

THORA

KIDNAPPED

1/ APPREHENSION

THE 11th HOUR.

1 minute before they were 83 space cadets.

1 minute after—?

The 83 young aspirants to acceptance as officers were scarcely calm and collected. Yet the closer time marched to the hour of 11, the more uniform their collective expression became: each strove to suppress the least outward sign of inner excitement and attempted to project instead the picture of self-composure and confidence.

In moments, in accordance to the roster and schedule of the Solar Empire's Space Academy, the 83 cadets, who averaged 21 years of age, were to enter the 'Great Hall'. Here they would receive from the Academy's commanding officer their commissions as lieutenants in the Spacefleet—or else be assigned to a 1-year cram course to prepare for a reexamination.

The hour following 11 o'clock would be an important milestone in their lives. For many of the cadets it would be a decisive moment for from then on their destiny would be one continuous active mission after another.

The 11th hour struck.

83 cadets drew themselves up to their finest posture and bearing.

The C.O. was punctual. The large folding door behind the podium rolled back and the Chief of the Academy entered The Hall accompanied by his staff.

Maj. Wals announced the C.O. to the cadets. The Chief acknowledged the introduction curtly. His word of thanks sounded completely impersonal. He took 1 step forward ahead of his officers and swept

the anxious men with a single all-encompassing glance. He knew each individual not only by name but training record, moral qualifications and special accomplishments. During the period of their instruction he had not only been their Chief, he had striven to observe each man according to his talents and abilities in order to have him fit in exactly the right place in the spacefleet.

The interstellar fleet demanded men who could inspire 20 or 30 crewmen with their leadership and insure that they would fulfil their duty to their utmost in the face of the most difficult action.

The chronometer in the Great Hall indicated 11:01 when the Chief began his address. He was not too fond of words. Dispensing with roll call, he announced only 3 names.

3 faces turned pale.

3 young men lowered their heads and wished they were invisible.

3 cadets had failed the Academy's final examination and for another year would remain cadets.

But for this disappointed trio the C.O. had a few words to spare. "Don't be discouraged by this setback. Don't give up—because the Solar Empire is waiting for you! Like every officer in the fleet you will become a pillar of support and I am not trying to boost your egos falsely when I say that one of you may one day be that deciding factor upon which the continuation or dissolution of the Empire will depend!

"And because each officer of the spacefleet represents a factor of strength in his particular position we are forced to apply the strictest standards to everyone who wishes to belong to this community of service."

One by one the 80 men stepped forward. They still wore their cadet uniforms but in accordance with the duty roster they were to change into the simple uniforms of spacefleet officers and appear before their department chiefs within the hour to learn where they were to be transferred.

There was not one day of furlough, not even one hour. Of course this wasn't official. The 80 young lieutenants were entitled to a short leave but they didn't take advantage of it. They had received their commissions from the C.O. and now they changed for the first time into their officer uniforms.

Tilf Reyno looked himself over and let out a big sigh of relief. "Looks like it's made for me! Thomas—would you say it's a perfect fit?"

Tilf was a Viking-figured Swede with blond hair and blue eyes. He turned to his roommate, Thomas Cardif, for an inspection.

After a brief survey Cardif had to admit, "You look as if you'd been poured into it. But how about me?" As he stood up his exceptional physique and bearing seemed to make Tiff pale by comparison. His personality virtually radiated and although unusual for a man only 21 his manner was marked by a certain air of pride. However it was not exaggerated enough to be offensive in any way.

"Crosht!" Tilf looked at him in frank admiration. "Dressed in that, you look like the Chief...!"

"Maybe if you tried you could say something even more ridiculous?" Along with the squelch went a flashing look from his strangely amber-coloured eyes but in the next moment he waved a hand as if to remove the sting.

Thomas Cardif was often like this and in fact was one of the problem cases for the psychologists who had to run tests on each cadet during the course of their training in the Academy and keep them under constant if unobtrusive observation.

Many of the tests hadn't been too favourable for him; yet other test series had shown astonishingly positive results. He was one youngster in particular who had been the most puzzling to the psychologists. The diagnoses indicated that he probably wouldn't make friends during his training time; however, outside of a few exceptions almost every cadet was his friend. His frankness and good will were proverbial which helped his comrades to easily overlook these indefinable streaks of pride and hauteur whenever they came to light.

A taped announcement came over the P.A. and was heard in the living quarters of the shave-tail lieutenants. The clock in every billet registered 11:55. Their duty schedule required them to appear before their respective sector chiefs by 12 in order to receive their transfer papers.

The officer in charge of Tilf Reyno and Thomas Cardif was attached to the 'General' Department. For every cadet in the Academy to be assigned to 'general' duty was the same as passing a final exam with top honours. Preparation for general duty involved the most extensive training curriculum; starting with astronomy, radio technology and astronavigation it embraced propulsion engineering, Arkonide hypno-training, metallurgy and some 30 other specialties including the study of poisons. In this department a future officer of the spacefleet was exposed to the broadest range of knowledge.

The course of training, which had ended today in the granting of officer commissions, had produced 3 men who were to report to Maj. Knight. Now they entered a room whose door displayed the uninformative sign: General Duty Sector.

"Lt. Hal Stockman!" rasped the Ibero-African as he snapped to attention.

"Lt. Thomas Cardif!"

"Lt. Tilf Reyno!"

Maj. Knight was a grey-haired officer in his 60s who was blind in his left eye. He recognized them curtly and glared at each one in succession. Then, impulsively, he shook hands with them and congratulated them.

"Lt. Stockman, you are transferring to Venus and will be 2nd orderly to Col. Dirkan. Stand by for departure at 14:00. You will go by courier ship. That is all. Thank you."

Lt. Hal Stockman turned and left.

Tilf Reyno was transferred 12,348 light-years away to Hellgate, an uninhabited planet on the border zone of the Arkonide Empire, where he was to relieve Lt. Bings as commanding officer of the outpost base.

This base consisted of a single giant steel dome and it served as a control centre for incoming messages from agents. Supported by a 2-man crew, it was Reyno's responsibility to assign a priority to all communications according to their urgency and then either to record them in a memory bank or to relay them to the Earth under a pulse-burst code system.

Tilf Reyno took off one hour after midnight.

At that same moment in time Thomas Cardif found himself on board a Solar Empire cruiser that was entering its first landing pattern over the planet Rusuf. The solar system of his origin floated now at a distance of 1,062 light-years in the depths of interstellar space.

At 8:43:08 ship's time the cruiser's Com Central received a clearance to land from the Terranian garrison on Rusuf. At 9:34:52 the spherical spaceship landed at the port of the garrison. By 9:57 Lt. Thomas Cardif stood before his new chief, Col. Julian Tiffloor, who was the commander of the small Terra base.

In that same moment Thomas Cardif was asking himself: why is the Colonel looking at me so strangely? It was not an idle question. From the first moment of his arrival here it had followed him like a shadow. It was the first time in Thomas Cardif's young life that something had made him feel uneasy.

He had to force himself to concentrate so that he could follow the import of Col. Tiffloor's words. He was describing the task that had been assigned to his force on this Arkon world plus the daily difficulties involved and he spoke of the constant flare-ups of disputes with the Galactic Traders who had also established settlements on Rusuf.

"...so you may utilize today for the purpose of familiarizing yourself with the garrison, Lieutenant, and I'll want you to report to me tomorrow morning at 6:30 for your first daily briefing. Thank you Lieutenant."

Col. Julian Tiffloor, himself a cadet under the New Power some 60 years before, had come through the most dangerous missions and distinguished himself by his exceptional valour—yet as Lt. Thomas Cardif departed he watched him go with an obvious expression of relief.

He shook his head. "Chief," he said to himself, "I'm afraid that *in this* case your calculations aren't going to work out so smoothly." He was thinking of Perry Rhodan.

Throughout the Solar Empire there was only one 'Chief' just as there was only one 'Tiff'—meaning in the first instance Perry Rhodan who in 60 years had built up a small but powerful stellar empire and in the second instance Col. Tiffloor. He could get away with addressing Rhodan merely as 'Chief' and Rhodan simply called him 'Tiff'. It was a nickname his friend had given him 60 years ago during his days as a cadet.

Between Rhodan and Tiff there was a strong invisible bond. The crowning proof of this was not alone the fact that he had been allowed to receive the life-prolonging biological cell shower on Wanderer, the artificial planet: the true test of closeness was that Perry Rhodan had confided in him as *to who* Thomas Cardif was. He was the *son* of Thora and Rhodan!

Again to himself Julian Tiffloor repeated the name: "Lt. Thomas Cardif..." Again he breathed a sigh of relief—and yet he was overcome with apprehension against the time when Thomas Cardif would learn the identity of his parents...

2/ THORA'S TEARS

Perry Rhodan's wife Thora had been staring at the park-like landscape with heavy thoughts. Out there what had once been the Gobi Desert had been converted into a paradise. Only to the right of her field of vision could she see the towering shapes of the industrial and administration buildings. They were the only indication that this miracle in the former desert was inseparably connected with technology, politics and determined men who had been well tempered in the crucible of experience.

Perry Rhodan's magnificent creation, the spacefleet of the Solar Empire, demanded men of this kind and the continuous training of the Space Academy was forming them to that mould.

Thora reached out and turned on her videophone. The robot operator of the house answered. She asked to be connected with the Academy. "Please ring me when the commanding officer is on the line." The Arkonide woman saw no reason to dispense with her customary politeness, even with a robot.

She had hardly sat back in her chair before her videoscreen flared up. Its lifeless grey tone was replaced by living colour. The striking countenance of the head of the Space Academy appeared on the screen. He gently nodded his head in greeting.

Thora smiled. "It's been a long time since I've attended graduation ceremonies at the Academy and I was thinking I'd like to see the cadets again when they receive their officers' commissions. You discharge them tomorrow, don't you?"

"I'm sorry," she heard him say and the regret was expressed in his face. "We had to advance the time. The young lieutenants received their commissions yesterday and in the meantime they have all been transferred to their duty areas."

"What a pity," Thora heard herself say. Her voice remained normal even though this news had almost robbed her of the strength to breathe. "Thank you Commander."

When she switched off the connection she no longer had to maintain her artificial smile. She was alone in her room. The proud daughter of one of the most ancient and renowned noble houses of Arkon pressed her hands to her face and wept. Her tears were for Thomas Cardif, the young lieutenant who had been assigned to serve under Col. Julian Tifflor on the planet Rusuf.

"Perry..." she whispered while her body trembled in her grief. "Perry, we have wronged our child! Both of us have made everything a living lie!"

She knew it; Perry Rhodan knew it. But when they had finally come to realize what they were relinquishing and what they were withholding from their son it was too late to abandon the course that had been taken.

Now Thomas Cardif *had* to remain Thomas Cardif because the youngster was at once too old and too young yet to withstand the emotional and psychological upheaval that a true revelation would involve—at least not without scars.

They had only wanted what they thought was best for him—Perry, Thomas' father and she, his mother. It was intended for Thomas that he should make a man of himself on his own merits without having to depend on his famous father. Until he became a man he was to make his own way in the world and never detect the hand of his father, which guided him unobtrusively.

That had been the theory when they had chosen to deprive themselves of their love's greatest

treasure—their own son—but finally it occurred to them that their offspring had grown up alone in a coldly impersonal world that was devoid of the warmth of the nest, totally without the balancing factors of parental relationship in his own home.

Too late!

And today it was again too late. Thomas was no longer in Terrania, Thora wasn't able now to even observe her son from a distance.

She wept in lonely silence. No one interrupted her. Not a soul intruded upon her solitude. The First Lady of the Solar Empire had become a very lonely wife.

Her husband Perry was not on Earth. He was presently located on Morag 2, a world on which 6 of his people had disappeared into the alien time dimension. She couldn't put in a call to him to seek consolation. It was not permitted.

But she was allowed to leave the Earth.

She could commandeer a Gazelle and fly in it to Venus. She'd make it look as though she were merely getting away for a change. On Venus it would be easier to take off toward her real destination because she had more chance there of eluding the surveillance of ground stations than she would here on the Earth.

Having been formerly the commander of a great Arkon expedition ship it was no problem for her to fly a Gazelle. To make a jump through hyperspace and put more than 1000 light-years behind her was routine Arkon technology.

Rusuf, the 4th planet of the star Krela, was Thomas Cardif's new location. Thora had known this for some time as well as the fact that with the exception of just 3 subjects he had passed his exams with honours. She had every reason to be proud of him. And that she was for there were only 5 people in the Solar Empire who were aware of the existence of the son of Perry Rhodan: herself and Perry, the Arkonide Khrest and Reginald Bell and now the 5th one, Col. Julian Tifflor, commanding officer of the garrison on Rusuf.

It was not as Rhodan's son that Thomas Cardif had passed his tests. No special advantage had been given to him in fact he had been denied more than any other cadet: love!

Parental love!

Still holding her face in her hands and sobbing, Thora whispered: "Perry, I can't take any more! I'm flying to him... I must see him!"

This moment of despair finally had to yield to her Arkon upbringing—and Thora was and would remain an Arkonide even though she had found the greatest happiness of her life at Perry Rhodan's side.

In its golden age, during the epoch of its mighty expansion, Arkon had forced its men to be stern with themselves and to look at facts as they were without flinching. Often such facts consisted of virginal planets which Arkon wished to incorporate into the Empire and soon many of them became constituents of the stellar realm in star cluster M-13 because the conquering Arkonides denied themselves advantage or personal comforts in their primary consideration of serving the Empire.

And now Thora recalled the conversation that took place prior to the birth of her son between herself and Perry and Khrest and Bell. She remembered that Bell, the impulsive but undying friend of Perry Rhodan, had only come in on the end of the conversation and hadn't heard the whole discussion but he thundered right into the middle of it: "Fine parents *you* are...! Thora, by all that's holy...!"

He was prevented from expressing more of his indignation because Perry had laid a hand on his arm and given him a sharp look. There was an agonized smile on his lips when he said: "Fine parents, are we? Bell! I'll reserve judgment as to whether that's an insult or a compliment—but you don't have to come in here flashing your anger at us, my chubby friend! As parents we're not as irresponsible as you might think and what joy we find in our child, Bell, you know as well as Khrest. It's just that Khrest has thought a little further than you and I and Thora here..."

"I caught that bit when I came in, Perry! You 2 are crazy enough to..."

Perry had stopped him then with a glare that demanded silence. "Now you just let me tell you the rest of it! Or do I have your permission?"

"Go ahead, talk!" Bell had growled back and in the same breath warned him: "But if that's the decision you're going to stick to, then count me out as your friend—I'll deal with you strictly in the line of duty and that'll be an end to it!"

Without saying a word, Perry had handed him the readout that had been calculated by the positronic computer on Venus.

Bell had flared up again when he read the prediction the machine had given as to the possible character of Perry Rhodan's son. "Horse-feathers!" he protested. "Do you believe it, Perry? Are you going to hang your kid's fate on a lousy plastic strip from a computer?"

It was this scene that Thora remembered now and she experienced again the way she had beamed at Bell then in joy, thankfulness and hope.

Bell had jumped up and thrown the computer strip on the table. Aggressively he turned to vent his rage on Khrest. "Naturally only an Arkonide could come up with such an Arkon piece of insanity! You can go to the devil! Do you know what you're doing here?—you're bartering the life of an unborn child!"

However Khrest had faced this tirade almost unemotionally: "Bell, the baby's mother is Thora, an Arkonide! Can you forget so soon how arrogant, how unyielding Thora was in her lofty pride just over 10 years ago? Have you forgotten that Thora was often the victim of this pride to the extent that she brought the Earth itself to the brink of disaster?"

"Would you care to consider what capacities are latent in Perry? And now suppose that he transmits only a part of that as an inheritance to his son... On the one side Arkon pride, haughtiness, self-conceit! On the other side a developing young son of Rhodan whose father created the Solar Empire. How will Perry's son grow up and what will he develop into when all of his decisions will be influenced by the fact that Perry Rhodan is his father and he can therefore follow any indulgence or whim with impunity?"

That had been more than 21 years ago. It was unusual for Bell to hear Khrest out without an interruption but the Arkonide had hardly finished before Bell turned and gave his friend Perry a penetrating look while picking up the computer strip again. He took it into his hands as though it were a red hot piece of metal, waving it back and forth in front of him, and finally blurted out: "Terry, didn't you say yourself that the Venus positronic isn't able to evaluate Earthmen 100% because it was built by Arkonides? Now did

you say that or didn't you?"

"I would make the same assertion again today, Bell—but isn't the situation altered a bit by the fact that Thora is Arkonide and that she is to become the mother of our son?"

Bell had not given him an answer but had turned to Thora instead. "Just simply say no and stick to it..."

"Bell! Perry told me the same thing long ago and repeated it just within this hour but..."

"What? You mean there's a but to it?" he had asked, flaring up again, and looked at her in despair.

"Yes, my thick-headed friend," she had told him. "There is a but to it when it's possible one day for our son to reproach us for being egotistically motivated in not having given him the elbow-room in which to develop freely on his own. His life would have become prescribed by his birth... Bell, you know how happy I am with Perry and that's why you deliberately try to forget that my origin is Arkon. Even we Arkonides can't go against Nature and it is our nature to be conceited, proud and obstinate.

"I feel, Bell, that our youngster will carry these characteristics of his mother into the world and uncountable hours of wailing and crying about it won't erase this fact. I fear for the price that Perry and I will have to pay for our happiness. But if our child—not knowing who his parents are—turns out well by his own efforts, don't you think he'll thank us one day for having given him this chance? And may not Perry and I hope that all 3 of us can then become a happy family?"

The memory of this momentous conversation faded slightly. Thora got up and walked to the window. Her eyes raised to the shining blue sky. Somewhere within a thousand light-years was her child—Thomas Cardif!

And hadn't he already demonstrated that he could turn out all right by his own efforts? Hadn't the time now come in which he might know who his parents were?

Thora's heart and maternal longing answered these questions in the affirmative. Of course her sharp intelligence warned her but even with an Arkonide mother the maternal instinct to hold her child in her arms is stronger than all the power in the world.

"Thomas..." she said. "Thomas, I'm coming to you! I'll be there soon!"

3/ THE "THOMAS CARDIF MADNESS"

The Solar Empire's spherical spaceship *Drusus*, measuring one mile in diameter, returned out of hyperspace with a thunderous roar accompanied by the light cruiser *Sherbourne*. They could thank their hyper-compensators for the fact that the resulting tremendous ether warp could not be detected or tracked by either the listening stations of their own solar system or by those of the Arkonide Empire.

It was the last hyper-transit of both vessels. Morag 2 lay 132 light-years behind them as well as the dangerous mission in which Perry Rhodan had rescued the so-called Time Expedition and also had saved the crew of a guppy who had disappeared into the other time dimension on Mirsal.

The sun and its planets began to grow visibly on the giant view screen of the *Drusus*. The 2 ships, which had flown separately on the trip, now hurtled toward the orbit of Pluto at 0.6 speol. The powerful ship's automatic transmitter sent out its recognition signal in pulse code. The relay stations received it and, after re-coding and repulsing it, passed it onward to Earth, Venus and Mars. Within 5 seconds the *Drusus* and the *Sherbourne* received a hypercom signal in return, which gave them permission to land.

