

FORTRESS ATLANTIS

1/ MY FUTURE

I STRUCK DOWN Perry Rhodan.

With an exact replica of an ancient Teutonic sword.

It was in the sword room of the Terra Museum on Venus that I temporarily bested the First Administrator of the tiny planetary domain which he, with a dramatic flare, called the 'Solar Empire'.

The fact that I had once confronted and defeated this man and had held him in my power for a time, satisfied my Arkonide pride.

Now I awaited him.

"You look splendid, sir!" The officer addressing me with a smile was of medium height, unostentatious looking, wearing the insignia of a Captain of the Terranian Spacefleet, Hubert Gorlat. But although he acted in a polite and respectful manner, one couldn't overlook the fact that he wore the badge of the Security Service on the left sleeve of his uniform.

I wondered with some amusement whether he referred to my personal appearance of my newly acquired sartorial splendour. I looked down and examined my trimly fitting pale green uniform, flecked a speck of dust from my pants leg and remarked, "You think so, Captain?"

"Indeed, sir!" But his next words piqued my ego. "It's about time they gave you an appropriate outfit." He meant my attire after all. I was disappointed. These Terranians always paid a great deal of attention to appearance and why should he make an exception in my case?

Hubert Gorlat coughed slightly and glanced at his watch—an overt hint, which I chose to ignore. I scanned my motivation and realized I would have deliberately taxed his patience less if he had been a little more diplomatic.

I knew why he had been sent to me: Gorlat was the officer in charge of security aboard the super-battleship Drusus, which had returned 3 days ago to the spaceport of Terrania from an adventurous trip, bringing back with it the man whom I awaited with considerable impatience: Perry Rhodan.

Our encounter on Venus had turned out for the best: I had realized at the penultimate moment how senseless it would have been to seriously injure this remarkable Earthling, let alone kill him. There were more than enough people about to thwart my escape and in any event it had become unnecessary.

Capt. Gorlat belonged to the type of cool, ever alert, never relaxing men who guided the fate of Earth since the beginning of the 21st century. If Gorlat's manners in dealing with extraterrestrial beings left something to be desired, it didn't mean he didn't know the right thing to do at the right moment. Perry Rhodan had carefully selected his men. I had no doubt that these daring death-defying Earthlings, aided

by a mixture of shrewdness, personal courage and scientific and technological know-how, were on the verge of conquering the Galaxy.

They proceeded step by step, exercising cautious restraint. At times, however, they struck with overwhelming force, only to vanish without a trace. Strictly speaking, they conducted a kind of cosmic guerilla warfare. In so doing they always showed the greatest concern for their opponents, taking care not to hurt friendly beings and treating them in such a fashion that no burning, lasting hatred was created in them. Their anger invariably subsided once they had a chance to coolly reflect on the situation. Precisely what happened to me after I awoke from my long deep-sleep at the bottom of the ocean and ascended to the face of the Earth. I had believed that an atomic war had taken place on Earth but this proved to be an erroneous assumption.

Perry Rhodan, whom I had known as a simple Major of the U.S. Spaceforce, had meanwhile surpassed himself and it had been painful for me to see that Terra's might was based on the knowledge and methods developed by my worthy ancestors.

Without the Arkonide super-technology Rhodan would probably be long forgotten and his accomplishments would have been buried in the chronicles of some archives as having been those of the commander of the first expedition to the Moon in an atomic rocket.

When I learned that he was the driving force behind the phenomenal development of Terra's leap into space, I had seen my chance to return home after thousands of years. However my efforts to flee had failed twice and each time it had been the tall lean grey-eyed barbarian who had frustrated my plans by his personal intervention.

After my arrest at the capital of the Venus colony Rhodan was gone one night but Lt. Gmuna, my constant companion and guard of the Special Corps for Psychological Defence, had dropped a few hints now and then, according to which some inhabitants of the Galaxy, who had believed that Rhodan was dead, had now found out that he was still among the living. This had ended the biggest game of hide & seek but I had to admit that it had borne amazing fruits.

This bold barbarian had been able to make all intelligent populations of other worlds believe for 56 years that Terra had been destroyed in the wake of a mighty attack from outer space in which Rhodan had met his death.

Taking advantage of this welcome respite, Rhodan had begun to work feverishly. What he and the young generation of men and women had created boggled the mind. I had no choice but to admit that these Earthlings were not inferior to my own people in any respect and they probably had more energy and determination, features which I had often found to my great sorrow absent from my race when I was an Admiral in charge of an Arkonide Fleet.

Now the mysterious Rhodan, who had become almost legendary, had returned to Earth. I could vividly imagine what hazardous ventures he had undertaken in the 4 months since last July when I was taken in custody at Port Venus.

When Capt. Gorlat appeared a few minutes earlier it became clear to me that I approached a final decision about my future. Rhodan was not one of those procrastinating people who kept putting unpleasant matters off. I expected him to ask me a few blunt questions in his ironic manner which I was supposed to answer either yes or no.

However I figured I had a good chance. If he really had been discovered again there was no

compelling reason he should refuse my return to the Arkon system. I closed my eyes to recall the 3 planets from which I had departed 10,000 Terrestrial years ago with the intention of remaining a few months in the distant Solar system.

How different it all turned out to be! I had become immortal. Why this happened was something I could never learn. A mysterious fate had chosen me to wander on Earth for thousands of years.

Capt. Gorlat cleared his throat again and interrupted my reminiscing. This time I was ready to respond to his glance at his watch. "You don't have much time, do you?" I asked him.

He sighed with relief and relaxed his stiff posture. "Yes, sir, that's right! Would you do me the favour...?"

He left it up to me to guess what he wanted. Without saying it, it was clear that Rhodan expected me. I rose from my comfortable armchair and walked to the wide picture window of my living room. My apartment was located on the 108th floor of a new sky-rise building which housed the offices of a recently established government department. The chief of the department was called Minister for Outer Solar Settlements and for his employees it was simply MOSS.

They had made a luxurious apartment available for my use. The balcony offered a magnificent panoramic view of the nearby spaceport and the continually growing suburbs of Terrania, a city of 14 millions.

The salt lake Goshun could no longer be seen since the bold architectural forms of Terra's capital obstructed the view. The little lake had lost its importance. Its salty water had never contributed to making the former desert of Gobi bloom.

Now the weather on Earth was controlled to perfection. The artificially produced rains had turned the desert into a verdant land. It was miraculous what the former astronaut and test pilot Perry Rhodan had accomplished with this wasteland. It was enough to put fear in me for the future of the Great Empire under the hegemony of Arkon and I was unwilling to stand idly by and allow these Earthlings to pursue their ambitions.

Such reflections only reinforced my burning desire to return home. I was fed up with the hospitality of my captors and wished I could reach my goal as quickly as possible.

I turned around and leaned against the windowsill. I looked at Gorlat, who was getting more and more nervous, Apparently he had instructions to be polite and considerate. If I had been in his shoes, I would have spoken in no uncertain terms. But he waited till I, his prisoner, was ready to comply with his request. This was a good omen for me since it indicated an intention to treat me more obligingly. "Are you aware, Captain, that I've made a written appeal to the Chief of the Psychological Defence? I've demanded my release."

Gorlat was informed about it. "Lt.-Gen. Kosnow has already contacted the Administrator as soon as we landed. This is why you're requested to come to the Drusus without delay, sir."

His tone had become a shade sharper and he no longer 'asked my favour' but he 'requested' me. It was time to go.

I put on the gold-braided uniform belt with the service weapon in the holster. However it was only a facsimile of the real thing. They didn't trust me with a genuine impulse-beamer.

Of course I owed it only to Lt. Gmuna, my black friend and protector, that I wore the uniform of the Solar Imperium at all. He had groused so long about my civilian garb that I finally gave in. However I had insisted on wearing the symbol of Arkon on my chest.

My wish had been granted and a picture of the 3 planets was embroidered on the uniform. I wore the Terranian insignia on my shoulders. I remembered the mischievous grin of Gmuna when he fastened the epaulets with the silver comets on my shoulder pads. It must have struck him as odd to adorn an Arkonide Squadron Chief with the insignia of a Terranian Lieutenant General.

From then on Gmuna had saluted me with such exaggerated precision at all possible and impossible occasions that I shoved him one day without a word into a swimming pool.

I donned my snappy cap and walked out the door. The guard robots posted outside the door pulled up their movably mounted impulse-blasters and stood at attention. The people around me seemed to enjoy a display of good manners.

Gmuna waited at the antigrav elevator. His thin face had a blasé expression and he leaned at such a grotesque angle against the wall that I had trouble not breaking out in loud laughter. Ever since I had nearly drowned him in the swimming pool, he acted with deliberate nonchalance.

"Hi!" he greeted me. "Coming, daddy!"

I stopped and looked at his grinning face. I had called him 'son' a few times and now he called me 'daddy'. I couldn't help feeling friendlier and friendlier each day toward these Earthlings. They were so natural and sincere. They acted the way my own people never could do: they let others know what to expect of them. Sometimes their unrestrained behaviour was almost insulting but it was usually tempered by a healthy life-sustaining humour such as Gmuna exhibited.

"Next time I'm going to throw you into the salt lake, son," I promised, tongue in cheek.

"Okay, daddy," he drawled. "I'll evaporate the puddle with an energy-cannon, then what are you going to do?"

Hesitantly Capt. Gorlat made a superfluous remark: "The Chief is waiting!"

I dropped into the antigrav field and pushed myself up. A Spaceforce helicopter waited on the roofport for me.

2/ A TROUBLED RHODAN

We flew about 20 kilometres till we reached the landing place of the Drusus. I had already seen the upper curvature of the super-battleship shortly after we had taken off but I was quite wrong to believe we would reach it in a few moments.

The mountain of Arkonide steel didn't seem to come closer. The perspective illusion was so perfect that I soon gave up guessing how far away it was. The gleaming bluish giant sphere slowly grew bigger till it towered above us although we flew at an altitude of 500 meters and when we approached it within a few hundred meters I was unable to take in the entire curvature of the Drusus with a single glance.

We landed and drove about 800 meters underneath the spaceship standing on tower-like telescopic supports, till we reached the lower airlock.

I struggled to keep my composure but apparently didn't quite succeed. Capt. Gorlat, who knew very well that such colossal ships did not exist during my time in the Arkonide fleet, tried to weaken my morale. "The flagship of the Solar Fleet, sir," he remarked casually. "The Drusus measures 1500 meters in diameter. It's been put in service only a few months ago. When it starts to fire its guns, worlds will perish."

That remark still disturbed me after walking through a perplexing maze of corridors and numerous armoured bulkheads to the centre of the gigantic ship.

Metre-thick round hatches of Arkonide steel slid open. Then came an air chamber and behind it 2 double doors again. In the pressure chamber I noticed the shielded conductors for the powerful forcefield projectors which could also block the Command Centre in case of extreme emergency.

It was astounding what the Terranians had accomplished since the time when Rhodan reached the Moon in a frail atomic rocket. Now they built super vessels which had no equals in the entire known Galaxy.

Our largest units had been those of the Imperium class but they measured only 800 meters in diameter. Of course Rhodan had used a psychological ploy by summoning me to the Drusus of all places. He could have just as easily met me in the red government palace. I even strongly suspected that they deliberately led me around through the titanic labyrinth in order to impress me with its size.

The Command Centre was a huge hall with an arched ceiling, observation screens as high as a house and an amazing array of instruments most of which were familiar to me because they had been taken over directly from the Arkonides. However there were also numerous other instruments of new designs which I had never seen before.

Rhodan had assembled the officers of the Drusus in the Command Centre and he gave me a reception worthy of the Emperor of Arkon himself. He stood at the end of the long line of silently saluting officers. They had keen and bold faces, these outstanding, energetic Terranians whose ancestors I had known as wild and primitive men of the Stone Age.

"Caution, psycho-trick!" my extra-sense warned. "They want to demoralize you."

However there was no need to warn me. I was already depressed by a feeling of inferiority in view of the demonstration of the super-battleship to an experienced space officer like myself.

I walked down the line of men all unknown to me and greeted them by touching my cap several times. I felt humiliated by this show of might and excellent discipline and Rhodan knew exactly that I would be sensitive to such a display. At this moment I had to seek strength from the knowledge that I wore the emblem of the Arkonide Fleet on my chest.

These symbols had already been carried by the pioneers of my venerable people to the far reaches of the Galaxy at a time when Rhodan's ancestors still gaped obtusely at our swift exploration cruisers! I had worn the same insignia myself when I first landed on the uncivilized Earth where dirty men had thrown themselves into the dust before me.

However these sentiments passed quickly. When I came to the grey-eyed Chief of the Solar system and paused in front of him, I had already regained my self-control. My smile expressed true scorn and I didn't have to put on an act to hide my deeper fears.

Perry Rhodan was bareheaded and I, therefore, removed my cap and threw it to the Captain of Defence who was following me. Rhodan was as tall as I was but I was about 20 pounds heavier. However I had already experienced how terribly fast, resilient and strong this lean-looking man really was.

Above all he had a keen mind like a rapier. He seemed to guess that his little ploy had been only partially successful and he began to laugh softly as his officers stood in line stiff like wooden dolls. "Good morning, Arkonide!" he said in a deep sonorous voice. "I suppose today is the first time we meet in our official capacities, right?"

He wrinkled his brow and looked at me with amusement. My inane pride reared up again and I had trouble suppressing it. "Hello, barbarian," I replied condescendingly. "That's true. The last time we met you were lying on the floor at my feet and I held the tip of my sword at your throat. I felt sorry for you."

A burly, broad-shouldered man with fire-red hair bristles took a deep breath. He stood next to Rhodan and wore the glittering insignia of a general. Apparently he was trying to find some appropriate words. As I haughtily looked down on him Rhodan introduced him with a grin: "This is Reginald Bell, Security Minister of the Solar Imperium and Chief of the Solar Space Patrol."

"Well, well," I said. "Pleased. I believe I've read something about you in the Encyclopaedia Terrania but I don't know what. Please excuse me!"

The red-haired one uttered a peculiar hissing noise and stomped away with clenched fists, making me chuckle. Reginald Bell had been Rhodan's companion on his early ventures into outer space.

Rhodan presented his officers one by one. Some studied me with curiosity, others with suspicion and a few showed signs of respect. My photographic memory easily retained all the faces matching the names. It would enable me to surprise them later by addressing them correctly.

When the little ceremony was over they returned to their daily routine. A lieutenant colonel by the name of Sikermann shouted orders in a booming voice and the men, most of whom were quite young,

were dismissed.

I was alone with Rhodan. At first we faced each other silently, each knowing that the other would not give in. We were like fire and water and yet we had already formed ties between us that could no longer be denied.

He pointed to some comfortable chairs near a drink dispenser and we sat down. I soon noticed with growing anxiety that the Drusus was being prepared for a takeoff. A deep rumble came from somewhere and machines started up.

I thought he would begin talking about these unmistakable noises. However the tactics of this man were not transparent and he chose to pursue another avenue for his attack. "If you leave your sub-oceanic pressure-sphere near the Azores again, please see to it that the automatic defence installations are turned off. Your robots almost destroyed one of my cargo subs."

He looked at me with a candid smile and I could feel my heart pound.

"Okay, let's not fool each other," he continued in a more serious vein. "We know where you've been keeping yourself. You've probably slept a few centuries in that steel dome. Since we've made an agreement on Venus, I've taken care not to interfere with your shelter."

It took me a moment to realize that I was once again obligated to Rhodan. "Thank you!" I gulped.

"Oh, never mind," he dismissed it. "I can imagine that you've collected quite a few souvenirs down there. The technical installations are of no interest to me. It can't be better than what we've got already. When you came to Earth 10,000 years ago, Arkon didn't have any more than it has today."

I closed my eyes, distraught. He had discovered my last retreat where I had spent so many years in a biomedical deep-sleep.

"I don't wish to annoy you," he went on with an earnest expression. "It's time we put our cards on the table. I've got troubles, Admiral!"

The frank revelation ended my inner turmoil. It was senseless to pull the wool over Rhodan's eyes. He obviously knew all my secrets. Instead a warm feeling of compassion overcame me and my natural impulsiveness gained the upper hand. "Troubles?" I repeated.

