

MAY DAY! MAY DAY!

1 MAY 2042—this is the deadline by which Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bell must be treated to a life-preserving cell-shower by the physiotron of the artificial planet Wanderer

Or else!

Else, without the biological rejuvenation good 62 years, perish miserably.

An ignominious finale for the far-flung plans of the Peacelord, devoutly to be avoided.

But Wanderer has disappeared!

The planet that promises perpetual youth, that is the only salvation for Rhodan and Bell, has vanished from the spaceways! Is gone from its orbit!

If it is nowhere to be found in this dimension, the only answer must lie in another. That answer is the reason for—

DIMENSION SEARCH

1/ LOST WORLD

THEIR VERY LIVES, from this moment on into an indefinite future, might very well depend upon the Ring's existence and the power that maintained it.

The heavy cable, thick as an arm, ran along a groove by the hangar rails and entered a tubelike connector box to disappear into the spherical body of the ship, where it furnished the K-238 with all necessary information. Otherwise its crew would have been operating blind because the airlock doors of the giant hangar still remained closed. On the viewscreens a glowing carpet of lightpoints covered the black background of endless space. From the receivers emanated a sound which also filled the Command Central of the *Drusus* at this moment—the giant ship which presently housed the smaller K-238.

Through the familiar monotonous humming a new sound made itself heard as the warp-field generator began to function. On the viewscreens of the K-238, traces of a nebulous circular shape began to materialize as though space itself had thinned at this spot and allowed some sort of alien vapour to pour through from another universe.

The weird ring grew and as it grew it became more distinct.

The 5 men in the small control room of the K-238 observed the phenomenon attentively as the howling from the generator grew louder and the ring from another world increased its luminous intensity.

Perry Rhodan lifted his chin from his hands to observe the small videoscreen of the telecom receiver as it suddenly lit up without warning. With a casual movement of his right hand he switched on the connection and saw Sikerman's large head appear on the screen.

"Ready, sir," announced the *Drusus*' 1st Officer. "Your orders can be issued now."

Rhodan replied: "Very good, Sikerman. We take off in 12 minutes, exactly 20:45 ship time. Issue the necessary instructions; I want to have my hands free."

Sikerman hesitated, then suddenly said "Sir—"

"Yes?"

"I mean—that is—we all wish you success!" Rhodan nodded with a smile. "Thank you. If you can add a little luck to that wish then we'll probably make it."

The screen went dark. Somebody sighed as though just realizing that this was the last communication with a human being that the K-238 would have for a long time, beyond the metalplastic walls_of its 200-foot hull.

Reginald Bell exhaled volubly.

Eyes closed, Rhodan began to look back over the path that had brought them this far. Was everything they had done correct? And above all, were their hypotheses valid? —including their own suppositions and the shrewd conclusions drawn by Atlan the Arkonide?

The chronometers aboard the K-238 registered 17 January 2042—Earth time.

How had the whole thing begun? On January 5, a few 100 light-years away, on Venus.

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"Cruiser *Solar System*, Commander Bell, returning from Sector 4, course 21," said a hard booming voice. "Precautionary measures as usual. Sectors 1 through 7 to be evacuated at once. That is all."

On the edge of the giant landing field of the spaceport stood a row of buildings which were typical of all space-ports: crew barracks for maintenance troops, material storehouses, a small hospital and a long line of single-storey office buildings for commissioned officers and their staffs. Everything looked strictly functional and drab under the hot, grey overcast sky; for the North spaceport on the great northern continent of Venus was exclusively reserved for the Terranian war fleet and the planners had not found it necessary to bother with flamboyant reception buildings, customs control stations and passenger service facilities.

Hidden in the mountains north of the landing field was the former Arkonide stronghold that Perry Rhodan had discovered 70 years before, along with its one time chief, Atlan the immortal, who had begun to be Perry Rhodan's friend from that time on. The heart or rather the brain of this mighty stronghold was the tremendous positronic computer installation which had become the focal point of all political and physical calculations pertaining to the Solar Empire. And above all: within a vast galactic area it was the only machine of its kind that, could quickly calculate the orbit of a certain artificial planet that hurtled around a large number of gravitational centres many light-years away, while utilising only such data as a fractional orbital arc and very few additional pieces of information.

This was the orbit of the planet Wanderer.

In the low rambling officers' building Perry Rhodan and Atlan the Arkonide sat facing each other in a small room that was amazingly well furnished and comfortable, each of them immersed in his own thoughts and unresponsive to the splendid panorama of solitude which was offered by the arrow-straight dark line of the Venusian jungle bordering on the field.

High above the spaceport appeared a glittering point of light which grew swiftly and came toward the ground. A strong blast of wind came across the broad field and the roaring sound of a spaceship followed as it cut down hastily through the dense atmosphere.

"He's in a hurry," observed Atlan.

Rhodan got up and moved to the window as if to see the glowing ball of the landing ship more clearly from there. "I probably also told him to make it fast," he answered absently.

"Well, Administrator," said Atlan sarcastically, "if you had allowed him to send out a hypercom message straight from the source you might have saved yourself 2 days of waiting."

Rhodan turned around and leaned against the window. "Oh? So that your top ruler, Admiral, could pick up my conversation and subject it to his ingenious faculties—adding his positronic currents, doing a little addition and subtraction, jumping into exponents here and there and whatever else—in order to find the galactic position of the Earth by the quickest means possible? Is that what you mean?"

The Arkonide made a deprecating gesture with his hand. "The chance was small. It's not so easy to intercept a direct beam like that."

"The chance was small but nevertheless—it was there. And I don't want to give him *any* chance at all."

Atlan also rose to his feet. "Alright, you have a point, Barbarian. I'm only sorry for the nervous tension it's caused you. It's easy to see how worked up you are about this."

Rhodan tapped the window over his shoulder with his thumb. "Out there is my reassurance," he said with a smile.

The flame and thunder of the *Solar System* reached its crescendo point at about 1500 feet above the field, sweeping the landing strip with an aftershock of displaced air masses. The glow of ionized particles was extinguished as the great ship braked into the customary landing speed and floated down softly onto the grey pavement.

A column of open personnel trucks shot out from behind a row of storage buildings and seemed for a

moment to be heading right under the lowering ship but they finally stopped at the spot where the wide landing ramp—just now appearing out of the main lock—would probably touch the ground.

Within a few seconds after the landing had finally been completed and the cruiser rested firmly on its hydraulic landing struts, 2 men appeared above in the lock opening; they glided down the conveyor ramp and jumped into one of the waiting vehicles. Instantly the personnel carrier got under way and headed for the office building complex.

"You really stir up a storm of activity," observed Atlan. There was that in his voice that indicated he was truly amazed.

The pickup vehicle stopped outside in front of the main entrance. 2 men emerged from it, both of them of average height and, by a curious coincidence, both red-headed. The huskier of the 2 wore the rank insignia of a commander; his companion, of average build, wore the uniform of a captain.

Their swiftly marching feet resounded through the hallway. The door of the small, comfortable room was jerked open. Reginald Bell stood on the threshold.

Instead of giving any form of greeting, he said: "Nothing! Absolutely nothing!"

The silence which followed this announcement was also absolute.

Atlan was still standing near the window, apparently a non-participant and showing little interest. If he revealed any attentiveness to the matter at all, it was directed at Rhodan in order to observe his reaction.

In the latter's face, however, there was nothing to be seen but a brief hardening of the jaw muscles. But within a second or so Rhodan recovered, appearing as though he had just received a message that was insignificant and of no particular interest.

"Come in," he said. "You, too, Captain. And then I want to hear a more detailed report."

Reginald Bell plopped himself into one of the chairs. Capt. Gorlat remained standing. Bell reported: "There's not much to tell. When we arrived at the coordinates calculated by the positronicon, we found nothing. I mean—absolutely nothing within a circumference of 6 light-years. Naturally we searched for any possible traces, such as a hydrogen trail, because you know such light gases are lost in small amounts as a planet moves through space. But we didn't find one extra hydrogen molecule above what is more or less normal for deep space. We lost a whole day working with the tracking equipment; all we picked up on the screens was one measly meteor. Wanderer has disappeared!"

Rhodan looked at Gorlat, who responded to the challenge.

"Our propulsion plant was in order, sir. The chance of a false jump is out of the question. We even made 2 test transitions and each time we came out to the exact light-second that was calculated beforehand. The spatial area at the point indicated by the positronicon was free of disturbances. No magnetic storms, no real-time variations, nothing. In fact there's no other conclusion, sir, than that which the Commander has already drawn."

"Wanderer has disappeared," confirmed Bell again.

"The Old Man has played a trick on us. Maybe he wants us to play puzzle games again like we did about 66 years ago."

Rhodan shook his head. With hands behind his back, he paced a few steps and then stopped in front of Atlan, a quizzical look on his face.

* * * *

Wanderer had disappeared. According to the promise of its builder and proprietor, it was a world whose existence guaranteed Rhodan eternal life. But now it was lost.

In the late 70s Rhodan made his first crucial visit to the planet and its master, who represented the accumulated consciousness of a long extinct race. He and Bell, who had remained his battle companion ever since that historically significant flight to the moon, had been found worthy of receiving the biological cell-shower treatment, which was good for 62 years of life without aging. The strange being who ruled over Wanderer had given them the instructions to return at the end of 62 years in order to again receive the gift of another 62 years of life by means of a 2nd treatment. Not sooner and not later, within a tolerance of 3 months. As a result of a retardation of time to which they were subjected during their first sojourn on Wanderer, they had not returned to the Earth until 1980.

Now in the year 2042 the allowed period was up. Or more precisely: the 1st of February 2042 was the earliest and the 1st of May of 2042 was the latest time when they were supposed to put in an appearance on Wanderer.

Exceeding the latest time period allowed would mean an immediate slowing down of the bodily functions. Without a further biological cell-shower the body's rate aging would make up for all the deterioration held in check during the 62 years. One week after May 1, Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bell would become a couple of 100-year-old decrepits with 2 feet in the grave.

And Wanderer had disappeared!

"I'm convinced that he's having us," asserted Bell stubbornly. "The Old Boy is leading us around by the nose!"

He had slept for 10 hours without interruption and the rest had restored his old fighting spirit as well as his tremendous optimism.

"That which he had referred to as the 'Old Boy' was the solitary inhabitant of Wanderer, a monstrous psychic power representing the collective consciousness of an entire race which was no longer bound to a physical body.

Rhodan was of another opinion. "He has granted us the cell activation treatment," he said, shaking his head. "What reason would he have to lie to us?"

"Lord knows!" blustered Bell. "In any case I don't trust that old rascal—never have!"

They sat in a subterranean room within the old Arkonide stronghold. A few passages away was the Control Central of the great positronicon, which was operating at the limits of its capacity, and they could hear its humming action even at this distance.

"No," declared Rhodan decisively. "The disappearance of Wanderer has to have another reason... or better yet: there must be another cause."

Atlan, Who had followed the conversation in silence, now looked askance at Rhodan. "That sounds as though you had a suspicion of something," he said.

Rhodan shrugged. "Why should we speak of suppositions when the machine will be through with its calculations in a few minutes?"

Atlan returned a smile. "I just was interested, Barbarian, to see if the same thing occurred to you as it has to me."

Although they refrained from expressing their thoughts at the moment, the positronicon spilled out the same conclusion, stamping the words bluntly into metal foil strips in accordance with its mechanical character: Wanderer had fallen prey to an overlapping of 2 time-planes. The machine gave a probability indication of 81% for the correctness of its findings.

"Is that what you suspected?" asked Atlan.

"Naturally," answered Rhodan. "The Druufs have swallowed Wanderer just as they did Mirsal. There's only one thing curious about it, though."

"And that is...?"

"Wouldn't the entity on Wanderer have had any possibility of defending himself against the Druufs? Would he have had to let himself be gobbled up like that without putting up any defence?"

Atlan became pensive. He only answered after a considerable pause. "I know that in your minds the Lord of Wanderer is supposed to be some mysterious creature who goes around haunting the depths of space like an omnipotent being. As a reasoning human being—which you generally demonstrate yourself to be—you should come to realize, Administrator, that such omnipotence is mere fiction. Every power has its limitation and it is by no means difficult to imagine that the Old Boy, as Bell calls him, is no match for the Druufs."

Rhodan shook his head in vigorous disagreement. "As far as I'm concerned, that would be very hard to imagine. My friend, you have not experienced what we did on Wanderer. No, I'm certain that there's still another riddle behind this that's waiting to be solved."

"Then you'd better get busy, Barbarian." The Arkonide smiled gently. "You don't have much time left for puzzling it out. Today is the 6th of January by your reckoning."

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The next step was obvious.

The positronicon calculated the orbital segment that Wanderer would have traversed from the time of the

Druufs' first appearance until the 5th of January of 2042—an arc of travel in which it had ostensibly disappeared.

Rhodan put top priority on the project of having an auxiliary spaceship of the Guppy class fitted out with a warp-field generator. This apparatus was the only means of providing a crossover into the alien time-plane of the Druufs, inasmuch as it made a kind of doorway between the 2 ratios of time. The Guppy, having receiving its alterations, was transported on board the *Drusus* to the place where the orbit of the Wanderer had been during the middle 3rd of the year 2040.

The battleship *Drusus* had already been furnished with a large warp-field generator during a previous operation. If the Earth fleet had any ship at all that was a match for the Druuf threat, then this had to be the *Drusus*.

The technology of warp-field generation had been discovered more or less by accident slightly more than a year previously but in the course of events in the Crystal World of the Druuf dimension it had been advanced considerably. Now it was possible to cross over into the alien time-plane wherever an interface of the 2 time-ratios had taken place in the past or where such an overlap might be happening at a given moment. So it was that the only thing the *Drusus* had to do was to fly along the orbital path of Wanderer with an activated warp-field projected before it. If, according to the findings of the positronicon, an overlap had actually occurred, causing Wanderer to fall victim to it, then as soon as the ship arrived at the intersecting point it would be able to penetrate the alien time-plane by means of its own warp-field.

And this situation presented itself after a brief search.

The *Drusus* penetrated into a kind of space that was permeated by a deep reddish glow that had been observed before. It was a void which seemed to serve no other purpose than to provide a location for the poisonous green star in its centre.

The weird colour phenomena occasioned no sense of fear since everyone had already gone through this experience before. The instruments of the *Drusus* indicated the distance between the ship and the green sun as being 54 astronomical units—a measurement which Rhodan regarded with well-founded suspicion. They had already observed that conventional measurements of the Einstein Continuum were either shortened or simply not applicable.

Since Rhodan did not wish to expose the *Drusus* to the danger of an alien time-lapse adaptation, he returned from the red universe through the warp-field energy lens after only a short stay.

It was now known where Wanderer had disappeared. It was also obvious that nothing could be learned in the normal time-plane concerning the whereabouts of the synthetic planet.

So it was that Guppy number K-238, equipped with its own warp-field generator, was prepared for takeoff. Rhodan had refrained from taking along the customary crew complement for this hazardous operation. The Guppy's functions, including the weapons operation, could be handled by 5 men in cases of emergency and Perry Rhodan was satisfied that such an emergency had arrived.

Aside from Atlan the Arkonide and Reginald Bell, he had selected Capt. Gorlat and Lt. Tompetch as his companions. These were the 5 men—himself included—who were in the small control room of the K-238 on that evening of 17 January 2042, holding their breaths as they stared at the viewscreen.

2/ STRANGE EVENTS ON 'SOLITUDE'

As the chronometer reached 20:45, the takeoff occurred automatically. The cable, which had thus far provided a connection with the larger ship's interior, slipped free of the connector slot. On the panoramic viewscreen of the K-238 appeared a picture of the large, brightly illuminated scoutship hangar. At the opposite end of the chamber the inner door of the airlock could be seen gliding upward.

A few seconds later the K-238 also set itself in motion. It floated into the airlock on its antigrav field and paused while the inner hatch closed, giving an electrical signal for the outer hatch to open.

The milky-looking ring of the warp-field became visible again; its centre coincided with the midpoint of the bow viewscreen. Rhodan saw the hatch slide open just as the green takeoff light came on.

The stationary ring of energy seemed to take a mighty jump toward the scoutship—and in the next moment everything disappeared: the ring, the glittering carpet of unnumbered stars, the Drusus...

Instead, the spacecraft was surrounded by a deep reddish glow and from the abysmal depths of an eerie, alien void came the malignant rays of the greenish fireball that was the other sun.

They had completed their crossover successfully.

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They knew that from now on they would have to be dealing with another dimension of time. One could not say that another time had to be 'reckoned' with in the sense of actual calculations because the phenomena occurring in this purplish red world were so complex, strange and often self-contradicting that even the mathematicians had failed entirely so far to erect a clear frame-work of reference by which one could be guided.

However, one thing was certain: the time reference in which the K-238 was now moving had a different lapse-rate than the one they had come from. Whether the differential was faster or slower would only be determined after their return to the Einstein space to which they were accustomed.

Rhodan was primarily concerned with the question as to whether the green sun was a celestial body in the sense of the hasty classification they had given it—and if so, whether or not it possessed any planets.

The assignments on board the K-238 were carefully divided: Rhodan was the combination commander and pilot; Atlan the Arkonide sat at the positronic nav-computer and made course calculations or analysed the results of all bearings taken; Reginald Bell operated the tracking instruments; Capt. Gorlat took charge of the weapons console; and Lt. Tompetch was all around backup man.

Within ½ hour of their transition into the alien time-plane, the astrophysical instruments had registered a spectrum of the green sun. They produced a spectrographic chart where in the width of the differentiated colour bands appeared as a function of the radiation wavelengths. Atlan, who was the first to take a look

at it, let out a snort of disgust and said it was a spectrum that wasn't good for anything other than to drive any self-respecting spectroanalyst up the wall. Rhodan took one short look at it and confirmed that the spectrum was more or less what might be expected from a rusty incandescent piece of baling wire but certainly it couldn't be that of a sun.

In place of the smooth curves the chart should have revealed, were semi-horizontal lines more or less running along the abscissa but with rises and peaks occurring at irregular intervals. One of these peaks registered a wavelength of 5600 angstroms and was obviously the cause of the weird light source's green colouration.