Perry Rhodan was asleep. Bell was taking his place in the Command Central of the space battleship, yet as second-in-command he had little to do at the moment. The crew of the *Drusus* was so well-coordinated that he had enough time on his hands to wander into the Communications Centre and pick up the latest news.

As he entered, the 2nd officer there was about to salute him since he was Perry Rhodan's chief assistant, but he waved it off with an idle gesture of his hand. He sat down next to the Cöordinator and picked up the latest bundle of dispatches, leafing through them as though they were a deck of cards.

Bell wasn't particularly looking for work; he merely wanted to satisfy his curiosity. But today he wasn't getting his money's worth. "What is this, a paper war?" he grumbled, and he leafed swiftly onward through the stack.

One communication mentioned that a new group of the ASF had been formed. The Anti-Socialist Free Settlers were those who believed they couldn't stand it any more on Earth.

"Down with you slobs!" snorted Bell. "It's a good thing the galaxy hasn't run out of extra worlds to shove you off on!" He didn't like these kind of people and anyone who knew Bell would have been surprised if he hadn't openly expressed his aversion toward them.

But now here was something interesting: Thora had gone on a little vacation. "Venus," said Bell half aloud, and in his memory the gloomy Venusian jungles came alive again. He seemed to see the incredible storms raging there once more and to hear the roaring of saurians and gigantic beasts in the hideous Venusian night. "But I suppose they've improved a few spots here and there. Hm-m... why didn't those bureaucrat paper pushers mention what tourist spa Thora was headed for?"

He read through 2 more dispatches—and that was the end of the news. He had expected more. "Is that the whole balawax (21st century corruption of 'Ball of Wax')?" he asked of the Cöordinator. The latter silently shoved over a communication to him which had just come off the decoder machine. "Oh-oh!" he moaned as he got up. "This is probably for the Chief."

He didn't want anything to, do with laws or legal amendments. He was more for things he could manage with his hands. Paper pushing and administrative work were not his cup of tea. Yet whenever unusual circumstances made it necessary for Perry to leave the solar system he had always fulfilled his duties as Rhodan's 2nd-in-command in an exemplary manner.

Even while he was leaving the Com Central he tried to think of more pleasant things than the dry imperatives of the Law. He popped his head in briefly at the Control Room to say that if he were needed he could be found in the positronic section.

Being an electronics engineer by profession Bell was always drawn to the department where he had dedicated so much of his body and soul during his younger days and so it was understandable that some things should slip his mind when he was so engaged. For example 3 hours later when he was with Perry in his cabin he forgot to tell him that his wife had gone to Venus for a vacation and that therefore Thora

would not be in Terrania to meet him when he returned.

Instead they again talked over the results that had been achieved by the mission of Lt. Rous on Morag 2. Meanwhile the *Drusus* and the *Sherbourne* landed at Terrania's gigantic spaceport. In spite of this, however, Rhodan and Bell continued their discussion until they had finished it. It was only 4 hours later that Perry learned that his wife was not on Earth and that she had been vacationing on Venus for some days already.

"What ship did she go on?" he asked without giving the question any special significance in his mind.

Unsuspectingly Maj. Mys replied: "She took one of the latest Gazelles sir, with the new translight propulsion. That model is going full speed in production now. We placed one of the latest test-run series at your wife's disposal. . . Excuse me sir, did we do something wrong?"

Mys had detected a well-known ominous flash in Rhodan's eyes but to his great relief the Chief answered him in a friendly manner.

"No you did just fine, Major. Thank you."

But Bell knew his friend too well to be deceived by this. Still he waited until he had come with Rhodan to his office. Here they were alone.

"Perry, you're worried about something!"

It was a kind of conjecture that was typical of Bell and in any other situation Perry Rhodan would not have let it affect him. Actually his concern was greater, however, than his usual impulse to make Bell explain himself.

"Yes Reggie, naturally I'm worried. Why did Thora take off to Venus in a new model Gazelle? Why didn't she wait until I got back from Morag 2? That way we could have discussed the matter."

Bell brushed a hand through his hair. He had to be careful not to make any ill-advised comment at the moment because he might reveal that Perry's observation was a disturbing one.

On the other hand Thora was very capable of taking care of herself.

Then a terrible suspicion flashed through his mind: within the past few days had the aging process begun with Thora? Had she been panicked by the realization that she was turning irreversibly into an old woman and therefore had flown into voluntary exile on Venus?

HeorIt, the master of Wanderer the artificial planet, had to this day denied the 2 Arkonides, Khrest and Thora, the life-preserving biological cell-shower treatment. The 2 of them had been kept young until now by Ara drugs and other serums of Earthly origin. But the moment could occur at any time in which all these methods would fail thus bringing on the final aging process which once begun could never be reversed again.

Bell watched his friend unobtrusively but Perry's thoughts turned to another point. From this master workroom he could directly contact the most important locations in Terrania. Bell swallowed almost convulsively when he suddenly saw the commanding officer of the space academy on the viewscreen.

"Yes sir," the commander reported to Perry respectfully. "All 80 lieutenants have already been placed on

their duty assignments."

"Thank you," Rhodan interrupted him. "Arrange to have the complete roster of names submitted to me at once together with the young lieutenants' assigned locations. That is all!"

Bell was sitting at Rhodan's writing desk. He puffed out his cheeks and exhaled audibly. Rhodan said nothing. His arresting features seemed turned to stone. Motionlessly he gazed outside into the cloudless sky above the Gobi.

Bell began to tap nervously with his fingers on the desktop, his forehead suddenly furrowed by a new thought: if Perry's suspicion was right, then Thora would be long gone from Venus. She would be out there where Thomas Cardif had been assigned!

"...so it can't be anything else..." Bell did not realize he was thinking out loud.

Rhodan startled him with a sharp "What did you say?"

Nevertheless he was able to cover up: "What do you mean? I didn't say anything. Why do you ask?"

"Alright..." A fleeting smile touched Rhodan's lips. He understood why his friend lied to him. In Bell's place he would have done the same thing. White lies of this kind were not really lies—they were expressions of sympathy.

The videoscreen on the right-hand side of the desk flickered on and revealed the face of an older officer, while his voice came over the loudspeaker. "Sir, to save time could I just hold up the whole officer list and..."

"You may," Rhodan interrupted him. And then the old officer's face was replaced on the screen by the duty roster of the 80 lieutenants along with their places of assignment. "Hal Stockman... Reyno... Thomas Cardif, Krela System, planet Rusuf, Terra Garrison, Col. Julian Tiffloor," Rhodan read half aloud and then nodded slightly. He had expected nothing more.

He cut off the connection. Slowly he looked up at his companion who was sitting on the edge of the desk. Bell remained silent because the situation brought to mind an emotional discussion on the subject which had taken place almost 22 years ago between Perry, Thora, Khrest and himself.

Recalling this he didn't say a word.

Perry Rhodan, the creator of the Solar Empire, the man who had so far been able to stand off the robot Regent of Arkon and remain partners with him on an equal footing—this same Perry Rhodan was now in a fever of inner anxiety, a father who feared for his only child.

Just a father now—no more and no less. And just as all fathers are alike when they're worried about their children, it follows that all mothers react the same when they want to run to their own.

"Bell... you know I confided in Tiff before we took off for Morag 2," Perry said. But his words contained more than just a simple statement; they also transmitted a plea for help—to a friend.

"Perry..." Reginald Bell got off the edge of the desk and came to stand next to his comrade-in-arms. He had suddenly become grave and thoughtful. I can't help you much by just keeping up the status quo but if it comes to a catastrophe I'm ready to go all out to help *all 3 of you*..."

"You think it could come to that, Bell?" Again Perry was *just* a father speaking and Bell was aware of it.

"You bet your life!" Bell answered bluntly. "Here you are all at sea about this and in the meantime Thora has gone off on some wild idea that could be a real Humpty Dumpty! I want to ask you one thing, Perry: why didn't the 2 of you receive the boy as your son the 1st moment he stepped out of his room in his new lieutenant's uniform?"

"Do I have to remind you of Morag 2...?"

"Ha!" Now came Bell's loudest complaint. "You, want me to let you off the hook for *that*, Perry? Have you forgotten who you are? You're the Chief! It's *you* who gives the orders! You could have easily told them to hold off on those lieutenant commissions until you got back to Terrania!

"What the devil are you trying to make out of that kid? How long does Tom have to go on pulling himself up by his own bootstraps? Man... that question's been a lead ball in my belly for 22 years! You mark my words—your Thomas isn't so all squared away that you and Thora couldn't make some improvements! I'll tell you what—if I were you I'd put in a call to Venus, Perry..."

The space control station on Venus gave a laconic and impersonal reply. They simply gave the time of Thora Rhodan's departure in a late-model Gazelle on a course terminating in the Krela System.

"Then she's been there long since, Perry."

"Yes..." It was Rhodan's only answer.

Suddenly the old Perry Rhodan came to the surface. With a new lightning swiftness he weighed all the alternatives and their possible results. "If Tiff doesn't slip up, and Thora..."

Bell placed a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Perry, take the *Drusus* and blast off right now for Krela...!"

"But the ship has just returned from a heavy mission..."

"So what? Now of all times you've got a right to throw your weight around a little—use it to take care of your own personal troubles for a change! Can't you do that? Isn't this situation worth it?" Thus Bell, the blustering bull in the China closet, urging his friend to pull out all stops possible in an effort to clear up the 'Thomas Cardif' madness once and for all.

But Perry Rhodan wasn't a man who could be so easily pushed into things. And in contrast to Bell he was also a man who often grasped intuitively what he could and couldn't do.

Perry decided to wait...

4/ MAN OF 2 WORLDS

In a gesture of helpless despair Col. Julian Tiffleur pressed both hands to his temples. "That's all I

needed!" he whispered. In the next moment he shot an emergency call through to the spaceport and spoke his instructions into the microphone: "An escort of 6-officers will receive Thora at the field and will accompany her by the shortest route to my office. That is all!"

His next connection was made to space traffic control. "Where is the Gazelle now?"

The routine answer came back: "Now swinging into final turn of approach pattern. Will land approximately in 3 or 4 minutes."

Col. Tiffloor didn't hear the rest. He stormed outside. At least one officer had to receive Thora. The escort he ordered would be there too late.

Meanwhile Thora's ship was already in sight.

The world of Rusuf swept by beneath her like a filmstrip. It was a Planet similar to Earth and, was an old Arkonide settlement. At 1.42 gravs its gravity was just at the borderline where one could adjust to it with an effort of will. Nevertheless in the course of generations it had enabled the native-born Arkonides here to make a good physical adjustment to their environment. In addition to a strong skeletal frame and a marked development of musculature it had given them a chest expansion that lent them an unwieldy or almost deformed aspect in spite of their height.

The Krela System with its 4th planet Rusuf was far enough removed from Arkon to have escaped being contaminated by the phenomena of racial retrogression which had appeared in the tri-planetary homeland. Now as ever before these particular Arkonides remained a proud and somewhat overbearing people with a thriving, aggressive energy.

With a broad-mindedness that can only be acquired over many millennia of time they had also permitted the Galactic Traders to build settlements on their world but they had never allowed the Springers to assume more rights than those established by treaty and charter.

2 times there had been hostilities between the Arkonides and the Galactic Traders. Twice the Springers had made the mistake of thinking that one Arkonide was like another and that these who were native-born on Rusuf were equally asleep at the switch.

During the first donnybrook the furious Traders had learned their lesson at the price of some bloodied heads and 9 of their cylindrical spaceships but the 2nd battle had cost them the annihilation of 3 entire Springer clans along with their fleet.

Since that time the Galactic Traders had demonstrated a grudging but high respect for Rusuf and those who were settled there were quite content not to make any more trouble.

They had also refrained from making a protest when Terranian spaceships arrived and unloaded their troops. They watched passively while the Terranians' laid out their garrison and a spaceport within a few dozen miles of the small Arkon city of Gelgen where they themselves maintained their largest settlement.

These Springers were characteristically out to do business with all comers at the highest profit margins but like the native Arkonides here they had subordinated themselves to the positronic robot Regent of Arkon.

And since the appearance of the small garrison force there had been no misunderstandings with either the Galactic Traders or the regular colonists. But if anybody did not trust this uneasy détente it was the

Solar Empire along with Perry Rhodan himself. It was repeatedly hammered into the garrison command that a sharp lookout must be maintained. "On your toes!" was the general inference. "The robot Brain is an unpredictable ally. Be friendly with the Springers but don't carry friendship so far that it may cost you your lives!"

All this Thora knew as she dropped the Gazelle down into the thicker layers of air and flew across Rusuf toward the garrison's spaceport.

She was suddenly challenged by the colonial ground station and had to adjust to the shock of hearing her mother language sounding out in such a distorted and ugly dialect.

She was requested to give her identification number but before she could even think about it an unmistakably Terranian voice broke in on the waveband speaking energetically in purest Interkosmo: "This is the Terra garrison. This ship beamed in its Terranian I.D. code from space 1 hour and 8 minutes ago. In accordance with Arkon agreements this gives full clearance. Other ground controls are requested to route inquiries over channel F-0775. Over and out!"

A slight smile touched Thora's lips. She was pleased by the alertness of the Terranian space traffic control. However she yielded to a misconception in assuming that this kind of communication break-in was common practice here.

And the space traffic control at the Terra garrison also made the mistake of not advising Col. Julian Tifflo of the incident!

Then a voice crackled on the speaker again: "Do you want us to bring you in on the guide beam?"

Which naturally prodded Thora's Arkonide pride. Didn't they think that she, the commander of the last Arkonide expedition ship, could set down a tiny Gazelle in the prescribed area? Owing to her inner tension and excitement, she unconsciously answered in classically pure Arkonide: "Thank you—I will bring in my ship by myself!"

But it had been many years since Thora had flown a spacecraft and even though she thoroughly knew every control she still had to concentrate carefully—and she was content to do so. For some minutes she was able to escape the uninterrupted hammering of her heart and thoughts accompanied by her son's name: Thomas Cardif!

Then the outlines of the garrison appeared in the distance. To the right of it was the spaceport marked by the typical spherical shapes of a number of light cruisers. Now she perceived 3 groups of Gazelles which lay on the other side of the landing field. And she also saw the ground car that was hurtling across the pavement to reach the area where she was to land.

With an elegant and professional manoeuvre Thora set the Gazelle down lightly. She deactivated the defence screens and with a flip of the controls she caused the main hatch to open and the ramp to emerge. When the control board signalled her that all was in readiness for her to disembark she shut the ship down entirely.

But she did not get up quite yet. She stared unblinkingly at the instrument panel. In her mind's eye she saw a young man—Thomas—whom she would stand before this very day but no longer as Thora the wife of the Solar Empire's Administrator. He would be facing his mother!

She did not realize how indescribably beautiful her motherly smile made her look. When she reached the

bottom of the ramp and recognized Julian Tiffloor this smile was still on her face. Yes, she was happy to see him again.

She ignored the fact that he was about to give her a military salute as wife of the Administrator and she simply took his hand with a completely disarming affection. "Tiff, I'm so happy that you're the first one to meet me on Rusuf!"

Col. Julian Tiffloor—alias Tiff—was 80 years old but still looked like a young man in the prime of his life. Which was enhanced by the fact that he blushed. He felt that Thora's impulsive greeting was honestly from her heart so he realized at the same time how very difficult it would be to fulfil the task that the Chief had transmitted to him.

As they drove in the car toward the garrison they chatted lightly until Col. Tiffloor apologized for not having had time to reserve a suite for Thora in the hotel. "We're not set up here for such important visitors, Mrs. Rhodan."

"Oh Tiff!" she laughed, beaming with the rosiest complexion in her feverish anticipation of seeing Thomas right away. "All I need is just a room. After all I'm not here officially. Isn't it possible to arrange a room for me at the garrison?"

Col. Tiffloor agreed to this with a surprising alacrity. He even went so far as to say that staying in the garrison quarters was more pleasant than in the hotel.

At any other time Thora might have detected a nuance here but all she could think of was that she was simply a mother who had come to reveal that fact to her son.

The car stopped in front of the plain, functional building in which the garrison's administration was conducted. Tiffloor gave Thora his hand to help her out. Beyond the guard room they entered a long hall then left it to step out into a spaciouly arranged garden beyond which stood a bungalow.

"Tiff," she said in amazement, "what is this?" She saw that work robots were busy in every room of the bungalow. "You *did* make preparations for my visit!"

"Well," replied Tiffloor, "what it amounts to is that on the way to the spaceport in the ground car I was able to call the guard room and have them open the bungalow and air it out. The robots are still at it—that's all."

One hour later Col. Tiffloor knocked politely on the door of Thora Rhodan's quarters. Her voice sounded jubilant as she called: "Tiff, if that's you—please come in!"

Fresh and youthful, her Arkon eyes gleaming with unwonted joy, Thora came to the window and watched the colonel enter. Having shaken off her travel dust and prepared herself with every benefit of the Arkonide style of living she was happy to see that Julian Tiffloor had also replaced his uniform with casual civilian clothes.

When Tiffloor sat down opposite her she looked at him sharply. His stern, almost lifeless expression alerted her. "Tiff..." she gasped, and his affirmative nod was all that was needed to silence her.

"Yes, Lady Thora... I know why you have come to Rusuf. The Chief has instructed me to keep an eye on Lt. Thomas Cardif."

Thora Rhodan stared at Julian Tiffloor so strongly that she seemed to have become stiff. "Col. Tiffloor, you will not dare to hinder me in my search for the lieutenant!" Thora could avail herself of no other expedient against the colonel than to exhibit her proud and haughty Arkonide personality at the moment. It was a move of desperation brought on by a sense of helplessness.

Julian Tiffloor had known the wife of his Chief for almost 60 years. They had gotten to know each other during many a rough campaign. No bond is stronger than that which comes from a mutually experienced deadly menace and exposure to grave danger. This is why he understood why she was flaunting her high-toned Arkonide nature and at the same time trying to make her weight felt as the wife of the Administrator.

He forgave her. She was Thomas Cardif's mother!

Nevertheless he did not reveal how sorry he was for her. Outwardly he was still the space fleet officer and Perry Rhodan his Commander-in-Chief. And he told her as much without embellishment.

"Tiff..."

He ignored her pleading. "Lady Thora, you know—right now I'd rather be sent out on a mission that I knew was a one-way trip—than to have to sit here and face you. I—"

She stood up. Her eyes were aflame but she strove with an almost superhuman effort of will to conceal the emotional hurricane that raged within her. "Col. Tiffloor, did my husband order you to keep *me* from seeing or speaking to Thomas?—yes or no!?"

"No!"

"*And what*, may I ask, gives you the right to stand in my way?"

Now Col. Julian Tiffloor also got up. He took a position behind his chair. The man who had risked his life a hundred times for Perry Rhodan and the Solar Empire was suddenly afraid of the next ½ hour.

"Col. Tiffloor, what gives you the right to detain me?" She did not shout the words at him. It was much worse than that: she whispered while her eyes appeared to consume him.

