

ALL GALACTIC INTELLIGENCES

Are endangered by the invisible alien attackers, the Unseen.

A defence against this incomprehensible & diabolical enemy must be found if, planet by planet, the inhabitants of uncounted worlds are not inexplicably to disappear from the face of space like the pitiful population of ghost world Mirsal 3.

What, indeed, happened to the Mirsalese people?

No one knows the answer yet to the wholesale vanishment of the populace of Mirsal 3 but Mirsal 2 now takes stage front & centre as the most likely spot to confront & apprehend the uncanny opponent.

A trio of Terranians volunteer to risk their all to save a doomed world in—

RETURN FROM THE VOID

1/ DISAPPEARING MIRSALESE

"I'M AFRAID!"

Rosita drew in her legs and curled up on the sofa as though she were cold.

Rous turned and gave her an encouraging smile. He said nothing. He knew she was sharp enough to take it as a signal from him that he didn't feel the situation to be any more frightening than she did.

Which was in contrast to Lloyd. Everybody was used to seeing Lloyd the way he was now: sitting there with his elbows on the table and supporting his head in his hands. His eyes narrowed as though focussed on some imaginary point. Silent.

"Can't somebody turn on more lights?" asked Rosita.

Rous nodded and got up. The room had 2 doors and beside each one was a length of cord that came out of the wall next to the doorframe and terminated in a wooden knob suspended about a foot and a half off the floor. Rous took one of the knobs and pulled on the cord. Along the low ceiling a row of light-tubes flared to life.

Rosita blinked.

Rous went to one of the 2 windows and looked out.

"What is it...?" asked Rosita and straightened up quickly.

Rous made a minimizing gesture with his hand. "Nothing. I guess it'll be a bit stormy tonight."

"And why do we have to spend it in this particular cottage?" Rosita wanted to know.

Rous yawned. How could he make her realize that he had already answered that question 20 times today? Though the very words bored him, he answered again: "We can go into any other cottage around here if you want to."

Rosita made no reply. Rous looked along the street that passed in front of the house. Distributed at random among gardens were the other houses, none of which was any larger than the one in which they had found shelter, nor any smaller. They seemed to have all been uniformly constructed. They were a bit dirty but nevertheless quite new in appearance. All were uniformly 6-cornered. Each of the rooms had 2 walls with windows which joined each other at a 120 angle, thus giving the room a strange appearance.

Strange, that is, for Terranians, thought Rous.

If the storm didn't raise too much dust one could see across the street and make out the garden and another house with brightly lit windows.

Rous was bothered by those lights—even though he'd been over there and convinced himself the house was just as empty as all the others.

While the sun lowered somewhere behind a bank of obscuring dark clouds, the light yonder became more noticeable until finally it was all there was to see beyond those windows. The light and a few stunted trees outside that it illuminated.

Rous turned from the window and went out of the room into another shaped like the first. Its furnishings, however, were different, and there were also 3 doors instead of 2.

He opened the door in the narrow rear wall and felt for the cord. He caught it in his hand and found the wooden knob, pulled on it. The light came on.

He asked himself why he had come here again. This round table with half a dozen half-filled dishes and the split wooden sticks for eating utensils—he'd seen them at least 10 times today.

He sat down in one of the chairs and rested his chin on his left hand, picking up one of the split sticks with the other. It had been lying at an angle next to one of the half-filled bowls as though it had been hastily thrown there.

Behind him he heard the door close. He didn't have to turn around to see who it was. He knew the footsteps.

"Are you hungry?" asked Rosita.

It seemed a lugubrious question, which he ignored. "I'm trying to imagine how it was this morning when the people were sitting here and what happened when they disappeared."

Rosita sat down in one of the chairs. "Are you trying to solve the puzzle by intuition?" she asked mockingly. "Do you believe..."

"Naturally I believe," interrupted Rous. "Now just consider: about 6 o'clock local time we landed in a Gazelle scoutship within 4 miles of the village of Keyloghal, in hilly country that was lousy for visibility. What's our assignment? To look into all this turmoil that an invisible enemy seems to be stirring up on the planet."

"According to orders, we were to proceed under cover, without attracting attention. So all we had to do was catch one of the little people who inhabit this world, extract everything he knew from his brain, with the help of a hyperanalyzer, and then let him loose again—naturally so conditioned that he wouldn't be able to recall the incident afterwards."

"Further: we then took an hour to assimilate the new information we had acquired. We altered our uniforms so that they wouldn't attract attention in the eyes of the people we had to deal with."

"According to instructions, we then left the Gazelle behind and set out on foot for Keyloghal. We found there a village that resembled an Earthly farming settlement except for the 6-cornered shape of the houses. We saw many people driving about in tractor-like vehicles, going out to the fields or returning from them."

"They even saw us and looked at us in astonishment because we are a head to a head-and-a-half taller than they are. They could see this difference quite plainly from a distance of 100 yards and we didn't come any closer to them."

"They disappeared abruptly, dissolving right into the air. Their tractors and wagons remained where they were or some kept going until they bumped into the nearest obstruction."

"But the people were gone..." Rous got up and took a deep breath. "Do you know why I've told all this to you again?"

Rosita shook her head negatively.

"So that you can see that all this is no fairytale," he explained emphatically. "We weren't hypnotized either. With our eyes wide open we saw how the whole population of an average-sized village disappeared within a second. And it doesn't help us any to consider anything metaphysical in this. It had to be due to natural causes. And if that is the case, then there must also remain the possibility of solving the puzzle."

Rosita looked at him thoughtfully. "Do you think maybe a teletransmitter is involved?"

Rous stared at her. "How do you mean?—as an explanation for what's happened? Like here, for instance?" He waved a hand over the food-laden table.

"Yes, exactly."

"I've already considered that. Look at it from what we know about it: We have teletransmitters that we can set up in one place and with which we can aim at an object in another place. We can then cause such an object to disappear and can hurl it through hyperspace to a 3rd place. That is a teletransmitter. We ourselves could also cause all the inhabitants of Keyloghal to disappear—but *one at a time*, not all at once! And another thing: if the person we would be transmitting happened to be holding a spoon or a

fork in his hand at the moment, such physical objects would go along *with* him.

"So take a look at the situation right here. These people were seated at this table having breakfast. And then it happened. They were suddenly removed from the table. They disappeared. Their eating utensils remained behind. Just as the tractors and wagons remained behind. No, I don't think we're dealing with teletransmitters."

"With what, then?"

Rous shrugged his shoulders. He was about to make a comment but just then a door slammed and heavy footsteps were heard approaching through the darkness of the adjacent room.

Fellmer Lloyd stuck his head into the room. "Somebody's coming!" he said simply.

"Quick, turn out the light!" ordered Rous. "Lloyd—one person or several?"

"No, a whole bunch of them, maybe 20 and approaching fairly fast."

"From what direction?"

"Apparently on the road from Ferraneigh."

The 3 of them had also arrived here on that road this morning. Rous went back into the room where he could see the street from the windows. Meanwhile Rosita had put out the light but a narrow shaft of light reached them from the windows of the house across the street where the light-tubes were still burning.

Rous had drawn his weapon. Lloyd went to the table and assumed his usual position, seated and with his head supported in his hands. Rosita stood by the door with the wooden knob of the light-cord in her hand.

"Do you hear that?" asked Lloyd suddenly.

Rous listened. He sensed a faint trembling in the ground—and from a distance came a steady humming sound. He recognized it. One didn't have to go closer to the source to hear it—the sound pervaded the countryside.

"Put the light back on," he ordered. "Lloyd, stay here and take care of Ms. Perez. I'm going outside."

"Don't, Rous!" cried Rosita. "Stay here! Do you really know what it is?"

"Yes," he said somberly. "It's a bus."

It was a bus.

With blazing headlights, it came down the road from Ferraneigh with astonishing speed. The storm whipped up bright whorls of dust in the oncoming glare of the headlights.

The heavy vehicle came clattering into the village without slowing its pace. Apparently the driver had no intention of stopping in Keyloghal.

Rous stood in the middle of the street and waited until he was caught in the illumination of the headlights.

Then he began to wave with both arms. For a moment or 2 he wasn't sure that it wouldn't be a better idea to jump out of the way. But then the brakes squealed, the motor hum struck a deeper note, the bus swerved to the right and came to a stop within a few yards of Rous. The stirred-up dust reflected enough light so that he could make out the route sign: RESAZ-FILLINAN.

The passenger door swung open. A short little man sprang out.

"What's the matter?" he asked excitedly. "Why aren't there any people anywhere? Where have they all disappeared to?"

Rous gave him the local sign of not knowing—a raised hand and a bent index finger—and answered him in the language which he had learned that morning in the course of an hour, utilizing the hyper-analyzer. "I don't know. We're strangers here. We arrived this morning. When we were within about a tenth of a mile of the village, the people disappeared. Where do you come from?"

"From Resaz," replied the driver. "We left around 5 this morning. Between 5 and 8 we stopped at Gollan, Gortrup, Vineigh and Bostall. Everything was still alright then. About half past 8 we got to Millander... and there wasn't a soul around. That's the way it's been ever since..."

Rous thought this over. They themselves had arrived at Keyloghal between 8 and 8:30 in the morning. Apparently people everywhere had disappeared at the same time.

"Did you notice anything on the way?" he asked.

"No, nothing. Once we got to Millander I didn't have any more time to pay attention to other things. My passengers started to panic. Some of them wanted to go back, others wanted to speed up and go ahead and another bunch of them wanted me to take side roads because they thought the main highway was too dangerous. I tell you I had my hands full to keep them all quiet or even to be able to keep on going."

Rous made a quick decision. "There are 3 of us here," he said. "Will you take us with you to Fillinan?"

"Sure, why not? From here on it's just 3 units per person."

Rous agreed. He didn't think it was necessary to mention that neither he nor Rosita nor Lloyd possessed any native money. In Fillinan maybe something could be found with which to pay the driver in place of the 9 units of price for the fare.

He fetched Lloyd and Rosita from the house. Rosita wanted to know what he had in mind. "To go to Fillinan," he answered curtly. "We won't get another chance like this. Do you notice the people are so worked up that they don't even react to our size?"

Lloyd put the case containing the micro-gear under his arm. Rosita went ahead of him.

The driver stared at her in some wonderment but he said nothing.

Directly behind him was a window bench that was empty. Rosita sat down there, followed by Fellmer and Rous. But Rous sat closest to the driver so that he could see ahead through the windshield and keep an eye on the road.

The passengers in the bus conversed excitedly and hardly paid any attention to the new arrivals. There were a few hesitant, curious glances, that was all.

Naturally the conversation had to do with the strange events of the day—the disappearance of the people from the villages. The only thing that Rous could extract from the bedlam of voices and opinions was what he knew already: that this phenomenon was unique in their eyes. Nothing like it had ever happened before.

The bus needed only a few moments to leave Keyloghal behind.

Apparently the driver was attempting to control his fear and anxiety by shoving the gas pedal clear to the floorboards.

It was factually a gas pedal, as such. Rous had time to observe the steering and shifting mechanisms and to compare them with what he was familiar with on Earth. There were no essential differences. Rous was confident that he could drive the bus without any other information. He'd have to go on what he knew because Mirsal 2 was about 14,500 light years distant from the Earth.

An hour later they roared through another settlement named Wimmanat. It wasn't necessary to stop in order to see that the place was just as deserted as all the others that the bus had gone through since 8:30 that morning.

Beyond Wimmanat the highway widened. The proximity of the capital city of Fillinan became apparent. Rous looked ahead and sought to discern the sky through the glare of city lights but either the distance was still too great or the storm had raised too much dust. The sky was black and devoid of stars.

Rous figured that if the people of Fillinan had not yet disappeared a few vehicles should eventually make an appearance on the road. Or it could be that they had blocked the city exits in the direction of Resaz and declared that area a forbidden zone.

He turned to look at Rosita. She had stretched her legs out and was resting her head back against the headrest behind her. Her eyes were wide open as she stared at the ceiling.

Rous was about to say something but before he had a chance Lloyd suddenly broke from his lethargy. "Look out!" he yelled.

Rous felt a shock of alarm run through him. Lloyd was staring beyond the driver at the windshield but Rous couldn't see anything unusual.

The driver and the other passengers were startled by Lloyd's shout. The driver reduced his speed slightly and looked behind him.

In that moment it started.

Rous suddenly saw the brilliant beam of the right hand headlight right through the body of the driver. He threw himself forward to grasp the disappearing man by the shoulders. But before he could carry out his intent the driver was no longer there. Rous' hands grasped at empty air.

"The wheel!" cried Rosita in fright.

Rous bent over the empty seat and strove to control the steering wheel. Fortunately the street was well paved and now that nobody was holding the gas pedal down the bus came to a halt rather quickly. Rous kept it safely in the middle of the road.

When the danger had passed he forced himself into the small narrow seat and pulled the lever that he thought might be the hand brake, which it was.

Then he got up and looked around.

The bus was empty. The 20 people who had made the journey this far from Resaz or Resaz-Gollan or Gortrup had disappeared—just like the driver.

The only survivors were Fellmer Lloyd, Rosita Perez and Marcel Rous. A mutant, a psychologist and a lieutenant.

Lloyd had seated himself again. The matter didn't seem to concern him.

"What's going on?" asked Rous. "What did you see?"

Lloyd shook his head sullenly. "I saw nothing. I sensed a clutter of mental patterns. Pretty confused and in comprehensible and worst of all they only lasted a few seconds."

Lloyd had detected something similar to this previously. For example, at the time when the Mirsal 2 rockets disappeared in outer space.

With a groan, Rous dropped back into his seat. In contacting Rosita next to him he felt that she was trembling.

"Take it easy, girl," he said, trying to reassure her. "They passed us up this time. It looks as if they prefer swallowing just the Mirsal inhabitants. Apparently we're too bitter for them. If I only knew why!"

2/ MUTANT TASKFORCE

Some 18 million miles from the scene of adventure on Mirsal 2, the signals from the 3 agents' body-transmitters were being received by the *Drusus*, the mightiest ship of the Earthly spacefleet. The sensitive equipment detected a momentary drop of signal strength and the event was duly recorded. The ship's commander, Perry Rhodan, received the brief report:

"At 19:34 ship time: brief attenuation of signal strength in body-transmitter beams from Rous, Perez and Lloyd. Simultaneous and for same time-span. Half-arc cycle: 2.8 seconds. Attenuation mean average: 0.01 normal intensity. Thereafter reception undisturbed."

Rhodan read the data over several times.

After the peculiar if not actually uncanny incidents on Mirsal 3, Rhodan had decided that his top priority was to gather every scrap of data he could concerning the enemy. There were unmistakable indications that some powerful, unknown opponent was about to challenge the combined forces of the Solar Empire and the whole stellar empire of the Arkonides. A possible lead was obtained through the disappearance of the primitive chemical rocketship just when it was determined that it came from Mirsal 2. To date,

nobody yet knew what role Mirsal 2 was playing in the drama nor did anyone know how its inhabitants had managed to remain undetected all this time, even though their technology was centuries in advance of the people of Mirsal 3. Yet the latter world had been known to the Arkonides for a long time.

Rhodan had considered it prudent to, conduct the investigations as unobtrusively as possible. In view of events on Mirsal 3 and the disappearance of the Mirsal 2 spaceship without a trace it had been quite clearly demonstrated that even the mightiest weapons of the *Drusus* and the *Arc-Koor* were powerless to affect the enemy. The latter ship was commanded by Talamon who had been placed under his orders by the Regent of Arkon.

So it wasn't a question of a show of force. There was no one there—no physical target against which one might expend military power. The enemy possessed a means of making a sheer mockery out of any and all forms of destructive energy.

The only alternative, therefore, was more or less a kamikaze type of assignment which Rhodan had often used with good effect.

Participants in the present assignment were the 3 people involved in the unusual report that Rhodan was looking at, people who at this moment were millions of miles away in the Resaz-to-Fillinan bus, looking about them in astonishment for their fellow passengers.

Fellmer Lloyd was a member of the small taskforce because he was one of the few mutants who could detect the presence of the invisible enemy by means of his parapsychic gifts. Rosita Perez had been assigned as a psychologist because any mission to an unknown world required a careful study of the inhabitants' mentality. And finally Marcel Rous was with them because he had already had some contact and experience with the unknown opponent—aside from the fact that he also had to make a few amends for disobeying orders.

So it was that Rhodan deduced from the report that these 3 had just come in contact with the enemy. The indications were obvious and they were similar to the signal fading that had been observed when the Mirsal 2 rocketship had disappeared. The basic difference was that in the rocket's case the signals had finally faded entirely, whereas in the case of Lloyd, Rosita and Rous the output from their surgically installed micro-transmitters had regained normal signal strength after only a momentary attenuation.

So it was to be presumed that the 3 agents had come through the danger intact. Their signals were distinctive for each one and operated continuously, so all 3 were definitely accounted for. In addition to the micro-transmitters they were also equipped with a minicom device which was similar to the big hypercom communicators that it could cover a considerable distance. Rous would be calling in as soon as the situation permitted.

The Gazelle type scoutship in which the 3 had landed on Mirsal 2 was also equipped with a 'body transmitter', just like the 3 agents. If the enemy were not completely outclassed by Earthly and Arkonide technology—if he didn't have to rack his brains too much in order to comprehend their technical devices—then the Gazelle that Rhodan had ordered to be left behind at the settlement would be a welcome object of study. The foe would steal it away and thus the Gazelle's transmitter would be able to tell them where it had been taken.

