

"THE COLONISTS": EPISODE# 5

EVACUATION TO VENUS. This is the fate forced on a portion of the exiles from Earth who have just begun to get used to the planet Grautier.

Others begin to do service with the newly established Solar Fleet Base on Grautier.

The problem of peril: mathematical calculations have revealed that in about 10 months the Myrtha system will be overlapped by the time-plane of the Druufs. When every volunteer counts in the race against time, there is no time for deserters.

And yet—Perry Rhodan is confronted with the frustrating fact of—

RENEGADES OF THE FUTURE

1/ TO BETRAY EARTH!

A BAD DREAM. Tossing and turning in his sleep, Gunther Chellish began to perspire. Finally he sat bolt upright, eyes wide open.

And stared straight into a gun muzzle.

At first he thought it was part of his nightmare but then his eyes adjusted themselves to the dimness of the cabin and he could see the reality behind the pistol barrel. It was a huge hairy hand that firmly grasped the butt-end of the weapon and the hand was attached to an arm that, from Chellish's perspective, seemed to rise to a towering height. There it joined a shoulder that seemed to belong to a professional wrestler.

The nocturnal intruder's face was barely visible in the diffused residual light from the night lamp but judging from the breadth of the shoulders, Chellish knew they could only belong to Roane—Oliver Roane, one of the settlers who had recently been taken over into the Fleet. Chellish wondered what Roane could be thinking of. To break into a Gazelle like this in the middle of the night and startle the only man on board out of his sleep with a pointed pistol was not something that anyone would do if he were just kidding around.

But before Chellish could complete his train of thought, Roane spoke to him gruffly. "Come on, on your feet—make it snappy! And don't try anything cute. You probably know I can handle a gun—right?"

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The Terrania Daily News, published under auspices of the Ministry of Public Information and Opinion, ran the following press release under dateline of 3 Oct. 2042:

On Myrtha 7, latest base of the Terranian spacefleet, three deserters have succeeded in making their escape on board a Gazelle type long-range reconnaissance spaceship. Their course is currently unknown but extensive search activity is in progress.

In addition to the deserters it is probable that 1st Lt. Chellish is also on board the scoutship. Chellish gained recent public notice in connection with repelling the encroachments of a humanoid race from Myrtha 12. It is presumed that he has been forced to pilot the hijacked flier.

Fleet authorities have attached no especial significance to the incident, since neither the data memory of the Gazelle nor 1st Lt. Chellish nor the three deserters are in possession of any important defence information.

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Yes, Chellish knew Roane could handle a gun. Squinting upward at the man, he slipped a leg over the edge of the low-lying bunk. Drowsily he placed his feet on the deck as though preparing to stand up. He moved and acted with the slow clumsiness of one who had not yet collected his wits about him. So his big-shouldered opponent was taken by surprise when he suddenly came up from the floor like an arrow. His left shoulder struck Roane's gun hand and Roane shouted a curse as he lost his grip on the pistol.

At the sound of the gun clattering across the deck, Chellish knew half the battle was won. In comparison to Roane he was a weakling but Roane was caught off guard and Chellish had the hard training of the Fleet behind him. He shot his hand forward and clipped his assailant across the throat, causing him to stagger back gurgling in pain. He followed swiftly as Roane crashed backwards against the bulkhead. With a flying leap, he rammed him heavily in the stomach.

He heard Roane let out a grunt of pain and saw him topple over to his left. Chellish stood there breathlessly, waiting to see whether Roane was really out or if he was playing a trick. But before he could determine which, something exploded in his brain with a flash of unexpected violence.

He didn't even know it when he crashed to the deck.

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As he came to again he heard somebody groan: "The crazy fool!" Even though a sharp, humming

headache impaired his thinking at the moment, he knew that he himself was being referred to.

The voice he had heard was Roane's but now a second voice answered: "It would have been a mess if I hadn't been close by. I hope he comes to. We can't hang around here till broad daylight. In another hour and a half at the most the sun will be up."

So that's how it was, thought Chellish. While he was taking care of Roane, an accomplice had sneaked up on him from behind. Who could this one be, anyway? He thought he had heard the voice before but he couldn't associate it with the face it belonged to.

So he opened his eyes and the first person he saw was Oliver Roane, who was standing with his back toward him. He himself was lying on his bunk again. The second man could not be seen because Roane's broad figure was blocking the way. Meanwhile, somebody had turned the lights on full. Chellish risked looking about, observing that the cabin was still all in one piece. Therefore, Roane and his companion had not come here to steal anything.

So what else could be the reason?

Gunther Chellish thought back in time. A few weeks ago after the 'Whistler Adventure' had been wound up, Lt.-Col. Sikerman had landed with three cruisers of the spacefleet on Myrtha 7, otherwise known as Grautier. The 8000 settlers who had been deported here from Earth were informed that for certain vital reasons Myrtha 7 would henceforth be a support base for the Terranian spacefleet. The settlers had been sentenced to exile by Earthly civilian courts because of revolutionary activities but now they were set free to establish themselves anew on Venus, in the direct vicinity of Earth. Most of them had accepted the offer and had actually been brought to Venus, 6000 light-years away. Only about 1000 of them had remained behind, being especially selected as people who had most likely gotten over their earlier discontent with the Administrator's regime. These people had been taken over into the spacefleet service. In fact, the swearing-in ceremony had only taken place a few days ago.

Some months before, 1st Lt. Chellish had landed here on Grautier under the command of Capt. Blailey in order to watch the development of the immigrant colony, and now he had taken command of this Gazelle. At present, Blailey commanded a semi-squadron of the space reconnaissance ships, and all of them were stationed here.

The ships' crews were in the habit of spending the night in the newly-constructed troop barracks. However, a ship the size of a Gazelle required one man to sleep on board. Chellish thought bitterly now of this arrangement as he tried to figure out who could help him in his present predicament. Of course the barracks were close enough to the ships so that the personnel could reach them in a matter of moments, and if he could give out an alarm he would be saved. The only difficulty was that Roane and his companion, whoever he might be, would not give him any opportunity for sounding an alarm.