He looked at me quizzically. "Yes. They've seen through my game of hide & seek. A Galactic trader recognized me and informed the Robot Regent of Arkon in whose existence you refuse to believe. However this is not as bad as the fact that mysterious and weird forces are at work in the inhabited Galaxy. They're a menace to mankind as well as to your people. We must stop trying to put each other down."

I was still confused. Rhodan spoke the truth. I could feel it. My logic sector didn't contradict me.

Before I could reply he leaned forward and said with emphasis: "Arkonide, listen to me. You've written a petition that you desire to return to your home after being on Earth many thousands of years and that you were stranded because you had lost your ultra-light-speed spaceship. I realize that you've waited impatiently for eons of time until mankind progressed enough to build spaceships. Now that time is here at last. I'm absolutely sure that you'll never do anything to cause us harm. Besides it would make no sense at all."

I couldn't agree more. I had done so much to instill the superior Arkonide knowledge in the human brains by bits and pieces. Not unselfishly, of course! I simply wanted to go home.

"Are you still unwilling to accept my word that your people have degenerated mentally and physically?" Rhodan asked.

His question gave me quite a jolt again. The mere thought was hateful to me and I was loath to draw the inevitable conclusions. "Impossible!" I maintained. "Give me a Gazelle so I can fly to Arkon and convince myself. I give you my word that I'll return."

I could feel that my eyes were blazing. Now the time for decision had come.

"I believe you, Atlan," he answered simply. "But I can't let you go."

"Why not?" I flared up. "You've been recognized, nobody believes the story of your death any longer."

"That's not the point. The Great Empire is being ruled by a gigantic automaton. The decisions of the machine are unmerciful. It is constantly on the search for still active and capable Arkonides who are pressed into service under its command to execute so-called punitive expeditions. The Robot Regent will never let you get away. I don't want to lose you, you see! Terra is now your true home."

I was upset and remained silent until my extra-sense advised me to my greatest surprise. Trust him! He's telling the truth. You were 10,000 years absent from Arkon!

I fought the mental impulse of my logic sector but at the same time I realized unconsciously that Rhodan had spoken more earnestly and clearly than before. "I'd like to make a suggestion, Admiral," he said. "I'll show you irrefutable evidence that the Arkonide realm you've known no longer exists. I've got authentic films, hyperradio messages of the Regent, audio-visual records and other proof to present to you. Your people are half-asleep. They're only interested in the fine arts, ridiculous sophistries and petty jealousies. The Emperor is a sham who didn't even have enough power to permit my men and me to enter Arkon although we came as peaceful visitors. The imperial battleships which are manned by robots and subjugated races have literally exterminated the rebellious intelligent beings of numerous colonial planets. The Great Empire will fall apart if the Machine remains in power much longer. The Regent is in a more precarious position than we are. I've just come back from Arkon where I've negotiated an agreement with the robot Brain. I've been given unrestricted authority over the Arkonide Fleet. I'm entitled to request the biggest units and to deploy them according to my own judgment. Atlan, I beg you to reconsider!"

I was amazed to see Rhodan's face flushed red. I had not yet seen the clever tactician and scoffing wit in such a state. I had seen hate, derision, fear and wild anger in the gleam of his bright eyes-but never despair.

A deep thunder shook the mighty body of the Drusus. I sat on the edge of my seat while Rhodan leaned back, seeking to relax.

"There are 18 propulsion-jets around the peripheral bulge," he explained. "We'll be starting in 10 minutes. You may accompany me."

My desire to fly through endless space again threatened to overwhelm me. I could hardly remember

what it felt like to be at the controls of a truly great ship. "What about my few belongings?" I inquired hesitantly.

"They're already on board. Gmuna sends you his best wishes. You must have bewitched the young fellow."

I smiled quietly with a sense of relief. Rhodan seemed to understand my emotions. His expression softened and he looked pensively at his sinewy hands. Without raising his eyes he said: "One of these days I want to send you to the Arkon system, Atlan. But now it's much too dangerous for an immortal being." Then he winked an eye and stared at the spot on my uniform which concealed the cell-frequency activator hanging on my chest.

"You slay me!" I mocked through gritted teeth.

Rhodan laughed softly. "We understand each other, don't we? Let me tell you one more thing: the robot Brain is already at work in accordance with its programming to break the agreement concluded with me. Aren't you a computer engineer?"

"It's one of my special subjects," I affirmed hesitantly. I quickly found out what he meant by his question.

"Okay, then you know how the machine must react. We've established a Robot psychology Department and have determined that the Regent follows outdated programs. It's incapable of adequately evaluating the new situation and counteracts with stupendous force. If it consents to make a deal with me, a dangerous Terranian and the creator of a new rival Galactic power, it must be in dire straits. It's probably in the same peril we are. You'll see films and talk to people from other worlds who will verify my information. Wait and see."

"Why do you tell me about your troubles, barbarian?"

He grinned disarmingly. He was his old self again. "Certainly not because I'm ready to throw in the towel. I've got good teeth, Arkonide, and I'm used to taking healthy bites. The trouble is that I don't like to have enemies at my back. You've caused me enough difficulties with your stubborn attempts to escape. You almost got away, too."

He shook his head and ignored my ironic smile. Did he really believe he could fool me with such an explanation? Or was it because he was unable to forget our common adventures? As far as I was concerned I realized very well why I felt such friendly affection for this Earthling. Although we had been hell-bent on killing each other, it now looked as if we had a great mutual need for one another.

He shouted a few commands across the huge Command Centre. The droning of the machines grew louder and I noticed an additional low hum which indicated that the enormous thermal converters of the super-battleship had been activated.

We took off amidst my reflections on the scope of the vessel's armaments but I soon gave up wondering about details. Rhodan obviously knew what he was doing.

I glanced at the panoramic gallery of observation screens which at this moment depicted only the white glow of highly compressed air-masses. Seconds later the black void of space filled the screens.

Then I became enthralled by the stars coming into view. The Drusus accelerated at an incredible clip.

The terrestrial moon was in a favourable position. However I could glimpse the shining half-moon only for a few seconds before it flashed by.

Barely 6 minutes later I heard the reports from the Engineering Control room announcing that our ship had entered the range of relativistic velocity which caused a diminished magnitude of acceleration at a constant energy output.

I watched the officer push the red button for the booster-mass injection. The roar of the impulse-jets increased and we reached approximate speed in 10 more minutes. I was awed by the thought that such a superb spaceship had been built on the ground of Terra.

Rhodan returned and sat down. He yawned. "Smooth sailing, isn't it? When I think back to my first flight to the moon when we were nearly crushed by a ridiculous 12G! Now we can accelerate at 500 kilometres per square second even below the speed of light. We're going to stop and wait beyond the orbit of Pluto. I expect to receive important information from my agents in space and I want to be ready for all eventualities." He looked at his watch. "Okay, now let's go and eat. Later I'll show you the evidence. You'll be amazed what's going on in the world of Arkon. Lt.-Col. Sikermann!"

The First Officer of the Drusus approached.

"Please prepare for a short transition. Thank you!"

The stocky, dark-haired astronaut saluted and silently walked away. I followed him with my eyes. "You've got very dependable men, barbarian," I drawled. "Do you think you'll be able to depend on me like that, too?"

He slowly depressed the button of the drink dispenser and waited till the refreshing beverage was poured. Then he looked at me. "You're ancient, Atlan. Did you know Wallenstein?"

I was startled. The memories suddenly came back to me.

"Well, you see, Arkonide, I know my Pappenheimers too!"

As the super-modern giant spaceship raced through the Solar planet system, I remembered the general who was called Gottfried Heinrich, Count zu Pappenheim. I was there in the year 1631 when he conquered the city of Magdeburg under the command of the Imperial Field Marshall Tilly. Yes, I knew these Pappenheimers and Rhodan seemed to know what the reference meant. One could trust the men of the cavalry officer to do their duty no matter what difficulties they were up against.

Rhodan handed me a warm drink. "Excellent beef bouillon," he said with a grin. "Will you tell us a little about your adventurous past? We'll have plenty of time while we stand by. The crew of the warship is dying to look you over a little closer. The wildest rumours are floating around about you."

That's how it was with these Terranians. They either kill you or love you to death!

The transition took place 10 minutes later. I felt the brief shock of total rematerialisation and after a few moments the pain of re-emergence. When I was able to see clearly again, the blazing sun had disappeared from the observation screens. I searched for it and when I found it again it was only a little star among countless other suns.

I moaned softly and rubbed my aching head with both hands. Rhodan studied me solicitously. He sat

there as if nothing had happened. "You'll get used to it again, my friend. You wouldn't believe how many times we've made these jumps lately. OK, now drink up!"

3/ 10,000 YEARS INTO THE PAST

I was given opportunity and ample time to recover from the devastating shock to my morale.

During the 7-hour-long show of proof I had drawn on all my experience and knowledge of human nature to find fault and discrepancies in the film documents and radio calls presented to me.

I was unable to refute the evidence. What Rhodan had shown me at first with an effort to spare my feelings and later with brutal frankness served only to inflict the most cruel shock on me.

I had watched the behaviour of Arkonides who were born much later than I. They no longer resembled the tall, athletic figures I had known in my time. These latter-day descendants of my venerable people were more to be pitied than admired. They lacked the qualities that I had always taken for granted.

The absurd simultan games pointed to their total decadence and inability to cope with life and so did the petulant and ridiculous little intrigues between families who had long lost their power and influence. The effeminate behaviour of the highest dignitaries left no doubt about the truth of Rhodan's assertions.

He was absolutely right. This was not the Arkonide nation of which I wanted to become a part again. Men like myself had died out long ago on the tri-planet and I had nothing in common with their emasculated descendants. Now I understood why Rhodan had said with pity when we first met that he could beat 'a hundred fellows of my type' with one hand tied behind his back. This blunt remark didn't seem as astonishing after watching all these pictures.

I was deeply shaken and depressed. However it was not sorrow for a vanished past alone that stirred my emotions: I was alarmed by the ominous sips of impending doom as I had watched the Robot Regent, which also called itself the Great Cöordinator, in action. It became obvious that the first indications of my people's degeneration had made their appearance about 4000 years after my departure from Arkon.

Our best scientists and technicians had built a huge machine and instructed it to assume power in case the government of the Arkonide stellar empire should completely fail to function.

This had indeed come to pass but not in the form the great planners of the Empire had desired. The robot Brain seemed to interpret several of the programs in a faulty manner. Moreover, the state of affairs had changed considerably during the last 6000 years and the Brain had neglected to keep pace with it.

My wrath was not directed against the rather 'innocent' machine but I felt utter contempt for my compatriots who allowed the empire to disintegrate and neglected the most important affairs because of their incredible cravings for pleasure. Undoubtedly the Robot Regent contained some special safety factors which would come into play as soon as the now prevailing decadence underwent a change for the better. Much could depend on taking a decisive hand in the situation.

For all these reasons Rhodan had evidently taken the right course and I now realized that my earlier attempts to escape had not only been foolish but also very dangerous.

After the presentation of the evidence Rhodan had accompanied me to the comfortable cabin where I now was. The powerful engines of the Drusus had been shut off and we floated motionless in space.

I had no idea what Rhodan was waiting for but I assumed it had something to do with the emergency which he had not yet described in detail to me. I looked at my watch. I had spent 4 hours in brooding and it was time to pull myself together. When I finally pushed the button of the telecom I had reached the firm conclusion that I belonged to the Earthlings from now on. If I wished to do something for my own people I had to side unconditionally with Rhodan and mankind. Only by cooperation with them was it feasible to remove the festering sore of the Robot Regent.

The broad face of the First Officer appeared on the picture screen in my cabin. "You called me, sir?" he responded.

I stepped closer to the camera. "Could you please find out for me if Rhodan is available, Sikermann?"

He raised his eyebrows, apparently surprised that I remembered his name. "He's waiting to see you. He's got some information for you."

"Not again!" I reacted in dismay.

"It doesn't concern Arkon, sir. It's about the incidents which have occurred during the recent months. We assume that you'll be very interested."

My lethargy vanished. This sounded so much better. "Where can I find your Chief?"

"I'll send somebody to pick you up."

The screen turned dark and a few minutes later a young dark-haired lieutenant appeared.

"David Stern?" I greeted him. He was perplexed and his face turned red in self-consciousness. I was happy to possess a photographic memory.

"Yes... yes, sir. I've orders to..."

"I know, thank you very much," I interrupted him. "Please show me the way. One can get lost in this labyrinth of corridors."

"When I first came aboard I almost starved, sir," he said cheerfully. "It was terrible. They let me and 3 other lieutenants wander around till we were exhausted while they watched us on the telecom from the Control Centre. Our buddies got a good laugh at our expense."

I chuckled. This was typical for the attitude of the Terranians. Their astronomical recruits had to go through a tough school but it brought results.

Stern led me to the briefing room in less than 5 minutes. It was located directly behind the Command Centre and contained a variety of communication equipment.

Rhodan was already waiting for me. A few officers of the ship simply nodded in my direction. They were far less formal than a few hours earlier.

Rhodan examined me with a glance. My thin smile seemed to be enough for him. "Are you all right again, gladiator?" he inquired.

When I silently nodded he picked up an oblong box and handed it to me. "A beautiful example of Terranian impulse-beamers," he commented. "The reaction chamber is already charged up. You can throw your own model away."

He turned around and left me standing with the box. I opened it. It was indeed a finely made impulse-blaster. I put it in my bolster and gave my replica to David Stern. "Will you please discard it for me?" I asked him.

"Now that this has been taken care of, please take a seat and look what we've discovered in the meantime!" Rhodan began. "Can you imagine that there is somewhere an alien power that depopulates entire planets?"

I thought I hadn't heard right. "Depopulates?"

"Depopulates!" he repeated, a deep furrow appearing between his eyebrows. "It sounds strange, I know. I had an appointment with a messenger of the Robot Regent on the 3rd planet of sun Mirsal, which is in the centre of the Milky Way 14,480 light-years from Earth. I didn't want to reveal the position of Terra and so far I've been fortunate that nobody has found it."

"A reason not to let me fly to Arkon?" I interjected with a touch of irony.

"Correct," he admitted frankly. "We're bound to be discovered sometime. At present we're concerned about the planets of the star Mirsal. When we arrived there we found planet #3 depopulated. All inorganic objects were untouched, only the, intelligent humanoids and all animals had disappeared. We became embroiled in a tough fight with unknown spaceships. We still don't know what we were fighting and we don't have any explanation why the terrible salvos the Drusus fired went without any effect whatsoever through the invisible alien spaceships which we pinpointed with our rangefinders. Mirsal planet #2 was also inhabited and we arrived just in time to witness how its intelligent beings vanished before our eyes and dissolved into nothing. The Robot Regent was so alarmed by these baffling events that it assigned the command of its new super-battleship Arc-Koor to me. However we were completely helpless. Not even my mutants were able to get to the bottom of it. All I could do was take as

many Mirsalese as possible aboard to evacuate the planet. I transferred the refugees to Arkon but I was pursued by the ghost ships and was saved only by a quick transition. This is the situation we're in and it still baffles us. I intend to... What's the matter with you, Atlan, hey?"

Rhodan jumped up and shook my shoulders. I could feel only his hard grip. The clarity of my vision had become clouded by a sudden surge of vivid memories. I saw Rhodan only as a shadowy shape and his shouts sounded like thunderclaps in my ears. My photographic memory had reacted against my conscious will as he recounted the events. I was thrown into a state of panic and it was a few moments before I was able to see clearly again.

Rhodan stood near me. His lips formed a thin line. I could feel my hands tremble. Somebody was calling for a doctor.

"Do you know these strangers?" Rhodan asked excitedly. "Please tell us, Atlan, if you can explain what happened."

"My friend," I stammered, "the story goes back 10,000 Terrestrial years."

"We're anxious to hear it," Lt. Stern urged.

I slowly nodded my head. My lucid memory threatened to overwhelm me. Rhodan seemed to realize how much I was disturbed by reviving the impressions of my past and he wasted no time. He led me to the antigravitor and we went to the large mess hall of the Drusus.

While I tried to suppress my inner turmoil and to regain my composure, the crew filled up the hall and I saw many members who had not yet been introduced to me.

Rhodan sat next to me. "Okay, we're ready," he announced. "If your report is truly significant it is better if the whole crew can listen to you. We hope we can clarify the mysteries with your help. How do you feel? You look miserable!"