The 'Tiff' approach was gone now. For her he had simply become Col. Julian Tiffloor, an officer of the Terranian space fleet and garrison chief on Rusuf.

"My sense of responsibility!" he finally rattled out at her purely in self-defence.

With a sinister composure she asked: "And this—so-called sense of responsibility—this noble conscience of yours—does it include burying a mother's feelings, Colonel?"

The accusation gave Julian Tiffloor an apparent advantage. He felt instinctively that a certain point was hinted at in her question which she would have to understand *because* she was Thomas Cardif's mother. But he avoided her accusing question. Still resting his hands on the back of the chair he forced his voice to a gentler tone. "May I come over to you, Thora!"

"Please do!" replied the Arkonide woman.

He came around the chair and stood in front of her, whereupon he asked his next question. "May I take

your hands in mine?"

She said neither yes nor no and Tiff—Col. Julian Tifflo—surrendered to his feelings: he took Thora's hands in his.

Physically he could feel her resistance. He felt the strength in her and he was frank enough to admit to himself that in this hour Thora Rhodan was stronger than he—but he had a trump card to play that might reduce those strengths and replace them with the power of a more rational consideration.

"I am sorry for Thomas Cardif!" This was his ace card.

Thora tore herself from him. Tifflo saw that she still had not understood him but when he tried to embellish his statement the strength of his words seemed to evaporate.

She would have to arrive at the meaning herself and understand it.

Her gaze continued to change in expression. Tifflo experienced the intensity of Arkonide hate; he sensed the terrible impact of her rage—and he also witnessed the extent of Arkonide willpower and self-control.

"Colonel... why—why are you sorry for Thomas Cardif?"

"Because in the few days since he has been in service here on Rusuf I have studied him continuously. His total sensitivities and consciousness are Arkonide! He is a man of 2 worlds. He has 1 foot immovably fixed on the Earth, the other anchored just as solidly on Arkon! That is his misfortune..."

He had spoken dispassionately, as moderately as a jurist defending the accused before a court of law.

"Arkonide...?" She seemed to echo the word.

Was she actually savouring this word 'Arkonide'?

Suddenly this woman seemed to be sinister to Julian Tifflo. For the first time she revealed to him that an abyss of eternity lay between the Earth and Arkon. Man and Arkonide were similar—on the outside—but alien to each other in their basic essence.

"Does that make sense?" He spoke his thoughts inadvertently aloud as had happened with Reginald Bell during his talk with Perry Rhodan.

"What, Colonel?"

He did not take refuge in a white lie this time: he told Thora what he had just been thinking. And she listened to him. She had to listen because it concerned her as well. She was the wife of a Terranian—the wife of Perry Rhodan. Had both of them sinned in having married each other?"

She began to react to this new apprehension when she remembered her son and in that same moment her eyes flared up with the pride of a mother who has given birth to a healthy child.

"Tiff, it *does not* make sense! Is Thomas healthy or is he sick?"

He laughed ironically. "He's healthy alright!"

"Then there must be some avenue I can pursue, Tiff, in which you would not feel so sorry for Thomas..."

He offered her no hope. Again his instinct warned him that he could not deceive this woman with any falsehood, however devious. "Lady Thora, I wouldn't know of any such avenue and I come back again to my original observation: in his feelings Thomas Cardif is Arkonide, in his thoughts a man of Earth—and that makes it impossible for you to find your way to him."

"And if my husband..."

Col. Tiffdor didn't let her finish. The sooner she learned the truth the better it would be for her. "The Chief is desperate, Thora! I don't really have the right to say this to you but now it's my duty!"

"Let me be alone now, please, Tiff..." She smiled at him through her tears. He was already at the door when she called after him: "Tiff, you're still the same wonderful person!"

Julian Tiffdor closed the door as quickly as possible behind him. In the vestibule he passed a hand across his eyes.

Halfway to the administration building he was challenged by a sentry robot. They had been deployed in a wide cordon around the bungalow. Col. Tiffdor had no intention of dispersing them. He could not and would not take the slightest risk with Thora here. Even the air space above the bungalow was under surveillance.

Sadly the colonel entered his office and an orderly came in close on his heels. But just now Tiffdor couldn't look at any administrative work. "Leave me alone. Don't disturb me unless it's extremely urgent."

He supported his head heavily in his hands. His thoughts always returned to a single point—and that was Thomas Cardif!

The young man with his Arkonide pride and arrogance and his frequent lightning flare-ups of stubbornness was in himself the insurmountable obstacle that prevented his parents from revealing their identity to him.

Even the positronicon on Venus, which had analysed his character, had come to the same conclusion and given a stern warning.

It was a tragedy.

Thomas Cardif was a man of 2 worlds and each world had imparted to him its prime characteristics. Thomas Cardif was a mixture of the 2 extremes.

Julian Tiffdor did not venture to reach any verdict of guilt or even to think about it. He would never forget Thora's look of terrible pain and despair or the effort it cost him when he said those few words to her: "I'm sorry for Thomas Cardif!"

That statement contained a pitiless truth. In that one short sentence he had accused her and Perry Rhodan of having yielded to the crassest form of egotism.

When he was suddenly interrupted by his videophone it came as a relief. "Yes...?" he asked vaguely. He

was jolted to attention as Thora's face appeared on the viewscreen.

"Tiff, please come to the bungalow," she requested him.

A few minutes later he was again sitting across from her in her quarters. She did the talking and he listened, deeply moved by what it was costing her. Her every word was one of renunciation. Each sentence was built around his one declaration: I am sorry for Thomas Cardif!"

"But I may be allowed to see him, won't I, Tiff? Is it necessary to promise you that I will face him only as the wife of the Administrator?"

"You may walk past him," said Tiffmor, more definitely. "I'll agree to that, Thora."

Though straining to control her emotions, she simply nodded. "When may I see him, Tiff?"

"Lt. Cardif is presently on a patrol flight in the Krela System. He should be back around 20 local time. I'm calling the officers into a briefing session at 21. May I count on you to address a few words to the young gentlemen?"

Thora impulsively reached out her hand to him. "You can count on that, too!" she agreed. Behind the tears in her eyes was a sad smile—the resignation of a mother...

5/ THRESHOLD OF REVELATION

Along about 19:44 Col. Julian Tiffmor listened only with half an ear to the mighty roar of antigravity fields as the heavy cruiser *Cyclops* manoeuvred for a landing. He had his hands full arranging for the briefing on such short notice, which entailed bringing his officers safely together in one spot without weakening the combat effectiveness of his garrison militia. In spite of an uneasiness that grew stronger as the hour of 21 approached, he maintained an outward calm.

His Adjutant, Maj. Lens, came in. Tiffmor only looked at him. Lens came directly to the point: "The spaceport is inquiring whether or not we still need the sentinel robots. Frankly speaking, Colonel, I don't understand this concentrated security. The men are already coming up with the scuttlebutt that you have Lady Thora under arrest."

"Scuttlebutt is a good word for it, Major. So? Have the Gazelle commanders been ordered to the briefing?"

Maj. Lens turned a pale pink. He had just received the Colonel's sharpest rebuke. Tiffmor made use of the moral reprimand only in emergency cases and now he was quite sure that the Major would see to it that the barracks scuttlebutt was squelched in a hurry.

"They've been ordered in at 21, Colonel. The staff officers from the cruisers—and from Administration.

"Naturally." Tiff sounded sarcastic.

"Shall I cancel them out...?" Maj. Lens didn't have a high opinion, either, of his comrades who spent their lives in the garrison or in the communications sector.

"No. Does Communications have anything special to report?"

Lens realized immediately why the colonel had asked this question. Everything revolved around Thora's safety.

"Not so far."

"Anything else, Major?" Julian Tiffloor wanted to be alone. He watched Lens go to the door and as the latter was in the act of opening it a strange sound was heard from outside.

Lens heard it too. "Raygun fire, Colonel?"

Alarm sirens rang through the garrison! The signal board showed that even the spaceport had gone on top alert!

Then the horrible hissing sound was heard again outside, penetrating even the soundproofing of the building.

"Major, that's coming from the bungalow!" Col. Tiffloor's announcement was no hysterical cry of alarm. 60 years in the service of Perry Rhodan had been a severe training ground. As a result his men had been forced to be ready for any situation.

Tiffloor issued orders through his desk intercom. He left no doubt that the attack had to do with Thora. He didn't wait for confirmations of his commands. He raced outside with Maj. Lens.

At the same moment sirens howled on board the cruisers at the edge of the spaceport. In less than a minute every ship was in battle readiness.

In the garrison the first of the fighter robots took up their positions.

Tiffloor reached the big exit door ahead of the Major just as a bluish-green bolt of energy suddenly blinded him and vaporized the door in front of him.

"Take cover!" yelled Tiffloor and pushed the Major back. They landed hard next to each other on the floor. 3 energy beams destroyed the whole exit portal and ripped part way through the wide passage as a tremendous thundering explosion was heard outside in front of the main entrance before the deadly uproar subsided.

Col. Tiffloor had split seconds in which to think. He was convinced that the attack involved Thora. He snapped on his pocket communicator. "Status reports to Commander!" he ordered.

Then he jumped up even as the triple destroying rays were fading away in the midst of thundering explosions. He stormed through an office where 4 men had taken cover, flung open the window and swung himself outside.

10 feet below him was a cultivated flowerbed. The earth softened his jump. Even as he sank to his knees, the first field report came through. "Sentry robots destroyed by alien fighter machines. The bungalow is on fire!"

The commander of the heavy cruiser *Cyclops* started to come in on the waveband. "Hold off!" he rasped, while running across the flowerbed. He stumbled in the darkness, caught himself and then roared into the communicator: "Where are the reports from the bungalow?"

But all he saw over there just now were Terranian fighter robots who were locked in battle with alien weapon machines. The colonel couldn't understand it. Where were the 3 officers with their platoon of 25 men who were supposed to head for the bungalow at the 1st alarm?

"Lt. Hecks..." he gasped into the microphone, ducking under a low-hanging branch just in the nick of time. Now at the other end of the park-like garden he saw that the bungalow was in bright flames. In the fire's reflections were 8 Terra robots firing with all available weapons, slashing the night in a redoubled outpouring of superior power.

Julian Tifflor wasn't concerned either with the burning structure or the battle of the robots. He shouted hoarsely into his communicator: "Who has seen Thora? Report to me at once!"

From the other side of the garden a new wave of fighter machines came stamping into view, followed by the 1st human troops. Col. Tifflor halted them.

"Search the garden for Thora!"

Then came a crossfire of thermo-beams from 3 sides. In fractions of a second 4/5ths of the trees and foliage in the garden area were destroyed.

Tifflor dove for cover again. He dropped to the ground where he stood. But the Terranian robots were programmed to destroy the enemy. Positronic entities which knew nothing of shock, fear or human emotions, they whirled about on their steel legs, detected the direction from which the thermo-beams came, and fired.

In a shower of flame and sparks that sprayed out in all directions, 4 of the enemy robots were blasted out of existence but the thermal fire did not diminish. Suddenly a blinding light burst in the sky over the garrison. Even Col. Tifflor failed to put his face to the ground fast enough to escape the minute-long duration of the searing brilliance but now he perceived the purpose behind this battle in the garden.

"All units!" he rasped into his communicator. "That light bomb must be covering up the enemy's retreat! Thora is missing! Watch for enemy spaceships! Cruiser fleet—are you ready for takeoff?"

"Ready, Colonel!" It was the voice of the *Cyclops* commander.

For a moment after reception was silent. There was no word of Thora. But then the reports began to flood in on top of each another. Only a man with hypno-schooling could organize the confusion in his head and retain an overall view of what was going on.

From what Col. Julian Tifflor gathered it did not augur well for Thora. He had not believed for one moment that she had died in the bungalow fire.

For the present the battle zone was about ¼ of a mile wide, traversing the garrison area and reaching close to the spaceport; but its starting point was not here in the garden. It also extended in an opposite direction which even exceeded the extra-territorial border.

The unknown opponent must have employed several hundred-fighter robots which seemed to be an inordinate commitment of mechanical troops; but the fact neither surprised Col. Tifflor nor caused him to ponder.

This attack was aimed at Thora and now only a stroke of luck could rescue her from the clutches of the enemy.

Quickly he broke up the fight between the positronic automatons just as the, Terra robots were running out of targets. New position reports crackled out of his communicator.

The battle on the edge of the spaceport threatened to engulf the space traffic control station.

Tifflor swiftly issued new orders.

3 light cruisers leapt from their takeoff pads to land in the near vicinity of the endangered station. Simultaneously they waded into the robot fight with 30% of their weapons capacity but they could not easily deter the positronic monsters. The insurmountable obstacle was Col. Tifflor's warning: watch for Thora!

The fighting subsided everywhere in its intensity with the exception of the spaceport area where it became an inferno. The unknown attacker seemed to be throwing in his entire force of fighting machines here.

Then came an announcement that should have cast some light on the nature of the attack but which only made the situation more problematical for Julian Tifflor: "Arkon robots! Definitely identified!"

Wild suspicions raced through Tifflor's mind. Arkon would never expose itself with such a gross violation of treaty! Quite definitely these Arkonide robots were meant to camouflage whoever was really behind Thora's abduction. And in that moment it appeared to him that the bitter engagement in the area of the control station was also a diversion tactic.

"Attention, combat troops...!"

Col. Tifflor didn't get any further. The group he was hailing reported through to him. They were 3 miles deep into Rusuf government territory. "The enemy is taking over 200 robots on board a small spaceship. Small spherical design—attacking us with energy beams. Our losses are 3 men, 19 robots. The ship's position... Hey! It's taking off!"

"Give me that position, Lieutenant, or face a court-martial!" Since the battle had begun to rage, Col. Tifflor had not bellowed until now and he meant what he said about the court-martial.

The Terranian space control station intercepted the conversation and broke in to take over for the Lieutenant. Trying not to block the frequency channel too long, someone rasped out a fast answer from there: "We've locked onto alien ship with our tracking beams they're in an emergency takeoff...!"

Julian Tifflor yelled back an order. "Keep that ship on your direction scanners at all costs! *Cyclops*, pick me up in a shuttlecraft at once! Over and out!"

He had deliberately refrained from ordering any of his cruisers to take off in pursuit. Thora's life was too important to him to place her fate in anybody else's hands.

The colonel's order caused some head shaking among the crew of the tracking station. To them it was a matter of course that they would not let the alien spaceship escape their detection.

Then the man who sat in front of the coordinate rectifier threw his hands up in desperation. At the tracking screen next to him, his companion cursed aloud.

The small alien spaceship suddenly reflected a blurred trace that seemed to melt away. And the coordinate checker—whose equipment always enabled him to make one-second adjustments to coordinates of any ship in his beams—now saw his number columns drop to zero.

"What kind of a new tracking screen *isthat?!* " groaned Gil Besser, the first to realize what was going on.

Col. Julian Tiffloor immediately became apprised of this new situation. His order went out to light cruiser 3 and while he was still speaking the spherical fighter ship made an emergency takeoff into the dark night sky. In a surrounding area of about 60 miles Judgment Day seemed to have arrived, so thunderous was the roaring of unleashed thrust-engines and the howling of the glowing air masses that were shoved aside by the spaceship.

Panting, Tiffloor arrived at the edge of the field. Almost in the same moment the pickup flier from the *Cyclops* swooped down in front of him. The biological cell shower that Tiffloor had received on the planet Wanderer was not only a means of prolonging life but also a true preserver of youth—which he proved now by making a 100-yard dash across the field and jumping into the ship's open airlock.

"Take off!" he yelled while the lock snapped shut behind him and the small craft shot into the night on the wings of titanic power.

Coordinates poured into the receiver in an uninterrupted stream. The *Cyclops* had also taken off. The auxiliary craft sped after the mother ship which meanwhile ascended at a lingering pace. With an almost incredible combination of technology and skill the small flier shot full speed into the hangar of the *Cyclops*, only then braking its flight with all of its antigrav power to make a gentle landing.

During the ascent to the *Cyclops* the colonel had climbed into a spacesuit. During the last 2 minutes of travel he waited behind the airlock hatch. The flier had hardly touched the hangar deck before the hatch opened and Tiffloor dashed to the adjacent large hangar lock, even as the air pumps were supplying air to the flier's own hangar.

In spite of antigrav lifts and conveyor strips it took Col. Tiffloor 3½ minutes to get to the Command Central. Without a word, Maj. Holbein, the *Cyclops*' commander, gave him his seat.

By now the heavy cruiser was already outside the lower strata of the atmosphere and hurtled under maximum power toward the position that had just been given by the light cruiser that had taken off before them.

With the *Cyclops* the machines howled and roared with the deep-throated power of generators and transformers, accompanied by the electrical hissing of the converters as they built up energy and phased it into the gun turrets in readiness for unleashing deadly fire.

The thrust-engines roared in the ring bulge of the *Cyclops*. With the superior calm of a man who knows the limits, Tiffloor hurled the ship out into space, presenting the outward appearance of a Terranian space officer who remained unshaken by any situation. However inwardly he was a boiling volcano and his

concern for Thora grew from moment to moment.

For the time being he could do no more so he attended to the unavoidable. "Hypercom to the Chief. Use pulse and scrambler codes 1, 1-A and 0-1..."

The Com Central of the *Cyclops* returned a ready signal for transmission.

The officers in the control room exchanged meaningful glances. Those particular code keys were normally used only by Perry Rhodan himself. Who had given the colonel the authorization to make use of these specially formatted pulse and scrambler codes?

Julian Tifflor suspected nothing of the petty worries of his officers. He was deeply absorbed in the task of composing his calamity message when he suddenly realized that he had been staring for some time at Thomas Cardif, who as 2nd officer was serving at the tracking console. He abruptly changed the text of his hypercom dispatch.

"Thora abducted by Arkon robots... presently on board a small spherical spaceship... Pursuit initiated with light cruiser 3 and Cyclops... Colonel Tifflor."

The message was still going through the pulse-coder when a video transmission came in from light cruiser 3. It was enough of a sensation to cause Tifflor to hold up the Perry Rhodan message for the moment.

The technical officer on cruiser 3 had just succeeded in breaking through the advanced tracking screen of the unknown ship and at that moment the officers of the *Cyclops* were able to look at their large viewscreen and see the enemy vessel leave the Krela System at top acceleration and disappear.

Acting cold-bloodedly on his own Julian Tifflor ignored the treaty agreements between the Terra garrison and the government of Rusuf.

Short transition inside the Krela System!

With a single control thrust he cut out the autopilot of the *Cyclops* and went into manual override. At the same time he took on a striking resemblance to Perry Rhodan as he pushed his officers to their utmost with one command after another.

He still had on the spacesuit with just the helmet removed. With seeming impassivity he continued to absorb all the back flow of information they were giving to him from every side. The 5 officers manning the positronic nav consoles were just a hair's breadth behind his driving tempo, yet at no time did Col. Tifflor show that he was at his limit of concentration. Meanwhile he handled countless switches, made settings and adjustments and took charge of numerous additional controls. Suddenly he saw that the copilot was about to make an error. The man's hand was heading for the emergency antigrav instead of main power button 6.

In the last split second Tifflor knocked his hand away. Simultaneously he snapped a command without a quiver in his voice: "Lt. Cardif to copilot station!"

