

1/ MENACE OF THE TIME FRONT

"SPACE AND TIME-we seem to have conquered them both."

"And yet we must not forget that, just 100 years ago, the idea of flying to the Moon ranked as sheerest fantasy in the mind of the average person. The feat was considered a science fiction fairy tale less than 30 years before the reality of lunar landing and the beginning of the stormy space development that brought us where we are in this year 2041.

"Thanks to the help of the Arkonides, leaps through hyperspace to stars thousands of light-years distant are no longer an impossibility. Space has been conquered and, with it, time as well.-Or at least, so we believed until recently."

The speaker paused for emphasis and fixed his gaze, each in turn, on the 6 men who sat opposite him on the long table. In their eyes he could read tense expectancy, excitement to learn the details of the mission as yet unknown to them. Perry Rhodan knew that he could count on these men and that they would unflinchingly attempt their mission even if it seemed absolutely impossible.

Next to Rhodan sat 2 other men. On his right, Reginald Bell, who had forced himself into much too small a seat for his physique. Nevertheless, he was at ease. His red hair bristles lay flat, evidencing that Rhodan's right-hand man was currently in a mood of rare serenity, for once in his life having nothing to be angry about. He looked about with friendly, clear blue eyes.

On Rhodan's left sat Atlan the Immortal. In his timeless eyes shimmered quiet pensiveness, as though he was searching his centuries-long memory for something that would answer all questions. But he had not found it yet.

"As you all know, we had unfortunately deceived ourselves," Rhodan continued, leaning forward almost imperceptibly in order to better grip and hold the eyes of the 6 men. "True, we mastered Space and Time in our own continuum of existence-but we forgot that there can be other planes. Indeed, we forgot that these planes could meet. And just that has occurred."

A rustling passed through his listeners; he waited till it subsided, then continued: "We are confronted by 2 time planes in the process of colliding. Clearly, such an event will not take place without unprecedented effects on both sides. Imagine our universe as a plane, somewhat like the thick disc of a galaxy. The time plane of the aliens looks similar but stands perpendicular in relation to us and moves slowly towards us. The aliens' plane is cutting through ours. Where that happens, all organic life disappears; becomes invisible in other words. Entire worlds are being stripped of their populations in this manner and it is no wonder the Robot Brain, the Regent of Arkon, has called on us for help and freely given us an equal partnership. Arkon and the Solar Imperium now stand together before a common enemy, which is bent on depopulating the entire galaxy."

Atlan moved slightly. Catching Rhodan's questioning look, he murmured: "Your men have found out that different time relations are in effect in the aliens' plane, right? Relative to us, time passes more slowly for them. Could that be the key?"

"The key-to what?"

Atlan shook his head slowly. "Don't ask me yet, Rhodan. I will speak only when I see my suspicions confirmed. I would like to give only one hint, however: your scientists have determined that time passes 72,000 times more slowly on the aliens' plane. That means that for them, only a few months have gone by since I arrived on Earth."

Rhodan looked inquiringly at Atlan. The immortal had been on Earth for more than 10,000 years. What connection was he trying to make? Atlan gave no answer. Not yet.

Rhodan turned again to the 6 men. "Marcel Rous and Fellmer Lloyd have succeeded in constructing a device that will enable one to penetrate the other time plane without any change in his own rate of time. In other words, he who enters the aliens' world will live and function just as he did before but will find that for his surroundings time moves 72000 times more slowly. We have named the device the Lens Field Generator and constructed the first experimental model. It will be installed in a Gazelle, whose generators will of course have to be accordingly augmented in supplying power. Besides the Lens Field Generator we have a second resource at our disposal: we can now positronically predict-with some degree of certainty-where the approaching time plane will next intersect ours. We suspect that the boundaries of the 2 planes are irregular and overlap in various places. We must find out if our suspicion is justified. You, gentlemen, will attempt to find out."

The 6 men looked at each other. Rhodan saw no terror in their eyes, only a happy surprise. All of those men had risked their lives for Rhodan and the Earth before. In the previous decades they had often found themselves having to fight against a living and very real enemy to defend the Earth. But this time the enemy was separated from them by a wall of time. However, the wall had holes.

"Lt. Rous will be leader of the expedition," Rhodan continued. "He is the only one among you who already has had some contact with the enemy. I am assigning the mutant Andr? Noir to the expedition, since he is a hypno and thus able to force the aliens to his will if necessary. I consider that of utmost importance, as we may be able to bring a prisoner back into our own time plane. Others taking part in the expedition are: Fritz Steiner, physicist and chemist; Ivan Ragov, biologist, zoologist and doctor; Fred Harras, technician and qualified mechanic; and finally, our Afroterranian meteorologist and metallurgist, Josua. Everyone knows each other, I'm sure. Liftoff is tomorrow with one of our heavy cruisers, which will take you to the star system in question. That will be all you need to know for now: I have no wish to spoil a night's leave in Terrania by weighing your minds down with the details. Are there any questions?"

Lt. Marcel Rous, a small, dark, nimble Frenchman, shook his head. He knew that there could be no questions for whatever was not known now would be revealed soon enough the next day. The other 5 men remained quiet as well.

Rhodan nodded, content, as though he had expected nothing else. "Thank you, gentlemen. We'll see you at about 10 tomorrow morning, half an hour before liftoff. Lt. Rous, please remain here: the others may go. And if I may give you a last piece of advice, don't get to bed too late. I don't know if you'll have time to sleep on the other time plane."

The hypno, Noir, grinned as he went out the door. The other 4 men did not reveal their feelings and simply left the room. Nights in Terrania were short. They wanted to take advantage of their last one and of course they hoped that it would not be their very last night ever.

Rhodan waited until the door shut then turned to Rous. "There won't be enough time tomorrow morning for discussing all the details so I had to ask you to remain here. You, as leader of the expedition, must be informed of what will happen tomorrow and what you will have to do in case the experiment is not successful. And that is unfortunately quite possible. Don't forget that the Lens Field Generator has yet

to be tested. It was constructed along the lines of the available calculations and we can only hope there wasn't a mistake in them somewhere. Our positronic calculations indicate that the next overlapping will take place in the system of the star Morag, and within the week at that. You are to remain in the immediate vicinity until then and witness the attack. You know the risk: there can be no return from the other time plane without the field generator. If you are overtaken without it, you'll be lost, for you will exist at a rate 72000 times slower than normal. Before you can even make a move for your freedom, months or years will have gone by. Never forget that a second of our time means 20 years on the other plane."

Atlan nodded slowly but said nothing.

Even Bell was quiet. He was rather happy that he would not have to take part in the expedition. When there was a tangible enemy to be dealt with, Bell was always on hand; but invisible, timeless creatures from another plane of existence...? Thanks, but no thanks.

"Please listen carefully," Rhodan continued, looking unwaveringly at Rous. "I'm going to give you some information that, depending on the circumstances, could mean the difference between life and death for you..."

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The sun was listed in the star catalogue under the name Morag, a yellowish-white star of virtually the same spectral type as Sol. The sun's 2nd planet was the size of Earth, possessed a breathable oxygen atmosphere and had a somewhat heavier gravity than Earth's. Its slightly lesser distance from its sun meant a hotter and drier climate than Earth's, although a goodly portion of its surface was covered by oceans. The areas along the coasts certainly had no need to complain of lack of rain: the vast jungles were proof of that.

Morag's 2nd planet was named Tats-Tor and had been settled by Arkonides just 3000 years before. The discovery of rare and valuable ores made Tats-Tor an important trading centre for the ships of the Imperium. The freight-laden spacers of many races landed on and took off from the huge concrete field of the spaceport at Akonar, capital of Tats-Tor. The streets of the city swarmed with the bizarre creatures that an inexhaustible nature had brought forth on the various worlds of the galaxy.

The actual masters of Tats-Tor were the New Arkonides, as they called themselves.

And not without justification, as Marcel Rous was soon to find out. Outwardly they were indistinguishable from the proud and arrogant Arkonides living on the 3 worlds of Arkon, where the mightiest positronic brain in the universe ruled an interstellar empire. They were not only proud but incredibly conceited about their ancestry and they treated the members of other races with insulting condescension. For the sake of trade in the valuable goods to be found on Tats-Tor, one put up with it.

The Terra-class heavy cruiser materialized 2 light-hours from Tats-Tor and released a Gazelle. The small scout did not have the usual spherical shape but rather resembled a flattened discus 35 meters in diameter.

Hardly had the Gazelle reached a safe distance and set course for the still-distant planet when the

Terra dematerialised again.

It simply disappeared and left not only empty space but the feeling of boundless loneliness as well.

At least that was what Lt. Rous believed he felt, looking at the suddenly black video screen. The emptiness was broken only by the sparks of stars that gave life to hundreds of planets.

Zero hour. Now they were alone, left to their own resources. If the worst happened, no one would be able to help them.

And Rhodan had said that the worst would happen with 100% certainty within a week, Earth time.

Rous sighed and corrected the course with optical help. To win time he decided not to make a transition. Time for what? To prepare for a meeting with the New Arkonides, who would not have the friendliest or most pleasant characters?

"Nonsense!" he said aloud to himself.

Noir, coming just then out of the communications room, looked up. "What's nonsense? Certainly not our expedition?"

"Where do you get that idea, Andr?? On the contrary-I think our expedition is absolutely necessary, even despite the huge risk we'll be stranded in time. No, I was thinking only of the New Arkonides. They aren't going to be congenial companions at all."

"We've taken care of other beings before," said the hypno confidently. "If the New Arkonides aren't friendly, I'll make them friendly."

"Individually you can," said Rous, "but you can't bring the inhabitants of an entire planet under your influence. Let's wait and hear what the Arkonide settlers have to say about the forthcoming alien attack. Then we'll know what we can do and what we can't.

"Where are you planning to land?"

"On the field at Akonar, the capital. The planetary Administrator lives there and we have to bring him Rhodan's message. If anyone can help us on our mission, he can."

Fritz Steiner came into the control central and heard the last few words. In his somewhat exaggerated and blustering manner, he said: "What do you mean, support? If those boys don't want us, they can just be gobbled up by time for all I care. After all, we have our LFG."

Rous raised his eyebrows. "Our-what?"

Steiner laughed booming. "Our LFG! That's my abbreviation for the Lens Field Generator."

"Very clever," said Rous sarcastically, angry with himself for not having guessed the meaning of the abbreviation on his own. "And are you really convinced that the generator will function?"

"Aren't you?" asked Steiner. "It was constructed according to your data. Are you suddenly having doubts?"

"Not at all. I'm only being cautious, Steiner. The slightest error and we're lost."

"No one knows how it really looks behind the time barrier," Steiner emphasized, oddly calm. "The other plane must offer the same conditions essential to life as ours. If we can get over there, we ought to be able to get back. Have I made myself clear?"

"A man without hope is a man without a future," said Rous in agreement. "Yes, you've made yourself clear. Our views are more or less identical."

2 hours after the argument they landed at the spaceport of Akonar. They had been contacted by ground control and given the exact landing coordinates. Ground control did not seem to be interested in who they were-in any event, they had not been asked what their home planet was. The logical conclusion was that on Tats-Tor a brisk and, above all, peaceful traffic was the order of the day.

Rous had Steiner remain in the control central and follow them by way of the radio receiver. The lieutenant wanted to go with Noir and search out the Administrator to warn him of the threatening danger. The transmitter built into a ring on Rous' finger would keep Steiner constantly informed of what was said. If something unforeseen were to happen, he could intervene as necessary.

It was part of the atmosphere of an interstellar spaceport that no one concerned himself with the business of someone else. Rous and Noir wore improved Arkonide battlesuits under their spacesuits. They could make themselves invisible in case of danger, or fly or even project an energy field around themselves. The main thing was that their battlesuits would enable them to make a fast escape in case of a surprise attack by the invisible aliens.

An unmanned robot vehicle brought them into the city and dropped them off in front of the Administrator's palace. It had been enough just to tell the robot driver where they wanted to go.

Now, however, they ran across the first checkpoint.

The Administrator's palace stood just on the circular border of an area including the spaceport and the business quarter. Inside the zone there were no checkpoints and no barriers of any sort. Anyone could land his ship at the spaceport and move around as at will within the city without being asked his name or the name of his home planet. Only when he wanted to leave the closed-off area did he have to submit to an examination.

2 uniformed Arkonides-Rous recognized them by their white hair and reddish albino eyes-stood at a ray barrier, which was passable at only a few places. Naturally, it would not have been hard for the Terrans to break through the barrier with the help of their Arkonide battle-suits but that would not have been in keeping with the purpose of their mission. They calmly pulled thin metal strips from their breast pockets and gave them to the Arkonides.

The taller Arkonide took the standard Imperium identification strips from them while the other watched the 2 strangers attentively, evidently trying to classify them visually. He probably believed them to be descendents of the Springers.

"Home planet Terra?" demanded the first Arkonide, looking at Rous, who stood closest to him. "There aren't any coordinates for its position. The pass is invalid."

"If we'd only added false coordinates, we could have spared ourselves all this constant questioning whenever we land on a backward planet," said Rous in all calmness. "The coordinates are missing with

the agreement of the Regent, my friend. Isn't that enough?"

"Anyone can say that," persisted the Arkonide. "I'll have to make some inquiries before I let you pass. What do you want on Tats-Tor?"

"To find the Administrator and warn him of an imminent invasion."

The Arkonide stared at Rous in surprise while the other took an involuntary step backwards. "Invasion? Are you crazy...?"

"Do we look it?" Rous demanded in return. "So don't think that we undertook our long and wearying journey here just to be insulted by you. And if you still believe you have to make inquiries, hurry up about it. We don't have any time."

The Arkonide's surprise gave way to the usual arrogance. "You're going to wait for as long as I feel like making you wait, Terran! You'll never get into Akonar without our permission! Hey, Roph!" He turned to his colleague. "Call Central and televise them these Terrans' passes!"

Rous and Noir threw each other a meaningful glance, grinning in a restrained way, and prepared for a long wait. It would not be pleasant but at least afterwards they would be allowed to pass through the checkpoint without any difficulty. Once they were known, everything would be simpler.

The remaining Arkonide turned to Rous again. "So the position of your home world is not to be noted on your pass? That is rather odd. It's a general rule that every space traveller must carry a pass that clearly shows where his home planet is to be found. That's a security measure whose purpose you must surely understand. In the case of a crime, it's easier this way to-

"I've already told you that Terra is an exception. Haven't you ever heard of Terra before?"

"No, never," admitted the Arkonide. "When was Terra settled? You don't look much like Arkonides anymore."

The last words were pronounced to sound contemptuous. Rous suppressed his anger and stayed calm. "Terra has belonged to the Imperium for only a few months," he told the paling guard. "Well, even that isn't quite right, since up to now we've refused to be ruled by a robot brain-in case you're interested. But in order to avoid any trouble, we agreed to an equal partnership. But I don't know why I'm telling you all this. You don't seem to understand much of large-scale politics."

The Arkonide required 2 minutes to recover from his surprise. With suspicious eyes he regarded the 2 men standing calmly waiting at the barrier. "Partnership? What does that mean? There is only one ruling race in the Imperium and that's the Arkonides! I've never heard of any Terra."

"I'm not surprised," said Rous indifferently. "You've probably never even heard of the 3rd race, the one we're here to warn the Administrator about. -Now what is it? How much longer must we wait?"

The Arkonide hesitated for a second, then opened up a passageway. "Alright, come along. I believe you may pass through. Yes, here comes my colleague now. Well, Roph, what did Central say?"

"No one knows the position of Terra. Central is of the opinion that we should let the aliens pass through."

Rous took the passes back and gave Noir his. "We will probably have to pass through this barrier frequently during the next few days. I hope it won't always take so long. But, they're just doing their duty."

When Rous later thought back to this scene, he was surprised he and Noir had put up with such irritation. It would have been easy for Noir to place both guards under his will. But Rhodan's order was clear: the New Arkonides must be voluntarily ready to cooperate with you.

Normally it probably would not have been so easy for them to speak to the Administrator of the planet but the barrier guards had already reported the incident to the highest authorities. Before long, Rous and Noir were in the entrance hall of the palace, walking towards 2 dignified Arkonides wearing the uniform of the palace guard. There seemed to be value placed on tradition here.

"Are you the 2 Terrans?" asked one of them.

Rous was not unduly surprised that their arrival had so quickly become known. It was almost certain that the New Arkonides had never heard anything of Perry Rhodan but the thought that the Imperium could have an equal partner made them undoubtedly curious. "Yes, we are."

"The Administrator would like to speak with you. Follow me, please."

In spite of his polite form of address, the official could not hide his pride and arrogance. Rous was tempted to trip him as he went by but remembered in time the rules of his mission: no use of force, do not become overbearing or presumptuous, always remain patient.

Everywhere loitered idle servants who stared curiously at Rous and Noir. Noir could not resist the temptation of putting his ability to the test without anyone noticing.