Before the conclusion was formulated and expressed, to the effect that this was not an actual sun but rather some kind of as yet unknown light phenomenon, the instruments came up with another indication: a gravitational field was being generated by the greenish body. The distance between the K-238 and the green sun amounted to slightly more than 18 astronomical units. Converting this distance in terms of the gravity measured yielded a mass reading of 2.64×10 to the 27th power, in tons, which was about 1.2 times the mass of Earth's mother star.

No celestial object other than a sun could have such amass. The evidence of the mass of the body was a more serious consideration than its peculiar spectrum.

However the turning point came finally with the discovery that Reginald Bell made about 15 minutes later with especially sensitive instruments. The equipment registered a disturbance of the gravitational field which could only be attributed to a 2nd and weaker gravity field. A few moments later it was demonstrated that the 2nd field was moving opposite the first one. From the originally measured amount of disturbance and its chronological alterations it was ascertained that the body responsible for the 2nd gravitic field must have a mass of about 5.478×10 to the 21st power, in tons, which was about 0.83 the mass of the Earth.

There was no doubt that Bell's instruments had discovered a planet and that the green light phenomenon was its mother star and therefore a sun.

Rhodan decided immediately to fly to the as yet invisible planet and attempt to land on it.

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The unknown world only became visible on the viewscreens after the K-238 had approached it to within 500,000 miles.

Rhodan cut down the ship's velocity to a speed that he would have considered ridiculous under normal circumstances. However, in a situation like the present one there was no doubt about the fact that he had to be as careful as possible.

He watched the screen and only listened with half an ear to the instrument readings that Bell was calling out in the small control room. He saw broad stretches of turquoise cloud coverings which stood out only vaguely against the surface. There were surface lines and markings which seemed to indicate some sort of organization and structure.

Bell was intoning: "Diameter, 6820 miles! Surface gravity is 1.12 normal. Picking up absorption bands for nitrogen, oxygen and argon. Composition: 60, 35, 4. The rest undetermined."

So the atmosphere was oxygen-rich—certainly breathable—thought Rhodan. At least this was something to start with.

By the time the K-238 was beginning to penetrate the upper layers of the atmosphere, Bell's instruments were also showing a rotational movement of the alien world. It turned on its axis at a daily rate of 18 hours and a few minutes.

So the strangeness of the place began to be minimized after all.

At least where the K-238 landed the surface of the alien planet presented the friendly appearance of parklike forests, broad grasslands and small rivers and streams, the latter flowing generally in a direction where they would apparently have to converge at some point beyond the horizon.

The overall aspect made it appear as though the K-238 had discovered a new Paradise. However, something else was discovered that—at least during the first few minutes—seriously disturbed this impression: the atmosphere contained a small admixture of hydrogen sulphide; it was a part of the 1% composition that Bell hadn't been able to identify upon their approach, generating a terrible odour that was reminiscent of rotten eggs.

A careful analysis of the intrinsically poisonous gas revealed that although the impurity was very active from an olfactory standpoint it was nevertheless not dangerous and therefore it would not be necessary to employ breathing filters. Moreover it was known as a common fact that the odour of hydrogen sulphide is quite bearable. After a certain period of getting used to it the human olfactory senses even fail to be aware of it.

Nothing further happened to Rhodan and his companions. After having explored the area around the scoutship on foot for about an hour, they did not seem to smell the offensive odour any more, so they returned convinced of having discovered a qualified Paradise.

Reginald Bell's spontaneous suggestion to call the planet Stinker went over like the proverbial lead balloon.

After he had determined that there was nothing particular interest in the vicinity, Rhodan returned to the ship. In the meantime the positronicon had evaluated all data picked up during the approach flight and had determined that no trace of intelligent life was to be seen on the surface of the planet.

"Under the circumstances," said Rhodan, "there's not much purpose in staying here any longer. We can't learn from an uninhabited planet where Wanderer disappeared to."

No one could disagree with this observation. The K-238 was placed in standby condition for takeoff while the positronicon utilized the newly calculated orbital curve of the planet as a basis for determining whether or not there was any other gravitational disturbance manifesting nearby—in other words, a 2nd satellite world of the green sun.

This investigation came up with an interesting finding: the orbit of the green world was not stable. Its orbital speed was too great in comparison to its orbital diameter. This meant that in the foreseeable future the planet would break away from its mother star and fly off into the purple-red void. At first glance this did not appear to be unusual. At any particular point in time within the universe there were more unstable

planetary orbits than stable ones conforming to the physical principle or axiom that an unstable condition was by far more probable than a stabilized one.

One thing, however, was very strange.

"I think we're all in agreement on one fact," said Rhodan. "The instability of the orbit can only have started recently. If it were a long-standing condition, no vegetation could have developed on this world. For the generation of life, no matter how primitive, stabilized conditions are required, and by my reckoning, there's been life on this planet for several hundred million years."

He looked about him as though inviting comment but apparently nobody but Atlan could make something out of the observation. "You're thinking of some sudden effect, right?" he asked with a smile. "Perhaps some gravitational explosion in deep space that may have caused the planet to accelerate, or...?"

Rhodan rejected the idea with a wave of his hand. "Much less dramatic than that, Admiral," he laughed. "To put it simply: I'm thinking of Wanderer. Wanderer has been transferred into this time-plane somewhere in this vicinity. If it passed this world at a close enough range, it could have caused this orbital disturbance."

Atlan nodded as though it were the answer he had expected. "You are a man who doesn't waste time coming to conclusions, Barbarian. So now what?"

For answer Rhodan switched all propulsion machinery to zero output. "That's what," he said. "We stay. If we can find out *when* the disturbance started, we can calculate the course taken by Wanderer."

"Oh-ho!" exclaimed Atlan with a raised brow. "That takes about 26 equations with 27 unknowns. That's a 3-body problem that would cause a mathematical genius to tear out his hair."

Rhodan smiled, pointing to the switch-panel of the positronicon. "So let it start tearing its hair..."

* * * *

Since they had decided to stay awhile, they gave the world a name. It was called Solitude because they couldn't imagine a more lonely place than this, where beautiful plants grew in riotous profusion but without a sign of an animal—if one discounted the small spiders and beetle-like creatures that Rhodan had thus far discovered.

Actually nobody had anything specific to do—with the exception of the positronicon which combined all possible information concerning integrals of radiation levels from the green sun, Solitude's surface temperature, plus its mass, orbital velocity and other factors in order to reconstruct the planet's original orbital path. Once this was established it would not be difficult to pinpoint the time of the first aberration caused by an outside influence, and from there on, in spite of the intrinsic complexity of the calculations, it would be only one straight step to determining the course that Wanderer had taken—provided, of course, that the hypothesis of Atlan and Rhodan turned out to be factual.

Rhodan could make no objection when Bell, Gorlat and Tompetch gave in to their need for some sleep

and retired to their cabins. Atlan had remained awake but after awhile he also excused himself, saying that he wanted to mull over a few ideas in his head.

While the positronicon worked industriously behind him, Rhodan observed the green landscape beyond the walls of the ship, noting that the sun was beginning to sink gradually toward the horizon. He studied the strange tree forms and had the impression that they seemed to combine the characteristics of oaks, pines and horse-tails all at once. It was a marvellous world for researchers in galactic biology, he thought. Here were plants from a world in which time stood still.

The plants did not move. No wind seemed to blow. When one took hold of the strange stalks or touched the leaves of the trees, it felt like touching hard metal. Rhodan knew this phenomenon, having experienced it on that world which Marcel Rous had called the Crystal Planet. It was nothing more than the effect of a decelerated rate of time.

He fell to brooding over the incomprehensible problem the different real-time ratios until he finally noticed the dark spot that had appeared between 2 great tree trunks at a distance of about 400 yards—which he knew had not been there before. This rooted his attention. In a world where time passes 72000 times slower than normal, nothing can make an appearance within a few minutes—not even a dark spot between 2 tree trunks.

If only there weren't such a predominance of green, he thought. Green doesn't seem to agree with my eyes. He blocked down the screen to a small quadrant and altered the lens setting of the visual pickup system so that the smaller area was magnified. The higher the degree of magnification he used, the more Rhodan was convinced that a man was standing out there between the trees. He remained motionless and appeared to be watching the ship. The features of the face could not be discerned nor what kind of clothing he wore.

He reflected that perhaps 1 of the 4 crew members had gone outside without telling him about it; but since he was not certain he called into the cabins, one after another. Reginald Bell, who could get away with it, was very cross about being disturbed; Capt. Gorlat announced himself in a regulation manner; and Mike Tompetch was so sleepy that he hadn't the slightest idea of what was wanted of him.

However, no one answered from Atlan's cabin.

"OK, Admiral you just wait!" Rhodan laughed to himself. "Leaving the ship without the Commander's permission!"

He stood up and went over to the weapons console. It wouldn't do the Arkonide any harm to lay in a well-aimed disintegrator shot and knock down a tree in his vicinity to give him a scare.

But Rhodan had not reached the seat usually occupied by Capt. Gorlat before the bulkhead hatch slid aside with a low rumble. Atlan appeared in the opening.

Although he was smiling, he looked a bit troubled or confused. Rhodan cast a quick glance at the viewscreen and saw that the dark figure was still standing between the trees.

So it had to be...!

"Perry—" Atlan began, and the very fact that he had used Rhodan's first name was sufficient proof that he was confused.

"What?" Rhodan wanted to know.

Atlan shook his head. "It's better you don't ask. Otherwise you might think that I—"

"Come on! Out with it!"

"I just saw a little man... in my cabin!" he confessed in a low, uncertain tone.

To his surprise Rhodan remained calm and collected. He turned and pointed to the viewscreen. "You mean, perhaps, that one there?" he asked—but then let out a gasp of astonishment.

The figure between the 2 tree trunks had disappeared. Atlan gasped too. "It's quite impossible, you know, no matter what you say. A man only this tall..." With his hand he indicated a height of about 10 inches. "And completely humanoid, too, with a Terranian spaceship uniform—and don't forget he came through a closed hatch."

"What did he look like?" asked Rhodan. "I mean, his face."

Atlan shrugged. "I don't know. He... I couldn't see it very well. But it was kind of strange. Like... yes, now I recall it: like a half-finished piece of sculpture. Not quite rounded out yet, so to speak."

"I see. And how did he get in?"

"I don't know that either. I was standing with my back to the door looking at the viewscreen. When I turned around, he was there. Absolutely without a sound. He stood near the table."

"And what was he doing...?"

"Nothing... other than looking around. His movements were fairly quick, astonishingly so for this world."

"Then he went out again?"

"You can't say he *went* out, in the normal sense of the word," protested the Arkonide. "I had just recovered from my surprise and was about to say something to him, when all of a sudden he was gone. From one moment to the other—gone—like one of your teleporters."

"Hm-m-m... Maybe he *is* one," said Rhodan. "It would also explain how he came through the closed door. What did you do then? Did you come here?"

Atlan nodded. "You know, it could well be that he's a teleporter. But do you have in your crew a man with a half-completed face who is only less than a foot tall?"

Rhodan laughed half aloud. "No, naturally not. But Solitude is a most unique world. So we don't have to lose our heads right off the bat. Maybe there is—"

"Right you are, Barbarian," interrupted Atlan and he seemed to have regained his equilibrium. "Maybe there is a purely natural explanation."

"Correct," Rhodan agreed and he pressed the alarm button.

When the sirens set up a howl it startled the Arkonide. The incident appeared to have gotten on his

nerves pretty badly, even though he gave the outward appearance of being completely at ease.

* * * *

The alarm was responded to with the customary swiftness of a fighting ship's crew. The sirens had hardly been silenced again before Reginald Bell burst into the control room. Close behind him appeared Capt. Gorlat; Lt. Tompetch came last.

"Has any one of you noticed anything unusual in the past hour?" asked Rhodan in an official tone of voice.

Reginald Bell sullenly shook his head.

"Captain...?"

"No sir—nothing. I was asleep."

"Lieutenant...?"

"No sir. I was asleep too."

In a few words Rhodan depicted what he and Atlan had observed. "We don't know," he concluded, "whether or not we've been the victims of a hallucination. Here on Solitude a lot could happen that would seem strange to us. But naturally we have to be convinced. Capt. Gorlat, you take a look through the cabin where the little midget was last seen. Be careful. You know what's involved. Bell, you take over the ship's command while Atlan and I take a look at the place where I saw the alien. And Lt. Tompetch, you keep in touch with us by radio."

* * * *

Toward evening the sky became overcast by a peculiar brownish hue that tended toward a dirty olive tint but gradually the greenish colouration faded and it made a transition into reddish tones.

Rhodan reflected that the principles of colour mixing held good here, where the greenish hues of daylight mixed with the purplish red of space to make brown. After sundown they would then only see the red component.

As it turned out, the distance factor had been grossly misjudged during the observation of the strange dark figure among the trees. The originally estimated 400 yards became twice that amount by the time Rhodan and the Arkonide reached the 2 tree trunks where the little alien had been standing.

Rhodan spoke into his micro-transmitter. "We've reached the place, Lieutenant. Can you see us?"

"Yes sir," answered Tompetch. "Just now I see you OK but it'll soon be dark."

"Good. How big do we appear to you?"

"About the size of my thumb, I'd say, sir."

"Thank you, that's all I need. Keep your receiver open." Rhodan looked at Atlan. "Too bad, Admiral. I thought maybe your dwarf might have turned into a giant. But he also looked like a Tom Thumb to me."

They looked for footprints. Since it had become too dark to discern any tracks or other signs with the naked eye, Rhodan produced a small but powerful flashlight and turned its beam toward the ground.

"The grass is hard," muttered the Arkonide. "It wouldn't be able to show tracks of the kind we're looking for. The blades can't be pressed down."

Rhodan flashed his light behind them, searching for their own footprints. The way was marked by broken and splintered grass blades, as though a narrow lawn-mower had worked its way this far.

"Maybe it doesn't press down," he said, "but it breaks off. It's hard and brittle. If anybody was standing here who weighed at least 8 to 10 ounces, there's got to be some sign of it."

Atlan straightened up and sighed. "But there's nothing to be seen, Administrator. What conclusion should we draw from that?"

Rhodan smiled. "Draw your own conclusions, friend. I don't like to open my mouth so hastily."

Atlan shrugged and spread his hands. "What can you say? Hallucination—nothing more."

Rhodan was about to answer him that he didn't think it was an hallucination, that there must still be some other explanation, but at that moment he felt that there was something behind him—he could sense almost physically that he was being observed from the brownish darkness.

His reaction was purely mechanical. Since it was instinctive it happened faster than any shock of fright could reach the brain to incapacitate the processes of reason. The wide light shaft from his pocket lamp captured a figure a few yards away which hovered above the ground and seemed to sway softly in the wind—in a wind that absolutely did not exist on Solitude.

Rhodan noted with amazement that the shaft of light passed through the figure, at least to the extent that it projected a bright ring on the tree trunk behind the apparition.

What was it?

Atlan's hand reached down to his belt and had already pulled out his weapon before Rhodan waved him off.

He cried out to the Arkonide: "Don't over-react! We don't know what he wants!"

At the same time he tried to figure out who 'he' might be, this creature who was still swaying in an imaginary wind and was no more concerned about the bright light of the lamp than if he hadn't perceived it at all.

He was wearing the grey type of overalls that were used on board terrestrial spaceships for maintenance work; but such overalls were made out of thick, solid material and this outfit was transparent. He wore the same kind of high boots with magnetic fasteners that Rhodan himself was wearing; but these did not damage the grass whereas the blades snapped and crackled under Rhodan's feet. He appeared to have a thick growth of hair but the face could not be discerned.

"Alright now, my friend," said Atlan caustically. "We have to do something. Staring isn't going to get us, anywhere—Hey there, who are you?"

The challenging shout awakened loud echoes among the smooth, diamond-hard boles of the trees. However the figure showed no reaction to it.

Rhodan took a step toward it and it moved back from him an equal distance. It did not walk but rather glided over the grass. Rhodan took a 2nd step and achieved the same result.

"Perhaps if I ran around to one side," said Atlan, "we might catch him."

"Catch him? What with? He'd slip through our hands like a damp fog."

"Well, to the devil with this, we certainly can't just—"

His voice sounded nervous and irritated but before he could finish his sentence the figure moved again, for the 3rd time—but now it moved without anyone having to approach it.

Rhodan covered it with his flashlight. It glided past a tree trunk and receded into the open grassland beyond. The strangely incomplete face kept looking back as though to see if they were following.

"After him!" exclaimed Rhodan with sudden decision. "It would be interesting to find out where it's going."

He informed Tompetch of the situation and instructed him to start using the infra-red tracker. "Try not to lose sight of us," he concluded. "It could be that we might need some help."

Then he joined Atlan in following the figure. It didn't seem to bother the alien that someone was following behind him; he did not change his pace but glided onward over the grass without leaving any tracks.

It was by no means a simple task to follow him. Although the grass was fragile, nevertheless it gave the impression that a vast army of Lilliputians was thrusting countless spearpoints against the intruders, and if a single leaf should penetrate a weak spot in a boot seam there was no doubt that it could cause a nasty wound.

By Rhodan's reckoning, meanwhile, they had gone about 2 miles away from the K-238 when the beam of his flash-light picked up a ridge ahead that was even in contour and lay directly across their field of vision. The alien floated up the rise and disappeared over the crest. Atlan and Rhodan followed him and when they reached the top they saw that the small stranger had come to a stop at the foot of the other slope. At his feet was a spot of darkness, as though the grass there had been burned away.

The creature only seemed to be waiting until Rhodan's light came over the ridge and picked him up again in its beam. Then, as though deliberately wishing to reveal the direction it was taking, it sank down slowly into the dark spot. After a few seconds it disappeared.

"Now grab your weapon, Admiral!" said Rhodan without looking at the Arkonide.

They moved down the slope and were only halfway to the bottom when the bright cone of light from the pocket lamp revealed that the dark spot they were heading for was nothing more than a hole that apparently sank vertically into the ground. It was approximately circular in shape with a diameter of about 5 feet. They stopped at the edge of it and Rhodan flashed his light down into it. They could see that the shaft went down vertically for about 5 feet and then curved off to one side. Where it led could not be determined.