I tried to smile although my head ached. "It'll be difficult," I began. "There are many concepts of the Arkonide vocabulary involved in my tale of the past. I'll convert all distances and time to Terrestrial values and express many other things, such as machines, weapons and ranks in your terms. Even though it won't be easy."

I looked around. The big mess hall was jammed with listeners. Where did they all come from? I felt like my brain was wrapped in cotton and I was barely able to visualize the present. My eidetic memory-stirred by Rhodan's account-had taken possession of me.

Somebody handed me a cup. "Drink it!" the man said. "It'll calm you down. What did you do to him?"

The question was addressed to Rhodan by the medical officer who had been called in.

The words seemed to pour out of my mouth by themselves. For the first time in years I began to speak about my life but I had never dreamed I would do it aboard a Terranian super-battleship of all places.

I ranged far out with my narration. I had to do this in order to explain how it had all come about. I used only contemporary expressions to make myself understood. It would have been quite senseless to

use the Arkonide designation 'Tsohlt-Taark' for the Terrestrial term 'impulse drive' or to call the Commander of a cruiser 'Vere'athor'.

I forgot that I was in the mess hall of the Drusus. Time had turned back in my mind and I was again aboard the imperial battleship Tosoma with orders from the Great Council of Arkon in my pocket.

My vision became hazy and I surrendered to the insistent demands of my memory. I began my story.

4/ THE PROBLEM OF THE ZAKREBIANS

"...May I be permitted to advise Your Highness not to treat the ever-rebellious colonists from the lower classes of these people too gently. My measures were aimed at presenting the Imperator a new world with faithful and willing settlers. I hope that my efforts have set a standard for you, august Crystal Prince..."

"Thank you!" I interrupted the officer reading the message. "That's enough. Amonar's advice can only have the result of increasing the riots further. Are there any other matters?"

My friend and counsellor Capt. Tarth, Commander of my fleet's flagship Tosoma, rolled up the document and tossed it on the magnificent desk.

I had arrived 4 days before on the 2nd planet of the little yellow sun which had been discovered by an exploration cruiser under the command of Larsaf.

We had called this world Larsa after him. It was a very young planet with steaming swamps and forests and vast muddy oceans. Its humid warm climate seemed to have agreed with our settlers. But the rule of the Administrator Amonar had been less healthy for the colonists.

The Great Council of Arkon called me back by hyperradio 3 weeks ago from my theatre of operations with instructions to proceed with my expeditionary squadron to Larsa's sun and to investigate the 2nd planet of this isolated stellar system from where they had received a desperate radio call from a colonist by the name of Tonth. The message complained of unfettered encroachments and draconian measures of the Administrator Amonar of the insignificant family Cicol.

I had covered the distance of 34000 light-years in 4 transitions and landed a little later with the Tosoma and the 2 battlecruisers Askohr and Paito on the main spaceport of Larsa.

A cursory inspection had already revealed that Amonar had abused his authority. I learned to know him as a hard and unjust man who was driven by a burning ambition to gain recognition and honour for himself and his family at any cost.

He had transformed a wild uninhabited world into an exemplary colony with cities and spaceports and had undertaken the construction of a robot brain on such a large scale that I was deeply surprised.

Amonar had bought his fame with the blood of our colonists. The most capable scientists and technicians among the settlers were used exclusively for the perfection of the automaton and I had gained the impression that Amonar endeavoured to build a state for himself in this little out-of-the-way solar system.

I had struck hard and mercilessly with my troops when Amonar's loyal soldiers tried to defend their master. In this clash they had deployed weapons which the Administrator had already bought from the Galactic Traders without the knowledge of the Great Council and installed in the fortified ring around the unfinished robot brain.

Yesterday I had arrested him and sent him back under guard to Arkon. His last attempt to change my mind was no different from the written statement Capt. Tarth had read to me. They were the usual hair-splitting phrases of a subordinate who knew very well that I was a member of the ruling dynasty. My family, the Gonoals, had given birth to the Emperors of Arkon in whose hands the fate of the Great Empire had been entrusted during the last 3 epochs.

I slowly rose from the luxurious contour chair. The opulent furniture and decor of the room were clear proof that the arrested official was more concerned about his own comfort than the welfare of the colonists.

Since I had been appointed as an Arkonide Admiral and Chief of a Task Force Squadron by a decree of the Great Council, I had encountered such infringements only once. A man of my people had tried to establish his own Imperium with the help of an alien reptilian race. It had been my first mission.

Not much blood had been shed in the case of Amonar. A report to the Great Council and my venerable uncle Emperor Gonozal 7 had been dispatched by a messenger ship. I expected an early reassignment since it was not my job to build colonies. It was only my duty to intervene in cases of unrest.

The administration palace erected by Amonar was the most splendid edifice in the planetary capital. The prisoner had called it Amonaris after himself. Since he had achieved great results despite the injustice he perpetrated, I was unwilling to change the name of the city. Later few would remember to whom it referred.

Tarth, an old and experienced battleship commander, stood silently at the magnificent operation table which was equipped with communication circuits by which the most important command stations and defence positions could be manually controlled. Amonar had made the most careful provisions but we got here too fast and his subversive plans were frustrated. I was convinced that the dismissed colonizer would be punished on Arkon by destroying the will power core of his brain.

I removed the wide mantle with the regalia of the ruling dynasty from my shoulders and put it over the high backrest of the chair. I felt more comfortable in the plain uniform of the Arkonide Fleet. Then I slowly walked to the transparent energy-wall which Amonar had installed in place of the usual armourplast windows. I stopped before the transparent wall, touched it with my finger and waited till the highly responsive climate control reacted to the warmth of my hand by drawing cool air from concealed vents.

"A little too sumptuous for the office of a minor official," Capt. Tarth commented. "There's a delegation of settlers waiting outside. A certain Tonth requests an audience."

"That's the man who sent the radio plea to the Great Council," I explained. "A very courageous fellow. Where does he come from?"

Tarth checked his list, "From Visal 4, Your Highness."

"For you I'll always be Atlan, teacher," I smiled. "Visal 4, hm? An old colony which now is overpopulated too. I've been told that 500 million citizens had to emigrate."

"The Colonial Office has transported 2 million of them to this planet in its ships and another 20,000 scientists and technicians of all branches. The guard troops are from Arkon. This planet is extremely well equipped."

I went back to the desk and sat down behind it. "Let the people come in. I hope their wishes can be fulfilled."

Tarth's deep red eyes seemed to twinkle. Slowly he went to the door. His steps were growing a little awkward due to his advanced age. I pushed the remote control button to open the doors. Amonar had safeguarded himself against surprises.

The 2 steel panels slid back into the walls. Outside one of the notorious Larsa-storms was brewing. It broke out fast and it became so dark that we needed light. At the first flash of lightning the energy-wall darkened itself.

My thoughts turned to the crews of the heavy and light cruisers which were stationed in wide orbits around the planet. They were probably unable to see the surface of this cloud-covered world. There were only 3 of the heavier units of my little fleet on the spaceport. It had been enough to create the desired impression.

5 colonists entered the room. They were dressed in plain, sturdy clothes as I had seen many times before. Their figures were tall and good-looking.

"Pure Arkonides," signalled my extra-brain, which had been activated with the consent of the Medical Board after my appointment as admiral.

The 5 men kneeled down and covered their faces with their hands. It was a gesture of humble submission which was no longer practiced on Arkon.

"Stand up!" I commanded, acutely discomfited. "Did Amonar compel you to act in this humiliating manner?"

"Indeed, Your Highness," confirmed an elderly man with short snow-white hair.

My hair was long and carefully groomed. Such care would have involved a great inconvenience for these hardworking men. They didn't understand much about grand policy in galactic space. All they were interested in was to obtain dependable agricultural robot machinery to help them with their work.

"Are you the colonist Tonth?" I inquired. The old man nodded his head. "I am, Your Highness. We came to give you our thanks for your swift help. I risked my life when I secretly sneaked into the radio station and transmitted my call. Afterwards I fled into the forest because the automatic warning devices had registered the frequency of my body. A technician warned me about it and I sought refuge in the wilderness but now everything is alright again."

I talked over an hour with the seasoned colonists and became convinced that the future of the 2nd world around the little sun Larsak looked bright. The immigrants who had come from a hot and humid planet had found a very suitable climate here. The virgin soil was fertile and supplied rich yields and there were also mineral treasures in abundance.

I considered the idea of turning Larsa 2 into a trading base but the fact that the armed might of the Empire didn't reach into this far corner of the known Galaxy spoke against it. Therefore I refrained from making such a proposal to these men. It probably was a little too early for such an enterprise anyway.

They thanked me exuberantly and then came the question which I had already expected. It was a well-established custom that audiences with these simple people ended in a petition. Capt. Tarth chuckled. He seemed to know already what it concerned. They probably had approached him earlier to act as a mouthpiece.

"Your Highness, we've among us 50,000 emigrants from Zakreb 5 who have been brought here against their will as a result of some negligence. They wish to be transferred to another planet because they can't stand the local climate for an extended duration. They've suffered numerous deaths. The Zakrebians must have cooler and drier air, Your Highness. Not only are the temperatures much too high for them here but they also miss the sunshine."

I glanced at Tarth, whose nod was barely discernible as he confirmed their facts. "I regret very much, Tonth, but it's impossible for me to transport these people in my warships and I don't have any passenger ships, available."

"But it's only a short distance in the same solar system to the 3rd planet, which has all the conditions they need. It'd be a simple matter for you to take them over there, Your Highness. Or would you allow them to keep wasting away here?"

Of course I had no wish to let this go on. Moreover it was my duty to assist settlers in distress. It was what I was here for.

Tarth mentioned one consideration. "The 3rd world of this sun has already developed a life of its own. Although the inhabitants of that planet are at a very low stage of intelligence, they are similar to Arkonide stock. The law prohibits the encroachment on oxygen-breathing intelligent beings."

"Yes, but only above intelligence stage C," another colonist quickly interjected.

"And what stage have they reached?" I inquired.

"At best A-3, Your Highness. I was there once. They are wild primitives with tools made of stone.

They've not yet learned to make holes' in their crude stone axes. The handles are still tied on."

His description sufficed. The law did not forbid taking over planets at this phase because experience had shown that such underdeveloped creatures could only benefit from a well-planned civilization.

I rose and thereby ended the audience. "I'm going to investigate planet 3," I promised. "In any case I'll see to it that the 50,000 Zakrebians will get a better place to live. You may leave now."

They left the room, walking backwards. Tarth stopped the sound recorder with a sigh and took out the spool to put it in the archives. "More trouble," he grumbled. "What fool advised me to join the Spacefleet?"

The guard before the official residence changed and I could distinctly hear the officer give his brisk commands. My formation was an elite unit of the Imperial Fleet. When we appeared on the scene, all revolts collapsed.

"We'll take a look at Larsa 3 tomorrow," I said. "What else is on the agenda today?"

"A reception at the house of Trento. That ought to be fun. Trento is the chief mathematician at the local research centre. He's reputed to be one of the best brains of the Empire and he's supposed to have been a member of the Great Council."

"This is too much," I grumbled. "I can hardly wait to get our new assignment. This world is a little too hot and damp for me although it seems to be fine for the people from Visal 4."

"But not for the 50,000 pure Arkonides from Zakreb," the old commander reminded me. "You'll have to make a decision before the new administrator comes."

I put my mantle over my arm and switched off the elaborate controls on the desk. This case was already finished for me. I had lost my interest in Larsa.

Although we already possessed a cartographic record of Larsa 3 we mapped it again before our landing. It was a beautiful planet resembling Arkon with wide oceans, blue skies and vast continents with green forests.

We liked the equatorial zone best of all. The temperatures that prevailed there were best suited for our needs, especially at the higher altitudes in the mountains where the heat was pleasant and the air good and dry.

We were less enchanted with the jungles spreading across the 2 continents at the equator. Also the north of one of these continents was covered by a large desert of sand and stone which we found rather unattractive. Farther to the north it was too cold for us. There was an expanse of forests which were outside the tropical zone.

We had already, from outer space, observed a rich animal life. This world could produce real intelligent beings in about 20,000 years. Therefore we had sufficient time to find a suitable location.

After an analysis of air samples I gave instructions to descend lower. I was, obligated by law to ascertain personally the mental and physical development stage of the natives before I granted permission by the authority invested in me to release the planet for an Arkonide settlement.

The Tosoma, a battleship of the Imperium class, entered the dense atmosphere at high speed. A white-hot mass of highly compressed air formed in front of our impact shield, a sight which was bound to scatter the natives in wild flight.

We flew over the continents at a low altitude and quickly crossed the oceans, looking for a land which was imbedded between the 2 equatorial areas. The land in question was large enough for our purpose. It contained some mountains and woods and the climatic conditions seemed to be ideal for the people of Zakreb.

It didn't take us long to find the land. It was almost big enough to be considered a continent. Narrow bridges of earth connected it with the regions east and west offering good opportunities for a later trade with the natives after we had a chance to teach them. Our experience had proven that gifted beings could learn very quickly to tend fields, build ships and construct houses.

We stopped the Tosoma at a height of 80 kilometres from where we could survey the oval, almost 2000-kilometre-long island. A small mountain chain studded with great lakes stretched toward a desert in the east. We discovered a plateau high above the ocean whose prairie-like surface offered a good place for landing.

The First Officer of the battleship showed me the maps he had made with the automatic cartographing machine. Capt. Tarth joined me and we discussed various details till I decided in favour of the plateau.

"We can create a good access to the ocean," Tarth suggested. "If necessary we'll burn a wide road winding down the side of the mountain. Over there I see a large wind-protected bay which would make a good harbour. The surface of this world consists mostly of water. Our colonists and especially the natives will have to learn something about navigation. We've got the necessary equipment on Larsa. I'd even propose to select this planet as a base for our Spacefleet although it is now at the edge of the Great Empire in an unimportant spiral arm of the Galaxy. Yet it might become very useful as a repair base. You'll have to decide this, Atlan."

I marked the area on the map in red although I shuddered at the sight of the huge icecaps at both poles. The terrain farther north and south seemed to be covered by melting glaciers.

"We'll stay here," I declared. "Now I want to check up on the civilization of the inhabitants. Will you please assemble these people?"

Tarth gave the necessary instructions. The gleaming muzzle of a heavy psycho-beamer moved out below the propulsion jets ringing the Tosoma. What followed was a simple matter of routine. If there was any degree of intelligent life within reach on the ground it was compelled to respond blindly to our suggestive commands which the psycho-officer voiced at the mike. They were transformed into para-vibrations and fanned out by the psycho-beamer.

We waited 2 hours till it was time to land. The battleship floated down till the white surf at the coast was visible beneath the shimmering antigrav field. Our 800-meter sphere touched down close to the coastal mountain range. The soft ground of the prairie yielded under the landing pads of the telescopic supports till they reached firm rock. I had landed for the first time on the 3rd planet of Larsa's star.

The analysis of the water and soil was very satisfactory. When we opened the airlocks and let the fresh, fragrant air stream in, the first of the indigenous intelligent beings approached.

Tarth's bellowed commands annoyed me. He could never refrain from disembarking heavily armed forces after a landing. In spite of his tolerant attitude he always put the safety of his ship first.

Borne by their antigrav fields the heavy fighter robots under the command of Lt. Ketlar floated down from the small hatches in the bulge around the Tosoma. Ketlar glanced at the scurrying natives who promptly followed the orders given by the psycho-beamer.

I abstained from performing the customary ceremony which brought a grimace of dismay to Tarth's face. He had never failed to plant the emblem of the Great Empire in the ground of a new planet and to intonate solemnly the time-honoured words of the ritual.

"We don't know yet if we're allowed to remain here," I pointed out, teasing him. "What's the rush, teacher? As far as I can see these people don't have stone weapons. They carry well-constructed battle-axes made of bronze, leather shields and apparently very efficient bows with long arrows. This attests at least to intelligence class A-5."

"But what you see here are the highest developed creatures on this planet," the colonial official from Larsa, whom we had invited to accompany us, interjected anxiously.

I looked at him dubiously.

"It's true," Tarth muttered reluctantly. "I've seen the reports to that effect. The people in the north have not yet learned to work with metal and they still wear animal skins because they can't weave clothes. There are great differences between the various tribes."

I had heard enough. It was a familiar story since we had encountered similar conditions frequently after landing on strange worlds.