2 or 3 officials, standing to one side, suddenly turned around and walked gravely away. Noir had given them the order to take a 5-day vacation. He knew that the Arkonides would obey the order without question, no matter what happened. No one would be able to explain the obstinacy of these few men who themselves did not know why they were doing it.

Rous smiled slightly as he noticed the incident but he hoped Noir would not be tempted to make further experiments.

The 2 Arkonides halted at the end of a wide corridor. "The Administrator awaits you behind this door. May I request that you lay your weapons-in case you brought any-here...?"

They had no weapons.

The door raised, giving free access into the next room.

Rous had expected some degree of luxury but in looking around he was pleasantly disappointed. The room was not very large and looked more like an electronics laboratory than an audience chamber. The walls were covered with videoscreens and their controls, and cables hung from the ceiling to disappear behind the various walls. Small intercom devices stood on 2 tables. Then it was from here that an entire planet was controlled; and Rous suspected that the Administrator could contact any point on Tats-Tor with the equipment to be found in the room.

The Arkonide himself sat behind a 3rd table. 2 empty seats stood in front of it. "Welcome to

Tats-Tor," he said in perfect Imperium-Arkonese. "I learned of your arrival from the barrier guards, although I must admit I have never heard of the planet Terra."

"You are the Administrator of a peaceful colonial world," answered Rous, standing next to Noir by the chairs. The Arkonide made no preparations to stand up. "If you were a Springer or belonged to the Imperium battlefleet, you would have certainly heard of us."

"What does that mean?" The Administrator remembered his etiquette and pointed to the seats in front of the table. "Please, sit down."

Rous and Noir glanced at each other as they sat.

"That means," Rous went on, "that we've had a dispute of considerable proportions with Arkon but that has since been settled. We are today equal partners with the Regent. The Administrator of the Solar Imperium, whose centre is the planet Terra, has made an alliance with your highest ruling authority in order to resist a powerful enemy. That's why we came here."

"Why to Tats-Tor?" demanded the Administrator. "You said yourself that we're a peaceful world which has nothing to do with the wars of the Imperium."

"That's true but even the most peaceful can't live in peace if their neighbours have other intentions. And the Unseen very definitely have other intentions."

"The Unseen? I don't know what you're talking about."

Rous took a deep breath and decided to say it in as few words as possible. He began to suspect that-in spite of the Administrator's politeness-it would be easier to come to terms with an enemy than with this smooth and slippery Arkonide. "An alien dimension is cutting through ours. Different relations of time are in effect in the other dimension. At those points where the 2 dimensions meet, all organic material and thus everything that's alive disappears from our field of vision. As of today, we have been unable to bring back any of those who have disappeared."

"Very interesting," interrupted the Arkonide without any trace of emotion. "Unfortunately, I've never heard of this phenomenon before."

"That isn't surprising," Rous explained to him. "The Regent decided it would be best not to panic the Imperium. Also, it was never before possible to predict an imminent attack. The aliens simply moved in and there was no defence."

"And why, then, do you come to Tats-Tor and babble the Regent's secrets?"

Rous answered simply. "Because according to our calculations, Tats-Tor is the next planet in line to be rolled over by the time boundary."

The Administrator looked at Rous in disbelief but showed neither excitement nor especial interest. "So? You've come to warn us, then?"

"You could say that."

"Why? What point is there in it for you? Why give us a warning at all if there aren't any means of defence?"

Rous was disappointed by the Administrator's questions. "It's our intention to develop a weapon against the time-aliens but we lack the experience. That's why we came to Tats-Tor. We wanted to carry out our experiments here and for that we need your permission. You surely would have no objections if we tried to-"

"Not in Akonar under any circumstances," the Administrator broke in. "I cannot allow human life to be endangered. Make your experiments wherever you like but not in the capital!"

"We aren't asking to carry out our experiments here. Our main task is look for the signs that indicate the approach of the enemy front. I don't know if we'll be able to save your world from disaster but we at least want to try to learn something from it. Do you understand me now?"

"I understand only that you want to gain some advantage for yourself from this alleged danger to us," said the Arkonide, leaning back. "There is probably some other motive behind your actions than you've revealed. I'm sorry, my dear Terrans, or whatever you may call yourselves, but I would like nothing better than to see you leave our world as quickly as possible. Before sundown today, let's say. Agreed?"

Rous did not move to stand up. A cold glitter suddenly appeared in his eyes-let his opponents beware! He laid both hands on the table calmly. Calmness was really out of character for him, for the dark-haired and agile Frenchman was well known for his impulsiveness. "You don't believe me, then?" he inquired, his voice almost friendly.

"I don't want you to cause a panic," said the Arkonide, evading the direct question. "Our world has never been attacked before this and if someone should attack us, we have the protection of the Imperium battlefleet. A call for help would be enough to-"

"Not this time," Rous told the Administrator evenly. "You would be terribly disappointed because the Regent can't fight the Unseen from another time plane. All the worlds they have attacked are now empty and deserted. Even the insects are gone. Those worlds stand completely devoid of life."

The Arkonide had gone pale. His red eyes blazed like live coals from his white face. "You lie, Terrans! Our Regent fears no enemy! I am going to find out what you really intend by your behaviour."

Rous stood up without any warning. "You can undoubtedly deny us your support but I don't believe you can forbid us to remain on Tats-Tor. So save yourself the trouble of telling us to leave. In any event, we'll let you know as soon as the signs indicate the invasion has begun."

The Administrator returned Rous' look coolly and arrogantly. "I don't need your warning. If an attack should actually take place, I'll know myself what to do. Of course I can't forbid you to remain on the spaceport field but I must ask you not to stir up the population of Akonar with your wild stories. I would be grateful if you would leave me now."

Noir had also stood up. He asked in English: "Should I try to influence him, Marcel? I could 'persuade' him to put a few people at our disposal and-"

"That would be against Rhodan's orders, Andr?," Rous replied. "If these conceited fellows don't want us to help them, we should leave it at that. Let's go." He turned to the Administrator and, in Arkonese, added: "It would be advisable for you to have your radio stations keep their receivers open on the general trade frequencies. Goodbye, Arkonide."

He had consciously neglected to use the Administrator's official title. By the Administrator's start he knew that the Arkonide had well understood the intended insult. Without waiting for an answer, the 2 men left the room and returned to their ship.

No one tried to stop them.

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The Russoterranian Ivan Ragov was one of those people who believed he could find a peace-loving element in the character of any other person. It stemmed naturally from his own wish to be left alone and to live in peace. Moreover, his professional specialty seemed to contribute its share: whoever concerns himself to a large extent with plants and animals and is a doctor besides must believe in the peaceful coexistence of even the most different forms of life.

Ragov strolled through the crowded streets of Akonar, carrying on a private study of the life there. Rous had had no objections to his wish to look around the capital city. Thanks to the tiny, all but invisible transmitters built into finger rings by the Swoons, Ragov was constantly in touch with the Gazelle. The communications officer on duty-Fred Harras at the moment-hold him under constant surveillance.

Ragov cautiously stepped out of the way of a shapeless being, encased in a spacesuit, walking past him. He overtook the strange creature and avoided letting his curiosity show too obviously. Still, he could not resist risking a glance to the side. Although he had already visited many planets, he had never seen anything like this. The alien's 'atmosphere' splashed against the transparent helmet: it 'breathed' an oily liquid of unknown composition. Now Ragov noticed that the creature had gills on the side of its head.

Unfortunately, Ragov had to turn his head away again in order not to arouse any unpleasant attention. Only provincials turned to stare at aliens, marvelled at the way they looked and considered themselves the most perfect beings in the Universe.

Ragov stayed on the main business avenue, which led from the spaceport. Here lived the traders and the visitors in large hotels whose signs shone harshly in the sun. Ragov did not understand a single word in the welter of conversations around him and he regretted not being a telepath.

He stopped in front of one of the numerous shops. Naturally, as one could have suspected, the salesman was no Arkonide. A Springer with a pointed beard loudly ballyhooed the worth of his merchandise, souvenirs from all parts of the galaxy.

Ragov stepped closer and looked at the selection. Fortunately the goods were labelled in Arkonese and he would not have to arouse the attention of the Springer, then occupied with calling out irresistible bargains to passersby, with unnecessary questions.

There were stuffed mugglis from the 3rd planet of the star Thorakl, 2000 light-years away. They looked like lizards and had 3 tails: if the label did not lie, the middle tail functioned as a radio antenna. Even though the animal was dead, its body could still be used as a transmitter.

Nearby was a colourfully glistening stone, which came from the planet Temporalis near the centre of the galaxy. If the stone was placed under a recently developed projection device, the past would live

again for the stone gave off rays which could be made visible. Events of thousands of years before could be projected on an electronic screen. The stone had absorbed optical impressions and stored them like a natural camera and film.

Ragov was debating whether to buy such a stone when his glance fell on a small object in the 3rd row.

He gasped for breath.

Lying there was a commonplace razor of the sort in use more than a century before on Earth. The label read: "Throat-slitter from the planet Terra, position unknown. When they desire a new wife, male Terrans murder the old one with this instrument. In common use all over Terra. Very valuable artifact of an alien culture."

Ragov did not know if he should laugh or cry. The shameless exaggeration in the razor's description made him doubt the authenticity of the information given for the other rarities but what still had to be explained was how the shopkeeper had come by an Earthly razor in the first place. Ragov wondered if he should ask him.

Hardly had he struggled to a decision when 2 men came up from behind. He recognized them immediately as Arkonides. Their uniforms showed that they were policemen or soldiers.

"Are you one of the Terrans who came in the small flat ship?" asked one of them with the usual arrogance of a petty official fully conscious of his power over mere mortals. "Then follow us, please."

Ragov was not ready to go off with them just like that. He shook loose of the man's hand. "I'm a Terran but that hardly gives you the right to arrest me in the middle of an open street. What do you want from me?"

"The Administrator will tell you that," answered the Arkonide. "Will you come voluntarily or will we have to force you? You will be allowed to return to your ship after the interview."

Ragov thought of his battlesuit. Should he make himself invisible and just leave a stunned pair of Arkonides behind him? Or should he simply fly away? No, that would attract unwelcome attention and not serve the mission at all. Besides, it would be rather interesting to find out what the Administrator wanted from them this time. 3 days ago he had come across to Rous and Noir as tight-lipped and restrained.

"I'll come along but only voluntarily!" Ragov finally said and threw a last look at the ominous razor in the Springer's shop. He would look into it later. "Go ahead. I'll follow you."

They did just what he asked. They had probably received strict orders not to use force. Ragov let them go a little distance ahead, then held his hand to his mouth and whispered: "Hey, Harras! Did you hear that? I've got to go see the Administrator. Let Rous know about this, will you?"

"He already knows, Ragov. You're to go along. We're keeping an eye on you, don't worry. The second there's any danger, well come and get you."

"Just don't be too slow!" Ragov said and followed the 2 Arkonides.

There was no difficulty at the barrier checkpoint and 10 minutes later Ragov stood across from the

Administrator.

The Russian, with only Rous' description to go on, had imagined the Administrator to look somewhat different, or at least more arrogant and conceited. However, it looked as though the high official had no time for such nonsense. Different emotions seemed to shine through his red eyes: uncertainty was the most obvious.

"Please sit down, Terran," he said hoarsely and with a forced calm. "I wanted to speak to your 2 friends who came here 3 days ago but my men found only you. Were you informed of the things that brought you to Tats-Tor?"

"If you mean the imminent attack of the Unseen, yes, I was informed."

"And this attack, as you call it, manifests itself in that living creatures disappear?"

"That's correct."

The Administrator stared into Ragov's eyes. "I'm convinced that there isn't any invasion by unseen or unknown enemies but that it's just a devilish trick cooked up by you Terrans for some purpose still unclear to me. Otherwise it would be impossible to predict so accurately when such an odd phenomenon would take place. Doesn't that sound logical?"

"I don't think so, Administrator." The Russian shook his head and looked with interest at the technical equipment installed in the room. "Why should we go to all this trouble just to frighten you?"

"I'm wondering that myself," admitted the Arkonide, winning back a little of his usual arrogance. "In any event, I can see now that you are ready to carry out your threat."

Ragov found himself unable to understand. He was still thinking of that idiotic razor back in the Springer's shop and it was difficult for him to follow the Administrator's train of thought. The man was speaking sheer nonsense.

"What threat?" Ragov asked coolly.

The Administrator took a deep breath and replied: "Half an hour ago the entire population of an average-sized city 500 kilometres east of here disappeared. No living creatures were left. Even the fish in the rivers were reported to have vanished."

Ragov awoke as from a dream. "Then it's started!" he murmured. He held his hand high and spoke loudly to the ring: "The time front is rolling, Harras! Tell Lt. Rous immediately-and come pick me up! Or should I fly?"

"What's that?" the Administrator asked, pointing to the ring on Ragov's hand.

By this time, however, the Russian had had quite enough of the eternal distrust. "This is the miracle weapon with which I'll make your shabby little city disappear from the face of Tats-Tor! And if you don't shut your mouth and help us in our struggle, you'll be the next ones sucked into the time stream. Do you understand me?"

The Administrator was grimly silent and waved for Ragov to leave the room.

But the Terran was hardly outside when the Administrator called some of his officers to him and gave them some very specific orders.

* * * *

"It's happening earlier than we expected," Rous concluded, a bit disturbed, when all the men had collected in the spacious galley of the Gazelle and heard Ragov's full report. "My view is that this can only be a forerunner of the actual time front, a forward bulge of the overlapping zone so to speak."

"That means the time front isn't symmetrical," said Noir, "which is just what the Chief wanted to know."

"For the moment we can't say anything with certainty," said Rous, warning against too-hasty conclusions. "We have to go take a look at the scene of the event, first, and wait for further attacks."

"I doubt if they're really 'attacks' at all," Ragov said abruptly. "On the contrary: I'm even convinced that the unseen aliens from the other time dimension have no idea what they're doing to us. Perhaps they can't even prevent it."

Nodding, Rous told him: "Determining that belongs to our mission, as well. I suggest we take off now and go look over the depopulated city."

They did not bother themselves with any formalities. Without warning the scout raised itself from the ground and climbed into the sky, disappearing seconds later into the blue.

Rous, acting as pilot, did not see the stunned faces of the soldiers marching into the spaceport under orders to arrest the Terrans and take over their flat spaceship. He guided the Gazelle towards the east and descended only once the city in question could be seen below. The radiation meter aboard the Gazelle went into operation and drew the outlines of the overlapping area on a map. All inorganic matter, which had been in the other time plane for only a brief period, had aged by millenniums. That was clearly shown by the radioactive decay of certain elements. The boundaries were easily marked.

"It's rather like an ellipse," murmured Fritz Steiner, the specialist in this area. "It looks as though the overlapping zone only grazed the planet. Next time it'll take in more area."

They landed on the edge of the city and investigated it cursorily. No living creatures were to be found within, not even the swarms of insects seen everywhere else.

Fred Harras, manning the radio, called suddenly: "The Administrator has just declared us responsible for the incident and has alarmed his military forces. The police in Akonar have been ordered to arrest us, by force if necessary, and a search for us has been commenced."

With half-closed eyes, Rous stared at the deserted houses. "Rhodan's premonition has come true. The Arkonides have already become so arrogant and decadent that they trust only their own experience. They believe nothing of another's word. All right, they can have their own experience to learn by but this time I fear it won't do them much good. Our world, our time plane, will pass by so swiftly for them that they will be invisible to the Arkonides' eyes. They will remain behind in the alien dimension."

Steiner mourned the fate of the Arkonides somewhat less. "We'd better prepare ourselves," he said warningly. "One of the next attacks-to continue using the not very precise terminology-will take place about 100 kilometres towards Akonar from here. Why don't we land there and wait? It wouldn't make much sense to return to the city itself; it would only cause some unnecessary aggravation."

Rous sighed. "Our mission comes first. Besides, we really don't have the means to help this world's inhabitants when the attack comes." He nodded to Steiner and rested his hand on the Gazelle's throttle. "OK, we'll wait in the desert by Akonar. Luckily there aren't any jungles there but if I'm not mistaken there are large herds of wild animals. A nice fresh steak would taste good to me about now."

"As long as it hasn't been sent through the other dimension and aged 10,000 years-great!" agreed Steiner and went back into the engine room where his complicated apparatus waited for action.

2/ SLOW MOTION WORLD

The frontier between jungle and desert turned out to be a small paradise they had not anticipated.

The ever-thicker jungle began towards the south, stretching to the shores of the ocean. Akonar lay just a hundred kilometres to the west. Towards the north was the grassy steppe, which merged into the infertile desert. The east resembled the west, except that there was no city in that direction, only the fertile area between jungle and desert.

