

TESTING THE ROBOT REGENT

THE SOLAR SECURITY SERVICE: 32 of its best men, picked for a Special Action against the Positronicon of Arkon, the Robot Brain whose extent of dangerous knowledge must be ascertained by Perry Rhodan.

Can the Positronicon measure the frequencies emitted by the structocomps of hypertransing ships of the Solar Imperium? If so, there's danger to the Earth!

Maj. Clyde Ostal, in the year 2042, receives orders from the Peacelord himself to take over the armed spacer *Tigris* in order to test the Robot Regent.

At the same time, events on Grautier, the Exile planet, have gotten out of hand and are careening inexorably toward a catastrophic climax as—

THE TIGRIS LEAPS

1/ THE DEVASTATING DIAGRAM

THEY'D DONE IT!

3 men with exhausted faces sighed deeply as their department's computer spewed out a length of tape with an audible click. The tape fell rustling into a cup-shaped receptacle and at the same time the computer, a device based on positronic principles, shut off and the humming and vibrating died away. A penetrating silence suddenly reigned in the room.

Chief logician Nourag got up and crossed to the machine, taking the computer tape from its receptacle. Then he turned and looked triumphantly at his 2 colleagues.

It was the finest reward for a work that had occupied them for 36 hours.

36 hours before, Chief Logician Nourag had been summoned to Allan D. Mercant, Marshal of Solar Defence.

"I need," Mercant had said, "in 40 hours, a set of precise coördinates according to which our solar system would appear to be in the following position... take this down if you will, Nourag... Phi 16 degrees, 34 minutes, 22 seconds; Psi 03:05:45; and Chi 44:43:01. Your range will be between 3,500 & 4,200 light-years from Earth. No more, no less. Within those limits, where you go is up to you and your

men to decide.

"Once you've determined those coordinates, you will have the interesting task of calculating the distance from the Earth's fictitious location to those star systems known to us.

"To put it simply, your mission is this: supply me data in the next 40 years that would guarantee that a spaceship of our fleet using it would never find its way back to Earth. However, the data must appear utterly genuine and stand up to the most suspicious examination without evidencing any hint of deliberate foul play."

With that the chief logician had been dismissed.

And now they had done it: in 36 hours, on the 4th run-through. 3 times before the positronicon had stopped during the middle of computations. The data it had been fed was not sufficient to reach any conclusions but Nourag and his colleagues were able to determine readily enough what information was lacking and supply it.

Nourag, a small, slender man, was radiant with joy now. The long plastic tape with its encoded symbols was like an open book in his mother language to him.

"Miltau," he said to his closest co-worker, "call Marshall Mercant and tell him our job is finished—and so is our strength, for that matter."

But the Solar Defence Marshall could not be reached.

"Alright," said Nourag, "then I'll wait for him. Thank you, gentlemen. You can go now."

Nourag had been alone for only a few minutes when he had a visit from Esting, the navigational mathematician.

Esting fell tiredly into a seat. "That Solar Defence bunch," he moaned. "One of these days they're going to kill us all. I had to calculate spring coordinates... Good Lord! I'd hate to be flying in the spaceship going into transition with *my* data! What in heaven's name is all this nonsense for, anyway?"

But it was not nonsense at all.

In all details, it was a very carefully thought-out plan.

For 2 hours Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bell, Marshall Mercant and Maj. Clyde Ostal of the Solar Security Service had been sitting at the final conference.

Allan D. Mercant handed new reports to Perry Rhodan, Administrator of the Solar Imperium. Rhodan skimmed over them and nodded. "The picture is becoming more complete," he said, "but we've waited long enough. The reports from our agents are growing steadily sparser and less detailed. Our experience with the Robot Regent indicates that that means Arkon is attempting to double-cross us again." He laid his hand on the reports that Mercant had given him. "Here we see how strong the probability is that Arkon has begun development of its new compensator-detector. Mercant, not even you know how dangerous our situation has become in the last 3 days!"

The Defence Marshall looked at Rhodan in astonishment. Rhodan reached behind himself and produced a slip of paper on which a diagram had been drawn. He laid it out on the table.

Bell, Mercant and Maj. Ostal bent over the diagram in curiosity.

The diagram came from the space freighter *Orinoco* and was 3 days old.

2 days before, the *Orinoco* had returned from a freight run to the M-13 System, landing at Terrania a full 6 hours behind schedule.

The 6-hour delay was due to unplanned transitions. The commander of the *Orinoco* fortunately belonged to the officers of the Terran spacefleet and merchant marine and consequently took his work very seriously.

The diagram that now disturbed 3 of the men taking part in the conference had deeply shaken him as well. And thus 30 minutes after his arrival in Terrania, he had requested to speak with Perry Rhodan.

"This is too much!" Bell exclaimed, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

Mercant's eyes shimmered dangerously.

Maj. Clyde Ostal had gone pale.

The testimony of the diagram was devastating.

Mercant began to speak, as though lecturing a class. He rarely spoke in that tone: only when he had been deeply disturbed. His pen flew over the diagram, pointing various things out. "Here... that's the *Orinoco*'s transition... uninteresting. But here, at 0434:05 hours, ship's time, the vessel came out of hyperspace. And there..." Mercant's hand trembled. "... At 0435:36 hours, ship's time, just 1 minutes & 31 seconds later, the first Arkonidean ship flew towards it. And that 1.23 light-years from where the *Orinoco* was going to land.

"No sir, I didn't know that. That's the catastrophe we've been trying to prevent for more than half a century. And tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, the first Arkonide *Titan*-type spacespheres will be landing here by the hundreds!"

It was astounding that Bell did not comment at first. This was something quite out of character for him. He, a man whose bent for flying off the handle at the least provocation was well known throughout the Solar Imperium, merely ran both hands through his reddish hair while gasping loudly for breath. Finally he burst out with: "What a fine fishket! (21st century expression for 'kettle of fish') The Druufs to the right of us, the double-crossing Robot Brain to the left of us... and the positronic scrap pile knows the position of the Earth now...!"

"I don't believe it knows yet," Rhodan interrupted. "The range of the Arkonide structural compensators is still limited." He reached behind himself again and laid the 2nd diagram on the table. "Commodore Lyst of the *Orinoco* had the fortunate idea of testing the capabilities of the new Arkonide device with a spring near M-13. This diagram doesn't tell us why the Arkonide sensor can't pick up the frequency of our structural compensators from a distance of more than 10 light-years but it does tell us that we Terrans don't dare lose another minute..." He allowed a pause to emphasize what he had yet to say. "...And we have to first make arrangements so that all our spacers can return to Earth when we transmit a coded message for them to do so; but making at least 20 different transitions while on their way before they finally set course for Terra on their last spring. That, gentlemen, is our situation at the present time."

"As if that motorized bucket of bolts hasn't given us enough trouble already!" Bell cried out angrily.
"Perry, don't you feel an urge to send Pucky to the Robot Regent so our little friend can 'play' with him a bit?"

In spite of the earnest situation, Perry Rhodan could not repress a smile. Bell's suggestion of sending the telepathic, telekinetic and teleportative mousebeaver extraordinary, Pucky, to face the giant computer on Arkon 3 was no joke but just the thought of *aplaying* Pucky was enough to cause a smile.

Had he been given such a mission, Pucky would have certainly displayed his single incisor tooth, as he always did to express his joy. Teleporting himself inside the mammoth positronic computer and then beginning to 'play'—destroying the positronicon section by section with his telekinetic powers unleashed full-force—would have been his idea of fun.

However...

"Such a suicide mission is out of the question for Pucky," Rhodan said, tabling the idea. "Mercant, don't have your agents concentrating their attention on the construction of the Arkonide sensing equipment. Ed much rather know if they're started mass production of the device. Its construction is less important..."

Bell stared at his friend, startled. Rhodan overlooked it, turning to Maj. Ostal. "Are you ready enough that you could take off at 12:45 hours?"

Mercant answered for Ostal. "They'll be ready by then, sir. The extra equipment is ready now and the rest of the work is just routine."

Rhodan turned to his friend. "Reggie, I asked you to have the light cruiser *Lotus* refitted. How has the work been going?"

"*We're* ready," he replied, gesturing angrily, "but those pickle people, the Swoons, seem like they never will be. If I could only see *what* they're trying to do. These microscopically small devices of theirs are beginning to get on my nerves.

"They'd get on my nerves, too, Reggie... if the Swoons were working for Arkon instead of us." That was all Rhodan had to say about that but for Bell those words had their own meaning. He knew Perry Rhodan better than anyone else and he was aware that when Rhodan spoke in such riddles, something was up and would soon reveal itself, usually at some unexpected moment.

"Anything else, gentlemen?" Rhodan looked at the men questioningly.

"Yes sir," said Maj. Ostal. "Is our destination still the star system of Naral?"

"Yes it is. According to the latest reports of our agents, suspicion as increased that one or even several compensator-sensors: are on the planet Ekhas, possibly built into Arkonide ships. We know already through the commodore of the *Orinoco* which Arkonide planet is definitely the site of a sensor unit but re-programming your ship's extra equipment would cause us to lose 5 days—and that much time, gentlemen, we don't have. In the next few days or hours Arkon could succeed in increasing the range of their compensator sensor to a thousand or more light-years. What then?"

"*I still* like the idea of sending Pucky to pay a call on the Robot Brain!" Bell muttered, vexed.

Perry Rhodan replied without hesitation. "We need both Pucky and the Positronicon on Arkon 3—we

can't afford to lose *either* of them!"

2/ PRISONERS: ENT-THAN

With the takeoff of the spherical freighter *Tigris*, which measured 100 meters in diameter, at precisely 12:45 hours from the spaceport at Terrania, an operation began with the precision of an adding machine—an operation that the Solar Imperium had to carry through to a successful conclusion at all costs.

Commander of the ship was Maj. Clyde Ostal of the Solar Security Service. The crew was 32 men recruited from Allan D. Mercant's Defence Ministry.

They knew what was at stake. They also knew that their mission was dangerous. Even though the star system of Naral was 'only' 4,536 light-years from Earth and from Arkon 1, 2 & 3 around 34,000, it belonged nonetheless to the Great Imperium, for the people who lived there were Arkonide descendants and had never forgotten that they were Arkonides. Their loyalty to the Imperium was proverbial; their contacts with Arkon 3 were so close they could not be any closer.

Speeding along at 85% SPEOL, the *Tigris* shot through the solar system, passed at length the relay station on Pluto and then plunged into the gulf between the stars.

Rarely had a ship been sent out from Earth with such precise orders as the *Tigris*, which was clearly identifiable as a Terran trade vessel.

The vast storerooms were filled to the limits with goods that were already impatiently awaited in the Tatlira system. Hypercom messages from Terran space freighters to Terran trade offices on alien worlds—inquiries and messages for relay between solar freighters underway—all these had been inconspicuously in progress for 3 days and whoever was listening in from the 'other' side saw in the last transmission of the freighter *Eugenio*, which stated that the *Tigris* would arrive on 18 June 2042, only a typical commercial message.

'Listening in' on hypercom traffic was as common as ever. The Galactic Traders listened in on all frequencies with a thousand ears. Arkon listened in from Globular Cluster M-13 or from its advanced bases on various worlds. And the Solar Imperium listened too. No one, it seemed, wanted to be caught unawares by some new development.

Maj. Clyde Ostal grinned as he listened to the last hypercom message of the *Eugenio*.

With that, Order 17 was carried out. Now he could go on to the next.

Order 18 read: Undertake Transition 1 & 2 only with the extra device. Shut off ship's Positronicon. Shut off data & storage banks. Check out 3 times! Inspecting equipment at 10 minute intervals:

Maj. Clyde Ostal

Lt. S. Seegers

Lt. Peter H. Hasting

The 'extra device' had been specially constructed for the 2 first transitions of the *Tigris* and in reality was nothing more than a small positronicon. It had been programmed to carry the trade vessel safely through 2 hytrans from one determined point in space to another 1,375 light-years away.

The small crew of the spacesphere experienced the unpleasant shock of transition twice. As the last man in the control room recovered, they all looked to the panorama screen, which offered them a view of an alien sky.

The extra device went into action once more. Within a few seconds it had calculated the coördinates of the trade vessel's new position to the 5th decimal place and, comparing the result with Order 19, Maj. Ostal found the two in agreement.

Now Order 20 waited to be carried out.

In Cabin 8, the alarm clock rang out in 2 short bursts, then 1 long. 4 men had been waiting for the signal. They hurriedly left their cabin and headed for the control room. There they wordlessly began the work of detaching the heavy extra device from the ship's up-to-now idle positronicon and removing all traces of any evidence that an auxiliary unit had ever been coupled to it.

They were still busy with the last of the labour when a work robot lumbered in and waited for orders to carry the extra device away.

Its steel limbs did not even strain as it lifted the unit, which weighed at least 150 kilos, and left the control room with it.

The robot was expected at Hatch B. The inner hatch door opened up, the robot stepped into the airlock and then the door closed behind it again.

Maj. Clyde Ostal and 3 officers watched the panorama screen. Suddenly a square object appeared on it, floating through space past the ship—the extra device which the work robot had thrown out.

During the next few minutes Ostal turned off one *Tigris* defence field after another. The extra device floated farther and farther away at a constant speed.

Lt. S. Seegers switched on his microphone and called the disintegrator crew. "Open fire on floating object!"

3 seconds later all men in the control room had to briefly shut their eyes to avoid being blinded by the sudden glare on the screen. The extra device had vanished in a cascade of rapid atomic destruction.

Nothing more remained to hint that the *Tigris* had come to this point in space with the help of a rather expensive technical trick.

Order 21, the next to last, remained now.

Maj. Clyde Ostal called up the Com Centre of his ship. "Contact our settlement on Goszul's Planet in the Tatlira System and tell our people there that in 3 hours & 10 minutes the freighter *Tigris* out of Terrania will be landing. Transmit the message over the scrambler and use the normal merchant code.

Over."

The Solar Imperium had known for some weeks that the Springers could now not only decipher the Terran merchant code but also reconstruct scrambled messages.

"Lt. Hasting?" Maj. Clyde Ostal turned and gave him the list of orders 1 through 22. "Annihilation of the equipment as ordered. You'll be responsible to me if even some ashes are left over!"

Clyde Ostal's face, which usually was inflexible and displayed no feelings, was now open and expressive. He, the 45-year-old commander of the operation, was letting his men perceive that they were nearing a decisive point.

"Transition to the Tatlira System!" he ordered. But a mocking smile suddenly played around his mouth. Over on his right, 2 officers were feeding the ship's positronicon the new data. Not only the coordinates of the ship's current position were necessary to insure a flawless transition but also the energy values calculated by the positronicon as being essential for reaching Tatlira by way of hyperspace. Hyperspace, of course, was that 'in-between' space which could be comprehended only mathematically.

Although the huge computer aboard the *Tigris* had been completely misprogrammed by Earthly scientists after hours of team effort, it operated in spite of the falsified data just as Marshall Mercant and the scientists had hoped it would.

Daring a hypertrans with utterly garbled programming and maybe 1/10th of correct data, and still feeling confident of coming out all right even in 'the wrong place in space', was not simply light-headed recklessness on the part of the *Tigris* crew. They were confident that the scientists on Perry Rhodan's staff had known what they were doing.

"Transition in 10 minutes!" announced the vocoder of the positronicon chronometer, then began the countdown.

At X minus 5 minutes, Clyde Ostal called up the Com Centre again. "All clear... is the message ready to send in the automatic transmitter? Are the scrambler and distorter units ready to go?"

"Yes, Major. The text of the message is uncoded, as ordered!" The officer on duty at the transmitter wanted to emphasize once more that the procedure was an unusual one. Uncoded hypercom messages were a rarity.

The last machinery in the transition sequence switched on. All the energy stations were in operation as well as all the transformers. On the control panel in front of Ostal one instrument light after another lit up in bright green, signifying 'Go'. The major did not concentrate unduly on what was happening before him: Arkonide hypno-training had so ingrained the intricacies of piloting a starship in him that he was hardly capable of a wrong move.

X minus 1...

At zero the *Tigris* sliced into hyperspace in a burst of unimaginable energy.

The image on the vidscreen of 10,000 near and far stars shining coldly in the void seemed to fly apart—and every man on board the spacesphere ceased to exist, as well. Although hyperspace did not take a man's life away from him, it did take away the usual form of his existence.

And then it was all over. The transition had taken place in an amount of time that could not even be measured as time because during that 'time' it had been in a continuum where the factor of 'time' had no validity.

Moaning, the 33 men who had sprung with the *Tigris* tried to recover from the shock of transition. Fortunately the effects of the shock were short-lived and the reality of their new situation forced them to their senses with a jolt.

Not one light-hour away, directly in the ship's path, shone a small, yellowish star. The Terran freighter continued towards it at a velocity 90% of light.

Every officer in the control room was feverish with tension. Everyone knew that the *Tigris* had not emerged from hyperspace in the Tatlira System but rather in the Naral System, 4,536 light-years from Earth.

The 3rd planet, Ekhas, the only one of altogether 8 planets which was inhabited, was their destination.

The energy stations, energy storage banks, transitional forcefields and the transformers, all shut down one by one. Finally the structocomp, which had brought the merchant ship through a leap of more than 4,500 light-years, turned off.

In the control room a new counting-off had begun, announcing without interruption the time that had elapsed since the re-emergence of the *Tigris* into normal space.

2 men sat at the radarscope, concentrating their entire attention on the equipment.

"3 minutes and 1 second," announced the posichron (positronichronometer).

No human in the control room spoke. No calls came in over the intercom. Each of the 33 men aboard knew that the first 10 minutes after leaving hyperspace could be of decisive importance.

"4 minutes and 30 seconds," droned the chronometer.

At 4 minutes and 38 seconds, Lt. Manteau called from the radarscope. "Our ship's been spotted—we're right in the middle of a radar beam!"

The officer in the Com Centre had been listening over the intercom, as he had been instructed. In the next moment he sent off a hypercom message by way of the scrambler.

The message was short, consisting of only 2 words: "Ship spotted". The scrambler had compressed those 2 words into an impulse 1/5,000th of their original length. The officer sending out the message tried to make out the typical curve the 2 words would make on the oscillograph but he was not even able to see a momentary flash.