Much could be gained by the maneuver because until now nobody on board the *Drusus* or the *Arc-Koor* had any idea where or in what sector of the galaxy these Unknowns were to be found.

* * * *

The initial shock of alarm had passed.

"Do you sense anything close by?" asked Rous.

Lloyd shook his head. "Nothing," he replied flatly. "Absolutely nothing."

Rous got up and worked himself into the narrow driver's seat. "Then let's try to keep going in this thing."

Cautiously he experimented with some of the levers, knobs and pedals that were installed in the floorboard, on the dashboard and on the partition between the engine hood and the passenger cabin. The motor, which had died out for lack of gas feeding, now came clattering to life again. It had a gasoline smell—an actual, Earthly odor of automobile gas.

Rous released the brake and pressed the accelerator. The bus made a startling lurch forward and the motor died. Rous tried another gear and succeeded. The heavy vehicle began to move along the highway, making deep rumbling sounds. Rous had to try a few fresh starts because the gear-shifting to higher speeds was not clearly indicated.

But finally he mastered the contraption. The bus roared noisily along toward the city at an approximate speed of 30 miles per hour.

Marcel had the necessary time and leisure to figure out a plan. The road was completely free of all traffic. There was no one in front of him that he had to watch out for. Fellmer Lloyd had fallen back into his customary lethargy in order to 'listen' for alien brain wave patterns.

Rous asked himself: what do we do in Fillinan? Answer: we must try to uncover some clue concerning the invisible enemy. And what makes you think that it will be any easier in Fillinan than it has been in any of the empty villages we have passed through?

Nothing.

At least there was one small clue: apparently the Unknowns who were operating here were not enemies of Terranians—because so far they had not attacked them whereas they were definitely after the people of Mirsal 3, who had all disappeared from the surface of their world with only one exception. And certainly they were enemies of the inhabitants of Mirsal 2, who were threatened with the same fate. So the Unknowns had agents here. But if you're looking for agents, you look for them in a capital city.

Lloyd stirred to life. "I'm picking up a whole bunch of thought patterns," he mumbled. "It sounds like a human anthill."

"In what direction?"

"Straight ahead."

Rous nodded. "That would be the city, then," he maintained. "So maybe the people there haven't disappeared yet."

Lloyd appeared to have lost interest. He was listening again. A while later he said, "There aren't any really alien patterns present. Maybe just here and there."

"What percentage would you say?" Rous asked quickly.

"One in a thousand," Lloyd answered. "It's tough to pick them up in such a mass of thoughts, particularly at this distance."

Rous made a deprecating gesture. "For all we know, the population of Fillinan could be over 3,000,000. If there were at least 3000 of the aliens among them, you'd know it. So I don't think there are very many of them present."

Lloyd grumbled: "Then we'll have to wait until one of them comes close enough." With that he leaned forward again and supported his head in his hands.

A few minutes later, Rous began to put on the brakes. He turned the bus to the side of the road and came to a stop. "We get out here," he announced.

"Why?" asked Rosita.

"At the most, the city is 3 miles away yet. Our headlights could be seen from there. I don't want to be questioned by anybody as to how we got hold of the bus or what's happened to the passengers."

They got out. Lloyd carried the case under his arm.

The rest of the way to Fillinan was uncomfortable. The storm blew against the lonely wanderers in sharp, chilling blasts. The gray dust particles bit into their skin and they held their heads down to afford themselves some protection.

Fortunately they encountered no one. By an Earthly way of thinking, the broad highway should have been swarming with traffic. But it was empty.

At the first glimmer of gray dawn the first outlying buildings and houses began to appear. The storm had abated somewhat but the sky was still overcast. Mirsal, the central star of the system, failed to appear.

The houses they were looking at appeared to be deserted. They had the customary 6-sided construction design like all the others they had seen. Some of the windows had drawn shades but nowhere was there a light to be seen.

Lloyd came to a halt suddenly. "3 or 4 men are close ahead," he announced. "Maybe 200 yards."

"Only 4?" asked Rous curiously. "What about the houses?"

"Nobody. They're all empty."

Rous pondered it. The city was inhabited, there was no doubt about that. Only the outlying houses were empty, Why?

Because they've evacuated them in order to observe the exit roads, dumbbell! The 4 men Lloyd is detecting are sentries at a military guard post.

"Take out the psycho-beamer!" he told Lloyd. "We don't have any other choice because we have to keep on straight ahead."

Lloyd nodded. He took the weapon out of the case and hung the case on a strap over his shoulder. Then they kept on walking. Rosita followed behind.

The first thing Rous saw in the gray dimness was a cylindrical weapon barrel with a 4-inch muzzle that was sticking out of a garden hedge on the left side of the street, supported on a double frame.

Rous knew that it was a type of flame-thrower. On Mirsal 2, ordnance technology was not as well developed as it had been on Earth at an equivalent time-period. Ordinarily Mirsal guns were no more dependable than the clumsiest flintlock of Earth's ancient past and more than anything they were equally troublesome to operate. So by comparison a flame-thrower was a virtual miracle weapon.

Rous pretended that he hadn't seen the flamer, though it made him a bit uneasy. He was not too familiar with the Mirsalese mentality, especially now that they had become trigger-happy over the disappearance of their people in the villages. It was hard to tell whether or not they'd prefer to shoot first before asking questions.

As it turned out, his apprehension appeared to be unfounded. A small, brown-skinned man raised up from the garden foliage behind the flame-thrower and waved his arms urgently.

Rous stopped where he was.

"Halt!" shouted the man. "Wait!"

"Careful now!" he said softly to Lloyd. "If he comes out alone, make him bring out the others."

Lloyd nodded.

The little man stepped into the street and came toward them. Rous noted that he carried a smaller version of the flame-thrower in his right hand. As the man drew near, he attempted to register an expression of astonishment.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Why are you stopping people?"

The little man gave no answer until he had come to within 5 yards of Rous and his 2 companions.

"Where are you from?" he asked suspiciously.

"From Wollaston," Rous told him.

Wollaston was a fairly large island in the Central Sea. The people who lived there represented a separate race, semi-civilized, whose average height was 8 to 10 inches greater than the normal Mirsalese.

"From Wollaston?!" inquired the guard in astonishment. "On foot?"

"No. We came by plane as far as Resaz and from there by bus to Keyloghal. From that point on, of course, we came on foot."

"Credentials please?"

Rous pretended that he hadn't the slightest idea of what was meant by credentials. The guard turned around and shouted over the garden thicket: "Hey, come out here! I've just caught 3 very strange geons" (Amphibious butterflies of Mirsal. Slang saying equivalent to saying "I've caught 3 strange fish.")

Rous turned to look at Lloyd. But Lloyd shook his head. He had not yet activated the psycho-beamer, the guard had shouted on his own volition.

3 men came out of the bushes. They were no larger than the first man and wore the same kind of uniform-like fabric of a dark green color.

"They claim to come from Wollaston," scoffed the first guard. "They don't have any papers."

"Just the kind we've been waiting for!" cried one of the other 3. "If we search them we'll find a lot of very interesting things on them."

Rous was aware of a slight movement behind him as Lloyd moved into position. It was an opportune moment. The attention of the guard in front of him had been distracted during the short conversation. He heard the faint high whine of the weapon. The guard turned to stare at Lloyd as if thunderstruck. Lloyd emerged from the cover that Rous had been giving him until now. The small psych-beamer was in his right hand.

"Drop your weapons," he ordered calmly.

The other 3 guards, who were already halfway across to them, came to a stop. Obediently they drew their small flame-throwers from their belts and let them fall. Also, the first guard offered no resistance.

"Form a line here," continued Lloyd.

This command was also followed without resistance. The 4 little men stared at Lloyd as though, in their ancient mythology, he had just arrived on a meteor.

"Why are you stationed here?" Lloyd wanted to know. "Come on, you—answer me!" He pointed to one of them.

"Strange things are happening," the Miralese answered tonelessly. "People disappear, whole regions of the country are depopulated. A powerful, invisible enemy has attacked us. We have to track him down. So all people who come out of the depopulated areas have to be investigated, it's the only way we can catch the enemy."

Rous considered that conclusion to be self-evident. Whoever emerged out of the depopulated regions had to be an enemy. It appeared then that 3 agents from an alien neutral power would complicate such a situation.

"Do you consider us to be enemies?" asked Lloyd.

"Yes."

"We are not enemies, do you hear?"

"Yes, I heard you; you are not our enemies."

"Good," nodded Lloyd. "How much money have you got on you?"

The soldier began to look through his pockets. "16 units and some small change."

"Hand it over!"

The soldier came up to Lloyd and placed the money in his hand. Lloyd gave the same orders to the other 3 and after they had complied he found that he had taken in almost 100 units of money.

"You will forget what has transpired here," he told them. "10 minutes after we've left you will not know anything more about it. This morning didn't happen, do you understand? No one has come on the road from Resaz into Fillinan."

All 4 men repeated the instructions obediently.

"Now go back to your posts."

They also obeyed this command. Lloyd turned off his weapon and put it back in its case. The post-hypnotic effect would last as long as he had ordered it to: 10 minutes.

"Let's go!" whispered Rous. "In 10 minutes we have to be out of visible range."

They ran a short distance. Within 5 minutes the street made a turn and led them out of view of the hypnotized guards.

Less than a mile into the city they encountered a 2nd guard station but inasmuch as Rous and his companions had apparently been permitted to pass through by the first sentries without hesitation, they were not stopped at this point.

Beyond this 2nd guard station the hubbub of the big city began. Rouse made a decision.

"We'll make our quarters in a hotel. Our money will last us through the first day but after that we'll have to rustle up some more."

"And what will we do in the hotel?" asked Rosita.

"For starters, we'll sleep. I'm dog tired."

"Hm-m," mused Rosita. "Do you already have plans for what you'll do after you've slept?"

Rous grimaced. "You're a very curious girl, Rosita. To be frank with you, no, I don't have any plans. I don't have the slightest idea of how to proceed from here. I'm afraid we'll simply have to let things come to us."

They inquired of a passerby where they could find a hotel nearby. The man informed them but failed to conceal his wonderment about the question. Rous learned that for the last 3 days an absolute travel quarantine had been imposed across the entire continent and the only people allowed to travel were those who possessed a special permit. However, the explanation that the 3 strangers were from the island of Wollaston seemed to suffice.

The hotel that the Mirsalese had described was in the vicinity. They went there on foot. Pedestrians stared at them and stopped to watch them. Rous felt uneasy. Rosita kept her eyes on the ground and did not look up.

On the other hand, Lloyd was apparently not in the slightest impressed by all this. He muttered continuously to himself, he nodded or shook his head and undoubtedly was sufficiently occupied by his own monologue to fail to notice the curiosity of the Mirsalese.

Suddenly he stopped. "Damn it!" he exclaimed.

"What's the matter?" asked Rous.

"Everybody who travels requires a special permit," said Lloyd thoughtfully. "So the people who were on our bus must have been very important people, wouldn't you say?"

Rous nodded. "Okay. And so?"

"Take a look at the way people park their cars here."

Rous had a look around. He had already noticed that people on Mirsal 2 drove on the left side of the street and correspondingly parked on the left side. But it had not occurred to him to give the matter any further thought.

"To the left," he answered. "What's the point?"

"But don't you remember that you parked the bus on the right?"

"So what if I did?"

Lloyd looked at him a bit caustically. "Lieutenant, I'm straight out of New York. If a bus full of important people disappeared in New York and the police found it later parked on the wrong side of the street, from just that alone they'd draw a bunch of conclusions. Maybe the police are just as sharp in Fillinan as they are in New York. On top of it they've already been on alert here for 3 days. And finally: the first guard post we passed won't have any recollection of us. But the second sentry station will be able to report, if anybody asks them, what direction they saw us coming from."

Rous had become thoughtful. "You could be right, Lloyd," he admitted. "But the only thing left for us to do is simply to wait it out and see just how smart the Fillinan cops are!"

They continued onward to the hotel. The large lobby was absolutely empty. There was no one behind the reception desk. However there was a call bell and after Rous had pressed the button several times a little man finally appeared who reacted skeptically to Rous' request for separate rooms for himself and each of his companions. The little fellow demanded credentials and special permits but Lloyds psycho-beamer influenced him to forget his request in a hurry. The 3 of them were assigned rooms and were directed to the 2nd floor of the hotel.

In spite of Lloyd's having used the psycho-beamer, Rous selected the rooms strictly in terms of their own particular suitability. They had connecting doors between them so that one wouldn't have to go out into the hallway in order to visit his neighbor.

Rous settled into his room by placing the bolster and the covers from the bed on the floor, where he stretched out more comfortably because the bed was much too small for him. Within a few minutes he fell asleep.

3/ PANIC IN THE STREETS

When he awoke it was already past noon. Somebody knocked on the door.

"Frokja!" he called—careful to use his best Mirsalese for "enter".

Rosita stepped into the room. "I hope you had a good rest," she said with a hint of sarcasm. "You sleep through the most important things."

"How's that? What's happening?"

"Lloyd's posthypnotic suggestion has taken effect. The little old man downstairs is convinced that he took our papers from us for safekeeping and then misplaced them later. The police are here to question us and issue new credentials."

Rous jumped up. "Good! I'll be there!"

There were 4 policemen altogether who were waiting downstairs in the lobby. By the time Rous got there, Lloyd and Rosita were already there ahead of him.

A deposition was made of the testimony of the little man who seemed to be the hotel business manager. After that, Rous and his companions were questioned concerning their origin and their purpose or intentions. They furnished satisfactory particulars because meanwhile they had thoroughly informed themselves concerning their optional homeland of Wollaston. Rous pretended to know nothing about the requirement for special travel permits. He let on that he and his friends had left Resaz 5 days ago and traveled to Keyloghal with many interruptions and that they discovered there that the entire village had died out or been deserted. From that point onward they had come to Fillinan on foot.

One of the 4 policemen was an elderly, grey-haired little man whose uniform indicated he held a higher rank than the other 3. He had introduced himself as Commissioner Flaring.

At the end of the interview he wanted to know something else. "Weren't you concerned about the disappearance of the villagers?"

"Naturally. We were very curious as to where they might have gone. We thought that maybe there had been an evacuation for some important reason or other and we hurried to get to Fillinan."

"Why?"

Rous gave a slight shrug. "Well... it could be that you had detected a subterranean volcano that was ready to erupt and you might have evacuated everybody for that reason."

Flaring appeared to be satisfied with this explanation. "Did you by chance happen to see an omnibus in your travels?—I mean, during your hike from Keyloghal to Fillinan?"

Rous pretended to ponder the question carefully. "Yes..." he answered finally. "Now I remember. About 3 miles outside of town we saw an empty bus."

"Empty?" gasped Flaring.

"Yes, empty."

Flaring glanced at his companions and then stood up. "Alright. New passes will be drawn up for you and will be sent to you." Without any further ado, he and his companions left the hotel.

Rous, Lloyd and Rosita went back to their rooms.

"There's something about Flaring that I don't like," said Rosita suddenly.

"What's that?"

"That time when we had a native victim in the Gazelle, I was able to study the Mirsalese mentality. When anybody goes away without saying goodbye it's considerably more serious a situation than it would be on Earth. Flaring has something against us... and he's let us become aware of it."

"Let's hope he keeps his suspicions to himself," answered Rous. "Him alone we can handle with the psycho-beamer. There'll only be danger if he should make his thoughts public. At all costs we have to avoid being taken for aliens because in that case the most logical thing for them to assume would be that we are the enemy who has been wiping out the Mirsalese in such a mysterious manner."

Rosita nodded.

Lloyd said, "It won't do us much good to waste away in our rooms. We should take a walk."

"You're right," admitted Rous. "Even in the face of having people stare at us."

* * * *

For some strange reason the Mirsalese were less curious in the afternoon than they had been in the morning. Only a few still tended to turn and look at their figures, which by Mirsalese standards were unusually tall. Apparently some kind of word had been passed around in this area concerning the arrival of 3 people from Wollaston.

Rous and his 2 companions took the subway to the downtown section. Fillinan's main showcase boulevard was called the 'Avenue of Kings'. More than 300 feet wide, it cut through the city from North to South. This happened to be a time when a new experiment was going on. At various places along the avenue, in experimental stretches of perhaps two-thirds of a mile each in length, the street had been equipped with a microwave guide-beam system. It was designed to take over the task of steering vehicles which were equipped with the corresponding apparatus to respond to it. So it was no wonder

that the crowds filled the walks along the edges of the testing areas. They watched the test cars of the police whose drivers ostentatiously placed their hands behind their heads in order to demonstrate that they actually didn't have anything to do with the steering. As a result of all the excitement with which the Mirsalese watched this spectacle, Rous and his companions were hardly noticed at all.

The houses on both sides of the street were grandiose and apparently had been built without any restriction as to their cost. They were hexagonal like all houses on Mirsal 2 and were surrounded by gardens.

Many of the buildings were as tall as the old New York skyscrapers. For the most part there were shops and stores on the ground floor and offices and apartments in the other floors above. With the exception of the alien-looking signs over the storefronts, this city might have been something that a very imaginative architect might have designed and constructed on Earth.