I left the Tosoma through a small exit at the bottom and went in a small aerocar over to the group of natives who looked at us with dull eyes. Our medical and biological specialists selected a few people of both sexes and took them back aboard our ship.

They had tall muscular figures with a reddish-brown skin. Their foreheads were high and covered by pitch-black hair. These ignorant barbarians bore an astonishing resemblance to Arkonides.

I had the spell of suggestion slowly lifted. As soon as they were in possession of their mental faculties again and realized their situation they wanted to bolt in fear. I waited till our psychologists took the necessary measures to calm their fears. It took patience and understanding to convince them that there was no reason to be afraid of us and that we had no intention of harming them.

Tarth kept pestering me until I donned my lavishly embroidered mantle with the symbols of the ruling dynasty and recited the prescribed greetings while the natives prostrated themselves before us and covered their faces with their hands.

At this moment I heard Inkar, the young enthusiastic Commander of the battleship Paito, whisper: "The sun symbol of your family will become a holy sign for these primitive people."

His remark upset me although our psychologists claimed that a certain adoration was beneficial to their morals.

It took 4 hours for the auxiliary ships I had sent to investigate the northern zones to return with their reports. They confirmed that the population living there was considerably more backward than the people we had met on the island. In addition they also mentioned that they had observed a variety of skin colours that had been produced in segregated regions.

Inkar, whose ship had remained on Larsa, was already busy working on our communications with the strangers. The first translations were coming in from the linguistic robot. They showed that these brown people used a simple, easily understood language.

I finished the ceremony and Tarth, my old friend and teacher, insisted on naming the newly acquired land Atlantis in my honour. I reluctantly deferred to his wishes and returned after the act to my flagship in order to prepare the necessary instructions.

Inkar flew back to the 2nd planet in one of the Tosoma's auxiliary ships to organize the transfer of the 50,000 Zakrebians.

I transmitted a hyperradio message to the Great Council advising its members of the measures I had taken in the interest of our endangered colonists and I received the confirmation a few hours later. My venerable uncle personally authorized me to proceed with the transport of the pioneers to the 3rd planet and to provide temporary housing for them until he dispatched a fleet of ships with the complete equipment required for quick establishment of a colony.

I lowered my head in front of the picture screen and put my right hand on my chest. The speaker at the other end smiled. Due to the great distance the picture was rather poor. "You must stay put in this planetary system a little longer, Atlan. Amonar's confessions lead us to believe that the conspiracy of the former Administrator was not confined to the 2nd planet of Larsa's star. We need a man of your stature in that constellation. I hereby grant you full powers."

His edict was irrevocable. When his picture faded away I heard Tarth laugh loudly and angrily. The men in the radio centre looked as if they wanted to bite my head off.

"He can't do that to us!" the old Commander exclaimed. "Why did you have to call him? I'm afraid

we'll be stuck in this miserable corner for years. We'll be waiting for an attack which will never come. I happen to know that not even the Galactic Traders know anything about the existence of these 10 planets."

I was exasperated myself. If I had left immediately the Great Council would have had to send in another commander. There were more important things for me to do with the insurrections that constantly occurred somewhere in the Galaxy than to waste my time in a world whose denizens threw themselves in the dust to beg for our benevolence.

We started the following day. I assigned a contingent to Capt. Felif and left him some mobile energy-cannons and graders.

When I returned a week later with a flotilla and disembarked the first pioneers from Zakreb, they had already constructed a temporary spaceport with a meter-thick solid base.

Our construction planner Capt. Felif had simply melted a part of the plateau with the impulse-cannons and let the liquefied rocks spread out and cool off to form a smooth surface.

2 weeks later the transport fleet promised by the Emperor arrived and an administrator was appointed for the 3rd world of Larsa's star.

The special robots that had been shipped in for laying out small settlements with a communal centre in accordance with proven plans went to work at once.

While they were busy with their work I received orders to station an armed taskforce on the planet and to take off into space again to join Space Admiral Sakal who was engaged in a bitter fight with the insurgent forces of methane-breathers that had attacked him with a large fleet of ships and novel weapons.

This gave me a welcome opportunity to depart from Atlantis. I put the taskforce under the command of Capt. Felif and investigated again each planet of the little system for the presence of intelligent beings before I prepared for the start. Only the 3rd world had developed higher life and I was satisfied that my job had been taken care of for the time being so that I could notify the Great Council to this effect.

I lifted off in the battleship Tosoma together with the battle cruisers Paito and Askohr and waited near the orbit of the 4th planet for my other heavy and light cruisers to join us so that we could perform our transitions.

The war against the methane-breathers had broken out again during the first days when the settlers on Atlantis began to build their new home and I was happy to be thrust again in the multitude of stars in the centre of the Galaxy although I knew that we were on the eve of a hard and bitter fight.

At the spacefleet base Alslaton 6, I took on provisions, water and nuclear fuel for my squadron. We received worrisome reports from the so-called nebula sector. It looked as if the intelligent beings of the whole non-Arkonide world had conspired against us.

When I finally arrived at the advanced planetary base Jangtu and reported to Admiral Sakal I no longer thought about the little yellow sun which had been named Larsa's star after its discoverer. Neither did I ponder the fate of the small continent which had been given the name of Atlantis by the commander of my flagship. It had become rather unimportant now that the Great Empire under Arkon's hegemony struggled for its very existence.

The so-called Methane War taxed our resources to the limit. At that time we did not yet know how much it would bleed our people and that it would lead the Empire to the brink of disaster.

Had it been otherwise, I would doubtlessly have found ways & means to circumvent the full effects of a terrible event 2 years later.

6/ ALIEN ATTACK

The focal point of the 35th battle to contain our enemies was only about 3 light-years away. This time the Koal System was at stake and all its inhabitants had been hastily evacuated.

4 weeks before beginning the new major attack I had landed on the spacefleet base Alaget 3 to obtain the long overdue overhaul of my machines and to replenish my exhausted weapons.

Alaget was in a state of indescribable chaos and I had to use all my influence to get the units of my squadron into the maintenance yards. The place was littered with badly damaged vessels of the Imperial Fleet and their commanders and squadron chiefs were desperately scrambling for replacement of killed or horribly maimed crews.

I was lucky to receive preference, as it was known that I was Atlan of the ruling dynasty and I had no scruples about taking advantage of my name to obtain reinforcements that were unavailable to other commanders. The importance of my special task force outweighed name and rank.

Capt. Inkar was given a brand new battle cruiser of the Fusuf class to replace his unfit wreck and he promptly christened it Paito again like his old ship. I was fortunate enough to be able to wangle 10 light cruisers as well and now I was equipped to go into battle once more.

* * * *

Capt. Tarth knocked at the door of my cabin and I wondered why he didn't use the telecom. After entering he put a note with a decoded message on the table before me. His wrinkled face looked deeply worried. I had prescribed a biochemical rejuvenation for him a few weeks ago but so far we didn't have an opportunity to visit a government medical centre. Such institutes didn't exist at the borders of the Empire.

"More setbacks, old friend?" I inquired with dismay, picking up the note.

He laughed grimly. He had been on many daring missions. "From your august uncle himself," he said weakly; his red eyes looked inflamed. "Atlan, I've put you through a hard school but this I don't like. Someone is stabbing us in the back. We're ordered away from the battle and instantly re-deployed. Do you know where?"

I perused the radio message. It bore the personal code signal of the Emperor. "Larsa's star?" I wondered out loud. "Sounds familiar, Larsa's star...?"

"It's the tiny solar system we left 2 years ago. The colonists there have once again sent an emergency call to the Great Council. But this time they're not concerned with the transgression of a megalomaniac official. They seem to be disturbed by a more serious matter. We've been instructed to move into that space sector and to be girded for a fight."

I glanced at the observation screens on the Admiral's cabin. Outside on the vast grounds of the maintenance yard agitated Arkonides from all parts of the stellar empire hurried to and fro. There were many men among them whose ancestors had emigrated thousands of years ago. All their petty rivalries about sovereignty and competition for trade were forgotten. The only thing that mattered now was to repulse the non-humanoid, methane-breathing intelligent creatures.

"And I'm supposed to leave at a critical moment like this and to go to such an insignificant little star," I growled, highly irritated. "My venerable uncle seems to have forgotten that we're 32,000 light-years away from there."

"The Commander of the local depot has been ordered to show us special considerations," Tarth responded in a calming tone. He was a loyal admirer of my family. "We're slated to receive a few more new cruisers."

I jumped to my feet and picked up my telecom-helmet as I walked to the door. What could have happened in the region of Larsa?

Only 12 hours later I took off with my fleet which now consisted of the battleship Tosoma, the battle cruisers Paito and Askohr as well as 42 heavy and light cruisers. I had held a short briefing on the telecom and my commanders were informed about our objective.

Shortly before reaching the velocity of light we became embroiled in a fight with several light warships of the enemy who had broken through our lines without being noticed. We demolished the 5 cruisers with a single terrific blast from our impulse-cannons, raced on leaving the glowing debris behind and informed the commanding admiral of the incident.

In conformance with the radio message I had to wait for further information in the vicinity of the Estaf system. When we got there, a messenger ship was already waiting for us, bringing further instructions from the Great Council.

The fleet resumed its course and I left the calculations for the transitions to Tarth while I pored over the new details I had received according to which it seemed that the 2nd planet of Larsa was subject to baffling attacks from outer space. More than 100,000 settlers had fallen victim to these attacks or-as it was expressed in their words-had vanished in a mysterious manner.

I called Tarth in and asked the commanders of all ships to participate in the conference.

"Squadron chief to all Commanders!" it sounded from the amplifiers.

"Squadron chief to all Commanders! Secret briefing. Switch to code 2020-34-176. Ready for scrambler. Condenser-impulse code 2534-B. Acknowledge when ready to proceed!"

I listened to the crisp commands. In the course of the war, which had already lasted 2 years, my men had become first-class specialists. The commanders quickly gave their all-clear signals. My entire squadron was on the verge of the transition. The centralized network of my flagship channelled all data to each structure warp converter.

The faces of my officers appeared one after another on the grid sectors of the main monitoring screen. Tarth and I took our seats in front of the camera.

"Ready, Your Highness!" the communication officer of the Tosoma announced.

I began with some brief preliminary information: "We'll proceed to Larsa's star in 4 transitions. The older commanders are already familiar with the conditions there. It's a new planetary system. The 2nd and the 3rd planet are settled by our people. I don't know what happened exactly. The information transmitted by the Great Council didn't go into details. Apparently they're also in the dark. We're going to enter the system at our 4th transition and if we detect any foreign object in the solar system we'll open fire without warning. Caution: there's a broad ring of planetoids between the 4th and 5th planets. As far as we know they're remnants of an exploded planet. Don't mistake these cosmic rocks for hostile ships. Set your range finders for metal."

I looked at my notes, and Tarth as the oldest captain, gave some specific instructions as to our imminent manoeuvres and battle preparations immediately after coming out of the transition shock.

"The methane-breathers are probably behind it all," I continued. "The monstrous races in the Galaxy seem to adopt more and more a strategy of a war with multiple fronts. They apparently have tremendous reserves of intelligent beings and material. We can't afford to lose a single vessel. Our heavy losses in the defence zone clearly prove that the time for warning calls is past. As I said before, we must open fire as soon as we spot something which looks like an alien spaceship. Our own units will exchange identification signals in conformance with the squadron manual at 5 phase intervals. Experience has shown that our opponent is unable to decipher in time. That'll be all for now. We'll have to wait till we find out what is going on in the Larsa system. Thank you!"

The first transition took place 10 minutes later and after the 4th jump we were in the small planetary realm of the yellow sun.

After we had pulled out of the rematerialisation shock the alarm whistles shrilled throughout the units of my squadron and our excellent rangefinders swept the space around us without detecting any unknown metallic objects. Our energy-sensors picked up only the impulse-waves of our own propulsion systems.

We sped through the satellites in a staggered formation 20 kilometres apart, crossed the paths of the 4th and 5th planets till the 3rd planet which was in a favourable position came into view on our observation panel.

As I was certain that our colonists had established some cosmic defence stations during the last 2 years, I called Atlantis by hyperradio. I didn't want to take the risk of losing any ships to a protective barrage from my own people.

The answer came 5 minutes later when we were already close to the orbit of the 3rd planet. Capt. Feltif, the specialist for settlement planning, appeared on the hyperset screen. When he recognized me on his own screen, his tense face relaxed and he broke out in a radiant grin. "Atlan!" he shouted in jubilant excitement. "I knew it. Everything is all right with us. I'm busy sending the natives into the forests and evacuating Atlopolis. The construction of fortresses in the provinces is underway. I let them construct simple fortifications of stone on the 2 southern continents to give our enemy the impression that he faces the work of primitive people. An evacuation plan for transporting the settlers to these bastions in case of emergency has been prepared. Stocks of foods have been stored. Our 2 cargo ships have been moored at the bottom of the ocean with an emergency crew to wait for further developments. If necessary we'll have to retreat below the surface of the water."

As Feltif continued his report, I noticed that my staff officers looked at each other aghast. What was going on here? Why did they flee into the forests and to primitive towers of stone under the threat of an attack by the methane-breathers? Didn't they know that the methaners burn up the atmosphere of oxygen planets, which was poisonous to them?

My planning expert kept describing all sorts of countermeasures. He must have accomplished incredible feats but we failed to understand what it was all about. Finally I interrupted him by raising both hands.

Far ahead of us the minor little sun grew into a brilliant ball of fire. We had to pass in its proximity if we wanted to reach the 2nd planet situated just beyond it. We maintained our speed with a steady energy output at 5% below the velocity of light. The weaker propulsion systems of the light cruisers required at such speeds intermittent booster-mass injections which soon would make a replenishment of their tanks necessary. Our impulse-converters digested virtually all-imaginable substances as long as their melting point was not above 1650°C.

Capt. Feltif stopped in the middle of a sentence. His tanned face mirrored his surprise. He seemed to comprehend our attitude as little as we could make sense of his.

"I get the impression that we're talking at odds," I said to him. "When I came here I was of the opinion that the methane-breathers had invaded this system. What has really happened? I don't believe you've become a fool. What are you trying to accomplish with your evacuation measures? Didn't anybody tell you what has occurred in the meantime? Or did your connections with Arkon break off?"

"Of course not, Your Highness," my capable officer stuttered, perplexed. "Naturally we've been kept up to date. We've already received fully equipped artillery units for our defence directly from Arkon as well as specialists for ground-to-space defence. But that's not the point, Your Highness."

Tarth, my old mentor appointed by the Imperator, cursed audibly and stared at the young man on the picture screen as if he wanted to bite his head off.

"By the ancients of Arkon!" I shouted irately. "What's the matter with you? Is it impossible to get a

straight answer from you? Why was I requested to come here?"

Feltif finally realized that we were completely ignorant of the facts. His face expressed horror. "Be careful, Your Highness," he quickly called out. "Our mathematicians are in the process of figuring out the phenomenon. We're subjected to periodic intervals of multiple attacks which can only occasionally be monitored. They don't appear to follow a controlled scheme but seem to strike abruptly at any convenient opportunity instead. The phenomenon can't be explained in simple terms. Our 5 dimensional sensors register a distinct energy-echo but our individual oscillation-recorders fail to respond. We assume that the enemy is supra-dimensional."

I suppressed an outburst of rage welling up in me and tried to ignore the impulses of my extra-brain which tenaciously inquired why I had been sidetracked from the battlefield because of these diversions. "Continue!" I demanded, shaking inside. "Go on with this claptrap. I'm willing to listen to you if I don't lose my temper. Quiet back there!"

Several loudly laughing officers froze at once. Strictest discipline prevailed in the Imperial Fleet. I had the power to administer severe punishments.

"I beg your pardon, Your Highness," Feltif replied in obvious despair. "But I have no other choice than to tell you exactly what happened. Explicit reports have been presented to the Great Council. Weren't you informed of them?"

"We've got more important matters to worry about, Captain," I admonished him angrily. "We're engaged in the most horrible struggle in the history of the Empire. Our dominion is slowly dismembered and our people are bleeding to death. Each ship is needed and every single man. How can you expect the leading brains of the Council of Arkon, who are so preoccupied with the most vital affairs, to look into such unbelievable stories? Isn't it enough that an elite squadron like mine has been diverted from the scene of the crucial action?"