The Com officer rubbed his hands together in satisfaction. Everything in his department had gone smoothly. He just hoped everything else would go equally well.

3 sizeable structural shocks were registered in the immediate area by the *Tigris*. A few minutes later 3 tiny points weakly reflecting the light of Naral appeared on the screen, evidently coming from the nearby star system.

Maj. Ostal called the Com Centre on his microphone. "Have they hailed us yet?"

"No, Major."

"Then try to call them on the Arkonide trade-frequency. The usual message, you know..."

The com officer acted immediately. Broadcasting in Intercosmo, he announced the ship's name, class, homeport, destination and so forth. As destination he gave the Tatlira system, giving the impression that the crew of the *Tigris* did not know they were not in the Tatlira system.

Now he was nothing more than a crewmember of a harmless Terran freighter—certainly not a trained agent of Solar Defence. He did not find the role hard to play and when the demand came thundering from 1 of the 3 oncoming spacers for the *Tigris* to reduce its speed, he began to stutter over the radio so well, and to choose his words so appropriately for the situation, that his colleague with silent gestures ordered him to get his play-acting over with as fast as possible.

In the control room the loudspeaker carried both query and reply. Maj. Clyde Ostal's amusement showed on his face. It was good that no one aboard the 3 Arkonide battlespacers could see him at this moment.

"Yes sir, Commander... Radio silence, complete radio silence. But if I may ask..."

The com officer of the *Tigris* could not ask.

The commander of the Arkonide battleships was a rabid fighter over the radio, threatening attack with all weapons and total destruction of the Terran merchant vessel.

Maj. Ostal then ordered the com officer: "Put me on the transmission!"

The screen in front of him flickered and then formed the image of a grim-looking Arkonide commander.

"Clyde Ostal, Captain of the merchant ship *Tigris* ..." Ostal began.

The arrogant-looking Arkonide made an imperious gesture. "Turn off your defence screens. I'm bringing my ship alongside. As soon as you observe that a boarding party wishes to enter your ship you are to open the main hatch. End of transmission!"

With that the first conversation between the three 300-meter Arkonide spacespheres and the small *Tigris* was at an end.

"Alright," said Ostal calmly, "these gentlemen are going to have their way!" But a slight undertone in his voice promised nothing pleasant. Then, over the connection to the Com Centre, the Major asked: "Have you been listening in? If yes, then don't make any permanent recordings of the conversation we just had, and erase temporary tapes. I want the Arkonides to think we're really stupid."

"1 of the 3 ships is transmitting on the Robot Braids frequency, Major. The text of the message has been coded, scrambled and speeded up. The connection has been in existence ever since I told them our destination was the Tatlira System."

Ostal smiled wanly. The Arkonides had fallen for the ruse immediately but it bothered him that they would act so hostile towards a Terran spaceship.

Perry Rhodan and the Robot Brain were officially still allies.

Lt. Peter H. Hasting reported quietly. "The boarding party is floating towards us. They're bringing battle robots with them!"

"The way things have been going, I'm not surprised." Ostal was not to be shaken out of his calm. If this new development had not been anticipated, either, by the same token it would not prevent him from carrying out the mission Perry Rhodan had given him.

An unruffled and unshocked security officer called in from the main hatch. "10 Arkonides and 15 battle robots on board, sir!"

At the same moment a report came in from the Com Centre: "The exchange on the Robot Regent wavelength had just terminated. The length of the discussion was 14 minutes!"

Clyde Ostal glanced meaningfully at Hasting. The young lieutenant, who had already proved himself in a number of dangerous missions, nodded slightly from his post at the positronicon. He quietly rested his hand on the *Erase* switch that was connected to the *Spring Coordinate* section of the memory banks. However, the officers in the control room well knew that pulling the Erase switch would not completely destroy that important data within the positronicon as a whole. Despite the erasure of the central storage bank, the hytrans coördinates could be calculated with data taken from other memory centres—but the work would take a goodly amount of time.

The heavy control room door opened automatically.

Lt. Hasting of the Solar Defence, now posing as a merchant marine with the rank of lieutenant aboard the *Tigris*, calmly pulled the Erase switch. A yellow light flickered brightly, impossible to overlook.

"Halt! Let that go!" shouted the first Arkonide to enter the control room, seeing what Hasting was doing.

"Alright," said Hasting, stepping back from the positronicon control panel. He smiled ironically. "But you're a little late!"

A minute later all the officers in the control room and the Com Centre were out of work. They had been crowded into a corner and guarded by battle robots while the Arkonides took over the *Tigris*.

The Arkonide officer whose face Ostal had already seen on the vidscreen suddenly asked: "Who is the captain here?"

Clyde Ostal stepped forward. "I am."

"Did you give an order to erase the hytrans coördinates?"

"Of course!" Ostal yelled angrily, finding he did not have to playact his rage now. "You were acting like pirates not Arkonides!"

"We are Ekhonides, Terran, and I am commander of the Arkonide battlefleet stationed on Ekhas." If the Ekhonide, a tall proud man who looked about 40 in Terran years, had hoped to make an impression with his statement, he was disappointed.

And we are Terrans, Ekhonide, and I'm a captain of Perry Rhodan's! Perry Rhodan will issue a protest to the Robot Regent on Arkon 3 and you will have to answer to the Regent personally for boarding a Terran vessel with engine trouble in such a high-handed fashion!"

Another Ekhonide came out of the Com Centre and whispered a few words to his commander, who grinned approvingly and looked back at Clyde Ostal, even more arrogant than before.

"Weren't you on your way to the Tatlira System, Terran?" he asked mockingly.

Ostal played the unsuspecting innocent. "I don't understand this at all. Where do you get the nerve and the impudence to operate with your battlefleet right in front of Goszul's Planet? You're Ekhonides, you say? Ekhonides...? But the Ekhonides inhabit the 3rd planet of the Naral System and..."

"That is correct!" the overbearing commander interrupted. "That's why your Perry Rhodan doesn't interest us in the least! Because you are not in the Tatlira System—your misspelling brought you all the way into the Naral System. Do you think your Rhodan would look for you *here*? We Ekhonides don't think so. Now go back with your men!"

Wordlessly, Clyde Ostal followed the order. He did not concern himself over the tight, bitter faces of his men. They were playing their parts just as much as he was playing his.

Then they watched unconcerned as 5 Ekhonides put the *Tigris* back on course. 1 of the 5 turned out to be familiar with the English language and knew all the written and spoken terms having to do with spaceflight.

Terran spaceships, in principle modelled after Arkonide spacers, had retained the practical spherical form. When, 2 hours of flying time later, the *Tigris* landed along with the 3 ships of the Arkonide fleet at the Ent-Than's spaceport, it looked as though a mixed squadron were returning from a patrol flight.

Maj. Clyde Ostal and his officers had seen on the panorama screen what a large city Ent-Than was and that on the spaceport field, which curved halfway around the city boundary like a vast crescent, ships were taking off and landing continuously.

Then after landing, the 33 Terrans were marched across the giant spaceport plaza. Naral, listed on the charts as a small yellow star, seemed from the surface of the planet Ekhas just as large as the Earth's own sun.

A cloudless blue sky vaulted over this world, which had been settled by Arkonides for more than 10,000 years. If during the passage of millenniums they had become also known as Ekhonides they had remained Arkonides at heart—but healthy and enterprising Arkonides.

The Terrans were marched for a distance of 5 kilometres. For over an hour they had to endure scornful looks, mocking remarks and undisguised contempt.

As they came to the spaceport's huge reception and administration building, they were crammed into a vehicle designed to carry just 15 men.

Clyde Ostal protested. An Ekhonide with an unknown rank insignia on his chest listened to Ostal's protest with an expression of arrogant scorn on his face, then asked contemptuously: "So what do you want me to do about it? You're nothing but a Terran."

Maj. Clyde Ostal felt the blood rushing into his face but he controlled himself. He drew his head back and said calmly in the most fluent Arkonese: "How right you are, Ekhonide! I'm a Terran, not a degenerate Arkonide or arrogant Ekhonide, and for that I thank all my lucky stars!"

Ostal turned abruptly around and left the confused Ekhonide little suspecting he would see him again the next day, and pressed himself in with his 32 men in the transport vehicle.

Guard vehicles studded with weaponry accompanied the transport on both sides. Escape was impossible. The Terrans were taken deeper and deeper into the sea of houses of Ent-Than. The column finally drew up in front of a huge skyscraper hotel. Star Of Arkon read the sign in Arkonese.

But the hotel had a shady side. 1/5th of the giant building, that portion 800 meters high, was a prison.

A special antigravity lift brought them up to a point 3 feet in front of a transparent barrier of forcefields. Lt. Hasting did not understand the warning a robot gave him and fell against the forcefield, breaking his arm.

He was immediately separated from his comrades. Then the barrier disappeared and the 32 remaining members of the *Tigris* crew were marched into the prison of Ent-Than.

3/ PROSPECT: BRAINLASH

Even as the crew of the *Tigris* was still on the way to the prison, which like the hotel in the same building bore the name Star of Arkon, the planetary security service of Ekhas had taken 2 dozen of its best specialists off their jobs and brought them to the Terran spaceship.

There, these men met 3 communications scientists.

The specialists assigned to the hypercom equipment of the *Tigris* were instructed to carry out their investigations with all possible care and accuracy for they were to determine whether or not the *Tigris* had been able to transmit a call for help to its home solar system which eluded Ekhonide surveillance of the hypercom frequencies.

In the control room, 8 specialists busied themselves with the ship's positronicon while others examined the controls of the structural compensator. The latter group then proceeded to that part of the ship where the actual structocomp machinery itself stood, that huge device which up to now had prevented springs through hyperspace from being detected and measured.

Even the radar was not ignored: the remaining 2 Ekhonides of the 2 dozen, however, went through the paperwork. They studied the shipping manifests and the waybills and went carefully over the flight orders. The English language and its specialized terms were no problem to them: hypno-training had allowed them to learn this language as well as their mother tongue.

The 3 Ekhonides detailed to inspect the Terran ship's engines quickly finished their work and reported back to Egg-Or, who was leading the operation himself.

"The engines operated without any trouble, Lord. There must be another reason for the misspring. We've also looked over the ship's energy reservoirs: there's enough energy on hand for 100 hytrans. That's not even taking into consideration the potential of the generators, which by the way are superior to those of Arkonide construction—better, more powerful, yet fundamentally simpler. We—"

Egg-Or, the Ekhonide to whom Maj. Ostal had protested at the vast spaceport administration building about the undignified treatment accorded his men, gestured for silence. "Save your explanations and findings for the written report—and don't forget to make it in octuplicate. Thank you."

Then his pocket communicator sounded. Planetary security headquarters for Ekhas was calling him to report that according to the department assigned to surveillance over all electronic communications in the Naral System, examination of the information stored in the memory banks of the Terran ship's positronicon had revealed the Terrans had sent no distress call or any other messages since reemerging into the normal space-time continuum.

Egg-Or did not even bother to thank his informant for the report. It was not certain enough for him. He required 100% certainty—had the *Tigris* called for help or had its crew been too surprised by the events?—and that certainty could be supplied only by examination of the memory storage units in the Terran hypercom installation.

The memory centre was coupled with the hypercom just behind the microphone and the loudspeaker; beyond them were connected the encoder and the scrambler. The 3 Ekhonide specialists did not reach what should have been an obvious conclusion: that through a simple flick of a switch the encoder and scrambler could be turned on before the hypercom's storage bank and microphone-loudspeaker systems. Nevertheless they discovered something.

It could not be perceived acoustically; and even with the help of their optical-positronic equipment they were unable to make visible the curve that is typical of a hypercom transmission. Only the Lar Detector, a device that functioned rather like a potentiometer, showed that a maximum use of energy, enduring for an improbably brief instant in time, had taken place in the recent past.

Again the Lar Detector registered the effect but the specialists looked at each other in silence. "Without importance," said the oldest at length.

"Perhaps this is the up-to-now inexplicable Echo Effect," ventured the youngest so doubtfully that Egg-Or noticed and entered into the discussion. He did not know what an Echo Effect was, at least as far as the hypercom was concerned.

The youngest of the 3 Ekhonide experts explained it briefly: "According to the theory, the Echo Effect should result when 2 hypercoms at different locations have their receivers tuned to the same wavelength. When one hypercom is transmitting, the 2nd will echo the 1st and rebroadcast fragments of the transmission at full power. However, this is only theory and has never been proven."

Egg-Or was not ready to take the slightest risk. "Alright then, take this hypercom unit apart and examine every component as minutely as possible..."

He was interrupted. The youngest specialist claimed to have found out now why the Lar Detector had indicated a maximum use of energy. "Excuse me, sir... Please take a look for yourself..." And then he launched into a long-winded explanation that concluded by saying that the *Tigris* had transmitted no hypercom message since emerging into normal space for the last time.

8 hours later, Egg-Or made his report to General Sutokk, commander of the Arkonide fleet stationed on Ekhas.

Sutokk, who to Clyde Ostal had been most arrogant during the boarding operation, nodded affably to Egg-Or. "So I can without hesitation report to the Robot Regent that we are running no danger of being disturbed by Perry Rhodan if we hold onto the ship and its crew?"

Egg-Or bowed to the General and with a confident voice assured him: "General, our specialists are even now working out the data that will give us the exact galactic position of the Earth. I can't report unqualified success in that important matter yet, but in all other points I can safely say to you that your capture of the *Tigris* has not endangered us in the slightest."

"The cooperation between the Ekhonide planetary defence and the fleet of the Regent of Arkon has never been as good as it is now," Sutokk declared, then asked pressingly: "How long will it take your scientists to figure out the Earth's galactic coordinates from the data in the Terran positronicon's memory banks? Egg-Or, you know as well as I do that the Robot Regent wants that question answered as soon as possible. You remember my last hypercom conversation with the Regent, of course... so when can we have it, Egg-Or?"

"In 3 days at the earliest, General..."

"Have you gone mad? The Robot Regent would tear my commander's stripes off personally if I sent a message to it like that. And it wouldn't treat you any more kindly either, *Ex* -Security Chief Egg-Or!"

Now Egg-Or demonstrated that he had a backbone. "Our scientists aren't magicians, General. A positronic computer is a little more complicated than an adding machine. At the moment our 3 largest positronicons are busy sorting out the data contained in the Terran memory banks and calculating from it. Don't forget, General, that these calculations are extremely difficult since none of the 3 spatial coordinates nor the time constant are known to us..."

"What nonsense, Egg-Or!" the General interrupted. "The time constant is immutable and doesn't change..."

"But it becomes subject to change with every transition into hyperspace," Egg-Or retorted in a self-assured voice. "Anyway, we have learned that the *Tigris* had tried to reach the Tatlira System directly from Terra in a single spring. Isn't that already an important piece of information? But we haven't found out yet why the *Tigris* made such a crucial error in springing... General?" Egg-Or had suddenly noticed that Sutokk was staring pensively at him.

"Egg-Or, I just had a terrible thought. What if this misspring of the *Tigris* was nothing more than a ruse Rhodan set up to deceive the Regent? And if Rhodan is even now lurking on the edges of our system somewhere..."

"General," Egg-Or interrupted, smiling, "have you forgotten your new structocomp-sensor on board your ship? That piece of equipment will register any transition, even one made under the cover of one of Rhodan's structocomps. And may I inform you that our galactic surveillance operation had cracked the Terran merchant code again and that the freight run of the *Tigris* to Goszul's Planet in the Tatlira System has been known to us for days? If you like, I can supply all the relevant information for your examination."

Gen. Sutokk was still not completely reassured. Pointedly he asked the head of Ekhonide defence: "Are

you absolutely certain that the *Tigris* did not deliberately misspring and that this is not a decoy operation of Rhodan's? You don't have to give me an answer now, Egg-Or. Just give the freighter captain a brainwash and if it turns out all my fears were ungrounded, I'll even be willing to call the Robot Regent and tell it that we'll need 3 days to find out the galactic coordinates of Rhodan's solar system."

Egg-Or shook his head. "No brainwashing, General. It violates our laws..."

"The 88 devils of the 8 stars can take those laws and—!"

"No, General, I would even refuse a direct order from the Regent on this point!"

The general smiled sarcastically at him. "As if you had any other scruples! Turn the crew of the *Tigris* over to me, Egg-Or."

"Not now, General! Not one man! Deport them, disperse them all over the Empire so that no one will ever find them again... all right, why not? But to make a man a mental cripple, which is always the result of a brainwash... No General! And that's my last word on this subject!" Egg-Or no longer had a drop of blood in his face. He felt his knees tremble but he knew that it was the only answer he could give and still be able to live with himself.

"In a few minutes I will have a very interesting little talk with the Regent," Sutokk threatened and the look in his eyes showed that he meant to carry his threat out.

At the same moment Egg-Or had switched on his pockom (pocket communicator). "Egg-Or here," he announced. "Message to Star Of Arkon, top priority. Not one of the incarcerated Terrans is to be..."

He got no farther. A stammer of words from the small but loud receiver interrupted him. "Sir... all 33 Terrans have broken out! The alarm just came in from the Star Of Arkon...!"

Egg-Or turned the communicator off and he and Sutokk stared at each other.

The mental image of each was the same: they thought of the top 5th of the towering hotel skyscraper where the prison was located. Both asked themselves how anyone could escape from that prison? Up to this day not one escape attempt had ever succeeded!

"All 33...!" Egg-Or whispered.

Then he heard Sutokk's hard laughter. "It's all turning out for the best, after all," Sutokk said indolently. "Don't let your conscience bother you, Egg-Or. The chances are that at least some of these escapees will be caught by Arkonide Fleet personnel. Then I'll be able to have one or more of the Terrans brainwashed. Egg-Or, I thank you heartily for your visit to the headquarters of the Regent's fleet stationed on Ekhas Good day..."

Egg-Or was anything but calm. Anger flashed in his eyes. "General," he said sharply, "this morning I insulted a Terran when we were bringing them to the prison. He did not meekly accept the insult without a word but in his reply he thanked whatever gods Terrans believe in that he was not born an Ekhonide. And General, you have just given me the proof that *it's* possible for some one not to be proud of being an Ekhonide... Brainwashing, General! Are we and the Arkonide Imperium so weak and feeble that we must resort to the foulest and most contemptible means of brute force available? Isn't it enough already that the Regent thinks only in numbers and treats us like ciphers? We—"

"Egg-Or, the Regent has instructed us to find out once and for all where Rhodan's home world is located and I intend to carry that mission out! How I do it is something you can leave to me and the fleet. What you and your organization do is a matter that does not interest me in the least. What does interest me is whether or not Rhodan is lying in wait near our solar system."