None of the officers in the Command Central had time to be shocked by this. The copilot replacement happened like a stroke of lightning. Thomas Cardif was pressed to orient himself quickly in order to understand how far the manual programming for the short transition had progressed. That there were many experienced comrades present in the Central, or that he—a rookie shave-tail lieutenant—did not belong in the copilot chair of a heavy cruiser, failed to enter his mind.

Tifflor did not have to remind him of button 6. Thomas Cardif had caught on. With the confidence of one who could do these things even in his sleep he carried out all of his complicated and vital tasks without a hitch.

Then the positronicon spilled out the required calculations. At the same time the countdown for the short transition began. Within 20 seconds the *Cyclops* hurtled outward into that area of the void where the alien ship had eluded the tracking beams of light cruiser 3.

During the 20 seconds it was comparatively quiet in the Command Central of the *Cyclops*. The muffled rumbling from the depths of the ship seemed a part of the stillness.

Julian Tifflor's thoughts and anxieties were focussed on Thora. The bold flight of the alien spaceship, its unprecedented acceleration which had even left the light cruiser far behind—and this newfangled anti-tracking screen that was not known to Earth science—all of it pointed unequivocally to the fact that Thora had to be on board that ship.

While he brooded over this his gaze drifted involuntarily to Thomas Cardif. His ordering him into the copilot's seat had been premeditated.

Long ago—how many years had passed since then?—he had also been a young lieutenant and during a catastrophic situation the Chief had likewise ordered him to take the copilot's seat. Together with Perry Rhodan the 2 of them had gotten the mighty *Titan* off the ground. His calling Thomas Cardif to his side today had been a kind of wordless expression of thanks to the Chief—for an order which had made him so proud.

He was brought swiftly back to the present by a loud remark from the rear of the room: "Hey, don't you think Cardif looks like the Chief?"

Cardif whirled about quickly toward the speaker. The Arkonide eyes—unusual for a human—flashed an inquiry. For a moment his young face took on a marked expression. Millions of intelligences in the galaxy knew this face: Perry Rhodan's!

While Col. Julian Tifflor was still trying to recover from the shock the *Cyclops* made its hyperjump in pursuit of the alien spaceship. The pains of transition tormented everyone including Julian Tifflor. Only one person appeared not to be affected: Thomas Cardif.

"Colonel, there it is!" Cardif's voice came on like a trumpet while he pointed to the master viewscreen of the *Cyclops*.

Julian Tifflor straightened up. He didn't care to be upstaged by the young lieutenant. "Where?" he grunted just as Cardif corrected himself angrily.

"I'm wrong, Colonel! That's another ship—much larger...!"

He was about to say more but suddenly a small gleaming point of light seemed to hurtle toward the large alien ship and ram into it. Wordlessly the lieutenant and the colonel exchanged glances. They both realized that their smaller quarry had landed inside the tremendous spherical spaceship!

Then came an angry cry from the tracking console. "It looks like the alien ship is going into transition...!" Even as it was announced, the unknown ship disappeared swiftly from the screen.

"Hypersensors?" asked Tiffloor sharply.

A weary and discouraged answer came back: "They also have their hyper-compensator, Colonel!" Julian Tiffloor mentally seconded the curses that the officer appended to his report.

He got up and relinquished the *Cyclops* command back to Maj. Holbein. Lt. Cardif was about to also leave the copilot's position; however it was the major himself who told him to stay.

"You gave a good account of yourself, Cardif. And you know, what was said just before the transition, I was about to mention myself. . . You looked amazingly like the Chief then, and yet now the similarity has gone. . . Oh well, so much for that. I'm putting us on autopilot. Request the course calculations for home base, Lieutenant!"

Julian Tiffloor peeled out of the spacesuit and left it where it fell. Maj. Holbein's remark about Cardif's resemblance to Perry Rhodan had supplied the finishing touch.

Rhodan's wife had been abducted by an unknown agency and had been carried off to an unknown destination and here by a trick of nature Thomas Cardif teetered on the threshold of the revelation that Perry and Thora Rhodan were his parents!

6/ RHODAN SURFACING

The superbattleship *Drusus*, its spherical hull measuring one mile in diameter, had come from the Earth in 3 hypertransitions, each one under protection of its hyper-compensator. Only during the 4th and last transit did it dispense with this camouflage.

Whoever was behind the abduction of Thora would detect and locate the mighty warpage of the ether caused by the *Drusus* and would thus be advised that Rhodan was prepared to employ every means at his disposal to rescue his wife.

The gigantic spaceship came in to the spaceport of the garrison close in the wake of the *Cyclops*. Supported by its mighty antigrav repulsion fields it was still hovering for a landing as Rhodan's order went out to Col. Tiffloor to make a report to him on board the *Drusus*.

At the time Julian Tiffloor was in Maj. Holbein's cabin. Both men were comparing notes on the observations they had made during the pursuit of the small spaceship.

"It's a very special ship, Colonel! It has a super-powerful spacedrive. Its acceleration capability was incredible and that's why I can't very well blame the commander of light cruiser 3 for having let the alien vessel get out of his reach. . ."

"I'd have to agree with you there, Holbein. In fact I'd go so far as to say that that ship is a custom job built especially for Thora's kidnapping. And that widespread attack of the robots at the garrison was a diversion to distract us. What we did was. . ."

That was the moment when Julian Tiffloor received his order to come to the Chief on board the *Drusus* .

Shortly thereafter on the *Drusus* he passed through the last security control, plus 2 sentry robots who searched him positronically. Then he stood before the Administrator.

There were just the 2 of them. Perry Rhodan stood in his cabin with folded arms. He asked the colonel to sit down and listen to his report.

When Tiffloor came to the subject of the small ship's advanced anti-tracking screen, Rhodan interrupted him. "Tiff, did anybody find out how it operates?"

"It consists of 3 weak anti-detection fields which counter-rotate against each other and due to the rotation they don't reflect a probing tracker beam. That is, they cause the field strength of the incoming beam to attenuate by at least 95% and whatever gets through is absorbed by reflections of the rotating fields..."

"Hm-m... A 3-fold weakness that doubles in strength OK, we are already familiar with that principle. Please go on, Tiff."

Rhodan's interjection was typical of him. He did not overlook the smallest detail that might one day become important. He was of the opinion that every defensive or offensive weapon lost much of its effectiveness as soon as its working principle became known.

But he suddenly glanced sharply at Tiffloor when the latter related how Thomas Cardif's face had momentarily taken on an astounding resemblance to him—his father. This began to gnaw at the vitals of the man who in a few short centuries had built up a mighty stellar empire. "Tiff, does he know it now? Does he suspect?"

It wasn't the Administrator of the Solar Empire who had asked this question; it was Thomas Cardif's father.

"No sir, he doesn't know it. Whether he suspects something or not, who can say? I myself find it incredible, this emergence of a frightening likeness to you. When his features are relaxed he has nothing of your profile at all. But in that moment of maximum concentration it broke through and it was *not* Thomas Cardif who sat in the copilot seat, sir... it was *you* ! It was *you* who were recognized by more than 30 of the *Cyclops* ' officers!"

In a tremendous effort to calm himself Rhodan looked thoughtfully at his confidant. "Tiff, do you know what you have to do now?"

Julian Tiffloor had known his chief too long not to have understood him now. Yet he was slightly guarded in his uneasy reply, as though instinctively aware that neither he nor Rhodan could block the course of destiny. "I will try to do my best, sir..."

"Not try, Tiff! No more trying! An end to human attempts to change things! We... Thora and I... we both have to atone for that! Send Thomas out on a mission! Don't let him get an inkling.

"Chief!" It was a moment in which he could interrupt the Solar Empire's Administrator with impunity and express his indignation over the other's view. "A mission at a time like this? That means..."

"Stop it, Tiff!" He underlined his words with a wild sweep of his arm. "What has it ever meant to you

before?—to send a young lieutenant out on a dangerous assignment? Well?... But because Lt. Cardif is *my* son you have everything turned around, don't you? That knowledge chases you like a phantom: Rhodan's son! He must be handled differently than the others!... Tiff—friend—wake up! You have to remember Thomas' character: half the blood in his veins is Arkon blood. Arkon is our greatest and most dangerous enemy. I know I'm using a lot of superlatives—I never liked them—but I'm using them now."

"What do you think Thomas would have become, knowing who he is? The specially privileged son who could allow himself any indulgence because his father is Perry Rhodan? *What* would have become of him, Tiff?"

"Alright Chief, then *what* does he become now?"

"Hopefully not my enemy!" Even Perry Rhodan was only human. His voice sounded weary. As though emotionally drained he crossed the cabin to his desk and sat down.

Julian Tiffloor was not surprised that hardly anything had been discussed concerning Thora's disappearance. He knew from experience how swift and all-encompassing Perry's actions could be. "Sir, your wife came here in the latest model Gazelle. Would it be alright with you if Thomas took the scout ship?"

"Turn him over to Maj. Holbein; he's assigned to him anyway, isn't he?"

"Yes sir."

"OK then. Don't let me down, Tiff... and watch out for my son for me..."

"Chief, this is tough—it's practically a Gordian knot to have to send Thomas out on the hardest assignments. I don't like to do it but on the other hand I can see your point... May I leave now?"

Rhodan nodded and watched the colonel as he slowly closed the cabin door.

Julian Tiffloor lost no time in getting to Maj. Holbein, commander of the heavy cruiser *Cyclops* .

"So who kidnapped Thora?" Holbein greeted the colonel with this question.

"How am I supposed to know that, Holbein?"

"But you've just come from the *Drusus* , Colonel. The Chief has arrived with more than 30 mutants on board—and if *they* don't know where Thora's been carried off to..."

Tiffloor waved him off. It was always the same thing.

Throughout the spacefleet Rhodan's mutant corps was looked upon as a special unit that consisted of demigods who went around performing one miracle after another. Only a few people took the pains to look behind the scene and realize that almost all successes of the mutants had been won only through the most difficult efforts and that the defeats they had suffered ran into the hundreds.

"The Chief has taken over the search operation for Thora. Holbein, you probably know by now that the Old Man is not the kind to wear his heart on his sleeve. What I'm concerned about at the moment is the good showing Lt. Cardif made when he was acting as copilot for me. You shouldn't let this youngster out of your sight, Holbein..."

"Why not let him fly the new-model Gazelle that Thora brought here? What we should do anyway is to make use of our long-range scoutships and comb through space over 1000 light-years. It's at least possible we might find a trace of the kidnapper ship."

"Now... the reason I came here, Holbein: you are responsible to me for placing all cruisers on standby so that they can take off at a moment's notice. Tell your men that Rhodan is expecting them to come up with something quickly that will be able to penetrate that new anti-tracking screen."

The Solar Empire spacefleet was a finely honed instrument. Maj. Holbein only had to issue very few orders to bring the comparatively powerful garrison fleet into readiness for takeoff. The technical crews were not placed under pressure; it was sufficient to tell them that the Chief was waiting for results.

"Naturally, Cardif, you will transfer your regular crew with you. Have you ever flown one of these latest models before?"

"Yes, Major. They trained us on 2 of them at the Academy.

"Fine. You'll get your final orders as to your assignment by radio just as soon as you report that you're ready..."

Thomas Cardif walked away. While alarm bells rang, he awakened his crew—the Irishman, Chauncey Muldoon, 32-years-old, who had a non-traditional Celtic calm; and Alim Achmed, the 24-year-old Arab from Juddah, a brown-skinned lad, wiry and cold-blooded when it came to taking risks.

En route to the main antigrav lift they encountered 2 other scoutship crews. These men were ordered to the hangars where the Gazelles were kept and they naturally wanted to know why Thomas Cardif and his crew were not headed in the same direction.

Ungrudgingly, Lt. Sheck whistled through his teeth. "The latest Gazelle model, Cardif! Good grief! They have a range of 10,000 light years! Compared to that the old scouts are lame ducks! I'll be darned if you don't have the luck!"

Muldoon and Alim Achmed were of the same opinion after they had hurried across the spaceport and come to a stop in front of the Gazelle in which Thora had come to Rusuf.

In outward dimensions the new model remained unchanged. The disc-shaped vessel still measured 100 feet in diameter and 30 feet in height but other features were different. It not only had engines triple the power of previous models plus the unprecedented 10,000 light-year range but was also equipped with the most powerful and ultra-modern weapons of offence and defence.

Thomas Cardif instructed his men concerning the new innovations for ½ hour so that they were finally familiar with them. He was unsparing in his praises of the ship but the Irishman waved a disparaging hand.

"Faith, and when you get down to it I'll say we've got it coming to us for all the sweat and grind a man puts us to in the first years of fleet service! Many's the time, I'm telling you, when they fair took the breath out of me with their hard-fisted driving! But now you take this fine little egg here: damned if she isn't a splendid shooting star!"

It was the highest praise a spacer could give to his ship. Alim Achmed's dark Arab eyes gleamed as he lovingly caressed the heavy-duty switch of the impulse beamer.

"Achmed, give our ready signal to Maj. Holbein," Lt. Cardif ordered.

The Arab warmed up the communications gear, then put through the signal. 2 minutes later they received their orders.

Alim Achmed rolled his eyes. Muldoon stood calm. The assignment wouldn't shake him. "Alim, my boy, with our shooting star this chase will be a lark!"

"That may well be," confirmed the Arab, "but an area that's 1,000 light-years in diameter—that's a lot of space to search through!"

Suddenly the code rectifier started hammering out a message. The command posts of the *Drusus* took no chances of having their transmission intercepted.

Pensively, Lt. Cardif put the tape strip in his pocket. During the next 10 days he would be receiving the recognition signals which would be changed on a daily basis and which were an IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) security measure in case of meeting an Arkon ship. The automatic codes were an 'open Sesame' in such cases so that they could continue their flight without delay.

The outer hatches of the *Gazelle* had closed. All equipment in the scoutship had been warmed up. The 3-man crew wore spacesuits with their helmets on the backs of their necks. Each man was in his place. The chronometer started running ship time.

Takeoff in 40 seconds. Together with this advance-type *Gazelle*, 19 other long-range scoutships raced out of the hangars of the *Cyclops* and into space.

Thomas Cardif concentrated on his work. He did it unconsciously and without strain, making sure to turn off all systems that were not related to the takeoff of his *Gazelle*. For him there was now only his ship, Although he had encapsulated his thoughts, he heard a sudden exclamation of surprise from Muldoon, the usually unperturbable Celt:

"Lieutenant! Faith now, if you're not the spitting image of the Chief!"

"*What* did you say...?" At that moment Cardif saw the countdown indicator racing to zero.

Takeoff!

The thrust-engines flamed to life, the grav-absorption fields sent up a howl and the wind roared about the *Gazelle* on all sides as the air masses were flung aside. The long-range scoutship climbed vertically into the dark night sky, guided by the positronic nav-computer but carefully watched by Lt. Cardif.

Muldoon sat at the weapons console and continued to stare at the young commander, thunderstruck by the change. He couldn't understand why he had thought just before takeoff that Perry Rhodan was sitting in the pilot's seat. Right now there was not the slightest trace of the resemblance to be seen in the lieutenant's face.

Inadvertently the Irishman turned his questioning gaze toward his companion, Achmed. He must have noticed the same thing because his features also reflected puzzlement.

Meanwhile the *Gazelle* continued to accelerate. The altimeter raced up the scale in visible jumps until at

120,000 feet it turned itself off automatically. It had fulfilled its function. Now it was time for a larger scale of measurements.

The Gazelle shot into her element. It left the atmosphere of Rusuf behind and plunged out into the universe.

Course: 32-12.43 X.; 45-02.54 Y.; 06-58.09 Z.

"Muldoon—weapon controls!" called Lt. Cardif from the pilot's seat. "Achmed—tracking and communications!"

He himself had his hands full. From the intensity of the defence screens that surrounded the Gazelle, the output of the antigravs, power banks and transformers, to the performance of the main engines, Thomas Cardif checked through everything that he had learned at the Academy.

His own adjustments of the Gazelle's trajectory were automatically regulated by the nav-positronics with lightning-swift new course calculations. Even when he cut off the auto-pilot for 30 seconds and flew under hand control within 4 seconds after the test the Gazelle was again right on the crosshairs of X, Y & Z.

The sun of the Krela System rushed across the panoramic viewscreen of the scoutship. It had appeared in the lower left portion of the field of vision and quickly disappeared from the upper right-hand edge of the screen. Now distant suns came sparkling coldly into view. They radiated in all their glory and yet could not dispel the measureless blackness of the universe, which seemed so menacing even though man had conquered it.

Thomas Cardif glanced again at the space speedometer. It registered a value of 0.7. At the moment the Gazelle was hurtling out of the Krela System at 125,000 miles per second.

Now the lieutenant turned around to Muldoon. "What was that you were just saying about my resemblance to the Chief?"

The Irishman had regained his habitual calm; nevertheless the question made him slightly uneasy. "Could be, lieutenant, I'm after having hallucinations, that I am! I've been asking myself the Whole time, how could I have seen such a thing? What more can I tell you, sir?"

"And if I've been told the same thing 2 times tonight at another location, Chauncey—would you still say you're having hallucinations?" Lt. Cardif asked this so strangely that even Alim Achmed caught his tone of voice.

Chauncey Muldoon started to grin broadly. "Well now, Lieutenant, I won't deny what you're saying..."

In spite of the prickly tension that reigned in the Gazelle, Alim Achmed hadn't taken his eyes from the tracking scanner. Cool as ice, he suddenly interjected: "I have a bogey in quadrant green..." and simultaneously he rattled off the coördinates involved.

In the same instant the receiver crackled: "Ship ahoy! Recognition code!" The challenge had been given in Interkosmo but the accent behind it was that of a Terranian.

Achim swiftly identified the blips on his screen. "8 heavy cruisers."

With the casualness of one who had done this all his life Lt. Cardif tossed the code strip to Achmed. It was a 9-digit number with letter coding included.

Achmed relayed it over the transmitter. An answer came back almost like an echo: "Bon voyage!"

After that it was quiet in the small control room of the *Gazelle*. 8 Terra cruisers were en route at top speed to Rusuf where Perry Rhodan's super battleship *Drusus* had just landed a few hours ago! This concentration of the Solar Empire's fighting power did not look good.

Thomas Cardif was the first to get the whole picture. Finally he expressed himself to his small crew. "I think soon we're going to be in a space battle that people will still be talking about 10 years from now! If the Chief is calling 8 cruisers into action all at once, he must have found the trail that will bring him to his wife. I only wish I knew who was behind this awful kidnapping."

Then his thoughts drifted to another subject. He turned involuntarily to look at Chauncey Muldoon, yet didn't actually see him.

He brooded mentally: "How could I have a resemblance to Perry Rhodan? But that's impossible! My ego hasn't reached to such monstrous proportions that I would identify myself with him! So how is it that the others noticed the similarity in my face?"

It was a fateful moment for Thomas Cardif.

He looked pensively at Muldoon but failed to notice the startled expression that came over the Irishman's face as he again had the impression that the Chief was sitting across from him.

In this very second—Thomas Cardif displayed the features of Perry Rhodan.