He rolled onto his side and the noise apprised Roane of the fact that his victim had regained his senses. As he turned toward him, Chellish caught a quick look at the other man. It was Suttney. Chellish knew that Suttney belonged to a group of men who had sought to stir up trouble among the settlers some months before, under a leader named Hollander. Hollander had been sentenced to death. Deprived of their leader, the members of his band had rejoined the settler community.

Suttney's presence here gave a new aspect to the situation. Chellish knew that he couldn't expect much good from a former associate of Hollander because he himself had taken a significant part in the chase after Hollander and his men.

Roane had long since retrieved his gun, which he now held in his hand. When he saw that Chellish had his eyes open he aimed the weapon at him and sneered. "I'll pay you back for getting smart—but not now. There's plenty of time for that."

Chellish raised up on his elbows. "Didn't you take an oath a few days ago?" he asked, while wondering how his roaring head could stand the additional thunder of his voice. "So you're subject to martial law. If you're caught you'll probably be shot by a firing squad."

Oliver Roane wasn't the quick-thinking type who always had a pat answer for every occasion. He was a muscle man and when he recognized Suttney he wondered why it had been left to Roane to take care of him.

Now Suttney stepped nearer into plain view. "We don't intend to get caught, because you're going to help us!" he said.

"*And then* what happens?" asked Chellish wonderingly.

"I don't think we have to blab our plans out to you," Suttney answered coldly. "The main thing that you have to do is follow what we tell you. Anything else will get you into trouble." He watched Chellish as if to detect the impact of his words on him. Then he made an imperious gesture. "Get up and come along with us!"

Chellish saw no way out but to follow instructions. He got to his feet and cursed the pain in his head. Meanwhile, Suttney had opened the cabin's sliding door and stepped out into the corridor. Chellish followed him and behind him came Roane with levelled pistol.

Suttney went to the control room. Chellish saw at first glance that without exception all the main systems on board the Gazelle had been turned on. It dawned on him what Roane and Suttney expected of him but he couldn't yet make rhyme nor reason out of their possible objective.

Suttney stopped beside the pilot's seat. "By now you may have figured out what we need from you," he said. "You're going to lift this ship into outer space. That's all we want you to do for now."

"You don't say!" sneered Chellish defiantly. "*Is that* all...!"

Suttney nodded gravely. "For the time being, yes."

"I wouldn't think of it!" retorted Chellish angrily.

In the same instant he received a blow in the most sensitive part of his body—the back of his head, which was still roaring and buzzing. For a few seconds he blacked out and when he came to again he was lying on the deck near the pilot's seat.

Roane grinned down at him. "There's more where that came from," he announced.

Chellish suppressed an impulse to leap up and attack Roane because it didn't make much sense to charge into the muzzle end of a loaded gun.

"Well...?" asked Suttney.

"Are you out of your minds?" yelled Chellish. "Don't you know what would happen if I took off now?"

Within 2 or 3 minutes we'd have the whole Grautier Fleet on our necks. Or maybe you were thinking we could stick to regulations and ask for permission to leave?"

But when he got to his feet he saw that Suttney's attitude had become surly.

"Quit kidding around!" warned the latter. His voice was low but menacing. "You're fully aware of what this fly-boat can do. You can make an emergency flash takeoff and go into a hypertransition within a minute. Don't try any fairy tales on me—I know what a Gazelle can do."

Great!—thought Chellish grimly. So Suttney knew what the ship could do, and now he was supposed to make it perform. Lord knew he'd never been a model soldier, because otherwise in all his time of service he would have become a captain or something higher. Nevertheless, this was something Suttney could not force him to do.

He went around to the front of the pilot's seat and sat down. He felt miserable but not so miserable that he was incapable of putting up some kind of resistance to Suttney's treachery.

"Give me some coördinates," he said peevishly. "If I'm going to make a hyperjump I have to know where to."

"Not necessary," countered Suttney instantly. "We can work out our plan from any part of the galaxy. Just get going and make sure you don't come out somewhere in Andromeda."

Gunther Chellish considered this, then nodded. "As you wish. The responsibility for it will be on you."

"That I can handle," Suttney assured him scornfully

Chellish moved slowly then. He reached out his hand to depress a control button but suddenly stopped and groaned, grasping his head. He choked several times as though prepared to throw up, thus gaining time. He took a minute and a half just to make his preliminary checkout, all the while considering a thousand ideas, rejecting them and coming up with 500 new ones. He quickly realized that none of them were worth anything. There wasn't a single fast play he could make without running a suicidal risk. But once he faced that fact he decided to take the risk anyway.

Everything depended on whether or not Suttney understood the significance of a certain control on the main switchboard. The button bore no decal, nor was it lettered, but it was big and glaring red. Anybody who had even had only one session at the flight console of a Gazelle would know what its function was. It was the ship alarm, and while the spacecraft was still parked on the field it was coupled to the ground installations. The interval between hitting that button and having troops swarming onto the field would be about 20 seconds. It would then be impossible to take off and Suttney and Roane would be caught in their own trap.

Chellish was apprehensive that in such case they might prefer to destroy him and themselves rather than surrender but it was a risk he had to take.

The alarm button was located high up on the switch panel. It had been intentionally installed out of reach of normal movement so that it could not be tripped by accident. To reach it, Chellish had to lean far forward. He did not do this all at once because he knew without looking around that Roane was standing behind him with the pistol aimed at his back. He depressed a series of switch buttons that were located beneath the alarm and which were ineffective temporarily because their respective equipment sections had not yet been turned on. In this process, his hand moved higher on the panel and he was forced to

lean forward more.

He didn't dare look around because in so doing he would alert them to his uncertainty. However he made a pause as though his headache were getting worse, and he listened. Behind him nothing moved. All he could hear was Roane's heavy breathing.

To gain still more time, he fell back in his chair. Since he had just been working the upper section of the panel it would not seem too conspicuous now if he were to lean far forward again. After taking a deep breath, he did so. At first he activated a few more switches—then his hand leapt forward suddenly.