"So let's climb down into it," suggested Atlan.

Rhodan shook his head. "Too dangerous. We need at least one man to stand guard here at the entrance." He hailed Tompetch over the radio. "Come and join us," he ordered. "Bring along a disintegrator and a portable radio. You'll be able to see our tracks in the grass; and beside I'll shine the light upward as a beacon for you."

Tompetch confirmed the order and said that at the most it would take him a ½ hour to get there.

3/ COFFINS OF MYSTERY

"What are we supposed to make of all this?" asked Atlan after a long silence. "How do you explain an intangible image with a human figure and the work uniform of the Terranian spacefleet?"

"Frankly," answered Rhodan, "I can't make heads or tails of it. But I hope that down there—" he pointed into the dark shaft "—we will find an explanation." And after awhile he added: "And we should also keep in mind that we may not be dealing with a mere image. I don't think it's just some picture projection with special refinements. That thing has intelligence; it seems to be a veritable mentality."

"Like a ghost, I suppose?" said Atlan derisively.

"Perhaps. That is, of course, if anybody knows what a ghost actually is."

For lack of information the conversation was threatening to take on a metaphysical aspect when there was a commotion up on the ridge. Lt. Tompetch came stomping over the crest with resounding, powerful marching steps. He came down the slope, stopped before the pocket lamp and gave a regulation salute.

"Tompetch, we're going to climb down there now. Keep your weapon ready and your ear to the receiver. I don't know what may be awaiting us down below."

Tompetch crouched at the edge of the hole while Rhodan climbed down inside. He supported himself on his arms until he felt a foothold beneath him. However, the shaft farther down was too sheer a drop to offer any further holds. With a sudden velocity he dropped on a dusty but surprisingly smooth chute down into the interior of the world.

He didn't come to rest until the shaft became horizontal. Rhodan moved swiftly out of the way, just in

time for the Arkonide to come scolding down the weird slide and make a rolling stop practically at his feet.

Atlan straightened up in a swift movement, raising his head as far as the height of the tunnel would allow, and looked back the way he had come. "I'd like to know how we're going to go back up there again," he muttered.

Rhodan crawled farther along. "Just now I'm glad we made it this far. I'll bother my head about what comes next when it gets here."

The pocket light had come through the tumble unscathed. Its powerful rays illuminated the smooth walls of the tunnel and farther ahead they penetrated a dark, circular opening that led into a subterranean room. Apparently the room was too large for the flashlight to illuminate it from that distance.

The tunnel itself was low, yet large enough to allow movement without much difficulty. While they both crept forward in order to inspect the dark room ahead, Atlan ran a hand over the tunnel wall and discovered that the smooth coating was textureless and seamless, evidently the result of a well-developed technique in the spraying of plastics.

When they reached the opening at the end of the tunnel, the beam of the hand lamp took in a large room that was fairly bursting with strange apparatuses and pieces of equipment, all of them apparently connected by tubes and conductor conduits. In the centre of the room was a number of coffin-like containers in a veritable network of connecting tubes and cables.

It was these latter which began to awaken Rhodan's curiosity the most. It was necessary to jump down a yard or so to the lower level of the floor in the room. Rhodan did so and pushed forward between rows of equipment until he stood before the first of the coffins. It appeared to be made of metal.

Rhodan touched the cover of the box and felt a slow pulsation in it. One of the conduits leading to it appeared to transmit a vibration which had a frequency rate of about 1 every 2 seconds. When this was converted in terms of the alien time-ratio it amounted to 32000 cps, which brought it into the ultrasonic range.

He attempted to lift the cover but did not succeed.

He swung the flashlight beam once around the room and observed that there was no other opening or door. The tunnel aperture where Atlan now squatted with his weapon to cover him was the only means of ingress.

Therefore their diminutive guide, the entity or ghost or whatever it was, had to be here somewhere close—unless it had just departed through the walls. But *where* was it, actually, and above all: what did all this mean?

While thinking of these 2 questions, Rhodan began to feel a pain in his head. It was a dull and unpleasant sensation that might be expected after a night of dissipation. It mystified him because the air down here was just as cool and fresh as it was outside in the open. So the air couldn't be the cause of it.

Rhodan withdrew to the rear wall of the somewhat rectangular room and waited to see if the pain lessened any. After awhile it seemed to become weaker and it was reduced to an even greater degree when he retreated into the farthest corner.

He noted that this spot was the farthest possible that he could withdraw from the coffin-like boxes in the middle of the room. But he did not attach any importance to this discovery until he wandered along the wall where he was directly facing the 6 containers. Here he noticed that the pain was at its peak of intensity.

Evidently the mysterious force that was causing the pain came from the coffins. That he had not sensed this when he first stood next to them was probably due to the alien time-ratio. It even took longer for a pain to register than it did in the normal universe.

"Something is inside those coffins," he said thoughtfully to Atlan, "and I'd sure like to know what it is." Then he spoke into his transmitter. "Tompetch, are you there?"

"Yes sir."

"Call the ship and tell Gorlat to get over here. Have him use an airco (Combination auto and airplane) to save time and—I want him to bring along a psychograph. Is that clear?"

"Understood, sir," answered Tompetch.

While the minutes passed, Rhodan considered whether or not he should attempt to open one of the coffins forcibly in order to see what was inside. But he rejected the idea quickly. If a force emanated from the coffins that caused him a headache, then it followed that they might contain something that was alive. At least the idea didn't seem to be too far-fetched. So the forced opening of any one of them could perhaps cause irreparable harm to the living contents.

Rhodan resolved to refer to the coffins as 'boxes' from that point on.

After a quarter of an hour Capt. Gorlat announced his arrival at the upper shaft entrance. Rhodan ordered him to bring down the psychograph and also told Tompetch to break out the ropes with which the light vehicle was normally equipped and to so arrange them in the shaft that Gorlat could climb down on them, thus protecting the sensitive equipment from the risk of a crash-landing at the bottom of the chute.

Soon after that, Capt. Gorlat made an appearance in the tunnel.

Rhodan took the instrument from him, set it on the ground and switched it on. If any articulate thought streams were being generated anywhere in the vicinity, the machine would register them. Of course the alien time-rate had to be taken into consideration. For constructing a brief thought or simple thought-form the normal human brain required a time-span of about one/100th of a second. If the alien life in the boxes thought with the same speed, in the real-time of their own plane it would represent a lapse of about 720 seconds, or 12 minutes.

And this only considered the shortest possible thought. In order to accomplish a full telepathic intercourse of any kind—if indeed there were any impulses here—one would require days, weeks or even months.

But then Rhodan suddenly remembered how swiftly the 'phantom' had moved. He did not seem subject to the alien time-rate. Was it reasonable to assume that their thought formations might be generated at a normal rate?

There was a serious argument against such a supposition: the pain Rhodan had experienced had not

assailed him immediately when he came into the room and stood before the 6 boxes. It had only manifested some time afterward—perhaps 15 minutes after he had dropped to the floor of the room from the tunnel exit. This meant there could be no question but that the aliens required a time-span for reaction and thought-formulation which corresponded to the alien plane's ratio. The 'phantom' and his own rate of mobility was apparently another kind of phenomenon.

Rhodan looked at his watch. 10 minutes had passed since he had put the psychograph into operation. Atlan the Arkonide was still crouching in the tunnel opening and Capt. Gorlat stood behind him, bent over slightly because of the low ceiling. Both were looking into the room.

5 more minutes went by during which the silence was interrupted only by the occasional scrape of a foot, a deep sigh or the clearing of a throat.

Until the Arkonide suddenly straightened up and narrowed his eyes, staring into the background of the room. In a troubled tone he muttered aloud to himself: "There's something wrong there...!"

Rhodan was cognizant of the extra-sense of the Arkonide which gave his perceptive faculty an additional range. Atlan sensed or saw things that were often too small or too far away for an ordinary human to perceive; and this applied even more so in the figurative sense of the word.

Rhodan felt a surge of hot air emerge from the 6 boxes, followed almost immediately by a crackling and popping sound. Then he saw the covers of the boxes begin to ripple and buckle as though someone had fanned a hot fire under them. The rapidity with which everything was happening in spite of the alien time-ratio left no doubt that danger was imminent.

"Merk it!" (Beat it—scram—make tracks) he yelled to Gorlat and the Arkonide.

Both men reacted instantly. By the time Rhodan had turned off the psychograph, picked it up and climbed into the tunnel, the 2 were already back at the place where the passage started to slope upward. By the time he reached the spot he found the lower end of the ropes, which waved back and forth, revealing that either Gorlat or Atlan was busy climbing up to the top of the shaft.

When the shaft began to curve too sharply for walking, Rhodan hooked the psychograph to his belt and grabbed the ropes also, climbing upward hand over hand.

Gorlat was in the lead and had already started the aircor's engine by the time Rhodan emerged at Atlan's heels. Tompetch sat in the rear seat with an unhappy and confused expression on his face.

"Let's go!" panted Rhodan. He grasped a boarding flange and let the craft's starting momentum swing him up into it.

Gorlat knew what to do without any instructions. The craft shot steeply up the slope, putting both vertical and horizontal distance between itself and the eerie hole in the ground. He guided the vehicle just beyond the ridge while looking at Rhodan questioningly.

"Wait!" ordered Rhodan as he unhooked the psychograph and stowed it in the instrument box.

He jumped out and crawled back up to the crest—a distance of some 20 yards. He had not quite reached the top before the ground beneath him began to tremble. But it trembled in the grotesque slow-motion manner of all such events on Solitude and in this whole alien universe. It was more of a jolting and shoving motion than a normal earthshock.

A few seconds later a pillar of pale greenish light rose upward from the valley on the other side. Meanwhile Rhodan gained the ridge top and was able to see the flame rise sluggishly out of the ground. Down where the column of fire broke out of the shaft, earth fragments scattered away in all directions but even these sailed through the air in such a lackadaisical fashion that one might have easily caught them in his hands. The whole thing was happening in comparative silence. The only sounds that could be heard were a deep rumbling that came from the interior of the ground and a dull growling tone that was being emitted from the rising pillar of fire.

There could be no doubt that the subterranean cave was being destroyed by an explosion of considerable magnitude—along with its mysterious inhabitants, provided that there actually were any living entities down there in the first place.

Rhodan remained more than a half hour behind the crest of the ridge and even then the explosion had not yet completed its cycle. Of course the flame pillar had reached its peak and was beginning to subside as slowly as it had risen. Rhodan could make out a 15-yard funnel-shaped crater down below where the 5-foot entrance had been. He finally got up and went back to the air car, where he was met with questioning looks.

"Wiped out!" he said laconically. "You saw the pillar of flame."

"Yes sir!" blurted out Tompetch, who could no longer restrain his excitement. "And it was the funniest explosion I ever saw or heard!"

Gorlat got the small flier under way again. Without any orders he veered toward the ship, to which Rhodan made no objection.

"What happened back there, sir?" asked Tompetch. "Who set off the explosion?"

Rhodan shrugged. "Who knows?"

"But there must have been some sort of indication down there below, sir," Tompetch prattled on. "I mean... oh-oh! I just remembered... it was just before you climbed out of the hole, there was a signal from the..."

"Oh stow it, Mike, will you?" interrupted Gorlat heatedly. "You can drive a man up a tree with all that chatter!"

Tompetch was somewhat offended but he became silent. On the other hand, Rhodan became interested. "What signal, Lieutenant?"

"The airco's micro-com, sir," answered Tompetch. "I was about to pick up the receiver because I thought Bell might be calling from the ship... but that was when Gorlat came tearing out of the shaft and he started to move things so fast that I didn't know what was coming off."

Rhodan leaned forward to turn on the micro-com. He beamed out the customary 'Calling-come-in-please!' and got an immediate answer.

Bell's excited voice asked, "What's the matter out there? How come I didn't hear from you till now?"

"No need for it," answer Rhodan. "Did you call us before?"

"No," answered Bell without hesitation. "I just sat here and listened by the receiver. Why?"

"I'll explain it to you later. We'll be there in a jiffy." Rhodan shut off the micro-com and turned again to Tompetch. "Lieutenant, you said that there was a signal from the micro-com. What did it look like?"

The question confused Tompetch. "Well... as usual, sir. The signal lamp lighted up."

"For long?"

"Sure! That is... I can't just exactly say, sir. As I said, Capt. Gorlat came storming out of the hole like a madman and from then on everything was a cloud of dust."

Atlan laughed at the figure of speech.

Rhodan pressed him further. "Try to remember. When Gorlat got into the airco was the lamp still on?"

"No sir," answered Gorlat. "I was pretty excited but I'm sure I would have notice if the lamp was still on..."

Tompetch interrupted him. He slapped himself on the forehead and groaned. "That's right!" he exclaimed. "What a donk I am! I recall I was still thinking when Gorlat gets here he can take the call himself. You know, sir, that when a captain's around a lieutenant shouldn't answer the radio signal. I was about to tell him when he climbed in—actually, 'climb' isn't the right word for it. He *flew* in! But at the moment he had other things to do and then I saw that the signal lamp wasn't on any more. It all comes back to me clearly now, sir."

Rhodan nodded. "What luck!" he said.

"Does it have any special significance, sir?" pursued Tompetch. "I mean, does it have any connection with the explosion...?"

"Please, sir," said Gorlat, turning to Rhodan. "If he gets on your nerves, let me know. I think I'm the only one who can make him calm down."

Rhodan laughed. "Let him be, Captain. He's led us to an important clue. And as for your question, Tompetch, the answer is: *I still* don't know."

A few moments later the 200-foot sphere of the K-238 loomed up out of the darkness. Reginald Bell was instructed to open the cargo hatch. Gorlat brought the small craft up and allowed it to glide through the wide opening into the body of the ship.

Rhodan took charge of the psychograph and asked his companions to get to the control room as quickly as possible.

* * * *

Rhodan's most important documents were 2 work graphs—one from the psychograph itself and the other from the recording system of the micro-com on board the ground glider.

The psychograph had operated for a total time of 15 minutes and some seconds. During this period it had produced a graph. After reducing the scale in the ratio of 1:72000, a clear indication was shown that 'something' down there in that subterranean room had been thinking.

Basically the psychograph was a comparatively simple instrument. It registered the weak magnetic fields associated with thought activity, whereby the intensity and frequency indicated the intelligence level of the thinker. For example, such fields associated with animal thought waves were found to be incomparably weaker and lower in frequency than those of a human. The psychograph was in no way intended for deciphering thoughts; it only determined the degree of thought activity. This capability had earned it the name of 'vibe scanner' among the more whimsical researchers.

The micro-com recorder graph was next examined. This equipment had picked up a signal that had duration of about 5.5 seconds, which was in the form of 2 hyperwave groups showing 2 sharp peaks. In the alien time-plane this meant that the entire signal had lasted about 76 microseconds. Under the greatest possible rectification the 2 wave peaks revealed no further harmonics or modulations. They represented nothing more than 2 closely spaced current surges that were being transmitted to an unknown receiver. So what was involved was not a message in the sense of someone wishing to convey intelligence to a person at the receiving end. It was just a straight signal and Rhodan was firmly convinced that it was the triggering signal that had set off the subterranean explosion.

Finally he summarized the situation: "First: some kind of living and thinking intelligences lived in the cave. We have to assume that one of them—or perhaps *it*—attempted to get in touch with me by telepathic means. Due to the time-ratio differences, however, all I received was a dull headache.

"Second: there was a demolition charge hidden in the cave. Just as the alien being was in contact with me—or was in the act of trying to do so—the bomb was triggered *from the outside*. The most logical assumption would be that some unknown observer became aware of this attempt at a contact and such an event was not desired. He made a quick decision and blasted the alien intelligence and the cave into fragments. Apparently he intended also to include us in the destruction but thanks to our faster time-rate we were able to merk out of there in the nick of time."

"And what about that 'phantom' we saw?" asked Atlan.

"That's something we don't know," admitted Rhodan. "It seemed to be related to the alien intelligences who were destroyed by the explosion. Apparently he wanted to lead us to them."

Atlan nodded. "There's one other item," he continued. "You said you experienced a headache. When did it go away?"

Rhodan seemed to have expected this question. Without any hesitation he said: "At the moment that I grabbed the ropes and started climbing out. It's my opinion that the telepathic strength of the alien intelligences has a limited range."

The Arkonide sighed. "So what remains is to find out who or what our 'phantom' is, what connection it had with the events that took place and where it disappeared to. Because we certainly didn't find it in the cave."

Rhodan nodded. "And another thing," he added. "Why did the cave have only one means of ingress?"

Atlan looked at him nonplussed. "Why? Well now, ghosts don't exactly need a paved street do they? They can move through solid walls as easily as through the air. Is that what you mean?"

"More or less," said Rhodan. "Down there in the cave there wasn't a single piece of movable equipment. Everything was built in there or firmly attached to something else. But the phantom appeared through closed bulk-head doors. So what is or rather was the purpose of the tunnel?"

"Of course there are many conjectures that could be made. For the purpose of bringing fresh air inside, for example; but for that one wouldn't need a 5-foot shaft. Or for bringing in the equipment, because certainly all that gear hasn't been sitting there for eternity; but for that purpose one would have built a straight tunnel and not a curved one.

"So none of it fits very well. I'm certain that there's a good, solid reason why that cave had such an entrance." After a pause, Rhodan smiled and added: "I could offer one other guess. Naturally it's lacking any kind of proof so far but maybe we'll still come across it. The way I see it, this being or community entity in the cave was indigenous to the planet and was subjugated by another unknown agency. What task or purpose it was to accomplish for the suppressor we don't know. In any event, it tried to make contact with us... maybe even hoping that we could liberate it. But its unknown captor detected this and reacted in a manner that was as rash as it was brutal."

Atlan had listened to him attentively. After awhile he offered his rebuttal: "That's just a hypothesis, isn't it? If we take that line of thought at face value, then in the future every phantom we see must be regarded as the mental entity or spirit of a subjugated Solitude intelligence, all of which could lead us neatly astray... do you see that?"