7/ RHODAN SURFACING

John Marshall, one of the first mutants to enter into Perry Rhodan's service, sat alone in Ook-Taan with an untouched glass of Rhegis. This was in the small town of Gelgen, some 27 miles distant from the Terra garrison. From outward appearances Ook-Taan could be considered an almost exclusive rendezvous for Springers. It did not seem to be frequented by any of the Arkon colonists because Marshall had not seen any Arkonides when he first entered and he was still waiting to observe the first customer belonging to that race.

Marshall was recognizable as a Terranian without any question but he was not concerned with acting inconspicuously at present. The advent of Perry Rhodan's superbattleship *Drusus* followed only a few hours later by the arrival of 8 heavy cruisers had already stirred up enough excitement on Rusuf. Not only had the government made pointed inquiries in protest against this demonstration of power and sent in a complaint regarding the situation to the robot Regent of Arkon but also the Galactic Traders had seen a threat to their interests in this assemblage of fighter spacecraft and they had threatened the Rusuf government at the same time that they would suspend all trade relations with the planet Rusuf.

They did not have to stretch the facts very much to point out that they had already suffered enough

damage at the hands of Perry Rhodan and his ships. Along with their protests they were not averse to bringing the Galactic Medical Masters, the Aras, into play, by hinting that a sudden embargo of medical supplies could have serious consequences.

John Marshall, an excellent telepath with a very shrewd mind, was the only person present who acted as though none of this concerned him.

He was not here in the Ook-Taan tavern merely to sit and watch his drink get stale. Rhegis was one of the strongest beverages that Rusuf had to offer. He was actually waiting for his colleague, the hypnotic suggestor Kitai Ishibashi, whom he had just sent off on a gossamer thin thought-trail. It was only a single thought impulse he had picked up out on the street. It happened when 3 Springers had passed them on the other side of the avenue going in an opposite direction. The strangers had challenged them with a probing surveillance.

One of them had been thinking of Thora and was wondering whether or not she had arrived all right. It was not much to go on but Marshall had immediately told Ishibashi to trail them while pointing to the boisterous fellow in the middle of the trio.

"Take that one under your wing, Kitai, and turn him into a zombie for me."

With these words they had parted. Marshall had gone into the Ook-Taan and the Japanese had turned about in order to follow the Galactic Traders.

Marshall's order that one of the men should be turned into a zombie was not as bloodthirsty as it sounded. Ishibashi possessed the power to telepath suggestions which could bend a person to his will, even while making the victim think that he was still acting in accordance with his own volition.

Twice during this waiting period Marshall had visited the rest room, regardless of what the Springers sitting at other tables might think. There, using his pocket communicator, he sent out his field report and at the same time inquired whether or not other mutants had found any stronger clues.

Rhodan himself had been on the receiver end. "Nothing, not a trace," was his return answer. "Your report is the first indication but it's hard to believe. Could the Springers be behind such a large-scale operation as this?"

John Marshall's thoughts also revolved around this point. One thing for sure, however, was that the Galactic Traders were not their friends. As for the Aras, who were geniuses in the field of medicine, they didn't waste any love on the Solar Empire, either. Nobody could understand the Aras better than Marshall because he had gotten the best of them more than once in the past.

So at the end of it all there was still the robot Regent of Arkon to be considered. Bell, who was Perry Rhodan's best friend and now in charge of the usual 'paper war' back in Terrania as the 2nd-in-command, had irreverently called the gigantic positronic brain on Arkon a 'bucket of bolts'. As representative of the Solar Empire, Perry Rhodan had made an agreement with this 'bucket of bolts' and had maintained at the time that a soulless machine was not capable of guile or deception. But after the passage of months and many events he had come to realize that the Arkonides-designers and builders of the mammoth Brain had endowed this positronicon with the capacities for betrayal, deception, malice and cunning.

It was not the kind of blatant deception that would attempt to merely take a partner to the cleaners, one might say, but rather there was a continuous attempt to gather all power to itself with every means of the

moment, if the partner to an agreement allowed his awakened distrust to fall asleep for only a second.

"And the bucket of bolts it has to be!" Marshall voiced this opinion loudly and clearly in the Ook-Taan tavern, taking pains to say it in the broadest Interkosmo.

He was looked at sharply from all sides and not a single glance was friendly. Marshall's presence in this locality was not exactly free of risks. Nor was this little Arkonide town of Gelgen an extra-territorial region where Terra was in power. But this didn't disturb him. He was strictly concerned with pinning down a solid clue to the kidnapping of Perry Rhodan's wife.

He suddenly felt a light electrical shock run through his body. He was either being called by the *Drusus* or by Kitai Ishibashi. His micro-communicator in his pocket was signalling him with this weak current to the effect that he must contact the receiver station in readiness to hear a message.

Marshall observed the inner side of his hands while still under observation by people all around him. Now he turned his hands over. The ring on his left hand was crooked. It was a natural thing to reach out and straighten it with a slight turn. Marshall had learned to inset the slight protuberance on the ring.

Ever since there had been a few thousand 'micro-technicians' on the Earth, the entire Mutant Corps had been furnished with this kind of miracle device, which was the smallest make known but capable of the highest power.

Now Marshall supported his head in his left hand so that the ring lay next to his ear. It was not necessary to have a wire connection to the other device in his pocket. A micro-transmitter almost as small as a needlepoint took care of that.

Kitai Ishibashi was calling him. "I'm stuck here. Rangeroon, lower basement, left. Grey black plastic building with Springer emblems. Out!"

It was a normal reaction for Marshall to pick up his glass now and toss down his drink of Rhegis.

Kitai Ishibashi was stuck!

So was he.

The Galactic Traders in the Ook-Taan left no doubt on that score. Some of them had placed their rayguns on their tables. The weapons were displayed as a warning and their grim attitudes said the rest. 5 Springers went to the door, having the obvious intention to keep any unwanted witnesses from entering.

John Marshall swiftly probed their thoughts. He read them as though they were open books. When he scanned the man at the bar, he had to keep himself under control in order not to show his reaction.

The cold-blooded assassin thoughts were directed at him. "With you we won't stand so much on ceremony as with Thora, that traitorous Arkonide woman!"

Swiftly Marshall touched his ring while he placed both hands over his mouth. "Marshall here!" he whispered. "Located at Ook-Taan on Main Boulevard. Send robot unit as fast as possible!"

The message had taken only a few seconds. He pretended to wipe his mouth and then brought his arms down. He reached for his glass and signalled to the bar for his next Rhegis.

Another weak shock of current notified him that a 2nd message was coming in. Marshall did not have to look at the faces of the Springers because it was simpler to read their thoughts. They were all waiting for a signal to close in on him.

John switched the ring microphone so that it became a speaker. In the same moment the leader of the Galactic Traders left the bar and came to his table. Marshall neglected to explore the man's thoughts. He barely had time to hear the incoming message.

Would he not look suspicious if he supported his head in his left hand again?

"Marshall, they're not going to let you out of there! I have requested them to send you help..."

He could not hear the rest of Ishibashi's transmission. The Galactic Trader with the crafty face stood by his table and aimed a thermo-gun at him.

"Come along, Terranian!"

The scorn and hate of an entire galaxy lay in that word, "Terranian."

"Police?" Marshall pretended surprise. "But..."

"Come along, no back talk!"

Neither too swiftly nor too slowly, Marshall got to his feet, while the others closed in from all directions. Only the path to the wide doorway was clear but there he was, awaited by 5 husky Galactic Traders.

"On with it—to the door, Terranian—but a bit faster than the way you got up!"

John Marshall, tall and dark-haired, turned his aquiline face to the Springer Chief. In spite of the grave situation he dared to ask: "Have you carefully considered the consequences of this?"

He received a menacing smile for an answer. From 2 sides he was seized from behind. 3 other Springers appeared swiftly in front of him and began to search him. They were not surprised to find an impulse beamer on him but they were puzzled by not discovering a communicator device in his clothing.

"Where does he keep it!" fumed the Galactic Trader who was the leader of the group.

Marshall actually kept it in his left pants pocket but the apparatus was so small that they would have had to grasp it with a pair of tweezers. Each searching hand would bypass it unless by chance it should happen to get caught under a fingernail.

The fruitless search gained Perry Rhodan's mutant valuable time. He did not resist when they locked his arms behind his back; he seemed to be indifferent to the proceedings. Actually he was attempting to contact by telepathy Kitai Ishibashi who had warned him by radio prior to the attack by the Springers. Since the Japanese hypno-suggestor was also in a jam, how could he know that these fellows at the Ook-Taan were not going to let him get out of here?

Marshall's telepathic searching brought no results.

The 3 Springers gave up the search for the communicator. One of them stepped back—grumbling, "He must have disposed of it in the lavatory."

Marshall read their minds one after the other. The leader of the Springer gang was also finally convinced that the Terranian had gotten rid of the device when he was in the restroom.

"Get him out of here!"

Then a small interruption occurred. Several code words were called out from the rear of the pub. At the same time the gang leader's face twisted into a grin of satisfaction.

Smugly he explained to Marshall: "You will make the 5th one to babble out all his secrets under the brainlash treatment."

While the Springer was saying this he was thinking intensely about Thora and combined this thought with the achievement of having caught 5 Terra agents. His mental conclusion was that he was doing a great and profitable business.

John Marshall had 60 years of experience in agent work. He had often had occasion to make use of his Arkonide hypno-schooling and had been drilled by Perry Rhodan himself to discriminate among many events and recognize the most essential details and pursue them. Now he read in the stubborn thoughts of the leader a new name: Itzre Delagin.

That was the man from whom the Springer chief would extract an exorbitant sum of money for the capture of the 5 Terra agents. Also he would have a trump card to play—the brainlashings would put him in possession of the Terranians' strategic information, indeed their total knowledge.

There was nothing more infamous in the galaxy than this brainslashing process. Whoever was victimized by this treatment was forced to surrender his total store of knowledge without restriction and the result was he emerged from the machine a babbling idiot.

Although Marshall knew that he could expect no sympathy from these Springers and that he was in danger of becoming an idiot within a few hours, he did not forget what Perry Rhodan had given him and all other mutants who were on this mission.

They pushed him toward the door where the other 5 Springers were waiting for him. As they released him into custody of the latter, Marshall suddenly put on a good act of making an outcry. 6 powerful Springer hands reached for him but got in each others' way. Marshall had his chance of bringing his arm up in front of him to turn on the microphone in his ring. His hours of practice in quickly manipulating the ring had never paid off as well as now. He bent forward with his mouth close to his balled fist. In a whisper that was inaudible to the Springers, he spoke 2 words into the mike: "Itzre Delagin."

Almost at the same time the leader roared, "Can't you even handle a lousy Terranian?"

This, too, went with the message that Marshall's micro-transmitter beamed out. So now the Com Central on board the *Drusus* was graphically informed as to his situation.

He was picked up like a sack. The door bust open. Directly in front of the door he saw the jet-jeep and he was quickly thrown into the small cab of the vehicle like so much inert material.

2 Springers got in right after him. The entrance hatch snapped shut. A shabbily dressed Arkonide sat at the wheel. With one glance he perceived that he could get started and immediately the drive jets gave out a throaty roar. They were about to open full blast when a satanic shrieking sound came from above and a

Gazelle just grazed the jet-jeep. The force of the blow sent the small vehicle crashing into the front of the Ook-Taan.

The wide door of the pub fell into the tavern. The jeep's drive jets continued functioning by themselves as a result of the collision, thrusting wildly at about half power. It was enough to send it hurtling toward the bar with a 3G acceleration, taking with it tables, chairs and also running over any Springers who hadn't been able to get out of the way fast enough. The bar and its glassware were no obstacle for the jet-jeep as they broke and splintered apart.

John Marshall heard or saw nothing more. The 1st collision had knocked his head back violently against something and he was unconscious. But his micro-transmitter continued sending so that the same cacophony of hellish sounds blasted though the Com Central of the *Drusus* as could be heard in the Ook-Taan.

Only one man remained unmoved by it all: Perry Rhodan.

He was already in contact with 3 of his mutants who were operating in Cill, the capital city of Rusuf. "Look for Itzre Delagin!" The brevity of his order nevertheless transmitted the highest degree of urgency.

Meanwhile the driverless jet-jeep had ended up with a crumpled front end stuck in the solid masonry. Rhodan's mechanical troops stormed out of the Gazelle. 2 Terranian fighter robots silenced the vehicle's drive jets with their impulse weapons. 6 others hunted down the fleeing Springers. Even the leader of the Galactic Traders was among the fugitives.

In front of the Ook-Taan, 14 other fighter machines had sealed off the street and surrounded the area in which the Springer pub was located. The Arkonide police who had been alerted by the violent landing of a Terranian scoutship in the middle of the town were powerless before the robots with their bristling weapons.

The impulse cannon of the Gazelle made a threatening and impressive sweep of the area, swinging 360°. For the most curious of the Arkonides, its presence took all the pleasure out of sensation seeking. A shout of protest and anger swept through the pressed back crowd as 8 Galactic Traders were driven out of the Ook-Taan by robots and taken into the Gazelle.

Rhodan's fighter machines looked neither to the right nor the left. They were programmed to operate according to the commands of their positronic brains. Their optical system of lenses and their unusually sensitive hearing equipment registered for them how their surroundings appeared and sounded but because their positronic ideation centres did not respond to such things, human cries and emotions were non-existent to them.

The 2 robots which had blasted the jet drive of the jeep to pieces inside the pub now retrieved John Marshall from the crumpled passenger cab. They did not overlook the 3-man crew—the unkempt Arkonide and the 2 Springers, who were as unconscious as Rhodan's mutant. I robot carried Marshall in its metal arms as though he were a child; the other had tossed the 2 Springers over its broad shoulders and was dragging the Arkonide behind it like a sack.

The angry outcries of Arkonides and Galactic Traders mounted. They saw in this appearance of Terranian fighter machines an outrageous encroachment on the part of the garrison and finally a senseless and weaponless attack on Rhodan's robots was launched by hundreds of them.

They broke through the light blockade. The robots stood like so many steel pillars in the midst of the

excited multitude, making no use of their weapons. Their programming did not provide for that. But the robots, which had remained on board the *Gazelle*, were provided with another kind of program circuitry.

They reacted immediately!

Suddenly the impulse cannon ceased its 360° sweep and came to a standstill. In its place the turret hatches of the hypno-cannons fell open and the weapons discharged their energies soundlessly.

The hypno-beams struck silently and as though cut off by a mighty blow the cries of rage were stilled in 100s of throats.

It was a ghastly sight but not even that could move the robots behind their hypno-cannons. Their programs gave them the order: "Hypno fire, free range; 0.25 seconds duration; intensity 10, starting from J-20." This was a very mild dosage.

In the street the silence was broken by the rumbling march of many robots, which returned from all directions to the *Gazelle* with great speed. At the lock there was no haste or pushing. As on a parade grounds, they stamped across the low ramp one after another into the ship.

The ramp retracted. The lock hatch closed. The propulsion system began to howl. During takeoff from the ground the defence fields around the *Gazelle* became active. Whoever was on the street within range of the screens was thrown to one side.

The robot commander of the *Gazelle* took no notice of it. His assignment was: after objective accomplished, return to the *Drusus* by fastest route and land inside the hangar.

When the *Gazelle* started its short 27-mile return hop, a 2nd *Gazelle* rose up out of Rangeroo-n Avenue 1.5 miles distant. It had also accomplished its objective, having rescued the mutant Kitai Ishibashi.

22 minutes after John Marshall's return to the *Drusus*, the 5th mutant also arrived on board the superbattleship. The robots had literally come for him in the last second. His micro-communicator had continued to broadcast uninterrupted, thus transmitting the Springers' conversation to the *Drusus*. Without this guide the mechanical men would not have been able to track him down on such short notice. He had been lying strapped down under the brainlashing apparatus at the very moment that the fiendish device was about to be switched on.

Perry Rhodan had just received the report of the 5th agent's safe return as he was seated in his cabin with Khrest. Both of them were waiting for news from the capital city of Cill. John Marshall's callout of the mystery name had been the only clue that had prevented the trail of Thora's abductors from coming to an end in Gelgen.

It was the only hope.

But even the Arkonide Khrest could not believe that the Galactic Traders were behind Thora's kidnapping. He expressed this view to Rhodan: "It looks like Arkon's doing, Rhodan!"

The Administrator of the Solar Empire seemed to shy away from any conclusion in that direction. "Its possible but we also know what the Springers are capable of. At the moment my suspicions have to be aimed at both Arkon and this as-yet-unknown Springer clan. Meanwhile all evidence points to the clear fact that my wife was abducted by the Galactic Traders. Unfortunately the men the robots brought in didn't know anything more. This Itzre Delagin is only known to the gang leader but what the man looks

like, what clan he belongs to or where he lives—all that he doesn't know either. That doesn't sound so strange, Khrest, when you consider that this local group's only job was to use every means available to block the search for my wife. For me it's understandable that this Itzre Delagin is interested in keeping himself removed as far as possible from this minor action.

"I'm just hoping that the name is a real one..."

It was. But the 3 agents in Cill could not find Itzre Delagin...

8/ A COSMIC FORTRESS?

18 hours before, after a short touchdown on the planet Heet-Ri, Lt. Cardif had taken off again and sent in a hypercom-RZ dispatch. He had received a return assignment from the *Drusus* to continue investigating the trail he had uncovered.

And with that assignment he was relieved of the restriction to keep moving within only a 500 light-year radius of Rusuf.

The spoor he followed was exceedingly faint and it had come to him purely by chance. It was Muldoon who had asked him to land on Heet-Ri.

It was a dreary-looking oxygen world, an abandoned Arkonide settlement. But long before the Arkonide colonization an important race of people must have lived on this 6th planet of the double star system because its impressive landmarks had survived more than 10,000 years while the people had been lost in the whirlpool of the centuries.

Muldoon had known about the mysterious 1½-mile high monuments which were distributed at random over the surface of Heet-Ri but until now he had neither seen them nor located any pictures of them. Being one of those who was fond of delving into such mysteries as a hobby he had expressed the wish that they might land on the 6th planet as they were passing through the double system. His enthusiasm for lost cultures whose mysteries had not yet been solved finally also infected Thomas Cardif and after a moment of hesitation he had decided, to land on Heet-Ri.

This solar system lay 376 light-years distant from Krela.

As Cardif set down the *Gazelle* he was only thinking of the ½ mile high metal monument nearby. The allegorical representation of the column had gripped him. Everything on it was so alien to human concept yet vaguely arresting.

Still distracted by this impression, Thomas Cardif overlooked one little detail while he was shutting down the ship's operation: he had failed to notice that the automatic air analyser was showing the Heet-Ri atmosphere to be radioactive.

"Screens up, Lieutenant!" Alim Achmed called to him over his shoulder. "Radiation danger!"

Alim Achmed's words and Thomas Cardif's reaction were simultaneous. The young lieutenant had

grasped the, situation instantly. He perceived the dangerous r-rating of the outside atmosphere but he became suspicious.

"Achmed, determine from what direction that's coming! Muldoon, are your weapons ready?"

"Fire ready, Lieutenant," called the Irishman from behind his weapons console. He had imagined the landing on Heet-Ri would have been a less dramatic one. Here was a smell of danger.