The Gazelle rested on its telescopic legs in the middle of some luxuriant bushes. They fulfilled the function of camouflage only imperfectly but served well as shade when the sun grew too hot for someone. One of the six men was constantly on duty in the main room of the small spaceship, holding it ready for takeoff at all times.

Steiner had his equipment ready for action. Just one twist of a knob and the LFG would open the door to another dimension of time. The other important device, the ray meter, was continually in operation. Any change in the rate of aging would be instantly registered and thus indicate the approach of the time front.

So equipped, the members of the expedition allowed themselves a rest pause. Harras and Noir had gone hunting, returning with a dead quadruped resembling to some distant degree a deer. Even the peace-loving Ragov did not balk at taking part in the preparations for a feast. He examined the meat and found that it was edible. Lt. Rous supplied a hand-beamer which, turned to low power, served as a

source of heat that would not go out very quickly.

While the tempting aroma of cooking meat wafted out across the steppe, Steiner sat duty in a bad mood in the Gazelle. The radio was on and let him know what was going on across Tats-Tor. The Administrator had alerted his military forces, it turned out, because he was firmly convinced that only the Terrans could be behind the extraordinary disappearance of the inhabitants of an entire city. His logic was flawless: no one but the Terrans had known of the event in advance, therefore they must be responsible for it.

As previously pointed out, Tats-Tor was a peaceful world. The Administrator had no spacefleet and no actual army. He had only his police corps and the attached vehicles. He had some manoeuvrable fighter-spaceships and some small bombers but they were hardly suited for extended flights into space. Should events develop on an interstellar scale, the Administrator would have to call Arkon for help. A feeling of uncertainty prevented him from making use of this alternative.

In any event, Steiner had not heard anything in the multitude of radio messages that indicated that the Regent had been informed of the events on Tats-Tor.

The move against the Terrans at the spaceport had turned out unsuccessful at the last moment but one of the fighters had been able to follow the Gazelle and observe it land by the now lifeless city. That only seemed to confirm the Administrator's suspicion.

He gave his police the order once more to arrest the 6 Terrans.

Steiner reported to Rous and his expression was serious. "Now what can we do? Our hands are tied and we aren't allowed to even defend ourselves if attacked. I don't understand what Rhodan has in mind with all this."

"He won't force anyone to accept our help," said Rous, trying to explain. "Anyway, self-defence isn't forbidden: we just aren't allowed to hurt anybody by it. Even Noir isn't supposed to intervene in such an event. That's all."

"That's all?" growled Steiner crossly. "What are we supposed to do when the Arkonides come to arrest us-throw rocks at them?"

From by the fire, Harras called out. "There's a flyer circling up above-now it's coming in to make a landing. Who can it be?"

Standing at the open Gazelle hatchway, Rous and Steiner looked up.

In all there were 3 gliders, which a few seconds later set down and rolled to a stop not 200 meters away. Immediately upon landing, about 2 dozen armed soldiers came out, assembled in formation and marched towards the Gazelle with weapons held fire-ready.

Steiner grimaced. "They could have at least let us eat our steak before coming!"

Rous looked towards the on-marching men and said to Harras: "Move, Harras! Get aboard the ship! Rig the Gazelle so it can't take off! Activate the camouflage covering. You never know what might happen. A twist of a knob will do it."

"As if I didn't know," muttered Harras angrily, leaving the cooking meat to its fate. Only Ragov

remained behind; looking at the large piece of flesh with remorse. Josua was coming from a nearby pond with a can of fresh water and his eyes and mouth went wide when he saw the approaching Arkonides.

Rous walked towards them. To all appearances he had renounced the use of any weapons but he knew that he was not entirely without defence. Steiner was certainly not asleep there in the Gazelle control room and just as certainly he was not going to hold to Rhodan's instructions 100%.

The Arkonide marching at the head of the column stopped. His small army stopped automatically also. "The Administrator has ordered that you surrender to me without resistance," he announced haughtily. With raised arm he pointed to the Gazelle. "Your ship is hereby confiscated."

"May I at least know what the meaning of this is?" said Rous.

"You have attacked our world and we suspect that your weapon is to be found aboard your ship."

"You'd be looking for it for a long time," smiled Rous, little convinced, for there were any number of incomprehensible devices aboard the Gazelle whose functions could not be very quickly explained. The Arkonides could believe any one of them could be the mysterious weapon that made men disappear."

"Do you intend to offer resistance?" inquired the officer.

"Why should we? We aren't conscious of any guilt."

The troop marched and surrounded the camp.

Rous gestured to the harmlessly poised Gazelle and commented: "So, do your duty, officer! But I'd like to warn you beforehand! If the suspicion of your Administrator proves to be unjustified, I'll report you to Arkon. A terrible danger is threatening your world and you don't have anything better to do than bother us. Even when we've only come to help you!"

"I'm only following my orders," said the officer, taking refuge in the most overused and stupidest excuse since time began. Was there ever a better method of avoiding responsibility-and hadn't it almost always worked? "If anyone is to be held responsible, it will be the Administrator."

Rous would have had an answer to that if he'd had the chance to say anything. However, that was not the case.

At that moment several things occurred that were closely connected.

Steiner appeared up in the Gazelle hatchway and shouted: "More disturbances are taking place! A large overlapping just hit the edge of Akonar and more than 10,000 inhabitants have disappeared. Another attack is taking place at the same time on the other side of the planet. The reports are confused and inexact. But that isn't all! If the messages are right, then a broad front is rolling towards us at the speed of the planet's rotation. For heaven's sake, Rous, get rid of those police! They're only holding us up!"

Rous would have gladly followed his suggestion but he had to adhere strictly to Rhodan's instructions however much they might irritate him. Besides, the reports of the mysterious events and new attacks were also received by the police themselves. The officer heard what a soldier racing up to him had said, turned pale, as expected, and faced Rous a bit helplessly.

"New attacks..." he said. "You must have heard. But... you're still here? How is that possible?"

"Think about it for awhile," said Rous, asking the officer to think for himself for once. Since he was a police officer looking forward to a pension, one could certainly ask that much from him. "If we're standing here in front of your eyes, we can't be out depopulating your world at the same time. I'm sure you'll agree with me."

"I must carry out my orders." The Arkonide had regained his typical arrogance. "I will search your ship with 3 of my men, then have it brought to Akonar. You're coming with me."

"I hope we have time for all that," said Rous, hinting at the threatening danger. "The reports speak of an approach of an Unseen front."

"Unseen...?"

"You don't know about that? The Administrator left out the most interesting part. The attackers are invisible and come from another dimension in time. We Terrans are trying to find a weapon against them and came here asking for support. Unfortunately... but why am I telling you this? It won't do any good."

But Rous had succeeded in sowing mistrust in the hearts of the officers. After all, it did seem impossible to be in 2 places at once. The Terrans were here but the attackers were...

Steiner called down from the hatch: "Refugees are mobbing the spaceport! The Springers are storming the ships and taking off in a panic. Even the other visitors in Akonar are jamming the passenger ticket officers of the spacelines. The official radio of the Administrator has admitted that much. Perhaps he's covering up even worse developments."

Spots of fire far in the west streaked upwards to suddenly disappear into the vastness of space. One could almost feel the terrible fear spurring on the pilots.

The police officer remembered his duty. He waved for 3 of his men to follow him and climbed into the interior of the Gazelle. Steiner led the Arkonides through the ship and explained the equipment to them. Then the officer returned to Rous, who was waiting outside. "Tell your man he should come out. My men will take your ship to Akonar. Quick!"

Rous shrugged and told Steiner to come down. The Arkonides would not be able to move the Gazelle from the spot and after all their fruitless efforts would soon give up.

Meanwhile, however, the invisible front drew ever closer...

Ragov turned the spit with the cooking meat one last time and shut off the beamer. "I think," he said calmly, "we can have our steak now. It would be a shame to let it get cold."

He carved the meat with a large knife and, smacking his lips, dug into his portion.

Josua did not hesitate to follow his example. Both men acted as though there were no Arkonides or Unseen.

Rous and Steiner looked at each other, grinned reservedly, and then joined Josua and Ragov. That was a sign for Noir and Harras likewise to forget their cares and enjoy some of life's more pleasant things.

The Arkonide officer stood alone like someone waiting to be picked up but who had been forgotten.

After awhile one of his men stuck his head out of the Gazelle's hatch. "The engines aren't working," he announced.

The Terrans did not let themselves be disturbed. Instead they went on enjoying their steaks. Only Rous kept his eye constantly on the 3 airplanes 200 meters away and the soldiers standing nearby.

"The engines have to work!" exclaimed the officer with complete confidence.

But the blocked engines of the Gazelle did not work. As hard as the 3 Arkonides worked on them, nothing moved.

In the meantime, Rous had swallowed the last bite. He began to feel that they did not have much more time. He did not know how quickly the other-dimensional attack front moved but his assumption was that it could reach the 3 airplanes at any second. And then things would happen very quickly.

He stood up and went to the officer. "I think you ought to look after your men," he suggested. "It could be too late in a few minutes. Besides..."

A shrill cry of fear interrupted him. He whirled around and looked towards the airplanes-just in time to watch a soldier disappear from normal existence. Only his head was left to view, floating along for a short distance, then it too blinked out.

Another soldier screamed as though he had been stabbed-then he was caught in the inexorably progressing time front and overlapped.

Panic broke out.

The officer shouted some senseless orders and ran in the direction of the 3 planes, which of course had not been affected by the mysterious event. Breaking formation, his men followed him. Rous wanted to call out a warning but it was already too late. The men ran straight into their fate and all disappeared in a space of 10 seconds. Only their footprints in the sand remained behind.

Rous turned to his men. "Quick! Into the ship! We don't have a second to lose!"

The 3 soldiers who had inspected the Gazelle had come down the ladder and run off. They could not be helped now.

Steiner was the first into the Gazelle and switched on the hypercom transmitter as agreed. Headquarters in Terrania had to be notified of events before the actual experiment began. Rous was also in the control room a second later, activating the energy of the Arkonide reactor within the Lens Field Generator.

Josua, last aboard the Gazelle, shut the hatch behind him with a hollow clang. The air conditioning came on automatically.

Steiner was receiving a reply from the station on Terra. Without paying any attention to the activity around him, he sent off the prepared message:

Gazelle Lt. Rous to HQ Terrania! Attack in progress. We are in Zone A. Overlapping zone runs asymmetrically; statistic levels. Overlapping has now reached 99%. We are trying to gain view of other plane with lens generator. Will report as soon as possible. End.

Rous waited until the generator was running and was beginning to form the time window. A shimmering circle of light suddenly materialized in the middle of the control room, about a meter in diameter. Josua stared at it as though it were an incomprehensible miracle, although he knew full well what it was. But Rous had to admit that he was not very comfortable himself. The luminosity of the Window showed that the time front had just rolled over them in that second.

Steiner turned off the hypercom transmitter and stepped over to Rous. "It's time," he said in a businesslike tone, despite a barely noticeable trembling in his voice. "What are we waiting for now?"

Ivan Ragov, standing a bit to one side, suddenly cried out in terror. "My arm! Those damned Unseen have grabbed me!"

It was Noir who acted. "Quick, Steiner! Ragov's got to go through the Window first! Help me!"

Rous raised his hand. "Have you gone crazy?"

"If we don't want to lose our Normal Time, we've got to try it, Lieutenant!" Noir yelled at him without respect for rank. "Should we fall into the other dimension and lose our Normal Time? Then we'd never get back!"

Rous understood what Noir meant.

But Ragov understood even more quickly.

He leaped forward, crying from pain while his lost arm became visible again, and sprang into the middle of the glowing circle of the time window.

At the same time, he disappeared completely.

Rous felt himself grasped and shoved through the ring of fire. His eyes noticed the change even as his head crossed the boundary into the other dimension. Not that it was lighter or darker... no, not at all. The light stayed the same. But the landscape had changed. It was as though passage through the time window had been a teleportation leap at the same time and he had landed on another world. Or was it Tats-Tor in a different time?

He saw Ragov, who had come to rest 2 or 3 meters away, having not landed on his feet. The Russian was just then standing up, looking around in surprise and not quite understanding everything yet. But-what had they really expected?

Rous suddenly felt a push from nowhere and lost his balance. Luckily, he did not fall and managed to regain his footing. He turned and saw Harras floating 3 meters above the ground and encircled by a faintly glowing ring.

"Jump!" Rous cried.

Harras jumped and landed next to Rous. "Good heavens-where are we?"

Rous waited until all the men had collected beside him and only the weakly shining ring showed the way back into their own time plane. Once it was lost to view, there could be no return.

"We're on the world of the Unseen, Harras," Rous said. "Nothing moves besides us here, not even the wind, because everything exists at a rate 72000 times more slowly than us. We are invisible to any inhabitants of this world because we move too fast."

"Where are the inhabitants?" asked Josua fearfully, staying close to Steiner.

"We'll find them," Rous promised vaguely and, pointed in the direction of a nearby hill. "Look at the Arkonide police troop, Noir. They've lost their Normal Time and exist now in an alien time. Don't those men look like lumps of stone?"

They looked around and were silent although they all were burning with questions. They assumed somehow that Rous would answer them all, for he had once been in the other time plane for awhile.

The horizon was cut off by a darkly shining wall reaching high into the sky. It marked the limits of the LFG's effective radius. The men could not penetrate beyond the black wall and what lay behind would remain a mystery.

They stood on a fertile plain which was broken by valleys and hills. Streams and brooks rolled on through the valleys towards an unknown destination beyond the black wall. Starkly motionless stood the trees in front of the men, unmoved by even a breath of wind. It was relatively warm and humid. Some clouds in the sky indicated that rain would not be long in coming.

An odd flickering in the air led Harras to a question. "It isn't really so warm that the heated air should be rising. And anyway-if your theory's correct, Lieutenant-any movement of the air would be so slow that we wouldn't notice it. Do you have an explanation?"

Rous looked toward the horizon and also noticed the flickering. He narrowed his eyes and nodded slowly. "Yes, I have an explanation. You will also have an explanation for all the phenomena you encounter if you never forget that everything here lives and exists more slowly. The flickering you see, Harras, comes from air molecules breaking up the light."

Steiner moaned lightly and took his eyes away from the astounding view. Then his glance fell upon a transparent and shining crystal about the size of a pea, hanging motionless in the air. All but frightened, the physicist pointed at it and stammered in bewilderment: "The explanation, Rous? Here's a crystal object floating weightless in the air. Does gravity also have something to do with the retardation of time?"

Rous looked at the crystal and smiled in relief. "Mr. Steiner, I already said, that there would be an explanation for everything. That includes this crystal, which is nothing other than a very slowly falling raindrop. Consider that this raindrop falls 72,000 times more slowly than on Earth, assuming this world has the same gravitation, which seems to be the case. What does that mean? The raindrop falls about 10 centimetres an hour, based on the usual speed of falling back on Terra."

They stared at the wonder of the floating crystal, which seemed to defy all understanding. Steiner was evidently not completely convinced. He reached out to the raindrop with his hand and tried to grasp it.

But he did not succeed. The crystal hung in the air as though nailed there and could not be moved a millimetre. The inertia of its mass had increased parallel to the retardation of time. One required 72,000 times more energy to catch a raindrop here than on the Earth. Not even Steiner had that much strength.

"You can't grasp it!" he decided and gave up. "At least we won't get wet here."

Rous turned, looking for the ring of light. He breathed easier when he saw it. "I think we'll take a little walk over to the black wall. Maybe we can find out what's on the other side. Careful, Ragov, don't trip over our police officer."

The Russian stopped and looked at the Arkonide with an indefinable expression. The officer stood unmoving and apparently lifeless before him. His eyes were half opened and it was impossible to tell if they were opening or shutting. In any event, it could be another 8 to 10 hours before he had completed the motion. Roughly speaking, a single second was about 20 hours.

Ragov touched the tip of his index finger to the Arkonide's cheek. It felt like stone and was just as cold. Half an hour would go by before the warmth of the living body penetrated to Ragov's nerves.

The staring face showed neither fear nor pain. There had not been enough time. With a sinking feeling Ragov suddenly realized that the Arkonide might realize what had happened to him only in another 50 hours. At the moment, however, he stood ripped out of his own world, a thousandth of a second incarnate.

"He can't see us," said Rous nodding to Ragov. "We're too fast for him. If he wanted to see us in his new world, he would have to film us with a camera that takes more than a million pictures a second. We are considerably faster for him than a bullet."

"What if we want to see how he moves?" asked Harras.

After considering for a few seconds, Rous went on. "Very simple, Harras. We'd have to photograph this monument with a time-lapse camera-16 exposures in 20 hours. When the film is played at normal speed, 16 frames a second, then we'd see the Arkonide as he really is."

Steiner pointed to the officer's half-opened mouth. "Is it the same for acoustic effects?"