What happened then came so swiftly that he could not remember later the true sequence of events. A searing hot pain shot through his outstretched hand even before he could reach the alarm button. Then he heard the hissing on a section of the forward bulkhead near the viewscreen and saw that the wall plate began to bubble. A few droplets of molten metal plastic trickled downward but hardened before reaching the control console.

Chellish saw it all in a dreamlike clarity although the murderous pain in his hand was beginning to cloud his consciousness. He realized that Suttney had seen through his ruse and that Roane had shot at his fingers just as he was about to press the alarm button. His discouragement and anger over his misfired strategy were almost more unbearable than the pain of his wounded hand. For a few moments he wavered in a semi-conscious state but Suttney's sharp voice soon brought him to again.

"That'll show you we're playing for keeps, Chellish! So now you get busy and do what we tell You to do!"

Chellish was too broken and weary to offer further resistance. He had run through the flight startups of Gazelles so often that he could have made the control settings in his sleep. In fact it was a good thing he didn't have to use his brain for it, because his shame and defeat and rage concerning Suttney and Roane crowded out every other thought or emotion.

He brought all the appropriate equipment to a full-power warmup and then sank back with a sigh. He had to admit that his game was up because any Gazelle-type scoutship could easily take off in such a way as to avoid pursuit and get out of gun range in a hurry. Suttney was right: beyond 40 seconds of top acceleration a hypertransition could be risked. And since this particular model was not only equipped with a hyper-compensator but one of the new frequency absorbers as well, it could make a transition without being detected by tracking stations.

So he had lost this round—or had he?

A new idea came to him suddenly. Suttney and maybe even Roane probably knew something about the technical details of a Gazelle—but they certainly couldn't know very much about galactonautics. They wouldn't be able to tell what direction he was taking. Perhaps he could jump the ship into a heavily travelled space lane somewhere. Once the space around them was swarming with ships from the fleet it would remain to be seen whether Suttney and Roane would prefer being taken prisoner to being annihilated by heavy disintegrators.

That was it. He knew he could make such a manoeuvre. Among the people who had been transferred recently into the Fleet was only one man who knew something about galactonautics: Ronson Lauer. He was not on board, although in retrospect Chellish would not have put it past the man to have gone along with Suttney and Roane had he been taken into their plans.

But the fact remained that he was not on board now and Chellish was confident he could fool Suttney and Roane any day of the week as far as the course of flight was concerned. This thought gave a new lift to his spirits. He turned around. "Better strap in!" he told them. "I'm taking off."

"What's the big deal?" asked Suttney wonderingly. "We're equipped with inertial absorbers. We shouldn't feel a thing, should we?"

Chellish shrugged. There was no use trying to talk them into anything that would take him out of their sight for even a moment.

He moved the drive control into its first position as a checkout. Although the darkness of night dominated the viewscreen he could see that the Gazelle was responding properly. Then he tensed and threw the flight bar to maximum.

Inside the spacecraft nothing could be felt, but the viewscreen suddenly blazed with the outside glare of light. Their acceleration was such that the collision of air molecules excited the exterior defence screen, causing ionization, and the Gazelle shot upward through the thick atmosphere of the planet, leaving a glowing, fiery contrail behind it. Chellish kept a sharp eye on his instruments. He noted the rapid drop of atmospheric pressure outside and saw that the illuminated velocity indicator had overshot its maximum range. But in that moment the meter switched automatically to a higher scale. Now a new range of speed was involved and the moving indicator started anew from the left but more slowly. Adjacent to the space speedometer, on the right, a small chronometer was ticking off the minus countdown since takeoff. There was also a more complex apparatus that integrated time, speed and acceleration by means of positronic computation to arrive at the distance covered since takeoff. At the end of 40 seconds the stretch they had put behind them amounted to about 250,000 miles, or slightly more than the distance from Earth to the Moon.

The time had come for the hytrans. Chellish didn't have time to calculate any exact coördinates for the jump. He merely programmed the propulsion units for a transition of 200 light-years. For the present he didn't have any idea where they'd come out at but he knew he'd be able to orient himself readily once the ship had returned to normal space.

He announced to Suttney: "I'm going into the jump now."

Then he depressed a control button with a swift motion of his hand and threw them into transition. He sensed the short tug of pain that accompanied dematerialisation and for the fraction of a second he had the impression that someone was holding a hand over his eyes.

When he could see again, the view on the telescopic screens had changed. The soft-glowing nebulous cloud of distant stars remained the same but the constellations formed by the nearer stars, like great pearls on the shimmering background—these had changed. The hyperjump was a success and from now on nobody on Grautier or anywhere else would know where the stolen Gazelle had disappeared to.

Chellish began to relax but at the same moment he heard Suttney's obvious question: "Where are we?"

"200 light-years from Grautier," Chellish answered. "That's all I know."

But soon, he thought, he would find out. And maybe 200 light-years wasn't far enough for Suttney? Here he might not yet feel safe enough. They would no doubt make a second jump—a longer one—over 6000 light-years for example. And he'd just like to see how these two would be able to tell from his calculations where they would come out at.

Galacto-math is a head-breaker, Suttney, he thought to himself. You don't understand it, do you? All I have to do is tell you the jump will bring us into the centre of the galaxy and you'll believe me. But your eyes are going to pop when you see that the sun that's going to emerge in front of us is our own: Sol!

Suddenly he no longer felt the pains caused by Roane's blows and the burning of his fingers. He felt strong and ready for action. He wanted to put Suttney where he belonged: A Security jail cell—and the sooner the better.

Then he heard Suttney say: "I think 200 light-years are shaving it a bit too thin. So we're going to make another jump just to be on the safe side. But before that I want to show you something, just in case you're playing with any smart ideas."

Chellish looked up in some surprise as Suttney indicated the entrance hatchway to the control room. The door panel was just opening as he looked. He stared, wide-eyed, at the man who appeared there. For a second or two the shock of recognition blanked him out. mentally and when he finally collected himself his mouth was as dry as if he had just spent a day hiking in the desert.