Meanwhile Alim Achmed attempted to determine the direction from which the uncomfortably high-intensity radiation was coming. While he bent over his instruments in amazement, Cardif and Muldoon realized that something here was not as it should be but before any question could be spoken the Arabian burst out with the announcement: "The radiation is coming from the top of the monument, Lieutenant!"

* * * *

"Alright," Cardif replied grimly, "we're on top alert standby. We'll take a look at what's up there!"

The positronic computer data concerning the giant pillars on Heet-Ri did not have much to reveal, except one impressive fact: at their bases they measured close to 2 square miles and at their tops about 0.6 square miles. Keeping a distance of about 1.5 miles from the first monument, the Gazelle rose upward and as it did so the r-intensity on the indicator jumped.

"Looks like pretty harmful stuff," Achmed muttered as though to himself but he continued to read off the increasing intensity readings.

At a 1,000-foot elevation Cardif reduced climbing speed to about 15 feet per second. He could not explain why. But he listened more sharply to Achmed's instrument readings.

1,800 feet. The r-intensity was so strong that it seemed to be coming from an unshielded reactor of great power.

"Whoops! Hey! Hoo-ha!" Achmed's tongue didn't seem to want to obey him as he tried to speak. Thomas Cardif glanced in his direction and was not startled to note that the r-intensity had suddenly dropped by 80%.

The Gazelle stopped suddenly in its ascent. Now it began to lower at a rate of 3 feet per second. With each yard of descent the r-intensity rose until finally the scoutship was located at the point of hardest radiation.

Cardif went into a circular course and flew around the monument.

"Interesting," he murmured without realizing how cool he was acting in this situation. His glance moved back and forth between the instruments and the panoramic viewscreen. At a 1½-mile distance the allegorical representations on the monument gave the impression of an insane painting.

At an elevation of slightly under 2000 feet they had flown around 2/3's of the circle when the viewscreen

revealed a large hole in the side of the monument which must have measured more than 300 feet.

"There's a chink in the armour," observed Muldoon calmly.

Under protection of the strong defence screen that enclosed the scoutship Thomas flew to within 600 feet of the opening.

"Vandals!" exclaimed Muldoon angrily from the weapons console. In that one word he had said it all.

The hole in the giant column had been burned in. Looking like hardened drippings of wax running down the outer wall, the solidified streams of molten metal told an unmistakable story.

"Radiation constant," said Alim Achmed half aloud.

That was when Thomas Cardif made his decision: he flew inside the monument through the jagged opening, straight into the raging hell of radiation!

The protective screens of the Gazelle were taxed to the limit of their capacity. Alim Achmed slowly wiped sweat off his brow but the Irishman sat calmly behind his console and watched his smaller viewscreen, in which he observed the hodgepodge of wreckage inside the giant column.

The scoutship hovered about 120 feet above a gigantic installation which had been ripped apart, fused, vaporized and blasted in all directions through some process of uncontrolled atomic disintegration. In spite of the large opening in the wall not enough natural light entered the place to reach into all corners so Cardif had turned on every available searchlight. As he swept the main shaft toward his left, he recognized in the wreckage fragments the unmistakable signs of Arkonide technology.

"Now it's getting interesting," he muttered. Then he called Muldoon from his weapons. "Take over my place, Chauncey. I'm going outside."

The latter was about to express his apprehension but Cardif cut him off with an imperious gesture. "Why so surprised, Muldoon? I know what I'm doing. In spite of the radiation out there I'll come back in one piece!"

Thomas Cardif was not aware that he was a frighteningly exact image of Perry Rhodan in this moment.

10 minutes later he exited from the Gazelle, which had landed in a small clear space amidst the rubble. Inside the cramped control room Alim Achmed and Chauncey Muldoon exchanged bewildered glances.

"Did you see that?" he asked in a hoarse tone.

The Arabian broke loose from his suppressed excitement. "That is uncanny, Chance! It's just not natural...! Every time the Lieutenant gets uptight and concentrates real hard on something, he practically turns into the Chief, to a hair! Muldoon, do you think maybe Rhodan has a son he doesn't know about?"

This question seemed to be too hot for the Celt to handle. "Alim, don't ever ask that question again! Whatever happens, keep your mouth shut!—What's he doing out there?"

In the large panoramic viewscreen they saw Lt. Cardif disappear among the piles of debris. After a painful 15 minutes of waiting, Cardif's voice suddenly came to them over his helmet transmitter: "What the devil is that?" After that the transmitter was silent except for the sound of the Lieutenant's somewhat

excited breathing.

"Muldoon?"

The Irishman jumped, startled in spite of his usual calm. It had been Perry Rhodan's voice. Involuntarily he answered with a prompt "Yes sir!"

Thomas Cardif appeared not to have heard or noticed the unusual response because with the same tone of urgency he said: "Find out what the following numbers mean—4186-41-62..."

Muldoon fed this question into the small ship's positronicon, which had only 5 different programming combinations. He had hardly completed the final input before the punched strip came out with the results.

"Huh?" muttered Chauncey suspiciously. He ran the strip through the deciphering unit and straightened up in astonishment. "Lt. Cardif?" he said, over the ship's transmitter.

"Yes?" responded the latter from the vast chamber in which the radiation holocaust was raging.

"Number 4186-4-162 is a code designation for a sun that... just a moment—I have to convert this... that lies at a distance of 8056 light-years from here... Arkonide Base number 776-B-667. The sun doesn't have a name. The giant planet—there's only one, by the way—Hm-m-m, strange... only one moon of the giant planet has a name: Siliko 5... Never heard of it, Lieutenant."

"Thank you. I'll have a further look around here. That radiation still constant, Achmed?"

"Unchanged. It's coming from the right."

"Thanks."

Thomas Cardif was known for his unusual taciturnity. When he reentered his scoutship ½ hour later, he exchanged his spacesuit for an uncontaminated one while he was in the airlock. Muldoon vacated the pilot seat when he came in and Cardif sat down in it wordlessly.

Achmed and Muldoon did not burden him with questions. They looked at him expectantly, however. Their lieutenant was the only one who had gone on the reconnaissance and he alone was able to evaluate what he had discovered.

Now he slowly turned to them and looked at them out of Perry Rhodan's face. His Arkonide eyes gleamed at their height of concentration. "Muldoon, give me the index list of all Arkon stellar fortresses!"

The Celt appeared to be completely flabbergasted. "You mean to say..." he pointed outside, "that this is a cosmic armoured fortress, Lieutenant?"

"Was, Muldoon! As far as I could determine, it was a fully automatic installation but in spite of an ingeniously designed positronic system of control it went up in a catastrophic nuclear explosion."

Chauncey took another quick look at the scoutship's panoramic screen. It showed a picture of senseless devastation. The heat and shockwave generated by the explosion must have risen to solar temperatures and unimaginable atmospheric pressures and was probably channelled in one direction. It would have blasted the mighty support beams outside as though they were toothpicks. By this process the material here must have been vaporized for the most part and the rest melted down the outer surface like rivulets

of wax.

"Lieutenant, we'd better get out of here," admonished Achmed "When you went out and came back in, the screens were down and let in a fair level of radiation."

"Alright, Achmed... And Muldoon, give me that list when we're on our way."

10 minutes later the Gazelle was 60 miles above the planet. Cardif had already studied the list of Arkon armoured fortresses. The planet Heet-Ri was not included in the index.

"Muldoon, we're going to fly to the next column."

"Lieutenant, do you think that every one of those monuments...?"

"Yes, Chauncey, I'm convinced that we're on the trail of a very slick Arkon deception. The Arkonides themselves have passed out all this talk about the prehistoric age of the columns, after which they secretly went about making their cosmic installations inside the mammoth monuments. Achmed, now it's up to you and your tracking instruments as to whether I've hit a bulls-eye or made a big mistake..."

The next column came into view. The Gazelle had come down to about a 6-mile elevation. Suddenly Achmed let out a whistle. "Tracking one, Lieutenant... Lord! I would have missed that entirely if you hadn't put me on my toes! That's hardly a beam at all that hit us... just a limp tap on the wrist!"

When they flew to the 3rd gigantic monument they experienced the same phenomenon.

"You can switch off now," said Lt. Cardif. Opening up the super-powerful space drive, he drove the Gazelle like a meteor out into the void.

A few minutes later, using pulse code and the scrambler, Lt. Cardif's report went through hyperspace to the *Drusus* on Rusuf.

They didn't have to wait long for an answer:

"Determine if moon Siliko 5 in system 4186-4-162 is cosmic fortress. Be careful not to take risks. Previous assignment to trace kidnapper ship hereby annulled... Perry Rhodan..."

Chauncey Muldoon the Irishman patted his weapons console fondly. A proud grin spread over Alim Achmed's swarthy face. There was a gleam of pride in Lt. Cardif's eyes. Ever since the Solar Empire had existed, it had been a rare honour to receive a mission assignment personally from the Administrator himself.

"Faith and I'm thinking we're on a fat trail now!" chortled Chauncey. "These Arkonide lads are the sly ones! And fine friends it makes them. But then what can a man expect from people who'd rather be led around by a positronic think-pot rather than take hold of their bloody fate with their own 2 hands? You wouldn't be finding that kind walking the straight narrow with a man in any agreement, I'm thinking... Lieutenant, now how ever did you come across that code number 4186-4-162...?"

"It was in the input settings of a half-melted old-fashioned piece of decoding equipment—but it was all genuine Arkonide technology..."

9/ MYSTERY SATELLITE

At a velocity of 0.39 speed of light, Lt. Thomas Cardif hurtled into the middle of star system 4186-4-162. The solitary planet belonging to this sun was in opposition, circling the mother star at a distance of 435 million miles.

The sun was a small G0-type, about half the size of Sol. The 3-man crew observed that almost 1/3rd of its surface was covered with tremendous sunspots.

At his instrument board, Alim Achmed snorted grudgingly. "That old blast furnace has character! That's a real crossfire of perturbations that can match the best of them!"

At close to the speed of light they moved past the glowing eye of the sun within 160 million miles. The G0-star began to move to the right across the panoramic viewscreen while the sole planet of the system appeared through its glowing atmosphere of fire.

Curiously the otherwise highly reliable Arkonide star catalogue had nothing to say about the giant planet. It also omitted the exact number of its moons but then in contrast to its poverty of information it gave the 5th satellite the name of Siliko 5.

"Lieutenant... this Siliko 5 has a diameter of about 50 miles," Alim Achmed announced, "but that's not all I'm picking up by a long shot. That thing actually has stronger defence screens than the *Drusus*!"

Thomas Cardif hit the retro-thrusters, braking the Gazelle abruptly down to 0.3 light speed. The inertial absorbers of the scoutship were strained to maximum capacity but only their thunderous roaring indicated their struggle to combat the mighty pressures of sudden deceleration.

"50 miles in diameter..." Cardif repeated thoughtfully. In the next moment he gave Achmed a command: "Send out our recognition code, cycle 20." Which meant a transmission 20 times per minute.

On a gently curving course the Gazelle raced between the 2nd and 3rd satellites and passed by the giant planet, which hid its face behind a roiling atmosphere of chlorine gas. The 4th moon was behind the planet, while Siliko 5 rode an eccentric orbit at a distance of 3.5 million miles from the world of chlorine gas.

The tiny celestial body could not be seen on the screen at this distance. Cardif pressed a button for maximum section magnification. The universe seemed to plunge forward into the Gazelle; the giant planet and the glitter of stars behind it disappeared. The magnification, which was set for 3.5 million miles, adjusted itself automatically to the current speed of the spaceship's approach and brought the in-depth enlargement into painfully sharp focus.

Thomas Cardif held a collision course for Siliko 5. The strange, airless world now occupied 2/3rds of the viewscreen. The detail resolution was down to 30 feet but nothing more could be determined than the fact that it was a celestial object 50 miles in diameter.

"No response to our signal, Achmed?"

"Neither an answer nor even any tracking probe from Siliko 5!"

"Not even a limp tap on the wrist?" Cardif asked, repeating the Arab's former expression.

"Nothing, Lieutenant, but I don't think it's harmless yet. Why does that thing have such powerful defence screens?"

"That's a question I'll ask the 'Thing' when we get closer to it," replied the young lieutenant. To himself he was putting another question: how many armoured cosmic fortresses had Arkon concealed from the Solar Empire?

In that moment a thought struck him. He had detected something illogical in the situation: why did Siliko 5 reveal itself as an energy-packed weapon system by activating its defence screens? Why did it thus throw away its advantage of surprise, whereby it could permit the opponent to approach more closely and then destroy him in one sudden salvo before the other could put up a defence?

He dropped down to 0.1 speol. Now he needed time to think. Nevertheless he was still swiftly approaching the 5th moon, whose ragged contours became ever more vivid on the screen.

Half distracted, he asked once more: "No answer to our identification code, Achmed?"

"No, Lieutenant."

Cardif continued the collision course. Achmed reminded him of the fact by giving an unsolicited report of their distance: "242,000 miles, Lieutenant!"

While maintaining a velocity of 0.1 light-speed, the Gazelle would collide with Siliko 5 in 13 seconds.

Thomas didn't concern himself about it. Instead he asked Muldoon: "Weapons ready?"

"Fire-ready, Lieutenant!"

"Distance 130,000 miles..." This meant they would crash into the super strong defence screens of Siliko 5 within 7 more seconds.

"Beam out a distress call, Achmed!"

Alim Achmed reacted with an uncanny swiftness. It was clear to him that he couldn't use the hypercom. They didn't want half the galaxy to pick up a fake cry of distress. Achmed sent out the distress call over telecom beam—in Arkonide, as a precaution—just as Cardif rocked the Gazelle with a braking action down to 60 miles per hour, which again slammed the inertials to their limit of capacity.

From Siliko 5 there was no answer as the Gazelle continued to approach. The satellite was the only heavenly object visible on the panoramic screen.

Thomas Cardif compressed his lips. He was conscious now of the full weight of his responsibility, yet it did not occur to him to simply turn away from unfinished business and give up because of a super-powerful defence screen.

"Attention, men! I'm going to accelerate to full power toward this dwarf moon, until we're within 1500 feet of it. Achmed keep the distress call going and add our recognition code. Muldoon, you watch

carefully when I pull up away and bring us into its shadow..."

"Lieutenant, do I have fire permission for all ray weapons?" Chauncey asked tensely.

"Yes, at the slightest enemy action by Siliko 5."

The decision was agreeable to all. The mood within the Gazelle remained unaltered. Alim Achmed and Chauncey Muldoon were long accustomed to flying such missions and had always come home with their skins intact. So they were not worried either. Their commanding officer, although a shave-tail lieutenant, took hold of things like an old space fox who had already run up a successful track record of several thousand campaigns under Perry Rhodan himself.

"Close space helmets!" It was Thomas Cardif's final command before he suddenly accelerated the scoutship to the peak of its capacity. Out of a remoteness of 95,000 miles the Gazelle came hurtling toward Siliko 5.

The distress signal combined with the recognition code continued unabated.

With an iron firmness, Chauncey's powerful, sinewy hands held the double switch levers of the impulse cannons. His eyes did not for a second leave the binocular sights which showed him the surface of the satellite.

Distance 50,000 miles.

The Gazelle's hurtling pace continued to increase. Inversely, the distance to the dwarf moon shrank horrendously.

The gap was 6,000 miles!

There was no answer either to the distress call or to the identification signal.

"Stubborn, as only an Arkonide can be..." Cardif heard the Arabian grumble through the helmet phones.

The distant raced downward on the scale of thousands: 5,000... 3,000... 1,500... 1,200...

The super-strong defence screen circled Siliko 5 at an altitude of 250 miles. Thomas Cardif didn't relish colliding with it.

420 miles...

360...

The Gazelle seemed to be heading straight for the middle of the miniature satellite. If there were any alert observers on Siliko 5 they must have the impression by now that the small spacecraft had damaged its guidance controls. To them it would appear to be racing helplessly toward the rough, desolate world whose surface was covered with thousands of small, interlaced mountains.

300 miles...

Cardif pulled away just as a tremendous bolt of energy struck the Gazelle head on. For the fraction of a second the screens appeared to hold off the vast deluge of ravaging energy but then they collapsed like a

soap bubble, bursting first on the left side and giving the ship an angular momentum to the right—which almost thrust it out of the inferno.

Thomas Cardif had just barely seen the terrible lightning bolt of energy before he was knocked unconscious. He only regained his senses in time to see the glowing remains of his Gazelle shooting silently past him into the depths of space.

"Chauncey! Alim! Please answer at once!" he roared into his helmet mike. But the receiver only hummed monotonously in his ear; neither Muldoon nor Achmed returned an answer.

Lt. Cardif tried 3 more times to establish contact with them, until he finally came to realize that the 2 of them had not survived the treacherous attack. His shipmates were dead...

His face showed no trace of emotion as he looked downward at the barren, uninviting world beneath him. He coolly stifled his sorrow. His spacesuit prevented him from smashing against the naked rocks because it had its own flight capability. But when he looked at his automatic altimeter and read an altitude of 175 miles, his features stiffened.

Siliko 5 had shut off its giant defence screens!

At the present moment the lonely satellite merely had the outward appearance of a 50-mile-wide ball of rock.

But what did it conceal inside? Thomas Cardif's presentiments were not particularly heartening...

10/ A WORLD OF ROBOTS

The reality of the situation exceeded his worst fears by far.

After his landing on Siliko 5 and he was escorted past the 1,000th robot he had counted so far, he knew that no human being was to be encountered here. Siliko 5 was a world of robots. With but few exceptions these positronically guided machine-men were assigned the task of guarding and operating the armoured Arkonide fortress that had been built inside this moon. They were to maintain the heavy guns and the mighty energy projectors in a battle standby condition at all times—and fire them when their programming required them to do so.

Thomas Cardif was being escorted by 5 robots. These 5 were apparently exceptions to the majority here. They appeared to be part of the security police and clerical group and were possibly also restricted as to their range of authority and action.

From a positronic standpoint they could even be considered above average in intelligence, which Cardif also learned to his dismay. He had listened to one of the robots with mixed feelings as this one spoke to him. With an ice-cold and soulless intelligence the machine proved to him on the basis of precise observation why the Gazelle's distress signal had to be regarded as a bluff and that the collision course could only be the result of a deliberate action on the part of its commander.

Cardif walked onward in their midst, having descended some 600 feet or more beneath the moon's surface. They showed him everything and what he saw left him speechless.

Even the *Drusus* did not possess energy projectors of this magnitude. He did not dare to even estimate their range of power. He was somewhat consoled by the fact that a patina of age seemed to cling to everything here but then again this was still an Arkonide fortress built inside a 50-mile diameter moon.

In Siliko 5, Arkon possessed a stronghold of stellar magnitude! And now as Cardif remembered the many mammoth monuments on Heet-Ri, each of them containing the striking power of a superbattleship similar to the *Drusus*, he became aware of the fact that the Arkonide Empire was actually 1000 times stronger than it had thus far revealed itself to Perry Rhodan to be.