Rous, Rosita and Lloyd strolled along the avenue. Lloyd carried the briefcase under his arm like a student who was determined not to lose his belongings. They did very little talking because there was too big a danger of being overheard.

They must have gone about two-thirds of a mile along the avenue from the subway exit when Lloyd suddenly stopped and looked about him. "Wait!" he said in a low, excited tone. "Something's going on!"

Rous and Rosita had also stopped. Lloyd stared up the street but there was nothing more to be seen ahead than the usual swarm of traffic.

"What is it?" asked Rous.

Lloyd waved his hand impatiently. "The aliens!" he blurted out. "Very close by. I can sense them!"

Rous felt a chill chase up his spine. The Mirsalese were still standing on the curbstones enthusiastically watching the police test cars.

"Now!" cried Lloyd. "They're coming!"

He made a grimace as though he were suffering pain. With a seemingly involuntary movement of his hands he opened the briefcase under his arm and took out a small defense screen generator of the type used in Arkonide transport suits and, in a larger version, on spaceships.

Rous didn't know what he intended to do with it. Rosita let out a shrill scream and pointed up the street. "There!" she gasped.

Rous followed her direction and saw that the air across the whole width of the street farther ahead seemed to be shimmering. He noted that behind this shimmering curtain of air the sidewalks were empty of people and the cars in the street that had been moving along in an orderly manner now became all mixed up and ran up onto the sidewalks or crashed into the sides of buildings or into each other.

The strange curtain seemed to jump nearer. It was a maddening spectacle the way the people disappeared from the street and how the cars would suddenly begin their crazy antics without any drivers.

The Mirsalese standing on the curbs turned their attention to the disturbance. The street rose on a gentle incline toward the north so that the view was unobstructed. Each one of them could see with his own

eyes what was happening—how this curtain that made people invisible and cars driverless was moving inexorably toward them.

A few seconds later, the panic began. Howling and screaming and shoving and pushing, the whole mass of humans set itself in motion, down the street and away from the horrible and incomprehensible thing that was moving toward them.

Rous, Lloyd and Rosita fled to one side. They escaped the general press of the throng by standing on the edge of a garden, where they watched the shimmering wall as it progressed down the street.

It seemed to have increased its speed.

Lloyd suddenly recovered from the shock of it all. "Get hold of one of them!" he called to Rous.

Rous didn't understand what he meant until Lloyd pointed to the fleeing Mirsalese.

"One of those people," he shouted. "Be quick, we don't have any more time!"

Rous reached into the crowd of fleeing people and grabbed someone at random. The man fought back and struggled to get away but he was no match for Rous' strength.

The invisible wall had come still closer.

The man hung limply in Rous' grip. He stared at the 3 Terranians with his eyes fairly popping, he groaned aloud but said no more.

"Get him between us!" insisted Lloyd and it was then that Rous caught on to what he was planning. He had turned on the defense screen generator.

Then the wall reached them.

Rous had a tingling sensation as though a gentle breeze swept over him but when he thought about it later he couldn't say whether it had been the effect of the wall itself or of his own imagination.

For a fraction of a second all sound ceased. The bedlam of the street throngs was cut off.

Rous, Lloyd and Rosita stood holding each other's hands in a triangular formation so that the Mirsalese would be protected in the middle.

Then the noise returned. Rous looked down the street where the weird phenomenon was overtaking the fugitives faster than they could run and causing them to disappear. The wall of strange energy seemed to have increased its speed tenfold, hurtling along the street and sweeping it clear. A few moments later there was no Mirsalese to be seen, far and wide.

Except for the one individual whom Rous and his companions had taken under their wing. With staring eyes and unable to speak, the man stood trembling between his protectors. He looked up and down the street and then drew in a shuddering breath and began to sob as the enormity of the catastrophe finally hit him.

Rous looked at him and wondered if he could be of any further use to them. He had been a worthwhile experimental object. Now they knew that a Mirsalese could be kept from disappearing if he were

surrounded by 3 Terranians under the protection of a powerful defense screen.

Rous placed a hand on the man's shoulder and spoke to him in a friendly tone. "Go home and be glad that you're still alive!"

The man obeyed wordlessly. He staggered away without turning once to look back.

Now Rous stirred into action again. "Come on! We have to find out if anybody in the city has escaped the tragedy."

Lloyd shoved the small generator into the case and walked away toward the next subway entrance.

"Don't waste any false hopes on that!" Rous called after him. "The subway isn't running any more. You can imagine what happened to the trains when they suddenly lost their drivers."

Rosita had a better idea. A few of the cars which had been overtaken by the catastrophe were still undamaged. She picked out one of the most powerful models. "Come over here," she called. "I think we can use this!"

Rous came across the street. Before he got to the car he saw something lying on the pavement. It had a dull blue shimmer to it and, was shaped like a comb without teeth. He didn't know what purpose it had once served but on a sudden impulse he picked it up and stuck it into his pocket.

Rosita had observed this. "What do you want with that?" she asked.

He shrugged. "For a later looksee. It was directly in the path of the... that wall. Maybe it's some kind of clue.

He got in behind the steering wheel. After having driven the bus it was no task to get the car going and to guide it carefully among the obstacles that lay ahead in the street.

At the first intersection he turned to his right. The side streets were comparatively narrower although still a good 40 yards wide but they were just as empty as the Avenue of Kings.

Rous tried to remember the location of the hotel. Inasmuch as they had come this far on the subway he hadn't had a chance to get a mental impression of the street layout. However he knew the general direction and was fairly confident that he could find his way through the empty streets—empty, that is, except for the clutter of wrecked and driverless cars.

He must have driven this way for half an hour when Lloyd suddenly cried out: "There are people up ahead! A whole bunch of them. Apparently the misfortune hasn't hit the whole city."

Rous narrowed his eyes. "Then we'd better be careful. They'll think that anybody coming out of the downtown area is their enemy."

The hotel was in the city outskirts, at least 9 or 10 miles from the Avenue of Kings. Rous required an hour and a half to cover the distance because of his lack of knowledge of the streets. But finally he got to a street that he thought he knew. Rosita recognized a sort of jewelry store where she had paused during the earlier afternoon and Lloyd knew the intersection to take in order to get to the hotel from here.

Rous made a turn and came within a hair of crashing into the red vehicle that was parked crossways in

the narrow street. Lloyd had just announced that the mental impulses were close by.

It was a personnel truck carrying about 20 policemen with ready weapons and double sentries stood on the right and left sides of the street. Rous came to a stop, he had no other choice. "Watch it, Lloyd!" he warned.

3 police officers jumped down from the red truck and came to the car. Rous put down the right side window.

"Where are you coming from?" asked one of the 3.

"From the eastern suburbs," Rous answered.

"Directly through the city?"

"Yes."

"What does it look like there?"

Rous registered an expression of horror which did not require too much acting on his part. "Everything empty, all disappeared!"

"Were you able to observe where or in what direction the people went?"

"No. We weren't there, ourselves. We came over the Finnestal Bridge. On the far side everything was in order but on this side—"

"Alright," said the policeman. "You may continue. You'll have to drive over the sidewalk."

Rous thanked the officer. He pulled to the left and drove around the red personnel vehicle.

"You've made a mistake," said Rosita calmly.

Rous looked at her in surprise. "What did I do?"

"You didn't say goodbye."

"But I—"

"You thanked him but you didn't say goodbye. Don't you remember what an important thing it is with the Mirsalese to give the word of departure?"

"Oh for—!" Rous cursed half aloud. "Do you think maybe he didn't notice it?"

"He did notice it," answered Rosita. "I could see it in his face. I think it was a ruse that he let you go past. We're going to run into some unpleasantries."

Rous said nothing more. A few minutes later he pulled to a stop in front of the hotel.

The streets were also empty in this sector. Lloyd maintained that the cluster of mental impulses he had received had come from a southwesterly direction. Apparently the southwestern portion of Fillinan was

the only part of the city that had escaped the fate of the others.

The hotel was now emptier feeling than before. Even the little man had disappeared. Rous rang a few times but when no one showed up at the desk he helped himself to the room keys. The elevator did not function. The catastrophe had also caused the power room attendant to disappear and now there wasn't any electricity.

They went up the stairs without saying a word to one another. They had enough on their minds to make them pensive.

Instead of separating, they all went together to Rous' room. Before Rous went in, Lloyd gave him a warning signal and pointed to the door. Rous raised an eyebrow, thought for a moment and then finally nodded. At the same time he pointed to Lloyd's equipment case. Lloyd took out the psycho-beamer.

Then they went in.

At first glance the room had the appearance of not having been disturbed. But as soon as Rosita had closed the door behind her, faces appeared from behind sofas, chairs and tables. They were the faces of the police. The men rose up now into full view, each with his miniature flame-thrower aimed right at them.

One of the police officers Rous recognized. It was Flaring. Flaring came out from his place of concealment. Smiling sarcastically, he said: "We thought that perhaps you could enlighten us concerning the recent catastrophe that has occurred. That's why we've come here!"

* * * *

On board the *Drusus* there was a new registration of signal attenuation from the body transmitters of the 3 agents. Like the first, it only lasted about 3 seconds. Thereafter the signals continued coming in flawlessly.

On the other hand, the *Gazelle's* transmitter had not yet been disturbed.

Rhodan assumed that Rous and his companions had made 'enemy contact' for the 2nd time. The fact that Rous had not communicated with the ship after the first contact was undoubtedly an indication that the incident had been of no consequence.

Now it remained to be seen whether or not such was the case this time...

* * * *

"What makes you think we can help you?" asked Rous calmly.

Flaring indicated the chairs and said, "Sit down—and don't try anything foolish!"

Rous, Lloyd and Rosita sat down obediently.

"You claim that you come from Wollaston," Flaring began without any hesitation. "In Wollaston there are many uncivilized people. I doubt that any one of them could drive an omnibus without instructions. And if he were instructed, then he would know the traffic regulations and he would have parked it on the left side of the street instead of the right side."

"Okay," he answered. "That's your theory. What's the rest of it?"

"Since the catastrophe in the country the arterial highways to the city have all been occupied by double sentry positions. Coming here on the road from Resaz you were able to get past the 2d station, meaning the innermost guard post, without interference, but the outer station's sentries strangely have no recollection of 3 people from Wollaston coming through their position."

Rous raised his right hand in a sign of agreement but he said, "Of course we can't help it if your people have poor memories."

Flaring smiled. "They have very good memories, I can assure you. Moreover, I haven't finished yet. The 3 of you were downtown this afternoon when the new disaster struck. And you 3 are the only ones who survived it. What explanation do you have to offer for this?"

Rous's hand sank down again. "None," he admitted. "We can only be thankful that we did survive."

Flaring frowned gravely. "What about the assertion you made that at the time of the disaster you happened to be on the Finnestal Bridge? Is that no longer true?"

Rous was startled. "You know that already, too?"

"Yes, that... and also that you seem to violate all our customs, which as I have been given to understand are also practiced on the island of Wollaston. In spite of the friendliness of the sentry who questioned you, you did not give him the proper courtesy of a goodbye when you left."

Rous stared at the floor in front of him.

"Now listen here!" said Flaring, taking a new approach. "We are scientifically advanced enough to be able to detect that you are not of this world. We ourselves have just entered the age of space travel. Presumably your race is already well into the middle of such an age. You have attacked Mirsal—on what basis we are not aware. So far we have done nothing to antagonize any alien race because heretofore we were not in contact with any to be able to do so.

"So we don't really know what you have against us. But if we knew, then perhaps we might be able to remove the cause of your resentments instead of suffering the disappearance of millions of our people."

"It is our most ardent wish to arrive at a reasonable peace with you. We will do what we can... if only no more of our people disappear. Mirsal has an approximate population of 3 billion inhabitants. In the past number of days 2 million of them have disappeared without a trace. We don't wish to have our world become totally depopulated in the next 5 or 10 years."

Rous had listened attentively. Now he looked up at Flaring and asked, "Are you authorized to negotiate...?"

Flaring saw himself closer to his goal. "Yes, of course. Do you wish—?"

Rous waved him off and got up. He spoke to Lloyd in English. "Put that thing back in its case!" he said.

Lloyd tucked the psycho-beamer out of sight in its case.

Rous took a few steps into the middle of the room before he, turned around and faced Flaring. "You're a reasonable man, Flaring," he said. "And that's why I'm going to be frank with you. But of course I'm going to have to disappoint you on one issue: we are not the ones you think we are. Admittedly, we are aliens, but we are not responsible for the disappearance of 2 million inhabitants on this planet. Neither we nor any other members of our race."

He gave Flaring a penetrating look, which Flaring returned. Then the latter finally raised his right hand in a sign of assent.

But his tone was one of disillusionment. "I figured that you wouldn't really confide in us."

Rous shook his head without realizing that Flaring would not understand the gesture, which was of Earthly origin. "You're on the wrong trail, Flaring!" he said severely.

And then he explained to him as much as he needed to know, concerning the situation involving 3 Terranians in their midst. He kept silent about those things he must not reveal—such as his home world, its name and where it was located. He also maintained silence concerning the role that the Solar Empire was playing in the overall framework of galactic power politics, although he had to comment on the fact that the galaxy contained a multiplicity of power blocks and separate interest groups.

Rous' lecture lasted about a quarter of an hour. At the end of it he said: "You can't commit a greater mistake than to consider us as enemies. We have resources and weapons against which your most modern equipment would be like so many stone-age hatchets. If anybody can track down your invisible enemy, we are the ones who can do it. So you will be depriving yourselves of this possibility if you persist in making difficulties for us."

It could be seen that Flaring was still not quite convinced. "Explain to me," he asked, "what possible interest your race could have in Mirsalese events, You admit that you've already been in 2 situations where my countrymen have disappeared without a trace but you emerged unscathed. If these attacks are not directed against yourselves, why do you trouble yourselves about them?"

Rous started to grin. "That's a very adroit question," he had to admit. "Don't think we're doing it just for charity. You know a prime principle for survival out in the galaxy is that anybody who wants to stay around had better know what's going on. In other words, he has to know all of his potential enemies. If he comes across a phenomenon that doesn't affect him directly, he shouldn't close his eyes on that account but instead should try to get to the bottom of the mystery. If he doesn't do that then maybe he'll be the next victim of the Unknown and because he didn't take the ounce of prevention and prepare himself in time, he becomes helpless to defend himself. Can you understand that?"

"Yes," answered Flaring simply.

"Good—and over and above all that we do happen to be a cooperative and philanthropic race of people. So if we can do anything to keep the Unknowns from taking you lock, stock and barrel, we'll certainly do it. But if that is to happen then it's necessary, of course, that you don't put roadblocks in

front of us!" With this last statement he gave Flaring a challenging look.

Flaring hesitated for awhile and then he said: "I am not authorized to make decisions on this type of matter. I shall have to submit what I have heard here to a higher authority, who will have to decide."

"The only thing I can arrange to ease the restrictions a bit," here he smiled slightly "is to discontinue keeping you under surveillance. Will you give me your word that you will not leave the city?"

Rous raised his right hand. "That I can assure you."

"Good. Then I will let you know as soon as possible what has been decided."

He made the formalities of departure. Also there was not one of his men who exited without saying a proper goodbye

Outside, evening settled upon the city. It grew dark. Nowhere was there a light to be seen. The police had enough to do without also manning the power plant.

4/ 20,000 YEARS IN AN INSTANT!

Lloyd and Rosita had returned to their rooms. Under an emergency light, Rous prepared a coded report concerning their experiences on Mirsal 2 up to the present moment. He wished to send it to the *Drusus* .

The report also included the negotiations with Flaring, and Rous requested an approval of his method of procedure. Although the uncoded text of the report was 3000 words or more in length, the punched plastic tape containing the coded version was small enough to be rolled up in his hand.

He started for Lloyd's room where the latter kept the micro-com in his equipment case. En route he passed through Rosita's room. Rosita stood at the window and stared out into the night. She didn't turn around when Rous came in but he heard her speak. "Everything is so terribly quiet!"

He came and stood by her at the window. There was nothing to be seen—not even the front of the houses across the street.

Almost a million and a half people had become victims of the invisible enemy during this 2nd attack. This was a count that Flaring had mentioned.

A million and a half people who disappeared from the face of this world in the space of only a few minutes! Why? To what purpose?

Rous was overcome by a sense of outrage as he thought about it. "Just wait!" he growled angrily. "We'll get them yet!"

Rosita did not answer. Rous drew away from the window and walked over to Lloyd's door.

When he opened it he was met with a bright glow of light. He was momentarily blinded but then he was

able to see that Lloyd's room was almost completely filled with a light of even intensity which seemed to emerge from all directions at once. It was just like coming from a darkened room into a sun room with all windows open to a full flood of sunlight from all sides.

Rosita also noticed the light as it fell through the doorway.

Lloyd was stumbling around somewhere in the flood of brightness and was apparently very busy.

"What is that?" cried Rous. "What did you turn on?"

Lloyd came to a stop. "For the time being I don't know myself what it is," he answered in some exasperation. "I was tinkering around a little bit... and suddenly I got this blast of light."

"*What* were you tinkering with?"

"With the defense screen generator."

Rous was speechless. In Lloyd's equipment case were all kinds of things for generating light—even the emergency light he had used to prepare the coded tape report for the *Drusus* had come from his collection. But of all the apparatuses that Lloyd carried around with him, the last one to be considered as a substitute light source was the defense screen.