"Of course!" Rous understood immediately what the physicist was getting at. "The sound waves have also been slowed down relative to us. Assuming that the same natural laws are in effect here as on Earth, then sound moves at a speed of about 17 meters an hour. Not the sound waves we produce-those are governed by different laws. The speed of sound is 5 millimetres for us in this dimension, then. Perhaps now you understand just how fast we're moving."

"Are we breaking the sound barrier?" said Harras, always the practical sort. His face contorted into a questioning grimace as he started to move and felt the gentle, flowing resistance of the air, which seemed to move to the side only reluctantly.

They gradually approached the black wall. The wall closed off a circular area about 232 kilometres in diameter. In the exact centre the time window shone faintly yet clearly.

Rous found time to look up into the sky. The cloud formation had not changed in the slightest and days would go by before the already falling raindrops reached the surface of this uncanny planet. Earthly days, of course. How long a local day would last in this timelessness defied calculation. If the world

revolved once on its axis in 24 Terran hours, then the sun would stand in the sky for about 100 years. A century would pass before the sun would rise from the east and cross the sky to sink in the west.

A day would last for 200 years!

Rous' brain reeled as he thought about it. No wonder an eye blink would take 20 hours to perform.

The sky was coloured a light reddish with a pale greenish undertone. The sun was hidden behind the clouds and under the circumstances could take years to reappear.

Rous suddenly understood.

Before he could tell the others of his new calculation, they stood before a new discovery.

A wide stream separated them from the black wall slicing across the landscape a few hundred meters ahead.

Stream...?

The stream, tossed by the intangible storm, was frozen in the midst of its movement, but one could plainly see the direction of the wind. The stream looked as though it had been suddenly petrified. Some of the spray hung motionless like shining crystals in the air. It could take hours for the crystals to fall back into the water.

"How are we going to get over to the other side?" asked Harras, disappointed. "It's a stream alright-the materialized stream of time."

"Nonsense!" answered Rous, turning away from the problem he had so intensively thought about. "Follow me!"

He walked ahead as though there were no stream in front of him. His foot touched the frozen surface of the water-and found support. Before the other men had rightly understood what they saw with their own eyes, Rous was out in the middle of the water, walking on it. He went ahead, as though the surface were made of stone.

"It's quite safe," he called back, stopping for a moment. "It would be at least 10 minutes before the water had time to give way beneath my feet."

It was like walking over ice but completely without the slipperiness. The unmoving waves showed the direction of the wind that had shaped them, just as the bent limbs on the single trees. Judging from the trees, the storm must be quite strong. Yet the men felt nothing of it because for them even a hurricane crawled along at the rate of 1/2 millimetre per second, or less than 2 meters a minute.

And then they stood before the wall.

Rous touched it with his hands and felt a solid resistance. The wall was black but not an absolute solid black, more like a faintly shimmering crystal marble. The darkness began only a few centimetres beyond the outermost, translucent layers.

Or at least it looked that way.

The wall was smooth and did not present any seams or cracks where fingers or feet could find a grip. It reached straight up into the sky and seemed to vault over the ground like a dome. The higher it went, the more its colour faded. At the zenith it allowed a view of the reddish rays of the sun and even the clouds were visible through it.

So the LFG created a spherical time-force-field around itself. Rous was convinced that the field extended below ground as well. At the same time he began to suspect they had not yet even begun to see all of the mysterious world of the other dimension. Again the decisive question came to mind:

What lay beyond the black wall?

There was only one way to find out but that seemed too risky to Rous: the LFG would have to be turned off while they were in the alien time-dimension. Then the wall would disappear.

But at the same time the way back would be cut off.

Rous turned around involuntarily and looked back. He breathed easier as he saw the pale circle of light floating over the ground. It was pure coincidence that he noticed a twisted nearby tree that resembled a gallows.

"Well, we can't go any farther," observed Steiner quite unnecessarily. "Nobody's going to get through this." He tapped against the wall. "What kind of material can this be?"

"None at all," said Rous and Noir seemed to agree. "It's energy, nothing else."

"Energy?" asked Josua, interested. He was the metallurgist of the expedition and the unknown wall thus fell into his area of specialization. "A solid wall of energy? I've never run across anything like that."

"Now you have," Noir told him. "Think of our ships' defence fields. Throw an object at them and it certainly won't go through."

The Afroterranian shook his head almost desperately. "But that's the difference, Noir! Our energy screens turn any matter that touches them into energy. But you can touch this wall. It doesn't feel either warm or cold, it doesn't give off deadly bolts of energy and so far it hasn't converted me into energy."

"You can also touch the neutralized energy dome over Terrania without being destroyed and yet it won't let any matter through," said Steiner after some thought, blasting Josua's argument to nothing. "It can be the same way with this black wall. It's energy produced by our machinery in the Gazelle and so governed by our natural laws. I think that last condition will be the key to a solution if anyone ever wonders how we can remove this barrier sometime."

"Consider the problem solved," Rous told him a bit gleefully. "But I wouldn't want to walk around this unreal world with the return to our dimension blocked. Only if someone would be stationed in front of the LFG with orders to turn it back on at a certain time."

"I think we've found a way now to one day penetrate the aliens' world," Noir commented matter-of-factly, stroking the wall thoughtfully with his hand. "Perhaps we would see things a little differently and a little better if we assumed that this barrier really protects us from any dangers that might be lying in wait for us on the other side."

No one answered, which meant in this case that everyone agreed with him.

They went another 2 or 300 meters along the wall, then crossed back over the river, heading towards the shimmering ring waiting for them more than 1000 meters away.

Ragov suddenly let loose a curse and put his hand to his face. Then he took a step backwards and stared at the tiny object floating motionless in the air just in front of his nose. He had simply walked into it noticing it.

"An insect!" he murmured in disbelief, shaking his head. "I just had a head-on collision with a fly-and it didn't move an inch!"

The others collected around the object of collision. It was indeed a sort of fly. It had long feelers, colourfully shining wings, 8 delicate legs, and glistening large eyes

Rous suddenly had the feeling he had spotted a slight motion in this world of absolute immobility.

The insect...?

But that was hardly possible even if the little creature flew along at 100 kilometres an hour. At that rate it would move at a relative speed of 1 centimetre every 20 seconds and movement that slight would be difficult to perceive with the unaided eye in free space.

But something else connected with the insect did move.

The wings!

Now the others saw it too. Very slowly and barely noticeable, to be sure, but without a doubt the iridescent wings were rising. The motion lasted 10 seconds, then they sank down again, only to begin the movement once more half a minute later.

"1 wing-beat per minute!" Harras exclaimed and made some lightning calculations. "Good heavens! This little bug's beating its wings a thousand times a second, alien dimension time. Unbelievable!"

"There are insects on Earth who beat their wings even faster," Ragov said quietly, watching as the wings reached their highest point and then began to descend. In the last 2 or 3 minutes the insect had moved several centimetres ahead. It was relatively swift and actually moved at a speed of some 30 meters a second.

"If someone shoots at us here," muttered Steiner with a happy tone, "we could easily step out of the bullet's way."

He calculated half out loud and gave the result beaming with joy. "Yeah, a bullet of the usual type would cover about a meter a minute. It's unbelievable to think about it. We're in a world of slow motion."

"But," said Rous with a serious edge in his voice, "don't get the idea that you would not be hurt if such a crawl-speed bullet hit you. If you stood still, it would bore into your flesh slowly but surely and kill you."

"Lovely prospect." The physicist shuddered and went back to staring at the glittering insect, which continued undisturbed its slow flight. "I wonder... could you kill it?"

Rous raised his eyebrows. "Why do you want to kill it? It hasn't done anything to us..."

"It was only a question," said Steiner. "I only wanted to know if it was possible to kill a living creature of this dimension-I didn't say I actually wanted to do it."

"Well, I would think it's possible," Rous admitted reluctantly, "but I hope it won't be necessary for us to find out. In our current situation, we are exactly 72,000 times more advanced than the inhabitants of this dimension."

"So our mission is as good as carried out," Harras broke in triumphantly. "Other than finding a way to defeat our enemies, we have nothing more to do."

Rous nodded, but without any enthusiasm. "Your quite right, Harras, only we haven't even encountered one of those enemies yet. We don't know what our enemy looks like, who he is and what he's planning. Looking at it that way, our mission is a long way from being completed. It hasn't even begun."

They went on and accelerated their pace. Josua, who took up the rear and followed a few paces behind, suddenly spoke. "What's that rustling noise? It's coming from somewhere up ahead."

While the others continued, Rous stopped. "Rustling? I don't hear any rustling noise."

"It's very deep and low, more like a murmuring. Odd, now it's getting weaker."

Rous stood still, listening. Now he too heard it but it soon stopped. Thoughtfully, he looked up at the other 4 men, who had stopped some distance away.

The rustling...?

Surprise suddenly showed on his face, then a smile. "Of course! That has to be it! Harras already said it: we're breaking the sound barrier! Josua, it's the sound barrier! A wake or a vacuum is forming in the air behind us as we move. The air flows in and thus your odd noise."

Rous was happy to have found an explanation and walked ahead.

The observation with the air reminded him of another problem which he had thought over a number of times with no success. Perhaps he should stop thinking about it...?

500 meters ahead, the ring of light shimmered. Through it the Terrans could return to their own world. For a moment a question came to the surface in Rous' mind, asking if their arrival in the other dimension had involved a change of physical location or if both worlds co-existed at one and the same spot. Was it just a crazy thought, with no substance behind it, or...?

Lost in thought, Rous walked straight into Steiner's back. The physicist had stopped cold.

"What is it?" Rous started to ask, then saw the staring, mask-like expression on Steiner's face, his raised arm and the wide eyes on the other men. He followed their line of sight...

All the blood left his face and it seemed as though his heart ceased to beat. For long seconds his reason refused to accept what his eyes saw.

What they saw meant that all the men would have to remain in the alien dimension for the rest of eternity for there was no going back now.

What they saw was that the shimmering ring of light had vanished.

3/ THE TIME EXPEDITION DISCOVERS

THE DRUUFES

After Rous recovered from the first few seconds of fright, his reasoning began to function again. The ring of light was no longer present-that was a fact pure and simple. But its disappearance had caused a few changes which could be of enough importance to have an effect on the Terrans' fate.

The sky was paler, as if something between it and the viewer had been removed. The clouds still blocked the hidden sun but it now was evident that it was a red sun. The entire sky was red.

And Rous noticed something else: The black wall had disappeared!

He could now see unhindered to the distant horizon but he was seriously disappointed. The landscape behind the wall did not look much different from that in front of it. Even so, high mountain peaks could be seen, reaching up into the burning sky as though to extinguish it. Wide valleys with silvery streams seemingly engorged with blood stretched out towards the far mountains. Variety in the scene of wild nature on the alien planet was provided by scattered forests and plains.

But otherwise-no living creatures!

Meanwhile, Ivan Ragov had broken out of his stare. "Good Heavens! What happened? The light-ring..."

"...just went out!" Steiner said with an unnatural calm. "Maybe someone on the other side turned the LFG off."

"Who...?" asked Rous. "The time front rolled over the Gazelle. And if our calculations are correct, then all of Tats-Tor has vanished from our normal universe-or at least all the living creatures on it. I don't see anything-shouldn't they all be here?"

This time Harras was the better logician. "There weren't any settlements between our campsite and

the capital city. Just 100 kilometres of open plains and forests. So we'd have to walk 100 kilometres before we found the Arkonides and Springers that have come into this dimension."

Rous had other worries. "How are we going to get back to our own plane?"

Steiner shrugged and looked at Ragov. The Russian laid his hand on the grip of Steiner's beamer and murmured: "We aren't exactly defenceless if someone attacks us. But for the time being I think we ought to stay around here so we would find out immediately if the ring comes back. It might be just an interruption of power in the Gazelle..."

"Rather improbable," said Harras, shaking his head. "But you're a botanist-you wouldn't know about these things. Somebody turned the machine off. That's the only explanation I can make."

"There are a thousand other possibilities," Rous told the technician, "and there isn't a one of them that would explain it beyond all doubt. And if we don't find a way to get back, we may never find out. But Ragov's right: we should stay here in the area, or at least one of us should."

"Does that mean you still feel a desire to go running around the neighbourhood?" asked Steiner. "What do you hope to gain by it?"

"Well, the wall has disappeared. That's one advantage. There's nothing more to stop us from exploring this world where time is 72,000 times slower than normal..."

"You're forgetting something," the physicist told him dryly. "You're forgetting that you can't move any faster than you could otherwise. Even if you exert yourself, it will still take you 12 seconds to cover 100 meters. To walk a kilometre will take you 10 minutes if you walk at a pace of 6 kilometres an hour. I admit that the petrified figures over there would need some years to cover the same distance but that doesn't mean you're relatively faster. Besides, I'm beginning to gradually get worried. Is there anything to eat here?"

Rous shrugged. "An expedition would be necessary just to find that out as well as anything else. We'll have to leave a watch behind-but who? Each of us is important enough to make a decision difficult. Shall we leave it to chance and flip a coin?"

"If you don't want to hurt anyone's feelings that would be the best solution," Harras agreed and reached into his pocket. He drew out a coin, a Solar. He weighed it thoughtfully in his hand. "I wonder if I'll ever be able to spend this...?"

After some tosses eliminated the others, only Josua was left and he had to remain behind.

Rous pointed to the isolated tree that resembled a gallows. "Josua, our Gazelle stands 10 meters to the right of that tree, though in the other dimension. Let us know as soon as the light-ring appears again-your transmitter still works, doesn't it?"

A brief test showed that the transmitter built into Josua's ring still functioned.

"Very well," said Rous, putting his hand on the African's shoulder. "You have nothing to fear in this world because no one can do anything to you. You're faster than anything that can possibly exist here-with one exception. But to face that would mean giving up all hope. So long, Josua. We'll be back soon."

The African watched them go, not very happy, and tucked the beamer Harras had given him into his belt. He admitted to himself only reluctantly that its possession made him feel a little better.

Meanwhile, Rous and the other 4 men neared the river that had flowed between them and the wall. They went somewhat slower once they reached the point where the black wall had towered above them. Rous stretched his hand out but his eyes did not deceive him. The wall had vanished. It had not even left the slightest trace behind on the stony ground.

"If we go on, we'll have to bear in mind the risk we're running," said Rous thoughtfully, looking at his companions. "What if someone turns the LFG back on while we're on the other side of the wall? How will we ever get back inside the energy dome? Have any of you considered that yet?"

"We'll just have to take that risk," answered Steiner impatiently. "Anyway, we've left Josua behind. If anyone turns the device on again, it could only be Rhodan. It wouldn't be difficult for him to go looking for us. No, I don't have any hesitation about continuing. We can't exist without food and water."

Rous pointed to the petrified waves on the river. "The water can't be especially refreshing. I'm beginning to doubt if we can exist at all in the other world. See that grass there? Can any of you move it? No, no one can, because it offers us too much resistance. It's the same with everything that lives or exists here. We'll starve or die of thirst if we don't find a way back."

"Well, anyway, I've brought along a good supply of energy tablets," said Ragov suddenly, a sly smile evident in his eyes. "I believe they survived the spring through the time barrier without any damage."

Rous looked at him for a bit before he shook his head and said: "You should have said something before now, Ragov! You would have spared me a few worried minutes."

"So your joy should be all the greater now," the doctor told him, giving each man a small packet. "Be careful with them! You're receiving an emergency food ration and some water tablets. By spacing out the supply, a man can survive for a week with them. In any event, we won't be starving for awhile. Now, let's go on, shall we?"

They went on.

The character of the landscape soon changed. The stony plains gave way to a grassy steppe, which proved no more pleasant for walking. The grass with its unbending and extremely sharp blades was extraordinarily dangerous. If he wanted to avoid being wounded, one had to avoid every single blade of grass, for the blades were like steel knives.

The men were happy when the grass became lower and was at length replaced by a cushion of moss-which was just as hard but not so impeding. Even the plastic soles of their boots seemed to be uncomfortably hard and unresilient, although that could have been due to the men's imaginations.

The terrain rose uphill.

Steiner wiped the sweat from his brow. "Time may go by more slowly here," he groaned, "but you sweat just as fast anywhere it's hot." He had stopped and looked over the plains. Josua stood watch somewhere down there but as yet he had not reported.

They stood on a small plateau. The terrain behind them sank into the broad plains while in front of them it rose onwards towards the summits of the mountains. After 2 hours of walking they had not

covered more than 10 kilometres but the curiosity driving them on to learn what lay beyond the mountains let them pay no mind to their strenuous efforts.

And then they saw a movement.

It started over in the western horizon where the thickest masses of clouds covered the sky and-as it doubtless had for hours, local time-it rained. The raindrops there would fall unendingly slowly, reaching the ground only days later. It was madness to think of it.

The movement that caught the Terrans' eyes started in the clouds and resembled a beam of light snaking quickly down to earth, reaching the surface in 1 or 2 seconds. The light-pattern did not dissolve but remained suspended between the earth and the sky.