Now they were crossing a bridge that spanned a vast chamber which was almost 1,000 feet wide and over 200 feet deep. He had a clear view of it and he could hardly believe his eyes: this mighty room was an inverter station!

Then they stopped in front of an antigrav lift. Still escorted by the 5 robots, he was taken into the depths at a fairly high speed. The altimeter in his spacesuit registered 11 miles before he felt solid ground under his feet again.

They followed a passage measuring about 100 feet in width which had a curved ceiling. This led them to a small door that was heavily protected by a screen of energy.

While one of the robots was busy to one side attempting to cut off the screen, Thomas Cardif picked up the sound of marching metal feet through his exterior microphone. Other robots were approaching from behind.

Still encased in his spacesuit with a closed helmet, he turned somewhat inadvertently to look at them. At first he was partially blinded by the reflection of a nearby light source and could hardly see anything but when his vision rapidly adjusted itself he felt the shock of a thunderbolt run through him.

He couldn't believe his eyes!

What was Thora doing here?

A hard shove from the fist of a robot drove him onward. The small door had opened. Behind it lay an airlock. After he had passed through it he heard a robot voice come through his outer microphone: "You can take off your spacesuit. The atmosphere in here is suitable for Terranians."

Although the robots towered above him by more than a yard, Cardif was apparently unimpressed as he rid himself of his heavy spacesuit. Inwardly he was not so calm because at this moment he realized that in removing the suit he was leaving himself weaponless. Realizing, however, that there was no alternative in such a situation, he allowed it to be taken away.

The bare room adjoined another chamber which immediately recalled to mind an Arkonide film that had been shown at the Academy in order to demonstrate a hearing and examination room that was typical of the Empire.

He was permitted to take a seat. Flanked left and right by 2 robots, the 5th one disappeared through a side door. He did not return but instead a soulless-sounding voice boomed into the room suddenly. In a hard, metallic accent the 1st question was directed at Thomas Cardif.

The thought leapt through his mind that this must be a positronic brain speaking! It brought to his mind the mammoth computer intelligence on Arkon 3 which ruled the mighty Arkonide Empire in star cluster M-13.

Thanks to his psychological schooling at the Terranian Academy, he retained his composure as he answered question after question. But when the invisible speaker wanted to know why Thomas Cardif had landed on Heet-Ri he became alarmed.

He leaned forward almost imperceptibly. Unknown to himself, his face changed. He answered without hesitation and gave as a reason for his landing on Heet-Ri the fact that Chauncey Muldoon had had an interest in prehistoric structures and monuments.

After a few moments of silence the invisible questioner appeared to be convinced of the truth of this answer. The next question was in Cardif's mind one that endangered the security of the Solar Empire. While he was rapidly weighing all possibilities one against the other, he failed to notice that a door had opened on one side of the room and that a woman had entered—slender, tall and with that exceedingly bright hair which could only be found in the Arkonide race.

This woman saw a man sitting between 4 robots, a man who was in the act of concentrating sharply on the answer he was formulating—and before she realized what she was doing she emitted a shrill cry: "Perry, how did you get here...!?"

In the next moment she knew *towhom* she had cried out.

She could only recognize him by his lieutenant's uniform, not by his face! Thomas Cardif, her son!

And she had addressed him as "Perry"—she, who was Perry Rhodan's wife!

But he was still the image of his father—even now as he sprang up unhindered by the robots.

This—this was then—her own boy?

This young man, who she had suddenly beamed at with her eyes and who looked so much the way his father had looked 60 years ago—now he came up to her—and he moved exactly like Perry Rhodan.

But still another had witnessed everything: the invisible speaker. Suddenly his metallic voice boomed out: "I thank you, Lady Thora!"

Thomas Cardif broke into this statement with a shout: "But this is..." His words failed as though he had sunk under water.

He raised an arm to his forehead in bewilderment, wiping the sweat away. He did not come any closer to Thora. He could not take another step.

A shocking suspicion held him rooted to the spot.

Perry Rhodan read:

"Itzre Delagin found. Thora located on 4186-4-162, Siliko 5. Entire abduction operation carried out by Galactic Traders; almost all of them from the clan of..."

He read no further.

He issued a top alert. "Takeoff in 4 minutes. Destination 4186-4-162, Siliko 5, in accordance with Arkonide star catalogue."

4 minutes later the *Drusus* thundered away into space in the company of 9 heavy cruisers and 23 light cruisers. Rhodan piloted the *Drusus* himself. The master control was set, which guided the entire fleet through a coupling circuit, since they all had the same destination.

4186-4-162 was 9431 light years distant from the planet Rusuf. Any modern spaceship with a good propulsion system could have reached it in a single hypertransition. The fleet formation from the Solar Empire made 6 transitions. Of these the 1st and the 3rd were executed without the protection of the hyper-compensators. Whoever might be lying in wait in the galaxy would be deceived by these manoeuvres and be falsely reassured. 3 of the hyperjumps led away from 4186-4-162 but only the last 3 were carried out under cover of the ether-warp compensators, hurling the formation toward their goal. At a distance of 65-light-minutes from the system of 4186-4-162, the ships came back out of hyperspace into the normal space-time continuum. The shock of transition was and always would be the same unpleasant sensation but everyone came through it with varying degrees of reaction. Perry Rhodan recovered from the aftereffects faster than the Arkonide Khrest.

Rhodan, the Administrator of the Solar Empire, was an ally and equal partner of the Arkon Empire and as such he had been given an extraordinary range of authority by the positronic robot Regent. But in this moment he felt very little sympathy for this metallic brain which seemed to base its reasoning faculties on an ingeniously cunning network of logic.

Since the takeoff of the fleet unit from Rusuf, he had ordered a study of all records concerning 4186-4-162. A simultaneous assignment was given with regard to detailed information on the planet of Heet-Ri. But the records on both subjects only disclosed what was already generally known about them. Nothing was there to indicate that both worlds were advance cosmic fortress installations containing the heaviest possible offensive armaments.

"Khrest," he asked of the Arkonide, "why is it that you don't know anything about this either?"

The conversation took place in the giant Command Central of the *Drusus*. The master control locking the light and heavy cruisers of the formation to the superbattleship's navcomputer had just been lifted during the last few minutes and each ship was now an independent unit.

Khrest shrugged his shoulders. "On the one hand one might suppose that these stellar fortresses were built more than 10 or 12000 years ago and due to some unknown interference are now out of contact with Arkon—however my hunch isn't quite that unreliable, when we recall that the positronic Brain on Venus was not known by myself to exist nor is it known yet to the present-day Arkonides. On the other hand the fortresses could have been built at the time under the top secret system whereby there are never more than 3 persons who know of their existence..."

"Plus the robot Regent!" asserted Rhodan.

"Naturally. That one first of all," replied Khrest disconsolately.

For Rhodan the subject was closed. He called the Com Central over the ship communicator. "No answer yet from the Gazelle under Lt. Cardiff?"

"No sir," came the unhesitating answer, "we're trying for contact uninterruptedly on all bands..."

"Thank you," he said curtly and the look he gave Khrest could only have been understood by the Arkonide.

Perry Rhodan was still worried now about his son.

Forming a mighty $\frac{1}{2}$ circle on a broad front, the fleet formation hurtled toward system 4186-4-162. The nameless sun continued to grow out of the background of thousands of stars. From a point of light it became a small disc and began to shine more brilliantly. Its single gigantic planet revealed itself as a dimly shining crescent, green in colour. The satellites of the titan world were not yet visible on the giant panoramic viewscreen of the *Drusus*. Everybody on board, including Perry Rhodan and Khrest, had a false conception regarding the size of Siliko 5.

The ships flew under the strongest available detection screening but it was a foregone conclusion that the closer they came to their goal the less reliable this protection would become. From a specific proximity onward the enemy tracking screens would reveal that notorious kind of blurry triple wave design which seldom gave any clear coordinate values but nevertheless clearly pointed to the presence of alien spaceships. A man well trained in the interpretation of the triple pattern phenomenon was capable of approximating the position of an approaching fleet formation in spite of the fuzziness of the signal.

The battle spaceships from Earth raced onward toward their goal at 0.96 the speed of light. At a distance of 15 light-minutes the *Drusus* alone lifted its anti-detection screen. Simultaneously it beamed out its recognition code and also announced that Perry Rhodan was on board.

Siliko 5 did not answer! The ultra-powerful transmitter of the *Drusus* sent out the signal on all possible wavelengths in an uninterrupted series of repetitions. The search calls for Lt. Cardiff's *Gazelle* ran intermittently in the same sequence.

From instrument computation came the report: Siliko 5, 50 miles in diameter; global in form. Atmosphere: none—but gravity strength is 1.1...!"

As Rhodan nodded acknowledgement his angular features reflected still more concentration. 1.1 gravitational strength for such a ridiculously small mass plainly indicated that the gravity field was being produced artificially. Then it came to his mind again that the Galactic Traders had carried off his wife to Siliko. But why didn't Thomas answer from his *Gazelle*?

The intercom connected him with the ship's research centre for cosmic radiations. "Examine and test-sample the space around Siliko 5. I want to know if the radioactive intensity is constant everywhere in that area and see also if it correlates with the local sunspot activity. Pick up your samplings from a point on the Siliko 5 orbit where it was 24 hours ago... Send the result immediately to me!"

Khrest slumped visibly, realizing what terrible suspicion was haunting Perry Rhodan. Apparently he

believed that the Gazelle was lost. Sometime during the past 24 hours it must have been destroyed under the rayguns of the cosmic fortress.

From the rear part of the *Drusus* control room came an excited cry: Siliko 5 has just turned on defence screens! Good Lord... they have an Arkon strength rating of..." and then the man rattled off a set of values which elicited an incredulous reaction even from Khrest. However he made no comment.

The radiation research lab sent up a report out of a 1,000-foot depth in the bowels of the *Drusus* : "Inside the X coördinates... strong radioactivity. Diagnosed unmistakably as particle residue from steel 465/r-02. Measurements show that the disintegration process was initiated at about 360 miles over the satellite and by its location in the Siliko 5 orbit we place the time of the explosion about 8 hours 17 minutes ago. The rapid nature of the disintegration process could only be the result of an impulse energy beam."

Steel 465/r-02 was a type of metal developed on Earth that was better than Arkon T-steel, which the Empire used for building its spaceships—especially with regard to its thermal qualities. In an unshielded condition it also had better resistance to strong radioactivity.

Seated motionlessly in his pilot's chair and watching the viewscreen with thoughtfully narrowed eyes, Rhodan maintained silence for a considerable time. Only Khrest knew what his friend must be suffering now.

There sat the mightiest man in the Solar Empire in the control seat of the galaxy's most powerful ship of the void, yet at the same time a poor soul who was agonized by his helplessness in the face of destiny—which had taken his wife and his son from him, one right after another.

For Thomas Cardif there was no further hope.

The hope of seeing Thora again had sunk below 1% of probability.

The flotilla still raced toward the system at 0.96 speol. The anti-detection screens which surrounded every ship but the *Drusus* continued to consume unimaginable quantities of energy. In spite of this each ship possessed mighty energy reserves which only waited to be called upon.

Using only the protection of its defence screens the gigantic sphere of the *Drusus* , measuring one mile in diameter, hurtled now straight through the system and struck a course directly aimed at Siliko 5. On a command from Rhodan the cruiser units fell back 30 liseks behind the flagship but at this astronomical distance and considering the range of the rayguns and energy projectors, this fallback had little significance.

When Siliko 5 first appeared on the great panoramic viewscreen of the superbattleship, it was only a dust mote, lost in the pitch-black background of the universe. At present it showed itself to be a tiny body, a harmless nothing.

"Gravity 1.1..." said Khrest, who had been standing behind Rhodan, forced to think constantly of Thomas Cardif and Thora. Khrest wanted to tear his mind away from such thoughts. He also wanted Perry Rhodan to concentrate fully on this approach flight toward the cosmic fortress. But in spite of 60 long years of close association, the Arkonide still didn't quite understand the Earthman completely.

But Perry was already concentrating on what lay ahead.

He was inhumanly hard on himself—far harder than anything he would have demanded of another. His pain, his spiritual distress—all this he had choked within him. With his own force of will he had quenched the flames of anguish and now what he thought or did pertained only to the interests of the Solar Empire and the men in the *Drusus* and those out there in the cruiser fleet who were nearing the small celestial body before them at an ever increasing pace.

Reports arrived in a hail of information from all sides. The big positronicon on board the ship was working incessantly. It kept sending constantly new and slightly altered data to the gun-turrets of the gigantic *Drusus*, ever more precisely came the calculations regarding the stellar defence screens that encircled Siliko 5. Each correction of power values that was in favour of the cosmic fortress weakened the status of the *Drusus* proportionately, before the ship had fired its first shot.

Within 3 light-minutes from Siliko 5, the flotilla braked its speed down to 0.1 speed. The light and heavy cruisers were still flying under the anti-detection cover and it was only the *Drusus* that moved head on with its 'visor' open.

"Rhodan, don't you want to put in a call to the robot Regent?" Khrest had to ask this question. The ship's positronicon had just figured out the full capacity of the stellar defence screen surrounding the cosmic fortress. If all Terra ships present were to open fire with all of their weapons simultaneously, the mighty screen down there would not even be strained to within 1/10th of its strength!

Which meant Perry Rhodan was not going to get through it!

Rhodan did not even turn around in response to Khrest's question. He spoke with that icy calm which never failed to unnerve the Arkonide.

"The time is past when I refused to believe that a positronic brain could not lie. I'm not going to call Arkon 3, Khrest, but I'll give the Regent the dubious pleasure of having to stand by and watch—while I convert this hornet's nest into a harmless chunk of moon rock!" He leaned forward slightly and called into the intercom: "Archive section—bring me immediately the construction plans for Arkonide cosmic fortresses... That is all!" And in the same tone, after making a lightning switchover, he called the department that none of the officers in the Command Central had thought of: "Bring all the fighter robots you can find a place for into hangar B-65. I want all restrictions pulled out of their programs—full liberty of action—to be ready in 8 minutes... That is all!"

The next command was directed to the Com-Central: "Hyper-com general order throughout the galaxy: emergency alert for all light and heavy cruisers, battleships and destroyer squadrons. Upon reception of code signal 45-L-00, all units will hyper-transit to 4186-4-162, according to Arkonide star catalogue... end of order!"

A fleeting smirk touched Khrest's worried features.

Code 45-L-00 was nothing more than a bluff that had been prepared long since. Whatever fighter ship of Earth received this order—it would only cost the commander a slight interruption of his repose, if he happened to be asleep, but it would not occasion a ship alarm. It was a special-purpose command which had been invented for the mammoth Brain on Arkon 3 as well as for the Galactic Traders, who also had their fingers in this situation.

Naturally the total strength of the Solar Empire would not be called upon because it was characteristic of Perry Rhodan's nature to achieve the highest degree of success with the least expenditure and the smallest risk possible.

Suddenly the dark of the universe was shattered by the ice-cold light-burst of a thousand suns. Without warning, Siliko 5 had struck!

Using 6 impulse cannons simultaneously the armoured fortress attempted to shred the defence screen of the *Drusus* and convert the mighty ship into a brightly burning gas cloud. But the *Drusus* only trembled slightly and continued toward the Lilliputian satellite at the unaltered velocity of 0.1 speol.

"Attack from sector red—number 251" came the warning from the battle command centre.

Siliko 5 struck again with a tripled strength. At least 2/3rds of the force impacted against the superbattleship's defence screens, which generated a blinding coruscation of lightning as raging energies hungered for their goal. In such a storm of forces any other spaceship would have been atomized—but the protective screens of the *Drusus* had only shuddered, though quite strongly, and finally had captured and absorbed the alien energies.

"Capacity level: 72%!"

The strain on the defensive force-field envelope now bordered on emergency conditions. It should have brought a decision from Perry Rhodan to open fire.

Khrest watched him.

What wheels were turning now in Perry Rhodan's mind? In Khrest's eyes this man appeared destined and appointed to be lord of the universe one day. So what was he thinking now?

"Is the tele-transmitter ready?" In the midst of this question the mighty *Drusus* suddenly executed an unexpected course change, hard to port.

The inertial absorption fields howled briefly but managed to maintain a 1G level of gravity within the ship. In the place where the battle titan had been only fractions of a second before, a miniature nova of 30 combined impulse beams blossomed into a ravening monster of energy, which soon became dissipated in the depths of the void.

Khrest stared in fascination at Rhodan. What had possessed the Terranian to undertake such a lightning action precisely at that moment? But he was left no more time to brood over such matters because Rhodan's next command shocked him out of his meditations.

"Now—ready with the teletrans! Set those fighter robots down on Siliko 5! Seconds count, so hit it!"

"Sir!" called the officer from battle station 8. There was a presentiment of disaster in his voice. "We are detecting a tremendous accumulation of magnetic energy on Siliko 5. It looks like an attack with a gravitation bomb...!"

The gravitation bomb was one of the most feared weapons in the universe. Whatever it hit was thrown into the 5th dimension.

Rhodan reacted immediately. "Flight transition!" he commanded and the order was directed to the entire mixed flotilla. The anti-detection screen dropped around the *Drusus* again while the ship shot away from the area at a 43° angle, accelerating at maximum.

The only entity capable of maintaining its calm other than Perry Rhodan was the ship's positronicon. It furnished the tele-transmitter all necessary data for launching the fighter robots to the surface of Siliko 5. Rhodan had received 2 of the unique weapons from the strange community intelligence that inhabited the planet Wanderer. The tele-transmitter operated in the plane of the 6th dimension. Nowhere in the universe was there a defence against this weapon, which could be used for transporting physical objects in a measureless instant of time across unlimited distances.

Even while the *Drusus* was executing its 43° escape manoeuvre, the TTM transported one fighter robot after the other down to Siliko 5. The super-powerful defence screens of the stellar fortress represented no barrier at all for the transmitter.

"Shut off present coördinates of teletrans!" Rhodan was not of a mind to take the slightest risk. The transportation of robots to Siliko 5 had a slight interruption. The officer at the main control panel of the transmitter now heard what he had to do.

The TTM was to intercept the gravitation bomb while it was en route from the mini-satellite to the *Drusus* and was to cause it to detonate somewhere in the universe where it would not create a catastrophe.

Only a few officers had been in battle against Topthor the Moulder one time when it had also been necessary to ward off a gravitation bomb. These officers knew what was to happen now—the others were in a private frenzy of suspense.

"Attack!" blurted out the officer at station 8. The following words were tense but clear: "Absolutely identified as a gravitation..." He was heard to gasp in unbounded amazement. "Now it's gone...!"

The tele-transmitter had ripped the bomb from the forcefield suddenly looming in the path of the *Drusus* and had flicked it into far-off realms of the void where it exploded harmlessly.

"Continue launching robots!" Perry Rhodan did not waste a second. The transmitter switched coördinates again. In the invisible grip of the mysterious apparatus hundreds of robots were sent out of hangar B-65 in swift succession and placed in positions on the opposite side of the diminutive moon.

Then the construction details of Arkon stellar fortresses were brought to Rhodan. Once more he demonstrated his genius for absorbing a universal scope of knowledge. With almost one glance his eyes flew over the first complicated drawing, he picked out the most important characteristics and then quickly compared them with equivalent details in the 2nd 3rd and 4th, finding them to be similar except for minor variations. Then he knew *where* the positronic brain on Siliko 5 had to be located.