Rous and Rosita stepped in and closed the door behind them. Rous sat down on a chair. "Tell me what happened!" he requested of Lloyd.

Lloyd put a hand across his forehead as though he had to think it over and recollect. Finally he said, "You recall how we saved that Mirsalese on the Avenue of Kings? Well, I took the generator apart to see if the forcefield could be strengthened under certain circumstances if you connected the apparatus to an auxiliary power source. Of course you know that it's possible in theory. The only question is, how much energy can the little thing absorb and make use of?"

"And what else?" asked Rous.

Lloyd shrugged. "I don't know about the rest of it. I took out a couple of capacitors and completed the circuit without them. Then all of a sudden there was blazing light in here. I have no idea why!"

Rous had gotten to his feet. "Show me—where is that thing?"

Lloyd pointed to the table.

Rous approached the small generator cautiously. The apparatus was no larger than a palmbook. Lloyd had removed the cover and attempted to work in the complicated inside of the generator with a tiny soldering tweezers.

Lloyd was a specialist. In addition to his astonishing parapsychic ability he had an almost complete knowledge of all electronic and gravito-mechanical problems such as occur in the construction of force-screen generators and similar equipment.

On the other hand, Rous was equally knowledgeable. In the Academy he had completed courses in electronics and gravitomechanics. So he was familiar with what he was doing and was able to see at first glance at which places Lloyd had made changes in the small generator. He tested the newly soldered

connections and traced the altered circuitry in his mind. His mental findings startled him suddenly. He reviewed his steps and arrived at the same results.

Lloyd stood behind him looking over his shoulder.

"Do you know what you have made?" asked Rous.

Lloyd nodded. "Well, the way it looks to me, I've only changed the form of the forcefield."

"Precisely, The protective field is built up by the generator in a spherical form with a variable but limited radius. And now..."

"...it's nothing but a circular field," finished Lloyd. "More or less a ring-shaped field."

"Correct. A ring field that in the first place we don't even know enough about to know where it is."

He continued the experimental investigation. He seemed to find what he was looking for and asked for the soldering pincers. He undertook a few changes, turned the adjustment screws on the front panel of the apparatus and checked through everything several times.

"I'm trying to determine the position of the field," he said as he went along. "It has a ring form at present but where the ring lies we don't yet know."

He continued working until finally Rosita let out a startled cry from the background.

"There... at the window!"

Rous looked up. On the window a circular spot of bluish-white brightness had formed. Beyond the bright circle everything was dark. The light that fell into the room now came solely out of the circle.

"That's strange," murmured Rous.

"Did I say it was a ring field?" asked Lloyd. "That's no ring, it's a circle—a circular spot of light!"

Rous shook his head. "Nonsense. What you see there isn't the field but simply light, as you say. The field itself is invisible. It lies as a ring around that circle of light."

Rosita had become curious. "Where does the light come from?"

"Ha... if I only knew!"

Rous stared thoughtfully for a few full minutes at the round spot of light. Then he jumped suddenly as if something important had occurred to him and thereafter he began to work as if possessed.

Lloyd and Rosita noticed that the light spot grew smaller while the intensity of the light itself increased. So the brightness within the room remained more or less the same except that the corners were not as evenly illuminated as before.

Finally, what had been originally an area about 25 feet in diameter had become a small point of almost unbearably bright light. While Rous continued to work, the light point again began to spread out. He noted this and went on turning things, switching and resoldering as necessary until the light point was back

again on the window pane.

Then he stood up. "So!" he sighed. "Do you know what that is?" He pointed to the spot of light.

Lloyd shook his head.

"Well, naturally I don't know either," admitted Rous. "But I have a hunch. I surmise that our annular field here is working as a kind of lens. Light rays from some very distant object are brought through it and are cut off just at the focal point."

Lloyd looked at him uncomprehendingly. "What light are you talking about—and where does it come from?"

Rous scratched his head. "That's the big mystery. If I turn off the generator the light disappears, so the light does not exist in *our* room—we know that."

"That's a little too esoteric for me," grumbled Lloyd. "So what room does it come from?"

Enthused by his discovery, Rous gave him a friendly elbow nudge. "Remember that we could never see the aliens when they attacked," he said. "They were invisible. If it's too complicated for you to grasp the concept of 2 space-continuums being coexistent in which we and the enemy are located, then simply imagine that we may have found here the means of nullifying their invisibility.

"Actually it works something like this: the ring field with its lens-like properties causes an instability in our own space structure and that instability acts as a bridge between 2 continuums. The light from one continuum can go over to the other."

Lloyd nodded. "Good. I think I can understand that. And what else?"

Rous pointed to the spot of light. "What you see there is a picture. A picture of some sort of object in that other realm of space. If we take a magnifying glass and enlarge it, we will be able to see something."

"Okay then... so we'll just get ourselves a glass."

Rous waved a hand negatively. "A glass magnifier is nothing more than a lens. If the first lens consists of an annular force field, then the 2nd one can be made up the same way. So all we have to do is to slice our generator ring into 2 parts and thus obtain 2 annular rings, the one as the objective lens and the other as the eyepiece." He looked around. "There behind us we have a wide white wall. If we're lucky we'll be able to project the picture over there."

Lloyd caught on. Eagerly the 2 of them began to work with the field generator while Rosita watched them curiously but without the necessary experience to know what she should make of it.

"I always thought lenses were made out of glass," she interjected. "Isn't that so?"

Rous laughed. "For the most part," he admitted. "But even 100 years ago there were electron microscopes with lenses made up of electrical fields or magnetic fields. So why shouldn't our forcefields serve just as well as lenses?"

"Okay, okay," Rosita protested, waving her hands defensively. "I don't understand all that. I'm just anxious to see what kind of wizardry you're going to put together there."

Lloyd's and Rous' enthusiasm was so great that within only a half hour a 2nd circle of light appeared in the middle of the room, which was not discernibly different from the first in its brightness. It was larger than the first one had ever been and Rosita drew their attention to it.

"Oh, good!" smiled Rous. "That is our eyepiece. Now we will focus that down until..." He interrupted himself and gave his forehead a slap. "I'm a fool!" With only one ocular lens you can't project a true picture... unless we also have a 3rd lens. But the generator can't put out that much... We'll have to observe directly."

He stepped to the lens in the middle of the room. "I don't see anything but brightness," he asserted somewhat disappointedly. "Lloyd, give a turn on the potentiometer."

Lloyd started turning the tiny power knob while Rous stared intently into the light circle.

"Stop!" he cried suddenly. "Mark that spot on the panel, Lloyd!"

Lloyd marked the stop position of the potentiometer on the panel with a small etching blade. Meanwhile, Rous was asking for more things. "Rosita, bring me a couple of cloths or scarves or towels and hang them over my head. The lateral light interferes with the observation."

Rosita brought towels. Once under these, so that only the light circle was visible to him, he stared ahead without uttering a sound.

Only after 10 minutes or so had passed did he step back and shake off the towels from his head. "You look in there!" he said to Lloyd. "Without any shadow of a doubt it's a picture but I can't orient my mind to it."

Rosita could no longer contain her curiosity. While Lloyd was adjusting the towels about his head she asked, "What do you see?"

In Rous' place, Lloyd described the picture: "There's a wide, flat surface of some kind. Dark objects are strewn around at random. It's a polychromatic picture but there don't seem to be many colors to speak of in this region. Those dark objects... well, they could be machines I guess. I don't know..."

"Is anything moving?" Rosita wanted to know.

"No, nothing. Everything is peaceful and still. The whole thing looks more like a photograph. I can't even wait! What's that?" He was silent for a moment and then continued excitedly: "Now something has moved. I mean the whole scene in its entirety. It looked as if someone had shoved the whole picture a bit forward. The dark objects have gotten bigger... ah yes, they are machines!"

At that moment Lloyd's observation was ruthlessly interrupted by Rosita, who simply couldn't suppress her curiosity any longer. She pulled the towels from his head, shoved him to one side and took his place.

Rous and Lloyd let her have her way. For a few minutes Rosita observed silently and motionlessly. Then she stood back from the observing position. "So it looks like a plain that's paved with tile and there's a couple of dark things on it that could be called machines if you stretched things a bit. Everything is slightly blurred. I don't see anything unusual there."

"Is that so?" laughed Rous. "You don't see anything unusual? Do you know what you were looking at?"

"No," answered Rosita.

"Alright, I'll explain it to you. You were present when we rescued a Mirsalese from disappearing by means of our screen generator. So you can understand that the forcefield has some kind of effect on the enemy, whatever or whoever he might be. Just what this effect is we don't know yet."

"Now when the same kind of forcefield is changed into the proper form it causes an instability in the structure of space and creates a bridge over which the light from the space-continuum of the enemy can transfer into ours."

Rosita began to comprehend. Her eyes went wide as she stared at Rous. "You don't mean to tell me that..."

Rous nodded calmly. "That's what I do mean to say, exactly. The world of the enemy is different from ours. He is located in another space-time continuum and he launches his attacks from there. What we are seeing through this circular window is nothing other than a small indistinct slice of the enemy's dimension!"

* * * *

They had gotten their first glimpse. After long weeks of having had to parry and thrust at an unseen enemy, this was the first time they had succeeded in peering into the other continuum where the opposition lived.

It was a boost to their confidence if it served for nothing else. The extreme complexities of holding the image by means of the energy fields made it an impossibility to determine or even estimate where the scene was that they could see through the circle of light. It was not possible to fix its location, no matter how logical and reasonable an objective it was to locate something that was, so to speak, in another universe.

There wasn't even the slightest clue as to whether what they were looking at was a static structure, fixed motionlessly by its very nature, or if it was only that another time relationship operated in that other space, to the effect that movements there were so slow that they could not be detected.

The image's tendency to jump closer had been noted a number of times since Lloyd's first observation and occasionally there seemed to be a mathematical inversion of the process so that the jerky movements resulted in a retreat rather than an advance. Rous did not consider it to be an actual effect but rather attributed it to fluctuations in the forcefield generator.

Rous attempted to send a minibook through the light circle into the other realm of space but it failed miserably. The small volume fell to the floor on the other side of the ring. Both of the annular-formed energy fields were to some extent serviceable as a lens system—a transport medium they were not.

Rous was dissatisfied with the clarity of the image. As for the machines that were visible through the light circle, he envisioned them to be strange, opaque structures as was to be expected of the products of an alien technology. But if it were possible to get the image a little sharper, perhaps they could figure out one or more functions of those apparatuses. Maybe they were the actual weapons the enemy used for his

brutal attacks in the Mirsal System!

But all attempts to focus the image more sharply misfired. Finally it was a matter of being content with having gotten an image at all by such an unusual and inadvertent means.

After some hours more of observation, Rous turned off the generator. A half hour later he turned it on again and was relieved to see the light spot and circle appear in the same positions and to find that through them the same image was to be observed as before. The image could be recaptured or reproduced—that was the main thing.

"In the future we'll have to do without our defense screen," Rous announced. "We need the generator here more urgently."

* * * *

Flaring appeared early the next morning. He brought good news. "I have explained your situation to the proper authorities," he said, after having carefully greeted all 3 Terranians one by one, "and I'm happy to report that you have a full vote of confidence. Gratitude has been expressed for your offer of collaboration with us and we are prepared to pave the way for you in any way we can. Of course my people would like to know whether or not you have already formulated any concrete plans."

Rous nodded grimly. "We'd like to grab these invisible characters by the neck and—"

Flaring smiled. "That's a fine objective," he agreed, "but—have you gotten far enough to do just that?"

"No," sighed Rous, "We're not that far along yet. But wait a minute..." He drew from his pocket the strangely formed stick of plastic substance that he had picked up the previous day in the Avenue of Kings and he held it out to Flaring. "Here is something." He explained where he had found the object and concluded: "I'd like to have that analyzed. Your chemists will certainly know what it consists of... or at least what it *should* consist of. What I'd like to know is: did the enemy attack cause any structural changes in this piece of plastic?"

Flaring cautiously took the thing in his hand. "I'll have that attended to as quickly as possible. Have you any further instructions?"

Rous frowned in thought. "We don't have any instructions of any kind to give you. We are happy to be able to put in a few requests to you."

Flaring felt flattered.

"Oh yes, there is one other thing," Rous continued before Flaring could say anything else. "We'd like to take a look at a map and see where the areas are that the enemy has attacked and what they look like."

Flaring raised his right hand. "Good. I'll see to it that you get the maps at once." He took his departure with the proper formality.

Rous utilized the time to send off his report to the *Drusus*. He had delayed sending it the previous

evening because so many new things had happened and had to be added. After the punched plastic tape strip had received a few more holes, it was fed into the micro-com transmitter. Almost simultaneously, the sensational message was received on board the *Drusus*, 18 million miles away.

Rous had hardly been able to get this task behind him before Flaring appeared once more.

"The analysis is still in process," he explained after greeting everyone, "but I was able to bring the along at once."

He spread them out on the table. The top map showed the whole province stretching between Resaz and Fillinan plus about 120 miles of territory on either side of the area. The region that had been depopulated by the invisible enemy's attack was outlined in red and shaded in by hatched lines.

Rous was startled to note the unusual shape of the shaded part of the map. "You're sure that your information is reliable?" he asked Flaring.

Flaring raised his hand. "Absolutely certain. You can well imagine what pains we go to in a matter like this to have accurate data."

"Yes... but what do you think of this peculiar shape?"

The red bordering described the approximate form of a shoehorn that someone had left on a hot oven and then forcibly pulled apart. The strange outline had 2 widely separated oval 'ears' in the east and in the west, with an irregular kind of pinched-in area between. In the eastern 'ear' section there was an elliptical-shaped blank spot, apparently a place where the tragedy had not struck.

Flaring crooked his finger in the local sign of not knowing an answer to a question. "We've already racked our brains over that," he stated. "We thought at first that the enemy was aiming at hitting the most populated areas by that configuration. But just here in this blank space..." he pointed to the strange unshaded spot in the eastern ear of the shoe horn, "... is Kelleyhan, a city of about 300,000 inhabitants. The total population of the remaining region all together is only about two thirds more than that of Kelleyhan alone."

"So the region isn't especially heavily populated?"

"By no means. The industrial area of Russom in the North has a density of 400 persons per square mile... and here between Resaz and Fillinan the ratio is only 30 to one square mile."

Rous spread out the 2nd map which represented the surrounding areas of Fillinan to a somewhat greater degree, with a circumference of 120 miles. He learned for the first time that the previous day's catastrophe had not just limited itself to the city area of Fillinan but had also reached about 90 miles north and south. The only areas that had been spared in the region of Fillinan were the southwestern suburbs. Of course the population density there happened to be the highest, so that of the total of 3,000,000 inhabitants only a million and a half had disappeared.

The region to the east and north of the city was a natural catch basin for a number of rivers—among which the Finnestal was the largest—and it was for the most part of swampy moor. In past centuries there had been attempts to dredge the area, according to what Flaring explained to Rous, but in modern times these efforts had been abandoned in favor of turning the region into a wildlife reserve. In the entire area, outside of the city of Fillinan itself, there weren't more than 1000 people.

On this 2nd map the area that had been attacked by the enemy had the shape of an irregular polygon. Also there were 4 more or less large spots left blank where no molestation had occurred.

Rous wanted to know how the stricken area could be so carefully delineated if the countryside there was so sparsely populated.

"Don't you know that?" asked Flaring, surprised. "Not only people disappear but also animals. Wherever the enemy has struck you'll find afterwards that not even a single worm or grub is left behind. All organic life disappears, with the strange exception of plants."

Rous nodded thoughtfully. "No, we hadn't realized that yet," he admitted.

Lloyd stood next to him and stared at the map. "Doesn't that look sort of meaningless or senseless?" he asked gently.

Rous shrugged. "Perhaps the enemy isn't trying to make as many people as possible disappear. Maybe he's in pursuit of something else. For the time being we don't know yet," he replied.

At this moment an orderly came into the room and announced to Flaring that the analysis of Rous' plastic comb object had been completed.

"That was quick!" said Rous, admiringly. "Let me see it."

The orderly handed him the report. Rous started to read it and Flaring read along with him. It turned out that the investigation had shown the physical and molecular structure of the piece of plastic to have remained unchanged. In other words, nothing had happened to the subject of the analysis.

"Oh here... wait a moment!" said Flaring. "There's an annotation down below. Do you understand what is meant by an aging analysis?"

"Yes. They tried to determine the age of the plastic. By what method?"

"In all organic matter there is a definite quantity of a radioactive isotope, which happens to be an isotope of the element possessing 6 protons..."

"Carbon!" interrupted Rous quickly. He turned to Lloyd and Rosita and informed them in English: "They've made a Carbon14 analysis!" Then he continued, talking to Flaring. "And what was indicated by that?"

"There is only a tiny fraction of the original concentration in evidence. Whereas the next higher element in atomic weight has been correspondingly increased."

"Wait, hold it!" Rous requested. "How long have you been making plastic like this on Mirsal 2?"

Flaring thought a moment. "I'd say since about 40 years ago."

Rous became more excited. With his head down he paced back and forth muttering to himself in English: "The occurrence of carbon 14 in crystalline plastic is practically impossible but whatever small amount contained there would show only the tiniest fraction of decay in only 40 years. So with this method you couldn't determine an age of 40 years. If anything happened to the C-14 it would have had to occur during those few seconds when the shimmering curtain of energy passed over it."