The tension between the 2 men had ebbed somewhat.

Egg-Or declared positively: "Rhodan *isnot* anywhere in the neighbourhood of our solar system! The *Tigris* missprang and nothing else!"

4/ PIRITICAL POSITRONICON

Perry Rhodan was somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Naral System!

As specified in Order 22 for the *Tigris* , Maj. Clyde Ostal had half an hour at his disposal in which to make the decisive 'misspring'.

In Terrania, capital city of the Solar Imperium and site of the largest spaceport in the solar system, time ran inevitably towards the hour given in Order 22.

The engines of the *Lotus* , a light cruiser in the Solar Spacefleet, ran at 10% capacity. The hatches of the spacesphere were still open and all the ramps had been extended out from between the massive telescopic legs. The thundering roar emanating from the equatorial rim was a familiar sound to the men who worked at the spaceport day in and day out and hardly anyone even looked up when such a ship took off. Only the liftoff of a superbattleship of 1500 meters diameter, an incredible sight, attracted any attention. When a *Titan* -class starship blasted into the sky, that was an unforgettable experience for anyone.

But who was interested if the *Lotus* were ready for taking off? Only a few knew that Perry Rhodan had made it his flagship. Another factor that made the *Lotus* even more unique among the ships of the Terran spacefleet was known only to Perry Rhodan and a few hundred Swoons whose trustworthiness and silence was already proverbial. It had been those 'Pickle-people' who had irritated Reginald Bell because he, like all other men, was simply not able to see their microscopic handiwork which they had installed in the *Lotus* .

Yet the crew of the *Lotus* was beginning to wonder about the coming mission for they had discovered that members of the secret Mutant Corps were aboard.

Tako Kakuta had not taken the normal way to his cabin: the Japanese had chosen to leave his quarters in Terrania by teleportation and materialized in Cabin 7 on C-Deck. He had returned to existence in a shimmering aura of light, carrying with him his pack of personal belongings and items necessary for the mission to come. He immediately began to unpack and stow his gear away.

His movements made the small, slender Oriental seem as harmless as a child. His boyish face only emphasized the impression and nothing about him hinted that this man was a first-class teleporter able to transport himself over almost any distance by nothing more than the strength of his will, no matter whether

he could actually see his goal or merely pictured it in his mind.

Like any other mortals Fellmer Lloyd and Kitai Ishibashi had to enter the ship by way of the hatch. Shortly after these 2 mutants came on board, Perry Rhodan himself arrived.

In the control room the commander wordlessly handed Rhodan the text of a hypercom message that had just been received. It came from the *Tigris* and announced its transition with landing to follow on Goszul's Planet in the Tatlira System.

"Thank you," said Perry Rhodan and shoved the message in his pocket. He sat down in the reserve seat next to the pilot. "We can take off now," he told the ship's commander. Then he turned his head, for his 3 mutants had made their appearance and were reporting in. Once again Perry Rhodan said "Thank you" and with that his 3 special agents were dismissed.

The officers in the control room were not surprised about anything anymore. Too often they had flown similar missions and again and again experienced the almost unbelievable precision with which all preparations were made.

The light cruiser *Lotus* took off. Powerful antigravity fields raised its weight ever higher into the sky and the engines roaring at 10% capacity in the equatorial rim increased their thrust.

However, the pull of gravity inside the spacesphere remained unchanged and not even inertia exerted any perceptible influence. Precisely calculated absorbers took up the pressure before the men aboard had a chance to feel it.

The *Lotus* had gone into action.

The 2nd part of a commando operation whose outcome no one could foresee began.

But Perry Rhodan did not let himself be concerned, or at least outwardly. His calm influenced everyone in the control room.

The *Lotus* reached the orbit of Pluto on schedule. A short message to the relay station on Pluto, a brief reply and at the same time clearance for the voyage into interstellar space, were the last contacts with the home solar system.

The *Lotus* approached the speed of light with ever-increasing speed and with that the moment of transition came closer.

At X minus 2 minutes, the commander of the *Lotus* looked at Rhodan. "Sir," he began, "is it true what the rumours say that the Arkonides have some new kind of sensing device that can detect hypersprings despite our structocomps?"

Rhodan smiled slightly. "The rumour is true, alright, and if you're astounded by my answer, I'm just as astounded that you've heard about this matter."

That was a clear request from Rhodan to explain the source of his knowledge. "I heard it somewhere, sir... and on my honour I don't know who told me."

Perry Rhodan's gaze became stern. "I believe you," he said after a short pause, "but I think that when we get back you ought to go see Allan D. Mercant and tell him about this."

10 seconds later the *Lotus* went into transition, crossing 4,535 light-years in a single spring, re-emerging into normal space about 1 light-year from the Naral System.

In the next 18 minutes nothing happened except that the *Lotus* had braked almost completely and was virtually standing still in space.

Suddenly the structure sensor showed a continuum disturbance at a distance of 1 light-year: shortly thereafter 3 further disturbances followed at the same distance and in the same direction as the first.

The intercom sounded and the Corn Centre reported: "Hypercom message from the *Tigris* received under encoder and scrambler. Text of the message: Ship spotted!"

Perry Rhodan turned his head to the commander. "Order B/3!"

Almost in the same breath the commander called out: "Carry out prepared transition!"

The short transition brought the *Tigris* some 20 light-days closer to the Naral System. When all the other crewmembers were still shaking off the effects of the transition shock, Perry Rhodan sat almost unaffected in the reserve seat and looked almost impassively in the direction of the structure-sensor. Inwardly he fought to hold down his excitement.

He was the only one aboard who knew what the next few minutes meant for the Solar Imperium.

When the 5th minute went by, Rhodan told himself that he had spent long enough waiting for something that was not going to happen.

The inhuman, grinding tension fell away from him. He felt like he was coming back to life and the 2 officers at the structure-sensor discreetly wiped the sweat from their foreheads.

"The *Lotus* hasn't been spotted...!"

And Perry Rhodan smiled, amused at being stared at from all sides. Some faces were questioning, others were completely at a loss.

He was only human and he needed to unwind from tension, to relax like any other human. The questioning faces and the uncomprehending expressions were *his* relaxation, and that relaxation gave him fresh strength to replace that lost in answering the question "Is there a means to render the Arkonide sensing device inoperable?"

And there was a means!

It had just passed its final test: the *Lotus* had not been detected!

The new device, the Frequency Damper, a counter-development to the Arkonide Compensator Detector, was the product of the Swoon technicians who earlier had voluntarily left their world to go with Perry Rhodan and begin a new life on Terra.

He had them and their skills to thank for the damper that neutralized the vibrations given off by the structocomp and thus effectively put a crimp in Arkonide plans to learn the position of the Earth with the help of their Compensator Detector.

"Yes, gentlemen," said Perry Rhodan, laughing heartily, "it is indeed a miracle that this ship was not detected after its 2 transitions. The *Tigris* was spotted in spite of its structocomp. Don't look at me with such disbelief. Perhaps Arkon does have a device that can detect and measure each and every hyperspring... but the *Lotus* is now out of its range, so to speak. This is the only Terran spaceship equipped with a frequency damper but I hope that in a month all Terran spacers will have such equipment. That's assuming, of course, that the Swoons can build so many auxiliary devices for the structocomps in so short a time."

"The pickle people?!" exclaimed the commander, using the expression that had been applied to the little technicians the first time man and Swoon had encountered one another.

"That's correct," said Perry Rhodan and his eyes were radiant with joy. "This swift development is something we owe entirely to our little friends."

Then a call from the Com Centre brought Perry Rhodan back to cold reality.

"Sir!" exclaimed the Com Officer, gasping out his alarming news. "At this time an Arkonide ship is transmitting over hypercom on the Robot Brain's frequency!"

"Are they using a scrambler and encoder system?" Rhodan demanded.

"Yes sir," the Com Officer answered. "We know how to unscramble the message and we can slow it down from its speeded-up version—which is how they're transmitting it—but the code is unknown to us!"

After considering for a moment, Rhodan ordered: "Feed the coded text to the positronicon and see what it can make of it!"

"They're still transmitting on the Regent frequency but we're giving the text we have already to the positronicon now, sir!"

Then, after 14 minutes, the hypercom exchange between an Arkonide ship and the Robot Regent was over. The large positronicon aboard the *Lotus* continued its attempt to find the key to the code but after 20 minutes the otherwise all but omniscient machine gave up. A small strip of tape fell into the receptacle—a request for more additional information.

"There's no point in it now," Rhodan decided and left the reserve seat. Bidding his men farewell, he went to the hatchway that separated the Com Centre and the control room from the rest of the spacer and walked across the broad A-Deck to his cabin.

The 14-minute exchange between an Arkonide spacer and the Robot Brain had given Rhodan more to think about than he had let on in the control room. Once more his suspicion, that the giant positronicon on Arkon 3, absolute ruler of the Great Imperium, had no scruples in its soulless logic against treason and deception, had almost become a certainty.

Rhodan thought of the mysterious Druufs, those powerful beings from the 2nd time-plane, who continually penetrated this dimension during overlappings of the 2 universes to abduct millions and billions of living creatures.

The Robot Brain had allied itself with him to combat this uncanny enemy and Rhodan had been named Commander-in-Chief over Arkon's gigantic spacefleet. However, he could exercise his authority only for

the fight against the Druufs and not for matters involving other interests.

Perry Rhodan smiled grimly. Once again he had been reminded that the friendship alliance between him and Arkon was nothing more than a temporary arrangement made necessary by a common enemy. Meanwhile, the mammoth positronicon was attempting unceasingly by any means no matter how foul to learn Earth's galactic position. Evidently it did not even hesitate to act like a pirate and capture a Terran ship that had erred in making a transition just to loot its memory banks for the Sol System's coördinates.

Shortly before the *Tigris* had taken off, Rhodan had given Maj. Clyde Ostal the order to contact the Terran trading outpost on Goszul's Planet, 3 hours after making the transition into the Naral System.

Now Perry Rhodan had to let those 3 hours tick by. When all but 20 minutes of the time period had elapsed, Rhodan called the control room over the intercom and told the commander: "Prepare for Order B/7, Commander. Carry out only when I specifically tell you to!"

Order B/7 concerned a new transition which would bring the *Lotus* into the welter of stars in the centre of the Milky Way.

Rhodan's choice of a new destination had been carefully thought out: it was far from all travelled routes and, moreover, it would be avoided by even the bravest Arkonides like the plague.

The region was 100 light-years in diameter, dominated by 4 monstrous, invisible and energy-rich radio stars which possessed magnetic fields of unimaginable intensity as well—making navigation in this sector almost impossible and paralysing hypercom traffic.

Perry Rhodan knew precisely which of the rumours about this place were correct and which were only legends old spacemen might swap. The first time he had been in the area had been with the *Titan* and on the other 2 occasions he had taken the *Drusus*. He had encountered improbable conditions that could be explained only by the magnetic fields of the radio stars which reached deep into space. However, this place in the universe lost all its terrors for someone who learned how to conduct himself there.

Rhodan's well-developed sense of time led him to glance at the chronometer. The 3rd hour was just coming to an end.

Order B/7 was to be carried out!

The universe seemed to explode in front of the *Lotus* and the ship disappeared, rematerialising in the same instant in the centre of the galaxy.

5 minutes later Rhodan was in the Com Centre. "Call the *Mab* 1, code word Arkon. You'll find the hypercom frequency listed in the printed wavelength guide. Bring the reply to my cabin."

Then he instructed that the mutants be sent to him. Even Tako Kakuta, the teleporter, arrived by the normal way.

Fellmer Lloyd, the muscular and dark-haired locator and telepath who could not only perceive brainwaves and analyse them but also sense other people's moods and feel oncoming danger far in advance, had a clumsy, ponderous look to him.

Quite the opposite was Kitai Ishibashi who had been a doctor and psychologist before joining Rhodan's mutant corps. He was tall, slender and perhaps fit the mould of an intellectual. As a suggestor he was all

but an indispensable member of the corps.

"Just a few minutes ago," said Rhodan, "I informed the galactic trader Mabdan that I'm waiting for him at the agreed-upon place. We will board his ship, the *Mab 1*, fly with it to the Naral System and land at the Ent-Than spaceport." Rhodan smiled a little as he looked at the suggestor and continued, "Ishibashi, you had better go talk to the commander of the *Lotus* right now and let him know how you plan to work. I'd rather not run any unnecessary risks on this mission, especially with the *Lotus* and its new frequency damper involved. You're the only one who can contact the ship and its commander from Ekhas—even though in only a suggestive fashion. Fill him in so that no one has to be unpleasantly surprised.

"The *Mab 1* will be alongside in an hour at most. We'll cross over in Springer spacesuits and we won't be taking any Terran equipment with us. Please check even your clothing over carefully with that in mind.

"The Ekhonides are Arkonides! If we never forget that, we'll never underestimate them."

Rhodan looked at his men thoughtfully. A vague disquiet was bothering him and several times his thoughts centred around Mabdan. That galactic trader was an agent for Earth like many others of his race.

Mabdan belonged to the agents who had worked longest for Rhodan but under one thin pretense or another he had managed to avoid the last 3 thought-probes by Terran telepaths. It was a matter of bad luck that Allan D. Mercant had to call on Mabdan, no one else being available, for the flight to Ekhas

The press of time which had affected the whole mission from the beginning had simply not allowed the Terrans to find a more trustworthy Springer than Mabdan.

Rhodan spoke to Fellmer Lloyd. "Check the Springer Mabdan's mind as soon as we step aboard. I have my suspicions, Lloyd!"

Soon the *Mab 1* was alongside the *Lotus*; Perry Rhodan and his 3 mutants floated in Springer spacesuits over to it. The make-up artist aboard the *Lotus* had produced his masterpiece: even Perry Rhodan would not have recognized himself in the mirror and he entered the hatch of the *Mab 1* as Alf Renning.

A young Springer received them with a broad smile. His Intercosmo, sprinkled liberally with slang, he invited them to come with him to his 'Master'.

Unsuspecting, the 4 Terrans entered the expansive cabin. Then Fellmer Lloyd telepathed his chief, *This isn't him! It's Mabdan 3!*

The number following the clan name indicated the rank of the Springer bearing it, and numbers up to 50 were not uncommon.

Mabdan 3 came towards them with a friendly expression on his face. He radiated calmness and trust. His invitation to sit down seemed hearty enough and Fellmer Lloyd could find nothing dangerous in the Springer's thoughts after examining them with the greatest concentration.

While the discussion turned around risk, danger and payments, and Perry Rhodan silently pushed a large sum of money to the Springer, Fellmer Lloyd perceived another set of thought emanations. They came from somewhere aboard the ship but they could not be clearly made out or identified.

Lloyd glanced innocently over at Kitai Ishibashi, who was just then relating some amusing space

anecdote. It brought Mabdan 3 to laughing but suddenly the Springer's laugh died away.

"What did you just say, Terran?" he demanded quickly and his face grew pale.

The tall, thin Oriental smiled his unfathomable smile. "Mabdan 3, I said. . ."

And then, grinning, the Springer had an impulse beamer in his hand.

Fellmer Lloyd desperately wondered why he hadn't sensed this coming while sitting directly across from the compactly built Springer with the carefully trimmed beard.

Lloyd felt no fear. The galactic trader had already passed up his only chance to kill anyone with the beamer by waiting too long. Kitai Ishibashi was already 'treating' him. Ever more strongly the slender Oriental forced Mabdan 3 under his will. He was confident of his success and overlooked the fact he had already ordered the Springer twice to lay the impulse beamer on the table.

But Mabdan 3 had no such intentions.

The malicious grin was still spread across his face. He opened his mouth to speak. Then an inexplicable flickering in the air frightened him and his fright became panic when the shortest of the Terrans materialized next to him. The Terran's hand shot out and knocked the beamer out of the Springer's grasp and then Mabdan 3 found himself at the mercy of a thermobeamer trained directly at him.

Tako Kakuta had reversed the situation with 1 short teleportation spring.

Fellmer Lloyd, who looked so clumsy, acted astonishingly fast. He swiftly disarmed the completely confused Mabdan 3 and threw a psychobeamer of the latest Arkonide model and a paralysers on the table.

In his panic Mabdan 3 did not notice Alf Renning giving his slim companion a brief but sharp glance. Concentrating with unusual strength, Ishibashi attempted to force his will on the Springer but to no avail. It was almost as if Mabdan 3 did not exist at all, for all the effect Ishibashi's efforts had.

"I'm not getting anywhere with him either," said Fellmer Lloyd in English. "I can't get a clear picture of his brainwave pattern and his emotional patterns have completely changed—I can't get a clear picture of them, either."

These words were directed to Perry Rhodan, who had not moved since the appearance of the impulse beamer. Only his eyes were moving, glancing from here to there. Now he fixed his gaze on the Springer once more. The galactic trader's eyes presented a riddle for him.

However, Rhodan did not have a chance to solve the riddle.

"There's danger coming from the deck!" Fellmer Lloyd warned, stepping behind Mabdan 3 and forcing the Springer's hands behind his back.

A moment later the commandeered weapons had been divided among the Terrans. Only Lloyd had not taken part: he had to concern himself with Mabdan 3 and continue his attempt to probe the Springer's thoughts.

"The danger is coming closer!" he signalled Rhodan and his comrades. "2 men. They're coming for us!"

Fellmer Lloyd was not able to penetrate the Springer's thoughts. Something was protecting them from his probing mind.

The door opened slowly and the faces of the 2 entering Springers went white when they saw the 3 weapons aimed at them. Without waiting to be told they dropped their psychobeamers.

"Ishibashi..." Rhodan only pronounced his name as he ordered with an imperious movement of his head for the Springers to enter the cabin completely. The suggestor was already active at this time and Mabdan 3 thought he was dreaming when he saw the inexplicable change in attitude of his 2 shipmates who suddenly smiled at the Terrans, spoke in a friendly manner to them and without being asked sat down and made themselves comfortable.