"TTM crew—how far along are you with the robot manoeuvre?"

"Finished, sir!"

"Turn the transmitter on the *Drusus* ! Have it take us to Siliko 5! You will obtain the coördinates from the ship's positronicon... That is all! Com-Central: call back the fleet units. All cruisers will fly in concentrated attack as soon as they see our fire... End of order... TTM clear?"

"Set, sir—just waiting for the coördinates..."

At that moment the defence screens of the *Drusus* took another hit. This time they did not seem equal to the deluge of energy. Inside the ship the generators which absorbed hostile energies set up a thunder of

protest. The absorption capacity indicator wavered dangerously close to 100%; then after suspenseful seconds the generator roaring ebbed away and the groaning of the heavily shaken screens also faded.

"5 seconds, sir!" This announcement from the TTM control.

The seconds ticked off on the automatic counter.

Now!

Having expected a transition shock, the whole crew of the *Drusus* at first thought the desperate attempt had failed because they were not aware of the slightest change.

"Fire permission for all guns!" It was the Chief.

The fire-direction officers stared through their optical sights. The men in the Control Central stared at the big panoramic viewscreen. Not 1000 yards under them was Siliko 5—an ingeniously designed, completely automatic Arkon world of destruction.

Now there swept upon it a Terranian tempest.

The *Drusus* opened fire with all weapons in all directions and at an unusually short range. Within 2 seconds the dead rocks of the moon were converted in hundreds of places into roiling gas clouds and sluggishly flowing magma.

The robot brain down in the protected depths of the moon was a relay station to the mammoth brain on Arkon 3. In spite of its positronic character it was not capable of grasping the swift counter-measures necessary under the situation because it was already stymied in several of the most vital areas.

It could not give itself the answer to the question: why had the stellar defence screen remained unscathed—why was it still in place around Siliko 5 while the *Drusus* was nevertheless flying over the lunar surface at the low altitude of less than 3,000 feet?

All things being considered, the Brain seemed to be presented with the task of solving a puzzle which leaned toward the bewildering conclusion that $1 + 1 = 3 \dots!$

"Destroy the surface!" Rhodan had ordered. He had been wondering in those first moments that his ship had not been met with answering fire until he finally suspected why the relay-brain was reacting so sluggishly.

"Watch out for our robots!"

However for the most part the robots were on the other side of the satellite and until now their surprise invasion had progressed practically without resistance while they covered a 60 square-mile territory with their flaming assault, reducing entire batteries of fire-ready ray cannons and their pillboxes to a liquid glaze of flowing lava.

Then the Terranian holocaust also swept out of space over Siliko 5. The mixed cruiser flotilla emerged out of hypertransition and immediately concentrated its entire firepower on *one* point of the stellar defence mantle. The penetrating power of their guns increased in proportion to their approach, so that within a period of one minute the defence screens of Siliko 5 collapsed at this point, permitting an inferno of punishing fire to enter and strike the dwarf satellite.

Now the ray weapons of the light and heavy cruisers fired without hindrance into the depths and converted the moon's polar cap into a 7-mile cloud of writhing gas.

Some of the stellar fortress' firing positions had not yet been destroyed by the *Drusus* and from these emerged a raging torrent of destructive fire against the oncoming cruiser squadrons—but the effect lasted for fractions of a second only as Rhodan's superbattleship brought such positions immediately under its guns.

The enemy attack ended abruptly followed by the unexpected collapse of the entire defence screen around Siliko 5.

The cruiser flotilla dropped toward the mini-satellite in close formation. Together with Rhodan's flagship they curved around the Lilliputian world, leaving behind them a 12-mile path of boiling and bubbling rock which slowly glazed over after their passage.

2 hours later all surface resistance had ceased. Rhodan ordered the fighter robots back. This radically inventive campaign had cost him 67 fighting machines but among his crew not one man had so much as been wounded.

In spite of this, however, the battle was not at an end.

They now had to enter Siliko 5, down to the positronic programming centre and the giant power installations—down there where somewhere they were hiding Thora.

Perry Rhodan no longer believed that he would ever see his son Thomas alive...

12/ CONFRONTATION CATASTROPHIC

11 miles beneath the surface of Siliko 5 the silence of complete isolation pervaded the room assigned to Thomas Cardif.

But he was not aware of it.

He was not even aware of what the room looked like where he had been placed in solitary confinement—nor did he care. A moral and spiritual storm of cyclone proportions was tossing him about like a straw man now and he seemed to have no will to ward off the terrible consequences.

He was 21 years old.

He was Perry Rhodan's son.

And Thora was his mother!

"Thora Rhodan claims to be my mother...?" Somewhat out of its original context he repeated the question he had put to her in the listening presence of the sharply alerted relay-brain.

Before his mind's eye the brief years of his young life passed by in review. As far as he could remember he had experienced no material deprivations but neither as a child nor as a developing adolescent had he experienced the warmth of hearth and home in the house of his parents.

In this hour it came to him what had been withheld—the magnitude of what had been denied him—and he couldn't comprehend why Perry Rhodan and Thora had treated him in this manner.

In fact it didn't matter anymore—he didn't want to know! The heritage of his mother, the dynastic strain of her Arkonide bloodline, was boiling up in his veins, swiftly feeding the dragon seeds of anger, disdain and rage.

"My name is Thomas Cardif, Perry Rhodan!" he shouted. "And as Thomas Cardif I shall die!" He savoured the sound and fury of those wrathful words and found that he relished them.

The Siliko 5 robots had placed him and Thora in separate rooms. Here 11 miles deep within the mini-satellite, it was madness to think of escape.

Suddenly Thomas Cardif heard his own laughter. It was an angry and bitter laughter as he rubbed his hands together in satisfaction.

He didn't *want* to escape!

And why not?

Arkon was his home; he hated this Perry Rhodan as only an Arkonide knew how to hate.

"Rhodan, you denied me parental love. You did it deliberately!—now will I deny the other: filial love! Now I wish to return to where my yellowish eyes lead me—to the seed-bed of my roots, homeward to Arkon!"

In the luxuriously furnished room he began to pace in excited circles. Now and again he glanced into the mirror and the mirror showed him the face that he hated in his soul: the face of Perry Rhodan!

His mother? Her outcry still echoed in his ears. *How* she must have suffered not to be able to enclose her own flesh and blood in her arms, only because this Perry Rhodan had forbidden it!

Now here 11 miles underground, imprisoned by Arkon robots, he began to comprehend why Thora had come to Rusuf; she had wanted to come *to him*, defying all inhuman orders of this dictator Rhodan.

"Perry Rhodan, you were not seeing your own son in me but the man who might one day become dangerous to you. Now it will come true! From here on my life has but one purpose: to destroy you!"

He hated him with that intensity of which only hot youth is capable. He was convinced of his logic yet in reality crushed reason beneath his feet. His Arkonide blood dominated him and thus it was an easy matter for him to forgive his mother, to find excuses for her overall comportment, considering the situation—but Perry Rhodan—?

A muffled rumbling tore him from his hateful reveries and brought him back to naked reality. Thomas listened while sensing that the floor was trembling under his feet. Accidentally he looked into the mirror again and saw Perry Rhodan.

His hand grasped a heavy object. "There...!" he shouted in rage and threw the weighty artifact with such force at the guiltless mirror that the impact dented the metal surface and permanently warped its reflecting capability. "That's what will happen to you too, Perry Rhodan!" He laughed in scornful triumph.

Before him on the table was a small button panel with which he could contact 15 locations by voice and video. He pressed the contact for the relay-brain but in that moment a renewed rumbling was heard, only this time it was stronger, more menacing, suggesting the approach of disaster. Now there was a more prominent trembling in the floor. Cardif had the impression that everything was swaying as in an earthquake.

Now the knowledge he had acquired in the Solar Empire's space academy took precedence over the feverish fire of his emotions. Dispassionately he evaluated the rumbling sounds of attack and the shaking of the floor. He recalled his last mission command regarding system 4186-4-162—and he knew how Perry Rhodan followed up when men he had assigned to a mission did not come back or could not be located.

"Come, then..." The Arkon-hate broke through again but he wondered no longer why he was unable to establish contact with the relay-brain or the other stations.

Perry Rhodan was on his way to him and his mother.

Thomas threw himself on the lounge, locked his hands behind his head and gazed unseeingly at the ceiling. The raging and rumbling of battle became louder and sustained itself without any interruption, as it grew ever nearer.

It bothered him not in the least.

Outside the energy grid that barred his door the battle now raged bloodlessly, all the more awesome because it was between Arkon robots and Terranian machine men, backed of course by the trained crews of the spacefleet.

The clamour of the fight forced him to listen in spite of his own inner turmoil. The unceasing approach of the clashing battle orgy indicated to him that the Arkon robots were being driven inexorably into retreat.

Finally the roaring of gigantic explosions, the infernal hissing of power generators dying in a holocaust of short-circuiting, and the muffled shattering of giant field coils, ebbed quickly away. Only the battle sounds of the robots continued. They carried their own power sources with them and within the framework of combat orders their programming gave them practically the authority of humans, leaving them a wide freedom of action.

Once more the clash of the fighting crescendoed almost unbearably. Then with an unexpected suddenness the battle seemed to collapse, dwindling off in a series of cracklings and slightly explosive clattering. The only sound remaining was the clearly audible march of the ponderous robots.

Once the lighting flickered in Cardif's room. He diagnosed this as a breakdown of the main power station. He thought of it coldly and did not even look up again at the lights.

But the extinguishing of the lights which he had expected did not occur. The light source remained constant.

When the door flew open, bringing 3 men into the room on a flood of outer noises, Thomas failed to move from his lounge. He sensed *who* it was who approached his couch: Perry Rhodan!

But then an element stirred within his nature which was even stronger than his mountainous hate and anger. 3 years of intensive training at the space academy had not washed off his back without a trace.

Thomas Cardif jumped up in front of the Administrator of the Solar Empire, who was accompanied by Col. Julian Tiffior and the telepath, John Marshall. "Lt. Cardif," he reported stiffly, "shot down over Siliko 5 on the mission to system 4186-4-1621 Chauncey Muldoon and Alim Achmed were killed in the action!" Now fully in command of himself, the lieutenant gazed coldly into the grey eyes of the Administrator.

With an equal display of self-control Perry Rhodan not only looked at his son but also *into his own face!*

At this moment Thora stepped into the room accompanied by Khrest and a staff of officers. She was about to step between her husband and her son but Thomas moved to one side with a lightning movement, thus creating a distance that was unbridgeable.

Behind Rhodan's back there was an excited whispering of officers. They were just now faced with the realization that the Chief had a son and that he was a lieutenant in the spacefleet.

Perry denied himself the use of his slight telepathic faculty on his son.

"Perry!" Thora's voice carried a note of desperation. "Thomas knows everything...!"

"I can see that." He was only a father now, studying his son's face feature by feature. At the same time he recalled what the positronic brain on Venus had stated with regard to his youngster's character. But simultaneously a wild resistance swelled up in Perry Rhodan as he fought with all his senses against the glacial logic of the positronicon. His son Thomas was *not only* of Arkonide bloodline—he had an Earthman for a father!

"I see it also, Administrator!" rasped Thomas Cardif curtly, indifferent to the fact that it startled his mother and caused her to clutch her husband's arm imploringly.

Perry Rhodan's voice rang through the room, still obviously under control. "Gentlemen, please leave us alone with our son."

In a body they left the room. Khrest followed them.

"Son?" said Thomas Cardif scornfully. "Since when, Administrator? My name is Thomas Cardif and I'm not in the habit of changing my name like a soiled shirt!" His yellowish eyes flashed defiantly—the heritage of his mother—yet in his erect movements he was completely the image of his father: Perry Rhodan.

"Thomas..." Despair burned in Thora's voice. Her tone clutched at the heart of the young man. With a diminished coldness and slightly less insensitive but still distantly, he replied, "We will stay with 'Lt. Cardif' ... if you don't mind, Madam!"

"Good!" said Perry Rhodan. "For the time being we'll stay with 'Lt. Cardif' and..."

The young man held his head high. Scorn gleamed in his eyes. His words slashed out with the sharpness of a knife: "I've had to get along without any parents this far so I can also do without any for the rest of

my life. I have a question to ask you, Administrator: does your position give you the right to delve into my private life without my permission?"

"But try to understand us...!" Thora's plea did not quite touch his heart this time.

"No!" he half-whispered hatefully but the glare behind it was aimed solely at his father. "I don't want to understand... *I can't* understand! I can only hate—even this face that is no longer my face! I hate this damning caricature of a mask! *Isthat* plain enough for you!"

Perry Rhodan had to support Thora. She seemed to be on the verge of collapse. Her body trembled with soundless sobbing but her eyes were empty of tears. She could not believe the words she had heard had actually been spoken.

"Thomas, my child..." she implored him but Thomas Cardif was deaf to his mother's plea.

"Administrator, do you still have any orders to give me?" Cardif gazed at his father almost challengingly.

"Yes!" Now it was Perry Rhodan, the Administrator of the Solar Empire, who was speaking. "Go outside, Lieutenant. Find Col. Tifflor and come back here with him! Need I remind you that you have sworn allegiance to the Solar Empire?"

For the first time Thomas showed a reaction. Holding his breath and suddenly motionless, he stared at his father. Then he said almost threateningly: "I shall stand by my oath, but *you*, Administrator, will one day release me from it of your own volition!"

"Then you will kindly leave that to me, Lieutenant!" Rhodan's voice was hard.

Once more the 2 crossed glances, then Thomas Cardif strode past Rhodan and Thora to search for Col. Tifflor.

He did not find the colonel and after ½ hour of looking through the sporadically destroyed passages of the subterranean fortress he reported back to Perry Rhodan.

"Thank you," replied Rhodan. "Stay with me, Lieutenant."

The other remained silent but his smouldering yellowish eyes spoke volumes.

Then came a return to routine... the assignments, reports and decisions. Rhodan frowned when it was reported to him that the relay-brain had been completely destroyed.

He pondered the situation swiftly and then said: "1 heavy and 2 light cruisers will remain on Siliko 5. The 3 cruiser commanders are answerable to me for the task of making sure that when they leave this runt of a moon it will for all time be totally unusable as a stellar fortress!"

Thora was no longer at Rhodan's side. Nor did Lt. Cardif ask about her. With the Chief he performed a difficult 11-mile march up out of the depths to the surface of the satellite. They could thank their flying spacesuits for the fact that they finally made it back to the *Drusus* in 4 hours.

From the Control Central, Rhodan put in a call to communications. "Please give me a hypercom connection to Arkon 3. I wish to speak to the Regent. You have the robot Brain's call code. I'll wait."

Lt. Cardif stood motionlessly beside Perry Rhodan, who had sat down in the pilot's seat of the *Drusus*. Rhodan seemed to have forgotten that he was present but his call to the heavy cruiser *Cyclops* proved the opposite.

"Is Col. Tiffloor on board?"

"Yes sir!"

"I will be expecting him in my cabin. That is all!"

Perry still refused to make use of his slight telepathic faculties. For him his son's inner thoughts were taboo but he still would not give up his right to negotiate with him. He was not of a mind to relinquish the heartbreaking struggle for his son's love.

Then came the Com-Central's announcement: "Sir, the Regent of Arkon."

Rhodan looked thoughtfully at the camera. It had to include both him and Thomas. The Regent had to see who was standing by his side.

"This is Rhodan, Regent. I am speaking to you from Siliko 5 in system 4186-4-162." His voice was hard, pitiless, accusing.

"Please proceed," replied the mammoth Brain on Arkon 3.

"With the help of Lt. Cardif who stands here at my side, I have rescued my wife from her imprisonment, 11 miles deep inside the fortress installation. On my approach flight..."

The giant positronicon on Arkon 3 interrupted Rhodan. I am unaware of any cosmic fortress known as Siliko 5. I am only familiar with a moon called Siliko 5 in system 4186-4-162, Rhodan."

"Regent, my wife was abducted from Rusuf 2 by specialized Arkon spaceships and carried off to Siliko 5. The relay-brain there..."

Again the ruling positronicon on Arkon 3 interrupted him. "I know of no relay station on Siliko 5, Administrator of the Solar Empire. Ask the brain for yourself and it will have to tell you that it does not know me. Also it should be a simple matter for your technicians to determine whether or not any connection exists between such a relay-brain and myself. Do you have any more remonstrances, Rhodan?"

"No," replied Rhodan, even as the Regent cut off the hypercom connection.

Khrest had heard the conversation. In response to Rhodan's questioning look he said regretfully: "This time our men and the robots did their work too well. The Regent has been aware for some time that there is nothing left of the relay-station but a miserable pile of scrap metal and that is why he was able to lie so disgracefully. If I heard correctly, the positronicon not only lied brazenly, he did it with a notable degree of apparent stupidity. And that *kind* of stupidity, my dear Rhodan, is often not as stupid as it sounds. The Brain on Arkon appears to be operating from an awareness of strength again and I'd like to know on what grounds—"

"We'll find that out sooner or later," stated Rhodan. He got up and directed Thomas Cardif to follow him. He took him with him to his cabin and shortly after their arrival, Col. Julian Tiffloor entered.

Perry came directly to the point. "Colonel, as of this moment you are transferred to Earth. The area of your assignment will be made known to you there. Your adjutant is Lt. Thomas Cardif. In the interests of expediency you will remain on the *Drusus* with us for the return flight. You are to make certain that under no circumstances does Lt. Cardif have an opportunity to leave the solar system."

Rhodan's son drew himself up with amazing rigidity. His yellowish Arkonide eyes blazed with feral fury as he grated, "I am grateful to you, Administrator! What happens from here on will be an easier task for me..."

Perry Rhodan held firm against the attack in those eyes. Then slowly, as though inhumanly burdened, he replied: "It is to be hoped that I will not one day be forced to be *only* the Administrator! Please leave, lieutenant!"

And Perry Rhodan and Julian Tiffior watched the angry young man depart.

* * * *

Thomas Cardif was gone but powerful vibrations, invisible but nonetheless present and discordant, rent the room... and the hearts of the men silently occupying it. When he finally spoke, Tiff sounded depressed. "Chief, your son is torn between 2 worlds..."

Perry could only wordlessly agree. His poor boy—had any halfling in history ever borne such a burden?

Son of Thora of Arkon, sired by Perry of planet Earth would Thomas Cardif ever find the personal peace his father was dedicated to establishing and maintaining on a planetary level throughout the universe?

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

INTERLUDE ON SILIKO 5

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

DATE DECISIVE: 2042.

This is the year the 2 leading men of the Solar Empire—Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bell—must receive another biological cell shower without fail if they are to avoid a tragic end to their existence within a very few days.

But the planet Wanderer has lived up to its name in a most ironic and alarming fashion—it has wandered away completely!

Pel, as Wanderer the Planet of Eternal Life is also known, must be found pell-mell, for in disappearing from space it has taken with it the 'fountain of youth'.

Now Rhodan and Reggie must make a—

DIMENSION SEARCH

By

Kurt Mahr