Steiner stared at the apparition for some time, then said: "What is that?"

Rous had gone pale. He saw his suspicions confirmed. "Lightning, Steiner. Everyday run-of-the-mill lightning-though slowed down 72,000 times. It could be that the lightning bolt out there will remain in the sky for the next 10 hours. Did you see it? It took a good 2 seconds to reach the ground from the clouds. That means that..."

"No!" the physicist interrupted, shaking his head without comprehension. "It can't be true! If it were, it would mean..."

"It's nothing but a logical conclusion, Steiner. If everything in this dimension moves more slowly for us because we live at a rate 72000 times faster, then light will be slowed down too! So light, Steiner, has a velocity of 4 km/sec in this time plane. We don't know yet what will result from that but you can see from the lightning out there that there will be results of some kind."

"Lightning can stay visible in the Earthly sky for 1 or 2 seconds. That means that the bolt out there in the west could remain in the sky for 20 or 40 hours, held there by the incomprehensible natural laws of the different dimensions. Those laws, however, seem to be fundamentally similar."

So-relatively speaking-the speed of light was 300,000 km/sec here too.

"Does the red sun have anything to do with that?" asked Harras, pointing towards the south where the sky burned like fire.

Rous nodded. "It's what gave me the idea in the first place. The extremely slow speed of the sunrays are a clear example of the results of the Doppler Effect. I'm surprised we can see anything at all, really."

"If we're here for awhile, I'll look into that," Steiner promised. With narrowed eyes he regarded the lightning bolt, which was not changing at all. "SPEOL here is only 4 km/sec. What would happen if I fired my beamer? The neutrons have certainly retained their own rate of time."

Rous shrugged. "I wish I knew..."

The Terrans walked on, each absorbed in his own private thoughts. A brief inquiry to Josua showed that nothing had changed. The African was told to climb through the light-ring as soon as it had appeared and he had radioed the others, and turn off the LFG for 2 hours. That would give them time to walk back and the black wall would not be a barrier.

Andre Noir was the first to notice the rising temperature. "It's getting rather warm out," he said, looking up in the direction of the hidden summit. "Why are we going to all this effort and trouble, anyway? I've wanted to ask why all this time but I assumed there was some special reason for us to go on foot. What is the reason, Lt. Rous?"

"You're thinking of the Arkonide battle-suits, right? Yes, there is a reason we're walking. Consider the terrible speed flying would mean on this world. I can't say this for sure but certainly we'd burn up at a speed of a few meters per second."

Steiner's face took on a grim expression as he bent to pick up a stone. Which is to say he wanted to pick up a stone. He was not successful. The inertia of the small rock had increased its weight 72,000 times.

Rous could not hold back a smile. "I know just what you wanted to do but I could have told you it wouldn't work. The stone is subject to quite another set of laws, laws we don't have any control over. I know, now, too, that unless we operate an LFG very skilfully we'll never be able to take a prisoner out of this world and into ours. But if you want to see my suspicion confirmed, use some object that we brought with us. A coin, perhaps. Throw it into the ravine there and we'll see what happens."

The men were all happy with the idea of being able to stop for a rest and not having to walk any farther. And the thought of perhaps flying instead of walking had a positively exciting effect. But if Rous were correct, they would have to give up all thought of flying.

Steiner drew a heavy platinum coin from his pocket, looked at it regretfully for a moment, then stepped up to the edge of the ravine. The rock walls were steep, plunging almost straight down for a hundred meters or so. At the bottom was a green meadow.

"You only have to drop the coin," said Rous, trying to keep his inner tension from showing. "That would be enough."

Noir, Harras and Ragov crowded around Rous and watched in suspense as Steiner raised his arm for a throw and then hurtled the coin far away.

It described a wide arc, then began to drop straight down—for at most a second, anyway. Then something very strange happened to it. At first the coin seemed to glow in a silver harshness, as though caught in the glare of a hidden spotlight. Then it became red, then white. A thin trail of steam marked the coin's passage. Finally, even before it reached the valley floor, the coin disappeared, dissolved into nothing by air friction.

One of the men gave a disbelieving moan.

Rous took a deep breath and said: "Just as I thought! And now I also know that a shot from our impulse-beamers will have devastating consequences. Can you imagine what they would be?"

Steiner, who stepped back from the cliff's edge, nodded slowly. "I can imagine, alright. On the Earth a beam of light moving 72,000 times faster than the normal speed of light would not only leave a trail in the atmosphere but also in time itself. The whole structure of things could break up and fall apart. And here...?"

"And here," said Rous with assurance, "we aren't even going to try it. I'm not going to run the risk of time... of time exploding!" he added decisively.

He did not respond to the fact the faces of his men had gone pale. After glancing briefly back towards the plains, he started walking again.

The others followed him.

* * * *

The air around the summit did not move any more than that on the plains but it was less clear and warmer. One could hardly see 10 meters ahead. The exertion required to get there had not paid off for a wide overlook on the surrounding countryside was impossible. It was as though the more or less level mountaintop was enveloped in wispy cotton.

"I'd like to know where the heat's coming from," Noir muttered. "Does anybody have a reasonable explanation right at the moment?"

"Certainly!" Steiner said and bent down. He laid the back of his hand against the naked rock, then pulled it quickly away. Surprise showed in his face. Then he stood up again.

"Well?" said Rous, hoping to encourage Steiner to reveal the results of his experiment. "What was it?"

"The ground is hot," Steiner murmured indecisively. "You could say there's a fire burning under the rocks."

Harras began to laugh. Steiner turned angrily towards him. "I'd like to know what there is to laugh about! Why can't there be volcanoes and such here?"

"Fire!" Harras grinned without embarrassment. "I'm trying to imagine what fire would be like here. A game burns and requires time in which to do it. How would that look here? A flame held frozen by time..."

"But just as hot," Steiner warned, pointing to the ground at their feet. "The warmth has had time enough to climb through the rock like on a ladder-millenniums, perhaps."

Rous looked at the slope on the other side of the summit. "I don't know... possibly we're not on the highest peak. You've given me an idea, Steiner. If this is a volcano, then perhaps we're standing on the edge of the crater. That would explain the heat."

Harras, who had walked a short distance away, called out suddenly: "Come over here, men! You'll be amazed! But be careful and don't slip..."

Steiner and Rous moved immediately but Ragov and Noir waited where they were. They were not quite so rushed in this world of endless time.

Rous felt the heat growing greater. He felt as though he was directly in the path of some heat source. Then he saw Harras waving to him through the haze.

"Here's the crater itself," the technician called, indicating the red-glowing pit at his feet. "The lava's down there."

The lava looked like a solid glowing red mass that did not move. But the frozen wave motion showed that the mass had been caught in the process of rising and would reach the crater's edge of some unguessable time in the future.

"And thus the heat," said Steiner. "My suspicion was right and that's all I wanted to know. Who can tell how quickly this volcano eruption we're witnessing will take place?"

"Volcano eruption?" Rous looked surprised.

Steiner pointed to the lava. "What else? I'm convinced that the lava is rising. It will reach the edge of the crater in 2 or 3 years, perhaps sooner. In any event, it's no danger to us. And if this liquid fire begins to flow down into the valley, there would still be time to get to safety-although it would be questionable for anyone who's on the same rate of time as the volcano."

"A volcano eruption!" murmured Rous, still amazed. "And we're standing here watching it! This is more astounding than the business with the insect's wings."

Noir cleared his throat. "Frankly, it's getting a little too warm for me here. We probably can't go any farther in this direction because nobody knows how wide the crater is. So what'll we do? Go back?"

"I don't see any alternative," Rous admitted.

"If we really want to go into the direction of Akonar," said Ragov, "We'll have to find some other route."

"We'll never find the city itself," said Steiner in reply, "because it remained behind in the other time plane. Our time plane. But we would find the inhabitants. Maybe we could do something to welcome that conceited Administrator into his new world."

"What would be the use of that if he wouldn't feel anything for 3 days?" inquired Harras sarcastically.

Rous had meanwhile realized the cause of the haze in the air was the steam from the lava. The thought came to him that the vapours could be poisonous. "We're going back," he announced, starting to retrace his steps. "There wouldn't be any sense in running any unknown risks. At least the air is clean down in the lowlands."

They had covered about one-half the distance back when Ragov suddenly yelled. He raised his arm and pointed to the rock wall on the left. His lips trembled. At first the others did not see what had excited him, for nothing moved. But then, what did move on this crazy world?

"That animal there...!" Ragov stammered frantically. "Don't you see it?"

Rous looked as hard as he could but saw only motionless lumps of rocks of various sizes. Did Ragov mean them?

The Russian lowered his arm, then bent his head so he could hear better. Something was in the air, an odd sound. It sounded like the hollow rumbling of a distant storm. But if the lightning still stood unmoving in the sky, then it was too far away for the thunder to have reached here yet. Sound did not move more

than 17 meters an hour.

And yet, that low rumble was in the air.

"...Uuuf... ruuuf... druuf..."

"Can you hear it now, Lieutenant?" asked Ragov. I noticed it the same moment I spotted the animals."

"What animals?" Steiner wanted to know. I don't see any animals."

"They're standing-or crawling-in front of those eaves there." answered Ragov. "I've never seen creatures like them. Are they caterpillars?"

"Caterpillars?" Rous demanded impatiently. "I can't make out any caterpillars. Besides, the distance is still too great to..."

"What I mean," said Ragov quietly, "is that they look like caterpillars but are much bigger. The stones over there in front of the caves..."

The black holes of the caves yawned like open mouths in the rock wall. Irregular stone steps led up to them, narrow paths smoothed by the passage of countless feet. And below, at the beginning of those paths, lay the stones.

The caterpillars...

Now the other men saw them too. The supposed stones were all of the same shape. As though carved from rock, they lay and stood unmoving singly and in groups in various places across the rocky terrain.

And in the air was the never-ending "...ruuuf... druuuuufff..."

"They're living creatures, no doubt about that, and they live in the caves," Ragov said, as though lecturing a biology class, and he walked fearlessly towards the strange creatures. "Since I hadn't run across similar organisms in the normal dimension, I must assume that in all probability these are inhabitants of this time plane. Perhaps they are even our unknown enemy."

Rous had recovered from his surprise. He followed the scholar, who now stood in the midst of the petrified creatures and studied them intensively. The other 3 men came along too.

They indeed resembled greatly enlarged caterpillars. The wing-sacs on their backs indicated that they could fly or at least had been able to fly at one time. None of the caterpillars were less than a meter and a half long. Instead of fine hair their bodies were encased in dark brown armour shells. Just under the round insect head was a pair of delicately structured limbs obviously evolved for working and grasping, as opposed to the legs all along the rest of the body which evidently served only for locomotion.

"... Druuuf... uff..."

The strange tones had grown shorter and clearer as the men approached but reverted to their old hollow reverberation when they stood still.

Sound distortion...?

Rous had guessed Steiner's question before he could ask it. "Yes, that's it! The animals here call out their cries, which because of the time lapse reflect into our ears at an unendingly slow rate. To hear how they really sound, we'd have to record them on a tape and play it back 72,000 times faster."

"You're right," Rous agreed. "The animals are communicating with one another. We can't even call them animals anymore since they possess a certain measure of intelligence. Perhaps more than we suspect."

"I wonder if they aren't even the most intelligent beings in this dimension," Rous murmured.

"Could be," Ragov conceded and bent down to look more closely at a caterpillar. "Maybe we'll find out someday."

Rous wanted to say something in reply but the light humming of his ring-radio prevented him from doing so. Josua was calling in.

Rous quickly activated the device. "Yes, Josua? Rous here. What is it?"

The African's voice sounded uncertain. "I don't know if it's anything at all but I thought it would be best to let you know..."

"Yes...?"

"A... a... well, something is above me in the air. I just now saw it. It looks like a ship, about 10 meters long and shaped like a torpedo. It must have come out of the clouds and it's slowly sinking lower. Looks like it's going to land."

The other members of the expedition listened attentively. Rous knew immediately what was in their minds and put it into words. "Josua, you mean to say you can see the ship move?"

"Definitely, Lieutenant. But it's still very slow. At least 2 hours will go by before it lands-if it lands."

"We're coming back," Rous promised, throwing a regretful glance at the petrified caterpillars. "The landing of a ship seems to me like something important enough to interrupt our investigations here."

"I'll report again if anything happens," Josua said in closing.

Seconds later, Ragov shook his head unhappily. "I wonder if it's right to simply ignore our discovery like this? If only we could take at least one of the caterpillars with us..."

"You know yourself that isn't possible," said Rous, "or at least under these circumstances and without any means of help. If you want to move any of these creatures here, you would need the same amount of energy required to accelerate a man on the Earth to a velocity of 70 kilometres per second inside of 1 second. Or to put it another way, it would be easier for you to knock a man into orbit around the Earth with your bare fists than to lift one of these caterpillars just 1 meter. Of course, you could take your time. I would say you would need 20 hours per meter."

Ragov looked around in desperation. "I'm gradually beginning to understand what role the concept of time plays. Only I'm afraid that once I do understand it, I'll go crazy..."

Rous gave the caterpillars one last look and listened to the weird clang of the cries which drove so slowly into his ears. 'We'll come back to take another look at the Druufs but now we'll...'

"The what?" exclaimed Steiner in surprise.

"I called them 'Druufs' because that's what their cries sounded like," Rous explained. "And now we're off to go see about that odd ship which seems to be landing in the area of our light-ring."

Partly relieved and partly discontent, the members of the time expedition took up the march once more.

Even if they had decided to crawl, they could still overtake the future any time...

4/ PHANTOMS OF REALITY

The ship was more than 1,000 meters long and orbited the planet at a great distance. Its interior consisted of an infinity of complicated control devices, automatically functioning alarm installations and chambers filled with positronic instruments. Vague and indefinite figures moved indistinctly through the gloom: they represented the only life aboard the giant ship.

The ship watched over the planet below, which stood on the edge of the time plane and more than once had penetrated the alien dimension and returned. Each time it had been laden with alien organisms and from overtaking them the scientists promised a fusion of the 2 time planes.

And so yet another world had been depopulated without its denizens being able to do anything about it one way or the other.

When the planet returned, it had obtained a new population whose temporal inertia had more or less adjusted its rate of time to that of the new dimension.

For the aliens it had been a bitter lesson: by the first meeting they had recognized the fact that their own dimension was not the relatively normal and real one, but the one theirs was cutting across. They had to adjust to it if they did not want to live from now on like exiles. What could be lonelier than being an exile of time?

Videoscreens lit up and indicators flew over illuminated dials. Somewhere deep inside the ship

reactors hummed. The robot surveillance over the planet was in operation.

The aliens were naturally well aware of their relationship to the other universe. All organic beings on the other time plane lived 72,000 times more quickly than they and only with the help of complicated apparatus and instruments could they be made visible. It was all reminiscent of a technology of unimaginable slow-motion photography. The films had to race through the cameras at high speed and then be run in the projectors at a vastly slower pace for even fleeting shadows to show on the screens.

But when one of their worlds penetrated the other plane, the organisms brought back with it had adapted to the new rate of time. Perhaps it would be possible to aim at merging the 2 dimensions...

Figures sped here and there; they could not be made out.

The screens looked identical but each was different. The first screen on the left stood relatively empty. On it distant mountains could be seen across a wide plane, separated from the viewer by valleys and rivers in between. The sky was clouded over and it was about to rain at any second. A storm was brewing along the horizon and the first lightning raced out of the sky towards the ground.

The 2nd screen showed precisely the same picture but the speed of events had been slowed down. The caterpillar-like creatures still moved with some degree of speed but the water in the streams already seemed to be flowing more slowly. The overall view was the same as that on the first screen: it showed the plane, the mountains and the rivers.

Only on the 3rd screen was the slow motion beginning to appear with any obviousness. The fascinating aspect about it was the certainty that the view on the screen was not merely slow motion due to photographic tricks but a living slow motion.

The 4th screen depicted events slowed by more than half.

On the 5th screen the lightning crawled towards the ground and the rain fell as though each drop hung at the end of an invisible thread someone only hesitantly reeled out. The caterpillars now barely moved; they seemed to have become the laziest creatures in the universe.

The first shadows flitted across the curved surface of the 6th screen. Since movement had been slowed by 60,000 on this screen and the figures were recognizable only as shadows, one could well imagine how fast these phantoms were in reality.

By the 10th screen the shadows moved normally and could be made out. But the motion had been so slowed down that all normal life seemed to be petrified. The storm and the lightning seemed like a painting. The rain hung glued in the air and the rivers looked as though frozen. Only the shadows of the beings from another dimension moved normally, as though unaffected by what was around them.

Indefinable faces bent over the 10th screen.

* * * *

At that moment Rous had the feeling of being watched.

He found it impossible to explain the sensation: he simply felt it and had to accept it at that. It was sheer nonsense, of course, since there was no one in sight who could observe him.