"Mabdan 3 has been blocked, men!" Rhodan said without further commentary.

Kitai Ishibashi, the most intelligent of the 3 mutants, understood at once what Rhodan meant.

That part of Operation Naral System involving the active participation of Springer Agent Mabdan 1 had been betrayed. And in that case the Robot Brain's defensive section must have reacted instantly.

In the place of Mabdan 1, Terran agent, and ignoring the order of Springer ranking, Mabdan 3 had been prepared.

A hypnotic block lay upon the Springer's mind and Kitai Ishibashi was unable to remove it. The Oriental's suggestive power was psychic in origin whereas Mabdan 3's blockade was the work of an Arkonide hypno-machine which, in its soulless fulfilment of its assigned task, did not hesitate to mercilessly distort the Springer's brainwave pattern.

Mabdan 3 did not understand that he would soon go insane unless Rhodan's mutants soon found a way to remove the artificial hypnoblock.

Fellmer Lloyd, still trying to understand what Rhodan had said, was startled. Once again he had sensed a strange brainwave pattern, and again only vaguely.

He began to search.

There it was again. In a sort of trance, he described to Tako Kakuta the layout of the cabin from which the strange brainwave pattern came.

Perry Rhodan had no objection to Kakuta's teleportational spring.

The 2 Springers were still under the power of Ishibashi and he gave them the order not to look at what happened in the cabin.

The slender teleporter disappeared in a flickering light in the air from Mabdan 3's cabin. Mabdan 3 himself thought of ghosts and devils while his 2 men sat harmlessly in a corner and chatted, taking no apparent notice of the odd goings on.

Now Lloyd entered into telepathic contact with Kakuta.

Kakuta had materialized in a small cabin at the end of the spacious deck and found an unconscious man

who had a surprising resemblance to Mabdan 3.

Fellmer Lloyd did not have to say anything. Perry Rhodan had tuned in himself. By way of their telepathic contact with Kakuta they witnessed along with him what was to be found in the small cabin, for under these favourable circumstances—Rhodan stood right next to Lloyd—Rhodan was able to receive Lloyd's thoughts.

I know about this poison, don't I? The Aras brew it, right? It's a time-stopping drug that reduces all bodily functions down to an absolute minimum. 4 breaths in 1 minute...

Then the telepathic contact between Fellmer Lloyd and Tako Kakuta broke off temporarily.

"Kakuta is to come back here and spring to the Com Centre with Ishibashi, Lloyd!" Rhodan ordered in English.

In the next instant the air behind Mabdan 3 flickered and the small, slender teleporter had returned.

Kitai Ishibashi stood next to Kakuta and waited for Rhodan's final instructions. "Transmit an emergency call to the *Lotus* using the equipment in the *Mab 1*'s Com Centre. The *Lotus* is to get as fast as possible, Alarm Level #1! They are to send over a commando team 10 men strong with a dozen battle robots!"

While Rhodan was still speaking, Kitai Ishibashi rested his hand on the slender teleporter's shoulder. He neither felt nor saw anything as the small man dematerialised with him and rematerialised at the same moment in the Com Centre of the cylinder ship.

Before the 3 Springers on duty in the Com Centre could turn around upon hearing the slight noise of the 2 Terrans materializing, Ishibashi employed his strongest suggestive powers on them.

"Let me sit down here for a minute, old friend!" Kakuta told the Springer at the hypercom transmitter.

Without a word, the young galactic trader stood up and gave his seat to the Terran. His 2 comrades saw nothing peculiar about it—and as Tako Kakuta sent his message, they sat off by themselves, deep in conversation and laughing over some joke.

Shortly thereafter, the Springers were back on communications duty. They had no memory of any visitors to the Com Centre. However, instead of leaving gaping holes in their minds, Ishibashi had filled the gaps with his suggestive power, and his implanted memories had become reality for the Springers.

Mabdan 3, still sitting defenceless in his seat, no longer followed the comings and goings behind his back. Whatever the Terrans were discussing in their own language remained a mystery to him.

Kakuta teleported into the cabin of the unconscious Springer for the 2nd time. He was to attempt to find out more about the man.

"Where is Mabdan 2?" Rhodan demanded sharply of Mabdan 3. "We've found the clan chieftain unconscious in a small cabin... your clan is going to wonder in a few days why you are playing the role of your patriarch. And then, my friend, I think you'll have some very unpleasant minutes ahead of you. Now, where is Mabdan 2, Springer?"

Perry Rhodan's warning made no impression on the defenceless man. Kitai Ishibashi told his chief as much. "It's not getting through to him at all, sir. I have—"

"Ah, Perry Rhodan!" exclaimed the Springer, his face distorted.

Kitai Ishibashi had made the inexcusable error of addressing Rhodan with the word 'sir'. He telepathed Kakuta, hoping that setting the teleporter into immediate action would at least halfway make up for his mistake. *Kakuta, spring at once into the Com Centre! Look to see if there isn't a 2nd hypercom unit that's transmitting the conversation here in the cabin. Hurry Kakuta!*

In that moment, Perry Rhodan, the Administrator of the Solar Imperium, became conscious when Mabdan 3 cried out his name that the giant positronic brain on Arkon 3 knew only one goal: learning Earth's galactic position at any cost and by any means, and then eliminating the threat of Perry Rhodan and his Solar Imperium by making it into an Arkonide colony.

The Robot Regent had assembled all data that could possibly lead to the identification of Perry Rhodan and the English title 'sir' was one such identifying datum!

Rhodan's thoughts raced farther. It surprised him that Mabdan 3 had betrayed his discovery in such a stupid manner. At that point Fellmer Lloyd interrupted his consideration of the problem. "Sir, Mabdan 3's brainwave pattern... I've never seen anything like it, not even with insane persons..."

And then Fellmer Lloyd was interrupted, as well.

Kakuta appeared in a shimmering of air. His face was bruised and he was bleeding from the left temple. But he paid no attention to that. His report was more important to him now than his own life. "Every word, everything that was said here, was transmitted by a 2nd hypercom, transmitted on the Robot Regent frequency... up to 2 minutes ago. But not any more..." And the slender Oriental showed his thermobeamer to Perry Rhodan with an apologetic gesture. "I used this on the hypercom. But the damage has been done, there's nothing we can do about it now. I'm just surprised that Arkon hasn't sent a few dozen superbattleships out here already with a friendly invitation for us to come aboard..."

"I'm not at all surprised," said Perry Rhodan and there seemed to be laughter in his grey eyes. After all, he knew this part of the universe and its 4 invisible radio stars.

5/ THE STARHELL

The Ekhonide prison administration for the Star of Arkon had its own opinions about the matter of hygiene and so far had had good results, especially with newly arrived prisoners from outer space.

Processing the entry of each new prisoner was quickly accomplished with the help of positronic equipment but despite first class Ara methods disinfection took up a relatively large amount of time.

Maj. Clyde Ostal and his men went from one surprise to the next without any time to recover from the first.

Just now they were being sent to the 7th department; no one felt very much at ease about it. They were taken up by antigrav lift for a 'Viroscopic Examination'.

The Virospectroscopic Department was on the top floor of the huge skyscraper and took up a good third of that level.

6 Ekhonides armed with shock weapons brought them to the entrance. As in the 6 preceding medical departments, the guards remained outside while the Terrans went in.

Maj. Clyde Ostal waved him away hastily when Lt. S. Seeger wanted to talk to him. The Terrans were lined up 2 by 2 and Ostal was in front of Seeger. Then the entranceway was sealed off by a powerful energy screen. Maj. Ostal did not notice: a small sidedoor through which Ekhonide medics were coming and going attracted his attention.

Now he saw that the sidedoor was open again and that it was staying open longer than usual. An older Ekhonide stood in the doorway, calling something up above.

Up above... that was a moving walkway leading sharply upwards. Beyond it Ostal could see a narrow stripe of the blue, cloudless sky of Ekhas.

"Here comes Hasting," Ostal heard Lt. Seeger say.

At that moment the major understood that Hasting, who had broken his arm by falling against the energy barrier at the entrance to the prison, had been treated. He whispered sharply to Lt. Seeger: "Bring Hasting over here!"

They were still waiting in the large, long-stretching anteroom of the Virospectroscopic department. The walls and ceiling were coated with a white plastic substance and the room was lighted indirectly from all sides. The Ekhonides passing through the room on business stared at the Terrans as though they were strange animals.

Maj. Clyde Ostal glanced at the small sidedoor. It was still open and the old Ekhonide was still standing in the doorway. The tiny bit of cloudless blue Ekhonide sky was still visible, too.

And wasn't that the typical noise of an Arkonide airtaxi starting up, coming through the open doorway?

Maj. Ostal felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Seeger, who was saying to him in a muted voice: "Hasting is here with us but..."

The small side door closed. The old Ekhonide crossed the large anteroom and disappeared behind a transparent door, through which was visible a room with a large number of flashing devices inside.

"Men!" Clyde Ostal's sharp but muted call drew their attention. "Keep it down but go on as before... keep on talking but listen to me!"

"Over on the left, that small sidedoor leads up to a flight deck on the roof! When I say the word *Tigris*, make sure that no Ekhonide has a chance to cry out. It won't hurt to be safe and it won't cost more than 3 seconds time. Then leave by the sidedoor. A rollband leads up to the roof. What we'll run into up there, I don't know..." Here the major saw that there were only 3 Ekhonides with them in the spacious anteroom.

He gave the signal. "*Tigris*." Even though all the Terrans were stark naked, they were dangerous and ready for anything. It was not for nothing that the Chief of Solar Defence, Allan D. Mercant, had a

reputation of always being on the lookout for new methods of teaching his men better ways in which to cope with the dangers they met almost daily while in service for the Solar Imperium.

3 unsuspecting Ekhonides, doctors in service for the justice Department of Ekhas, suddenly saw naked Terrans in front of them—then they saw only shadowy fists flying at them and after that they saw and heard nothing more. They felt nothing more for they lay unconscious on the floor while 33 pairs of naked feet hurried towards the small sidedoor. Maj. Clyde Ostal had opened it by laying his left hand on the rosette in the middle of the door.

Once on the rollband which carried him swiftly upwards to the flightdeck on the roof, he turned around. In perfect order, as though on the way to an exercise field, his men left the large anteroom.

They came out one after another and stepped onto the rollband, which appeared perfectly capable of bearing the steadily increasing weight.

Clyde Ostal reached the roof in 4 seconds. The brilliant light of the yellowish shining sun of Naral blinded him. Squinting against the glare, he glanced from right to left. He had expected heavily armed guards waiting at the end of the rollband and he was astounded that there were none.

"Everybody's out, Major!" someone called from below.

In 4 seconds the last of his men would have reached the roof. He stepped aside to give them room.

From the left came a shout!

On the left travellers were leaving an airtaxi that had just brought them here from the spaceport.

But on the right, not 20 paces away, stood an identical airtaxi with an extended but motionless rollband.

"Let them yell...!" Maj. Clyde Ostal called over his shoulder to his men, who were coming up to the roof 2 by 2 on the rollband. "Head for the taxi there on the right!"

3 seconds had gone by. 8 of his men were still on the rollband. With 24 of his men behind him, he ran for the taxi. "Seeger!" he exclaimed and got a reply from the right instantly. "Seeger, come with me—the others go in the passenger cabin!"

Clyde Ostal made a running leap towards the airtaxi, grabbed the handholds projecting from the sides and pulled himself up into the pilot's chamber.

Lt. Seeger followed immediately after, closing the door quickly behind him. "The last ones are coming, Major... but, good heavens! Those Ekhonides on the roof will *never* forget us!"

From the passenger cabin came the shout: "All here, Major!" At the same time the broad cabin door closed with a hollow thud and the rollband was drawn in up under the taxi's hull.

Ostal, who had immediately turned on the engines, did not worry about whether he could take off so soon with such a heavy load or not.

The engines roared. The airtaxi lifted from the flightdeck and climbed 20 meters straight up. Then Clyde Ostal turned the airtaxi in the direction of that dark stripe in the north far beyond Ent-Than which he had recognized as a forest area during the landing manoeuvres of the *Tigris*. He gave the airtaxi full thrust.

Seeger sat in front of the radio. In spite of the roaring engines, Ostal listened too. As yet none of the wavelengths Seeger had tuned to carried any word of their escape.

How could they know that at that moment the doctors in the Virospectroscopic Dept. assumed the Terrans were being tested in G8, while their colleagues in G8 thought they were still being examined by the Viroanalyzers?

No one had yet noticed the 3 senseless doctors lying together in a corner of the anteroom, covered with their own soft, green doctors' jackets.

The airtaxi went faster & faster. The vast sea of houses of Ent-Than slid past them below and soon the suburban settlements appeared in front of them.

Maj. Clyde Ostal's sharply profiled face looked to the distant forest edge approaching at an impossibly slow speed. He was still not quite convinced of the success of his desperate undertaking. The sensation they had unwillingly caused by their unclad appearance on the flightdeck of Ent-Than's largest hotel must certainly have its consequences.

"Nothing on the radio about us yet," remarked Seeger, grinning like a boy who has just pulled off an improbable prank with unexpectedly great success. "Major, I wonder if the hotel guests are unaware that the upper 5th of the Star of Arkon is a prison and took us for some odd race of savages on our way to our home planet?"

"Oh, cut the kidding!" Ostal told him. "You'd do better to keep your ear glued to that radio and keep watch over all channels! Is there another ship following us yet?"

The major could not know that the lieutenant's conjecture matched the truth perfectly. In that moment the administration of the hotel was under fire with complaints from all sides. Outraged tourists and guests of the Star Of Arkon, Ent-Than's most exclusive hotel, were demanding to know why quarters had been given to naked savages and why they had been allowed to take off in full view from a public flight deck.

The administration along with its robots was completely at a loss. Their statements that they knew nothing of any of this and certainly had nothing to do with those mysterious events were not believed. But no one connected the happenings with the prison in the building's upper 5th and so the authorities were not immediately notified. The prison had been located there for 208 years and in all that time not 1 prisoner had ever succeeded in escaping.

"Still nothing?" Ostal asked for the 8th time.

"No, Major!" Lt. Seeger could not remember ever being so pleased about answering a question.

The forest edge shot towards them and then it was suddenly behind them. The sea of trees beneath the airtaxi grew thicker and thicker. Now a small clearing appeared. The roaring of the overheated engines suddenly stopped. The braking equipment screeched loudly but it was enough to slow the airtaxi's fall.

It landed as gently as a feather.

The rollband slid rattling out from its slot under the rear of the airtaxi. Hissing, the automatic equipment opened the broad cabin door. 31 Terrans hastily left the airtaxi and sought cover under the first trees at the clearing's edge. Even Lt. Seeger sprang out. Maj. Clyde Ostal still had something to do: he had to

somehow dispose of the airtaxi whose presence would otherwise betray the Terrans' location.

It was a daring manoeuvre but the major did not hesitate for even a second.

The engines began to roar again, though muted. Ostal's right hand lay on the switch that would supply full power to the machinery. Calmly but not slowly he checked over the robot-steering one more time. Set on an easterly course, the airtaxi would suddenly fall and crash from an altitude of 3,000 meters after an 8-minute flight—assuming that no Ekhonide policeship had discovered by that time the airtaxi carried neither pilot nor passengers and captured it.

"Ok. . ." said Ostal to himself. He half stood up, turned to the open doorway of the pilot's cabin and then with his right hand threw the power supply switch.

Then Maj. Clyde Ostal jumped the 2 meters to the ground. Above him the mistreated engines roared in protest, shaking the airtaxi down to its last nuts and bolts.

Soft grass absorbed Ostal's fall. A shadow from above slid past him, slipped just above the tops of the first trees and then, still in the range of vision, turned to the east and climbed at a 15° angle into the sky.

A minute later the clearing was as still as it had been before the landing of the airtaxi. The roaring of the engines could no longer be heard but then a voice called out: "I'm curious to see how all this turns out!"

Maj. Ostal replied severely to the speaker: "Sgt. Brack, I can understand that this affair would have you wondering—but this is neither the time nor the place to discuss it! We won't be able to accomplish anything by just talking."

Egg-Or, head of the planetary defence for Ekhas, felt rather the same way. After a lightning trip from the headquarters of the Arkonide fleet back to his own offices, he was being briefed on the new developments in the case.

More than that, he was also reprimanding his chief of police. "Do-Man, have you notified all the clothing stores that they might be broken into tonight? . . . No? May I be so bold as to inquire when you're going to do so? This concerns all stores within a radius of 500 drans (1 dran = 1.47 kilometres). While you're at it, warn all the weapons merchants and the food vendors and anyone else it may occur to you to notify. That's all, Do-Man!"

Dragging his steps, Do-Man left the gathering. His 6 colleagues, who were not allowed to go yet, envied him. He had the worst behind him; for them it was yet to come.

But Egg-Or was a man who could do more than just upbraid his staff. Hardly had the door dropped down behind Do-Man then Egg-Or's face relaxed and he made himself more comfortable in his seat.

"We have 33 Terrans to capture again, men," he said. "We've been broadcasting their faces over the television channels for the last hour without stopping. If they weren't *Terrans*, they'd be no problem at all to apprehend. Yes, I—" Without warning the vidscreen in front of Egg-Or lit, showing the excited face of Exwin, chief of traffic control at the Ent-Than spaceport.

"Yes?" asked Egg-Or tersely, sitting up straight. He knew that a surprise was in the offing, only he could not say whether it was going to be a pleasant or an unpleasant one.

"Egg-Or, just an hour ago the *Mab* 1, first ship of the Springer clan Mabdan, landed here. Our check of

its papers and cargo—a cargo being shipped to Ent-Than and so labelled—disclosed no discrepancies but, a chance visit to the Com Centre gleaned the knowledge that the *Mab 1* had a second hypercom unit aboard, destroyed during the flight to Ekhas."

"Egg-Or, I wouldn't have called you had the investigation of our officials relative to the 2nd hypercom and its destruction turned up a satisfactory explanation. But no member of the Springer crew could explain the purpose of the 2nd unit or why it was destroyed.