The man who had entered the control room was Ronson Lauer, the one who knew his way around, somewhat, in the field of galactonautics.

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The history of the planet Grautier had been short but eventful. In the annals of Terranian space travel this world had appeared for the first time only slightly more than 2 years before. The transport ship *Adventurous* had been commissioned to bring the 8000 exiled revolutionaries to Rigel 3 but a mutiny had broken out among the settlers which had resulted in severe damage to the engines, making it necessary to land on the unknown world instead. After the emergency landing the ship itself was nothing but a useless wreck. The crew had been forced to join the settler community on Grautier.

At first the settlers had fallen into conflict with each other. They separated into two rival groups: the True Democrats under Horace O. Mullon and the Nature Philosophers under Walter S. Hollander. It soon became evident that Hollander was striving for sole totalitarian power over the others. In his first attempt he succeeded in driving Mullon and his people against the wall but in his retaliation Mullon was able to retake the town of Greenwich—the only one that had been built to that date—and capture Hollander and his associates. In accordance with the law administered by the People's Assembly of Greenwich, Hollander was sentenced to death. His companions were sentenced to forced labour but events were soon to intrude which interrupted a full application of the punishment and finally made it impossible.

Mullon and a few companions who had a scientific interest in the planet had discovered meanwhile that Grautier was populated by two remarkable types of organic life: the Mungos, half-intelligent apes who lived high up in the mountains; and the Blue Dwarfs. These latter were wholly non-humanoid creatures that appeared to be bluish blobs of matter but when they occurred in considerable masses they seemed to possess a very significant parapsychic and telekinetic capability. However, Mullon's effective statesmanship had succeeded in winning the indigenous intelligences over as friends of the settlers.

Finally, calamity descended from an exterior source. In the Myrtha System there were altogether 49

planets of all types and sizes, and among these was a second world that supported intelligent life. This was Myrtha 12, a small, Mars-like planet on which lived humanoid creatures that were strange in form and characteristics. The Whistlers, as the settlers were to call them later, were about 6 feet tall on the average although frightfully thin, and their language was made up of a series of whistles, twitterings and hissings. For this reason they were dubbed Whistlers.

There were about 3 billion Whistlers living on their world, and since living space had become a problem and they possessed the requisite technology to do something about it, they had taken a look around in their immediate environment and had come to Grautier. The 8000 settlers were subjugated. They were not sufficiently equipped to defend themselves against the Whistlers. They were forced to till the soil with the help of machines the conquerors had brought with them, and they had to plant and harvest prescribed quotas of various types of grain. The Whistler ship departed from Grautier, leaving behind them a guard force of 200 in order to supervise the progress of the work. One of Hollander's former followers, a man named Pashen, had aligned himself with the usurpers for the purpose of personal advantage.

Gunther Chellish was a crew member of a Gazelle that had been sent to Grautier by Perry Rhodan for the purpose of secret observation, and his party had hidden Out in the mountains. But even before the death of Hollander he had allied himself with the regular settlers, of course without revealing his true identity for the time being. So it was that he had discovered that the Whistlers' agricultural machines were powered by small nuclear reactors. He disassembled several of the reactors and reconstructed an atomic bomb with the fissionable material. The 200 alien sentinels were overpowered and 4 months later when the Whistler ship returned it perished in the fireball of the ignited bomb.

Meanwhile, Chellish had finally revealed his identity, and he told the settlers he had no doubt that sooner or later a whole Whistler fighting force would visit Grautier and take over if the settlers did not take action to prevent it. The *Adventurous* was equipped with an auxiliary spacecraft that had scraped through the crash-landing without too much damage. Since it was fully capable of a 500 light-year range, it was made flightworthy again. A commando group of 13 men took off for Myrtha 12, where they played the role of a legation from a distant planet named Aurigel. Chellish, who was a part of this expedition, managed to drop certain ominous hints which quickly led the Whistlers to believe that the Aurigel people were planning to attack Myrtha 12 and overthrow them. So the Whistlers' attention was attracted to this alleged new danger and for the moment Grautier was forgotten. Chellish's plan seemed to be succeeding but at the last moment a series of unfortunate incidents enabled the enemy to see through their subterfuge. He and his companions were arrested and would have been executed had it not been for a last minute miracle.

The miracle appeared in the form of 3 cruisers of the Terranian spacefleet under command of Lt.-Col. Sikerman. Terranian scientists had discovered the fact that in the course of the next 10 months there would be another one of the strange overlaps of two time planes, this time in the Myrtha area. Such phenomena had occurred initially in the year 2040 in the Mirsal System and had posed a very serious problem for Perry Rhodan. The situation called for turning Grautier into a fleet base where preparations would have to be made for making a large-scale penetration into the alien time plane.

Sikerman had arrived well-informed concerning the political situation in the Myrtha System. He knew that he could not proceed with his base construction in an orderly fashion until he had first pumped some sense into the Whistlers. He accomplished this through an impressive demonstration of Terranian power, which resulted in the release of Chellish and his companions and their return to Grautier again. Thus a local threat was eliminated but now Grautier was no longer an independent colony. Terra had taken it over.

During the following weeks, Grautier was a scene of unprecedented activity. Entire transport fleets

brought in the material necessary for building the military base. A legal commission appeared also, through whose auspices the settlers were offered a chance to build a new home on Venus, which was much closer to Earth. Those people who were judged to have taken a direct part in the various criminal activities of Hollander—among whom was Pashen in particular—were recaptured and brought to trial. The evacuation of the remaining settlers was taken care of in a matter of a few days. Those people who had been mere ‘fellow travellers’ with the Hollander factions were allowed to go unpunished.

About 1000 people who had once called themselves the Free Settlers Anti-Socialist Party had remained behind on Grautier. A plan developed whereby those among them who had special training or ability would be taken over into the fleet. The settlers were in agreement with this and the rest was a mere matter of formal processing. In this manner the new fleet base had been able to provide itself with operating personnel.