He came to a stop in front of Flaring. "Alright, that much is clear," he said. "So what age has the analysis arrived at?"

As Flaring examined the report in his hand his face took on an incredulous expression. "Approximately 20,000 years," he answered, somewhat uncertainly.

Rous raised his brows. "And your methods of analysis are trustworthy?"

Flaring curved his right index finger. "This piece here just happens to be part of a group of samples whose ages were known exactly and which were thoroughly tested. I don't believe any error is involved."

Rous turned around to Rosita and Lloyd. He spoke in Mirsalese so that Flaring could understand him. "That means that during the few moments in which the hostile attack passed over us in the Avenue of Kings, as far as this piece of plastic is concerned—20,000 years went by!"

5/ THROUGH THE RING—OF LIGHT

The discovery was staggering—but in the long run it was no more than one more link in the chain that made up the mystery of the invisible enemy.

Flaring didn't know what to make of it all. He knew little of the things that were hidden in the universe. His race had only just begun to conquer space in the narrow confines of his home system.

Rous went out of his way to reassure Flaring and make it clear to him that the 20,000-year-old piece of plastic had come by its age through natural processes.

"But tell me..." Flaring protested. "According to that, then everything the enemy took with him during his attack must have aged by the same amount, wouldn't you say?"

Rous waved his hand cautioningly. "Be careful with such assertions! Why should it be by the same amount? Certainly everything must have aged but to what degree we can't yet say."

"Very well," conceded Flaring. "Then the way I see it, this hotel we're standing in may only have aged 1000 years instead of 20,000 years—but don't you think that it still should have fallen apart by now?"

"Oh no! You are confusing 2 different things: the aging of matter that would be caused by a continuous passage of years and the simple passage of time itself. During the 20,000 year span that this plastic piece passed through it was not exposed to an equivalent time stress. You read yourself that its crystal structure or matrix is still just as it should be. And that's the way it's been with all other matter involved. You needn't fear that the houses in Fillinan are going to start caving in one after the other like a row of dominoes... But you've just given me a new idea."

"What is that?" asked Flaring.

"Instruct your people to look for samples of material in both of the attack areas so that we can make an

age-analysis of them. I need as many samples as possible from a representative cross-section, do you understand? From as many different places as you can manage. I want to conduct the investigation in such a way that we can indicate on this map the place it was located during the attack and the aging that it underwent. Can you start with that at once?"

Flaring was in full agreement. He took his leave and promised to get everything going that was required.

* * * *

A few days passed without any new sign of an enemy attack on Mirsal 2. Meanwhile Flaring's people worked in the designated disaster zones and collected bits and pieces of plastic, wood and other samples, which were analyzed immediately.

In Rous' hotel room, which in the course of time had become a sort of headquarters, the information was assembled. It was meticulously arranged, catalogued and indicated point by point on the map.

After the first hundred results thus obtained, Rous knew already the kind of configuration to expect. Age groupings fell into lines which paralleled or followed the contour of the outer boundaries of the attack region. From the outer boundary toward the center the age increased. The overall aspect of the growing chart looked like nothing more than oceanographic map in which the various ocean depths were delineated by lines. But on the lines Rous was drawing were ages instead of depths. The objects, which had been taken from the outer edge of the attack area, were as good as not aged at all. In the center of the marked area the aging was found to be about 50,000 years—that is for the region that lay west of Fillinan where the first attack had occurred—and 33,000 years for the city region of Fillinan itself, where the 2nd attack had taken place.

A curious finding was that in an area west of Fillinan, that is toward Resaz, a type of 'trench' occurred in which the samplings showed an aging up to 80 or 100 thousand years. At first Rous thought there was some mistake in the analyses until Lloyd gave him the right clue.

"Do you remember the people on the bus that we came with? In this area there were actually 2 enemy attacks: the first one in the morning just about the time we got to Keyloghal and the 2nd that night while we were traveling in the bus. The Mirsalese don't know about the 2nd occurrence because there were no more people in the already depopulated region to disappear... except the people on the bus. So the samplings taken from there have had *adouble* aging process. The agings are cumulative and so you arrive at these higher figures."

This fact could clearly be seen. On the map it was evident that the attack causing the bus passengers to disappear had only touched a small area of about 10,000 square feet.

Flaring was given the signal to take his people off the sampling project when Rous had drawn in enough contour lines to give him the overall picture of the situation.

For the time being, nothing more could be achieved by the effort.

* * * *

"Won't we ever be able to solve this riddle?" asked Rosita. Her voice sounded dejected.

They had finished the day's work and had prepared a small supper from Mirsalese canned goods. Now they sat before the bay window in Rous' room where they had a southern view of the city.

Meanwhile the police had been able to put one of the power plants in operation. Some lights were on; their effect was seen in the feeble glow that lay over the southwestern suburbs.

In spite of this, Rous, Lloyd and their female psychologist companion sat in the dark, each one immersed in their own thoughts.

"Of course we will," Rous answered confidently.

"What makes you so sure?"

"The mere fact that I'm a Terranian," Rous answered simply. "Over the past 60 years we've had a whole big rash of riddles to contend with and there's not one of them that hasn't been solved."

Rosita sighed. "I wish I could share your optimism."

"Wait till the next attack," put in Lloyd. "Each attack brings us a step farther, as you can see by the fact that we've only been on Mirsal 2 just 10 days and we already know plenty!"

"And what it all adds up to," retorted Rosita, "is that we still haven't the faintest idea of what to make out of this invisible opponent and his objectives or intentions. I'm of the opinion that what we've been referring to as attacks aren't actually attacks at all. The zones where they hit, the configuration of such regions, the number of people and animals there who disappear... it's all such a random phenomenon—I mean, it's whole sampling curve is a purely statistical average and it's impossible to find any deliberate planning in it at all."

Rous pondered over this for awhile and then answered her. "You may be overlooking one thing: if the enemy only wants to cause alarm and confusion, then he could very well be resorting to the random and accidental patterns that are occurring here."

"That might be," admitted Rosita. "But why go to such efforts merely to create confusion?"

"Nobody knows... But why don't you tell us what you think it is that we're dealing with?"

"I don't have the faintest idea. My only assertion is that we're dealing with accidental events rather than something that is planned and aimed at a specific objective."

"One should never underestimate a woman's intuition. She often grasps in a second what a man's reason requires hours of thought to arrive at. But in this case I think you're getting onto the wrong track. I'm certain that we'll find out what's behind all this and discover the reason for these strange goings on," said Rous.

Rosita got up. "Well, I hope so," she laughed. "But meanwhile let's not lose any sleep over it, right?"

Good night, gentlemen!"

"What I've been thinking about all this time," Lloyd began suddenly, "is whether or not—" He interrupted himself in mid sentence. "What was that?"

Rous had jumped up. "Somebody yelled! Listen... now everything is quiet downstairs! Come on!"

They rushed out of the room and down the stairs. On the 2nd floor, Flaring's policemen were in platoon-like formation in the hallway and were looking at their commissioner who moved toward the rear area of the hall with his head down like a bloodhound following a scent.

This back part was empty although a contingency of police had just been assigned to it and should have noted the cry and the following stillness as well as anyone else.

"Flaring!" shouted Rous. "What's happened?"

Flaring straightened up and halted. "10 of my men have disappeared!" he answered.

"Disappeared...?"

Flaring raised his hand. "Yes. One of them saw one of the others just as he was about to go through this doorway, he saw him suddenly turn transparent and then disappear. He shouted in his fright, which is what you no doubt just heard."

"And what are you doing there?"

Flaring crooked his index finger. "I'm trying to determine whether or not the danger is still here."

"Wait!" Rous passed by the waiting line of excited men and went down the hall to the end where another stairway led down to the ground floor. Then he came back. "Have you already looked inside the rooms?"

"Yes."

"Out of which rooms did your people disappear?"

Flaring pointed to 3 doors.

"And to the left of them?"

"No men were quartered in there."

"But to the right?"

"That's just it," complained Flaring. "From there on I had all rooms covered—including the offices that's 14 of them. The first 3 are completely empty now but in the remaining 11 rooms nothing happened."

Rous opened one of the rooms where men had disappeared. It was temporarily furnished with 4 beds, 2 of which had not been used. "These 2 were on leave," explained Flaring. "The others must have disappeared out of their beds."

Rous examined the room. Before Flaring had moved in here with his staff it had probably looked no

different than any other room in the floors above. Directly above this room was...

He was struck by a terrible thought. He ran out into the hall. "Lloyd!" he shouted. "Upstairs! We have to check on Rosita!"

They charged up the stairs and sprinted along the hall until they got to Rosita's door. Rous knocked on it while Lloyd probed his inner senses, listening. There was no answer from inside.

Lloyd shook his head. "She isn't there!" he asserted.

Rous dispensed with formalities. The door wasn't locked. He swung it open and dashed into the room, turning on the light.

Rosita was nowhere to be seen. The bed was untouched. Rous also searched the 2 adjacent rooms, Lloyd's and his own. Nothing had changed there except that there was no trace anywhere of Rosita.

He cried out her name in the whole place but Rosita did not give a sign of herself. Flaring's men hadn't seen her either. There was no doubt that Rosita had disappeared.

The enemy had struck for the 4th time and this time a Terranian had also become a victim!

This attack differed from the 3 previous ones in many ways. The most striking difference lay in the size of the affected area this time. In addition to Rosita, only 10 men of Flaring's group were missing—for the simple reason that these 10 men and the girl psychologist were the only humans occupying the zone beyond a line of demarcation which lay between rooms 14 and 15.

But Rous hastened to get a few aging analyses run through and a number of tested objects showed signs of having aged about 3000 years more than after the main attack on Fillinan. In this manner the area of the 4th attack was marked out, and it had a somewhat cubical shape. The height of the cube was 20 yards and reached from the hotel cellar to the 3rd floor. The breadth and width were both 10 yards, which figures were convertible into the breadth of 2 rooms and the depth of 3. Within this roughly cubical area the 3 rooms that had been occupied by the police were included, in addition to Lloyd and Rosita's rooms.

When Lloyd found this out he scratched his head and mumbled: "It was lucky that I just happened to be with you!"

Rous was not satisfied with the purely superficial investigations he had made so far and went on with the research. He knew that no Terranian should be affected by an enemy attack on Mirsal 2 under normal circumstances. After all, they had come through 3 other attacks unscathed. So why was it that this time Rosita had to be taken?

The more clinical investigation disclosed some interesting data. Rosita's room was more or less at the center of the cubical zone in which the attack occurred. It was determined that the same degree of aging was discernible on all sides of the attack zone—in other words, a consistent 3000 years—so that at first glance one might conclude that the aging process was equal throughout. However, in Rosita's room there were a number of articles which exhibited a much greater degree of aging. The test on a wooden strip from an armchair finally yielded a result that said all traces of carbon-14 had disappeared. But inasmuch as the analysts were certain that they might still show one ten-millionth part of the original C-14 quantity, this meant that the aging amount exceeded 130,000 years. Rous immediately ordered the further analysis of the fractional amount and the age of the armchair turned out to be in the neighborhood of 3,000,000

years.

With this information Rous considered the puzzle to be solved. The aging of objects inside any attack zone was evidently a measure of the force with which the attack was carried out. In all previous cases the highest age readings had been in a range of 100,000 years but in the last instance the upper limit had shot up to 30 times that much. Apparently this range of intensity was sufficient to also cause a Terranian to disappear.

All of which brought up a new set of problems. After the first attack on Mirsal 2, Rous had been convinced that he and his companions were more or less immune to the disappearing effect. He had thought that they could move around anywhere and make their investigations unhindered in the very areas where a Mirsalese was in danger of disappearing in the next moment.

All that was now a thing of the past. The enemy had energy reserves at his disposal which could also endanger a Terranian.

Rous knew what he had to do. "We're through waiting around!" he announced to Lloyd. "Now we have to take the initiative ourselves!"

Lloyd was in agreement. "Do you remember I was just about to tell you about an idea when Ms. Perez disappeared?"

"Yes. What kind of an idea?"

"I've figured out in the meantime that our defense screen generator can handle up to 20 megawatts of power. If we could somehow manage to conduct that much power to it..."

"...then maybe we might also be able to convert our lens system into a means of transportation, is that what you mean?"

Lloyd nodded.

"We'll give it a try," Rous decided. "Flaring will have to put his power plant at our disposal."

Flaring and his chief were quite willing to help. 3 more power plants in the city of Fillinan were set into operation and Marcel Rous got his 20 megawatts. The necessary connections to the field generator were made by Lloyd and Rous within very few hours. Then they were in a position to deliver the small apparatus more than 100 times its normal power requirement. If their conclusions were correct, this hundred-fold increase would also strengthen the effects of the forcefield lenses by an equal amount. It had been Lloyd's idea that perhaps something a good deal more than just light could be passed through such a powerful lens.

Flaring was the only witness present when Lloyd and Rous started their decisive experiment. Prior to this they had briefed him with a short explanation. Lloyd had made Ms setup at the table where the generator was located, whereas Rous stood behind the ring of light that still formed itself more or less in the middle of the room and he peered through it. "Increase the power slowly!" he ordered.

Lloyd complied. Current began to flow through the generator from the city power supply cables. Lloyd had connected a heavy' power meter into the circuit and now its needle began to climb.

However there was no change in the image that Rous could see through the light ring.

"More!" he ordered.

When Lloyd exceeded the level of one megawatt, the image began to fade out. Rous made Lloyd hold off and he made some adjustments. This process happened a number of times. The increase of power also changed the focal length of both lenses so that from time to time it was necessary to reposition them.

Finally all the power that was being furnished from the power plants was streaming through the generator. The last notch of output was reached.

Lloyd leaned back in his chair and sighed: "So far so good—now we can begin!"

Rous threw off the head towels he had been using up to this point for masking out peripheral light. He went to a 2nd table where he had piled various experimental objects of different sizes. The first and the smallest was a palmbook again like the one he had used a few days before in an unsuccessful test. Lloyd had turned around and was observing the light circle from the window side.

"Watch out!" said Rous. "Here goes!"

Within half a yard of the circle of light he raised his hand and threw the minibook. From where he was standing he had the impression that the small case hesitated in the ring as though meeting a resistance. Just for the tiniest fraction of a second an invisible force seemed to be supporting it.

Then it disappeared.

On the other side of the light circle Lloyd emitted a sound of astonishment. "Nothing...!" he shouted. "The book has disappeared!"

Rous breathed a sigh of relief. The experiment had succeeded. He stepped to the light ring in order to see whether or not he could discover the case, but in this he failed—even when he covered himself with the cloths.

This was puzzling. To his way of thinking the case should not have landed anywhere but in the area one could observe through the double forcefield lens system. But such was not the case. The book had actually disappeared.

"Remarkable," Rous murmured and he picked up a second and larger article.

But with this it was no different from the first attempt, it disappeared and was to be seen no more.

"I don't like that!" Lloyd decided. "Under these circumstances it's a bit dangerous to personally..."

"Wait! I have an idea. Give me a hand!"

In addition to the regular bed in Lloyd's room there was a sort of Hollywood daybed—a cot with no armrests or head supports. Since it was cut to Mirsalese body measurements it was just small enough so that it could be shoved through the light circle.

At first the couch seemed to resist going through.

"Let's take a run at it!" said Rous. "*It has* to go through!"

They supported the couch in their hands with the padded side down and the legs up. Then from the back of the room they took a run with it. Rous, who carried the front end, came to a stop close to the light ring and guided the piece of furniture through while Lloyd pushed energetically from behind.

The resistance was overcome. The couch glided through the light ring and disappeared.

Lloyd brushed his hands clean. "Now you *have* to be able to see that!" he insisted.

Rous stepped in front of the light ring, put the towels back on his head and peered through. At first glance it looked as though the image had not changed, but then...

"Lloyd, come here!" he said.

Lloyd joined him.

"Let's drape these towels so that both of us can look together." When Lloyd had complied, he asked, "Has the picture changed any to you?"

"No," answered Lloyd disappointedly.

"Look very carefully!"

Lloyd took a 2nd look, this time longer and more thoroughly. "No," he asserted. "The image has not changed."

"Do you see these tiny black dots?"

Lloyd squinted his eyes. "Do you think they mean anything?" he asked. "I've been taking them for image distortion effects."

"I have too," Rous nodded. "But a new dot has been added."

Lloyd looked at him wonderingly. "How do you know that?"

"I had noticed before that the dots I was taking for image distortions were collected around the edge of the picture, whereas there were none at all in the middle, Now look into the center of the picture!"

Lloyd looked carefully. "Yes... now there's a dot there too! But do you mean to say you think that's our day couch?"

"Naturally. It can hardly be anything else."

"But that thing isn't any bigger than a speck of dust!" Lloyd cried out in amazement. "Why, that would mean..."

"...that we've grossly underestimated the size of the image, nothing more. Those machines you see there must be the size of skyscrapers!"

Lloyd stared at him. "And you want to go over there now."

"Yes. In fact, right now." Rous took off the towels. "I know it's no small gamble," he said calmly, "but I think we can keep the risk at a minimum by keeping the generator running without interruption from now on. Flaring will have to see to it that there'll be no fluctuations in the power source and above all that there is not a power failure. Just now I haven't the slightest idea of what the hole looks like from the other side that I'll be crawling through; but I don't have to tell you that the slightest change of setting in the generator controls here will make it impossible for me to find my way back."