"I'm prepared to face a Judicial Court, Your Highness," Feltif said quietly. "May my grandchildren be cursed if I falsify the facts. On Larsa, the 2nd planet of Larsa's star, 150,000 colonists have already vanished without a trace. Everything else is still there. Not a shot has been fired from a hostile source, no bombs exploded, nor has any ship tried to land. We defended ourselves desperately but we were shooting at invisible targets. I've personally seen several soldiers of the army guard turn into shadows before my eyes before they vanished into nothing as if dematerialised. We've detected alien spaceships but we were unable to come to grips with them. We no longer have any warships here. Your Highness. Every available cruiser of the colonial defence fleet has been called back more than a year ago. All we've left are a few poorly armed cargo ships in which we don't dare venture into space."

My wrath subsided. I knew Feltif well enough to realize that he didn't make up silly stories. Tarth seemed to have become worried too, his face looked pinched. On his instructions the communication centre had switched the telecom to a circuit enclosing all ships so that the commanders and officers of the other units could listen in.

"Has there been any attack on Atlantis?" I inquired anxiously.

"No, Your Highness, only on the colonists of the 2nd planet. We're probably too insignificant. Besides I've taken all protective measures, as I've mentioned before. However the Larsa colony has already grown too big and immobile. A year ago I decreed a law against new births. I wanted to prevent babies being dragged into the chaos. I request the belated approval of this rule."

I dismissed his appeal with a gesture of my hand. He had acted logically and correctly. These colonists were not adapted to be spacefleet soldiers and I would have been unable to use them now since I didn't have a training ship with hypno-schooling equipment at my disposal.

While this conversation was taking place we rushed past the sun of Larsa. I noticed the activation of the ever-ready protective shield-projectors. Our powerful forcefields absorbed or reflected the energy rays of the small sun. The flaming glow in the outer region of our protective screen diminished the farther we got away from the fiery furnace.

Minutes later he began to brake, decelerating at 500 kilometres per square second, and manoeuvred toward the spot where the 2nd planet would be on our arrival.

Our connection with Capt. Felif was still intact when we received a message from Commander Henos. The radio centre brusquely interrupted our talk which now lost its urgency.

Henos' loud voice seemed to penetrate every corner of the warship's commander centre. "Cruiser Tantor, Commander Henos to Crystal Prince. Observed alien object. Poor hyper-echo. Normal sensors fail to register object. Point density only 103 per measuring field-grid. No optical reception. Object appears to be nebulous. Computation of energy output impossible. Impulses of higher order. The ship must be partly in hyperspace and partly in the normal universe. I request your orders."

"Caution!" I heard somebody shout at the top of his voice. It was Felif who was still on the hookup and had heard the report. "Caution!" he repeated. "This is the way it always begins. The last attack occurred 3 months and 2 days ago. They're returning now, although it's much earlier than the time we had anticipated according to our probability studies. Your Highness, they're on the attack again!"

The radio officer on duty broke off the connection. He acted according to the rules which put the security of the flagship first under these circumstances.

The brightly shining sickle of the 2nd planet was suspended in the space before us. Its huge mantle of clouds so strongly reflected the light of the sun that I would have had no trouble recognizing it among hundreds of other worlds.

I looked around for Capt. Tarth. When I saw his erect figure that had suddenly assumed an energetic expression, I pushed the alarm button without a word. Super-light-speed code signals flashed from the antenna of my flagship. The cruisers of my unique squadron scattered apart in such a hurry as if they had to escape the sudden birth of a supernova.

I heard the howling of the propulsion system in the equatorial bulge of the gigantic Tosoma. Seconds later we also received an echo. The measurements ascertained by Henos were correct to a hair. I could depend on these magnificent men from Arkon. There was not one colonist among my crew. They were all pureblooded Arkonides and each one was ready to fly in the face of death with open eyes.

"We'll see about that!" I heard somebody say shaking with emotion. I looked around until I realized that I had spoken these words myself.

Tarth smiled grimly. His face reminded me of the Atlantic marble which the pioneers from Zakreb had so enthusiastically admired shortly after their landing. That stone was said to be white as snow and laced with fine reddish veins. Tarth's face looked just like that.

We brandished the mighty weapons of the Tosoma and the next moment I was thrown back by the

recoil of a concentrated impulse salvo. One of my men caught me before I fell to the floor.

"I guess these uncanny aggressors came to the wrong address this time," I heard a young lieutenant murmur.

I winked an eye at TARTH who had taken up his battle position. Our eyes met and then he listened again to the reports from the various departments. Everything functioned smoothly. It was a well-tuned and unfailing war-machine in action.

I also shared the opinion that we would quickly finish off the phantom enemy. "Cruiser formation turn to ecliptic, 10 off G," I ordered. Askohr and Paito go ahead with wedge attack. Tosoma in frontal assault with lead for 21/2% below light-speed. Manual fire. Ready? Go!"

There was no visual sign of the atomic blasts from the muzzles of our impulse. The space void of all matter made the trajectories of the barrage invisible. However I could hear the awesome rumbling reverberating in the hull of the 800-meter sphere. The battle-hood of my safety chair was automatically pushed over my head and I switched over to the non-visual audio-communication system.

Now my instructions could be heard everywhere in the ship. The communication centre was attuned to hyperradio waves and operated with a scrambler code. All commands were transformed, consolidated and broadcast in a split second. The commanders listened in directly. There was only a slight delay caused by the deciphering but it amounted merely to 1/10th of a second.

I expected to receive the announcement of our success in shooting down our enemy any moment. One of us was bound to score a hit.

7/ ALIEN ATTACK

A terrible growl emanated from the loudspeakers, ear shattering as if the sound were excessively amplified. I nearly jumped out of my seat.

The officers in the Command Centre of the Tosoma-most of them veterans of the defence battles in the nebula sector-craned their necks, staring in disbelief, as if transfixed, at the gallery of panoramic

observation screens.

However there was nothing to be seen. Our adversary was too far in the distance and Larsa's sun was too weak to make the dimmest reflex on the armoured hull of the unknown ship.

We continued our bombardment but received no sign of a hit. We only got a message from the heavy cruiser Igita under the prudent command of Capt. Cerbus that the registered object had veered off sharply in order to escape our energy salvos.

At the same moment we heard the eruption of fierce screaming. We didn't know what the cause of it was until we received the evaluation of the robot machine in the communication centre which reported with mechanical indifference: "Entire crew light-cruiser Matato casualty. Radio silent. Ship undamaged and maintaining its course. Fails to respond to interconnection commands."

Reports similar to this had not been unusual during the last 2 years. Yet there was something peculiar about its wording and it startled me. How could the ship be undamaged if its crew had been last? And its course was still on target at the directed 10°?

While I was racking my brain over these inconsistencies, Capt. Inkar of the battleship Paito informed us that the foreign object had suddenly disappeared and that it had probably retreated by a transition jump. This was contradicted by the fact that the highly reliable structure sensors of my flagship had failed to register a space disturbance. At that short distance of no more than 3 million kilometres it was practically impossible not to notice even the most minor transition. There was no way of eliminating a disturbance of the warped space.

When we lost our target I broke off the one-sided battle and gave directions for salvaging the runaway cruiser Matato with a tractor-beam. The entire squadron performed a complicated 2-hour manoeuvre aimed at correlating with the flight of the Matato. Then we caught the 100-meter sphere in our irresistible tractor-beam and the vessel inched closer to the flagship.

During our weird battle we had swerved from our initial course and the 20 planet was now hardly visible as a pallid little disk between the sparsely distributed stars in this sector of the Milky Way.

After we had finally secured the Matato alongside the flagship, the officer in charge of the rescue team appeared. Lt. Cunor looked in astonishment at my light spacesuit as I flipped the helmet over my head and adjusted the oxygen supply.

"Are you coming with us, Your Highness?" he asked dubiously.

"Certainly," I said gruffly. "Are you ready?"

15 minutes later we opened the lower airlock of the light-cruiser whose crew no longer answered our calls. I climbed inside with 50 men and weapons ready to shoot. Capt. Tarth had joined us against my instructions. I could hear his hard breathing on my helmet-radio. I didn't wish to embarrass him but he understood my disapproving look and he frowned in disgust.

The Matato looked as if it had never had a crew aboard. We went systematically through every room without finding a single soul. When the search groups returned to the Commander Centre of the completely undamaged ship, my convictions were shaken to their foundations. The men spread out their hands in despair. I had never seen a more disconsolate bunch of people. I recalled the ominous warnings of my planning officer Felif who had spoken of the sudden disappearance of living beings.

As I pondered the eerie mystery I heard someone utter an urgent cry for Lt. Cunor. We ran to the room where it came from and when the men stepped back to let me in, my heart almost stood still.

A member of the Matato's crew lay on the floor. His body was hard and stiff down to his thighs but his legs were thrashing around as if he were panic stricken and trying to flee from some tormenting apparition.

It was a sight to make the most hard boiled men pale. I suppressed a groan, pushed Lt. Cunor to the side and knelt down beside the helpless victim. When I tried to lift him up, I was unable to budge him. Not only was he as solid as rock but he weighed as much as well. The density of his organism must have been increased enormously. Only his legs that kept beating against the floor felt normal to the touch.

I made room for a physician who tried to give an injection to the injured man. He gave up in bafflement.

"What's the matter with him? Speak up!" I yelled at the medical officer. He looked at me, pale and stupefied. He didn't know. I directed him to take the soldier aboard the Tosoma and to try everything to restore him although I was afraid that it would be useless.

After we returned to the flagship, I ordered an emergency crew to take over the ghost ship. The men obeyed my orders with the greatest reluctance. They were stunned by their mates' weird fate that defied explanation.

Then we resumed our course again. Shortly before landing, my chief mathematician Grun asked to see me and soon entered, accompanied by his assistants. He was a fairly small man and quite old but his unusually smooth skin indicated that he had received a biomedical rejuvenation treatment. The Great Council had adopted a policy of prolonging the lives of more and more men if they were considered to be outstanding and irreplaceable. Earlier it had been unthinkable to obtain permission for a reactivation by submitting a request. Now every capable man was badly needed and Grun was one of them.

While Capt. Tarth held a conference with the commanders in an adjacent room, I devoted my attention to the scientist.

"The matter represents more a physical puzzle than a medical problem, Your Highness," he explained. "The patient is still alive. The nerve paths to his legs have been immobilized. We've observed that the rigid-looking hand of the man has moved about 3 millimetres to the left during the last hour and I've ordered a study of the movement. I suspect that the total condensation of the organic fabric is subject to a relativity-time effect. The course of normal events which is valid for us no longer seems to apply to the injured man with the exception of his legs."

"Madness," I exclaimed in exasperation. "How do you explain it?"

"We're still investigating a tentative theory, Your Highness. We're thinking of the possible existence of a new weapon whose effect is restricted exclusively to organic life. It could be a converter-projector which creates a field with a focal point producing a structure transformation. Organic matter becomes dematerialised and enters a different state. In our particular case the soldier seems to have been touched only by the weak fringes of the field and the legs remained entirely beyond its radius. The result was that no dematerialisation took place, only an internal compression of the body. Simultaneously a shift of his relative time occurred. It is possible that the patient is going through the entire experience on a slow-motion scale. We're certain that he moved his hand. The movements of his legs are no longer

controlled by his conscious mind."

I could feel the moisture blurring my eyes, a sign of my excitement. Grun had lectured with the detached manner of a scientist.

"Have you drawn any conclusions?" I asked nervously.

"Yes and no, Your Highness. Such a weapon could decide the war with the methane-breathers if we could succeed in capturing one of these mysterious ships."

"How?" I challenged him.

Again Grun had some advice. "We'll have to wait for their next attack and refrain from using our customary tactics. I would recommend the conversion to ray-cannons of some of our more obsolete cruisers' impulse engines which function on super-dimensional principles. Instead of jeopardizing the lives of our men, we ought to rig up a remote-control steering system for the ships. If it should come to the worst, we would lose only a few outdated vessels."

Grun had a good head on his shoulders and the proposition he had outlined seemed logical. However I had one objection: "The technical aspects of the war are only of secondary importance to me. As the Chief of a special squadron I have to know first of all who our enemy is. I'm inclined to rule out that we're dealing with a spaceship of the methane-breathers. If they had such weapons in their possession, we'd have already encountered them in the nebula sector. It's more likely that we're facing here a different type of highly intelligent beings who may not even be aware that we're engaged in a mortal combat with those monsters."

"According to my figures there's a 97% probability of this being true," the physicist acknowledged. "I've already computed it and I believe we're confronted by an entirely new situation."

I was grateful that he didn't insist on sending a report to the Great Council on Arkon. I wouldn't have known what to tell them. Our situation was so perplexing that I preferred to await further developments in the hope of clearing it up a little better.

I chose the 2 oldest cruisers of my squadron for the experiment. Their crews were transferred to the depleted Matato and to the battleship whose commander needed more technicians. I wrote off the 2 remote-controlled warships but I still had more than 40 heavy and light cruisers at my disposal.

After Grun had excused himself I descended with the 3 units of my squadron into the fog-like atmosphere of the 2nd planet. The capital Amonaris on a mountain slope near the equatorial ocean gave the impression of swarming with refugees.

The big robot brain in the mountains, which had been started by the criminal administrator Amonar, was now finished. After landing I immediately gave instructions to send all our available technicians to the robot fortress in order to double the reinforcements of its defences.

3 hours later the 2 old cruisers Titsina and Volop were put into the well-equipped spaceship yard of Larsa. Every effort was made to modify the cross-section of the powerful impulse field jets to adapt them as military weapons and to augment the existing electronic remote control system by a semi-automatic switch arrangement for the armament designed to react to ultra-microwave steering signals. It required a great amount of material, time and experts, the latter fortunately available on Larsa.

Next I inspected the areas that had come under attack and where 150,000 colonists were reported to have vanished without a trace. The chief physicist Grun and his staff joined me and we cautiously set foot on the first of the fully automatic farms.

The flat buildings were empty. All the valuable equipment was still intact and in place, only the settlers were missing.

The scientists of the planet's administration showed us the results of their investigations which revealed that the surface of the jungle had been exposed to an irregular pattern of sharply bordered fields which had caused the colonists living inside its limits to become disembodied.

Grun called these zones 'relativity fields' which didn't help much to explain it to anybody else. We determined that it had never come to an all-out attack and I talked to a few people who had sat out the raids in nearby houses as their relatives literally faded away before their eyes only a few feet away while nothing happened to them. This confirmed the sharp delineation of the area swept out by the rays, assuming it was the method used by the killers.

Grun persisted in his opinion that it was a super-dimensional weapon of unheard of efficacy and that we must discover its secret at all costs.

I was not sure that he was on the right track. The scientists of Larsa leaned more to the theory that the unknown opponent merely took advantage of a natural effect. If this was correct, one had to conclude that the aliens were constantly on the lookout for an opportunity which suited their purposes.

After long conferences and exhaustive consultations with the scientists I was beginning to feel the strain.

I ordered the highest state of alert and a speedup of the robot brain's expansion as well as continually changing shifts for the experimental work on the cruisers Titsina and Volop. Their regular weapons were taken together with their energy aggregates by air gliders to the defence ring of the positronic brain to be installed against the expected attacks.

Finally I sequestered the 21 large transport ships in the hands of the local administration. The full-bellied, minimally armed vessels were stocked with food and made ready to lift off so that no time would be lost in case it became necessary to evacuate the 2 million colonists. I had already experienced many times before how difficult it was to bring big crowds of excited and frightened people to safety.

The district chiefs of the colonial government were advised by radio to prepare everything for an instant flight. However I was bothered by the question of how to squeeze 2 million people in 21 spaceships under perilous conditions. The various vessels could accommodate by utmost utilization of space between 10 and 20,000 passengers if they were herded into machine halls and other service rooms.

I fell asleep and when I woke up I sent a long hyperradio message to the Great Council, describing the situation as vividly as possible. In turn I received the prompt decision from the Arkonide Central Command. I was directed to send immediately 1.8 million emigrants to Arkon and to retain the remaining 200,000 on Larsa who would be sufficient to preserve its budding civilization.

I had expected to create something of a revolt and I was amazed how eagerly the settlers snatched up the available space on the ships. Nobody wanted to be left behind in the jungle of uncertain fears and I was glad when 50 huge transporters arrived 3 days later.

