for the moaning man they carried. Fellmer Lloyd was a physical wreck, completely paralysed but mentally as alert as ever. Despite his painful convulsions his thoughts went out to someone else.

For the 2nd time he questioned his rescuers by telepathy: *How do you know Kuri Onere is also on her way to the Omniscient Mother?*

Again he received the same reply: *We know, Fellmer Lloyd... we know.*

After he received the same answerless answer for the 3rd time, he stopped asking questions. If the Volatians would not tell him, perhaps Time would provide the information which at the present time remained an enigma.

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SHADOW OF THE MUTANT MASTER

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

PEACE in the Galaxy.

The strongest force in the continuing struggle of the Terranians to preserve not only interplanetary but interstellar peace is the group of espers, audiopath, seer, cephalopath, ignitive twin-head et al that Perry Rhodan employs to assist him.

The famous Mutant Corps.

But 2 members of the corps have turned renegade!

Are against Rhodan rather than for.

So far the anti-Rhodanites have not revealed their secret to strangers... but how long can they be depended upon to remain silent when their situation becomes critical?

And it does in the near future.

In the next episode, when—

THE DEAD LIVE

by

Clark Darlton

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