Ragov did not laugh when Rous spoke of his feeling.

"Why couldn't we be observed?" the biologist asked. "Doesn't the coming landing of the ship bear witness to that? But we still don't know if it even intends to land. Perhaps..."

"Perhaps...?"

"Perhaps it's remote-controlled and was sent to observe us! That could be it! We don't know anything about the intelligences of this time plane but that doesn't mean we should underestimate them. In any case, I'm not comfortable thinking about the Druufs. There's more to them than they're willing to let show."

They walked across the plane and crossed the river that had once flowed just inside the black wall. They recognized the gallows tree in the distance and in front of it a familiar figure-Josua.

And the ship floated just 100 meters overhead.

Rous switched on his ring-transmitter. "What is it, Josua? Isn't the ship going to land?"

"It's stopped," the voice of the African replied. "It isn't sinking any farther. It isn't going to land at all. I wonder if it's seen us?"

"Impossible!" We're moving much too fast." Rous had an uncertain feeling as he said it. He was suddenly not so convinced that the Druufs could not see them. If they had any knowledge of technology at all-and that had to be the case since they built spaceships-then they could have succeeded also in breaking through the time barrier.

The other Terrans required 5 minutes to reach Josua. Above them floated the motionless ship.

Rous found his suspicions confirmed. "An observation station," he said, pointing upwards. "Do you see the different cameras pointed at us? I bet it's a relay station of some sort. They're photographing us with television cameras and then transmitting the picture somewhere else-although where that is I don't know either. Perhaps to one of their cities or to another ship."

"You don't think anyone's aboard?" asked Steiner. "A robot-guided ship, maybe?"

"I can't be certain," said Rous, "but I am convinced that this little ship is nothing more than an auxiliary vessel for some larger ship. The aliens don't want to expose themselves to any danger so they send a portable TV camera. We wouldn't do it much differently if we were in their shoes."

Steiner's eyes narrowed. "Answer 2 questions for me, Lieutenant, and I won't say another thing."

"Ask away!"

"First: why are their cameras so obvious? Second: why are there at least 8 or 10 cameras trained on us? Wouldn't one be enough?"

A few creases showed on Rous' forehead as he thought over the physicist's questions. He knew that the scientist would not ask any questions without good reasons for them. The answer was not very simple, either.

"Why the cameras were not sunk farther into the ship, I don't know. It would be hard to find a plausible answer for that. But to your 2nd question, I think I can find an explanation. Let's take an example: if I have 2 or 3 tape recorders I can stretch or condense music as I like. If a piece normally takes 3 minutes to play, its simple enough for me to convert it into an impulse of 3 seconds by recording it at a slow speed and playing it back at a fast. I could also stretch a 3 minute piece out to 3 hours and every single note would last for minutes."

"Great," said Steiner. "So what does that prove?"

"Transfer your acoustic experience into the realm of optics. The aliens want to see us. So what do they have to do? They're photographing us with their cameras, going simultaneously from one camera to another. The pace of events is slowed-and the aliens, who live 72,000 times more slowly than us can see us."

Steiner looked up at the unmoving ship standing just over them. "They can see us?" he murmured uncertainly. "Then we aren't safe here any longer. If they decide to do it, they'll kill us..."

How can they do that?"

"If they can slow events down enough to see them with their own eyes, then they can surely find some means of shooting at us fast enough to hit us."

Rous nodded slowly but gave no answer. Mute, he looked up at the small camera-ship floating motionless over a dead world.

* * * *

"They must not be allowed to live!"

"Why not?"

"Their influence is harmful to the fusion process of the time planes. If we leave them alive, they would remain aliens forever. They can't get back to their own dimension."

"How did they get into ours in the first place?"

The answer was not immediately forthcoming. Nothing had changed on the 10 differently paced videoscreens. The 6 men could be clearly made out. They looked upwards as though searching for something. Everything else had been frozen into immobility. On the horizon the lightning still stood in the sky, an awesome picture of time suddenly stopped in its tracks.

"We don't know but it's the 2nd time beings retaining their own time rate have come to us. That means a blow to our purposes. If a fusion is to take place, then the others must assume our time rate."

"But the other plane is stronger, larger..."

"But we aren't going to give up!"

Again there was a pause.

An order finally emerged from the command centre and it put to rest all thoughts of compromise.

The order read:

"Kill them...!"

* * * *

Ivan Ragov looked at the ship for some time, then said, bored: "What do I care about that? If it's going to land, it might take hours or even days. I'll be back by then."

"Back?" demanded Rous. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm going to take a look at the caterpillars-the Druufs, as you called them. Maybe I'll find the key."

"Don't go by yourself, Ragov. Andr? Noir should go with you. Perhaps he might even be helpful to you."

Noir was not very enthusiastic but he realized that the scientist could not be left to run about the mountains alone. And it was clear that Ragov could not be swayed from his intention.

After it was agreed that any new development would be reported by radio to the others, the 2 men left.

Rous, Steiner, Harras and Josua remained behind.

They watched Ragov and Noir go, then turned their attention back to the alien ship.

Rous noticed it first. "It's moving, Steiner! Sideways! Slowly... but it's moving!"

Almost 5 minutes went by before the physicist lowered his head. "You're right, Lieutenant. To the left. I'd say at Mach 2 at most."

"A centimetre per second. Hmm... what does it mean?"

"Well have to wait and see. If we only knew where they were sending the pictures. Perhaps to a city, perhaps to another and larger ship."

"I have a feeling," said Harras slowly, "that it isn't a good idea for us to stand out in the middle of an open plain like this. The alien ship is above us. If they decide to do away with us they can do it before we

have an opportunity to defend ourselves."

"Why should they want to kill us?"

"Reasons...? Wouldn't we lose too much time trying to figure out their reasons?"

"Harras is right, Lieutenant," Steiner said. "What do we know of the aliens existing in this dimension? Rago was not so dumb, going into the mountains."

"If we hurry up we can still catch him and Noir," Rous said. He looked up. "The ship is speeding up."

Josua fingered the controls of his battle-suit nervously. Rous noticed it with raised eyebrows. But Steiner and Harras were following the African's example.

"You don't want to fly, do you?" asked Rous.

"What about making ourselves invisible? Up to now we've assumed the inhabitants of this alien time plane couldn't see us because we were too fast for their eyes. But if they've really discovered a method to make us visible..."

"Or the energy defence-screens!" Steiner's suggestion was even better than Harras'.

However, Josua shook his head. "No! We should fly away-into the mountains, into the caves!"

Rous knew that a speed of up to 3 meters a second was not dangerous at all. It was thanks to the composition of the atmosphere that this relatively great speed did not have any unfortunate effects. One would sense the beginnings of frictional heat but no more.

"We have to be careful," he reminded. "No one is to move faster than I do. I'm not keen on the idea of going by foot now myself."

Steiner rose first into the air. Supported by antigravity fields, he hung weightlessly a few meters above the others.

"It's great, letting your legs simply dangle like this. Are we flying in formation?"

"I'd like to see the Druufs' faces when they see us now," Harras commented, also rising into the air. He was closely followed by Josua who looked quite happy that his suggestion had been followed.

Rous followed last. "Stay behind me," he said, "and don't fly too fast. As soon as the heat can be strongly felt, slow down! Believe me, I never would have thought before that the thickness of an atmosphere is also dependent on the speed with which one goes through it."

Though not altogether correctly expressed, Rous' comment neatly summarized the problem. It was Time that had changed this world and seemingly thrown all natural laws overboard. If the passage of time in this dimension could be speeded up 72000 times, then the world would look normal again.

Or was it normal...?

Was this alien time plane the real norm...?

The question ripped through Rous like a lightning bolt and it seemed to him that here was the key to their problem.

They floated just a few meters above the stony ground and Rous became aware of the odd fact that at the beginning of their adventure they had simply not realized that they could fly if they had to.

They had all but completely forgotten their suits.

Steiner glanced at the sky and called out: "The ship's following us but it isn't as fast. They don't want to let us out of their sight. Anyway-we're moving at Mach 60."

"Do you feel the heat?" Rous asked. "There's an actual vacuum forming right behind us because the air moves so slowly." He looked upwards as well. "You're right, Steiner: their camera-ship is following us."

They crossed the river and the valley and reached the level cliff that was already familiar to them. The small ship had been left far behind. It covered perhaps 2 centimetres a second, making a good Mach 4.

"I wonder if they can still see us?" said Harras.

"I don't think their range is that great," Rous replied. "If that were the case, they wouldn't need to follow us."

A few minutes later they spotted 2 moving human figures among the rocks below-and any movement on this world of absolute motionlessness was instantly noticeable.

Ivan Ragov and Andr? Noir!

Rous had hardly touched his foot to the ground then he heard Steiner give a loud yell. With stretched-out arm the physicist pointed back towards the plain. The men followed his gaze and stared.

Rous felt as though an ice-cold hand had grasped his heart for now he saw the practical illustration of his theories. There, where the gallows tree had stood, was now only a harshly bright ray of energy standing perpendicular to the rocky ground. The tree, now only an indistinct silhouette, was completely wrapped in the beam.

The ray, about 10 meters thick, led straight up into the sky and lost itself in the violet-red of the cloudless portion of the heavens. It seemed to be coming straight from outer space. It stood like a gigantic pencil of pure energy out there in the plain, striking just that area where the Terrans had been an hour before.

Rous figured that he could follow the energy beam with the naked eye up to an altitude of 40 kilometres where it was swallowed up by the sky.

"They hesitated too long," he said grimly. "The deathray would have finished us and we wouldn't have had time to get out of the way. Light still moves at 4 km/sec, an unimaginable speed for this world where nothing at all moves. Maybe now we can understand what it means to cover 300,000 km/sec like light does in our universe. That out there is an energy beam fired at us from a ship flying at a very high altitude. That means we've discovered the Druufs. And we know something else: they intend to kill us!"

"That out there... an energy beam?" stammered Josua, holding his head as though trying to collect all

his knowledge of physics. "For so long?"

Rous smiled gently. "What does the word 'long' mean here? Say they're firing an energy beam lasting 100th of a second. If the ship stands 400 kilometres high, then the beam will take a minute and 40 seconds to reach the surface. And then it will remain for approximately 12 minutes. For the Druufs, 12 minutes are 100th of a second. Unless I miss my guess, we'll see the beam dissolve. We'll have to watch for that because if it happens, we'll know then that even the speed of light is affected by the time dilation. The process of dissolving will begin at the top and continue along the beam at a speed of 4 kilometres a second."

"It's completely unbelievable," Steiner murmured, then added: "But logical, all the same."

"But it would be wrong to conclude that we could get out of the way of a ray beamed at us," Rous said thoughtfully. "We were lucky because we happened to move to another place. If we had remained standing by the gallows tree, we would have been lost. If light moves only at 4 kilometres a second, we'll still see it only when it hits us. So practically speaking, there isn't any difference between a speed of 4 kilometres a second and 300,000 kilometres a second if a shot is coming directly toward us."

Steiner looked up into the cloud-covered sky. "What if they're aiming again now?"

Rous shook his head. "Don't worry, Steiner. I've already thought of that. But there isn't any danger for us here. Do you think the Druufs would kill their own people? They would hardly dare destroy one of their settlements."

Ragov, who had bent down by one of the motionless Druufs, stood up again. A questioning expression was on his face. "I don't understand this," he concluded. "They have spaceships and energy beamers but they live in caves. How does that make sense?"

Rous was not without an answer this time. "Just think of a hundred years ago, Ragov. How did things look on the Earth then? Josua's forefathers possibly still lived in the African jungle and were happy if they could kill a lion with the help of spear. Yet the first atomic bombs were being developed 5000 kilometres away. If such differences in technical and cultural development could exist between the inhabitants of a single planet, consider how great the differences might be when the same race inhabits entire solar systems.

"You're right, of course, Lieutenant," Ragov said slowly. "One should never come to conclusions too hastily and forget one's own history. So you're convinced, then, that these caterpillars are the ruling intelligences on this alien time plane?"

"We can only guess, Ragov. We'll know for sure only when we meet the Druufs face to face. I must admit, though, that I look forward to our first meeting with them with a certain amount of discomfort."

Noir pointed into the heavens. "The camera ship has stopped. It isn't coming any closer."

"It's only avoiding the energy burst," Harras supposed. He wiped his forehead and added thoughtfully: "It ought to be easy to fly up and shoot the thing down."

Rous threw him a quick glance. "Are you crazy?"

"What do you mean? We were attacked. It's our right to defend ourselves. Who knows how much time we'll have to spend on this world-I have no desire to have to be running away from these sneaks all

the time we're here."

"Harras is absolutely right!" Steiner said. Noir and Josua nodded in agreement and the expression on even Ragov's face was far from one of refusal.

"Hmm..." Rous found himself outvoted. "it would hardly be as simple as Harras imagines. We don't want to forget that the Druufs can see us and..."

"They can see us only so long as the camera ship exists. If it's destroyed, it will take them an eternity to get another one." Harras seemed possessed by his idea. "I'll take the hand-beamer and melt the cameras away. Then I'll try to damage the ship itself so much that it crashes."

Rous looked up into the sky. "Look-over there!" he suddenly exclaimed. "The energy beam! It's dissolving!"

They saw it clearly.

The process ran from the top down, quite swiftly yet relatively slowly. For the first time in their lives the men could follow the passage of a beam of light with their own eyes. At least 10 seconds went by before the beam had entirely vanished.

The 100th of a second was over.

Harras fiddled with the controls on his belt.

"Now," said Rous, "I've thought about some things and would like to let you know what I've come up with. A good hour ago we were afraid that we would have to give up the idea of firing our ray pistols because of a possible catastrophe: our beam would move at a speed 72,000 times faster than the speed of light in this dimension. We were even afraid of tearing apart the space-time continuum. Well, I don't think so anymore."

"Why not?" asked Steiner matter-of-factly.

"Because we can radio each other! Radio waves are just as fast as light waves. Have any of you noticed any effects? All right. Nobody! Nothing happens in this dimension when something moves faster than light-relatively speaking. So I think you can make use of your impulse-beamer without any worries, Harras."

"Frankly," Harras said, trying to stay calm, "I had forgot all about our earlier speculations and would have fired in any case..."

"You always were reckless," Ragov reprimanded, looking thoughtfully at the Druufs in front of the caves. "I hope I can find an opportunity to finally investigate these caterpillars."

"It's a mystery to me how you expect to do that," Rous admitted.

The scientist smiled. "Not to me any longer," he said evenly.

5/ THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

"The slowing process is still taking too long."

"We'll never be able to kill them. They're too fast."

"They've gone into the mountains. As long as they're so close to the winged slaves, we can't attack them."

Relay contacts clicked, video screens lit up and colour patterns flitted across curved projection screens. The reactors hummed somewhere in the depths of the ship.

"We must try to accelerate the slowing process so that events don't take place too far in the past. How are we ever to eliminate an opponent who is always 5 or 10 time-units in the future? We'll never catch him."

Again the shadowy faces bent over the videoscreens, especially the 10th one which showed the miraculous results of advanced technology. This screen showed what had happened just a few minutes before-and it showed it as someone who lived 70,000 times faster than the viewers would see it.

"They can fly, Master."

"And without wings! Probably antigravity."

Again a long pause. Then: "One of them is coming towards us!"

"Alone!"

"What can he want?"

And then, shocked and with sudden certainty: "He's carrying a weapon and flying towards our camera ship! But what we're seeing took place some time-units ago. We've got to do something and-"

"Too late!"

Within seconds all 10 video screens had gone dark.

The aliens' slow-motion photography took precisely 5 minutes to process.

Thus they lived precisely 5 minutes in the past.

5 minutes too many...

* * * *

Fred Harras was not altogether in good spirits as he slowly approached the all but motionless ship, fire-ready impulse-beamer in his right hand.

The camera ship might have been an easy 10 meters wrong; they had not guessed wrong on the ground. 100 meters below Harras stretched the surface of the unknown planet. He hung weightless and controlled his flight with the instruments on the belt he wore beneath his suit. He felt as though he were floating in water.

The ship was only a few meters away. He could plainly see the lenses of the 10 cameras. The first of them was now trained on him. 5 minutes must have gone by before he was noticed. The theory that the slow-motion process required several minutes seemed to be confirmed by that.

Harras spoke into the microphone of his ring-radio. "I'm within firing range. Should I...?"

"What are you waiting for?" Rous' order came in the form of a question.

Harras mumbled an assent and took aim at the first camera. Within the space of less than a second the fine energy beam hit and melted it. But the camera itself was a product of its own time plane and followed the natural laws of that plane. Harras could follow the melting process but the metal droplets and the resulting gas acted like all other objects in this crazy world.

Unendingly slowly, yet noticeably driven on by the normal time-light-fast energy burst, the white-glowing debris floated away, growing ever slower.

The 2nd camera melted, then the 3rd the 4th...