It took only 12 hours to load the ships. They soared into space and I never saw them again. A count of the remaining population was taken. It showed that no more than 15,000 immigrants had refused to abandon their new domicile. All others had preferred to join the service of the Imperial Fleet. At least it was possible to see the battleships of the methane-breathers.

We were already resigned to giving up a prospering colony. The defence battle in the nebula sector was of prime importance and the tiny system of Larsa's star was negligible and expendable in the eyes of the Central Command.

However I had received personal orders from the Emperor to seek out the mysterious enemy and to learn the nature of his unique weapon because it could decide the fate of the war under the conditions that prevailed.

8/ ALIEN ATTACK

Larsa could no longer be held! After we had futilely waited 3 months for an attack, it had struck so abruptly that nobody was able to react in time. I was in the Command Centre of the Tosoma. 2 minutes earlier we had received the radio alarm that an invisible destructive front was approaching the equatorial zone, where the main centres of population were located, at a velocity of 3000 kilometres per hour.

I had taken off at once to witness the incredible events on the spot.

The terror-stricken colonists virtually fought to climb aboard the 21 transport ships on the spaceport of Amonaris. It was the same chaos I had seen all over whenever people feared for their lives.

We still had a little time left. The relativity-field front was still far away and it was possible that it would change its direction. Nevertheless I had given orders for the final evacuation of all inhabitants. The time had come to leave the planet to the military forces of the Empire. The possibility of re-establishing the colony at a later date still existed since the cities and settlements, which had been built with so much effort, were not likely to be annihilated.

We were fully geared for battle. The powerful protective screen of the warship caused the

atmosphere of the planet to become steamy. We proceeded toward the scene at the slow speed of only 3 kilometres per second. I had taken the precaution of setting the thrust absorbers at emergency range in case we would be forced to flee at maximum acceleration.

The Askohr and the Paito followed the flagship at a low altitude. Capt. Cerbus, who was in temporary charge of the commanders stationed in outer space, reported monitoring by hypersensors some foreign objects which could not be clearly identified but moved only in the sector determined by us to be an energy-field.

I instructed him to await further developments and to avoid entering the danger zone.

Meanwhile we watched the telecom aboard the Tosoma, exchanging messages with the officials of the Administration and the fleeing settlers as well as with the taskforce standing by on Amonaris.

My men were trying desperately to help the frantic settlers to reach the transport ships whose Commanders had given the strictest orders to leave before the wave of destruction came close enough to be hazardous.

I left the rescue operation to the officers on the ground. There was nothing I could do to alleviate the tumultuous conditions. It was my duty to flush out the enemy and to confront him in an attempt to repulse him successfully.

A short time later our supra-dimensional energy-sensors picked up a signal. We had received these sensors only a few months earlier from one of the spacefleet depots of the Empire because the methane-breathers had developed a defence shield, working with supra-dimensional forces. These instruments reacted proficiently as we approached the danger zone.

Tarth calmly issued precise commands. The machines of the Tosoma were stopped. A short backward thrust held the vessel at a spot 5000 meters high. The antigrav-absorbers performed their function quietly and adequately. Our gigantic sphere of Arkon steel stood still as if it were beyond the influence of gravity.

"Optical effect of wavefront observed," the rangefinder officer reported. "There are bizarre light reflexes in the atmosphere. Velocity of front computer at 3011.567 kilometres per hour constant."

I leaned my head back to look up to the wide screens of the optical receiver.

"Fantastic!" Grun exclaimed, his eyes shining feverishly. "I admit that this effect does not give the impression that it is caused by a weapon, Your Highness."

I thought grimly how little consolation his conclusion offered to the pioneers who were still in the danger zone. We seemed to be flying over an impenetrable jungle. The magnification of our optical instruments revealed a few small settlements but we were unable to determine if their inhabitants were still there or not.

The Paito and the Askohr inquired by radio whether they had permission to open fire.

"No, not yet," I rejected their request. "It would be senseless to shoot into the wall. Let it come a little closer." Then I called the remote control centre. "Did you send up the Volop and the Titsina?"

"They took off 2 minutes ago, Your Highness!"

"Keep them in the vicinity of Amonaris. They might be our last means of defence. Attention battlecruiser Paito! When will the evacuation of the colonists be completed?"

The telecom switched to a rocky clearing in the jungle where more than 500 people had gathered. They were scrambling to get into a few antigrav-gliders that might have had just enough power to escape the approaching forces of destruction if they made an all-out effort.

"At your command, Your Highness!" Inkar replied. His 500-meter ship zoomed in without delay. The front was only a few kilometres away and would reach our position in about 10 minutes.

Inkar tried at first to get the fighting settlers aboard in a small auxiliary ship. I could hear his angry curses when the little ship was stormed by the furious-looking men.

"Get back to the ship, Inkar!" I shouted into the mike. "Use a wide tractor beam to haul these madmen aboard. A few black & blue bruises will be better than letting them perish in their madness."

The Paito shot a shimmering tractor-beam from its projector, fanning it out over a broad field. The terrified colonists ran back toward the jungle but they were scooped up by the beam and pulled in with such force that I was afraid they might get hurt. On the other hand, Inkar had probably set up a barrier to cushion the shock.

The dark bodies disappeared in the intake of the battle cruiser and I soon heard Inkar's loud guffaws. "I've got them," he announced, "but we also picked up some stuff we didn't bargain for."

Tarth chuckled while his eyes stayed glued to the forward observation panels which clearly depicted the fluorescing mass of air in the way of the approaching disaster. It looked as if the radiation-or whatever it was-came vertically down from the space above. My cruiser commanders reported that this time the entire northern hemisphere of the planet would be caught in the relativity field.

"We're on the borderline of a cosmic zone," Grun pointed out from his department where he had meanwhile returned although it had escaped my notice.

"Very interesting!" I said in an irate tone. He ignored it and continued: "It can only be caused by overlapping the normal universe with unstable, continually changing forces of a higher order and this is what produces the amazing effects. Creatures of this relativity zone take advantage of the situation to..."

"To do what?" I interrupted him. "To steal people and animals? What good will that do them? It would make more sense if they destroyed industrial plants, captured spaceships or looted some valuable products. It's hard to understand, unless they're bent on extinguishing the intelligent life of our universe."

Grun switched off. His face showed that he was vexed and was at a loss to give me any advice. Perhaps our antagonists' actions were based on their own inherent principles which were totally alien to the human race. The idea of abducting thinking individuals would never have occurred to us. Their behaviour was utterly incomprehensible to me. I was thrown into a raging fury by our helplessness. We were fighting against shadows.

10 seconds later I gave orders to commence firing. We accelerated our speed to align our ships with the advancing field and unleashed all the weapons we dared use. Tarth first turned on the heat with the impulse-cannons. Their highly effective nuclear reactions created solar temperatures in the wake of their violet light tracks which brought the atmosphere of the jungle world to a boil.

We shot into the shimmering wavefront as if we were trying to wipe out several attacking super-spaceships with one blow. The disintegrator-cannons, which blasted molecules apart, generated less noise and their flickering trajectories buried themselves in the blazing wall.

We didn't dare to deploy our neutron-beamers as they destroyed all organic life and we were afraid we might kill our own people. Arkon and gravitation bombs were suited only for long-distance fights in outer space. If we had used them here, any further defence of Larsa would have been superfluous since the planet would have been turned into a blazing sun.

Thus we were restricted to applying our impulse-cannon whose fire-breathing atomic energy ignited an inferno in the dense atmosphere. But when the devastating energy-rays struck the wall, they were suddenly swallowed up. They seemed to pass through or were absorbed so perfectly that they were snuffed out from one moment to the next. It had become impossible to recognize the landscape of the swampy planet behind the shimmering frontal wall. The light was distorted and our sensors no longer reflected the view. The hypersensor merely registered the existence of an unknown energy form of which we had already become aware earlier.

The moist air of the planet had become heated to such a degree that the highly pressurized water vapours threatened to burst into a terrible explosion. I decided to break off our engagement in the face of the brewing storm.

Holding the mike close to my lips I commanded: "Squadron Chief to all units! Cease fire, resume speed and follow the flagship on course to the capital which will be taken under protection as long as possible. We will safeguard the departure of the passenger ships. Finally we'll start the experiment with the 2 remote-controlled cruisers. Confirm!"

The roar ceased. The Tosoma gained high speed so quickly in the experienced hands of TARTH that the air of Larsa began to glow again. The battlecruisers were a few kilometres north and south of the flagship. We had been unable to stop the advance of the shimmering relativity field with our bombardment.

We didn't know whether we had maimed or perhaps killed the living beings inside the region. We had blindly shot at an energy form which could not be simply 5-dimensional. We had been familiar with such effects since our invention of ultra-light-speed spaceships.

The wall continued its sweep across the planet. When our roaring engines slowed down over Amonaris, we had barely 30 minutes left. Capt. Cerbus, who now was Chief of the cruiser formation, reported troubling news: the entire space surrounding the yellow sun and its planets had gradually come under the influence of the intruding powers. Planets, which were in opposition to #2, were undoubtedly haunted by the same menace, the difference being that no intelligent life existed there.

To my greatest relief the 3rd world stood exactly on the opposite side of the sun so that my people on Atlantis were, for the time being at least, not exposed to an immediate danger.

There were only 3 spaceships left on the spaceport of Amonaris. The other ships had already taken off in desperate flight. Those who had failed to follow our orders to evacuate had probably perished in the primordial forests.

The last freighters zoomed up through the tempestuous air when the radiation of the approaching wavefront was already visible to the naked eye. Inkar picked up a few more people who were still

running around in panic on the abandoned spaceport, waving frantically up at his ship.

Then we were ready for the next operation. I summoned Grun and his assistants to the Command Centre and asked them to observe the results of the impending confrontation on the huge screens.

The cruisers Titsina and Volop, painstakingly converted to remote-controlled drones, still hovered above the broad landing field. All but one of their engines had been reconstructed to serve as weapons. Now it was of prime importance to find the weak spot of the adversary.

The remote-control engineers sat in the adjacent rangefinder section where they could watch the measurement transmissions of the cruisers' instruments.

I waited for the front to come within 40 kilometres before I gave orders to intercept it with a barrage.

Grun had leaned his contour chair back in order to follow the entire proceedings on the gigantic observation panels.

The modified engines of the empty ships launched the barely visible, spatially superimposed impulse-waves which derived a higher form of energy from the total transformation in the powerful converters. They shot out with the absolute speed of light but affected normal matter only when a ship was about to land or to start with engines running at full speed.

I noticed a flash when the impulse-waves collided with the relativity field. Grun shouted excitedly and I rose up from my seat to watch the weird phenomenon closer.

"They're breaking through!" TARTH bellowed and kept repeating: "They're breaking through!" Suddenly a whoop and a holler emanated from the intercom of the battleships as if pandemonium had broken out in an insane asylum. I joined the noisy jubilation. A load had been taken off our minds. We felt freed from a curse.

The titanic energy-shield collapsed where the highly concentrated impulse-waves struck against it. They ripped gaping holes with ragged edges, suddenly creating a dark abyss behind the wall. The structure began to waver around the point of impact and it seemed that it veered somewhat from its steady course.

Nothing could be recognized in the pitch-dark void. An eerie violet fire danced around the edges of the hole and caused our warp-sensors to swing wildly. The effect we had produced with our impulse-shot definitely resembled that of a transition.

The next moment we spurted away. The torn wavefront had lost no speed. Only at the point where our fire had converged did it look as if it had been brought to a standstill. The frazzled holes were propagated along with the wall.

Just before the Tosoma pulled away with whining machines, I took a last look at the 2 clearly visible cruisers. The power of their remaining engine was sufficient to drive them out of the danger zone with ease.

As soon as we had put a distance of 50 kilometres between ourselves and the danger zone, I demanded silence. "Squadron Chief to remote-control station! Make the tail of the cruisers swing back & forth and sweep the wavefront with a bombardment. Determine where the maximum effect is obtained and adjust movement accordingly."

The remote-control officer skilfully made the Titsina oscillate in a slow motion. Gradually the old ship turned around its transverse axis as it performed the directed manoeuvre. It had been built before the spherical shape of the modern ships had been adopted and we could clearly see the action as it spewed its rays. Soon the Volop followed the manoeuvre.

Seconds later the legendary past of my ancestors came alive again. An awesome energy-hurricane was touched off by the devastating force of the sprayed-out impulse-bundles. Black craters, ringed by flashes, were formed, then overlapped by still intact formations until these wave-planes were also smashed.

The surging wall was halted in front of us as far as I could see. However it still moved on left and right. We stared into a dark chasm but nothing else happened. I continued our operation against the wall, covering half the planet, to the point where it no longer made sense to riddle the energy structure with dark tunnels no matter how much we enjoyed seeing it punctured and lighting up the rims.

We zoomed up through the atmosphere swirling in a tremendous storm and reached the space above the 2nd planet where we found that the heretofore-yellow sun now was shining red as blood.

Soon we discovered that the starry void was no longer as empty as before but contained gigantic, luminous reddish energy-agglomerations in the shape of funnels. Wherever these phenomena appeared, the light of the distant stars was blotted out, which enabled us to take accurate measurements of the transfigurations. They tapered down and ended in the lightning-streaked atmosphere of Larsa. We had created something we could not have anticipated since it was beyond imagination.

I stared uncomprehendingly at the observation screens till I became aware that a radio officer was urgently calling me, which shook me out of my stupefaction.

It was truly incredible what our bombardment had accomplished. I toyed with the idea of converting the propulsion engines of the modern cruiser's as well as some of the heavy impulse-converters of my battleship. If we were to meet the invisible spaceship again in the future, the scales would be decidedly tipped in our favour.

Tarth began to shout. His eyes were filled with horror.

"What's the matter?" I cried.

At the same moment the expressionless mechanical voice of the sensor-robot began to intone: "Cruiser formation no longer answers. Energy-echo negative. Capt. Cerbus remains silent. No metal registered in a radius of 3 light-years. Formation must be considered lost as of 6-6-5 standard time. End of message."

The rasping robot voice shut off. I stared dumbfounded about the room. Tarth collapsed in his commander seat and buried his face in his hands. Grun moaned pitifully.

I was unable to utter a sound. My dazed mind refused to accept the impassive report of the robot as fact. My entire formation of cruisers was supposed to be missing? All the ships I had commanded in the most valiant battles of our history and had brought home virtually undamaged?

I heard a loud scream but it was I who had yelled. The radio officer on duty rushed into the Command Centre and I stared blankly at him till I realized that he was the one who had called me so

urgently. He had already done what I wanted him to do. He must have been the first to notice that the Chief Commander of my cruisers failed to respond.

My throat felt as if it were choked by invisible hands. No one in the Great Command Centre of the speeding Tosoma uttered a word. The screens of the energy-detector showed only 4 green points, the 2 battleships and the 2 converted warships, a total of 5 units left out of the former 45 vessels.

"Call again!" I whispered with a choked voice. "Hurry up! TARTH, this can't be true. CERBUS has told us in his last message that they kept a respectful distance from the clearly recognizable wavefront. How can they disappear all of a sudden?"

I paid little attention to the medical officers whose robots carried out GRUN. The physicist had fainted, the shock had been too much for the old man.

"This message came shortly before the warships commenced firing," the commander said, depressed. "ATLAN, the whole fleet perished. One of these funnels spread out at the place where the fleet was ordered to wait in a wedge formation. The funnel has a diameter of about 20 million kilometres and CERBUS landed in the middle of it with his cruisers. It's simple terrible. We won't hear anything further from CERBUS."

One of GRUN's physicists verified the facts on the basis of the first results of their observations.

I gave orders to brake our high speed and sent the heavy units on a search mission. After scouring interplanetary space for a full 3 hours to locate drifting wrecks and broadcasting uninterrupted radio signals, we realized that it was all in vain.

I felt burned out and I had lost my voice. My brain seemed to suffer from a debilitating pressure. The catastrophe which had befallen us was too gruesome to contemplate.

TARTH and a physician led me to my cabin and helped me to recover. Now I knew what we had done with our impulse-fire. It probably was only by blind accident that, of all places, the formation of cruisers happened to be at the exact spot where the wavefront was torn asunder in a virtual explosion.

I clung to a last hope that my men were still alive. But the fact that not one of the ships could be found spoke against it. It was the first time that the relativity field had also absorbed non-organic matter.