Ultimately Perry Rhodan himself put in an appearance on Grautier in order to satisfy himself that the work was progressing properly. Almost over night Grautier had become one of the most important bases in the galaxy. From here the decisive blow against the Druufs was to be launched. The Druufs were the alien race from the other time plane who had taken advantage of the creeping dimensional overlap in order to carry out their depredations throughout the reaches of the galaxy. Whatever had happened previously on Grautier was forgotten. The Whistlers, who had feared the 8000 settlers more than the plague or the giant grey beasts from whom the planet had gotten its name, faded into relative obscurity.

Under the pressure of events, no one had taken special pains to reexamine the present political convictions of the new fleet recruits. It had been all of two years now since they had been sentenced to exile because of their revolutionary agitations, underground conspiracies and similar crimes, back on the Earth. Of course most of them had perceived the error of their ways, above all, Horace O. Mullon. But there were some who still clung to the old ideas, in particular the former followers of Walter S. Hollander.

Their transfer into the fleet had been as smooth and uneventful as that of any of the others. But once they found themselves wearing their official uniforms they were convinced the time had finally come to put their plans into operation.

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The takeoff of the *Gazelle* triggered a major alert. Capt. Blailey’s semi-squadron and all available space cruisers announced themselves ready for action within a few minutes of the alarm. However their flight readiness was of little use as long as nobody knew where the surprise fugitive had gone.

Perry Rhodan appeared in the provisional Ground Control Central at the spaceport. The C.O. on duty was a young captain who saluted and began to launch into a long-winded explanation. Rhodan waved him off gently, telling him that he was already informed of the situation.

"I take it you haven’t mustered out all hands for roll call?" he asked, finally.

"No sir," replied the captain. "I haven’t gotten to that yet."

"Good. Then do it now. We have to know *who* has absconded with the *Gazelle*. By the way: who had

duty on board the scoutship?"

"First Lt. Chellish, sir."

"I presume there's been no signal from the Gazelle so far?"

"No sir."

Rhodan frowned pensively. First Lt. Chellish... He had a clear recollection of the reports from his immediate superior, Capt. Blailey, which had been submitted concerning him during the original mission on Grautier. Chellish was a go-getter and somewhat of a daredevil although still a practical and rational type. He was one of those in whom there were unsuspected reserves of mental and physical strength—which had gone so long unnoticed that he had developed the habit of depending solely on himself. As former exile Horace O. Mullon had expressed it, Chellish had 'saved Grautier from the Whistlers single-handedly.' Chellish was 31 years old. A man of his capability should have become a captain by now or even a staff officer. Rhodan had considered the case to be curious and important enough to look personally into his personnel dossier. There he had found a series of complaints from his former commanding officers, which referred to a 'pronounced' over confidence if not conceit. This meant that he had consistently failed to suppress his own ideas if he thought they were better than those of his superiors. Rhodan was familiar with many such cases. The 'pronounced over-confidence' was not always the villain in such situations. In Chellish's case it was to be noted that Capt. Blailey had not shown the slightest indication to register any complaints concerning him in any sense of the word. Obviously Blailey and Chellish were of a mutually harmonious temperament.

No, Chellish was not the type of man who would hijack a Gazelle. He must have been forced to do it, or else he was dead!

Still deep in thought, Perry Rhodan left Ground Control and returned to the low, rambling building that was Sikerman's residence and where a few rooms had been allotted to himself. Sikerman was in his office with Reginald Bell. The great viewscreen over the tremendous desk revealed a shimmering bright grey raster, which meant that it was ready at any moment to go into action and establish a visual connection between Sikerman's office and any other important point in the galaxy.

Bell jumped to his feet as Rhodan entered the room. Sikerman was about to get up also but Rhodan signalled him to remain seated.

"Still nothing new," he said calmly. "So far all we know is that the Gazelle has disappeared. Other than that, nothing: not where, why or who. In regard to the *who*, though, we'll soon find out. Ground Central is making a full roll call."

As though this were a cue, the viewscreen brightened to reveal the head and shoulders of a young lieutenant. He raised a hand in greeting. "Lt. Radcliffe. A general roll call has been ordered by Top Command. I must ask you to identify yourselves."

Sikerman answered with a sarcastic smile: "Lt.-Col. Sikerman, Commander-in-Chief of the base."

Reginald Bell snapped, "Vice-Administrator Bell."

Rhodan remained silent.

"And you, sir?" asked the lieutenant, turning to him.

"Rhodan," returned Perry with a smile.

Radcliffe gave them his greeting signal a second time, expressed his thanks and disappeared from the screen.

Rhodan started to chuckle. On the other hand, Sikerman was obviously disconcerted. The incident had not been at all amusing for him. "That young scamp is going to hear from me," he growled angrily. "As far as I personally am concerned he could get by with merely being stupid and not knowing what 2 plus 2 equals—but *you*, sir—for him to ask you to give your name, that's going a bit too—"

Rhodan was still chuckling. "Relax, Sikerman. If I were in his place it would have been just as amusing. Besides, you know, he's right. He *has* to hear each name. After all, somebody could have replaced me with a robot and he wouldn't be able to tell it by looking at me. He has to analyse the sound of my voice as a part of a positive I.D."

"Well, anyway..." mumbled Sikerman, apparently running out of rebuttals.

No one said anything as the minutes passed. Perry Rhodan attempted to analyse how the situation might have been changed by the theft of the *Gazelle* but he failed to even come up with a reasonable assumption. A half hour went by. Then the viewscreen lighted up again, this time revealing the captain in charge of Ground Central.

"We have the results, sir," he announced, addressing Rhodan after a brief greeting. "In addition to 1st Lt. Chellish, who had night duty on board the ship, three others have also disappeared: Oliver Roane, Walter Suttney and Ronson Lauer. All three of these men were among the settlers who were recently taken into the Fleet."

"What data do you have on those three?" asked Rhodan.

"Nothing, sir, other than the fact that they were former followers of Hollander."

Perry Rhodan pondered over this for a moment. Then he thanked the officer and indicated that he had no further instructions for the moment. The viewscreen darkened to its former grey raster of shimmering half-light.