The demolition work was completed in half a minute. If the aliens did not possess a 2nd camera ship, then, they were now blind again.

Harras hesitated. Should he return to the surface or shouldn't he rather attempt to shoot the ship down? It hardly moved and constituted no danger to them but perhaps its interior offered clues about the unknown enemies from another time.

Rous would have to decide.

And Rous decided: "If you think you can find it and destroy some appropriate spot, then try it, Harras. Perhaps then it will actually crash and Steiner can have some work to do at last."

Maybe at the 'stern,' Harras thought, and moved carefully around the silvery shining aircraft. He was cautious not to blunder into the clearly visible exhaust, which forced its way out the lens-jets at just 4 kilometres a second. But what did 4 km/sec mean compared to real light-speed?

He allowed himself to drop back and a bit to the side, raised his weapon and aimed it towards the lens system at the stem. Then he pressed the firing button.

The result was obvious and decidedly impressive.

The ship exploded.

It exploded in slow motion: at first expanding at a speed of half a meter per second, then more slowly. Harras did not find it difficult to dodge the debris, which then began to sink seemingly as light as downy feathers. Finally, half a minute after the explosion, the debris seemed to hang in the air as though glued to various places on the outer surface of a vast and invisible sphere. Only when one looked at it for awhile did he realize that everything was falling very slowly, the lower segments somewhat more quickly than the upper. The sphere was gradually becoming an egg, thanks to gravity.

Through his receiver Harras heard the cries of his companions, who had witnessed the spectacle from the ground.

"Incredible!"

That was undoubtedly Steiner, who was still able to marvel over the optically perceivable effects of time-dilation even though he understood them well enough.

"Come back!" Rous called, concerned. "Otherwise you'll be hit by a retaliatory beam from the mother ship... if there is one."

"Who else would have shot at us?" Harras murmured, as he let himself sink towards the ground in a somewhat lateral direction. He caught up with the wreckage of the ship, which would land just 200 meters from the place where the Gazelle stood-in its own time plane.

* * * *

Ivan Ragov had not been idle in the meantime.

"It wouldn't have been believed possible," Rous said when the zoologist explained his plan, "that time has something to do with gravity too! How did you come to that idea, Ragov?"

The scientist smiled almost shyly. "Well, the connection isn't quite as great as that between time and space but that there is one can't be denied. Don't forget that my thoughts are nothing but sheer theory. Only putting them to the test will decide whether they're valid or not. How did I get the idea? Simple! I was wondering how the inertia of these petrified caterpillars could be overcome. It can't be done with energy alone; something else has to be involved. So why not gravitation?"

"You're right," Steiner conceded, glancing overhead to where Harras was taking care not to fly too fast and break the "heat barrier." He fell at a speed of 4 meters/sec. "You want to lift a Druuf in an antigravity field and move with it?"

"Exactly!" exclaimed the Russian, adjusting the controls of his Arkonide battle-suit. "Besides, I'll

make use of my energy shield: it creates an enclosed bell-shaped area and perhaps I'll be able to create its own time field inside, if you understand what I mean."

The men looked at each other.

Rous shook his head. "You've always got ideas, Ragov; I'll say that much for you. But its own time field? Are you trying to say that it's possible to make the different time planes approach each other closely enough that a new, neutral time plane can be created in which communicating with the aliens-that is to say, the Druufs-is no longer as hopeless as it might seem?"

"Yes, that's what I was trying to say. Exactly that!"

"And all that inside a small energy bell?"

"Yes, because in it I can produce the conditions I want. I can adjust the gravity, create any temperature I like and change my location at any time without altering the conditions inside..."

"But you can't alter the existing time, can you?"

Ragov still smiled modestly. "Who says so? You seem to have forgotten that the speed of light is a close relative of time itself. And as we've conclusively found out, speed in this world is only 4 kilometres a second. But in the energy bell, men, I'll be safe from the heat barrier. What would happen if I zip around the area at Mach 12 or 13 under these conditions?"

Rous stared at him without comprehension but the first glimmer of understanding shone in his eyes. Even Steiner nodded slowly and hesitantly. Noir showed open admiration for the scholar's daring conclusions. Josua stood by, waiting.

When Harras landed, he arrived just in time to witness the beginning of the great experiment.

One of the Druufs stood somewhat to the side of the group. Ragov took up a position next to it and turned on the energy bell with a decisive motion of his hand. The shimmering dome had a diameter of 19 meters and was 3 meters high and entirely enclosed the scholar and the apparently petrified caterpillar.

Then Ragov activated another switch on his suit. He held himself still so that he would not float up and strike the roof of the energy-field, for as gravity had been neutralized he too lost all his weight.

The Terrans outside watched him smile faintly as he bent over and raised the Druuf with a light hand motion. Yes, he had lifted it! Though virtually frozen into time itself, the creature had suddenly become movable. Although it still looked made of stone and apparently dead, as before, it had lost some of its stiffness. The giant caterpillar with the crystalline wings floated slowly by Ragov's side.

And then, when the zoologist touched another switch, the energy bell and its living contents rose into the air, climbing rapidly into the sky. In just a few seconds Ragov had surpassed the previously safe speed and not many minutes later had disappeared from the sight of his friends.

Rous looked at Steiner. "We shouldn't have let him fly off like that," the Lieutenant said. "Who knows if his theories are correct?"

"That's something we should have thought about beforehand," the physicist replied. "But I hardly believe we need worry. Can you reach him with the radio?"

Rous tried but the result was negative.

"Perhaps he doesn't have the time," Harras suggested after being brought up to date by Noir. "That's it! When I was up there destroying the ship, I would have all but forgotten that I had a radio myself."

"Ragov doesn't have any time?" Steiner said, shrugging. "He's out there now trying to change time, so he must have some."

No one gave him an answer.

Immobility lay heavily upon them.

And the quiet, broken only by the long and drawn out "ruuf... druuf..."

* * * *

"We'll look into the matter of the aliens who have penetrated our dimension later; now we must see to it that the slaves take the captured populations into their care. The population of an entire planet-won't that cause an appreciable assimilation?"

"The scientists maintain that the others are gradually adapting to our time stream and will no longer affect it. A complete synchronization of the 2 planes is not expected."

"But the synchronization must be attained or we'll be alone again, as we were up to now. Who knows if we'll ever get another such chance to establish contact with the other intelligences in the Universe?"

The great ship moved out once more and attained the speed of the colonial planet's rotation.

Then alarms shrilled through the wide corridors and rooms a few minutes later.

Minutes that could mean weeks or months somewhere else.

"What's going on?"

"I don't know. The Master will tell us..."

"Attention all on board! There has been a penetration of our dimension from the other time plane! The penetration has been achieved by force! We are being attacked!"

"Attacked...?"

"Attacked!"

But all of 5 seconds went by before counteraction could be undertaken.

5 valuable seconds!

5 entire seconds too many...

6/ A MYSTERIOUS REAPPEARANCE

Ivan Ragov was alone-assuming one ignored the motionless Druuf.

He sped through the atmosphere of the alien planet at an altitude of 10 kilometres, encased in the protective energy bell. The reactor of his battle-suit gave him a constantly increasing speed. Contrary to Lt. Rous' opinion, Ragov was convinced that exceeding the speed of light in effect here would create certain effects.

3 kilometres per second!

That was equal to about 225,000 km/sec in the home dimension. The Einstein dilation had as yet not made an appearance; or at least if it had, it was not yet strong enough to be noticed.

The Druuf did not stir. It floated motionless next to Ragov inside the energy bell. Yet... it had raised its right grasping arm a few centimetres in the meantime.

As Ragov read from his instruments that he had attained a speed of 3.99 km/sec, he noticed the first change in his companion. At first it was only the 2 arms which moved, then the feet and finally the fine wings and the eyes.

The eyes! They were looking at Ragov!

4 kilometres per second! Just under the speed of light! Perhaps it would be enough.

The Druuf seemed to be waking from sleep. An intelligent expression came into his eyes and he seemed to understand that something unusual was happening to him or his surroundings. He made a movement and was driven by momentum against the invisible barrier of the energy bell. He bounced off and floated in the opposite direction.

He gave out a short, shrill cry.

Ragov grinned contentedly. The acoustic adjustment already followed the optical: a shrill peeping had

emerged from the long and deep "druuuuf". Perhaps the caterpillar still lived at a rate a bit slower than Ragov's but anyway it had been broken out of the death-like immobility.

"Calm yourself, old caterpillar," said the scholar, pointing to the depths below where cloud cover obscured all view of the planet's surface. "If you fall out, returning to your old lazy-bones time-plane won't be the worst of what happens to you."

The Druuf cocked his head slightly and listened to the tone of the words. He did not understand their sense but he seemed to comprehend the warning in them. His expression betrayed astonishment, then showed panic.

Ragov lessened the speed of the energy bells-and the Druuf's movements immediately grew slower. Then as the velocity decreased, the Druuf returned to his own time plane.

The scholar uttered a light curse. "Then I'll have to try something else!" he murmured obstinately and accelerated again. Neither he nor the Druuf felt anything: the antigravity field created its own realm in which nothing from outside could affect it. "I'm curious to see what will happen."

The tiny needle on the dial neared a point that had not been specially marked for it meant nothing on Earth and in the normal universe.

4,160 meters a second; 4.16 km/sec.

That was the speed of light! Here, at any rate...

The Druuf's movements were now fully normal and in terms of speed corresponded exactly with Ragov's. The absolute synchronization of the 2 time planes had been attained but it was not permanent. A slight change in the flying speed resulted in a new difference between the two rates of time.

4,160 meters a second.

At least that was certainly the case when one dropped beneath speol again. But what would happen if he went over the speed of light? Ragov had already considered this question but without coming to any logical conclusion. Practically speaking, there could be no exceeding of the ultimate speed but on this plane of a slower time lapse it was possible.

What would happen?

5 kilometres per second! 10 kilometres!

That was far beyond speol. Ragov regarded the Druuf carefully but there was no sign of any change. The caterpillar moved in fully normal fashion although it was attempting to accustom itself to weightlessness.

Ragov turned on his radio and called Rous. An answer came only minutes later. The others were 300 kilometres ahead of him. He himself had already gone around the planet once.

"What is it?" Rous wanted to know. "Where are you keeping yourself, Ragov? We've been worried about you."

"As usual, that wasn't necessary!" The Russian replied laconically. "At the moment I'm streaking

through the upper levels of the atmosphere at a speed relatively faster than light. The Druuf is behaving normally and has adjusted his time rate to ours."

"Are you going to land?"

The answer came hesitantly. "I'd like to but I'm afraid my subject for study will slip back to lifeless stone again. But I still have one crazy hope..."

"Well, out with it!"

"I'm surpassing speol. Perhaps an unknown effect will stabilize the time rate."

"That's only another one of your ideas!" Rous said, disappointed. "You'd better land!"

Ragov rapidly diminished his flight speed in the meantime and did not let the Druuf out of his view.

3 kilometres a second... 2...

The Druuf moved normally. Nothing was to be seen of a relapse into the slower time plane.

1 kilometre per second.

Ragov could hardly believe it but there could be no more doubt: the Druufs time rate had synchronized with his own. The surpassing of the speed of light had fused the 2 dimensions into one!

The future would show if the results were lasting or only temporary.

Ragov continued to decelerate his speed and let himself drop lower. Just as he touched the planet's rocky surface he turned off the energy field and let the normal gravity return. The upright-standing Druuf was shorter than he by only a head. The strange creature looked around to all sides attentively and curiously. It was quite apparent that the sight of humanoids was nothing new, to him.

"Cute little fellow," Steiner said in acknowledgement. "Is he quite normal now...? I mean, he moves just as fast as we do? How is it possible?"

Ragov shrugged. "We can rack our brains over that as much as we like but this much I do know: we can bring any creature we choose up to our own time rate. It's easier for the Druufs. They can just roll over us with their time-front-and we're on their time just like that."

"What are you going to do with him?"

Ragov did not answer. He watched with interest as the Druuf went down on his short legs and walked away. Then the Druuf called out some of his shrill cries: no one could have guessed that when slowed down they sounded like "druuf!"

The caterpillar-being went up to the eaves and then suddenly stopped short. Ragov, who had followed him, realized why: the Druuf had spotted his immobile fellows.

The first visible proof of the caterpillar's intelligence! The possibility that there could truly be dealings with the lords of the other dimension was thereby relatively strengthened.

Ragov was almost frightened when he saw the questioning expression in the Druufs eyes, which were focused fully on him. Then the strange creature began to touch and examine his stiff compatriots. For 10 minutes this went on. The 6 men watched breathless and mute, standing ready at all times to protect themselves from a sudden attack.

But then the Druuf turned and came towards them. He stopped in front of Ragov.

He knew Ragov; then...?

Rous whispered to Noir: "Is he a telepath? Can you make anything out?"

"I'm a hypno, no more," Noir replied. "I can't read thoughts; I can only influence other brains. But I can create some thought images in the Druuf's mind which will help him understand what we want to say to him. What I visually imagine will be seen by the Druuf, too. And finally, I can order him not to run off if you like."

Ragov broke in. "I would prefer it if he retained his own will. Limit yourself to communicating by thought pictures, Noir."

"Alright," said the hypno and went to work.

He found a very receptive student...

* * * *

They brought 2 more Druufs back into their own time rate and thereby found the proof that the outcome of Ragov's first experiment had not been the result of chance. Even Steiner was not able to give a well-founded explanation for the phenomenon. The fact had to be accepted for what it was and the questions of how and why left open.

Rous and Harras went off a bit to one side, not wanting to disturb Noir with his experiments. Ragov, too, seemed extremely busy and like he would rather be left alone. Steiner had flown off to begin his investigation of still-falling debris from the camera ship and Josua stood watch on a large rock outcropping.

"Perhaps we should bring one of the Arkonides up to our time rate," Rous suggested, pointing down into the plain where the petrified police troop of the Administrator of Tats-Tor endured an apparently motionless existence.

"What would be the point of that?" Harras demanded. "We don't owe those stuck-ups any thanks. Quite the contrary! Besides, they wouldn't understand and they'd blame us for it all."

"I agree with you, Harras, but it isn't important. We've carried out the mission Rhodan gave us for the most part: everything but getting back and making our report. Somebody's going to get worried about us and perhaps do something soon. The Gazelle must be still standing on the old spot."

"Assuming it survived the attack and the LFG is still intact!"

A shadow crossed Rous' face. "That would have to be our main concern. Why did the device fail? It must have happened without any human interference, since when it happened there weren't any people left on Tats-Tor anymore. I'm also convinced that where we are now..." he gestured expansively across the plain to the distant horizon... "is not Tats-Tor! We're on another planet-and yet our Gazelle must be standing right where the gallows tree was. Is it possible that 2 planets can exist simultaneously at one and the same time?"

Harras shook his head. "Never at the same time, Lieutenant. But when the 2 planets exist in different times, they can very well seem to occupy the same place. In reality, they occupied the same place only for a millionth of a second-in that millionth of a second when the 2 time planes intersected."

Rous stood with his arms akimbo. "You know what, Harras? You shouldn't think about these things too much. We'll never figure them out, or at least not with philosophic hair-splitting. If we're ever able to explain everything, it will be with the help of mathematics or physics. Steiner ought to be able to help us."

The name reminded them of what the physicist was planning. They looked up. They saw the man clearly in the middle of the ship debris about 50 meters above the ground. Steiner was still busy capturing important-looking pieces one by one with his energy bell and with the help of his antigravity field.

Rous switched on his radio. "Having any luck, Steiner?"

"As much as can be expected," came the prompt reply. "But I'm still wondering how I'm going to examine the pieces. They're subject to the laws of the other time rate. As soon as I let them out of the range of my suit's gravity field, I can't move them anymore."

"Try Ragov's method. What works for organic creatures ought to work for inorganic material. Take the stuff on a trip."

Steiner understood immediately. "Good idea. I'll surpass the speed of light and bring the material into our time rate. It's really nonsense, though, when you stop to think about it..."

He left the contradiction of his statement to the 2 men below and flew off in his energy bell. The debris which remained behind continued to sink slowly downwards as though nothing had happened. Their interminably slow impact with the ground would probably bend and twist them just as slowly, if not break them apart.

"You know what I'm think about now?" asked Harras, looking out at the point on the horizon where Steiner had vanished.

"No, what?" said Lt. Rous.

"We're existing here in the other dimension and we're been able to fend off all attacks up to now. We're even superior to the aliens. But... the time relations are confusing me. Like the business with Ragov when he managed to... well, reverse the Druuf's poles, so to speak.

So what I want to know is... how much time has really passed by? At home, on the other side, I mean."

Rous looked at him attentively. "That, Harras, none of us can answer. We can only hope that the difference isn't all too great." He fell silent because at that moment the tiny receiver built into his ring

hummed. He turned it on with the press of a button. "Yes-who is it?"