Rhodan laughed. "Relax, Admiral. I'm well aware of the weakness of hypotheses. I was only thinking that there had to be some reason why the unknown agency wants to hinder any form of contact here. The simplest reason that comes to mind is that the Solitude intelligence knew something that we weren't supposed to find out. So what we ought to do is try to discover another phantom and make sure this time that our unknown observer won't be able to interrupt our conversation."

Even Atlan couldn't argue with this suggestion. "Of course," he said, "that depends on whether or not there are a number of such beings on Solitude."

This remark elicited a suspicious look from Rhodan. "Who is going to convince me, Admiral, that a physically extant race—whatever kind it might be—could consist of a single entity?"

4/ TIME TRICKS

During the entire interim the positronicon had been working without interruption. Upon interjecting a machine question as to the time schedule, the answer returned to the effect that it would still be 5 or 6 hours before even partial results would be available.

So Rhodan sent the crew to their bunks again but he was not surprised when Atlan declined the offer, explaining that he'd prefer sitting up in the control room rather than take a chance of being surprised in his

cabin by another midget.

Rhodan knew that there was another reason. Atlan had an idea and he didn't keep it to himself for long.

"Has it occurred to you yet, Administrator," he asked pleasantly, "that our unknown suppressor of the Solitude intelligences may not be satisfied with the results of the recent action? Perhaps he's not willing to make the assumption that we were decimated by the explosion and he might just come to have a look for himself. He might even be around here somewhere, maybe sharpening up a few missile warheads for us..."

Rhodan smiled. "A shrewd observation, Admiral. If you hadn't mentioned it, it would have skipped my mind completely."

"I hope you choke on that lie, Barbarian," Atlan said with a good-natured pretense at anger. "So anyway, how is it that we're not making the appropriate preparations?"

"Because we have a sufficiency of time," replied Rhodan.

"How do you arrive at that conclusion? If he's anywhere in the vicinity he can strike at any second."

Rhodan nodded. "Alright, let's suppose he's around here somewhere. How far away? Say an orbital distance of about 600 miles? OK—what can he do? He can take potshots at us with missiles or other weapons. Let's take a worst case: he has a disintegrator whose decrystallization field propagates at the speed of light. How fast is speol?"

It took a moment for Atlan to grasp the full import of the question and then he became very annoyed with himself. "What kind of an idiot am I that I didn't think of that before!?" he cried out with a fist pressed ruefully to his forehead. "Time goes 72000 times slower here than what we're used to. And naturally that lapse also affects the speed of light. So here it would travel at... not much more than 2.5 miles per second. Right?"

"About 2.58 would be more exact," answered Rhodan. "So if a spaceship aimed a disintegrator at us from orbit—say 600 miles or so—even though the shot would be coming at us at their speed of light there would be a delay of around 4 minutes between firing and contact. That's more than enough time for our instruments to detect and locate such an attack and for the K-238 to merk out of here. And that's aside from the fact that any spaceship that close would be tracked even if it didn't fire a shot."

Atlan groaned. "Where was my mind? It's a bitter pill to swallow, I'll have you know—being trumped by a Barbarian."

"There are worse things," Rhodan laughed. "Seriously, it looks like we're going to be able to kill 2 birds with one stone here on Solitude. First, we'll find out where Wanderer wandered off to; and secondly we may get to see the Druufs face to face. I don't think there's any doubt that the Druufs are the ones who so recklessly sent the poor Solitude intelligence to his death tonight."

"I think you're right," agreed the Arkonide, "unless one would care to assume that the Solitude intelligences and the Druufs are one and the same. However, considering what we know, that's a supposition that hardly holds water."

"Because," added Rhodan, "we would then have to suppose further that there is someone mightier still than the Druufs themselves... and frankly a thought like that brings on cold sweat."

Atlan nodded in agreement.

At that moment the automatic tracking alarm sounded. Rhodan made a quick instrument reading and then turned on the general ship alarm.

"8 unidentified units en route to Solitude," he explained to the Arkonide. "Distance is 6200 miles."

* * * *

For the time being the K-238 didn't have much to do. The tracking system registered the flight trajectories of the unknown objects and came to the conclusion that they were either manned or equipped with very ingenious automatic—pilot mechanisms because they carried out their manoeuvres without a hitch. Since there was no good reason for suspecting the presence of automatic-guidance and piloting equipment, it was more plausible to believe that the ships were manned.

1 hour after the first alert the alien ships had not come substantially nearer. This was due to the fact that they were hardly moving 1000 feet per second. But in their own real-time perception, this speed converted to almost 14000 miles per second, which was exceptionally fast for this close distance to a planet. One was thus forced to suspect that the aliens were somewhat in a hurry.

When 2 hours had passed and the intent of the aliens had still not become apparent, a certain degree of tension began to pervade the control room of the K-238.

After some 3½ hours, 4 of the 8 ships began a braking manoeuvre at about 3700 miles and shortly thereafter came to a halt. On the other hand the remaining 4 retained their original pace and disappeared 2 hours later into the shadow of Solitude. Apparently they were intending to land on the daylight side.

Only then did Rhodan start to go into action. Since it had been determined that the first 4 ships were keeping their positions and inasmuch as it could be presumed that they were merely holding a defence position above the highest strata of the atmosphere in order to cover the retreat of the other 4, the K-238 took off. While it shot upwards at a steep angle, on a command from Atlan the positronicon interrupted its labours to project the probable landing area of the enemy ships, based on their courses that had been recorded by the tracking equipment. Since all necessary data were available, it solved the problem with a minimum of error by the time the ship left the atmosphere of Solitude and flattened into a horizontal course. Atlan could find no further objections against its return to the original assignment—namely, the calculation of the point in time when Wanderer passed by Solitude.

Rhodan brought the ship to a velocity of 9.3 miles per second. In order to keep following the surface curvature of the planet he had to activate a radial acceleration in order not to be driven out into deep space. Once he had his course established he decided the time had come to explain what he had in mind.

"We'll go take a look at the 4 alien ships," he explained. "There won't be any risk involved because with their slow time-ratio they are helpless compared to us. Actually this hasn't anything to do with our search for Wanderer but I think we shouldn't lose an opportunity to closely observe the aliens, who probably have something to do with the Druufs."

In a short time the K-238 passed the day-night border and moved once more into the light of the green sun, which glowed against the purple-red background of the alien void. The automatic pilot activated the repulsion when the precalculated point was reached. Braking swiftly, the ship dove into the atmosphere again and headed like an arrow toward the surface.

On the viewscreens appeared a broad endless plain which was mainly covered with bushes, through which a number of wide rivers were flowing. Rhodan inspected the terrain with some dissatisfaction. He explained his feelings to Atlan. "Landing in this kind of terrain is like presenting ourselves on a silver platter to the enemy. If you spot a likely hiding place, Admiral, let me know."

But the 'Admiral' couldn't help him and neither could the much more reliable contour-scanner. This device operated as a kind of microwave plumbline which registered uneven areas and ground protuberances; however, it was unable to detect any land rise that projected more than 50 feet above the surface of the plain. Since the K-238 had an imposing diameter of 200 feet, even the most favourable location would still leave 150 feet of its contour uncovered.

These considerations suddenly became immaterial when Reginald Bell announced that his tracking instruments had gone blank. He had no trace on the 4 ships that had presumably landed in this region nor of the 4 which had remained out in space. The local vicinity and the outer void were empty, as if the alien ships had simply been blown away.

Rhodan subjected the tracking radar to a brief inspection and discovered that it was operating as faultlessly as ever. What he did not find was an explanation for the fact that the 8 space vehicles had suddenly disappeared.

But now it was Atlan's turn to smirk triumphantly. "I've just regained my self-esteem, Barbarian. What did we calculate was the actual speed of light in this universe?"

"Slightly over 2.5 miles per second," replied Rhodan disconcertedly. "Why do you... Oh man! This time the lights were out on *my* side! You're perfectly correct: we have to take such an effect into consideration."

Bell and Tompetch looked at him wonderingly. Even on Gorlat's smiling face there was a trace of puzzlement.

Rhodan explained: "The velocity of light in this time dimension is naturally subject to the same temporal distortion as all other time-related values. On Solitude and in this continuum in general, light speed amounts to 2.58 miles per second. The K-238 outstripped that considerably during its flight to our present location and in doing so it produced a strange phenomenon. If any physical body exceeds the speed barrier imposed by Nature—that is without using some superior transport medium such as hyperspace, for example—then what happens?"

Bell brushed a hand through his red stubble of hair and attempted an answer: "Well, just to carry out a mental experiment—if the speed of light is exceeded, without using such a superior transport medium, it would lead to a loss of causality." His inflection seemed to indicate that he had memorized this from somewhere, a fact which he proceeded to confess. "Frankly, I got that out of a text-book. I'd be happy if somebody could tell me what it means."

He looked at Rhodan with a wink and Rhodan asked himself what he might have in mind. Bell had joined Perry Rhodan in absorbing the entire complex of Arkonide knowledge in the course of a few days of intensive hypno-schooling. Bell was not likely to be without an answer regarding ultimate questions in

the physical sciences. He wanted to give somebody else a chance to shine. But who?

"I can explain it, sir," offered Tompetch from the rear of the group. "You can express the loss of causality like this. If I turn a switch and am able to take the current flow through the conductor faster than speed of light, then the lamp would have started to burn before I turned the switch!"

Bell started to grin but without letting Tompetch see it.

"Good, Lieutenant," said Rhodan with a smile. "So what we have here is not exactly a time-reversal but a phenomenon that has the same effects. Loss of causality can't very well be grasped conceptually—at least not in its entirety. Of course examples can be invented like the one Lt. Tompetch gave us... or the case where 8 spaceships that were just here suddenly disappear, to stay with our original subject."

"Which has the advantage over the former example," added the Arkonide, "that it was not invented... as we can see."

Bell cleared his throat for attention. "By way of ending the conversation: we can't even say how far we've knocked our causalities out of the box. We haven't any idea whether the 8 ships were here way ahead of us: and disappeared in the meantime or if they'll arrive later... maybe in a couple of hours or in a couple of thousand years. We don't know any of these things; but I assume we're going to land in spite of it all and have ourselves a look around. I mean—since we more or less made up our minds to look for another Solitude intelligence."

"There's no objection to that, Commander!" laughed Rhodan. "We will make a landing."

* * * *

The K-238 lay in a ground depression; it was not the deepest one in the area but it was a place where the ship could manoeuvre in and out more easily. And after all it was no longer important whether the hull of the ship towered 150 or 135 feet above the plain.

This time Bell and Rhodan left the K-238 in a shuttle-craft to make a reconnaissance flight while Atlan remained on board with Gorlat and Tompetch.

So far Rhodan hadn't gone to the trouble of adjusting his watch or putting an overlay dial on its face so that it would show true Solitude time. He had to judge by the sun's position and he knew that it was fairly late in the afternoon. At the most they had about 3 hours of day-light left for their search. From then on they would have to use the infra-red equipment.

The broad plain offered an aspect that was chiefly somnolent and monotonous. The dense brushwood covered the ground completely, reaching an average height of about 6 feet. Trees were so rare that a lonely wanderer could have used them as landmarks without any difficulty. The rivers, 2 of which the small flier negotiated, were unusually broad but offered no other variation.

After an hour and a half or so, Rhodan turned the flier back toward the K-238. However he took another course in the return trip in order not to waste time and that was how they discovered the hole—at a time when their eyes had begun to smart from such a long session of visual observation.

It was a small, insignificant opening in the brush-covered ground, just large enough to be seen through the maze of green leaves and branches.

Rhodan lowered the flier and held it in a hovering position above the bush tops because he couldn't find a suitable landing spot. Bell jumped down but cursed loudly when his face was scratched by thorns. He carefully examined the hole in the ground and discovered that it was lined with the same plastic coating as the other shaft where the Solitude entity had been found.

"OK!" called Rhodan. "Better get back here or the Druufs are liable to get suspicious."

Bell made heroic exertions in order to climb up the thickest branch he could find, where he finally reached a point high enough to grasp the lower rim of the craft. When he finally succeeded in swinging on board he glanced reproachfully at Rhodan.

"I hope the next time you don't pull rank on me, so's you can go yourself."

* * * *

Rhodan found a suitable landing place within 250 feet of the hole. It was one of the rare gaps in the foliage where only a few, branches had to be pulled aside to accommodate the flier. After making the landing, he notified Atlan immediately concerning the discovery. He asked him to get the same equipment ready that they had used before and then told him to stand by with Gorlat and Tompetch to be picked up.

Reginald Bell unloaded the weapons from the flier, whereupon Rhodan flew back to the ship to pick up the 3 other men and the equipment. To cover the period of their absence, Capt. Gorlat had taken extensive security measures. When the shuttle-craft moved out of the cargo lock the ship was automatically sealed off from its surroundings by the defence screen, which was triggered to turn on by itself when they left. To turn it off again a code sender was required. There were only 2 senders available. One of them Rhodan himself carried in his pocket; the other was placed in a safe spot not far from the K-238.

Meanwhile, Lt. Tompetch had observed the tracking instrument up until the last moment of departure and he reported that the 8 alien ships had not yet reappeared.

When the small craft came down through the small gap in the foliage and landed, they found Bell still sitting beside his pile of weapons. He looked as though the short time of being alone had been sufficient to make him a victim of the melancholy mood that could be induced by the monotonous landscape.

For the time being the equipment was left on the loading deck of the flier. Rhodan took time out to explain his plan in every detail.

"Our most important objective is to prevent any interference by the Druufs while we're in contact with the Solitude Intelligence. This means we have to block that 2-peaked hypercom signal and keep it from reaching the demolition bomb that's probably been stashed in this cave as it was in the other one. This we can do, perhaps, with the help of an interference transmitter. Our own transmitter will be operating at

our own time-rate and will be far faster than the alien transmitter as far as reaction is concerned. Its circuits are so arranged that it will beam out an interference signal as soon as the enemy's triggering signal starts coming in. So the trigger signal and the interference beam will cancel each other out.

"To reduce all risks we'll also generate a barrier field around the cave entrance. It should prevent any conceivable influences from getting in to us from the outside."

"3rd, one of us will always be stationed at the small tracker we have on board the flier. If the 8 alien ships show up again, we have to know about it immediately."

"And finally, we have here all the equipment necessary for getting into communication with the Solitude Intelligence a psychograph, a telepathy amplifier, a recorder and memory storage unit, plus a time-accelerator that will condense the telepathic transmissions and recordings into a manageable time-span.

"First of all it may as well be said that the task we have here before us could take a couple of weeks to handle, under the circumstances. If what we pick up during our contact with the Solitude Intelligence turns out to be very promising and informative—which we can determine within a couple of days—then we can probably arrange to leave the recorder gear running down in the cave while we're attending to other things. It's of course too much to expect that the Druufs are going to leave us alone indefinitely, now that they've caught wind of our presence here." He looked at his companions, one by one, and saw that nobody had anything to say. So he wound up the briefing: "It's best we get started right away. We only have a few more minutes of light to work by."

They set up the interference transmitter and the barrier field generator in the vicinity of the cave entrance but with about a 30-foot gap between them so that neither piece of equipment could be influenced by stray effects of the other.

Meanwhile Lt. Tompetch had taken over the post of radar operator for the tracking function while Bell became communications man—both of them remaining outside the barrier screen. Inside the screen, Capt. Gorlat posted himself at the edge of the hole, while the task of making contact with the Solitude Intelligence was reserved for Rhodan and the Arkonide.

Rhodan was at a high pitch of excitement now and did not wait for Atlan. He went down into the tunnel and thrust forward to the end of it, where he found a room that matched the other one to a hair. While Atlan came crawling behind him, Rhodan jumped down into the room from the tunnel and again stopped in front of the heavily connected boxes. After a few minutes he sensed the same kind of headache that he had experienced the previous night, which had led him to suspect that the subterranean room harboured a thinking entity of some kind

He set up the recorder equipment and the time-accelerator on top of the first box and connected them in such a way that the memory-storage recorder would collect the impulses from the telepathic amplifier and then run the completed thoughts through the time-contraction machine. But he interchanged the input and output leads of the time-contractor so that instead of compressing time the device acted as a time-magnifier. This served to adapt the speed or the time-lapse rate of his own thoughts to the alien real-time of the Solitude Intelligence.

Only after he had convinced himself that the devices were working perfectly did he make use of the special hookup. He jammed the metal ring of the telepathic amplifier down on his head and concentrated on sending a thought message:

We are your friends! We are bringing help.

He finally found that it was easier to articulate the words out loud at the same time. Meanwhile, Atlan had also entered from the tunnel and was puttering about near the side wall. When he heard Rhodan speak, he turned to look at him in astonishment.

Rhodan removed the ring from his head. "It'll take an hour yet," he said, "before the Entity will have absorbed and understood that."

"Then you have time, my friend, to take a look at this over here," answered Atlan, beckoning to him. "Come on over here... I think I've found something interesting."

Rhodan turned to weave his way among festoons of wires and closely positioned pieces of equipment. When he reached the Arkonide he saw a case or a box that was about the size of a family medicine chest suspended against the wall. A single wire entered one end of it. Following the wire back to its other end he discovered that it emerged from a device that seemed to be made up of only 2 electrical coils. One coil was thick, consisting of many turns of wire, whereas the other was smaller and only loosely wound with a few turns.

"Oh no!" he exclaimed incredulously. "It can't be that simple!"

Atlan tapped the 'medicine cabinet' on the wall. "Nevertheless I'll wager that the bomb is hidden in here."

Rhodan took a closer look at the 2-coil apparatus. Upon careful inspection there seemed to be no doubt that it was some kind of spark induction device in other words, where a low-tension alternating current was transformed to a high-tension alternating current, with the spark-gap built into the secondary lead. The primary coil drew its current from a small generator, which in turn could be activated by the 2-peak hypercom signal.

The actual spark-gap was located in the explosive material that was in the box on the wall. So in order to render the bomb inoperable it was only necessary to interrupt one of the leads at either end. Rhodan reached for the thin wire that led from the generator to the primary winding and jerked it loose.

"There!" he said cheerfully. "That's one more item taken care of!"