"Alright," replied Lloyd with grim determination. "I'll keep an eye on it."

Rous turned to Flaring. "Have you understood everything that's going on here?" he asked.

"As far as I'm concerned, yes," answered Flaring. "Are you really going across?"

Rous nodded. "Of course I am. There's no reason any more to sit back and let the enemy take the initiative."

"I wish you luck!" said Flaring.

Rous stepped to the side and examined the light ring. The under edge of the circle was almost 5 feet off the floor so that it was still an effort even to look into the aperture.

"I'm no decathlon champ," he mumbled, "so I'll need something to help me crawl into that hole."

Lloyd knew what to do. They took one of the dressers and laid it on its side, then shoved it up to the light ring. Rous got up on this and shoved himself toward the circle.

"I'll try to give you a signal from the other side," he told Lloyd, "so don't be startled if you see a flash of light somewhere. Give me the weapons!"

Lloyd handed him the psycho-beamer and a small disintegrator. Rous stuffed them both in his clothing and then began to shove himself through the circle of light.

Flaring stood nearby so that he was looking at the energy ring edge-on from the side. For him it was a breathtaking sight to see Rous stick his head into one side of the ring but not appear on the other side.

Rous didn't seem to encounter any difficulties. Within a half minute he had disappeared.

6/ FROZEN TIME

Rous had expected to encounter the same resistance as the palmbook and the daybed that had gone this way before him. Instead, the opposite happened. He had just stuck his head through the light ring and was looking ahead where the familiar image had been replaced by a vague, grey-white shimmering—then something like an undertow grasped him. It pulled him completely through the circle and let him drop.

Rous let out a startled cry, not having expected to fall after going through the lens system. He opened his eyes and saw that actually he was lying on solid ground. The falling sensation was just a trick played on

him by his over-taut nerves.

He sat up. As a matter of habit he tried to test whether the gravity here was different from that of Earth or Mirsal 2, but he had no way of telling.

The next consideration was his surroundings. The most outstanding feature was the apparent absence of a horizon. Of course as far as Rous could make out his field of vision was circular as it should have been but in place of a horizon there was an opaque wall of darkness. He estimated that it might be slightly more than a mile to that mysterious wall, from the point where he had come through.

The whole aspect seemed to be like that portion of a stage that is illuminated by the footlights, suggesting that much else lay beyond and unseen in the surrounding darkness.

He looked above him. The sky was pale blue and overcast with thin, transparent clouds. After watching the clouds for some time he determined that they were not moving.

The ground or floor of the strange circular land he was standing in was paved with what looked like very broad flagstones. They were irregularly shaped but none of them had a surface area less than about 300 square yards. Where their edges came together there were dark stripes similar to plastic welding seams. Rous suddenly recalled the reference Rosita had made to 'tiles' when she had first looked at the image of this place.

What at first had appeared to be machines when seen from Lloyd's room, proved on closer inspection to be a collection of weirdly shaped giant buildings. Rous had not underestimated their size: each of them could easily be compared with the tallest structures on Earth. He figured their average height to be around 1500 feet.

The form of the edifices struck Rous as being weird and alien because of their almost absolute functionalism. As he stood before one of the gigantic structures and stared up at all of the crazy bends and twists and fissures and offsets of its walls lie was somehow firmly convinced that every curve or cleft or inset served some definite purpose.

There were no windows anywhere—unless one could consider all the differently shaped holes as windows, which seemed to break through haphazardly in many different places.

The color of these buildings was dark gray, offering a gloomy and sinister aspect that didn't quite harmonize even with the pale blue winter-hued sky with its transparent and motionless clouds.

Close to the spot where Rous had emerged into this world he found the minibook he had thrown through the forcefield ring, as well as a can of preserves he had also tossed over. And there was the daybed lying in the same position that he and Lloyd had placed it in when they shoved it through with its legs in the air.

Rous turned around. He attempted to locate the light circle through which he had come or at least whatever impression he could detect of it from this side. For a moment he almost froze in a shock of fear when he observed that the ground was as even behind him as before him and the air equally as transparent.

But then he discovered a faint shimmering that began a few yards behind him, hovering in the form of an angularly disposed ellipse that was about 3 yards high. The shorter diameter of the ellipse was approximately 1 yard.

So from this side the circle had a different appearance and more important it was harder to locate. Rous used the couch as a landmark, shoving it under the lower edge of the ellipse so that he could locate the place as swiftly as possible.

He made no attempt to crawl back through the ellipse. The fact that it was present seemed proof enough that the return route was still open. And besides, he had no time to lose.

He kept an eye out for the points which he and Lloyd had recently taken for image defects and he found them far away and close to the wall of darkness that formed the edges of the 'Stage'. From his present position they were not essentially any more recognizable than they had been when seen from Lloyd's room. So he started walking toward them in order to have a closer look.

He got the impression that the ground he was moving over was extraordinarily hard in texture. After awhile his feet began to pain him with every step. He came to a stop and took the time to bend down and examine the material of the great, irregular flagstones. He had a knife with him, which he snapped open and used in an attempt to scratch the surface of the stone or whatever it was. He met with no success and so he was forced to conclude that the broad tiles were at least harder than his knife blade—and that meant very hard.

Owing to the difficulty of walking, it took him almost an hour to cover the more or less 1500 yards that had originally separated him from the "points". Some time before he arrived at his goal he was already able to make out that he was approaching nothing other than a statue.

The statue was variegated in color and represented a small, dark-skinned man who didn't quite reach to Rous' chin. The little man had bright spots on his face which looked something like pockmarks. His clothing was patched in places and his shoes looked dusty. All of these detailed features the artist had, taken care to bring out in his plastic sculpturing.

Rous attempted to determine what kind of material the statue was made of. At first glance he got the impression that it was genuine: that is, flesh made of flesh and clothing made of cloth. But when he touched the man's cloak it felt like cold, hard stone and could not be moved by even the breadth of a finger.

Rous stood there for awhile and looked at the strange likeness. The longer he reflected upon it the more difficult it was for him to dismiss the idea that the unknown sculptor had used an inhabitant from the world of Mirsal 2 as his model. If this little man were alive, he would have fitted into the general scene of Fillinan or anywhere else on the planet without causing the slightest disturbance.

For a few moments Rous was visited by a grotesque suspicion: were the Mirsalese themselves the invisible and uncanny foe? Was the disappearance of 2,000,000 people nothing more than a massive diversionary action which merely served to mislead the Terranians and to drive them out of the Mirsal region if possible?

Rous thought about it and then finally shelved it again. It was foolish. Mirsal 2 was at the threshold of the age of space flight. They hadn't the slightest knowledge of the presence of Terranians on Mirsal 3 where the puzzling human disappearances were first observed because till the present day no Mirsalese spaceship had so much as come close to Mirsal 3 much less landed on it. Moreover it could be assumed that the landing of the 3 agents on Mirsal 2 wasn't suspected at first—but in spite of that people disappeared when Rous and his companions approached the village of Keyloghal.

No, the Mirsalese were innocent. Rous had no alternative other than to assume that the inhabitants of

this world in which he now found himself were similar in appearance to the inhabitants of Mirsal 2, by a sheer coincidence.

He looked about him. The wall of darkness he had first perceived upon his arrival was still about 500 yards distant from him. That enigma also interested him. He wanted to take a closer look at it and find out why nothing could be seen beyond it.

He glanced for the last time at the unusual statue and suddenly stood rooted to the spot, staring in startled amazement.

He'd been certain when he had first seen the little man that his eyes were wide open. He remembered having been especially struck by the fact that even the statue's eyes had the unique characteristic of the principal Mirsalese race, which was violet irises. But if the man's eyes had been in the position then that they were in now, he could not have noted the iris coloration at all. It looked as though the eyelids had slowly lowered in weariness during the past quarter hour. By now, both eyes were about half closed.

Rous stood there. A horrible suspicion rose up inside of him. He observed the small, motionless man anxiously. He couldn't see the eyelids moving because the action was too slow; but after another quarter of an hour he was able to determine that the eyes were completely closed.

Rous was so perplexed that it took quite awhile before the first clear concept could emerge from the chaos of Iris startled thoughts: this was no statue—the man was alive!

But how did he live? Every movement of his body was slowed down thousands of times from the normal speed. Rous hadn't been able to detect the slightest sign of breathing on the part of the 'statue' and yet the man *had* to breathe if he was capable of moving his eyelids.

Rous made some feverish calculations. How long did it take for the blink of an eye? In any case at least a tenth of a second. Let's assume even five-hundredths of a second. Further, assuming that the eyelid movement he had observed constituted one-half of a blink, it was an event that in a normal framework of reference would last 0.025 second. *But there* the man had taken a full half-hour!

This yielded a conversion factor of 72,000 to 1. The life events of this man happened at a time rate that was 72,000 times slower than normal—that is, provided that Rous' assumptions were correct and that he had not been deceived by his senses.

It was no wonder that no other movement had been detected. The man could be in the act of turning his head or maybe lifting his leg in the process of walking. But what would be a matter of 1 second for the little man was to Rous a period of 20 hours, which was too long a time-span in which to perceive motion.

And another thing: the man on his part was also unable to perceive Rous. For him, Rous was a very shadowy something that darted here and there with the swiftness of a bullet and could not be fixed by the eyes.

Rous tried to figure out how he might help the unfortunate fellow. For example, he could drag him over to the daybed and guide him through the ellipse back into Mirsal 2 because there was now no further doubt that Rous had before him one of the 2,000,000 people who had disappeared from Mirsal 2 in the course of the past 2 weeks.

But Rous decided against this idea. He didn't want to retrace his steps yet. He wanted to investigate the dark wall and find out what lay behind it. Upon his return, then he could take this man with him—or any

one of the others. The other 'points' nearby were people like him, frozen in the same awful condition of time stasis.

Rous hastened away. In his excitement he forgot how hard the ground was until the pains in his feet made him aware of it again. At the same time this brought with it a new realization: the apparent hardness of all the materials he had tested here was nothing more than an effect of the altered time relationship. A piece of material—for example the unfortunate little man's cloak—required an endless span of time, due to its inertia, to yield to an external pressure such as from Rous' finger. It was a time-span that was more than 70,000 times greater than that in which his finger moved. Without any yielding or giving to the touch, Rous' finger had sensed something that was terribly hard.

It was the same with the ground he walked on. Probably the material that it consisted of was nothing much more than ordinary plastic. But in the time frame of this super slow world, Rous' feet struck the surface at every step with the speed of an interstellar rocket. It was similar to the effect of falling very swiftly into water, which though normally soft and yielding can become the hardest mass in the world.

Rous sweated out his foot pains and covered the intervening distance to the dark wall in 10 minutes.

The wall was not material in nature but nevertheless it was as impenetrable as the strongest defense screen. His outstretched hand contacted something that he couldn't see and it was blocked. Rous pushed harder but the dark obstruction did not yield.

Here was the world's end and while Rous was still wondering where he should turn to now, a thought occurred to him that was perhaps the answer to the astonishing phenomenon. The forcefield lens system only had the capacity of delineating a small cross-section of this world. No matter how the generator was turned, pushed or altered, the image remained the same. So in a physical sense the same was true. That which it gave access to was the same and with the same limitation.

So logically under such circumstances the circular dark wall was not an actual characteristic of this continuum. It only indicated a limitation of the lens capability. It was a wall that didn't even exist here but rather something merely established by the lens. He was sure that if any inhabitant of this time-space-continuum happened along he would not be able to notice such a wall.

Rous turned about. On his way back he came upon a number of the alleged statues and decided that he would take with him the one that was closest to the couch and the shimmering exit hole. Because distances were deceptively great and under the weird circumstances prevailing here the going was unpleasant and painful.

As far as Rous could see, all the motionless people standing around here were Mirsalese. There was no figure higher than about 5 feet, but men, women and children were fairly evenly distributed.

Finally Rous approached the rear side of the building he had faced a few hours before. He discovered one of the curious apertures at a level close to the ground and wondered if he shouldn't try to enter the structure.

He had just about decided on this course of action when he heard a peculiar sound. At first it was just a faint humming that lasted about a minute, holding the same tone and intensity, but which then began to increase. Within 5 minutes it reached such a pitch of crescendo that Rous' ears were hurting. After that it faded almost with interminable slowness. By the time Rous could finally remove his hands from his ears, 20 minutes had passed and still the moaning and humming continued to emerge from somewhere in this strange world.

He didn't know what the sound was or what it signified nor did he care about that part of it. But he did sense the danger that was involved with it. Without being able to explain it, he knew that he must not wait any longer. In delay itself was danger! He would have to postpone his inspection of the building to another time.

He ran as fast as his sore feet would allow, going left around the gigantic structure so that he could get to his goal as fast as possible, which was the spot where he could reenter into the world of Mirsal 2.

He was in the process of finding his way past various projections, clefts and extensions of the giant edifice when he discovered a motionless figure standing in the shadow of 3 pillar-like structures.

He was about to push onward because at first glance he thought it was another transplanted Mirsalese who was dragging out his existence there in the semi-darkness. But then he noticed that this figure was taller than all the others he had seen so far. He turned back and pushed in between the 2 pillars.

His eyes weren't adjusted to the darkness here after being exposed to the bright blue sky outside. The only thing he noticed at first was that this figure was about a head taller than the others. Then he discovered that in contrast to the Mirsalese style the figure was wearing long black hair.

When his eyes finally adjusted themselves to the darkness he saw that this was Rosita Perez!

Rous disciplined his astonishment quickly because of the menace that seemed to be at his heels. He attempted to guide Rosita's body between the pillars but he didn't succeed until he finally tipped her forward, grasped her about the waist and carried her out like a log. The girl showed no reaction because she was subject to the same kind of stretched-out time relationship as the Mirsalese. Instead of bending in the middle as would normally be expected with this means of transportation, she remained stiff as a board and actually made Rous' work all the easier.

Rous hurried, although with his new burden he couldn't move as swiftly as before. The couch that he had positioned as a road marker was now no more than about 200 yards away but under his load those 200 yards stretched out to a near eternity.

A momentary shock of horror went through him when he saw a figure appear out of the nothingness in the vicinity of the couch. In contrast to the slowness of movement with which this world was afflicted, the figure waved its arms and uttered shrill sounds that Rous couldn't understand.

Rous stopped and the excited figure approached him. A big load went off of him when he recognized Fellmer Lloyd. As the latter came closer, Rous began to understand him.

"Better come quick!" cried Lloyd. "There's danger brewing!"

"Help me!" Rous called back to him. "I've found Rosita!"

Lloyd came up to him. Out of concern for Rous he hadn't yet taken time to observe his surroundings. But now that he knew that Rous was as good as back to safety he did take a look around him. Rous saw him start.

"Good Lord!" murmured Lloyd. "What kind of a strange, weird..."

"Give me a hand!" Rous interrupted impatiently. "We don't have time to gawk!"

It was easier to carry Rosita between the 2 of them. Within a few minutes they reached the couch, behind which the slanting ellipse of shimmering force could be seen.

"Who's on the other side?" asked Rous. "Flaring?"

Lloyd nodded. "I told him to keep an eye on everything."

"Okay, then let's get Rosita through here first!"

Which didn't pose any difficulty. The girl psychologist was still as stiff as a board. They shoved her through the shimmering oval of light and watched her disappear.

Then Lloyd climbed into the ellipse, entering feet first. In spite of his excitement, seeing the phenomenon from this side was still a chilling experience for Rous, watching Lloyd's legs disappear bit by bit and seeing the border of invisibility creep up his body until only his head was sticking out. In another moment, Lloyd disappeared entirely.

Rous followed him immediately. This time he had none of the previous sensations—neither the resistance he had originally expected nor the undertow that had come instead. He simply crawled through the ellipse and after a short period of grey-white shimmering light he found himself on the side wall of the dresser that they had shoved up to the light circle originally in order to facilitate 'entering'.

Meanwhile, Rosita had recovered from her time-stasis condition. She had recognized Flaring and asked him what had happened. But Flaring couldn't do anything other than crook his finger at her. He had no information.

But when Lloyd and Rous arrived, she stormed them with questions. They had to wave her off.

"Later!" Rous told her. "Just now there are more important things. Lloyd, what makes you think there's danger brewing?"

Lloyd made the observation indicated. He didn't even need the towels over his head to be able to see that the field of vision had become enlarged. It wasn't so much the borders of the field that had changed—there were still the same objects to be seen as before—but the image itself had grown larger. For example the couch was no longer a barely identifiable dot but had instead become an almost endless streak. The gigantic buildings had grown and under the present conditions the dark spots occupied by the Mirsalese could no longer be mistaken for image distortions or defects.

"It's all come closer, is that it?" asked Rous.

Lloyd nodded agreement. "Quite a bit," he confirmed. "It made one big jump and then it was suddenly as big as you see it now."

"And that's what makes you conclude that there's danger?"

Lloyd shrugged. "We ought to be careful," he answered. "I don't think any more that these sudden changes of the image can be blamed on variations in the generator. Maybe something is really coming closer to us and from what we've seen and experienced so far I'd say we can't keep that weird dimension or whatever it is far enough away from us."

Rous conceded that point. "Perhaps another attack will occur," he said to Flaring. "Will your people inform you if it happens anywhere?"