"Steiner here! Listen, Rous-I found something about 100 kilometres west of you on the high plateau. Can you get out here as fast as possible?"

"What is it?"

Short pause. Then Steiner said: "It's one of our Guppies-landed! 60-meter class! And if my eyes don't deceive me, it bears one of our usual identification insignias: K-7."

Lt. Marcel Rous felt as though his heart had stopped.

The K-7 had been under his command just 3 months before when the planet Mirsal 3 was overtaken by the aliens and depopulated. Cadet Becker and 2 men had been captured first, disappearing without a trace. Then, as he had returned from an excursion into the deserted city, there was no more auxiliary vessel K-7 anymore, either. The aliens had kidnapped the ship along with its entire crew and it had been listed for 3 months as lost.

And now... months later!

Rous took a deep breath as he said: "Wait there and transmit a homing signal, Steiner. I'm coming immediately..."

"I'm going with you, sir," added Harras determinedly.

7/ IMPRISONED IN PARATIME

They found Steiner thanks only to the homing signal beamed out by his transmitter. The Guppy could barely be made out from a high altitude for it did not stand out prominently from the rocky terrain around it. However, as the 2 men descended farther, the spherical ship became more clearly visible. With a wide-open main hatch, it stood down there on the plateau as though it were the most natural thing in the world. At the time the K-7 disappeared, no one suspected what was going on with the 2 intersecting time dimensions.

Steiner waved to Rous and Harras as they slowly descended and softly landed. "I would have gone

in myself already," Steiner said, "but that's your affair, Lieutenant. Is it really one of our own ships?"

Rous nodded grimly. "And how! More than that, it's my ship, which we gave up for lost 3 months ago when it was overtaken. I thought I'd never see my good old K-7 again. How did you find it?"

"Pure chance, Lieutenant. Just as I surpassed speed and slowed down again so I could turn around my instruments showed an ore deposit below. When I looked for the deposit, I found the Guppy." Only now did Steiner seem to understand what Rous had said. "What did you mean, Lieutenant-this is your old ship? Your ship? That would be...!" Words failed him.

Rous did not concern himself with him but instead walked towards the K-7. Harras followed after, sympathetically clapping Steiner on the shoulder. The physicist was occasionally slow about catching on.

The Guppy-and over the years that name for the smaller spacespheres had been made official-stood on its telescoping legs and seemed to be waiting for something. The open hatchway indicated that the crew felt safe here and knew that no danger threatened them.

While Lt. Marcel Rous approached the K-7, memories of past events swirled through his mind.

They had landed on the planet Mirsal 3 for a parley with the emissary from the robot Brain of Arkon. There they learned for the first time of the monstrous danger threatening their universe. And even as the alliance between Arkon and Terra was being sealed, the invisible enemy attacked Mirsal 3.

Cadet Becker and 2 other crewmen of the K-7 disappeared during a single action. Rous himself had been present when the impossible took place. A little later he left the K-7 to tour the deserted city. When he returned to the Guppy's landing place, it was gone as well. For the first time Terrans learned that the invisible and uncanny enemy seized not only organic life but inorganic material as well.

That had been at the beginning of September 2040. Now it was the beginning of January 2041: 4 months later.

And there, hundreds of light-years removed from the site of the first event, the K-7 stood unchanged as though nothing of importance had taken place during the meantime.

Rous had reached the ladder leading up into the airlock. Harras stood next to him. The 2 men looked at each other. 50 meters behind them, Steiner was occupied collecting the debris that now belonged to his time rate.

"I wonder if they're still alive?" asked Harras in a low voice.

Rous shrugged. "I don't know, Harras. Too much time has gone by in the meantime."

"Maybe," said Harras meaningfully and began to climb the ladder. He did not even think of letting the leader of the expedition go first. "We'll soon find out."

Rous followed him into the roomy airlock. The inner hatch was likewise open. If they had been closed... how could one have opened them? Assuming, of course, that the K-7 was on the alien time rate and subject to its laws.

The corridor was empty.

"Let's look in the control room," murmured Rous and shuddered as the echo of his words bounced back hollowly from the empty hallway. "They could be having a conference."

No one met them and Rous' fear of encountering a closed door was fortunately never realized. The ship was as though deserted. But the door to the control room was only half opened.

A man in the light green uniform of the Solar Imperium had just stepped into the control room and was in the process of closing the door. Rous knew the man on sight. He belonged to the technical personnel. Motionless and as though carved from stone he stood there, face still trained on the empty corridor and his hand on the doorknob. He was closing the door but it would be hours before it was finally shut.

Rous carefully squeezed past him, bending to get in under the outstretched arm, and stepped into the control room. His guess had not been wrong: the entire crew was collected here. Of course, there was not much room, but all the men had found a place to sit down. Lt. Hiller, First Officer of the K-7, stood somewhat elevated on top of an overturned box and was speaking. His mouth was open and was probably forming the letter "o". Almost simultaneously Rous heard the deep and humming tone driving at his ears.

Lord-how long might an "oooooh" last here? 2 or 3 hours...?

With only the exception of the man at the door, all eyes of those present were on Lt. Hiller.

"My God!" Harras gasped as he followed Rous in. "This is like an assembly of... of corpses...!"

"They're dead-at least for us," Rous commented. "Luckily we know now how we can bring them back to life. Ah..." He interrupted himself to point at a man in the uniform of a space cadet. "There's Becker. How he found the Guppy is beyond me. The aliens got him a good distance away from the others."

Harras did not reply. He came closer to the speaker, whom Lt. Rous had identified as Lt. Hiller. Harras looked at the round mouth of the officer for awhile, fascinated by the appearance of a man frozen in time. Then he listened to the bumming tone floating in the control room, which seemed unwilling to fade away.

"A single heartbeat," said Rous in the silence, "lasts between 15 and 20 hours."

Harras nodding, seeming to break out of a spell. "I know, Lieutenant, I know. How are we going to free them?"

"With the same method we used to bring the Druuf on our time rate."

Harras pointed to the door. "Shouldn't we hurry up? When that guy there's shut the door, we'll be stuck in here. Do you know how we could get out again? I don't!"

Rous went pale involuntarily. Harras was only too right: once the door was closed, there could be no getting out. The First Officer could speak for 10 minutes-and in reality about 2 years would have gone by.

In spite of the normal temperature, he suddenly felt uncomfortably warm.

How long had they really been in the alien time dimension?

How much time had really gone by on the other side in the meantime...?

Rous pulled himself together. "You're right, Harras. Well have to hurry. I figure it will be some hours before that door is shut. Call Ragov, Josua and Noir and tell them to come here. They'll have to help us. Take one of these men with you. I'll take care of Becker."

He switched on the antigravity field of his suit, caught Becker's body with it and manoeuvred him cautiously out into the corridor. Becker was as stiff as glass but in the weightless field he could be easily moved. Outside Rous explained things to Steiner, who had forgotten his pieces of wreckage and come up to the K-7. The new task seemed more urgent and, moreover, more interesting.

Then the physicist hurried into the ship to find a crewmember as well.

Rous activated his energy field and rose with Becker into the air. At an altitude of 6 kilometres he sped up and experienced the 'awakening' of his cadet. The man moved only slightly at first but then his movements increased in speed as the 2 rates of time neared one another and finally synchronized.

Becker's wide and staring eyes showed only too clearly what was happening. Rous waved to him and said: "Wait a bit, Becker! I'll explain everything later. Don't try to talk!"

Becker stared into the depths below where the planet's surface glided along beneath him. Rous went up to 5 kilometres per second, then made a U-turn in a wide curve and began to slow down. Finally they landed again by the K-7 and Rous turned off the energy screen and the antigravity field.

"Welcome, Cadet Becker!" he said, smiling wryly. "Now you can ask questions. In the meantime, my men will be freeing your comrades. I hope you realize you were prisoners. Prisoners of another time."

Becker nodded slowly, looked around and whispered timidly: "How did you get here? What did Sikerman say?"

Rous went pale and saw his suspicions confirmed. "Sikerman... eh... I mean. Sikerman has already forgotten the incident. Be very calm, Becker. Can you remember exactly what happened? Do you still recall how it all came about?"

"Of course I can. You sent me into the house-it had disappeared with all the other houses and the city. Then it seemed to me that something was tearing me out of the visible world-it must have been some kind of forced teleportation: because when I opened my eyes seconds later, I was here. I only stood on the plateau with Horrahk and Jeffers for a moment-then the K-7 materialized right in front of us along with its entire crew. We couldn't understand what had happened but the First Officer, Lt. Hiller, called us into the control room. He believed he had found an explanation. But hardly had he spoken one sentence when something strange happened."

Rous' thoughts began to spin. He could guess the whole truth already and was afraid of drawing the inevitable conclusions. For what had affected Becker and his companions was equally valid for him and his men.

Or not...? After all, they had not lost their own time rate by existing in the alien dimension.

"What happened?"

"It was like before. I saw Lt. Hiller gradually disappear from before my eyes, as though a cloud drifted in between us. Something pulled me away, although I didn't notice the change very quickly. Then I saw nothing more until I saw you."

Rous understood. The change in surroundings had taken place before Becker's nerves had a chance to react. "We retained our own time rate when we came into this time dimension, Becker. Steiner can give you all the details later. We found a way to bring living beings and even inorganic matter from the other dimension into ours and that's how we freed you. The question now is: what happens to the Guppy? It's too big for us to free it from the time prison."

Becker shook his head. "I'm going to go crazy yet! How could you do all that so fast? And who is Steiner? I don't know the others either, except for the hypno..."

Rous laid his hand on Becker's shoulder. "Tell me something and don't be surprised at my question: can you remember about how long it has been since the time you came out of the house on Mirsal 3... and the other time plane sucked you up?"

Becker looked at his superior officer thoughtfully. He noticed that Lt. Rous was holding his breath waiting for the answer. "Well," he said slowly, "I know for sure that it hasn't been any more than 2 minutes. I hardly came to rest on the plateau before the K-7 appeared and Lt. Hiller opened the batch to tell us."

Rous was not listening anymore.

He began to realize that if he ever saw the Earth again-at all-it could very well be an Earth thousands of years older, if some miracle did not take place.

He overlooked the fact that miracles had been taking place one after the other for hours now.

* * * *

Somewhat later, Harras shook his head energetically. "No, Lieutenant, that's utterly hopeless! The K-7 will have to stay where it is! We could never bring it out of the other time rate and back to its own. And what would be the point? We now have a way to bring the food, water and anything else we need into our own time, so we can easily hold out until help arrives. Rhodan will certainly start looking for us when we don't come back. In the meantime, we can live in the K-7. We've already found out that we can open and shut the doors when the antigravity field is in operation."

"We've got a place to hole up, that's true," Rous answered. "But I'm worried. We don't want to forget that Cadet Becker and all the men aboard the K-7 aged 2 minutes while we became 3 months older. What will happen if the same natural law affects us while we remain in the alien time plane even though we've retained our own time rate? A slowing will result but we don't know how much of one or what relation it has to the actual passage of time."

Steiner waved it all away. "I think we're getting worried over nothing. If a really long period of time had gone by, Rhodan would have done something a long time ago. Or does someone here believe that

Rhodan would leave his men in the lurch? Well, then! Nobody believes that. If he hasn't shown up yet, that can mean only one thing: not enough time has gone by for him to get worried."

"Or else," said Harras unmoved, "this place, wherever it is we are, has moved somewhere else in the meantime. How could anyone find us then?"

Steiner decided not to offer a counter argument. He did not have one.

Degenhoff, communications officer of the K-7, stood somewhat to one side and listened in on the conversation. Now he stepped in and said: "Lieutenant, if I may offer an observation... why don't we send out a message? A perfectly good hypercom stands right here aboard the K-7. What does it matter if the Arkonides or someone else picks it up? The main thing is that Rhodan receives our distress call."

Rous was about to dismiss the idea but stopped. His questioning glance took in Steiner and Harras. "How can we use the transmitter?" he asked.

"It's too large to be brought on our time all at once but it can be dismantled, Lieutenant. The single parts can be put back together again later."

"Excellent!" Rous remarked, smiling doubtfully. "But if we do all that, what will happen to our signals? Would they leave this time plane and reach the receivers on Terra? You probably can't give me an answer, either, Degenhoff

"No one could," Steiner said, somewhat reproachfully. "Anyway, trying something is better than talking about it. I vote we try Degenhoff's suggestion."

"Me too," said Harras, "although I'm convinced that something will alter the hypercom impulses. Either the time barrier will absorb them or they will be accelerated or slowed down so that no one can understand them..."

"Alright, then," said Rous, breaking off the discussion, "we'll try it."

Degenhoff went to work and could report 2 hours later that he had dismantled the hypercom transmitter into 3 sections: it had been decided a demontage of the complicated receiver was not worth the risk. Another 2 hours later the hyper-transmitter stood ready for operation in the shadow of the K-7. Degenhoff waited for the signal to start.

"It's hopeless from the start," Rous commented "because we have no idea in what direction the Earth or other receiving stations are to be found. You can see, Degenhoff, that not only time but space too is causing us problems."

"I'll run the message tape repeatedly and keep the antenna constantly rotating. That way every sector of this hemisphere will be included. Later we'll have to fly the transmitter and reactor to the other side of the planet and repeat the whole process. Only then can we be relatively certain that our message will be picked up somewhere."

And what will be in that message?" Steiner asked sceptically.

Rous took a pad out of his pocket and began to write. Steiner looked up into the still-cloudy sky. His eyes searched for the lightning on the horizon. It had not changed and one gradually grew used to it. Altogether, they hadn't been on this world for even one full second. Josua who stood watch again by the

burned hulk of the gallows tree, had reported just a few minutes before that the light ring had not yet appeared again. Noir would go relieve him in 2 hours. Someone had to be there at all times.

Rous had made some improvements on the text and now seemed to be satisfied with what he had written. "I think this will do," he murmured and gave Degenhoff the sheet of paper.

The com-officer took it and read it into the recording unit microphone:

"SOS! Time expedition of Marcel Rous calling for help! Attention anyone! Our way back is blocked, the Lens Field Generator broken down! Position unknown, our time rate constant. Crew of the K-7 has been found. We are in otherwise good shape.

Lt. Marcel Rous"

Steiner nodded. "Good message-if anyone hears it."

Degenhoff retorted almost angrily, "Someone will hear it, believe me. And even if these Druufs intercept it, it will take them some time to slow it down enough that they can listen to it at the right speed. Even then they won't be able to translate it. And as for the Arkonides-if they hear it Rhodan will find out about it."

Rous gestured impatiently. "What are you waiting for now, Degenhoff?"

Steiner's eyes narrowed as he walked away. When he believed himself out of Degenhoff's hearing and alone with Harras and Rous, he asked grimly: "Tell me, Lieutenant, are you really convinced that the message will do any good? Do you really think that it will break through the time barrier? You don't have to spare me. I can bear hearing the truth."

Rous looked quizzically at the physicist, then smiled coldly. "Honestly, Steiner, I don't know, so I can't answer either yes or no to your question. Only time will answer that."

"And that," grinned Harras wryly, "will take time."

"I want to tell you something else, Lieutenant. We have yet another hope, even if the transmitter fails. I admit it's a crazy chance but it's well founded and in no way based on sheer theory or vague speculation. If nothing at all happens and no one comes to pick us up, then we can take the K-7 apart and free it piece by piece from the time prison. Once she's back together, we'll have a space-worthy vessel obeying the laws of our own time plane. I'll bet we could even find the Earth with it eventually."

"Yes, perhaps we could find the Earth. Hopefully it won't be an Earth where everyone's forgotten about us because thousands of years have gone by in the meantime!"

Steiner didn't answer. He narrowed his eyes in shock, hesitated a second, then walked away. He paused at the plateau and looked out over the broad plains.

Harras followed him. In no way did he show his feelings.

Degenhoff was already at work with the transmitter, preparing the recorded tape. Minutes later, the reactor began to hum. Invisible impulses radiated from the aerial and sped into the reddish sky of the unknown world at the edge of eternity.

Lt. Rous watched the com-officer for a few minutes, then turned and walked away. Without turning around once, he climbed the K-7's ladder, crossed the airlock and finally pushed his way through the still half-open door of the control room.

He sank down heavily into the pilot's seat and stared lost in thought at the dead control panel and unmoving instruments. Wasn't he himself as good as dead, prisoner of another time which might just as easily be past, present or even future?

His glance fell on the instrument panel chronometer. It was the only thing that moved on this alien world because it indicated thousandths of a second.

Even so, a thousandth of a second lasted for 1 minute and 12 seconds!

Exactly 2 minutes and 1 second ago he had landed on Mirsal.

Exactly 1 second ago he had climbed through the LFG's ring of light.

He sighed.

It was a kind of resignation as he let his head sink down in his arms on the control panel and decided to sleep for a quarter second.

No one, not even he, could guess how long this quarter second would really last...