"Thereupon the *Mab 1* was put under close watch. We learned thereby that at least 4 persons more, if not 6, were on board than were carried in the crew lists. Further, *Mabdan 1* was missing. The crew could give no information about the present whereabouts of the Springer patriarch and knew nothing of the presence of extra persons aboard the ship. They were all certain, however, that at the beginning of the voyage to the Naral System, *Mabdan 1* had been aboard.

"Accordingly I put the *Mab 1* under quarantine. The Springer ship is being searched again at this time and I've brought in 4 specialists to give the positronicon aboard the *Mab 1* a thorough examination."

The longer Exwin spoke, the greater grew Egg-Or's excitement. More out of instinct than reason he saw connections between the captured *Tigris* and the just landed *Mab 1*.

"Thank you for this information, Exwin," said Egg-Or with a slightly hoarse voice. "Interrogate all the Springers intensively and separately. Put 3 or 4 men on the investigation of the ship's positronicon. Have you contacted the *Mab 1*'s port of origin yet?"

"No," came Exwin's answer from the spaceport.

"Then do so immediately. Call me when you've learned anything new, no matter what time of day or night it is!"

Egg-Or switched off. He glanced almost absentmindedly at his staff. They didn't dare speak to him. Each man knew that often in the past their chief had solved problems sitting at his desk, which the entire alerted defence ministry had not been able to handle.

Egg-Or was one of those lucky individuals whose reason and intuition were equally developed. He was one of the few who often followed his hunches and set his reasoning aside.

"Now..." he said, sounding like someone who had just awakened from a light sleep with a start. "You know yourselves what has to be done. Set in motion every means at your disposal so that we can have those 33 Terrans back in our hands by tomorrow. If I'm not here in headquarters, I'll leave a message in any case telling where I am."

The staff left the chief somewhat confused. They had thought the meeting would proceed not a little differently and they could not shake off the feeling that the abrupt end of the conference had something to do with Exwin's call from the spaceport.

They were right. Egg-Or flew to the spaceport and entered the planetary defence department offices just as a hypercom exchange with Soral, 4.7 light-years away, was ending.

Exwin, an unusually tall Ekhonide, gave the impression to the entering Egg-Or that he was on the verge of a breakdown. He was alone with Egg-Or in the room. With an exhausted motion he switched off the microphone. "Egg-Or, did you hear who I was talking to?"

"Of course—with Soral. Did the *Mab* 1 come from that planet?"

"Yes, Egg-Or," Exwin replied, nodding, and trying to regain his composure. However, the beads of sweat he wiped from his forehead testified to a considerable shock. "But it took off from Soral for Ekhas with a gravely ill Mabdan 1 on board; and because a cylinder spacer has to have a capable captain, Mabdan 3 was put in his place although the clan was neither asked nor advised about the move. Egg-Or, now I'm asking *you* a question: where are Mabdan 1 and 3? Why is it that no Springer knew if one or the other was on board?"

"Have the galactic traders been asked how many transitions it took them to make the trip to Ekhas?"

"Yes. They all said 5, and the ship's positronicon confirms it..."

The loudspeaker interrupted with a question. "May Sassas see you, sir?"

Exwin spoke into the microphone. "Send Sassas in!" And to Egg-Or he said: "Sassas was one of those investigating the *Mab* 1's positronicon."

An old and bent Ekhonide entered. His face promised nothing good and neither did the sheaf of papers he held in his hand.

"Take a seat," Exwin told him. His voice sounded impatient.

The specialist sat down and handed the papers to Exwin. "Here," he said, greatly excited and pointing to the confusion of coördinates and figures covering the 8 sheets. Seen as a whole, the diagrams made an impressive flight curve. "Here is where the *Mab* 1 reentered our universe after the 4th spring. Point of entry: Restricted Zone 0674 B-00001..."

"00001?" exclaimed Egg-Or in surprise while Exwin tried to understand it. "00001, Sassas, isn't that...?"

"Yes, it definitely is the Starhell! And as Starhell it's listed in the catalogue of restricted areas under the number 0674 B00001."

"Sassas, you must be mistaken," Egg-Or said firmly.

I can make mistakes but a positronicon never does. I obtained these coördinates from the *Mab* 1's positronicon. But not only did the Springer ship search out the area of the 4 hellstars in the middle of the Milky Way for transition but it also cruised here and there in that region for over 3 hours, seemingly with no destination in mind at all, until it received a hypercom message consisting of just 1 word: 'Arkon'..."

"Just a moment," Egg-Or broke in, looking at Exwin and Sassas in surprise. "What does the star catalogue say about the Starhell area? Doesn't it say that hyper-communication is impossible there and that the same goes for any astronavigation? Something isn't right, Sassas!"

"I'm only telling you what we found in the positronicon," said Sassas obstinately. "But isn't it noteworthy that the *Mab* 1 reached our system from the starhell in one transition... and as I heard, thanks to our interrogators, even without a captain!"

Egg-Or turned to Exwin. "Call Soral again. This change of command in the *Mab* 1 seems mysterious to

me in a way. Every Arkonide administration is reluctant to even attempt to meddle with the customs of the Galactic Traders but has the port authority on Soral gone so far as to step in directly and interfere with the all but holy order of Springer rank? I can believe all the rest but *that* I won't! Quick, Exwin, call Soral, but don't ask for the spaceport—get the Arkonide administration."

But a hyper-communication was not yet in the cards.

Gen. Sutokk called from his headquarters. His face, which had not struck Maj. Clyde Ostal as a particularly delightful one on the *Tigris* vidscreen, now gave the Ekhonide Egg-Or a somewhat unpleasant feeling as well.

"Ah, so your office has informed me correctly for once, Egg-Or," said the general mockingly when Egg-Or's face appeared on the headquarters vidscreen. "I'm calling because I've heard some odd things concerning a Springer ship. Has it ever occurred to you that this merchant clan could be in league with Perry Rhodan? Leave the Springer crew to me for a few hours and my fleet officers will be able to give you the most eloquent confessions without any contradictions! Then well know, both of us, the whereabouts of these 4 or 6 persons who secretly came to Ekhas aboard the *Mab 1*!"

"Brainlashing, General?" asked Egg-Or sharply.

"Naturally..."

"Good," said Egg-Or. "I still have some business to finish, important business. When I'm done with that I'll call and tell you my decision."

"I'll be waiting for your call, Egg-Or!" With that the General switched off and his face disappeared from the vidscreen, which gradually grew grey once more.

Egg-Or did not concern himself with Exwin's questioning glance. "Mark this well, Exwin: whatever happens, I'm not going to allow any Terrans or Springers from the *Mab 1* to undergo a brainlash! If the Arkonide spacefleet decides to take matters into its own hands and you learn of it, act as though you were saving your own child from brainlashing! Now, let's see if we can't finally make that call to the Administrator of Soral!"

A few minutes later they had a reply. "The Administrator for the Robot Regent on Soral will not be available for the next 10 days!"

Egg-Or grabbed the microphone for himself. "Then connect me with the chief of defence on Soral, my colleague En-E!"

This time the reply came back sleepily and with half a yawn: "Don't you know it's midnight here? Call back tomorrow morning! Goodbye!"

Egg-Or and Exwin swore heartily—then stopped with a start when they heard Sassas giggling.

The positronicon specialist rubbed his hands together in utter delight. "It did me good to hear you gentlemen. We've had more than enough of the Arkonides and their structural compensator detector!"

"We didn't say that," said Egg-Or, trying to hold down his anger.

"No," Sassas agreed, "you gentlemen didn't say that." And he winked at them, pleased.

"The general's waiting for your call," Exwin suddenly remembered.

"He'll call here eventually, and when he does tell him I was called away and you don't know where. If you need me or if some important bit of news comes in, I'll be at the *Mab 1*. I want to take a look at those Springers myself."

Egg-Or was driven to the cylindrical spaceship. The broad loading ramp had been connected and on an endless rollband huge quantities of wares and freight rolled out of the starship. But before the first work robot could even touch the merchandise, the cargo had been inspected by 3 different 2man teams, looking to see if a man might be concealed in the wares.

Egg-Or entered the ship by way of the small ramp in the most forward third. Specialists from the defence ministry were still at work in the com centre and the control room. The crew was confined to the main cabin and 1 by 1 at long intervals they were taken in for a renewed interrogation.

The methods used by Egg-Ors men were not brutal. In the long run, however, only especially strong-willed men withstood the psychological techniques.

Face impassive, Egg-Or listened in on the interrogation of a quite young Springer.

According to the youth's own statements, he had been on duty in the Com Centre after the 2nd transition.

The interrogation took up on this point. Question, answer, question, answer... 10 minutes passed and still it was question, answer, question, answer.

20 minutes had gone by. Question, answer, question, answer. Exhaustion had plainly left its mark on the young Springer.

"How did you get the wound on your right hand? Answer me now!"

For the first time the galactic trader was taken by surprise. Then he laughed nervously and asked half ironically: "Where? What wound?" At the same time he looked at his right hand and seemed astonished by what he found. "Where did that come from? It looks bad..." he mumbled.

"Who were you fighting with?"

"Me? But I haven't been in a fight for 3 weeks!"

"The wound on your hand is a combat injury! Had you perhaps fought back when the 2nd hypercom was being destroyed by a thermobeamer? Who destroyed it? Answer me, Springer!"

"Wait a second... Yes, there was something... or somebody. But what or who could it have been?"

"You are to answer at once and not waste any more time—"

"Let the man think!" Egg-Or broke in for the first time He had the impression that the young fellow was honestly trying to remember something.

And then Egg-Or suddenly became suspicious. He saw the Springer struggling with his memory; he saw

him labour painfully to pull the forgotten out of the past and into the present.

Something's been done to the Springer, Egg-Or thought over and over again and was honestly disappointed when the Springer could not explain where the wound on his hand had come from.

Meanwhile, Exwin, who was responsible for planetary security inside the Ent-Than spaceport area, had not been idle. He had requested and received all the available information over the starhell, or Sector 00674 B-00001 as it was officially known, from the archives of the Arkonide Administration on Ekhas. The information he found seemed so important to him that he called his chief at the *Mab 1*.

Egg-Or entered the com centre of the cylindrical ship, saw Exwin's face already on the vidscreen and said in a tense voice as he sat down: "Alright, shoot, Exwin!"

Exwin gave a summarized description of the starhell.

"Repeat that again!" Egg-Or suddenly interrupted, bending intently and excitedly closer to the screen.

"Well..." the powerful gravity fields and the pure, highly concentrated radiation are capable of disturbing the electrical capacity of the Arkonide nervous system. Staying within Sector 00674 B-00001 for any length of time can result in psychological aberrations of long duration, including depression and paranoia.

"The *Oak-Oak*, a battleship which has since been wrecked, was—"

"I think that's all I need to know," Egg-Or interrupted Exwin. "This is interesting! It explains why the crew seems to know nothing of the whereabouts of the 2 *Mabdans*. The effects of being in the starhell include not only depressions, baseless fear and so on but also amnesia. But that still doesn't explain where *Mabdan 1* and 3 are and who those men were who left the *Mabdan 1* right after it landed—What is it?" he asked angrily and turned to the side.

One of the hypercom specialists surprised him with the news that the *Mab I* had been in radio contact with another spacer while in the starhell.

"Details!" demanded Egg-Or but the scientist only shrugged.

With a reproachful look at the transmitting equipment aboard the cylindrical ship, the scientist explained regretfully: "This old model doesn't have any memory banks for recording incoming and outgoing signals. But the unit that was destroyed by a thermobeam... sir, do you know that it's the kind of hypercom found only on the Regent's warships?"

The connection with Exwin was still open and the chief of the spaceport division was listening in. "Sir," he suggested, "why don't I call the planet Soral again and force those sleepy Arkonides at the other end to connect me with the appropriate agency. If the secret service on Soral doesn't know anything about the *Mab 1*, then some other agency must"

Egg-Or's hand gesture, which betrayed despondency, broke him off. "Exwin, are you still unaware *how* sluggish and irresponsible *areal* Arkonide is? If we can't solve this riddle ourselves, it never will be solved."

"And what if I call the Robot Regent itself, sir?"

Egg-Or laughed. "I won't forbid you but I won't recommend you do it either. If I were you, I wouldn't.

Do you seriously believe the Regent has been informed of this trifling matter? Seen in the broad perspective, this affair isn't important at all. The headaches are left to us."

Exwin's face showed dissatisfaction. "Sir, I've set the alien police to looking for 4 to 6 Springers and I mentioned that 1 of them will be seriously ill. But 4 or 6 Springers who arrived with the *Mab 1* are nowhere to be found. It's enough to drive me to despair."

6/ TAKING THE BAIT

Although the upper 5th was taken up with the prison, the Star Of Arkon was Ent-Than's largest hotel.

Perry Rhodan and his 3 mutants found quarters in the vast building's lower third.

They had left the *Mab 1* just a few minutes after landing without taking any special security precautions. An automatic ground taxi had taken them to an airtaxi stop and from there along with Springers and Arkonides from various other spacers they were taken to the flightdeck on the roof of the Star of Arkon.

They were registered at the front desk and according to their identification and other papers they came from all directions on different spaceships. But not one had arrived with the *Mab 1*.

The 4 Terrans were given quarters on 3 different floors. The mutants were told to meet Perry Rhodan in his room in 30 minutes.

Before Rhodan parted company with Fellmer Lloyd, he had the telepath and sensor attempt to discern the whereabouts of Maj. Clyde Ostal and the crew of the *Tigris* by means of his psychic abilities.

Fellmer Lloyd was quite familiar with Ostal's brainwave pattern but no matter where he turned, he could not perceive the Major's pattern among the thousands he sensed.

When he entered Perry Rhodan's hotel room half an hour later, Kitai Ishibashi and Tako Kakuta were already present.

Lloyd understood Rhodan's telepathic question. No, he replied in the same manner. *I haven't been able to contact them.*

Rhodan looked at him, meditating. He could not forget what he had seen at the spaceport: the merchant ship *Tigris* standing out in the portion of the field reserved exclusively for the Arkonide fleet. All its ramps had been extended and all hatches were wide open.

"Kakuta," Rhodan said to the slender teleporter, whose small figure passed least well for that of a Springer, "I'd very much like to know what's going on now aboard the *Tigris* and if any of the crew are still there. But don't take any risks. Would 10 minutes be enough?"

Kakuta, who like the others was disguised as a Springer, chuckled. "I'll be back right on time, sir!"

Then the air where he was sitting began to shimmer strangely. The energy the small Japanese was now

developing within himself allowed him to leave the room and rematerialise in the place he was concentrating on: Maj. Clyde Ostal's cabin aboard the *Tigris* .

Hardly had the teleporter disappeared then Fellmer Lloyd was given his orders.

"Try to find the commanding general in the Arkonide fleet headquarters, Lloyd. We have to find out as soon as we can where Maj. Ostal and his men are. I have the feeling someone is searching for us."

Fellmer Lloyd, leaning back comfortably in his seat, closed his eyes. For him the world consisted only of brainwave patterns, of telepathic energy and his spotting sense. He no longer perceived what Perry Rhodan was now saying to Kitai Ishibashi.

"The crew of the *Mab 1* is going to make problems for us, Ishibashi. That is not meant as a reproach. I'm able to judge whether or not you've done your work well but if from here on in we don't have enough time for good work, then we'll have to be ready for trouble of any kind. Because of the capture of the *Tigris* , the Ekhonides are going to be uneasy and so doubly distrustful. That means that they'll examine very closely every spaceship that doesn't carry passengers and they'll surely notice that there isn't any captain on board the *Mab 1*."

"I could influence anyone who tries to investigate the *Mab 1*..."

"It's too late," Rhodan said. "Because of what happened on it, we arrived here too late. Who knows how many people are already involved with the Springer ship by now and..."

Kakuta made his reappearance in a shimmering of air, sitting in his former seat as though he had never left. Rhodan and Ishibashi looked at him expectantly but Fellmer Lloyd saw and heard nothing of what was going on around him.

"Sir," the slender Oriental began. "The control room and Com Centre are swarming with scientists from the planetary defence. Their chief is named Egg-Or. I heard the men talking about him. I also heard that they've swallowed our bait whole. They believe that in a few hours they'll have the Earth's coördinates. Not one Ekhonide suspects that all the information they've laboured so long to extract is fallacious."

"Did you learn anything about the crew?" Rhodan wanted to know.

"Not a word. Everyone was too busy trying to get their job done. No one spoke of our men."

Rhodan glanced at Fellmer Lloyd but he still sat with his eyes closed, seeming to be listening to something far away.

"Ishibashi, I don't want to underestimate the Ekhonide defence and alien police. Go down to the reception desk in the lobby and put a block on the 5 or 8 Ekhonides I saw on duty there."

"Right, sir," answered the thin suggestor and quietly left the well-furnished hotel room.

He went down by way of the antigrav lift and crossed the huge lobby to the reception desk. Everywhere he saw registrar robots and had the feeling that they were somehow perceiving him, for their staring lens-eyes were trained on him. He went up to the desk, behaving like a traveller who had left his home planet for the first time and felt lonely and uncertain on this alien world.

Kitai Ishibashi did not force his way through the crowd to the desk but the others did. Springers, Aras,

Arkonides and intelligences belonging to non-human races, even some in spacesuits because the local atmosphere was deadly for them—they all pushed and shoved towards the desk, wanting information from the 9 Ekhonides on duty behind the counter.

Kitai Ishibashi heard the stock answer over and over again: "Please direct your question to one of our information robots! Please direct your question to one of..."

Kitai Ishibashi's face was relaxed. It betrayed nothing of the strain of his efforts to concentrate his suggestive power and beam it at the Ekhonides behind the desk.

His suggestive order was simple: "Tell any officials who inquire about 4, 5 or 6 Springers that with more than 20,000 guests in your hotel you cannot give any information. Refer them to your information robots!"

It was an order that could not be any simpler and still attempt to protect Perry Rhodan and his 3 mutants.

But Kitai Ishibashi was not through with his work yet. Suddenly he pushed his way up to the desk. "May I help you, sir?" he was asked by the Ekhonide behind the counter.

"I'd like..." Ishibashi began, and thereafter he only moved his lips. Any chance observers would have heard nothing. Using all his power, the mutant suggested to the young Ekhonide: *Tell me when the registrar robots are changed!*

"Only once a year, sir," answered the Ekhonide politely, convinced that the slender Springer had asked the question out loud.