"Of course!" replied Flaring. "You might say all the 'wires' lead into this hotel."

Rosita pressed them again. "Won't anyone just tell me what..."

Rous still waved her off. "No, girl, Not yet! Lloyd, keep watching the image and give a shout the instant it comes closer. I'm putting through a report to the *Drusus*."

Lloyd nodded. He put the towels over his head and took up his observation post in front of the light ring. Rous prepared a hypercom tape on which to compose his report to Rhodan.

He had just started coding it when the door swung open. One of Flaring's orderlies came in gasping for breath. "There's an attack, Commissioner! The radio stations in Fregnaat aren't putting out any signals!"

Rous pricked up his ears. "Where is Fregnaat?" he wanted to know.

"Southeast from here," answered Flaring quickly. "About 800 miles."

"Are your radio listening posts close enough together so that you can determine what direction the attack front is taking?"

"Yes, on the average we have a post about every 10 miles—they extend like spokes from Fillinan."

"Good! Then keep track of the latest developments as they happen."

The orderly departed swiftly, only to reappear within about 2 minutes. "The attack is moving toward Fillinan!" he declared. "2 more stations have been silenced. And in addition—"

"*In addition!*" groaned Flaring.

"In addition to that, the stations in the area of Kovan are being knocked out one after another. This front also is moving in the general direction of Fillinan!"

Flaring stared at Rous helplessly. "What can we do?" he wailed.

Rous calculated. Flaring's stations were at 10 mile intervals. Within at the most 5 minutes 2 stations were silenced on a line of direction originating from Fregnaat. 20 miles in 5 minutes—that was a speed of about 240 miles per hour.

Rous turned to the orderly. "Try to determine how wide that front is and if it's progressing at a constant rate of speed. How far is Kovan from here?"

"1000 miles."

"Good! Let me know as soon as you have found out something."

The orderly disappeared. Rous looked gravely at Flaring. "For you I have a very heavy task." As Flaring returned his gaze with equal gravity, he continued. "We can evacuate 100,000 people out of the threatened area. We have only 3 hours to do it in. Do you think you can prepare 100,000 people for

such an evacuation without causing panic among the rest of them?"

Flaring watched him intently. "You... you want to evacuate... one hundred thou—"

Rous cut in. "Yes, that's what we want to do. Don't worry about it. Can you get the 100,000 together?" As Flaring raised his hand in the Mirsalese sign of agreement, he continued. "Good. Then get going. We'll be able to start the embarkation within an hour."

"Embarkation...?" mumbled Flaring in bewilderment. "Then you do have ships?"

Rous shoved him out the door. "Don't ask questions!" he told him. "Show some action! We don't have any time to lose!"

When Flaring hurried away, Rous turned back into Lloyd's room and called out to him: "You can drop that now! Come on—we have more important things to do."

Lloyd threw off the towels.

"Take the micro-com and send out an SOS to the *Drusus* and the *Arc-Koor* !" Rous ordered. "Both ships must land at once. Give them as much on the Fillinan situation as you can. There are only minutes to spare!"

7/ CATASTROPHE STRIKES

Perry Rhodan did not hesitate. Within a few minutes after Rous' emergency call was received, both of the giant ships were making an approach flight. The 18 million miles that had originally separated them from Mirsal 2 were traversed in less than half an hour. Of course the landing maneuvers required an extra 30 minutes, so that in all one hour transpired after Lloyd's SOS before the 2 gigantic spaceships had landed in the vicinity of Fillinan.

Meanwhile, Rous had furnished additional information. The main idea was to throw a defense screen around the southwestern suburbs of Fillinan. Rous wanted to repeat the same kind of maneuver that he and Lloyd had used a few days before when they managed to save the Mirsalese in the Avenue of Kings. There wasn't any doubt that the field generators of both ships would be powerful enough to envelop an entire city section. And such would be necessary, according to Rous' plan, in order to save as many people as could be brought under protection of both ships, on board or otherwise.

Rous was on hand with his companions and all his material that he had gathered to the present time as the *Drusus* landed on the western edge of the city. He had had the area blocked off by Flaring's police so that the embarkation might proceed quickly and without interruption by curious onlookers.

But in this he had miscalculated as far as the Mirsalese mentality was concerned. By their nature none too plucky, and having been in a transport of fear because of the attack of the Unseen, the little men had no intention of gawking at the 2 space giants. Terrified, they ran away, and with them went the police

who had been assigned to keeping the landing area clear.

Rous reported to Rhodan, who was in agreement with his method of operation. He approved the plan of saving as many of the city inhabitants from the enemy as possible. Talamon, the commander of the *Arc-Koor*, had landed on the southern edge of the city. He was instructed to turn on his defense screen generators to their maximum power and to so form the screen that it would enclose about half of the southwestern suburbs, from the south.

The *Drusus* generated a similar field configuration. A half-hour after both ships had landed, the still-populated portion of Fillinan was under the protective cover of an impenetrable bell of energy and Rous hoped it would be strong enough to hold back the hostile attack.

The Com Central of the *Drusus* was able to monitor the signals from Flaring's radio sentry posts. By this means it was learned that the front of the attack had moved forward from 240 miles to 400 miles toward Fillinan in the Fregnaat area and also 600 miles out from the Kovan area.

If the movement of the 2 attack fronts did not increase its speed by any marked degree, then there was a good chance of being able to complete the embarkation maneuver before the attack even reached the city.

One hour after the landing, Flaring showed up with his first group of Mirsalese, who numbered about 15,000 men, women and children. Flaring stated that he had assigned a deputy to lead another group to the *Arc-Koor*. In accordance with Flaring's public announcement, another 70,000 Mirsalese stood in the outlying avenues of the city, ready to be evacuated. After the first panic caused by the appearance of the 2 monster spaceships, a comparative calm had now settled upon the suburbs.

While the embarkation process was proceeding under the directions of Flaring and his deputy, along with the assistance of the organization-trained officers of both ships, Rhodan finally took time to obtain a more detailed report from the 3 agents he had infiltrated into Mirsal 2.

* * * *

"Sir, I have described the phenomena, which were subjected to thorough observation," said Marcel Rous at the end of his explanation. "If I may, I'd be happy to give you my personal opinion of this situation."

Rhodan nodded, smiling. "Please do. I'm anxious to hear your views."

The lieutenant began: "Whoever the enemy may be that we're confronted with, he attacks from another dimension or continuum. He does not live in our universe. Further: for Terranians the attacks on Mirsal 2 are not as dangerous as they are to the indigenous people, for example, and that's something to think about. For the sake of argument one might define a separate structure, for each different place in the galaxy and conclude further that the one who is most endangered by the enemy attacks is the one whose characteristic makeup is most similar to that of the foe. If we stay with this picture we have to say that the composition of a Terranian is apparently so different from that of the enemy that a Terranian can only be affected by an attack when it is at its greatest intensity—as in the case of Ms. Perez.

"Thirdly: inanimate objects go through an aging process when an attack passes over them. Exactly the opposite happens to people who disappear in the attacks. You're familiar with Ms. Perez' report, sir. By our reckoning she was several days in that other world, yet she herself had the impression of being there only 4 or 5 seconds—just enough to take her first look around. Behind this effect—that is, an increase in the passage of time for inanimate objects and a slowing down of time perception for living, sentient life—perhaps in that is the reason why humans and animals actually disappear and inanimate articles are left behind. I have experienced this myself, sir. When I started to crawl through the forcefield lenticular system, as I have already described to you, I expected the same resistance as we had observed in the case of the palmbook, the can of food and the daybed that we had shoved through before. But the effect was exactly the opposite, not only was there no resistance but I felt a suction instead. To make it a little more plausible, one might think in terms of a negative and a positive charge. If one were to consider men and animals as being charged positively and inanimate things as negative, then it's possible to imagine that all the enemy has to do when he makes an attack is to place a negatively charged plate over the region involved. Positive charges are attracted—and they disappear as a result—while negative charges are repelled. Of course, sir, I hope you don't..."

"...take you literally," Rhodan cut in, completing the statement. He nodded. "Yes, I can well imagine that no one actually places a charged plate over the countryside. Continue, Lt. Rous!"

"We don't know what role plant life may play in the situation," Rous went on, "since after all plants do belong to organic life. But in each case of an attack they have been spared."

"The 4th and last observation is that this enemy or force is superior to us, sir!" The only thing we can do is make use of the forcefield lens in order to slip through a string of men into their world. But we already know that the zone of action that the lens makes available is limited. We can't get through the dark wall. On the other hand, the enemy naturally is not restricted in his movements on his own world. We..."

"One moment, please! Haven't your observations shown that our people would retain their own rate of time after going through the forcefield lens system, meaning that they'd be able to move 70,000 times faster than the enemy?"

"I was coming to that, sir," answered Rous enthusiastically. "We would be considerably faster than the opponent. In the time he would take to draw in a single breath, we can rescue all the prisoners... that is, the ones we find within our allowed zone of action. The..."

"The people who have been captured are living in the time-rate of the hostile world, right?"

"That's right, sir. As reported, Ms. Perez had the impression that she had only been 4 or 5 seconds on the other side. The only ones who will have the advantage of swiftness will be those who go through the lens system. We can do a reconnaissance and maybe free a few prisoners, that's all. Inside the circumference of the area I could move around in I'd say there were about 100 captives. But in the past few days alone, 2 million people have disappeared from Mirsal 2, and then you can add to that the entire population of Mirsal 3. They weren't to be seen anywhere. Probably they are there somewhere *behind* the wall."

Rous ended his discourse. Perry Rhodan sat there silently for awhile and stared seemingly into space. Then he suddenly looked up and smiled at Rous. "You have done your job well—all 3 of you. I'm very grateful. And above all: you've pulled more information together than I could have hoped for previously."

"With regard to the opposition's superiority, don't worry. We've been in situations a few times before which seemed to be hopeless. The mere fact that we are still here proves that we still found a way out in

spite of it all. We are men of the Earth, Lt. Rous, don't forget that! I have no doubt that we can also resolve this problem without it costing us our lives. So again, I thank you!"

* * * *

Half an hour after this conversation, the Com Central registered the fact that both of the approaching attack fronts from the North and the Southwest had increased their rate of progression. Of the 100,000 Mirsalese whom Flaring had prepared for evacuation, so far 50,000 had gotten on board. The Mirsalese kept themselves under control. They were overawed by the size of the 2 ships and they were fearful of what lay in store for them if they didn't move along fast enough.

* * * *

Shortly before 17:00 ship's time, the 2 attack fronts reached the city. At the moment, Rhodan himself was in the Control Central of the *Drusus*. The instruments registered a sudden power load peak in the defense screens and a few seconds later Talamon was heard from over the telecom system.

His voice sounded nervous and fearful: "If we don't take off immediately, the generators will burn out!"

Rhodan saw his panic-filled face on the small videophone screen. "They will not burn out!" he answered coldly. "That kind of load demand happens twice an hour to us out in space. Keep your nerves under control and see to it that the embarkation is completed according to plan. *When* we take off is something I will decide!"

Talamon's worried face disappeared. Rhodan turned back to his instruments. A continuous stream of information kept coming in concerning the progress of the evacuation. The *Drusus* was almost at the limit of her capacity but on board the *Arc-Koor* there was still a lot of room.

After the first peak demand of power that had been placed upon the defense screen fields it appeared that the enemy had turned away from the city. In the western part of the city where no transmitter stations had failed thus far, 2 of them were suddenly silenced.

Rhodan breathed a premature sigh of relief.

Minutes later another peak demand struck the screens, even stronger than the first one. For a few seconds all screen generators threatened to break down under the force of the attack.

But these few seconds passed and the only thing remaining was Talamon's fear, which in the meantime had increased to hysterical proportions.

"Get those people on board!" Rhodan told him in no uncertain tones. "And wait for my orders to take off. I don't believe that the Great Empire sent me the *Arc-Koor* to have it fail. Surely it's not such an old ship that its defense screens are going to cave in under the first heavy load!"

The unconcealed sarcasm worked. From there on, Talamon was not to be heard from.

* * * *

Rous, Rosita and Lloyd were helpful to Flaring during the embarkation because they could speak Mirsalese. Shortly after the second attack wave had driven both ships' generators to their maximum, the last of 60,000 Mirsalese were taken on board.

According to reports, the *Arc-Koor* had only been able to take on 40,000 people in the same length of time.

Flaring stood at the foot of the broad escalator ramp that led up into the heart of the giant spacesphere. He looked around. Across the broad expanse of trampled grass lay the first rows of houses of the suburb of Fillinan-Horun.

"So it looks like we did it," he murmured.

"Yes, come on and get on board!" urged Rous. "I think we're going to take off any time now!"

Flaring looked at him in astonishment. "Who, *me*?" He shook his head. "I'm staying here. I belong to the people out there who are waiting for their destruction."

This took Rous by surprise. "Don't be a fool, Flaring! You can't help them. Come with us. When this is over, we'll return here. You still have a lot of work to do for your people."

But Flaring gave him a sign of refusal by lifting his arm and then letting it sink down slowly. "No, I'll stay," he answered. "Perhaps the attacks will cease and we will survive. And perhaps not."

Rous saw that he was serious and he sensed that all further words of argument against the other's decision would sound foolish. Nevertheless he said: "The 2nd time we met I told you that you were a good man, Flaring. Be assured that we will never forget Mirsal! We shall come back—with better weapons. And then..."

At that moment Rhodan's voice roared from the speakers down through the loading lock: "All personnel on board. Immediate takeoff in 4 minutes! Everybody on board!"

Rous jerked to attention with a start. Whenever Rhodan announced a takeoff within the short time of 4 minutes one could be sure there was more fire than smoke. The escalator ramp began to retract into the body of the ship.

Rous had been standing on level ground with Flaring but now he jumped onto the rising ramp "Come with us!" he shouted to Flaring.

But Flaring gave him the refusal sign with his arm again. He bowed slightly to all 3 agents, then turned around and marched back toward the city with his head held high.

A little brown man who walked to his demise with eyes wide open.

* * * *

The 3rd attack had knocked out one generator on the *Drusus* and 3 on the *Arc-Koor*. Rhodan knew that he couldn't wait another second. A 4th attack would mean the end of both ships.

Exactly 4 minutes after the warning call, the 2 giants neutralized their titanic weight with antigrav fields and shot upward from their respective landing fields. The massive vessels caused air pressure disturbances which blew a storm wind over the southwestern suburbs of Fillinan. But the storm was nothing compared to what burst upon the city a few moments later.

The 2 ships were still clearly visible in the blue sky when the 2 attack fronts rolled in upon the city, now no longer hindered by defense screens. In a matter of a few seconds almost one and a half million Mirsalese disappeared—or to be more specific: one and a half million minus 100,000.

Among those who disappeared was a certain police commissioner named Flaring. He felt nothing when the catastrophe struck. He saw a brief, grey-white shimmering, then he entered into a world he had never seen before...

8/ RHODAN TRIUMPHANT

The 2 spaceships left Mirsal 2 without opposition and made a thrust outward as far as the orbit of Mirsal 4. During this flight the *Drusus* picked up signals from the *Gazelle* that Rous and his companions had landed in on Mirsal 2. They became weaker and within half an hour faded out entirely.

Rhodan's plan had miscarried. The enemy had stolen the *Gazelle* as planned but no further radio signals emerged from the particular continuum in which it was now located. The scoutship was last, just like the guppy on Mirsal 3.

* * * *

Rhodan had made his decision even before the landing on Mirsal 2. At the end of that undertaking he would fly to Arkon and have a conference with the robot Regent of the Arkonide Empire and it would be a meeting to decide all remaining questions.

The ship's positronic brain confirmed to Rhodan that this would not be taking a risk. The robot Regent saw itself confronted by a menace that it could not control through its own forces—namely, the menace

represented by the invisible enemy who could, with apparent ease, depopulate an entire planet, causing all inhabitants to disappear within but a few hours. The robot needed an ally. The positronicon was of the opinion that it saw this ally in Rhodan, since it had little or no information concerning the Earth itself.

The robot was incorruptible and impartial. It was no burden of the soul for it to admit that under the circumstances Rhodan might have a few trump cards to play, which just might be sufficient to end the enemy's game.

With the cold, calculating diplomacy of a machine, the robot Regent would try to win Rhodan to its side for purposes of waging the battle against the enemy, and then, when the battle was ended, it would, so to speak, put a gun to his head and demand that the Earth be subjected to the rule of the Arkonide Empire.

Rhodan expected as much. But he intended to use the present situation to the Earth's advantage. The robot Brain would be ready to make certain concessions and compromises for the sake of the alliance. So Rhodan proposed to so arrange and construct those compromises in such a manner that they would also protect the Earth for the duration of the war against the Unseen.

While the 2 ships were leaving the Mirsal System, Rhodan explained to Talamon, the Commander of the *Arc-Koor* that he intended to fly to Arkon. Since his outbreaks of fear on Mirsal 2 the Mounder had been somewhat embarrassed and he offered no comment now. But his face revealed surprise, as well as the apparent conviction that the robot Brain would never accede to Rhodan's request to be admitted into the Inner Sanctum of the Arkonide Empire.

But of course Talamon deceived himself in this respect because he didn't understand the situation.

Rhodan's hypercom message to the robot Regent was short and to the point: "Valuable information obtained concerning unknown enemy. A mutual conference regarding further measures and evaluation of data is mandatory. Request landing permission and agreement on deadlines."