Almost entirely bereft of my senses, I gave orders to fly to the 3rd planet and to land at our base on Atlantis. Now I was glad that I had permitted this beautiful world to be settled by us 2 years ago. The 2nd planet of LARSA's system had become completely useless to us. The supra-dimensional zone continued to encroach on it. In any event, we had left our big robot brain and its formidable defences behind. Perhaps we could use them again later on.

I sent everybody out of my cabin and laid down to rest. I needed all my willpower to regain my self-control. The faces of my cruisers' officers passed before my eyes. They had been the cream of the crop, all excellent men who were direly needed in our desperate war against the methane-breathers.

4 hours later we touched down on the greatly expanded spaceport of Atlantis. My planning officer Capt. FELTIF received me in silence. I put my hand on his shoulder without a word and greeted the men of his small defence troop he had lined up for me.

Then I looked around. ATLOPOLIS, the new centre of the colonial planet, had already grown into a

regular city, It was amazing what Feltif's men and the 50,000 Zakrebian emigrants had made of the little continent in the comparatively short time.

A few of the natives were standing in the background. They wore colourful garments adorned with shells and had put bright feathers in their hair. They came closer, sliding on their knees, raised their hands and spread out some gifts before me.

I was delighted to see their sincere faces and their bright eyes which showed considerable intelligence. These savages were capable of giving birth to a great race.

Capt. Feltif acted as military governor. He put his residence at my disposal and later presented documentary films of his achievements.

He had only 2 more transport ships available. They were stationed on the bottom of the ocean and could be brought to the surface any time by a simple radio signal.

The following morning I conducted a detailed briefing on the latest episodes for the benefit of the anxious colonists.

Then Feltif took me on a tour of the improved fortifications and asked me cryptically to go on a little trip with him. His secretive smile made me very curious. I was still baffled when he took me down to the harbour where a special landing ship of the Imperial Fleet was anchored next to primitive vessels powered by oar and sail. These landing ships were designed to facilitate operations on planets with many waters. They could travel through air and under water but were not equipped to fly in outer space.

We went aboard and began to dive under the surface. A luminous energy-field held the masses of water back from the flat elliptical hull. At a depth of about 100 meters a wide undersea plateau came into view below our bright searchlights. A bluish cupola of Arkon steel rested on the plateau. It was big enough to admit a vast number of colonists.

"This is our emergency shelter, Your Highness," the engineer explained matter-of-factly. "The diameter is 120 meters and it is built to withstand extremely high water pressure. It is equipped with all the machines and instruments which could be spared on land in addition to those which we were able to retrieve from Larsa. The shelter is served by a crew of robots and is stocked with abundant supplies of food in concentrated form. There are large flood chambers in the dome. The rock underneath the refuge has been excavated and sprayed with Arkon steel by a thermal high-pressure process. Finally it was welded to the periphery of the hull so that the entire structure consists of a solid unit which exposes only a hemispheric cupola. Our static calculations have proved that the construction can withstand any predictable stresses and is capable of absorbing unforeseen shifts that might occur in the ocean floor. If necessary we can accommodate 10,000 refugees in the sphere."

"But you'll have to take care of 50,000 colonists and your soldiers," I pointed out. "Where are you going to put all those families?"

"I've already organized a program for them, Your Highness. 30,000 will be sent to the 2 southern continents. There are already some native civilizations flourishing in the eastern desert and in the mountains of the west coast. I've provided for the erection of stone fortresses and pyramid-shaped silos by robot commandos. In the event that a wavefront should arrive, it is unlikely to encompass the entire planet. Furthermore arrangements have been made for a warning system. By determining the propagating speed of the lethal zone we've found that it's feasible to escape in time by using simple airplanes. In this respect we're well equipped. Our emissaries will establish new settlements in the East and in the West.

However what we lack here most of all is the protection of a few warships."

Our submersible craft entered the undersea shelter through a huge flood-chamber. As I listened to the hum of the big pumps, I considered Feltif's wily suggestion. Naturally he would have liked to see us remain with him.

I was overcome by a burning hatred for the unknown enemy who was responsible for the irreplaceable loss of my best men. At this moment I decided to exercise my authority and to station the remnants of my once-powerful squadron on Atlantis. Here we had an opportunity for the further developments of our weapons. Perhaps I would even have a chance to crack the secret of the wavefront and gain the knowledge that would empower us to make short shrift of the methane-breathers.

To be honest with myself, I had to admit that the self-reproach and scruples that plagued me were the main motivations impelling me to stay away. The order issued by the Imperator was a convenient rationalization. After all, I did have instructions to get to the bottom of the problem.

After my thorough inspection of the excellently equipped undersea station the positronic brain was keyed to my Individual wave frequency. From then on I was in a position to gain admittance to the steel enclosure whenever the need arose. Beside myself only Feltif and 2 other officers were given the right to open the deadly energy barrier.

When we emerged again from our dive, I enjoyed the warm sunshine. The sun radiated once more a yellow-white light. The discolouration had lasted only 2 days.

My radio report to the Great Council didn't even elicit a mention of regret. The cruisers had been destroyed; that was it. I realized that the Imperium was in even worse shape than I had thought when the loss of 40 ships was accepted without a murmur.

This was so far the most obvious sign that we had entered the phase of total war where only cold figures mattered. The loss could be replaced by the Arkonide spaceship industry in half a day. On the 3rd planet of Arkon the biggest vessels were put together by robots on an extremely intricate assembly line. I had witnessed myself how a battleship of the Imperium class was finished in a mere 12 hours.

Now it was left to the individual commanders to pick a name for his new spaceship. Frequently they came up with identical names so that the ships were also designated by additional numbers. That way one knew which of the numerous Arkons or Posono's one was dealing with.

I was determined to undertake a methodical project of creating a new weapon. The converter-cannon Grun had originally mentioned fascinated me. If it were possible to generate a focalized warp-field at a target, it should bring about the total dematerialisation of the attacked object.

On Atlantis we had more incentive to tackle such a project, considering that we had experienced the effectiveness of such a weapon at the peril of our lives.

10 days after my arrival on Atlantis I transmitted a personal message concerning my intentions to the Imperator. I signed off with 'Crystal Prince' to make sure that my uncle received my communication.

Only a few hours elapsed before the hyperradio antenna of the Tosoma picked up the affirmative reply whose content was roughly: "Loss of cruisers is negligible. The new weapon is considered extremely important. You are to remain on Atlantis and spare no effort to solve the underlying causes of the unknown field's function."

This was all he needed to tell me. My scientists and technicians went to work together with those living in the colony. Grun had recovered again and he became the head of a research team that collaborated on a task for the ultimate benefit of the Imperium of Arkon 34,000 light-years away.

9/ MYSTERY OF THE "BODY" SHIP

Nearly 2 months had elapsed. Inkar and Taneth had continually taken their battlecruisers on dangerous missions to the 2nd planet in order to remove from its plentiful hoards all the goods so sorely needed on Atlantis.

I provided cover for their missions with my flagship. 3 of its powerful propulsion jets had been changed over to weapons as well as one engine of each battle cruiser.

We had scored our first success 3 weeks ago when we had registered a foreign object with our hypersensor. However the enemy had conducted only a minor foray in a small sector. After we had latched on to the ship with our new automatic targeter, it exploded in our intense fire in a rapid sequence of events.

The impulse-wave cannon had gouged a tremendous funnel in the relativity field. Then something happened which proved to be a valuable lesson for our experts.

The ship was invisible when we registered it. Then it was hurled through the tunnel, which glowed around the edges, as if shoved by a gigantic fist and we recognized it as a long black body. It was as clear as it never had been in another dimension. Its movements seemed to us extremely awkward and slow. The explosion had taken place after the spaceship had become visible.

I had accused the weapons officer of acting prematurely and threatened him with a court martial. Naturally I would have liked to capture the hostile ship but I was thwarted by his hasty action.

From then on all was quiet again and we had sighted nothing that looked like a vehicle of the prowler.

"They're afraid to get too close to us," Tarth had murmured grimly. Yet I held hope he would be

wrong. I wanted to know who was lurking out there.

* * * *

Exactly 24 days after the destruction of the long rod-shaped spaceship I took off again with my flotilla. We cautiously coasted to the 2nd planet in an attempt to install a switch unit we had prepared for the monitoring system of the robot brain on Larsa.

It was a 5-dimensional measuring device which was precisely tuned to the frequency of the wavefront. We needed an immediate warning when another transgression occurred.

I was deeply worried because the 2 planets neared each other more and more in their orbits and a total opposition was close at hand. If another raid were to take place at this particular time, the colonists on Atlantis would suffer also.

The natives had already been evacuated to the prepared fortresses. They were dispersed in such a manner that they could not be seized all at the same time. At least we still assumed for our own comfort that the purpose was merely the abduction of intelligent beings although we failed to see the logic of their reasoning.

The 2 remote-controlled cruisers were now directed by an auxiliary vessel of the battleship. We could no longer afford to venture too close to the enemy with the last 3 fighting units, especially since our manoeuvrability was diminished by the conversion of some of the propulsion jets.

I ordered the battle cruisers Paito and Askohr to stand by in space. After I had determined that everything was peaceful on the 2nd planet, the Tosoma picked up speed and plunged into the dense atmosphere. We radioed the code signal to the big robot brain situated on the planet and landed at the high chain of mountains.

The energy dome of the brain was deactivated. My technicians were already waiting on the antigrav platform on which the switch unit had been loaded. If everything proceeded without a hitch, we could finish the installation in 10 hours. The airlock hatch-doors above the ring of engines were opened and the glider floated outside and quickly trailed off in the hazy air.

The formidable guns of the Brain were pointed menacingly up to the dense clouds covering the young world of jungles. Under normal conditions the automaton was well equipped to repulse conventional attacks and the passage of the wavefronts had so far had no detrimental effect on it.

The hours dragged on interminably. The technicians did a bang-up job at top speed and we followed their progress via telecom. There was no interference from outer space.

The commanders of the 2 battleships were required to send alternating code signals every 3 minutes. We trusted nobody and least of all the intruders who, presumably, were no denizens of our universe.

After waiting 8 hours something happened which I took at first to be another one of the creepy attacks. I noticed that I wasn't the only one who had heard the noise when I saw Tarth and the others in the Command Centre cock their heads.

We had the impression that an invisible caller was in our midst. However we heard no real sound. What we perceived seemed to originate in our subconscious minds and reached our brains as understandable thoughts without the aid of a spoken language.

Tarth stared at me in utter amazement, slowly retracting his finger from the alarm button. "Someone is calling you!" he said in disbelief.

"Yes, I know," I replied hesitantly, looking around with circumspection. What in the world could it be?

My name was repeated again, followed by a request which almost sounded like a command. A young officer took down in writing the message which had been conveyed in such an extraordinary fashion. It comprised only a few words and it was difficult to judge its true intentions.

The young lieutenant was visibly shaken when he came over and handed me the note without a word. I read: "To Atlan, the Arkonide Commander in chief. I'm not identical with your unknown adversary in the time zone. Take an auxiliary ship and proceed to my body. I'm going to wait 2 hours. If you fail to meet me it'll be your and your people's misfortune. I vouchsafe that no attack will occur during your visit in my body. Take your bearings as to my position."

As I perused the message my incredulity grew at its weird content. Nevertheless I was unable to laugh it off. My officers looked at me with anxious eyes.

"It's crazy," Tarth warned. "Somebody is using a ruse to entice you so he can get you into his clutches, Atlan."

I was dubious and the mental message was once more reiterated in our minds. It made the same request as before. I rose from my seat. The face of Capt. Zerg, our psycho-officer, appeared on the telecom screen. He requested permission to speak to me.

"Go ahead!" I said, outwardly composed and inwardly quaking.

"We're dealing with para-vibrations, Your Highness," he explained. "They resemble the impulses we produce with our psycho-beamers although they're much stronger. It's a purely mental transmission of concepts as used by some telepathic races. Although we don't possess these powers ourselves, their existence has been definitely confirmed by our research."

"Did you form an opinion about the meaning of the communication?" I inquired.

"It's inconclusive, Your Highness. However I'm quite certain that it didn't come from the same shadowy source we're fighting."

The sound coming from the loudspeaker in the radio centre caused me to interrupt our conversation. Capt. Zerg waved quickly and got off the screen.

The radio officer on duty switched the incoming call to my battle-station. It was Capt. Inkar reporting from outer space. His eyes glittered excitedly. "Inkar to Squadron Chief," he said swiftly. "Did the Tosoma receive an unusual request?"

"We did indeed," I acknowledged. "Were you able to locate the sender whom I'm supposed to

meet?"

"We've picked up the object with optical and sensor instruments," Inkar asserted. "It contains a great amount of metal other than Arkon steel. It looks like a spaceship, however its shape is asymmetrical. It's formed like a cube with numerous protrusions which are arranged in various positions over its surface. I've abstained from launching an attack against it."

I was undecided. Capt. Zerg entered the Command Centre with a few data cards in his hand.

"I request instructions, Your Highness," Inkar demanded impatiently. He obviously didn't relish the uncertainty and his powerful ship was probably all set to go into battle.

"How far away is that 'body'?" I inquired.

"It's hovering motionlessly in space at a distance of 1.5467 million kilometres which is well within range of a small impulse-cannon. This leads me to believe that we're not threatened by an attack. Nobody would be so foolish as to stand still before the guns of a battle-ready Imperial battleship."

"That's right!" TARTH chimed in without being asked.

"I want the Paito and Askohr to continue their observation patrol," I ordered. "Don't take any action unless the stranger commits a hostile act. I'm going to leave the Tosoma in an auxiliary ship. That'll be all!"

I would never forget the flabbergasted expression on Inkar's face as I switched off the screen.

"What good'll that do?" TARTH beseeched me excitedly. "I'm afraid you're falling into a trap. Why else would anybody call you from out there?"

Capt. Zerg, who was standing at a respectful distance from me and the old commander, spoke up: "Your Highness, I consider it virtually impossible that our ephemeral foes know your name and are informed that we belong to the fighting forces of the Great Empire. Whoever has entered the field knows exactly what is going on in this stellar system. According to the logical evaluation I've obtained, we don't have to fear an attack."

I was in a state of vacillation. My decision to obey the strange invitation from outer space seemed to be absurd again. "When will our technicians be finished with their job?" I asked.

"In about 2 hours," came the reply from the mountain cave of the positronic brain.

At the same moment we perceived the message from the depth of space once more. The unknown, or unknowns, persisted in the tenacious effort.

For a while TARTH maintained his silence. He had been a devoted servant of my family for many decades and was deeply concerned about my well being. After studying me intently, he suddenly broke his silence. "Well, you might as well take off. I know you're itching to go. However I insist on one condition: the Tosoma must not remain here on the planet. The Askohr under Taneth can take over the protection of the technicians on the ground. The battlecruisers are no longer fast enough to cope with all emergencies."

TARTH's suggestion bucked up my confidence. I was severely troubled by the remark that my failure to respond to the unknown's demand would only worsen the fate of my people.

I issued my instructions and waited till then. Askohr emerged from the atmosphere and touched down next to US. The engineers working in the fortress were advised to discontinue their efforts at the first sign of danger and to flee into space aboard the battlecruiser.

Then I was ready. The urging of the stranger grew unbearably intense inside my head. The increasing insistence was communicated by a gradual reinforcement of the impulse signals.

The Tosoma leaped out of the glowing atmosphere of the 2nd planet and into the glaring light of the sun which loomed much larger here than seen from Atlantis. A few seconds after we had left the stratosphere, our rangefinders picked up the first image. Fascinated, I stared at the 3rd screen of the ultra-light-speed hypersensor.

I saw merely an outline of an irregularly shaped dark body which was suspended motionlessly in space. If it was a ship it was certainly the oddest configuration I had ever seen. The construction was asymmetric and the numerous protrusions jutting out from its surface gave the impression of being bulky isolators, armoured turrets or measuring instruments for some kind of energy units.

"Hold your horses!" I admonished Tarth, who was trying to get a few 100,000 kilometres closer.

The old man gave me a disgusted look before he started to laugh. "Listen, Atlan," he growled. "I've rocked you on my knees and taught you how to fly a spaceship. The Emperor has appointed me as your guardian and I protect you with my life. If anything happens to you out there, I'll turn this part of the cosmos into a pile of junk. I'm going to wait exactly one hour, Atlantis time. If you fail to return by then, I'll take action. Should that thing over there make the slightest move to get away with you, I'll be at its side in an instant transition."