Who gives the order for the robots to be changed? Ishibashi next demanded.

"Ulgald, our chief engineer, sir..."

Where can I find him?

"On the 1st floor, wing gg-3, Registry Dept., sir."

"Thank you," said Ishibashi out loud. He left quickly, then searched for the registry department on the 1st floor. He spoke to an Ekhonide he met on the way and got directions.

"Forget that you ever spoke to a Springer!" Ishibashi ordered suggestively, then went on with his search for chief engineer Ulgald.

But he was not sufficiently familiar with the arrangement of Ekhonide offices in the building and lost his way. He asked directions of another Ekhonide after a long wandering about, and the reply was:

"I am Ulgald, Springer..."

As the 2 went to the antigrav lift shaft, as companionable as old friends, the chief engineer seemed no different than usual. He gave the tall, thin galactic trader with the slightly bent posture a hearty farewell, then quickly went off to his office to order a change of robots.

His order was accompanied with a note of such urgency that no refusal or even questioning of his instructions was possible.

The young Ekhonide at the reception desk did not remember Ishibashi or his questioning even while the robots were being changed.

10 minutes before the alien police arrived, the robot change was complete. The memory banks containing information covering the last 9 months and 3 days were completely erased and blank.

Bits of information that might have led to Perry Rhodan and his mutants no longer existed.

For the first time in the hotel's history, the Star of Akron had no records concerning its guests. To make the confusion complete, the memory bank erasure had taken place just before the robots were scheduled to transmit their recorded data to the bookkeeping department, as they did regularly every 3 hours.

Ulgald, who would remember this terrible day with a shudder still 20 years later, did not lose his position for the alien police wrote the inconvenient robot change off as an act of pure chance and left, shrugging their shoulders in resignation.

Subjecting every single one of the more than 20,000 guests of the Star of Arkon was beyond even their capabilities.

When Kitai Ishibashi reentered Perry Rhodan's room after a 45-minute absence, Tako Kakuta was already back from his 2nd teleportation spring. In the meantime, Fellmer Lloyd had read the thoughts of General Sutokk—and once during the telepathic reception even laughed out loud.

"What?" Perry Rhodan had demanded in surprise, looking at Fellmer Lloyd in disbelief. "Ostal and his men made their escape stark naked? Are you sure the General wasn't telling some disreputable joke while you were reading his mind, Lloyd?"

Fellmer Lloyd swore that the General had not been telling any jokes. In any event, the General had no good thoughts of any sort for the chief of the planetary defence because Egg-Or had refused to allow the Arkonide fleet to brainlash even one solitary Terran.

"But is he trying to make a connection between the *Mab 1* and the capture of the *Tigris*?" Rhodan pressed.

"He isn't exerting himself especially in that area, sir. He's much more interested in getting Earth's galactic coordinates into his hands as fast as he can."

"He'll have them before long," said Perry Rhodan, half sunk in thought. "Kakuta is taking his time..."

The small, slender Oriental had made his 2nd spring to the flagship of General Sutokk for a look at the newly developed Compensator Detector.

As a mutant he, like most of his comrades, had not only received a cell renewal on the planet Wanderer to keep him from aging for the next 62 years but again like most of his comrades he had undergone an intensive hypno-training that made him well-informed in all areas of knowledge.

Tako Kakuta rematerialised in the vast transformer chamber of the flagship Ebneb, in the shadow of a house-sized, ring-shaped magnetic coil that reached from the floor to the ceiling and angled over the transformer at 45°.

The light noise that Tako Kakuta made by his materialization was drowned out by the constant humming of a large number of energy banks.

Neither the transformer nor the energy banks—huge machines that would have been enough to have supplied a planet of average industrialization with electrical power for 5 years—nor the magnetic coils nor the insulated circuit boards of gigantic dimensions could impress Tako Kakuta. The engine rooms of the *Titan* and the *Drusus* had accustomed him to a larger scale.

He had arrived where he had wanted to go. Arkonide space-battleships differed from one another about as much as so many eggs; only in the class of ship and in the weaponry could any variation be seen. Kakuta felt as much at home here in the *Ebneb* as he would have aboard the *Lotus*, the *Ganymede* or the *Drusus*.

He saw a metal catwalk winding around the transformer about 3 meters above the floor. He teleported himself up to it, looked out over the circuitry and discovered 2 Ekhonides conversing with one another. They turned their backs to him, sat down on an energy cable, dangled their legs and laughed aloud.

He had to get them out of the transformer chamber or at least to distract them that they would not hear the opening and closing of a diaphragm-like hatch.

Tako Kakuta had no love for radical methods. He always tried to find means that would bring him safely to his goal without having unfortunate consequences for innocent bystanders.

He stood next to the magnet regulator, which could alter the position of the giant magnetic coil. A fleeting smile crossed his face. He grasped the regulator with both hands and under the force of his fingers the wheel turned. The huge coil began to sink from 45° to 30°.

The coil was held floating in place by controlled antigrav fields and as it changed position a positronic warning system sensed that it had sunk too far. A siren screamed out, growing louder the more Tako Kakuta allowed the floating magnetic coil to sink. It was a work of seconds and would have been suicidal for any normal man to attempt, for he would have been seen by the Ekhonides. Since he was a teleporter, however, the place where he had been standing was suddenly empty.

2 frightened Ekhonides; raced up the steps to the control board after first having had to run around the transformer.

The alarm still howled. The 2 Ekhonide space soldiers thought only of the punishment awaiting them and so far had not concerned themselves for the reason for the magnetic coil alarm.

Tako Kakuta had performed 2 short teleportations. The last spring brought him to the hatch. Behind it lay the structocomp, an improbably small device in relation to its power.

But the newly developed compensator detector must be here, too. Marshal Allan D. Mercant's scientific staff had at least reasoned as much and they had not been wrong yet in their analyses.

The hatch opened, let the Japanese through and closed again.

Seconds later, Kakuta stood before the great secret.

"So that's the thing that's supposed to bring about our downfall!" he heard himself say. Then his eyes searched for the grey-coloured bulges that would unfasten the machinery's covering once he had rested

his hand on them.

The compensator detector, about 3 meters high and more than 10 meters long, was connected to the structural compensator located next to it. Tako Kakuta did not think of sabotage. The Chief had not given him any orders for it. Perry Rhodan wanted much more to know the details of the compensator detector's construction.

He laid his hands against 2 bulges in the covering and a piece of it separated from the rest. Kakuta let it drop to the floor.

The newly developed compensator detector revealed its secrets to the knowing eyes of the Japanese mutant. In the same moment that he had first glimpsed the inner workings of the machinery through the hole in the covering, his entire knowledge of this area of technology had awakened within him.

He gave a start. The construction as displayed in its fundamentals was familiar to him! It reminded him of the pickle people, the Swoons, and at the same time he understood that Arkon's newly developed sensing device was simply an enlarged copy of the Swoonish invention.

An uncanny intimation struck him all at once and he glanced back at the hatch.

As his head turned he concentrated for a teleport spring behind the structocomp.

The hatch sprang open. A man, one of the 2 Ekhonide space soldiers, started to come in and let out a yell—and then Kakuta saw him no more. His short teleport had brought him behind the structocomp. But he hesitated to disappear completely. He wanted to find out what the Ekhonide would do when he saw that a piece of the detector covering had been removed. Kakuta was fortunate that the Ekhonide was motivated solely by a desire to escape punishment and was thus ready to cover up events he would have otherwise reported.

"Stars and suns!" Kakuta heard him mutter with a trembling voice. "I haven't been drinking any Uquir! I've never believed in ghosts before but I do now. Why, the little stardevils must have taken this plate off the machine...!"

Kakuta listened as the Ekhonide replaced the covering, then with the force of his will sprang back to Perry Rhodan's room in the Star of Arkon.

And after him Kitai Ishibashi arrived. Ishibashi had been away the longest but had the least to report.

"Now, where are Ostal and his men?" asked Perry Rhodan.

Fellmer Lloyd looked at him without the faintest idea. "I can't perceive them, sir. If only at least one Ekhonide or even that fleet general knew something... but the general is only toying with the notion of giving some Springer a brainlashing."

A dangerous light seemed to appear in Perry Rhodan's eyes. "He won't succeed in that. *We'll* have to see to that but I think we also must be prepared in the event they find our men. Certainly at the moment they aren't feeling any too comfortable. Let's go."

7/ OF ROCKS & ROBOTS

Egg-Or did not get to bed.

Gen. Sutokk of the Arkonide fleet stationed on Ekhas did not think of sleeping at all.

Perry Rhodan and his 3 mutants were on their way through the night-lit metropolis of Ent-Than, buying clothes for the fugitive Terrans and obtaining a freight-transporting vehicle.

Maj. Clyde Ostal and his 32 men were on their way too.

They stood on the edge of a large clearing and saw over the treetops a greenish-lit moon. Over the right side of the clearing was another moon, 3 times larger than the first. It, too, reflected greenish light, so brightly that the opposite forest edge cast shadows and the men could see out over the broad, level expanse.

The forest of the planet Ekhas was silent. Its quiet was uncanny. No night animals called out, neither the birds flying through the darkness nor the mammals who fled at the approach of man.

Nor was there any wind.

But despite the lateness of the night, it was still oppressively humid. The atmosphere was supersaturated with moisture. Sweat gushed out of the pores of all 33 Terrans.

They had been standing under the trees at forest edge for some minutes. They were waiting for Maj. Ostal to give the order to march on. But not yet. Ostal was inquiring into the cases of 6 men with foot problems. Allan D. Mercant's rugged training had taught them everything—everything except the art of going through a vast, trackless forest barefoot.

All craved water; the thirst had closed their mouths. Only those who absolutely had to speak said anything. They had given up muttering and cursing. But their morale was good.

Whatever they had not attained today would be theirs tomorrow or the next day. Clothes. Food. Water.

Suddenly the larger moon disappeared behind a cloud that had silently crept across the night sky of Ekhas. Now more clouds came and the smaller half moon vanished as well. From a distant wall of black clouds the 33 men heard a thundering and soon after the first lightning was seen crashing to the ground. The thunder grew louder.

"A storm!" the Major cried. "A storm will bring water, men!"

He was promising water both to them and to himself.

But first came the storm and with its howling innumerable flashes of lightning blasted over the men.

Suddenly the clearing lay in the harsh light of the thundering forces of nature unleashed.

33 men saw the cabin—or the house—simultaneously. Maj. Ostal tried to shout above the chaos but only S. Seeger, who stood next to him, understood what he had said.

Lt. Seeger yelled into the ear of the next man. "Follow us! Pass the order on!"

A long chain of 33 men ran barefoot across the grassy meadow toward the building on the other side.

Then came the rain. It gushed out of the clouds as though from a waterfall.

Large puddles quickly formed on the ground. Even Maj. Ostal took advantage of them to still his thirst. The water was warm and smelled brackish: they only noticed it once they had drunk their fill and wiped their no longer cracked lips with their hands.

"Onwards!" came Ostal's order, which was passed from man to man.

They ran, and the unchained energies in the sky above provided enough light that no one became separated from the rest.

The clearing was wider than they had first estimated in the unfamiliar light of the 2 moons.

And then the storm died just as suddenly as it had arisen.

They had still not reached the cabin or house on the other side of the clearing.

The 2 moons appeared in the sky once more.

All of a sudden the Major signalled with an outstretched arm for the 2 men following him to stop. The order was repeated and everyone in the group quickly came to a halt. No one saw anything; then Seeger and Sgt. Fip heard the Major's order. "You 2 follow me! The others stay here!"

They had been wading by 3's through large pools of water, which were already being slowly absorbed by the thirsty ground.

Ostal pointed the direction in which to go and Seeger and Fip silently followed.

Then Ostal held out his arms again and stopped the 2 men. At the same time he made a low hissing noise. He had seen something. Seeger and Fip tried to penetrate the darkness with their eyes.

Isn't that a light? Seeger asked himself just as at his side Fip whispered: "I see a light!"

Against the black background of the forest's edge showed the barely visible form of a low, flat building, lit at one place by the weak light source which the Major had discovered before Fip and Seeger.

Clyde Ostal slowly took cover on the ground. If there were alert observers in the building, then the Terrans, standing out in the full light of the 2 moons, had just been seen. Lt. Seeger and Sgt. Fip followed the example of their superior, then crawled on their stomachs to the right and to the left so that in case of attack the small party would not be wiped out by a single shot.

"Seeger, come with me!" Ostal ordered. "Fip, you try to get back to the men if anything happens to us. Under no circumstances are you to try to help us. It would be senseless in the situation we're in now. Fip, I'm counting on you!"

Ostal and Seeger approached the building from the right running stooped and in a wide, curving path. In

that fashion they reached the dark shadows of the forest's edge and there dared to continue in an upright position.

Maj. Clyde Ostal was about 6 meters ahead of his lieutenant. Before him the outlines of the flat building became ever sharper. It was not a simple cabin but a building made of plastic, the plastic Arkonides had used for construction of houses for millenniums.

Suddenly Ostal stopped as though rooted to the spot. Next to the left corner of the building, the one turned to the clearing, he saw the outline of a robot. "Back, Seeger!" was all he could say before a powerful hypnobeam struck him and he lost consciousness.

Lt. S. Seeger was not a victim of panic. The word did not exist in Allan D. Mercant's training. He reacted unbelievably fast. He watched as the robot strode out of the shadowed side of the building, went to its victim, bent down and picked him up—then he watched as the robot carried Maj. Ostal to the low building.

During his observation Seeger had crawled back into the shadows of the woods. He did not understand why the mechanical man had not detected him and put him out of action, too.

As carefully and cautiously as he could, Seeger made his way back to Sgt. Fip. When he saw the lieutenant was alone, Fip whispered: "What happened to the major?"

"Robots back there!" was the lieutenant's reply and Fip did not need to inquire any further.

When they returned to the waiting group, Lt. Seeger took over the leadership. They marched onward across the clearing, avoiding the building by going far to the left of it, reached the forest and continued from there.

In Terran measurements, a full day on Ekhas lasted 38 hours, They had fought through the night and forest for 10 hours, and 9 hours of darkness still stretched before them. They were too realistic to have any hope of coming to a settlement by daybreak. The day before they had seen no human communities from the airtaxi high above the forest. So it struck them as a completely unexpected surprise when they spotted some dozen unmoving lights shining through the trees ahead.

"Sgt. Fip!" Lt. Seeger said, calling the man to him. "The 2 of us will. . .!"

The night stillness was torn by the typical thunder of spaceship engines.

"On to the forest edge!" Seeger ordered.

But they did not reach any forest's edge. The forest simply petered out into a down-sloping terrain covered by tall bushes. In front of them, lit by the greenish radiance of the 2 moons, stretched a kilometre-wide band of tangled shrubs and creeping vines that at first steeply then gradually descended to merge into the plain below.

"No wonder we didn't see *that* from the airtaxi," said Lt. Peter H. Hasting, looking out across to the distant lights, and listening, like all the others, to the increasing roar of engines. "But that out there can't possibly be the spaceport of Ent-Than." Then he noticed something about his own body: the arm he had extended for pointing across the plain had been broken—now it was healed!

The claims of the Ekhonide prison doctors had been proven true. The new Ara treatment, a serum that

had been injected into his arm, had accomplished the healing process in less than 20 hours. The preparations used up to now in the Great Imperium, also known and used in Perry Rhodan's Solar Imperium, required 50 to 60 hours to take full effect.

Lt. Hasting wanted to bring it to the attention of his comrades but at that moment a cylindrical spaceship took off, silhouetted against the once more clear night sky. At first it rose almost straight up but at 500 meters levelled off for horizontal flight that would take it directly over the Terrans' heads.

Engines roaring, it sped past them and for half a minute thereafter a ringing, distant thunder was the last to be heard from it.

"The lights..." Lt. Seeger exclaimed and pointed in the distance.

One light after another went out. Then the brushland before them lay as though it were virgin, untouched wilderness.

"And our major...!" It could not be determined who said that but it was said and the words had the effect of an exploding bomb. 32 men were suddenly ashamed. They had left Ostal to his fate without even lifting a finger to help him.

Seeger whirled around. "I don't care to know who just said that but I must remind you just what sort of situation we're now in." His voice had a sharp edge to it. "We have not deserted the major. He ordered us not to do anything if something happened to him or me or both of us. And we can do something to find and help him only when we have the means to do it. I think we can find those means where the Springer ship took off from, there where the lights were burning. We have to get there before daylight. *We must* do it, men!"

They did it but not before daybreak.

Seeger, Hasting and Fip stood before the last bushes and cautiously drew the branches aside.

50 feet ahead, 3 Springer robots stood like steel monuments. The light from yellow star Naral reflected off their optical lenses. It did not bother the robots: positronic systems are not so easily blinded.

Now one of the robots turned in the direction of the Terrans. Fip was last to let go of the branch he was holding. The men stood unmoving. They knew that Springer robots were not as sensitive or as perceptive as Arkonide robots. All their hope rested in that fact.

5 long minutes ticked by. There was neither the hollow tread of an approaching robot nor the low hissing of a thermobeam slicing into their hiding place.

"We can't stand here forever!" Peter Hasting whispered. "How can I go talk to a Springer without being blasted by a robot in the attempt?"

"Hasting," said Seeger, "how do you hope to find a Springer to talk to when we don't even see a single building here? Only the robots are any kind of hint that there's something here... What can you make of that?"

"Everything, Seeger. Whoever sneaks into this wilderness is attempting to hide something from the Ekhonides. And whoever has something to hide is not necessarily our enemy. And if we warn the Springers that we were... He gave a start and asked hastily: "Could the low building with the weak light

and the robot guard belong to the same Springer clan? Seeger, Fip... what do you think?"

Seeger shook his head. "The low building stood unbidden on the edge of the clearing. It can be clearly seen from above. But here there seems to be hidden an actual landing place for spaceships. I don't see any connection between this place and the building where the major was taken prisoner."

"If that's true, it reinforces my position," said Hasting without further comment on the matter. "Seeger, 3 or 4 men have to take some risks now. We have only stones at our disposal. I need men who are good at throwing stones and hitting their targets... Allan D. Mercant, that's something you never taught us in your commando school: throwing stones at positronic robots!"