Rhodan stood up and walked a few steps to the window. He stopped there, appearing to gaze silently at the floor. "That puts us in a bind," he said gloomily. "In fact, right into the ringers!"

Reginald Bell watched him with narrowed eyes.

Rhodan continued. "Maj. Ostal's operation has met with considerable success. As we all know, the Robot Regent on Arkon has placed top priority on one particular objective these past number of years—and that is to discover the galactic position of the Earth. Ostal has succeeded in giving him a false lead. A powerful fleet of robot ships is presently on its way to the planet which was indicated as the Earth by the false coördinates on board Ostal's ship. It's a world that lies deep in the interior of the Milky Way. The Regent will eventually find out that we've led him on a wild goose chase."

He fell silent, failing to note Sikerman's astonished expression. The latter was unable to see any connection between Maj. Ostal's mission and the disappearance of the *Gazelle*.

"But that's not the main point," continued Rhodan. "The important thing is that we recognize how badly the Regent is itching to locate the Earth and that he will strike at the first moment he obtains the correct information."

Sikerman could not suppress his curiosity any longer. "Please, sir!" he blurted out as Rhodan made a slight pause. "I can't see what the hijacking of the Gazelle has to do with the Arkonide robot's curiosity!"

Rhodan turned and raised his brows at him. "But it's all quite simple," he answered in some surprise. "You know what kind of men Walt Hollander had around him. All that most of them wanted was to get rich in a hurry and they figured a revolution would be the shortest route. You know there were very few of the Nature Philosophers who were serious about their stated ideals. And those few have long since seen the error of their ways. So the culprits we're dealing with now are of the first type. They're looking for the big payoff, nothing else. Can you possibly imaginewhere? "

Sikerman appeared to be grasping the import of this but before he could answer Rhodan explained it himself:

"1st Lt. Chellish's Gazelle is the same ship that we sent to Grautier several years ago with the assignment to stand watch over the settlers. Its positronic data bank contains everything that could be of importance to a certain galactic power—namely the true coordinates of the Earth's position!"

"There's no doubt about it at all. Suttney and his two cohorts are on their way to Arkon to betray the Earth and sell our location to the Robot Regent."

2/ WANTED: AN ARKONIDE CONTACT

Under dateline of 5 Oct. 2042, an announcement appeared in the *Terrania Times*, an independent tabloid:

With reference to the Daily News article of Oct. 3 concerning the escape of 3 deserters from the Myrtha 7 Fleet Base, our informants have learned that Solar Administrator Rhodan is presently on Myrtha 7 and that the incident in question turns out to be a matter of high priority concern. Apparently the situation created by the theft of the Gazelle class scoutship is considered to be so serious that it has occasioned the imposition of a news blackout at the base. This appears to indicate that from now on the public may expect to have only the synthetic reassurances of the Ministry of Information dished out to them.

Our own opinion of the situation is that if we are actually endangered then Earthmen and all inhabitants of the Solar Empire should be considered sufficiently stable to be able to face such a threat openly. The practice of releasing obviously false and security-edited bulletins to the world should be avoided. This kind of information only breeds distrust and creates confusion precisely when the danger presents itself in spite of all attempts at concealment and at the moment when everything depends on a full and clear understanding.

* * * *

The man who stood in the bulkhead hatchway of the control room was Ronson Lauer. Gunther Chellish knew that his game was up.

Slowly his habit of cool deliberation returned to him.

He looked from Lauer to Suttney, who still stood next to his chair, and suddenly Suttney's strategy became clear to him. Suttney knew that he would try to resist doing whatever was asked of him. But the man also knew that Chellish would be relying on his and Roane's inexperience in matters of galactic navigation and would count on being able to fool them about the course of the Gazelle instead of offering resistance to two armed men while he himself was unarmed. So Suttney had kept Lauer in the background so that the takeoff could proceed without friction of any kind. At the right moment he had presented him in order to convince Chellish he'd have to stop fooling around.

For Ronson Lauer would be sitting right next to him when he worked out the coördinates for the next hyperjump. And Lauer was not a man who could be taken in by any navigation trickery.

"Alright, you heard what Suttney wants you to do," he said by way of opening their relationship. "Turn on the stellar scan and pick out a sector where we'll be safe. Move! What are you waiting for?"

Ronson Lauer was a small man with a ferret-like shiftiness and quickness about him. Chellish could not place his age easily, figuring it to be somewhere between 30 and 50. He appeared to be a bit boisterous and with a certain capacity for humour but there was a flavour to it that didn't quite set well with Chellish.

He decided to ignore Lauer's orders and to centre on Suttney as the responsible spokesman of the group. He looked at Suttney questioningly.

"That's right," Suttney nodded, "we can't lose any time. Start working out the data for the next jump. You've got an assistant now..." He indicated Lauer. "So you should be able to speed things up. Right?"

Chellish did not feel obliged to answer. He turned his seat back to the flight console and pressed a readout select button. The intercom screen over the panel began to flicker. While the readout screen was warming up, he took the time necessary to scan his flight instruments.

Relative to Myrtha the Gazelle was moving along at 900 miles per second. The course veered radically away from the Myrtha System. Within a circumference of 10 light-years there was no object of sufficient mass to even get a rise out of the proximity sensor. According to a not too exact parallax measurement, the nearest star was about 3 light-years away.

Meanwhile the title page of the Galacticatalogue had appeared on the readout screen. Chellish turned once more to Suttney. "Don't you have any definite spot in mind at all? Where am I supposed to transit to?"

When Suttney glanced at Lauer again, the latter shrugged his shoulders carelessly. "More or less up for grabs, I'd say. Main thing is, don't put us in a hot spot. Give any Earth spaceships a wide berth. I'd suggest somewhere in the centre of the galaxy."