"Wait and see. I don't have the feeling that they'll give me trouble. Now will you please get an auxiliary ship ready for me?"

"Already done," Tarth replied. "I knew you wouldn't listen to my advice."

I put on a spacesuit containing air, water and food for 48 hours and checked all its equipment. Everything functioned perfectly. Then I took the elevator down to the huge hangar of the Tosoma. The little elliptical impulse gadabouts were barely 8 meters long and only half as wide.

I slipped through the tiny airlock and turned on its air and warm up system. Its perky engine began to hum. They were capable of reaching the velocity of light in less than 2 hours, which was more than adequate for the requirements of a rescue ship.

Tarth inspected the little impulse-cannon mounted in the ship. It was ready to be fired. All was shipshape on board the Tosoma as usual.

"Attention all ships!" I called into the mike of the hyperradio. "Refrain from intervening on my behalf unless given orders to the contrary. Keep calm if you don't hear from me during my visit to the alien spaceship. In case of emergency, I expect to rely on the protection of my spacesuit's energy field projector. Ready, Tosoma?"

I listened to the sucking noises of the vacuum pumps. Then the door of the airlock rolled back and I was ejected by the magnetic catapult whose sudden push was absorbed by the counteraction of the thrust-absorber so that I was kept from feeling the severe shock.

I soared into the spacious firmament. The Tosoma became quickly unrecognizable to the naked eye and in a few moments it disappeared as a dark, shapeless speck.

I reflected on the recklessness of a manoeuvre that would bring a spaceship within the range of the Tosoma's devastating firepower. I would never have taken such a chance. Whenever I approached an unknown vessel I always kept in motion in order to be prepared for an evasive move by a quick thrust of energy.

I accelerated quickly toward the mysterious object, pondering at the same time the meaning of its commander's peculiar request to 'appear in my body'. Moreover, I suddenly realized that I had not been asked to come alone. On the other hand no mention was made of anybody else either.

My nerves were on edge when I coördinated the directional beam of the hyper-transmitter with the echo-sensor. When the light turned green, I put the mike to my lips. I had not yet flipped down my space helmet. "Admiral Atlan, Chief of the 132nd Imperial Taskforce, to alien ship! I received your message and have consented to meet with you. I am alone and will arrive in 10 minutes."

I listened intently to a response which came in the form I had expected. The unknown sent me a telepathic message again. I've spotted you. Shut off your engine. I'll bring you safely into my body.

There it was again, the same ambiguous expression. Naturally I would enter the spaceship but why did the commander call it his "body"? Those people seemed to have very strange concepts.

My curiosity grew immensely as I obeyed his instructions to cut off the engine. A few minutes later I noticed a gentle pull and the dark hull of the spaceship soon loomed in front of me. I realized that I had undergone a miniature transition and my hitherto unconscious respect grew by leaps & bounds. The technique demonstrated to me was something which the Arkonides had not yet achieved.

I took time out to keep the men on my ship abreast of the developments in order to assuage the anxiety they must feel.

"Sheer madness!" TARTH's voice boomed in my receiver. It was a favourite expression of his. "Remember, this is precisely the weapon we're trying to get."

As if I didn't know! It was the first idea which had occurred to me when I felt the slight pull. At that moment I had thrown all my mental reservations against the unknown overboard. I had experienced a controlled dematerialisation and if we succeeded in duplicating the method, the war against the methane-breathers was bound to take a turn for the better.

Suddenly a bright round spot of light appeared before my eyes. It was the sharp outline of an opening in the hull which invited me to enter its light, although I heard nothing from the commander.

I was gradually pulled into a bare-looking metallic room. The door was closed behind me and some air began to fill the room. Then I received the next information. I'm providing you with a mixture of oxygen and helium. There's no gas pressure inside my body.

This contributed to my bafflement. I reached nervously for the switch of my radio transmitter but on second thought abstained from calling my flagship. TARTH was too jumpy. If he did something foolish, all could be lost.

I took a sample of the air and put it through the automatic analyser. I got the green light in 4 seconds so that I was able to breathe the artificial atmosphere. Then I opened the cabin door and climbed out. The impulse-weapon in my belt gave me a feeling of confidence. Instinctively compensating for the weak gravity I moved slowly toward the inner door which slid back before I walked through.

I had expected to see some people but there was nobody around. The long corridor was only dimly lit. There were humming and whirring noises all around me. It sounded as if billions of insects were busy building their hives.

Guarding my steps, I walked through the corridor. My mounting apprehension left me only when I perceived the voice coming from within again. Welcome, Atlan. You're now in my body. I know your thoughts. This is a robot spaceship without a live organic crew. I'm a compact control unit operating in space and equipped with every device my creator considered to be useful, including superior force for combat. Turn left!

I was stunned. So this was the solution of the puzzle! A robot who was, for all purposes, identical with the entire ship could very well speak of receiving me in its body.

I entered an antigrav-field which carried me upward where I emerged from an opening in the floor and found myself in a large circular hall with an arched ceiling. It contained a confusing array of innumerable instruments with countless rows of pushbuttons which impressed me deeply. The ship seemed to carry on a mechanical life of its own.

I stood still in the middle of the room because I was afraid I might touch some high-voltage conductors. They evidently worked with extremely high-energy values and I failed to see shielding installations which apparently were unnecessary for robots.

The next thing that happened was done in such a casual manner as if I had encountered a fleeting acquaintance.

"I've been instructed to give you a micro-activator for the regeneration of your organic cells. You're free to use it or not. You may do whatever you wish. The device can prevent your natural aging process. If you wear it next to your heart you'll be biologically immortal, provided you suffer no external destruction. I repeat: you'll remain young and healthy and your life can only be terminated by accidents or violence. Take off your clothes and enter the apparatus in front of you. I'm going to attune the cell-activator to your individual cell frequencies.

This short and simple pronouncement was all the robotic ship bothered to make. As if in a daze I followed its instructions and stepped with bare feet on a shining metallic platform. A cap moved down and was placed on my head. I felt the not-so-painless jabs of needles making contact with my skull.

The entire procedure took about 2 minutes. Before the hood was lifted again, a mechanical hand of excellent precision put a small egg-shaped object on a fine but extremely strong chain around my neck.

I continually kept asking questions but received no reply until after I had dressed again.

My job is done. I'm not at liberty to answer all your questions. I can tell you only that my creator deems it beneficial to save the Arkonide race from annihilation. It'll be your duty to work for your people. He doesn't think it would be wise to let other creatures take over the Galaxy. In particular he doesn't approve of the invasion of the universe by creatures of the 2nd time-plane. You were given the cell-activator in order to enable you to take the necessary preventive measures. One word of caution: it is

possible that certain circumstances might cause an acceleration of the aging process. However you've been equipped to cope with such an eventuality. My creator has no intention to intervene further but he trusts you to act in accordance with his wishes.

This ended the strangest conversation of my life. The machine unceremoniously deposited me in the antigravitor. When I exited at the corridor below and started to run, I was stopped by a mechanical hand which popped out of the wall.

Then came the 'voice' of the robot again: I've received additional orders to let you have instructions for the construction of a weapon which your scientists call a converter-cannon. It is a method of generating an unstable field concentration of 5-dimensional character at any distant target area. As soon as the projector relinquishes the artificial concentration effect it causes a dematerialisation of objects inside the field zone. All details are contained in a magnetic spool. They have been expressed in Arkonide mathematical symbols so that you can use them directly. Good luck!

I was finally dismissed, picked up a small tube from the metallic hand and put it in my pocket.

For the first time I felt a stimulating wave flowing through my body. By the time I was back in my tiny ship, all fatigue and tension had disappeared and I had the impression of gaining new vigour.

The trip back to the Tosoma was accomplished by another miniature transition. After I went aboard I retreated to my cabin in order to avoid the curious questions of my officers.

Tarth announced via telecom that the alien ship had suddenly departed. "What happened?" he inquired. "Why don't you say something?"

I glanced at the little tube. It seemed to hold several visitapes like the ones we used. I had trouble focusing my thoughts. "Are the technicians done?" I asked.

"Are the technicians done!" Tarth echoed my words in amazement. "Of course. We've been waiting 18 hours for your return."

"18 hours?" I muttered.

"I thought there was something wrong," the commander exclaimed furiously. "You kept calling every 30 minutes that your talks were still in progress. I'd have waited only 2 more hours before busting in. What's going on?"

"Nothing," I evaded the answer, "nothing at all. The whole ship was nothing but a robot without a living person aboard. It must have had its own time. I didn't think I spent more than 15 minutes there at the most and I never called you either."

"Yeah?" Tarth shouted, still upset. "It was 18 hours. Are you alright? I'm going to send for a doctor."

"I'm okay, I think. I'm coming up."

When I entered the Command Centre, my officers stared at me as if I had come from another world. Tarth asked a few questions concerning matters unknown to anyone but me. Only then did he drop the idea that a monster in disguise had come aboard in my place. Finally he went back to his combat chair, cursing loudly on the way.

We landed on Atlantis without having encountered a trace of our shadowy foes. The ominous time of planet #2 & #3's opposition drew nearer and I prepared everything for the imminent evacuation.

Meanwhile the scientists studied the secrets of the spools and Grun told me jubilantly 3 days later that they had found the solution. This was the point in time when one of my trusty companions had to leave me. I summoned the commanders and ordered the captain of the Askohr to take the valuable data at once to Arkon and to hand them personally to the Emperor.

At the same time I took advantage of the opportunity to send 40,000 settlers back to Arkon in the 2 last transport ships despite their strenuous objections. It was my opinion that no more than 10,000 people should remain on Atlantis and I insisted on compliance with my wishes. Furthermore, I directed Capt. Taneth to take over the protection of the convoy.

3 weeks later the big spaceships departed on the long way home. Later on I learned that Capt. Taneth and the Askohr had been assigned to another admiral after completing their mission. They were thrown at once into the battle against the Methaners and were destroyed in a daring raid.

My repeated pleas to the Great Council for obtaining one of the new converter-cannons were ignored and I never received the weapon. However the Emperor requested me again to remain in the small system of Larsa's star and to try to solve the mystery of the wavefront.

In recognition of my efforts to secure the plans for the new weapon I was promoted to the rank of Fleet Admiral. However I received no additional ships. I was told that Arkon's resources were stretched to the limits by the war against the monstrous Aliens, already 3 years long and that each new ship was sent at once to the battlefield.

Therefore I was compelled to rely on the Tosoma and the battle cruiser Paito under Capt. Inkar. The deployment of the converted remote-controlled cruisers was severely restricted since they were too antiquated. They were so slow that it was extremely risky to commit them in a fight against a more mobile enemy. Consequently I issued orders to decommission the ships, to remove the converted propulsion engines and to install them as stationary weapons on Atlantis.

Together with the crew of my remaining units there were about 14,000 Arkonides left on the small continent which began to bloom under the diligent efforts of the pioneers. The 10,000 farmers from Zakreb 5 cultivated vast fields and taught the natives the art of agriculture. Our relations with the barbarians were excellent. We were never ambushed by them or suffered any other untoward incidents at their hands.

Eventually I gave Feltif permission to acquaint the indigents with metalwork and building crafts and he established our first schools on the 2 large southern continents east and west of Atlantis. In this manner we expanded the farthest base of the Great Empire.

During the coming weeks, Inkar and I flew numerous dangerous missions to the 2nd planet in order to remove as much as possible from its depots. I had only 2 powerful units left at my disposal and it seemed that their existence had been forgotten on Arkon.

It took considerable time till the converted engines salvaged from the 2 old cruisers had been mounted in the rocks of Atlantis. From then on we had 8 completely self-sufficient firing positions whose impulse-wave converters could make their presence felt if necessary. Of course their crews would have to be withdrawn to a safe area before they were inundated by another wavefront. Hence I held sufficient numbers of antigrav-glidors in readiness for the escape of the men in case we should be unable to repulse

the relativity field or tear it apart at least in some places.

Atlantis had become a fortress.

Finally we could afford to relax in the warm dry air high in the mountains and to explore the icy region of the north where we encountered more backward barbarians of the Stone Age. Although some of these tribes already lived in huts, others roamed the primordial forests in search of food. It was amazing how differently life had developed on the 3rd world of Larsa's star. Especially the northern people seemed to have endured many hardships for thousands of years.

On the seashores bordering a mountain farther south we erected sturdy huts on stilts for the convenience of primitive fishermen. Other than that, it seemed senseless to introduce the products of Arkonide technology to a population many of whom still lived in caves. It was better to let them develop by themselves.

We devoted our attention to the brown-skinned natives who had reached a higher stage of civilization and now began to build their first cities under the helpful supervision of the Zakrebian settlers.

We were highly pleased with our progress and remained undisturbed by the wavefronts which stayed in their own sector of space. We had long since determined that they were brought on by natural events that were manipulated by intelligent beings.

We settled down to wait for further developments and didn't expect another attack until the 3rd planet would be in opposition to Larsa-when the fatal decision was bound to occur.

10/ BACK FROM THE PAST

"Atlan! Atlan!" Someone was repeatedly speaking this meaningless word and shaking me by the shoulders at the same time. The insistent sound finally resolved into sense and, tired and weak, I struggled up to consciousness as from a deep drugged sleep as I recognized my own name.

The faces of the officers around me were blurred and indistinct.

"Admiral, wake up!"

Fingers roughly pressed my cheek.

"Tarth-is it you?" I stammered.

The voice that had been calling me stopped abruptly. When I heard it once more, it was speaking in a sharp tone. "We must stop delving into the past. From now on there'll be no more unnecessary questions and you'll restrict yourselves to finding out the results of his actions. Doctor, will you please take care of him?"

I was startled by the crisp commanding voice. Something pricked my arm and I felt a warm current vitalizing my veins. I heard the nearby breathing of a man and when he spoke it was in a foreign language-which I understood nevertheless.

It took me almost an hour till I finally realized I was no longer aboard the old Tosoma but in the mess hall of a super battleship called the Drusus. Whose commander was Perry Rhodan.

The stellar system discovered by Larsaf was now known as the Solar Empire and Atlantis-Atlantis no longer existed! Drowned 100 centuries ago, my men, dead 10,000 years. The Great Imperium, which I wanted so desperately to save, was in dissolution and a robot regent held the reins of power on my home planet Arkon.

Rhodan helped me sit up. I forced a wan smile. He said softly: "You'd have kept recounting the story of your past for hours if I hadn't brought you back to reality. I've heard enough. It's all ancient history. By the way, would you believe that I come from the north and those cavemen were my forefathers?" Then, solicitously, "How do you feel now?"

I fingered my cell-activator as it began its invigorating action. "It's still working," I whispered to myself, relieved. Then to Rhodan: "Do you understand why I can't tell you anything about the secret of eternal life? To this day I don't know myself what happened at that time."

"But I do," Rhodan asserted calmly. "Because I too have met your mysterious benefactor. The It that lives on the artificial world called Wanderer must be the one who gave you this gift. Although greatly amused by our human foibles and fond of uproarious laughter on such occasions, in the time of Atlantis he was probably upset by the emergence of the creatures from the 2nd time-plane. He must have considered you his military arm since he now exists only in non-material form. I'm very curious to learn how It reacts to the latest events, now that your shadows have returned. This time we're going to knock out their teeth-well, assuming shadows have teeth.

"OK-you need a rest. Your emotional return to the past was a little too taxing for you. By the way..." he paused for a moment, then continued with a smile, "now I've got a much better opinion of the Arkonides. Your Tarth must have been quite a guy."

"And so were all the others," I replied quietly with a reawakening pride in the heroic and glorious past of my people. "I wonder if they ever used that converter cannon?"

"I've seen old reports that mention a legendary weapon whose construction was lost and forgotten. The methane-breathers were beaten back and then thoroughly defeated. If the other admirals of the old Imperial Fleet were like you, they undoubtedly cut their enemies' worlds in the nebula sector into asteroid-sized chunks.-You better take it easy now."

I leaned back in my chair and looked up at the luminous observation screens. Here I was in space again, even if another man was plotting the course, picking the goal. But that man was Perry Rhodan and I realized that when one had said that, whether in my native Arkonese or adopted English, one had said something.