Lt. Seeger laid his hand on his comrade's shoulder. "And what will *you* be doing while the robots are distracted by the hail of stones?" he asked, his expression sharply suspicious.

Peter Hasting replied: "Well, *one* of us has to try it. When the robots are distracted, I'll make a break for it."

"No!" Seeger exclaimed energetically. "That'd be suicide!"

"Do you know any other solution, Seeger?" asked Hasting calmly.

"Let me go in your place, Lt. Hasting!" offered Sgt. Fip.

"It's 2 against 1," said Hasting with a grateful glance at Fip. "The sergeant also sees that my plan has a chance. Will you give the orders for it? Once the first stones fall and the robots take a closer look, I'll make my dash. But see to it that I have the most possible freedom of movement on the right side. The bushes are thickest there. Well...?"

Lt. Seeger was still not happy with his comrade's plan and had he known that Hasting himself reckoned the chance of success at 3%, he would never have relented.

Reluctantly he nodded his agreement and silently disappeared behind the thick 4-meter high bushes.

Peter Hasting Jay poised, ready to spring. By now, he figured, Lt. Seeger must have finished with his preparations.

Then he saw on the right 6, 7 or 8 fist-sized rocks flying soundlessly through the air. Just above him a 2nd flight of stones whizzed towards the robot standing in the middle.

The stones thudded into the ground near where the robot stood. Through a narrow gap in the protective bushes Hasting saw the middle and rightward robots turn around, and the ponderous step of the robots mixed with the thudding of fist-sized stones.

The men Seeger had put on this operation threw their stones almost unceasingly.

Then the rightmost robot reacted with its deadly weaponry.

3 beams hissed in the bright morning light and annihilated a portion of the on-flying rocks. The robot Hasting had been standing precisely in front of reacted the same way, having moved somewhat to the left.

The moment had come for Hasting to make his break!

The optical lens systems of the robots stared at the rock swarms coming at them. Hasting knew that the robots could not 'see' behind themselves. But he also knew that the robots would find out in a few seconds the place from which the stones were coming and train all their ray weapons on it, not letting up with their fire until the ground was bubbling lava.

The gap between the 2 robots on the right and in front of him was not even 100 meters. Peter Hasting ran like he had never run before. He constantly looked in both directions. The 2 battle machines were about ¾ths turned away from him but only a slight turn would be enough to bring him into their field of vision.

Instinctively he threw himself under a bush at a full run but he did not remain where he was. He crawled farther, like an Indian, and managed not to touch a single one of the low-hanging branches.

Then he heard 2 sharp impacts in rapid succession.

2 stones had struck a robot about to turn in his direction.

Hasting considered with forceful logic.

Positronic brains were unfeeling. Being hit with stones did not bother them but the impact was only the beginning of an attack and therefore the robot must react to it and turn back to where it was.

Hasting sprang up again, threw himself between 2 bushes, losing the robots from view in the process, and then was shocked to see a ray hit the ground 3 meters in front of him. The ground began to melt.

The robot on the left had spotted him!

Hasting turned, wanting to run back in his first reaction, then through a gap in the branches he saw 2 Springers running toward him, summoned out of their quietude by the robot alarm.

Hands raised above his head, Peter H. Hasting ran towards them.

Behind his back, a new impulse beam was fired by one of the robots and this time only missed him by a hair. The heat from the bushes and earth blasted into gas struck him all over the surface of his back.

2 uncomprehending Springers let their weapons sink!

The naked man running towards them with his hands raised could be judged harmless with one glance.

8/ THE COSMICAVALRY COMES THROUGH!

Egg-Or not only looked up in surprise when the 2 robots brought Maj. Clyde Ostal into his office—he leaped out of his chair and started at the Terran.

They knew each other!

And the Terran's mocking expression bothered the chief of planetary defence for Ekhas more than he was willing to admit.

"Sit down, Terran!" snapped Egg-Or more sharply than he had intended.

A mocking look faced him again and Maj. Clyde Ostal asked: "Do Terrans have the effect of ghosts on Ekhonides and Arkonides or was it only your guilty conscience that got you up out of your seat?"

Against his will, Egg-Or was impressed by the fearlessness of the man with the impassive face.

"Sit down... please!" The 'please' came after a conspicuous pause.

Clyde Ostal glanced at the Robots on either side. "Will these gentlemen object, Ekhonide?"

"You're making it difficult for me to speak reasonably with you," said Egg-Or.

"Give me my *Tigris* back, let me have my crew and allow me to take off with my spacer. Then we'll be able to talk over the hypercom like good friends," said Clyde Ostal, businesslike. "Thereafter I would be happy to report to Perry Rhodan that on Ekhas there's at least one decent Ekhonide."

"I'd like to know what gives you your confidence, Terran. Your Perry Rhodan won't help you..." The Terran's mocking smile confused him. Frightened, Egg-Or thought of the general's suspicion that Perry Rhodan had only been setting out a decoy with the *Tigris*.

"Rhodan?" asked Clyde Ostal, surprised. "Ekhonide, who do you think we Terrans are? Each one of us is a Perry Rhodan! All of us! How long will it take for the Great Imperium to finally learn *that*? We don't sleep with our eyes open but we do play with open cards and... Ekhonide, we're looking for friends so that we can live with our friends in peace!"

The call from Gen. Sutokk interrupted the conversation between Egg-Or and Ostal just as it was beginning to enter an interesting phase. On the vidscreen appeared Sutokk's harshly outlined face. His voice was equally as harsh. "Egg-Or, I have just learned that the captain of that merchant was recaptured. I request that you turn him over to the Arkonide fleet immediately. By order of the Regent! You'll have the original of that order in the next 10 minutes! Over and out!"

Did this Egg-Or forget about me? Clyde Ostal wondered, looking at the Ekhonide who stared without seeing at the greying vidscreen. Ostal was still standing in front of Egg-Or's desk, flanked by the 2 Arkonide robots. Then Ostal's distrust awakened. Why had this Gen. Sutokk emphasized that it was an order of the Regent for the Terran to be turned over to the fleet and that the original of the order would shortly be sent over to Egg-Or?

Was there some sort of rivalry between Egg-Or and the General?

* * * *

In that same moment, Fellmer Lloyd impulsively laid his hand on the arm of the Administrator of the

Solar Imperium. They sat by 2s at different tables, waiting in the predominantly Springer-trade restaurant for the rollband to bring their orders to the table.

"I'm on Ostal's trail, Chief," whispered Lloyd from behind his hand and then switched to the telepathic connection.

Clyde Ostal now finds himself a prisoner of Egg-Or. This Sutokk seems to be an especially fanatical supporter of brainlashing, for his orders are that Ostal is to go into brainlash as soon as he is delivered... Egg-Or, chief of the planetary defence, has so far refused to allow any Terran or Springer from the Mab1 to be turned over to the fleet for a brainlash... Chief, there's even an order from the Robot Regent demanding brainlashing. The original of the order has just been delivered to Egg-Or by courier... odd. They're only thinking of Major Ostal. The General hasn't thought once about the rest of the Tigris crew...

"Well," said Perry Rhodan in a low voice, seeming to regard with interest the food on the dishes just delivered by the rollband. "Soup's on!"

"OK, I see..." Fellmer Lloyd said without thinking, receiving Rhodan's telepathic order:

You must now find Clyde Ostal, Lloyd! Search for him, then I can put Kakuta and Ishibashi into action. If I understand your thoughts correctly, Ostal must be in the city. Why is it so hard for you to find him now?

For Fellmer Lloyd there was only one answer to that: *Ostal isn't thinking of us at all, Chief! I don't believe he thinks we're on Ekhas. There isn't any other explanation. If he would only wish we were here one single time...* Fellmer Lloyd's thoughts suddenly broke, as though his mind had suddenly gone mute. Then his thoughts hammered against Rhodan's forehead once more: *Chief, a swarm of officials from the alien police are on their way here to investigate the place!*

Among the thousand or more Springers in the restaurant, their getting up and motioning Ishibashi and Kakuta to follow did not attract any attention. They headed by pairs towards the 4 rear exits.

On the way, Lloyd came close to Ishibashi briefly, long enough to whisper in English to him: "Alien police are coming to investigate here!"

"Surely we didn't have to leave our food in the lurch like this," Ishibashi commented in Intercosmo.

"Orders from the Chief," Fellmer Lloyd whispered back in answer and separated himself unobtrusively from the other mutants, going towards the 3rd rear exit with Rhodan. There they found that the alien police had arrived first. The officials in their inconspicuous uniforms occupied all the rear exits. From this moment on, no guest could leave the restaurant without having his papers checked.

With the calm of a genuine Springer, Perry Rhodan gave up his identification pass, which had been manufactured by Solar Defence. The official who was to check him gave it back after a fleeting glance. Fellmer Lloyd experienced the same.

They crossed the street by way of a bridge-like antigravity band. In front of them floated Tako Kakuta and Kitai Ishibashi.

"Well done, Ishibashi," said Rhodan as he and Lloyd caught up with them.

At that moment Fellmer Lloyd lost contact with his immediate surroundings. "I've got him, Chief!" Lloyd suddenly exclaimed, slightly exhausted. "He thought of you. He's just learned... learned through Egg-Or, that the general wants to have him brought in for brainlashing. The Major is now in the headquarters of planetary defence. He's still in Egg-Ors office, guarded by 2 robots."

"How is it that he was captured alone? Where are his men?" Rhodan suddenly demanded of Lloyd.

Fellmer Lloyd switched again to the telepathic connection, for that means precluded any misunderstandings.

Last night, on a march through the jungle, Ostal and his men discovered an Ekhonide relay station. Ostal approached it alone and was shock-beamed by a robot. The relay serves as a listening post over hypercom communications and it reported its capture to the defence ministry immediately. Ostal was picked up this morning by a small rayship and brought to Egg-Or. Ostal does not know where his men are now.

* * * *

"Klot!" exclaimed Lt. Seeger, leaping in fright to one side. The face of a slender galactic trader had just suddenly appeared out of nowhere next to him. Then the lieutenant's eyes became unnaturally large and he whispered hoarsely, half in disbelief and half in hope: "Kakuta...?"

Kakuta saved himself the trouble of replying. "What kind of place is this, Seeger?"

With an all-inclusive gesture, the lieutenant indicated the windowless room in which he and 31 men had been imprisoned. "A landing station and trading post for smuggling Springers, and our 2nd prison on Ekhas. The Star of Arkon was much more luxurious in comparison..."

The teleporter interrupted him, paying no heed to the fact that the entire crew of the *Tigris* had crowded around him in order not to miss a single word. "Is Lt. Hasting still dickering with the Springers?"

Lt. Seeger repressed his surprise at Kakuta's excellent information and hastened to reply: "They've been at it for hours. Or we hope they're still at it, anyway, and that they just didn't lock him up by himself somewhere. Tough customers, these Springers! Well, at least we have clothes now and we've had something to eat..."

"Describe to me the room in which Hasting is conferring with the Springers! Are you familiar with it, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, I was in there for 10 minutes myself. It's underground too, only a lot deeper than this hole. If I'm not mistaken, 2 or 3 large storerooms lay behind it. The room looks as follows..." And with astounding precision he described the parley room in a few words but so graphically that the teleporter Tako Kakuta could picture it well in his own mind.

The mutant disappeared in a shimmering of air, as silently as he had come.

Tako Kakuta rematerialised in total darkness. The numbing aroma of unknown herbs or drugs

penetrated his nose like a cloud of poison gas. He thought of Lt. Seeger's assertion that there were 2 or 3 of these storerooms below the ground.

His teleportation succeeded. He rematerialised in halfway fresh air, though again in impenetrable darkness. He looked around for a moment but found no light anywhere and switched on his spotlight.

The spotlight had been built into the 3rd button of his overalls and represented a piece of Swoon work. While Allan D. Mercant's Solar Defence had not yet been equipped with Swoon devices, Rhodan's mutant corps had already been outfitted completely with the unbelievably tiny but monstrously powerful and maintenance-free gadgets.

The beam of his spotlight rested on the large storeroom door. Nowhere could Kakuta find an energy barrier or an alarm system. Calmly he threaded his way between the piles of merchandise crates to the door.

The door could be opened. The teleporter pushed it open only as far as a hand's breadth and peered through the slit. Kakuta was looking into the very room that Lt. Seeger had so precisely described to him. Voices came to his ear, speaking in the plainest of Intercosmo, Now he recognized the voice of Lt. Peter Hasting. There was impatience in his tone and a threat.

"Springers... for the last time! Help us and you'll make the best bargain of your lives! It'll be all over for smuggling drugs, of course, but you'll smuggle information! Valuable information that would interest Perry Rhodan and you'll get good money for it—more money than you're making with smuggling drugs.

"Change your smuggling operation into a secret information agency. It surely won't be hard for you to do it. And don't tell me how much you're concerned with the security of the Imperium! You must make your choice... now! And if you decide for Rhodan that means you will secure a spaceship for us Terrans at the same time..."

"Not so fast, Terran!" Kakuta heard the bass voice of a Springer. "Who's paying for this? You know of course that we can perhaps be the best of friends if you pay better than Arkon or the Aras or whoever."

"Upon my honour as an officer of Perry Rhodan, I promise that payment of the still to be negotiated sum will be made to you 15 days after our escape from Ekhas..."

2 or 3 Springers laughed hollowly. Only the trader with the bass voice rumbled: "Shut your mouths, you blithering fools! Didn't you hear what was just said? So you're an officer, eh Terran? Good! Let's talk about what the spacer will cost and then you can give us your word as Rhodan's officer. I think that will make a very good start..."

2 sharply protesting voices loudly interrupted.

"I won't let my clan move a finger for this Terran!" exclaimed one.

"I'm not one bit in support of this Perry Rhodan!" asserted the other.

"Have it any way you like," commented the bass-voiced trader. "We'll just close the deal without you but because you know too much already, you'll just have to make yourself useful on the Gango plantations and..."

"What?" shrilly demanded one of the other voices. "Are you threatening us? You want to send us to the

drug farms on Klinu-Lun's Planet?"

"You heard me correctly," affirmed the bass-voiced Springer. "Haven't you had enough of this vile drug business? Sooner or later the Ekhonides will spot one of our drug ships taking off or landing... and then it will be all up for us!"

Tako Kakuta remained motionless at the slightly opened storeroom door, listening. Hasting's idea of making information agents out of drug-smuggling Springers was worth as much as the peaceful conquest of a planet.

The argument between the Springers went on for half an hour, coming to a sudden end with an ultimatum from the galactic trader who believed implicitly in Lt. Hasting's sworn word. Kakuta did not dare to open the door any farther but he believed that the bass-voiced Springer had made coming to a decision easier for the other 2 by holding a beamer on them.

Suddenly the teleporter heard an inarticulate short cry. His sharp hearing perceived approaching footsteps. In the same instant he concentrated and as the door behind which he had been listening was jerked open, he teleported back into the first storeroom.

He did not dare breathe the narcotic atmosphere but then came the moment when his lungs were screaming for air. An audacious idea shot through his mind and he carried it out almost simultaneously.

Lt. Hasting saw the air shimmer before him. He did not quite understand what was happening until Tako Kakuta stood in front of him with a thoroughly unfamiliar face. Yet he recognized Kakuta by his small, slender figure and by his manner of entry.

He reacted immediately. He stepped between the Oriental and the Springers, who were busy in the storeroom, blocking their view of him. Kakuta spoke. "Rhodan is on Ekhas. If the *Tigris* crew can't escape with the help of these Springers, we'll get you out of this ourselves. Try to convince the traders that they should become our agents and..."

"Disappear, Kakuta!" Hasting hissed at him. He listened to the Springers discuss the open-standing door; they seemed to be looking for something in the storeroom.

2 of the traders saw nothing more than a slight shimmering in the air but thought nothing more of it, chalking the apparition up as an effect of the lighting.

Tako Kakuta rematerialised on the edge of the city where Perry Rhodan, Kitai Ishibashi and Fellmer Lloyd were waiting for him. They stood in front of their small transport vehicle which they had purchased the evening before and which was only partially loaded.

A smile seemed to twinkle in Rhodan's grey eyes. Kakuta had ended his report and Rhodan asked: "I wonder if the police or the planetary defence will ever figure out who these clothes were meant for when they find the truck here with its load today or tomorrow?"

* * * *

Egg-Or, chief of planetary defence for Ekhas, let Gen. Sutokk's mixed squad of space soldiers wait. Sutokk had ordered over the telescreen for the Terran Clyde Ostal to be turned over to him immediately.

Again flanked by 2 robots, the Major of the Solar Security Service entered. Egg-Or's deathly pale face boded nothing good.

The vidscreen buzzed and a face appeared on it. Exwin, responsible for the security of the Ent-Than spaceport, spoke hurriedly. "Sir, the Terran crew was spotted at the northern edge of the spaceport when they were leaving a small Springer cutter. But our agent was unable to determine if they boarded a Springer spacer or flew to the city in 3 or 4 airtaxis; he was knocked out by an unknown assailant during the Terrans' disembarking manoeuvres. "I immediately..." For some seconds Exwin's voice could not be heard. Egg-Or stared at the vidscreen. Maj. Ostal listened with feverish tension.

When and where had his men made contact with Springers and how had they been able to convince these galactic traders to help them?

Now Exwin's voice sounded again from the loudspeaker. "Sir, Gen. Sutokk's space soldiers have also taken up the search for the Terran merchant crew as of just a few minutes ago! The General demanded that I issue an order forbidding all ships from taking off... for an unlimited duration! When I refused he threatened me with his fleet."

"Do what he wants, then," said Egg-Or, oddly calm. "But if he gives you any new orders, let me know first before you carry them out. Over and out."

He glanced up and looked at Ostal. "Take a seat if you will, Terran. This may take awhile. I have some things to take care of yet."

Then he remembered the watch robots and sent them out. He watched them go until the door had closed behind them.

Maj. Clyde Ostal sat down hesitantly. He had to admit to himself that he did not know the defence chief very well. Was this Ekhonide simply a declared opponent of brainlashing or was he one of those influential men who in their actions resisted the rule of the positronic Regent on Arkon 3 though through wisdom never displaying their resistance in any revolutionary form?