Chellish nodded. He pulled the readout terminal board closer to him, which with its button rows of

numbers and letters was reminiscent of a desk calculator. He depressed a series of the buttons and then activated a red switch. The title page of the catalogue disappeared from the screen, to be replaced by another. It consisted principally of a dizzying mass of points, ciphers and letters. Between individual points, lines had been drawn in, most of them dotted. A heading on the upper edge read: General Index Map, Sector 10000-12000 parsecs, Theta 0–1°, Phi 89-90°.

"Good!" Lauer spontaneously. "That's just the bailiwick! Look at the breakdown sheet on parsecs 11000 to 11100, Theta 0–0, 10 minutes, Phi 89° 50 minutes to 90°."

Chellish complied. Skilfully he fed the instructions into the terminal board and then switched on the data retrieval button. A few moments later a new index map appeared on the readout screen which showed the heading Lauer had called for. Chellish noted that outside of a white background and the black points and lines the map did not contain any other colours. This made him feel more insecure than ever. The region Lauer had selected was not under anybody's control or influence. It seemed as though these 3 deserters actually wanted to search out some inconspicuous spot where they could spend the rest of their lives without being disturbed by anybody.

He stared at the screen and waited for Lauer to say something. His eyes wandered over the numbers marked alongside the black dots representing the stars without actually reading them, since he was held in suspense as to which of these 2000 or so points Lauer would decide on.

The Galactic catalogue was an Arkonide product as were all star catalogues used in Terranian space navigation. More than 10,000 years had been necessary to create an Atlas of this magnitude and degree of comprehensiveness. Thousands of registry ships had been involved in gathering all this stellar information.

Of course this didn't mean that the catalogue contained all the stars in the galaxy. Experts on Earth had estimated the work to be about 75 or 80% complete but actually only about 7% of the stars listed had ever been visited. The rest had been indicated by numbers and letters, which was quite sufficient for galactonautics officers to find their way around.

Terra had reproduced the Arkonide catalogues in their entirety, retaining the Arkonide names and converting only the linear and angular measurements in order not to have to also assimilate Arkonide mathematics. The unit of distance was the parallax-second, abbreviated parsec, and the unit of angular distance was the degree of arc. The point of origin of the coordinate system that was the basis of the catalogue was Arkon. Various people on Earth had taken the view that this should be changed. As a rising new power, Terra should not have to use a catalogue that had Arkon as its central reference. Basically it would not be a difficult task to convert all the catalogue values using Terra as a new central reference but it would represent a tremendous investment in computer time.

But the actual reason in favour of keeping Arkon as the coordinate centre had been quite something else. If the Solar Empire was to continue to develop without interruption, Terra's galactic position had to remain secret. In view of the many and varied means that were at the disposal of the potential enemy, maintaining this particular secret was no mean task. It required a great deal of costly and tedious preparations and precautions. In fact it would have been completely insurmountable if there were catalogues showing the Earth or rather the Terran sun as a central point of the coordinates. Anybody wishing to discover the galactic position of the Earth then would only have to compare a few entries of the Arkonide catalogue with equivalent entries in the Earth catalogue. So it was that Arkon had been kept the centre of coordinates.

The coordinate system was spherically symmetrical. The radius vector gave the distance of the object

from the coordinate origin, that is Arkon, in parsecs. The angle formed between the radius vector and the vertical axis was Theta, and that formed with the horizontal axis was Phi. The system was so standardized that the centre of the galaxy lay at coördinates Theta 90° and Phi 0°. The length of the radical vector to the centre point amounted to 10936 parsecs.

The individual data cards or sheets of the catalogue represented galactic sectors and they were selected in such a manner as to be nearly all equal in terms of cubic space covered. Since the microfilm record of these sheets was necessarily 2-dimensional, the altitude or distance of individual stars above or below the film surface was again designated by parsec measurements.

The star points were accompanied by still other markings which were the coördinates used for fixing a stellar position in hyperspace. These added coördinates were transferred by a constant conversion factor into energy units that a propulsion system would have to yield for a spaceship to reach a specific star via transition, that is by means of a hyperjump. So these latter were closely related to what were referred to as 'jump data' in the jargon of the galactonauts.

Meanwhile, Ronson Lauer had made his decision. He reached for the terminal control set which looked so much like a calculator. Turning a small thumbwheel, he brought one of the 2000 stars to the centre of the viewscreen. When the black dot representing the star reached the cross-hair lines, Lauer pressed another button which caused the displayed field of vision to be magnified. Now the almost microscopic data near the selected star became readable.

"That one," said Lauer tersely. "A Sol-type—just the right one for us."

Chellish noted that Lauer turned toward Suttney. "Whatever you think," agreed the latter with a nod.

Lauer gestured carelessly at the viewscreen. "So start your calculations, Chellish," he ordered. "You know, of course, how it works: parsec differential between our location and the point of destination; the ship's mass, and energy conversion of the catalogue data. So move it, will you? What are you waiting for?"

Chellish realized that Lauer wanted to show off his knowledge to him but since it was relatively schoolboy routine he regarded the demonstration as somewhat ridiculous. As he initiated the calculations somewhat mechanically and absently, his mind was on the 3 deserters who had stolen a Gazelle and he wondered what business they had snooping around in the vicinity of a nameless sun that was 7500 parsecs or about 25000 light years distant and where neither Terranians nor Arkonides had ever ventured before.

For the present he didn't have the slightest idea...

* * * *

"It's perfectly clear what we have to do," explained Perry Rhodan. "We have to search for the missing Gazelle. It *must* be found before those three succeed in causing us trouble. I'm counting on their uncertainty, though, to make them trip themselves up sooner or later so we can track them down. And I'm also relying on 1st Lt. Chellish, in case he's still alive. He'll find a way to give us some kind of a signal."

"At the moment there is nothing more important than the search for that ship. We still have a number of months yet before the expected overlap of the two time planes, so we don't have to hurry ourselves in that regard. We can call up the entire fleet to look for the Gazelle."

"And as for the 20,000 micro-technologists of the Swoon race now living on Earth, we can give them the job of developing a piece of equipment that will make it possible to trace a ship in transition in spite of its built-in resonance frequency absorber."