At the same moment his dull headache disappeared. He had been experiencing the pain continuously but had almost gotten used to it. He was perplexed for a few moments, thinking that perhaps the tearing out of the wire had somehow disturbed one of the life functions of the Solitude Intelligence. But then he realized this Being would naturally have to cease sending out thoughts as soon as it began to receive and attempt to comprehend the ongoing impulses from the time-contractor. The fact that the 2 events occurred at the same time was merely a matter of coincidence.

He breathed a sigh of relief and pointed to one of the 6 boxes. "He's beginning to understand."

The Arkonide raised his brows in surprise. "How do you know... no more headache?"

"Precisely."

Atlan looked at his watch. "1 hour yet," he muttered. "Perhaps in the meantime we can make an attempt to figure out what all this equipment down here is for."

He turned, looking from one apparatus to the other, and finally chose one that appeared to be comparatively uncomplicated. Rhodan heard him muttering to himself but he couldn't understand a word he was saying. He agreed with Atlan that the time must not slip by without being utilized and he began to look around for a piece of equipment he might investigate with some hope of success.

However he had hardly made up his mind when something happened that upset all of his plans for the present.

Everything happened so swiftly that neither Atlan nor Rhodan were able to say afterwards what made them first notice the sudden change. In the fraction of a second the temperature in the cave became so severe that it threatened to suffocate the 2 men. Simultaneously a muffled roaring sound filled the room. Rhodan was still facing the side wall, where he saw the wire fall to the floor which he had torn from the primary pole of the spark inductor only moments before.

That settled it—at least for him. He knew what was happening. In the slow, alien time-rate the wire would have taken another few hours to fall to the floor. Whatever may have occurred, one fact was obvious: it had caused a change in the relative time-ratios.

Things happened differently with Atlan. He remembered that he had already experienced such a sudden surge of temperature: that is, when the explosion had started in the other cave. Taking care not to injure himself, he crept agilely between the equipment cases and under the interconnecting cables, finally swinging up into the tunnel.

"Rhodan!" he shouted. "Get a move on, man! That bomb is going off!"

Only then did he become aware of the muffled roaring sound in the room and he realized that this had no connection with his other experience. Rhodan's apparent calmness did the rest for him. He jumped down from the tunnel opening and placed his hand on a tall, narrow cabinet that stood near the forward wall. He felt it vibrate. He placed his ear to the metal and heard a deep humming sound.

The noise came from the equipment!

He saw Rhodan take out his micro-transmitter and heard him speak into it swiftly. He could make out a part of the answer that was given, ostensibly by Capt. Gorlat.

"Suddenly very hot... powerful storm, sir..."

Rhodan nodded, replying: "We're coming up!"

Atlan turned to the tunnel mouth and again swung himself into it. Rhodan followed him.

"What's wrong?" the Arkonide asked. "What's it all mean?"

Rhodan sounded amazingly calm. "I think that somebody has thrown us into their own time reference or else the whole planet's been jogged into ours. I'm not sure which way it's gone, of course. We'll find out more upstairs."

It seemed to Atlan as though scales had dropped from his eyes. Naturally—that was it! Their own time-reference was now no different than that of the equipment and the Solitude Intelligence down here in the cave—nor that of the bushes and grasses above on the plain. They could now hear the humming of

the various apparatuses and sense the movement of the wind, things that had functioned too slowly to be perceived before.

And the sudden heat? Atlan wiped sweat from his forehead and regarded the wetness of his hand in incredulous amazement. Where did the heat come from?

What is temperature, he thought. A measurement for the mean velocity of molecules. Naturally they move faster than before and naturally there would be an irregular rise in temperature at the moment when both time-references assimilated each other.

Assimilated! Who in the devil had caused them to come together like this?

Just then the rope struck his face. Without interrupting his train of thought he reached for it and drew himself upward. Above at the edge of the hole was Capt. Gorlat, already composed again and ready with a smile of greeting.

Atlan stepped away from the hole and marvelled at how soft the grass had become all of a sudden. But in the next moment he thought how stupid it was to marvel at it. The grass would naturally also be subject to the real-time conversion.

Behind him, Rhodan crawled up out of the hole. "Turn off the barrier field!" he called to Gorlat even before he was over the edge.

Gorlat complied. The faint shimmering that had hung like a hazy bell-shape over the cave entrance suddenly disappeared.

Above the sound of the wind they could hear the crackling of branches among the bushes, accompanied by loud curses in a voice that was unmistakable. "How the blazes is a man supposed to put up with this lousy heat...?!"

"Come over here!" called Rhodan. "The barrier field is turned off."

Reginald Bell stomped into view between 2 thorn bushes snapping off branches in the process. "Before you explain anything," he blurted out, "Tompetch has the 8 ships on his screen again."

Rhodan nodded calmly as though he hadn't expected anything else. "Of course!" he answered. "And now they're moving faster—right?"

"A heck of a lot faster," Bell confirmed.

"OK, now listen, Bell," Rhodan went on. "I want you and Atlan to climb down into the hole. You know what's happened. We don't need the time-contractor any more for communicating with the Solitude Intelligence. Our time-frames have been equalized. 1 of you 2 should make it clear that we are friends and want to help it... and of course find out if it knows anything about the transit of Wanderer or about the Druufs. And you have to do *itfast*. Our time advantage over the Druufs is kaput."

Bell nodded. "And what do you intend to do?" he asked.

"I have to worry about the ship," Rhodan answered, already half underway. "We don't know what's happened there. Gorlat, you come with me. Atlan, tell him that he doesn't have to worry about the bomb anymore."

Then he disappeared into the bushes and Capt. Gorlat followed close behind him.

* * * *

Mikel Tompetch sat before his miniature tracking equipment. He saw 4 of the 8 alien ships disappear behind the radar horizon and the other 4 began to drop downward—which in his opinion would bring them to the spot where he was now.

The bushes crackled in front of him and Rhodan appeared close behind him came Gorlat. Tompetch quickly wiped the sweat from his brow and sprang to his feet.

Rhodan briefed him quickly on what had happened and told him that in his opinion the current phenomena were attributable to a mutual assimilation of the 2 time-frames.

Tompetch assured him that with the exception of the heat he was doing fine and that nobody should worry about him. He promised to notify them just as soon as the 4 alien ships had come to within 30 miles of their location.

Rhodan and Gorlat got into the flier. Rhodan took the pilot's seat and lifted the shuttlecraft vertically out of the foliage, taking a course through the night in the direction of the K-238.

"Sir," said Gorlat suddenly, "may I ask a question?"

"Shoot!" Rhodan encouraged him. "What do you want to know?"

"When the time transformation happened, the temperature jumped. That's logical, because naturally the molecules of our time-rate move faster than the others. But if the actual time-lapse factor were operating in this case—I mean 72000—all of us would be fried to a crisp by now, wouldn't we?"

Rhodan smiled. "You would have to ask me a question I can't answer myself," he said. "You're absolutely right. It's true that the temperature has risen but not as much as one might have expected." He shrugged. "We can only assume that the distortion factor doesn't have the same effect with all phenomena. I don't know if that answer satisfies you or not but in any case I don't know of a better one... at least not now."

Gorlat accepted this and stared through the window into the night ahead in order to look for the K-238. It seemed unusual to him that the darkness was no longer brownish in its effect. Rather, it seemed to be black or dark blue. But since it was hard to ascribe any kind of colour to darkness he considered his observation to be a doubtful one so he said nothing about it.

Besides, he found it much more disturbing that the K-238 was nowhere to be seen. Certainly it was dark but such a colossal object as the ship ought to be noticeable even in the darkness.

Without a word Rhodan hit his controls and flew the light flier though a tight curve. The contour scanner revealed a wide earth trench that was 30 feet deep. It was the trench in which the K-238 had landed. Gorlat remembered that the ship had stood where the trench made a wide indentation in the plain for

several hundred yards—and that indentation stood out clearly on the scanner screen.

But not the ship.

Rhodan slowed his flight and let the flier sink slowly down into the earth depression. Gorlat flashed a light outside through the window and saw that the ground was intact. The hydraulic landing struts that had supported the ship had not left any indentations behind.

The K-238 had disappeared!

"Put in a call to Tompetch!" said Rhodan suddenly. "Ask him what's become of the 4 alien ships."

Gorlat carried out the order.

Tompetch's powerful voice came back: "They came down to about a 50-mile altitude," he answered. "They stopped there but after awhile they started climbing again. They're off about 125 miles now and are moving so fast that you'd think they're never coming back to Solitude again."

"Did you catch sight of a 5th ship?" asked Rhodan, leaning toward the microphone that Gorlat was holding.

"No sir," answered Tompetch with a note of surprise in his voice. "The other 4 are still on the other side of the horizon."

"Then take your equipment," ordered Rhodan, "and try to locate the cave entrance. When you've found it, burn away a few of the bushes with the disintegrator so that we can land there. We don't need any more advance posts. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir," answered Tompetch.

Rhodan guided the flier up into the air and turned back high above the bushes, heading for the cave entrance. After awhile they saw Tompetch down below moving like a dark shadowy as he stamped through the underbrush and either tore up or pushed aside whatever stood in his way. The wind swept more gently over the plain now, just slightly moving the thorny bushes.

Tompetch arrived at the cave entrance at the same time as the ship. According to his assignment, he drew out the disintegrator and in a few moments cleared away an area of about 30 square yards. Rhodan guided the air-car down slowly and heading for the cave entrance.

Tompetch stood close to the craft as though he were bursting with questions.

"The K-238 has disappeared," said Rhodan. "We're going to have to work out a new battle plan. Tell Bell and the Arkonide to come up here!"

5/ THE BOMB!

"The question as to who is responsible for a cross-assimilation of time-frames is actually of relative unimportance," Rhodan concluded after a short briefing. "We have to assume that the Druufs have a means of taking people from other time-planes and transferring them to their own at will. But fundamentally it doesn't make any difference to us to speak of."

"We have to put up with the fact that we're now living according to Solitude's real-time frame of reference. While 24 hours are going by for us here, outside in our own universe only 1.2 seconds have passed. Nevertheless, we don't know just how this whole time-displacement situation will work out when we come back out of it."

"Moreover, our ship has disappeared. So our most urgent task is to find a way of getting off Solitude and returning to the *Drusus*. Such things as locating Wanderer or finding out something new about the Druufs only have 2nd priority now... since anyway we can rest assured that the Druufs themselves will be concerned about us. A few of them still seem to be present on Solitude, because I'm sure the K-238 didn't fly off by itself—and Tompetch hasn't picked up any trace of it in outer space."

Rhodan saw that everybody was staring at the ground. They were not happy about the situation. And no wonder! By way of changing the subject, he asked Bell: "How does it look down below? Has there been any response yet from the Solitude entity?"

Bell nodded. "Yes. He's received your first thought message and believes that we are friends. At least that's the way I get it. But after that there was a jumbled mess of strange thoughts that I couldn't make out at all. I think it'd be best if you went down there."

Atlan also confirmed that he hadn't been able to decipher the alien thoughts.

Rhodan got to his feet. "Good, I'll go down again and give it a try. We need at least 3 lookouts up here on top. I know that you haven't had any decent sack time for quite awhile but you still have to keep your eyes open. It's better not to sleep at all than to sleep forever—right?"

Then he went down into the hole, followed by Atlan.

Without hesitation, Rhodan jumped down from the tunnel mouth into the cellar-like room. The first thing that caught his attention was the fact that in their absence somebody had set the small a-c generator into operation. It's rpm was at least 1800, or 30 revolutions per second, and when he came close to it he could hear it whistle faintly.

He thought: if he hadn't pulled that wire loose they'd have all been blown up by now.

Behind him he heard the Arkonide come into the room from the tunnel.

"Did either of you 2 turn that thing on?" asked Rhodan.

Atlan didn't know what he meant but he finally pointed to the generator. "You mean that? No. Aha! So it's running! Apparently our friends the Druufs take a dim view of our paying our 6-crated chums here a visit."

Rhodan nodded "By this time they must be well aware that something's wrong with their bomb. I wouldn't be surprised if they came here to take a look."

"I wouldn't object," growled Atlan menacingly. "I'd be glad to let them know what I think of ship

stealers."

Rhodan sat on the floor in front of the 6 boxes. He turned on the telepathic amplifier and placed the metal ring receptor-transmitter on top of his head. He closed his eyes in concentration and said: "I am your friend. Speak to me!"

At first he received nothing more than a mental impression of raven-black darkness. Then a bright spot appeared suddenly in the darkness and began to rotate back and forth as though forming a faint pattern. The spot had the form of a cylinder, several times appearing to blaze up heatedly to a melting point, then cooling again.

After that followed another image. It was that of a man. At first it was somewhat vague but then it came rapidly into focus as though the thought behind it had become more precisely formulated. Rhodan was not surprised when he finally recognized himself. He tried to figure out what he was doing. He didn't succeed but he had an impression that this represented a friendly meeting between himself and the Solitude Intelligence.

All of which helped him to understand the imagery. It meant: I am also your friend.

He was pleased by his rapid progress and the Solitude Entity appeared to take notice of his satisfaction. A bright glow swept rapidly across the image in Rhodan's mind.

Then it disappeared to be replaced by another: broad meadowlands covered by an enormous number of sea cows who turned luxuriously in the grass, apparently occupied with nothing more than letting the sun shine on their bellies.

A simplified representation, thought Rhodan quickly. Naturally they had more to do than just wallow about in the grass. The image was supposed to illustrate that they were happy—or used to be.

The image changed suddenly. At first one section of it was magnified; then a spindle-shaped. Something appeared beside the insert, which he failed to recognize at first. When a hole appeared in the Something and a file of glittering points came marching out over a landing ramp, he realized it must be a spaceship. He had been confused by the false perspective. The sea cow in the image was equally as large as the ship.

The view he was now getting excited him. If he was not being deceived by all this he might quickly obtain his first look at a few of the Druufs—that is, if the Solitude Intelligence didn't persist in representing itself as large as the ship and making the Druufs as small as pinheads.

The image changed again. One of the glittering light points was captured by the mental camera and magnified. Rhodan held his breath but then what he finally saw was nothing more than one of the strangely-shaped Druuf-robots that they had come up against on several previous occasions. This one had the form of a diamond, more or less as though shaped by a drunken diamond-cutter. There were multiple small surfaces, all of them dissimilar and set against each other at random angles.

A new image: the robot legions fell upon the unsuspecting sea cows. The latter made no effort to defend themselves, even though they must have realized already that their lives were at stake. Rhodan thought he could make out a thermometer-shaped object which each robot used to insert into the nose or mouth of each captured sea cow. Whereupon the mistreated victim became motionless. Probably, thought Rhodan, they had lost consciousness.

The Solitude Intelligence did not seem to have any thought-memory of what happened after that, as indicated by a few seconds of imageless darkness. Just when Rhodan thought that the communication was at an end, one more image appeared: it was that of the room in which he was presently located.

With certain exceptions: a sea cow hovered above the 6 boxes that stood in the centre of the room. It seemed to be not an actual part of the image but rather a superimposure. Suddenly its body began to break into pieces. 1 piece fell into the first box, a 2nd piece into the 2nd box and so on until 6 pieces had been distributed into the 6 boxes.

The image presented difficulties for Rhodan. Was it supposed to mean that the Druufs or rather their robots had hacked up each Solitude Intelligence into 6 pieces and store them in 6 separate boxes? If so—why?

The amplifier seemed to respond obediently to the question, developing the theme further: as though in answer, 2 images now appeared, flashing repeatedly before him. The 1st of the image pair showed a 'whole' sea cow, which moved like a snake, and the 2nd revealed a dismembered sea cow whose individual parts hung motionlessly within the frame of the image.

Rhodan finally comprehended: the dismemberment incapacitated the physical functions of the sea cow. Only the mental or psychic function remained, perhaps, unimpaired.

This thought had no sooner come to him than the sequence of images ended. The Solitude Intelligence had perceived that he understood what it wanted to convey to him.

Rhodan was so pleased with the results that he surprised Atlan with an audible reply. "Alright! Just hang in there, old fellow!"

* * * *

The 'sitting', as Reginald Bell referred to it later, had lasted more than 3 hours. Rhodan was fairly exhausted when he came back through the tunnel and climbed the rope, preparatory to telling the crew what he had found out.

"The Solitude Intelligences are unisexed, non-humanoid creatures. About a million of them live on this planet. I don't know anything yet about the status of their civilization or their technical capabilities and such related items. At any rate, they seem to have led a very happy and peaceful existence until a couple of Druuf ships landed here about 3 years ago. Entire armies of robots proceeded to capture and corral the Solitude beings—which they achieved swiftly and easily because the Solitude people were accustomed to living in great herds—after which they took them down into the caves. Of course, as we suspected, the caves must have been created by the robots, since they were not here previously.

"The Solitude creatures were separated into 6 parts each—which perhaps may indicate that the Druuf mathematics use a 6-base method or some related non-decimal system. Then they brought each set of the 6 pieces under-ground and put them in 6 boxes. The purpose of this dismemberment was to render the captives immobile and to make it impossible for them to escape from their cave prisons. However, even though cut into pieces, the captives' mental or psychic faculties were not impaired or extinguished. And that was what the Druufs were depending on in the long run.

"The Solitude Intelligences have an unusual ability: to separate their psyches, or you might say their intellects, from their bodies. So while the prisoner is lying physically helpless in its cave, it can send out its mentality or intellect, which enables it to perceive what is happening in the near and far vicinity of its prison.

"It was this ability that the Druufs proposed to make use of. They used the Solitude Intelligences as a sort of inexpensive detection and locating system. The Druufs seem to know that Solitude lies at the border of their time-plane and they attach great importance to knowing who may be arriving from the other side. A Solitude entity would be cognizant immediately of any unknown intruder and its recognizing mentality would cause a reaction of surprise in the physical portion. Such reactions can be detected and registered by comparatively simple equipment, whereupon they can be transferred over a hypercom transmitter and communicated to the Druufs. So from that time on, the Druufs only had to keep an eye on their receiver recorders. If they noticed a strong reaction coming through, they knew that something was wrong on Solitude.