With the uncanny swiftness characteristic of a positronic machine, the Regent considered the advantages and disadvantages of the proposition. Its answer was ready in two-thousandths of a second. It read:

"Agreed. Land both ships. Am at your disposal upon arrival."

Even to Perry Rhodan such a quick assent was unexpected. He was perplexed. The swift reply could have 2 meanings: either that Arkon's robot Regent actually saw itself in deep trouble in the face of attacks by the invisible enemy—or that it was playing games in the hope of trapping or overpowering its most powerful rival.

Before the *Drusus* went into transition some 100 astronomical units from Mirsal, all hands were placed on alert. On the other hand, Rhodan informed the *Arc-Koor* that the landing permission had been obtained from the Regent and that Arkon was now the next goal of the journey.

* * * *

For thousands of years a number of space fortresses had encircled the Arkon System for the purpose of barring entrance to uninvited guests. The 2 approaching ships terminated their final transition far outside

the outer defense ring of these forts.

Rhodan made his approach to the outer perimeter in the 2 ship formation, flying the *Drusus* within 500 yards of the *Arc-Koor*. He figured that if the robot Regent had any treacherous ideas it might change its mind when it saw that the price of a kill now would be losing its mightiest ship. Rhodan was using the *Arc-Koor* as a security hostage.

In this manner the outer defense ring was penetrated without molestation. Traveling in the closest possible formation, the 2 ships flew swiftly into the Inner System.

Arkon, situated at the center of star cluster M-13, consisted of 3 planets which revolved in a synchronous orbit around their central sun. This arrangement had been achieved artificially. Originally there had only been one planet in this particular orbit—Arkon 1. In the course of development this one home world had not been sufficient for the Arkonides. Their technology made it possible for them to alter planetary positions and bring 2 extra orbs into the orbit of Arkon 1.

Each of these 3 worlds fulfilled a separate function: Arkon 1 had remained the dwelling world of the Arkonides—a fabulous synthetic garden. Arkon 2, which was considerably smaller, had been reserved for commerce and private industries. On the other hand, Arkon 3 was the home of the spacefleet and of the robot Regent.

With their super-technological capability, the Arkonides had insured the most precise stability for the tri-planetary system. Arkonide mathematics demonstrated just as well as Earth mathematics that such a balance could not be maintained without a very special relationship between the 3 planets. The 3 worlds together with their center star formed 2 equilateral triangles, of which the Arkon Sun was the common apex. So here by artificial means the same kind of synchronous grouping had been achieved as had been formed since millennia in the Earthly solar system between Jupiter and its so-called Trojan asteroid group.

The 2 ships hurtled toward this tri-system. Their goal was Arkon 3, the ‘War Planet’ where the robot Regent held forth.

Rhodan had not failed to utilize the intervening time. Some hours had been devoted to a sort of dialog with the ship’s positronicon in an attempt to determine how the robot Regent would probably act in the forthcoming negotiations. The inputs that Rhodan was able to give the positronicon were of course not exhaustive enough for an exact answer or even one with a reassuring degree of probability. But the machine was able to point out a number of ways that the Regent might try to go, under given circumstances, in order to achieve its purpose, and Rhodan took care to commit all answers to memory. It amused him to thus play off one machine against another.

Upon query and recognition by the Arkonide Ground Control, Rhodan gave orders to land. Still in close formation, the 2 ships glided down through the clear, cloudless atmosphere of the war planet and landed within less than a mile from the shimmering wall of the giant energy dome which towered into the blue-white sky above them.

Perry Rhodan still maintained a full alert status on board his ship. He knew that it was one of the customs of the robot Regent to keep its guests waiting for awhile. During such time, all battle stations would be manned and Com Central was ordered to radio silence.

An hour passed.

After an hour and a half the *Drusus* was hailed by radio. The telecom videoscreen over Rhodan's console came to life and as he switched on the visual reception he saw the face of an Arkonide officer.

"Welcome to Arkon," he said in a somewhat disinterested tone of voice. "My name is Drenn. The Regent requests that you visit it personally."

Rhodan nodded. "It will be an honor," he answered. "But how do I gain entrance?"

"I will accompany you," said Drenn.

"Good—then pick me up!"

Drenn agreed to this and then cut off the connection.

Rhodan issued his final instructions.

* * * *

Drenn seemed to be a liaison officer between the Regent and the outside world. When his ground glider approached a certain area of the shimmering energy wall, it became transparent and permitted passage of the vehicle without harm. On the other side of the energy barrier a broad area stretched out, covered with a smooth layer of synthetic material. Far in the background, Rhodan saw a cubical, windowless building.

"What is that there?" he asked Drenn.

"The reception building," answered the Arkonide. "Whoever has the honor of being permitted to speak personally to the Regent is sent there."

At close range the cubical structure with its gleaming black walls made an impression that was at once powerful and ominous. Rhodan could not detect the slightest unevenness in the walls, much less detect a door. But Drenn sped onward toward the building without any lessening of velocity and at the precise moment an opening appeared in the wall just large enough to admit the passage of the vehicle into the brilliantly illuminated interior of the building.

Drenn set the glider down and turned off the motor. "You may get out and continue onward," he said.

Rhodan complied and in so doing he had a look around. The inside of the great cube consisted only of this one single room and it was empty—except for the glittering, blinding brightness that seemed to issue from every cubic inch of the clear pure air.

There was not a trace to be seen of the Regent. Rhodan knew that the gigantic installation and equipment of the positronic brain was underneath the ground. Everything within the energy dome that was to be seen above ground served solely for appearances—and Rhodan was forced to admit that its simplicity and size could make a powerful impression upon the impartial observer.

When he had taken about 20 steps, he looked behind him. It did not surprise him that Drenn had

disappeared in the meantime.

Rhodan walked farther and when he reached the approximate center of the cubical room a mighty voice resounded from on high:

"Stay where you are, Rhodan!"

Rhodan complied without looking about.

If the robot Regent possessed any ability at all to receive optical impressions, and if in addition it were capable of comprehending human mimicry and nuance of expression, then at this moment it should itself be frightened. Frightened by the impression it made on Rhodan with this kind of a greeting.

Rhodan grinned. He believed he understood what the designers of this installation had in mind when they gave the positronic brain the ability to speak to its visitors in this manner. Did it not sound like the voice of an angry god coming from the clouds? Wouldn't anyone with less self-confidence than Rhodan have fallen on his knees?

These shrewd Arkonides! They had considered all the mentalities of the galaxy when they erected this place—with the exception of Terranians.

"Okay, I'm staying," answered Rhodan. He was sure there was a microphone somewhere that had picked up his answer, spoken in Arkonide and transmitted it to the Regent.

"I am the Lord of the Galaxy!" thundered the voice anew. "For awhile you have been able to detain me from that which by right belongs to me. I will forgive you if you will confess that you have acted wrongly."

Rhodan listened closely to the voice. It sounded different than usual, less mechanical and more personal in tone than one might expect from a machine. Apparently the Arkonides understood how to give a note of individuality to inanimate equipment.

As for the rest, he gave an impression as though he didn't know what the Regent was talking about. "I don't understand what you mean," he answered.

"I speak of your native world, Rhodan," declared the Regent. "All worlds are under my rule and authority and your world also should be under me. Until now you have resisted me. Have you come here to tell me now that you will subjugate yourself to me?"

"No," answered Rhodan. "That is not why I have come here."

"If it is not voluntarily given, I shall exert my right by force!"

"It is not your right to be the ruler of my native world."

"What is right? I am the stronger. What I consider to be good is right."

"You won't consider it good if you resort to force."

"Why not? Your world is no more than dust by comparison to the Great Empire."

Rhodan laughed. "That's what you think! But you'd be fooled if you ever made such an attempt. My

home world is more powerful than ancient Arkon!"

"That's impossible!"

"No. Remember that you don't know my race and that almost 60 years have passed since we heard from each other the last time. In 60 years my race accomplishes more than others do in 3 centuries!"

"What's 60 years? What is time for a being like me? I am immortal. For me one time span is as long as another, quite irrespective of what names you mortals apply to it."

"Be that as it may," said Rhodan indifferently, "but for us 60 years were a good long time."

"Therefore are you refusing to subjugate yourself?"

Rhodan evaded the question. From one breath to the next an idea had come to him. It was so obvious and compelling he almost forgot to breathe for the moment.

"I'd like to propose," he answered, "that we discuss our common enemy first. After that we can talk about my world. The most important things should be taken care of first."

The Regent did not seem to take offense at the reprimand. After a short hesitation it answered: "Agreed. Report what you have found out!"

Rhodan made his report—actually what he'd been able to put together only hours before on board the *Drusus*. He described the general impressions his 3 agents had gotten from Mirsal 2 and he limited himself to a general account of what happened—with the exception of Rous' fortunate attempt to penetrate the enemy's world plus all the relationships he found that were involved in the different time ratios.

It wasn't much for the Regent to go on. "Is that all?" it asked. "That isn't enough to enable us to move against the enemy."

"Even if it were all there is," said Rhodan sarcastically, "it would still be ourselves who would have found it out, not particularly your own people who in the meantime hide behind the walls of their ships."

Rhodan knew that he couldn't insult the Regent but perhaps it was well to leave the thought in its memory cores that the Earthly race was more enterprising and active than the Arkonides, the Springers included.

"Then that is not all?" asked the Regent.

"No. We have mountains of material that we've gathered together and would like to ask you to evaluate it. We don't have the means at our disposal."

"I am in agreement," answered the Regent. "I shall instruct Drenn to pick up the available information and submit it to me."

"I'll turn it over to Drenn," confirmed Rhodan. "Does this terminate our discussion for the present?"

"Yes. You may go. Drenn will take you back."

Rhodan turned about and left. When he was $\frac{3}{4}$'s of the way back through the huge room, Drenn appeared with the ground glider. Rhodan climbed in, Drenn put the vehicle in motion and it went out through the same opening that it had entered.

The trip back to the *Drusus* only lasted a few minutes but it was long enough for Rhodan to analyze his impressions.

He was disappointed. At the seat of power over a mighty empire he had expected something impressive and mighty, even though it was only a machine. But what had he found instead? A thing that concentrated on outward appearances and which sought to make an impression with clumsy, impossible demands while treating a visitor with presumptuous arrogance.

Was this the heart of the great Arkonide Empire?

* * * *

Drenn had been informed concerning his assignment. He had to pick up all the assembled information. For this purpose it had been agreed previously that he should undergo a psycho-test prior to receiving the data. This was done and Rhodan submitted the material to him in the Control Central.

Drenn accepted the bulky bundle of notes and magnetic and punched tapes, left the ship and drove a 2nd time in his land glider to the Regent's energy dome. Rhodan saw him disappear behind the shimmering wall of force.

After only one hour, Drenn put in a new appearance. The mere fact that he asked to be admitted and came up to the Command Central proved to Rhodan that his guess was correct: Drenn had come to pick him up.

"The Regent requests a further conversation," Drenn notified him.

Rhodan declined with a wave of his hand. "The Regent overestimates my stamina," he replied calmly. "I haven't seen a bed for over 30 hours. I think it will be sufficient for us to set up a telecom conference. I can do without the exertion of another glider trip."

Drenn's face had turned white as a cadaver. "I... can't tell it that...!" he stammered.

Rhodan nodded reassuringly. "Why of course you can. You aren't telling him, from yourself, you're merely transmitting my message: that I'm too tired to leave the ship again just now. Either it may contact me over telecom or it can wait until I've rested."

Drenn stood wide-eyed and open-mouthed and it took him a moment before he could stammer: "I... I will deliver your message. But it's on your own responsibility!"

"Yes, naturally," Rhodan replied. "Now go!"

Drenn stumbled out. After a considerable time he was seen to climb into his glider below and set off a 3rd time in the direction of the energy dome.

Not long afterwards the telecom videoscreen flared to life. After Rhodan cut in the video reception, Drenn's face appeared, still as amazed and incredulous as before. "Well...?" asked Rhodan.

"I am authorized to connect you with the Regent," he blurted out. "Are you ready?"

"I am ready, Drenn."

* * * *

The conference lasted an entire hour. And Perry Rhodan won.

He was assured the command of more than 75% of the Arkonide battle fleet and in addition he obtained the assurance that none of the ships to be placed at his disposal would be manned by robots. From that moment on and effective immediately, Arkon 3 was considered to be the fleet base for Perry Rhodan, as long as the Administrator of the Solar Empire needed it for such purpose.

And finally a number of additional support bases and strongholds throughout the galaxy were placed at his disposal. Through the highest channels, each garrison commander was placed under Perry Rhodan's command.

Rhodan explained it to Baldur Sikermann, First Officer of the *Drusus*. "This means that the Regent has shelved its ideas of annexing the Earth for a long time to come. From today on, 75% of the Arkonide fleet is under my command. Due to the fact that no robot may be installed on any of the ships, their commanders will have no direct contact with the Regent and will hear my orders alone. If I want to, I can occupy Arkon itself."

Sikermann slowly recovered from the shock. "And it... it just simply made you a present, like that?"

"No. I was able to convince it that I'm not out to become an enemy of the Empire. The fact that I'm married to an Arkonide woman carried a lot of weight. The machine trusts me. And besides, it can't fend off the new enemy without my help."

"Still can't? Even with all the information the Regent got?"

"It won't do it much good."

"How come?"

Rhodan sat down. "I now have my first conversation with the Regent on my own tape copy," he answered. "Let's listen to the heart of the matter." He took a small device out of his pocket, set it down before them on the console and turned it on.

After a short search he found the place he was referring to. Sikermann first heard Rhodan say: "...remember that you don't know my race and that almost 60 years have passed since we heard from each other the last time. In 60 years my race accomplishes more than others do in 3 centuries."

And the Regent's answer: "What's 60 years? What is time for a being like me? I am immortal. For me one time span is as long as another, quite irrespective of what names you mortals apply to it."

Rhodan cut off the tape. Sikermann looked at him uncomprehendingly. "I really don't get it," he mumbled.

"But you should. The key point in all the data we've collected about the Unseen is obviously what we found out about the time differences between the 2 universes. Now naturally the Machine is capable of counting off seconds, minutes or hours, or it can register any time-span as so many years. It can also calculate time—just as with any other arbitrary set of numbers. But when it's a question of 2 different time-continuums, then the Machine lacks the necessary comprehension, which is the true comprehension of an immortal."

"In a word: it can't do a thing with our information. Either it will be necessary to build into it a new sector that can deal with real times in separate reference frames... or it is absolutely dependent upon us, because you know there aren't very many Arkonide scientists who would be willing to come out of their artificial shells to handle such a problem."

Sikermann drew a long breath. "What you're saying is, then..."

"We're out of danger," Rhodan completed the thought for him. "Not only that: figuratively speaking, we're king of the hill—lords of the universe. The Regent really must have felt those Unseens breathing down its armour-plated neck—otherwise it'd never have made such concessions as these..."

* * * *

The *Drusus* remained on Arkon-3 several days. The transfer of a large part of the Arkonide spacefleet to Rhodan's command entailed an incredible amount of administrative work. During this period Rhodan had a series of conversations with the Regent, whose tone had become considerably more cooperative than before. For example, Rhodan received permission to unload the 100,000 Mirsalese on Arkon 1 and leave them there till the way to their home planet was clear again. It was the first time in the history of ancient Arkon that aliens had been quartered on the Arkonides' residential planet.

As for the Arkonide fleet, Rhodan had initially been concerned over the likelihood that the commanders would only become subordinate to him unwillingly. But as it developed, he misjudged them: first, as was characteristic of their race, they were generally too languid to even experience an emotion and, secondly, it was much more preferable to them to be commanded by an alien human than a machine of their own construction.

* * * *

The fleet transference was close to completion. The units in space had received their orders and held to their assigned waiting positions.

Rhodan planned to make a grand enveloping movement on the invisible opponent.

The Regent assured Rhodan once more that all the resources of the tri-planetary Arkon worlds plus their galactic support bases were unconditionally at his disposal and the robot Brain seemed pacified by Rhodan's reiterated assurance that there was no intent to move against Arkon itself.

Rhodan wasn't deceived by the conclusion of the peace treaty. He knew that while he was out there somewhere in space, fighting the Unseen, the Regent would be striving to regain a part of its former superiority—for example by building more ships or fostering a closer alliance between the Springers and the Empire. Of course for the time being the Regent's 'hands' were tied and the Earth was secure.

Rhodan would keep his word: he would never make *a forceful* move against the Arkon Empire—even the potential power of 75% of the Arkonide fleet under his command didn't tempt him. For he knew that in due course the day would come when the Empire would have to succumb of its own ennui and that would be the day for Terra's only worthwhile way of conquest.

Peaceful.

CONTENTS

[1/ DISAPPEARING MIRSALESE](#)

[2/ MUTANT TASKFORCE](#)

[3/ PANIC IN THE STREETS](#)

[4/ 20,000 YEARS IN AN INSTANT!](#)

[5/ THROUGH THE RING—OF LIGHT](#)

[6/ FROZEN TIME](#)

[7/ CATASTROPHE STRIKES](#)

[8/ RHODAN TRIUMPHANT](#)

[THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME](#)

RETURN FROM THE VOID

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Atlan!

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FORTRESS ATLANTIS

by

K.-H. Scheer