"Terran," Egg-Or began, forgetting about all the things he was to take care of, "you told me in our last interview that every Terran is a Perry Rhodan. I'm giving you the opportunity to prove it!"

"Look here..."

Then the telescreen sounded again. Exwin was at the other end. "Sir! Gen. Sutokk's space troops have captured the Terran crew without a fight!"

"Where?" Egg-Or demanded.

"In the headquarters of the United Small Traders on the north edge of the city."

"In the headquarters of the United Small Traders on the north edge of the city," Egg-Or repeated softly, not realizing he had said it out loud. He considered only what he might still do and did not sense the alien force overpowering his thoughts.

Egg-Or suddenly stood up. "Terran, from this moment on it would be senseless to ignore the orders of the Regent. Whatever you and your men have to hide the General will soon know. Meanwhile, Arkon is already aware of Earth's galactic position. Yes, in spite of your erasure of the *Tigris*' positronicon memory banks, we were able to obtain enough data to indicate the place where Terra might be found.

"But just tell me one thing which interests the General and me considerably: was Perry Rhodan behind this puzzling mistransition of your ship?"

Ostal managed a sympathetic smile. "Egg-Or, the *Tigris* is a small merchant vessel and not a ship in the Terran spacefleet. What is so mysterious about the mistransition of my ship, really? Doesn't it happen to every spacer now and then? Or do you have something to hide? It almost seems that way to me, Ekhonide."

"What do you mean by that, Terran?"

"What do I mean? Well, the crime of illegally capturing the *Tigris* is hardly enough for a Gen. Sutokk to make a murderer out of himself as well by ordering members of my crew to undergo a brainlashing! Behind this murderous order is hidden much more... but what, Egg-Or? That is what I'm asking myself and what I'm asking you!"

Unnoticed by Egg-Or but evident to Maj. Ostal, officer of the Solar Security Service, an astounding change came over the Ekhonide defence chief. His tense face relaxed and a pleasant and friendly Ekhonide made his appearance, nodding affably to Ostal.

Rhodan's here! the Major thought. One of the mutants is at work on Egg-Or with hypnotic or suggestive power. The cavalry certainly arrived at the last minute this time!

Egg-Or was chatting now but mentioned nothing of the *Tigris*, Gen. Sutokk or anything else relating to the *Tigris* operation. Then he stood up and approached Ostal, who instinctively rose as well, reached out his hand and said: "You are free to go now. Come visit me again, Ostal, should your travels bring you back to Ekhas. I would be very happy to see you again..."

...though I rather doubt it, the Major thought as he stepped out onto the street. He was not at all surprised when a small, slender Springer hurried past and whispered to him in English: "Maj. Ostal, go to the head of the 3rd street on the right!" The 'Springer' went on and after a few steps was lost in the press of the crowd.

9/ THE DESPERATE GAME ENDS

Gen. Sutokk had assembled his staff around him. The newscaster ran constantly, broadcasting one report after the other. All the news was coming from the offices of the United Small Traders. That was a union of small Springer clans who conducted their business together on many different worlds, thus keeping their overhead low. Considered as a single entity, the UST was no small economic factor and the trading General was reminded of that by an adjutant.

"General, we should let the matter drop. If it should also become known that the Arkon Defence

interfered with the strict rank-ordering laws of the Springers in the case of the *Mab 1*, we'd drive a large number of Springer clans straight into Rhodan's arms. The Terran agents are already spreading it quietly around that the Positronicon on Arkon 3 can't be trusted. So I urgently advise that we accept at face value the claim of the Springers in the United Small Traders' offices that the crew of the *Tigris* came in only by chance. We'll find out the truth when we get the Terrans under a brainlash."

Gen. Sutokk finally realized that his adjutant's suggestion was reasonable and would save him a great deal of trouble. With a grim expression he turned to the officer at the newscaster. "Have the Terrans sent to headquarters at once! Should we send out watch robots?... What for? 50 men would be enough to safely bring that weaponless group here. Pass on the order, then! What are you waiting for?"

In spite of his success, the General's mood was still bad. He simply could not rid himself of the feeling that Perry Rhodan could be behind the mistransition of the *Tigris*. Moreover, just an hour before his scientists had reported their thoughts on the coordinates obtained from the *Tigris* positronicon.

"General, it's possible that the whole lot of data is false. With the help of the great Arkon Star Catalogue we checked out the galactic coordinates and while we did find a solar system in that position, it's a system that has been known to us for 8,000 years and contains no inhabited planets."

"You're just now telling me this?" Gen. Sutokk had stormed. "You know that I've already passed the data on to the Regent by hypercom. Have Arkonide ships started flying out to that system yet, gentlemen?"

"So far as we can ascertain, sir, no."

"Then the catalogue's wrong!" With that rather audacious statement he had sent the scientists away. He thought of it again as his order was transmitted to the office of the UST for the Terrans to be brought to fleet headquarters, which was located in that part of the spaceport reserved for the Regent's battleships.

The streets leading past the business offices were completely blocked off, resulting in 2 enormous traffic jams. Hundreds of Ekhonides and vehicles grew in minutes to thousands. The civilians were ill pleased by the stoppage and Arkon's space soldiers suffered all manner of insults.

Then the Ekhonides saw the 30 Terrans whose picture had been continuously broadcast over the television channels since the day before, the same Terrans who had accomplished the impossible by breaking out of the Star of Arkon.

No one paid any attention to 2 galactic traders wedged in the crowd and looking across the street to the Springer trading office door. I was small and slender, the other tall and lanky with a slight slouch in his posture. They did not speak. They only saw.

3 armoured vehicles pulled up from the side streets. A cordon of heavily-armed space soldiers formed a narrow lane to the armoured cars for the Terrans.

The tall, lanky Springer gazed calmly at the loading site. Nothing about him betrayed the vast powers he controlled.

Then the officer wearing a portable communicator, in direct contact with the newscaster in Gen. Sutokk's office, declared the leading operation finished and announced that the 32 Terrans would arrive in the next half hour.

Then the order came for the space soldiers blocking the street from both sides to climb aboard the armoured vehicles.

A minute later the convoy rolled out. Nothing more could be seen of the Terrans inside the vehicles.

Traffic moved again and the Ekhonides and tourists could go on their way. The 2 Springers who had stood silently next to each other entered the nearest building.

In the middle of an empty floor, the tall man stood behind the short one, wrapped his arms about his companion's chest—and the air shimmered and the room was suddenly emptier than before.

Out in front of the reception building at the spaceport, 2 Springers stood on the street seeming to wait for something in particular. Their patience was not put to any great test. A small modern truck rolled up and stopped near them. They climbed inside without a word and the man at the throttle, a Springer with a steely gaze, set the truck in motion once more. He drove up to a fork in the road: an unmistakable sign read to the effect that the sideroad led to the headquarters of the Arkonide fleet.

4 Springers sat in the somewhat cramped cab of the truck along with a man who could be recognized at first glance as a Terran: Maj. Clyde Ostal.

They were all waiting for the crew of the *Tigris*.

From their parking place they could see the Terran merchant spacer. Its name shone clearly in the light from Naral reflecting off the surface of the sphere: *Tigris*.

"They're coming," a Springer with Fellmer Lloyd's voice said suddenly. "They're driving at top speed. Everything seems to be running smoothly."

Then the convoy thundered past them but it did not turn in to the sideroad leading to Arkonide Fleet Headquarters. It went straight on!

The small truck started up again and sped up, maintaining a position just behind the armoured transports. The group raced past the huge reception and administration building. Now the convoy went out on the spacefield itself, streaking across the flat plastic concrete surface of the spaceport towards a small Ekhonide spaceship whose crew came out to meet it and seemed to think nothing of leaving a spaceship behind with the engines running and no one aboard.

The armoured cars rolled up to the broad ramp leading up into the spacer. The space soldiers sprang out, again forming a double line to make a pathway for the 32 Terrans to reach the alien spaceship. They did not concern themselves with the truck that had held close to the rear armoured car nor did they take notice of the 5 men who pushed through the line of guards to climb into the Ekhonide ship too.

In front of the 2nd transport vehicle stood an officer making his report over the audio-video communicator. "In 3 minutes the convoy will turn back towards headquarters. ETA: 15:67 and..."

A high-pitched voice bellowed out of the loudspeaker. "What did you say, Thur-Ges? Why did you stop in front of a spaceship? What's going on over there? Answer me!"

With incredible calmness Thur-Ges, officer in the spacefleet of the Regent of Arkon, repeated his statements. "In 3 minutes the convoy will turn back towards headquarters. ETA..."

The last Terran to enter the hatch of the small Ekhonide spacer heard the scream from headquarters: "All ships take off immediately! Alarm! Take off immediately! Details will follow!"

Sgt. Fip had been the last man. He closed the hatch and the ramp automatically drew itself in. Meanwhile, Perry Rhodan, at the head of their men, ran through the ship to the control room.

Every second was precious. The lead they had over the Arkonide fleet was only relative. They did not know how many ships the headquarters had already underway in the Naral System.

Perry Rhodan threw himself into the pilot's seat.

Kitai Ishibashi, the suggestor, had once more accomplished an excellent piece of work. All the equipment aboard this small spacer could be immediately turned on at full power. Just then a light came on indicating that all the hatches were closed.

Syncontrol set at '1'!

The engines began to howl.

Antigrav field: max!

The spacer leaped into the blue Ekhonide sky and accelerated like it never had before. The absorber hummed as it soaked up the inertial force of acceleration before it could affect the crew.

"Hypercom ready?" Rhodan asked over the intercom to the Com Centre, which on this small ship was adjacent to the control room.

"Ready, Chief," the man at the hypercom unit called back. The word 'chief' sounded like a fanfare.

"Prepare a hypercom message for the *Lotus* : Arkon, Arkon... No, not that!" Rhodan decided, remembering suddenly that he had already used the word 'Arkon' in the middle of the Milky Way for the call from the *Lotus* to the *Mab 1*. "Use this instead: Mercant, Mercant, Mercant..."

"Chief...?"

Rhodan already knew what the man at the hypercom wanted to say. "Pronounce it with an Arkonide accent: that's all that's necessary. Then the boys listening in on the 'other side' will have their work cut out for them, trying to figure out what that word repeated 3 times can possibly mean..."

The small radar also functioned. The man posted at it reported: "Sir, a battleship is nearing Ekhas. Position..." and gave its coordinates.

"I've got him," said Kitai Ishibashi with uncanny calm, meaning the commander of the oncoming Arkonide battlespacer.

Just as he had influenced Egg-Or, 50 Arkonide soldiers and the crew of this small ship, so now he reached across a gigantic distance in space and forced the mind of the enemy commander to his will. 10 minutes later Gen. Sutokk was overcome by a 3rd outburst of rage because his radarman reported that the Arkonide spacer had taken a different direction than the one ordered over the radio.

"Has everyone gone crazy?!" he exploded.

Meanwhile the small Ekhonide ship had left the atmosphere. Mercilessly Rhodan drained the ship of everything that it was capable of. Every second was precious. If the Arkonide spacers lying at the spaceport had already taken off, their desperate game would soon be at an end. His suggestor Kitai Ishibashi was no magician and, no matter how much he was capable of, Rhodan knew where his mutant's limits lay.

"Transmit hypercom message!" he called to the Com Centre, using his raised voice instead of the intercom as he was even then attempting to raise the small hangar on the latter.

"Fellmer Lloyd?" was all he asked over the intercom.

"Lifeboat ready, Chief. The crew's getting in now."

"Thank you!" Rhodan turned around. "Everyone leave his position. There's a small hangar on B-deck: go there immediately and get into the lifeboat spacer there. You've no time to lose!"

The last report Rhodan received was: "The Arkonide fleet has taken off, sir!"

He looked at the chronometer. Their head start amounted to a matter of 12 minutes. If the *Lotus* had immediately understood the thrice repeated "Mercant", it could arrive in 5 or 6 minutes and take them on board, lifeboat and all. The newly developed frequency damper would prevent the *Lotus* from being spotted.

"Get going!" he ordered Maj. Ostal. "I'll get this ship ready by myself. Save a place for me in the lifeboat—of course the pilot's seat! See you soon, Major! You've done a good job!"

The compliment from the mouth of the Administrator of the Solar Imperium in this dangerous situation struck the Major as a bit odd. Had Rhodan said it because he knew that if the Regent's robotships arrived very soon he would never have another chance to say it?

Perry Rhodan had no time for such thoughts. The small Ekhonide ship raced at a speed that threatened to tear it apart, yet in spite of all its strain, it was slow in comparison to the ships of the Arkonide fleet.

But perhaps it was possible to shake off the pursuers in some other manner? And for the preparations for that, Rhodan allowed himself no time to think of other things.

He made an atomic bomb out of the ship!

His brain functioned as precisely as a positronic computer

A twist of a dial, a press of a button, a twist of another dial. And then he was ready.

The small transformer would explode first, in 2 or 3 minutes. Its explosion would detonate half a dozen energy storage banks and then the entire ship would be a blazing atomic inferno.

Now Perry Rhodan raced to the hangar on B-deck.

2 or 3 minutes remaining until the ship blew up—that span of time was considerably limited. But there was no other way out.

Maj. Ostal had saved him his seat.

With a reverberating cracking the inner hatch of the hangar closed, then the entrance hatch of the lifeboat was shut. Rhodan transmitted the electronic signal that triggered the opening of the outer hatch in the ship's hull.

Slowly—much too slowly—it started to open.

Finally the outer hatch had opened 1/3rd of the way. Rhodan could wait no longer.

Engine thrust at 33% capacity! The small lifeboat engines pushed the tiny spacecraft, crammed with nearly 40 men, out into open space with only centimetres to spare on either side of the partially blocked hatchway.

They hurtled into the void. To the right shone the yellowish star Naral, glowing like the eye of a beast of prey. Somewhere behind them the robot spacers of the Arkonide Fleet were shooting towards them.

Perry Rhodan had sped the small lifeboat up to full speed. The little craft, first supplied with the velocity of its mothership and now well underway thanks to its relatively powerful engines, was not nearly out of the danger zone yet. Behind them the Ekhonide ship became a tiny sun swiftly expanding in all directions at once.

Over the large vidscreen in his office, Gen. Sutokk witnessed the destruction of the Ekhonide ship as relayed by cameras aboard one of the robotspacers.

His hard face twisted into a satisfied smile but it quickly gave way to an expression of regret. "Now I'll never find out which Springer clan was collaborating with these Terrans. That's too bad. But I won't tell the Regent that. I'll just say that the *Tigris* crew no longer exists..."

He was listening with only half an ear. Then it was announced that in spite of his orders to the contrary, ships were taking off. One of them had been the *Mab 1*, and he had been told nothing about it because of an unavoidable mix-up in communications. As he listened to this piece of news, the *Mab 1* was long vanished into the depths of the galaxy and could no longer be reached.

Gen. Sutokk could have been satisfied with the outcome of the operation, however, except when he remembered how unreasonable stupidly some of his people had suddenly acted, actions not even his scientists could explain. Then he came near to an outburst of rage.

Suddenly he remembered the captain of the *Tigris*. He was still with Egg-Or.

Why hadn't he been sent here yet?

"Get me Egg-Or!" Sutokk roared into the microphone. Egg-Or's face soon appeared on the vidscreen. "Egg-Or, did the stupidity epidemic hit you too? What's going on here on this planet all of a sudden? You mean to say you sent the captain over to see me... without any guards?! Oh, this is too much..." At that point Gen. Sutokk got up and ran out of his office for some fresh air. His staff breathed easier, in relief.

* * * *

No Arkonide ship spotted the *Lotus* when she sprang into the Naral System, took on a tiny lifeboat packed full with men and then disappeared in the direction of the Solar System once more. The newly developed frequency damper covered for any spring through hyperspace.

The danger that the Robot Regent might have discovered Earth's position after all still existed but only for the next 3 to 4 days. When the 4th day had passed, the danger was over. What Perry Rhodan had secretly feared had not materialized—no Arkonide spacespheres had appeared in Earth's skies!

All Terran ships were ordered to return. Only the few ships already equipped with the damper were allowed to make transitions. All the others had to wait until they too were supplied with the equipment that did not allow vibrations from the structocomp to escape into space. But so that the Robot Regent would not immediately learn that Terran ships were outfitted with an important new device, Perry Rhodan had some of his damper-equipped starships in the middle of the Galaxy make serial *undamped* transitions which of course would be detected by the Great Imperium's sensor stations, Perry Rhodan was well aware that he could not have his ships doing that for months on end, for if nothing else, he knew enough not to underestimate the Robot Regent. But every day he realized more and more that time worked for him and against Arkon.

Rhodan looked up from his desk.

Maj. Clyde Ostal stepped in. "Sir," he announced, "Professor Manoli has just informed me of the death of Mabdan 3. He died as a result of Arkonide forced hypnosis. There was nothing that could be done for him."

"And what about the old Mabdan... Mabdan 1: is he still lying in a drugged stupor?"

Clyde Ostal smiled. "That's why I asked to speak to you, sir... Mabdan 1 is waiting in the anteroom. He's in good health now and feeling fine. He wants to thank you for his rescue from his addiction. Our doctors did wonders with him."

"Then send him in, Ostal. After that, go remind Mr. Bell of the former drug smuggler on Ekhas and that the sum of money we owe him should be paid immediately. After all, who knows when we might need a friend...?"

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE TIGRIS LEAPS

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

EXISTENCE QUESTIONABLE.

That is the question facing the 8000 exiles from Earth, banished to Grautier, 7th planet of the Myrtha system, lying far off the routes of the interstellar space lanes. For they have learned, these transplaneted Terrestrials, that they are not alone on their grave new world—in the mountains exists a semi-intelligent race of monkeys, the Mungos, and in the jungles of the lowland live strange blue dwarfs who are endowed with amazing paramechanical and parapsychological powers.

But that's not all.

There are also intelligent beings inhabiting the 12th planet of the system—the Whistlers—and their recent invasion of Grautier has made the continued existence of the colonists quite questionable.

To protect themselves against a potential second invasion, A group of Grautierians 'reciprocate' the visit of the Whistlers, appearing on their planet in the guise of—

AMBASSADORS FROM AURIGEL

By

Kurt Mahr