"That's the rough picture of the situation. We have to presume that the Druufs are able to differentiate various types of reactions on the part of their prisoners here. I'm sure they're able to tell the difference between a reaction to a cyclone and a reaction to alien beings—us, for instance—but that's a matter of Druuf technology. Our friend down below here knows nothing about it."

"Let's see... what else is there? Oh yes! The Solitude body naturally has to be kept alive. But since it no longer has any mechanical activity its physical exertions are nil. So its consumption of food and air is very small. The apparatuses down there in the cave serve the purpose of keeping the prisoner alive. Synthetic food in the form of a sort of broth or mush is brought into the 6 boxes along with air, by means of the conduits we saw.

"And one more thing: in spite of all the tricky devices used on them, the prisoners' bodies tend to atrophy after a certain length of time. And the Druufs figured out that problem too. They knew there was only one way to hinder this tendency of dying off and that was to free the prisoners from their dungeons and let them out to move around naturally. They seem to be able to unite their separated parts and become whole, once they are freed. This happens, as far as I understand it, once every 3 years by our reckoning, for a period of a few hours or days. Of course this is done with supervision, since the prisoners are not by any means designed for their present way of life.

"But this explains the unusual tunnel entrance and exit. The Solitude beings use it—once every 3 years—for leaving and entering the cave."

He fell silent and his listeners remained silent also.

"By the way," he said suddenly, as though he had just remembered now to tell them something, "Atlan and I, of course, have opened the 6 boxes down there. We didn't have any reason to leave our friend in its imprisonment any longer. It needs awhile to join its separate parts together and then it'll come up here."

"I've already told you that it is not humanoid. Tompetch, this is directed to you as the least experienced among us: don't be frightened by its appearance and don't think of anything that might offend it. Along with its ability to separate its intellect from its body, there's a certain amount of telepathic awareness involved also."

Tompetch nodded to show that he understood.

* * * *

The first thing they became aware of was a hissing sound that emerged from the shaft. Rhodan explained it to them. "It's a very ingenious arrangement. "The Solitude Intelligence sucks in the air at the head end and releases it under high pressure at the tail end. By this means it gradually builds up pressure inside the cave. Since our friend fills the shaft hermetically with its body, the back pressure will shove him out, bit by bit. Presumably the whole operation is surprisingly fast."

Everyone stared fixedly at the shaft hole. At its edge appeared a circular mass of greyish material whose composition no one would have ventured to guess. For awhile the grey substance only managed to move a few inches or so out of the hole. Then there was a new hissing sound and the alien body appeared to jerk upward like a thick pillar, extending more than a yard above the hole rim.

The hissing and sliding sounds were repeated several times while the pillar of flesh rose to a height of almost 10 feet—whereupon it suddenly toppled over and fell with a dull thud on the ground that Tompetch had swept clear with the disintegrator. Meanwhile the high-pressure air blasted forth from the cave in a flurry of dust and quickly subsided.

Tompetch's eyes fairly popped when he saw the grey cylindrically shaped thing lying on the ground. He watched in amazement as it began to move in a half-rolling, half-gliding motion toward Rhodan. It finally came to rest as one end of it practically touched his feet. Tompetch stood there aghast when he saw Rhodan bring himself to fondle and stroke the greyish Thing as though it were a pet dog. Rhodan's words came to him as though from a distance:

"Naturally our collaboration can only now begin. We have to try to get over the idea to our friend that we'd be very grateful if it could keep a lookout for the Druufs. As we know, its psyche or intellect—or whatever we want to call it—is not subject to any particular time-frame and can move practically as fast as it wants to.

"If we succeed in having it do that for us, then there's no better confederate we could wish for."

To Tompetch it was all very strange. He was witness to an hours-long session of so-called communication with the grey, tube-like thing while Rhodan sat there with the wire-ring from the telepathic amplifier on his head without once receiving an audible answer. Nevertheless he could see by Rhodan's expression that he was making progress and now and then he would hear him speak:

"Keep going, my friend. We're getting along better all the time."

Tompetch also saw the sun come up and observed that suddenly it was no longer green but white, as it was back home. And the sky was no longer turquoise but a blazing blue.

Tompetch experienced all this as though it were a fantasy in which he was somehow not actually there.

In the final hours of the night and during the early part of the day he had not paid particular attention to the tracking scanner. Occasional glances at the empty screen seemed to be enough indication that there was no sign of danger from any quarter nor did it seem likely that anything threatened in the immediate

future.

But now when he suddenly observed that the formerly empty dark green scanner field was strewn with a myriad of tiny blips along the baseline, he felt like a sentinel who has been asleep at his post. Shaking in his boots, it took him awhile to stammer out an alarm.

Altogether there were 40 light-points and their grouping on the screen indicated that they had already completely encircled the small camp by the cave entrance. In Rhodan's opinion there wasn't any doubt that the ground blips the scanner had detected involved metallic figures, which had to be robots, obviously sent out to capture his crew or kill them.

And small wonder. The Druufs must be as anxious to know their toughest opponent as the opponent was to meet a Druuf face to face.

Rhodan's apprehension was not too great as far as the impending engagement was concerned. In a series of battles which had been fought before, partly in connection with Marcel Rous' mission on the Crystal Planet, it had been found that the weapons of the Druuf robots were inferior to those of the Terranians.

What was of real concern to Rhodan was another matter entirely. It was something he had not discussed with anyone so far: the complete disappearance of the K-238 and the inferences that he was forced to draw from it. Even if it had left its takeoff location at its highest velocity, such a metal colossus as the K-238 would have left a clearly visible trace on Tompetch's scanner screen. But that had not been the case, so therefore...

Rhodan had made an agreement in the meantime with the Solitude Intelligence. Now that there was no question as to the enemy's intent, and since he made his presence known openly, the Solitude entity would look about for the Druuf ship, which undoubtedly had brought the robots here. It must be in the vicinity—no more than 50 or 60 miles away, Rhodan had figured.

Although the company of enemy robots continued to push closer to their position, Rhodan took the time to observe the Solitude creature as its tremendous body suddenly became slack and lifeless. This meant that its spirit or intellect had separated from it and it was this wandering entity that they had first seen in the form of a little man. But it wasn't visible now as it had been before when first spotted from the control room of the K-238. At that time it had been relatively easy to see it because it subjected the surrounding air to a change in the refraction index. Since it was not subject to any particular time reference, it moved as swiftly as Rhodan and his men had moved prior to the assimilation into Druuf-time. But in their present time-frame they were not able to perceive such a swift movement.

Rhodan stood up and beckoned to Tompetch. "Bring along a heavy disintegrator," he ordered. "We'll have a look at the enemy line from above."

Tompetch was enthusiastic. He had an opportunity to prove himself. He hurried to the weapons that had been laid out on the edge of the clearing. Selecting a heavy D-automatic disintegrator, he swung on board the flier. Equipped with a similar weapon, Rhodan had already taken over the controls. The other men appeared to know what they had to do. Reginald Bell directed the Arkonide and Gorlat to places between the bushes and admonished them not to stick their heads out even an inch.

They had also dragged the inert body of the Solitude Entity under the coverage of the bushes.

* * * *

Outside the temperature had risen to 138° Fahrenheit. By comparison the 125° maintained by the flier's air-conditioning system was a veritable tonic.

There were 2 choices at Rhodan's disposal—either to hug the ground in his flight or to reach for altitude. He chose the latter since it offered more visibility. Owing to the shuttlecraft's powerful antigrav propulsion it was not difficult to make it soar like an airplane to an altitude of about 6000 feet above the plain.

From this elevation the mighty Druuf robots appeared again as tiny glittering points of reflected light but it could also be seen that they had encircled the camp to within 600 yards. They seemed to be unaware of the flier above them or else they weren't concerned about it. And either conclusion seemed equally amazing to Tompetch. He knew that their weapons were similar to Terranian thermoguns and that they could no doubt be effective even at this distance. And certainly they must know that they were within effective range of their own Terranian weapons here on board the flier.

"What do you think of it, Tompetch?" Rhodan suddenly asked as though he had guessed what was on his mind.

"It's strange, sir," answered Tompetch. "Those are robots down there and since robots are programmed not to miss anything they must have spotted us right away. So if they're not firing at us by now, then all I can say is—"

Suddenly as though in scornful answer to Tompetch there was a brilliant flash from below. A glowing white beam of energy shot past the flier within a 20 yard distance, causing it to sway in the thunder of superheated air.

Rhodan went into a dodging manoeuvre and escaped the following shot by at least 200 yards.

"You were saying...?" he asked as though nothing had happened.

"Well, I *wasgoing* to say that in that case maybe they weren't intending to do us any harm—or maybe this might be a diversionary attack of some kind. But of course that theory just went all to blazes because now they're firing at us."

A 3rd shot flashed upward at them. It passed close to the cockpit canopy and caused the inside temperature to jump to 130°. Thunder faded away through the heated air channel of the course taken by the shot.

Rhodan had dodged again but now he became serious. "That was a mite too close for comfort," he said. "You'd better pay them our respects down there, Lieutenant!"

Tompetch thrust the heavy automatic weapon through the firing slot that was just below the cockpit window. While Rhodan manoeuvred evasively and a series of ray-gun shots hissed by the ship without effect, Tompetch activated his automatic target tracer, aimed it at a closely packed group of robots and held his finger on the release button. Each time the target light blinked red he fired, knowing that his target was perfectly centred.

8 times the light blinked. 8 glittering points disappeared below and 8 puffs of atomized metallic gas rose from the ground.

"Now there are only 32 of them," reported Tompetch.

Apparently recognizing their dangerous position, the robots scurried for cover in the bushes. However they were not prepared for the perfectionism of Earthly technology. The position scanner revealed the trace blips on the screen just as clearly as before, since the device was not hindered by the coverage of foliage. Tompetch tied in his weapon to the scanner itself and brought his automatic target circle to a halt on the screen where a group of 5 blips was indicated.

After a moment he announced: "Only 27 of them left, sir.

The firing from below was becoming desultory and infrequent now. The robots appeared to be fully occupied with the task of escaping the cross-hair accuracy of Tompetch's disintegrator fire. In spite of their frantic efforts, however, it took Tompetch only another quarter of an hour to convert more than half the enemy into metallic gas clouds, while the rest of them took off in an automated sort of panic—for even robots have a self-preservation drive built into them as a means of reducing endless costs of replacement. Meanwhile, guided by Rhodan's target data from above, Reginald Bell's ground forces also moved into the battle.

Curiously, the robots ran haphazardly in all directions, in spite of the fact that robots generally have an exceptional sense of coordination and know better than any organic intelligence where they're supposed to go. Rhodan deduced from this that the enemy was not particularly interested in revealing the location of his spaceship. Apparently he also had little concern for the possibility that the shuttlecraft might discover it. This could be due to either 1 of 2 conditions: either the Druuf ship was very well hidden—or the robots knew the natural reluctance of the opposition to separate 1 or 2 men so far from the main group, which would be necessary to search for the ship.

While brooding over such considerations, Rhodan perceived that the battle had been won. He put the ship into a dive and headed for the clearing in the brush that Tompetch had burned away for him. He was greeted by the triumphant, dirty-faced, dust-covered figure of Reginald Bell.

With his weapon hung over a shoulder by its straps, Bell threw his arms up and shouted: "We've chased them to the devil! They're running their gaskets loose!"

Rhodan stepped to the ground and was about to answer him but he was struck by a sudden thought. It came full-blown into his mind with an abrupt clarity, as though it had been lurking in his subconsciousness waiting to be noticed.

The bomb!

Why hadn't he thought of it sooner? why hadn't he figured out before this that the Druuf robots could take advantage of their absence from camp during the battle?

He stared at the dark mouth of the shaft for only a brief moment. Then he turned around swiftly and practically shouted into Bell's beaming face: "Load the sea cow onto the ship—on the double!"

Bell didn't know what it was all about but he was conditioned to respond quickly to commands. Gorlat and Tompetch jumped in to help him. Atlan moved a bit more slowly, but Rhodan's quick glance alerted

him to the fact that haste was of vital importance.

Even for the 5 of them the body of the Solitude Being could hardly be moved from its position. They rolled it to the flier but could not hoist it onto the cargo loading deck until Rhodan turned on the antigrav. The wide-sweeping field cancelled out the weight of objects within its effective range so that now even 1 man could lift the creature. But it required 3 men to hold onto the flier, which seemed determined in its weightlessness to reject being loaded.

"Tie it down!" ordered Rhodan when the cylindrical body was in place.

Tompetch fetched the rope that was still hanging down in the cave shaft. He tied it around the sea cow and through the deck cleats in such a fashion that the inanimate body could not fall off even during violent movements of the ship.

"Climb on board, Tompetch!" shouted Rhodan. "Take it to a distance of about 500 yards in the direction of the spot where the K-238 was standing—then find a landing place somewhere in that area."

Tompetch complied. He raised the ship expertly, even though the multi-ton weight of the sea cow gave it a heavy list to the stern. Then he flew away, drifting close above the bushes, and headed for the indicated location.

"The rest of us will travel on foot," Rhodan ordered. They loaded the equipment onto themselves and got under way. They made fair headway until they reached the place where the flier had been parked previously but beyond this spot began the undisturbed brush, which presented an almost impenetrable wall of thorns.

Carrying the heavy barrier-field generator over his shoulder, Rhodan burned out a path ahead with the disintegrator, making a wide enough passage so that they would not be impaled by the thorns.

Under their loads and a temperature which had risen to 145° they struggled onward amidst grumblings and groanings. The murderous heat distorted their concept of the distance covered. If a man had the impression of having been on the march for several hours and that with his very next step he would fall on his face, it could well be that he had only put 100 yards or so behind him.

But Rhodan didn't stop until they were 200 yards away from the cave. He carefully lowered the generator to the ground and threw himself flat on his stomach in the shade of a bush. He panted. His mouth was dry. He wanted to say something but couldn't even move his tongue.

But he found it wasn't necessary to speak. He had hardly hit the ground when a tremendous jolt of the earth almost lifted him into the air again. Seconds later the under of a powerful explosion, came rolling across the hot plain. For a moment a towering brown pillar of earth rose up from the area where they had been and then it slowly collapsed with a sound of falling rocks.

The bomb had exploded.

Reginald Bell looked at Rhodan in some wonderment, not untinged with suspicion. "Looks like you're the head medicine man," he said after awhile. "Where do you keep your crystal ball?"

Rhodan had shoved a concentrate tablet in his mouth and was struggling to swallow it. The burning sensation of thirst began to ebb away and finally his tongue was freed from his palate. "The K-238," he answered. "It's gone without a trace. Where?"

Bell shrugged his shoulders. "Beats me!"

"Even Tompetch couldn't find it on his scanner screen. It was simply not present. What would you make out of that?"

Bell's eyes widened as he began to grasp the idea. "The Druufs have transferred us into their time-frame and... swapped places with us? In other words, *they* are now in our rate of time? Is that what you mean?"

"Something like that. The K-238 didn't go anywhere. It stayed right where we left it but it also remained in our own time-reference. On the other hand, we were dumped into the alien time where everything happens slower. At the same time, a couple of the Druufs—or Druuf robots—changed over to our own time-rate. They would move 72000 times faster than we do—and would be invisible to us. So that's what happened. When they observed that we had gone down into the cave, they tried to set off the bomb in the normal fashion. They didn't succeed because I had broken the connection. Then they moved in to set off the bomb by using a more direct method. You can see it didn't pose any danger for them, can't you? No more than it did for us in the other cave, which we were able to leave in plenty of time."

Bell shook his head in amazement. "But why? OK—so they went down into the cave, they patched up the wire and gave the generator a whirl. When the spark jumped across the gap, the explosion started to run its course in our present time-frame but that was so slow that the Druufs or the robots could still get out of the cave at their leisure, giving them time to get to safety. But why did they set it off at all? By their time reckoning we were already gone when they got there. So they couldn't do us any harm by their action."

Rhodan nodded but before he could give a reply Atlan interceded: "Because they didn't want us to find out toward what point in the universe their micro-hypercom transmitter is pointing."

Bell slapped his head. "Boy, what a blunker I am!" he groaned. "Naturally! And that was the same story for the other cave, too, wasn't it?"

"I'm inclined to believe it now," admitted Rhodan. "There are no secrets concerning the Druufs that the Solitude creatures can reveal to us—as we had assumed—because they don't know, themselves. But the transmitter could have given us information as to where the Druuf world can be found."

Nobody raised the question as to why no one had thought of locating the transmitter and taking it apart in order to determine in what direction it was facing. Even though the mechanisms and circuits of an electromagnetic beam transmitter were admittedly complicated, nevertheless such a device was essentially a hypercom transmitter, though more involved. They had not had time to think about it—even after they first realized that the bomb's true purpose was to keep the transmitter from being discovered.

Bell looked around. "We aren't able to see them," he muttered suspiciously. "They could be standing here... or there... or over there." He pointed in 3 different directions. "And we don't see them. Why the devil don't they start shooting?"

Rhodan smiled. "They've probably long since given up shooting at us. After having marvelled sufficiently over the fact that we don't fall dead. Or maybe they were aware all along that they could have no effect on us as long as they were in the other rate of time."

Bell stared at him. "Aware? what do you mean? How come they can't affect us here?"

"Because they use rayguns that project energy faster than the light-speed admissible to this time-frame or to the particular temporal nature of this universe. Again it's a loss of causality, that's all. They press their trigger buttons at us and anything but the normal effect can happen. A causally conditioned course of events is impossible. Their ultra light-speed energy beams can't affect us."

Reginald Bell began to laugh, at first hesitantly as though he were still uncertain as to what he should be laughing about but finally he was roaring with laughter. Gorlat joined him. Atlan grimaced at first but finally they were all laughing. They were laughing at their own mental image of the astonished Druuf face—if indeed they had faces at all—and at the crazy picture of invisible creatures running swiftly around them in circles while continuously hitting the release buttons on their weapons without being able to cause any damage.

The laughter seemed to relieve them. The environment into which they had been delivered became somehow more bearable.

Rhodan finally took up his trend of thought again after they had calmed down. "So the Druufs are working in 2 separate groups on Solitude. 1st group transferred over to our own time-rate level, stole the K-238 and exploded the bomb in the cave. The 2nd group has probably landed in an alien ship somewhere near here in order to back up the first group—as for example the diversionary attack of the 40 robots which was aimed at keeping us from taking a closer look at the hypercom transmitter.

"What I'd like to know is: why did the Druufs come to Solitude in the first place?" As he noticed that everybody seemed to be at a loss for an answer, he continued. "The first ships appeared the night after our landing which means about 10 hours after our arrival, at least. Now 10 hours for the Druufs would have been half a second in their own time and nobody can react to a situation that fast. At the time we landed, they must have been on their way here already and they probably picked up signals from the transmitter in the first cave which told them we were there. Naturally they worried about who or what we were and what we were intending. They could not tolerate an alien visitation to one of their advance base worlds. So they placed us into an alien time-frame and at least some of them came over into our own time level. They stole our ship and thereby succeeded in isolating us. Now they probably consider us to be fairly harmless and all they have to watch is that we don't find the secret of the hypercom transmitter. And when they finally realize that we can't do anything with the secret anyway, because we have no means of sending information to the outside, they'll probably leave us entirely alone.

"Well, that may seem to be the picture but I don't think it's the whole story. Those 8 ships originally came here for an entirely different reason and I'd like to know what it is."

Reginald Bell rolled over onto his other side. "naturally you'd like to know," he moaned, "but nobody is in a position to tell you. Oh man—this lousy heat! Do you think maybe Tompetch could—"

As though Tompetch had waited for his cue, Rhodan's micro-receiver buzzed in his pocket. He took it out and turned it on. Everyone could hear Tompetch's excited voice.

"The sea cow is stirring again, sir. Its 'ghost' part has probably come back to it."

"Good! Then unload that thing and come pick us up. We'll give you a trace signal."

6/ CHRONO-CONTORTIONS

The sea cow—or rather the part of it that could separate itself from the body of the creature—had made a discovery. A spindle-shaped Druuf ship was lying 50 miles away at the edge of the plain where the mountains began. About 200 robots were busy there making an excavation with a reinforced foundation. The activity seemed to indicate that they were planning to erect a building on top of it and by the looks of the reinforcements the structure was to be fairly big and massive.

It was a new mystery for Rhodan and his men but to their relief it was one that didn't seem to have anything to do with themselves. The Druuf robots could build houses or entire cities if they wanted to: it had nothing to do with the crew of the K-238.

Rhodan alone had a hunch in regard to this report, which he discussed with Atlan. "There's one item we haven't thought about during our entire time here, Admiral," he began. "And that's the fact that Solitude has been disturbed in its orbit by the transit of Wanderer and is drawing away from its sun. It looks very much as though the Druuf robots are preparing to set up some heavy equipment of some kind which will be designed to stabilize the planet in its orbit again."

The Arkonide gazed away toward the mountains as though he could see the building site from where he was. "If they are able to do that," he muttered thoughtfully, "then they must be quite advanced technologically. It takes a lot of doing to move an entire planet."

"Yes, but it isn't impossible. Anyway, that isn't what I'm getting at. If they are actually in the process of engineering an orbital stabilization, then they know everything that we know—concerning Wanderer."

Atlan's white eyebrows went up. "You're a wayout thinker, Barbarian!" he answered mockingly but nevertheless with concern. "Yes, you could be right. If they are preparing to move Solitude, then they must know why it was deflected from its orbit. . . . What does your over-weight friend have to say about that? Does he know anything about Wanderer?"

Rhodan nodded. "Wanderer was visible for 3 nights in succession as it passed Solitude—at a distance of 125000 miles. We know the point in time of the start of the gravitational effect—that's down pat now—but we've only estimated the distance. When you consider that we don't have much time left for long-winded calculations, the best choice would be to capture a Druuf robot and take it along with us. In the meantime, the positronicon of the K-238 must have completed its calculations long since. This would give us 3 pieces of data to compare with one another."

There was a look of unadulterated astonishment in Atlan's reddish eyes. "The K-238! Do you think we'll ever get our hands on it again?"

Rhodan smiled. "We have to," he answered. "Otherwise, how would we ever get back to where we came from?"

* * * *

"On the other hand," said Capt. Gorlat in a bored tone of voice, "The axial rotation of the planet isn't subject to this time-frame. At the time of our landing here, Solitude had a rotational period of 18 hours. Now that we are in the other plane ourselves, it should have been shortened by 72000 times, which would amount to something less than 1 second—right? If the subject of this time assimilation problem comes up again, remind me to mention it, OK?"

Tompetch, who was at the controls of the flier, looked at him dumbfoundedly. "Did you maybe expect that to happen? An axial rotation in less than a second? Ha! It would be a real sight, that—getting ourselves shot off into space by sheer centrifugal force!"

He laughed heartily at the idea. Gorlat gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Don't get carried away, buddy—watch your course! If you climb too high the Druuf robots will see us. We can lose a lot of furloughs that way!"

Tompetch slanted the air car downward until its underplating scraped noisily over the uppermost branches of the bushes. Gorlat peered ahead into the night. Somehow he had the impression that robots did not interrupt their work even in the dark. It was quite costly to design them all with infra-red vision, so the building site was probably lighted. If he were not mistaken, the place should be visible from a distance.

He wasn't exactly overjoyed about his present assignment—to capture a Druuf robot and bring it back undamaged. How do you catch a 'live' robot? A robot of a completely alien design, that is, which could prevent one from knowing where the emergency cutoff switch was located?

Just then Tompetch broke into his thoughts. "I see light ahead, Captain—there!"

Shading his eyes from the reflections in the cabin interior, Gorlat stared through the windshield. Tompetch was right: on the horizon was a vague bowl of light, still pale and barely discernible. It was the building site!

He attempted to estimate the distance: 5 miles? 10?

Tompetch reduced his speed. The terrain began to be uneven as the nearness of the mountains began to become evident. He found a declivity which ran straight toward the building site and manoeuvred the craft down into it.

"Good," said Gorlat approvingly. "If this valley holds out we'll be able to fly in close."

Now that he was flying under the enemy's scanner beams—if there were any in the first place—Tompetch let the aircar develop a higher velocity. There was only a narrow strip of the light bowl to be seen from the valley but it brightened swiftly.

Then an area was reached where the declivity began to rise toward the level of the plain. Without needing instruction, Tompetch slowed down the flier and set it down softly on the ground.

"Captain," he said, "I think we'll have to go on foot from here on."

They got out of the ship, drew their weapons and climbed up to the edge of the cleft. They had not expected to find themselves so close to the building site and Tompetch let out a low cry of astonishment as he saw that it was less than 100 yards away. A high mast towered upward from the area which

supported a powerful floodlight. It shone downward upon an army of glistening and glittering robots.

"You know it wouldn't do any harm if you flattened yourself on the ground," said Gorlat from a lower position behind him. "With your Hercules figure you probably make a beautiful target."

Tompetch threw himself to the ground. In breathless amazement he observed the excavation which the strangely shaped robots had already completely reinforced. With the help of a crane a group of about 100 of them were in the process of joining prefabricated sections along a base framework. The framework was rectangular like the foundation and was about 150 feet long.

Meanwhile Gorlat turned his attention to the dully shining hull of a tremendous ship beyond the excavation. It towered upward like a giant cigar, pointed at both ends. It was difficult for him to suppress the idea that everybody would certainly be surprised if they brought the whole ship back instead of just a captive robot.

You're a captain, old friend, he told himself—not a bandit chief.

"Yup!" said Tompetch suddenly. "As far as I can see there's a group of robots sitting down on our side of the excavation. If we are going to have any luck at all, that's where we should try it."

Gorlat's gaze followed the other's outstretched arm. Not far from the light mast, just at the edge of where the darkness began, 6 robots were huddled over something they had spread out on the ground, which looked like paper. Perhaps a building plan, thought Gorlat. Tompetch was right. These 6 were the only ones they could approach without being seen. And there was still another advantage of this small group over the milling hordes of robots who were down in the excavation. One of these was of larger stature, probably a special purpose robot. If any of them would know why, how or where Solitude was deviated from its orbit, it would be the larger automaton there.

"That's the one we've got to have," growled Gorlat. "Let's go!"

* * * *

Tompetch lay behind a bush and looked at his watch. Still 50 seconds to go before the coordinated moment of action.

For the 10th time he took aim along the barrel of his thermo-automatic and confirmed that everything was set. His first shot would hit the opposite basement wall, burn through the concrete-like reinforcement and cause the robots to chase after the assailant in the direction from which the shot had come.

That was all he had to do. That is—what he had to *do here*, he corrected himself. After that one strategic shot, if he saw that his plan had succeeded he was to run to the shuttlecraft and fly it so that he could come to Capt. Gorlat's aid. By that time Gorlat would have the large robot under his control.

Still 15 seconds.

Tompetch took aim for the 11th time and this time he held the weapon in position. Since he could no longer look at his watch, he made the balance of the countdown mentally. Then he pressed the release

button.

A hissing and whistling discharge of energy struck the opposite wall of the basement, started the reinforcement to melting and then vaporized it in a matter of seconds. In the twinkling of an eye a deep hole was produced, through which the earth tumbled into the ravening beam of the weapon, whereupon it also began to become molten.

The robots down in the excavation were only confused for a few moments. Then a portion of their number went back to their labours, while about 80 of them who were nearest to Tompetch reacted and came clambering up the basement wall. As Tompetch and Gorlat had already observed, their locomotion was based on a chain and pulley system, which was the most suitable for work robots.

Tompetch was satisfied that the moment for retreat had arrived. He took his weapon and ran as fast as he could go. A quick glance over his shoulder gave him a sense of relief as he saw that, at least for the moment, these robots moved at a slower pace than he did. He glimpsed the lightnings of brilliant energy beams piercing the darkness, which revealed that the Druuf robots did not yet have any idea of where he was.

After he had run for some distance under the weight of the thermo-automatic and bathed in sweat from the heat—which had not abated much during the night—he saw the deeper darkness of the declivity before him. He slid down it more than he was able to run or stumble toward the aircar and then with his last strength he swung up into the pilot seat. By the time the first robots appeared on the rim of the cleft he had already glided away and now he flew low above the bushes toward the rendezvous point with Gorlat.

* * * *

Gorlat emitted a grunt of satisfaction when he saw that 4 of the group of 6 robots left the area, leaving only the large one and a single companion. The 4 were apparently robot foremen who now had to explain to their crews what was next to be done.

Even among robots there was a system of rank and a line of authority. Evidently such things were no different among the Druufs than on Earth. Intelligence built robots in its own image, which endowed these mechanical beings with certain idiosyncrasies for which they might not have any use but nevertheless their creators had bestowed them upon them.

The object the 2 robots were studying appeared to actually be a blueprint or building plan. Since Gorlat was now only about 10 yards away from the floodlight mast, he could even make out a few lines on the drawing. One of the big robot's hands was running along one line as if to show the other one what he wanted.

Gorlat looked at his watch. 5 seconds more!

Tompetch's shot came according to plan and produced the desired results. A few moments later, that part of the basement closest to Gorlat was entirely empty. The robots had climbed out and were trying to search now in the darkness beyond the floods for the brazen assailant who had dared to disturb them in their construction work.

The large robot who crouched before the building plan with the other, smaller robot did not seem to reveal any sign of excitement. Gorlat thought he saw it look up just once when the shot occurred. In fact, 'looking up' was a questionable term, thought Gorlat, because he didn't know where the thing's eyes were located. But then it turned back to the drawing and continued to indicate the lines on the paper or whatever it was.

It was a lucky thing that among robots there were also generals who considered the actual battle as a task for the lower ranks. Gorlat had to admit that he'd have been in a fix if the big robot had also charged off with the others in the search.

He moved forward, crawled out from under the brush and converted the smaller of the 2 robots into a cloud of metallic vapour with a well-aimed shot from his disintegrator.

This time the large robot seemed to be frankly confused. It stood up and turned another side of its glittering, faceted body toward Gorlat. Gorlat aimed at the narrow part of the chain and pulley drive mechanism that emerged from the actual body of the robot. The shot was fired just as the robot started to move toward him. 1 of the 2 chain drives was completely destroyed and the robot started to turn in circles. Gorlat noticed that it raised one of its grasping limbs and realized that it might also be a weapon arm—so he shot it in two.

After that, the robot came to a standstill. Gorlat moved toward it while keeping his weapon ready and his senses tensely alert so that he would be able to elude any surprise movement on the part of the many-faceted monstrosity. It was the first time that he noticed that the robot towered at least 2 heads above him. It would be harder to get this thing onto the cargo deck of the flier than it was to load the sea cow a few hours before.

Gorlat observed that the robots in the excavation were not interested in anything but their work. If they had noticed the new incident they were probably programmed to leave the matter to the others who had gone after Tompetch. Gorlat came to a halt within 2 yards of the big robot. Having discovered several more prehensile-looking limbs depending from the strangely formed body of the thing, he shot them away. As far as he could make out, the monster was peeled down to where he now had no means whatsoever with which to grasp him.

He walked around him and attempted to shove him toward the bushes. He only succeeded partially. Because of the missing drive chain the robot had developed a right drag which kept turning it. Gorlat pushed him a bit to guide him correctly and found to his astonishment that it didn't take much effort so he kept on shoving. After 2 minutes of this labour he finally arrived at his previous hiding place.

He looked back and saw to his horror that the robots in the excavation were now becoming alerted. They had interrupted their work and had turned in his direction, exposing the narrowest facets of their bodies as though this were their way of looking toward the bushes where he had disappeared with his towering companion. Shortly after that about 50 of them started moving. They climbed up the nearest side of the foundation wall.

Gorlat left the big motionless robot to its own resources for the moment. He threw himself to the ground and brought his weapon into position. As long as they didn't deploy themselves more shrewdly than at present, he thought, he'd be able to hold them off until Tompetch arrived.

He had not even fired the first shot before he heard the low humming sound of the aircar's engine somewhere behind him. Tompetch brought the flier down among the bushes and sprang down to his side.

"Let's get out of here!" he exclaimed in a low, urgent tone. "It won't be long before the others pick up my trail. Where's the monster?"

Gorlat jumped up. "Over there. Have you built up the antigrav field? The robot's heavy and won't be easy to hoist on board."

"All set," confirmed Tompetch. "Give me a hand and we'll push it over to the airco."

They put their shoulders to the task and had finally gotten the heavy cargo onto the deck and tied it down just as the first of the pursuing robots appeared. Gorlat crawled directly from the cargo deck into the cupola while Tompetch swung around outside and dropped into the pilot's seat with a sigh of relief.

In the next moment the ship climbed steeply into the air. A single energy beam hissed past them in the rear but missed by at least 10 yards. A few seconds later the airco was out of sight and firing range of the Druuf robots.

"Well done!" Gorlat praised him. "Really, you were fabulous!"

Tompetch looked at him, somewhat amazed, and then laughed. "That's funny," he said. "I was just going to tell you the same thing!"

* * * *

Rhodan scanned the sky. In one area it was brighter than the surrounding darkness: the first reflection of the rising sun.

"I don't believe they have any need of tracking you, Lieutenant," he remarked. "They'll know that we're the only ones who could have kidnapped their building superintendent so they'll come here by the most direct route possible. Actually I'm surprised that they're not here already."

Tompetch glanced doubtfully at Rhodan who lay beside him on the ground. "They could still be looking around in their own area," he answered. "They still don't know that we've established a camp here."

During the time that Gorlat and Tompetch were on their mission, Rhodan, Bell and the Arkonide had pushed their march farther, finally arriving at the ground depression where the K-238 had been standing. Rhodan was completely satisfied with the success of the 2 officers and agreed with Gorlat that if any of the Druuf robots knew what they wanted to learn it would have to be this big one.

Of course what he was looking for in the area of the K-238's old landing site he had not as yet revealed to anyone.

1 hour later the sun came up. The temperature rose fairly rapidly from 125 to 140°. The men sought protection from the solar heat and glare beneath the thorny branches of the bushes.

The grey-bodied Solitude Intelligence lay motionless in the dust. Its psychic entity had separated in order to wander about and keep a lookout for the Druuf robots. ½ hour after sunrise, however, the sea cow

showed animation again, which indicated that its entity had returned. The intelligence communicated to Rhodan that a group of 100 robots was approaching from the direction of the cave and that another group of 5 robots had been observed who were 'fast-time' oriented. This meant that they moved within the faster time-frame of the Terranian's own universe.

It was these 5 who were the main source of Rhodan's immediate concern. The plan he had in mind made little allowance for any time-accelerated robots.

He had long since brought to light the small code transmitter that had been buried in the vicinity of the landing site. The device was the size of a matchbox and was equipped with a single control button. The pressure of a finger on the button released the code signal that would activate the K-238 to shut down the defence screens and permit free access to the ship's main airlock and entrance hatch.

The very unusual phenomenon involved with the box now, however, was that it still belonged to the other time-frame. Rhodan could detect this when he pressed his thumb hard against the rear partition of the device. The metal-plastic material, which normally was harder than steel, yielded elastically to his thumb pressure like a very taut-stretched piece of rubber. Nevertheless, depressing the control button still released the code signal, now as before. The signal duration would be too short to be detectable by anyone in the Druuf time-frame—to be exact: 0.00015 microseconds. But it would affect the receiver of the K-238 because the ship was still in the same time-plane as the code sender.

There were just the time-accelerated robots to worry about now.

That is, thought Rhodan, if he were right about the possibility of the K-238 returning. In that case he would need 10 seconds from the moment of sending the code signal to enter the airlock and close the outer hatch behind him. 10 seconds amounted to 200 hours from the reference point of the accelerated robots, or slightly more than 8 days.

Consequently he saw that he had no other choice. He was forced to resort to trickery. The time-honoured strategy of camouflage and diversion would have to be resorted to.

* * * *

The sea cow entity assured him that it would not be detrimental to divide its projected essence into 2 separate parts. It confirmed that it could produce two 'ersatz bodies' and, just as it had originally 'materialized' in the form of a little man, 2 such projections could separately present an outward appearance or 'reflection' of other persons—namely, a semblance of Rhodan and Capt. Gorlat. It saw no problem in accomplishing this feat.

Rhodan was satisfied with this. With the help of his heavy disintegrator he excavated 4 man-sized pits in the ground, covering them with branches and camouflaging them with earth, leaving only a narrow entrance in each.

Then he acquainted Bell, Atlan and Tompetch with his plan, since Gorlat and the Solitude Intelligence were already informed about it.

Although the men were in full agreement with it, of course Bell had a comment. "If I only knew what

makes you so sure," he said, "that the K-238 is going to come back..."

Rhodan shrugged. "Calculation, old buddy. Just calculation."

A few minutes later the 100 robots who were still in the Druuf time-plane made a strategic observation. Having advanced from the cave position about 300 yards in the meantime, they were able to see 3 persons leaving the former campsite near the earth depression. They were flying in some sort of air glider or shuttlecraft.

On the other hand the 5 robots in the accelerated time-plane had a different impression. To them it appeared that there were 5 persons in the aircar and their motions were so slow that they seemed to hang suspended in the air. In their accelerated state the non-material projections of the Solitude Intelligence had become visible.

So to these 5 robots it was clear that the enemy had fully vacated the former campsite in order to retreat from the approaching fighting force represented by the slow-time robot army. Consequently they sent out a command impulse to their slower colleagues, directing them to the new target. For the 5, the signal lasted 10 seconds, where-as to the other robots this was equivalent to only 140 microseconds, but it was sufficient to achieve the desired response on their part. The 5 faster robots never did learn that their slower companions had only seen 3 persons on board the flier. And even if they had found out about it they probably wouldn't have given it a second thought.

* * * *

Rhodan and Gorlat remained hidden in their observation pits until the coast was completely clear. This was about 3 hours after sunrise—a point in time when Rhodan figured that his masquerade trick would have either succeeded entirely or fallen flat on its face.

Rhodan was the first to push the roof of branches away and climb out of his hole in the ground, sneezing and shaking the dust off. He wiped the sweat from his face and forehead and waited until Capt. Gorlat also emerged.

"Shoosh... that's an oven down there, isn't it?" Rhodan groaned.

"It's not exactly a deepfreeze, sir," Gorlat confirmed, while looking about. "Where are they?"

"Out of range, I hope. But I don't think it's time yet to turn cartwheels or shout hallelujah. In the time we take to speak 10 words, a year passes by in the sunny life of the revved up robots. They could return here in the flash of a second and discover us."

Gorlat nodded. He smiled in spite of the heat. "Actually it looks like everything has worked out smoothly," he said, still searching the area with his eyes. "Everything is quiet. If only your hope concerning the ship—"

Suddenly—in the interval between one breath and another—the K-238 was back again. It stood there where Rhodan had landed it a few days before, just as though it had never moved from the spot. There was no landing manoeuvre, no point of light emerging from the sky—nothing. It just came down.

It was simply there.

With a swiftness of which he was capable only at the highest moments of crisis, Rhodan raced down from the edge of the depression. A fraction of a second later Gorlat saw the shimmering of the defence screen vanish.

From Rhodan's point of view, however, he seemed to move more slowly than a snail. He had chosen the location of the earth pit so that he would have a minimum distance to run in order to reach the ship's entrance lock. While he charged down the slope toward it, he had the feeling that his mind and reason were functioning in the old accelerated time-plane while his body was moving in the slower plane.

He activated the button of the signal sender while on the run. The shimmering defence screen vanished while an opening appeared suddenly in the side of the ship. He swung up into the open hatchway, rolled across the-deck of the airlock and at the same time pressed the signal button again. Outside, the defence screen again sealed the K-238 hermetically from its environment.

But Rhodan's task did not end here. He jerked the weapon from his belt and trained it on the thick hatch door of the inner side of the lock, burning a hole in it the size of his fist. Only then could he be certain that the ship would not fly away, for any reason. Whoever might be sitting at the master flight console would not be able to operate the propulsion system until the damage was repaired.

In spite of his exhaustion, Rhodan pulled himself from the deck and opened the inner lock hatch after closing the outer one. Then he entered the adjoining corridor and headed for the Command Central. He didn't trust himself to use the conveyor belts because he knew they were moving at a relative speed of over 200 miles per hour. He wondered that they didn't fly to pieces.

Fighting fatigue, he reached the control room quickly and with an equal swiftness grasped the controls he needed in order to complete the success of his mission. He turned on the warp-field generator but was not surprised that he couldn't hear it operating. He knew that the sound-waves of the faster time-plane were at a frequency which was far beyond his present audible range.

Nevertheless he saw the milky ring of energy taking shape outside beyond the defence screen. Slowly and carefully he turned certain control knobs on the control panel, which were as tacky to his sense of touch as the small box of the code sender. As a result the warp generator gradually focussed the energy ring, projecting it into the Command Central itself.

He stood before the vaporous circle for a long moment—and then stepped through.

* * * *

In the same moment he heard the high hum of the warp-field generator once more. To him it sounded as beautiful as Thora's voice.

He looked around and saw that his surroundings had not changed. He was still in the Command Central of the K-238. The landscape outside was green and peaceful-looking. The bushes were not moving in the wind any more and no swirling dust devils moved across the plain. There were just a few transparent

dust shapes above the bushes, seemingly hanging there motionlessly.

The experiment had succeeded. He had returned to his accustomed plane of time!

On the viewscreen he saw Capt. Gorlat standing next to an earth pit, seemingly as motionless as a statue. He again adjusted knobs on the control panel and caused the generator to project the energy ring outside to a spot where Gorlat could reach it in a few quick steps.

Then he leaned back in his seat and waited. At least ½ hour would pass before Gorlat even became aware of the force ring. Then it would still take him time to walk forward and step through the warp aperture. To Gorlat: 3 seconds. To Rhodan: 60 hours.

* * * *

Rhodan could envision the expression on Bell's face and could already imagine the questions he would be asking: "So you knew that the K-238 would come back. You even knew approximately when. Is it supposed to be a secret how you knew all that... or would you care to spill it to me gently?"

And then he, Rhodan, would attempt to explain to him the principles governing the 2 space-time continuums. He knew that it would be a difficult chore because Bell was sharp and very knowledgeable and had an inborn aversion to all things of a vague and abstract nature—especially where the vagaries involved were due to a lack of usable theory where nothing could yet be expressed as mathematical reality.

"Our operation on Solitude," he would explain, "has been a teeter-tottering back and forth between 2 space-continuums and 2 reference frames of time. During the first few hours after our landing, we and the K-238 together constituted an alien object in this universe. We were a part of its chain of events but we still did not belong here. We were something like a small piece of foreign territory stuck into another country.

"Then we made a fateful move. We flew the K-238 from its original landing site to a 2nd location, meaning here—and we moved at a velocity which was greater than the local speed of light. To any observer indigenous to the slower time-frame of the Solitude universe, the event would work but something as follows: he would see us take off from the first landing site but would not be able to see us land here. Because the landing in the 2nd location was *acausal* result of the take-off from the original place—since it is specifically causality that is lost when one exceeds the velocity of light.

"For us it was otherwise: we flew at the ridiculously slow speed of slightly over 9 miles per second, or about one twenty-thousandth speol. We took off and a short time later we landed. It was a simple continuity of cause and effect.

"The confusion started when the Druufs projected a warp-field to the surface of the planet and *simultaneously* transferred us to the alien time-plane while accelerating some of their robots into our faster time reference. Because then we were the ones who became the observers. For us the K-238 had jumped the causality barrier because of its higher-than-light speed, and although to us it took off alright from the 1st location, it had not yet arrived in the 2nd location. So when we came back looking for it, it wasn't there... it couldn't have been.

"It was something else again for the accelerated Druuf robots: they had been transferred into our own original reference frame. They would have seen the K-238 standing there and so they would have stolen it."

At this juncture Bell would no doubt make a rebuttal: "How was that again about the guy with the electric light bulb? You know, the bit where the light was already on when he flicked the switch? This loss of causality—doesn't it mean that the effect comes *inbefore* the cause? Wouldn't that make it seem to a Solitude observer that the K-238 appeared at the 2nd spot before it took off from the 1st?"

Trapped by this question, he would have to answer: "The interchange between cause and effect is only *l* possible manifestation of an acausal event... among many others. For example: consider a rifle bullet that is flying toward the bullseye of a target card. Now let's say that, without any influence from outside forces, the bullet does not exactly arrive; that is, it disappears just before it gets to the card and then reappears behind it, only to resume its trajectory. In this case, the bullet would be operating twice against causality: 1st, it escapes the 1st effect—hitting the bullseye—which would be the normal result of the cause—in other words, a well-aimed shot. 2nd, a new effect comes in—the disappearance and reappearance of the bullet—without there being any related cause."

Then Bell would probably grumble to himself about stupid comparisons but nevertheless and after all et cetera and so forth. Whereupon he would have to continue: "The case of the K-238 involves a similar situation. The causal start was the original takeoff, from which one would expect an effect: namely, a landing—but the landing didn't happen. Apparently we must deduce from the theory of alternate time-planes the fact that over a much longer period of time eventually the sum of all causes and the sum of all effects must be equal—even when there can be a loss of causality. The 1st cause which is lacking in an effect must be balanced off by an effect without a cause. Such a causeless effect was the landing of the K-238 as witnessed by myself and Gorlat, at a time when it was not expected. For Solitude universe observers, the K-238 was simply non-existent.

"Be that as it may, the ship is back again—as the end effect of an acausal event, or better yet, 2 of them. It is possible to compute the point in time when a causeless effect may equate to, match up with or link itself to an effectless cause. It is derived from the fact that the amount or extent of speed travelled in *excess* of the speed of light, during any particular movement, is a measurement of the acausality of the associated event. From the velocity of the K-238 during its transfer from the 1st landing site to the 2nd one I was able to compute when it should reappear for an observer in the Solitude continuum. Naturally it was merely a try—like a shot in the dark—but as you can see I rode a luckboat (21st century idiom for lucked out, got lucky)."

What would Bell do then? He would probably scratch his head noisily, then trip up the noble spirit of science with a question he shouldn't venture to ask: "So what the devil's happened to the K-238 that the Druuf robots stole from us?"

"That all depends on what point of view you are using to look at the situation. For a Solitude observer the Druuf robots could not have stolen the K-238 because it's only just now arrived. For an observer in our own time-frame it must be inferred that there was another kind of exchange. At the moment when the K-238 became visible also in the Solitude plane of reference, the accelerated Druuf robots would have returned simply to their slower time-frame, without any further alien technological influence, and the hypothetical ship of the higher time-plane would disappear where they were concerned."

All of this was merely a basis or pattern for logical explanation. If anybody hankered after an exposition that would necessarily be distorted by such wayout abstractions he would have to be satisfied with

ideational patterns only; and such processes, for the most part, only coincided with a few points in reality, whereas other facets of it produced false concepts.

Bell would realize this and ask no more but he'd still probably add some such remark as: "It seems you've really dug into this thing pretty deeply. From all your 'we must infer' and 'can be deduced from' one might suspect you did some cribbing on this double-time theory and had it all down pat beforehand. Is that right?"

And he would answer: "No. But I have a few ideas that can make the search a bit easier for the mathematicians."

Bell would no doubt consider that a deliberate understatement but would accept it. And thus Rhodan might survive the difficult ordeal of having to clarify vague abstractions to Reginald Bell which Reggie would never be able to figure out by himself.

* * * *

5 hours later it could be observed that Capt. Gorlat was making his first move toward the energy ring. But it was very slow.

In the meantime Rhodan had detected no sign of either 'fast' or 'slow' robots in the vicinity of the ship. According to his theory, ever since the reappearance of the K-238 there shouldn't have been any accelerated robots in evidence. The fact that he didn't see any did not necessarily prove the correctness of his theory but it helped to substantiate it.

After 8 hours Rhodan had an idea how he might accelerate Gorlat's return into the Earthly time-frame. He waited until Gorlat started to leap through the ring, which left him, so to speak, floating motionlessly in the air. Then he took a plastic rod that had a hook on one end and went outside to the ring of the force-field. Here he reached through with the rod and hooked Gorlat around the collar of his uniform, whereupon he pulled him through the ring to his side. In so doing he had to be careful to keep Gorlat from touching the ground at any point on the other side because there such a tremendous velocity of movement might cause serious injuries in case of any contact.

Gorlat fell to the ground as soon as he had traversed the ring. He looked about wonderingly. Then he bounced to his feet and said: "Thank you, sir. I'm glad it isn't so infernally hot over here."

* * * *

The rest was simple. After the hole in the inner airlock door had been repaired, the K-238 followed after the shuttlecraft in which Bell, Atlan, Tompetch and the two 'ersatz images' were seated. The aircar—with the exception of the 'images'—was brought through the warp-field into the proper time-continuum. The 2 projections returned to the physical portion of the Solitude Intelligence and the K-238 landed again in the depression not far away from the 4 pits in the ground. The sea cow was fully

reconstituted within an hour or so and then it was also assimilated into the Earthly time-frame.

Rhodan considered whether or not it would serve any purpose to look for a 3rd Solitude cave so as to take out the hypercom transmitter and determine its directional setting. Since the fundamentals of the alternate-time theory were understood to the extent that the mathematicians could probably make headway with them, the transmitter didn't seem to be so important any more—especially in view of the fact that there was no further reason Terranian ships couldn't go in and out of the 2 time-planes at will. The top priority now was Wanderer. The location of the Druuf world could be investigated later.

It turned out that Reginald Bell of course asked the very question Rhodan had anticipated. He also appeared to be satisfied at precisely the point which had been rehearsed and from there on ceased to ask further questions.

But he did add an extra comment: "I guess it's about time that I retired and went back into private life," he complained. "75 years ago I was satisfied to be able to multiply 17 times 18 in my head but today I've got to mess around with alternate-time theories. It's too much for me—I've had it!"

The Solitude Intelligence did not wish to remain any longer on its home planet because it feared pursuit and persecution by the robots. It was therefore completely receptive to Rhodan's suggestion that it should return with them to the *Drusus* and later accompany them back to Earth.

The K-238 finally took off on its return flight without any more worries concerning the Druuf robots. The latter had evidently scattered far and wide in search of the enemy.

The captured robot building superintendent still lay on the deck of the airco's hangar in the K-238, restricted to a state of complete immobility because of its slower time-frame status. It was to be transferred into the Terrestrial time-continuum on board the *Drusus* so that the electronics experts could dismantle it and probe its memory bank.

Rhodan believed that he didn't have to worry too much about Solitude itself. The Druufs considered the planet to be such an important advance outpost that they were taking pains, themselves, to bring it back into a stabilized orbit.

A few hours after the takeoff the K-238 reached the location in the purple-red void where the *Drusus* was still maintaining its warp-field projection, which appeared as an opalescent, elliptical framework of energy. The ship shot through the ring without any need for time adjustment and found itself in a universe where the background was gratifyingly black and the stars shone forth with a redeeming whiteness—even though there were some among them which radiated a slightly different colour.

The return had been accomplished. Now the only question remaining was—how long had the operation required in terms of Earth time?

* * * *

The day of the return was the 21st of April, 2042. Rhodan had to be content with that—and he was—because if the time-distortion factor had been the same as in the other universe, where the lapse-rate of all events was 72000 times slower, the K-238 might not have returned for several thousand

years.

But time was pressing, nevertheless. The time-span remaining in which he could safely visit Wanderer would end on the 1st of May. Rhodan commissioned a 10-man team of specialists to perform the necessary research on the Druuf robot, telling them that he would prefer to get the results that same day. It was an impossibility, which he knew; but the work team did its best and concluded the investigation early on the morning of the 23rd of April.

The results were far more informative than Rhodan had expected, eliminating all the difficulties which had stood in the way of finding Wanderer until now. The Druuf robot had not only possessed information concerning the cause of the gravitational disturbance that had thrown Solitude from its orbit; it also knew the course taken by Wanderer after its transit past Solitude. And above all it was aware of something that utterly astonished Rhodan—data which seemed to indicate that the collective being on Wanderer had by no means been as helpless in the face of the time-plane transit as had first been supposed.

In the meantime, Wanderer had exited from the Druuf universe at another location. The Druufs had not been able to prevent it. Of course they had made an attempt to retain the synthetic world inside their own dimension but the power of the Wanderer entity had apparently been superior to theirs. After a short flight through the purple-red ‘other’ void, Wanderer had returned into its own universe. The distance it had travelled was now a known factor. Using this travel arc, Rhodan was able to compute the place where the Wanderer would have to be at present. This point lay within its original orbit but at a location it would not have reached under normal circumstances for another 18000 years.

Research on the robot had brought a number of other important bits of knowledge to light. A vast number of very evident clues concerning Druuf technology turned up in their product and it was to be hoped that they would shortly come to know the status of the enemy’s technical development.

Prior to concerning himself with such matters, however, Rhodan prepared the *Drusus* for its next journey. The orbital point at which Wanderer was now located was 9.5 light-years from the present position of the *Drusus* —a distance which it could easily cover in a single transition.

The takeoff was set for 20:00 ship time, 23 April 2042. For Perry Rhodan, immortality could come to an end within 1 week—but now he was confident he would keep his appointment in time.

CONTENTS

[1/ LOST WORLD](#)

[2/ STRANGE EVENTS ON ‘SOLITUDE’](#)

[3/ COFFINS OF MYSTERY](#)

[4/ TIME TRICKS](#)

[5/ THE BOMB!](#)

[6/ CHRONO-CONTORTIONS](#)

[THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME](#)

DIMENSION SEARCH

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

BETWEEN DIMENSIONS...

Somewhere in the interstices of the fabric of space, maintaining a tenuous existence between the 4th dimension and the 5th, lies that mysterious realm known as semispace.

This halfplane must be penetrated if the planet Wanderer is to be reached in time—and reached it must be, else it will be the end of Perry. Not to mention Reginald Bell.

Incredibly, the venture between the dimensions alters their physical forms so that the Terranians, strangers on a strange terrain, find themselves metamorphosed into—Giants!

And make no mistake about it, the next step is a giant one, for—

DEATH WAITS IN SEMISPACE

by

Kurt Mahr