He remained silent for awhile and then began to smile. "It turns out that our highly celebrated invention of the absorber is working to our disadvantage here. We've installed an apparatus on board the stolen craft that now makes it impossible for us to find a trace of it. So we have to develop a weapon to counter our own weapon in order to extricate ourselves from this dilemma!"

He paused a second time to glance along the row of officers who were seated before him, until his gaze rested on Lt.-Col. Sikerman. "I'll have to requisition a lot of your men, Sikerman," he continued. "The ships stationed on Grautier must be fully manned. Meanwhile, you will continue constructing the base. But don't think for one moment that the importance of your work here has diminished—you keep it rolling!"

Then his gaze wandered to Maj. Van Aafen, or 'Teldje' as he was known to his men. "Van Aafen, I want you to make a flight to Earth. You will be given written notes and instructions which will inform Marshal Freyt concerning the situation here. You are hereby commissioned to hand the pertinent documents personally to the Marshal. A cruiser will be placed at your disposal as a courier ship."

As van Aafen acknowledged the assignment with a nod of his head, Rhodan fixed his gaze on the man next to him, Capt. Aurin. "You get the main spotlight, Aurin," he said. "You're going to be the one to send out the Fleet alarm. You will get your forming up and deployment instructions in... say 40 minutes. In the meantime you'd better make the necessary preparations."

Rodes Aurin stood up, saluted and exited.

"That is all, gentlemen," Rhodan concluded. "I thank you!"

Instantly there was a scraping of chairs and a shuffling of feet and within seconds after Perry Rhodan had uttered his final word the small briefing chamber was empty.

A mighty force was set in motion. The Earth prepared to protect its secret, arming itself against an enemy who would strike as soon as he discovered where the Earth was located. Earth prepared to demonstrate its power—a power which had been created in less than 70 years and yet dared to compete with that of the 10,000-year-old Empire of Arkon.

* * * *

They had left him alone with Oliver Roane. They had also disconnected the intercom so that from the pilot's position he would not be able to know what was going on. Suttney had told him to go into the transition within one half hour and Chellish would have given his eye teeth to know what Suttney and Ronson Lauer would be up to during that time. But under the circumstances there was no possibility of

finding out.

Oliver Roane sat behind him, more or less in the centre of the control room, and still held the pistol in his hand, the barrel of which was aimed unwaveringly at his back. The control panel of the telecom transceiver equipment lay within easy reach of Roane but not himself. Chellish closed his eyes and mentally reviewed the switch settings necessary to make the transmitter beam out a trace signal. There were only two: turning on the main power switch that would put the transmitter 'on the air', and hitting the code button which would feed in a prepared I.D. trace to the transmitter. That was all. It was a move that a practiced technician could accomplish in half a second.

But even if it had only required a hundredth of a second and only one switch, Chellish could not have manoeuvred it. Roane was fully alert and he had twice demonstrated already how swiftly he could react.

Gunther Chellish found himself trapped in a condition of unalleviated frenzy.

He began to fool with the flight console board. Before leaving the room, Ronson Lauer had looked it over carefully and explained to the others that Chellish could not get into any mischief with it. After the jump data had been fed to the propulsion section, the main release lever for the hypertransition had been electrically blocked with a time relay. It would only release when the prescribed half hour was up.

So Oliver Roane took no particular exception to Chellish's handling of the controls. Out of boredom he turned back to the stellar catalogue and reexamined the visual readout concerning their target star. When he saw that the data here were equally boring, he switched to the adjacent sector sheet.

This area was partially coloured in yellow, which meant that this part of the galaxy lay within an Arkonide realm of influence. The yellow portion penetrated the displayed star sheet like an inundation, spreading from the right-hand edge to the middle of the screen. Chellish switched on the sectional magnification and observed the star points' names and navigational data.

They all had names in Arkonide spheres of influence. Chellish read Galtha, Oone, Sophrun, Lowaun, Hayireko, Minnit and a number of others he had never heard of before. He fell to daydreaming, wondering what the planets of these suns might look like and what kind of creatures might be living there.

But as he continued to turn the selector on the terminal board the magnified readout section wandered upward and beyond the yellow-hued part of the microfilmed catalogue sheet. Here the star names were less frequent. Outside their own area of responsibility the Arkonides had not taken the trouble to name the stars. Chellish read: Naaiwoon, Joplat, Hoshan, then a nameless stretch for several centimetres, followed by: Latin-Oor.

It startled him. Latin-Oor. This name he had heard mentioned once and not too long ago. In what connection was it?

Latin-Oor. He brainstormed, pushing his memory for a clue. The name had sounded like 'Latin ore' when he first heard it. He traced this back in his thoughts. Ore. He remembered having wondered if there really were any 'ore' on Latin-Oor, although of course the Arkonide name bore no relationship to Chellish's translation. He had thought that if there were any valuable minerals on Latin-Oor it could be made into a military base, if only... if...

That was it! If only the Arkonide robot fleet didn't turn the planet into a blazing Inferno—because that's where they were headed!

Suddenly the picture came to him clearly. He had attended a training class with a number of other officers and had learned through the internal Fleet news service that Maj. Clyde Ostal had succeeded in planting a false clue with the Arkonide Robot Brain which had led the enemy to believe that the Earth was to be found somewhere in the centre of the galaxy. Latin-Oor was the sun containing in its system the planet which was playing the role of Earth, per Ostal's falsified information. According to the catalogue, Latin-Oor possessed two Earthlike worlds, both of which, however, were uninhabited. The robot Regent must suspect that one of them was the Earth.

So Clyde Ostal's operation had worked out as planned. The Regent had swallowed the bait and dispatched a huge fleet Chellish couldn't recall which of the two planets the information furnished by Ostal had pinpointed, whether Latin-Oor 3 or Latin-Oor 4, but he was sure that the robot fleet would surround one of them and demand of its inhabitants an unconditional surrender. In the officer class at the time they had all laughed heartily when they imagined the Arkonide fleet making a landing after receiving no response to their demands and finding out that there was no intelligent life on either Latin-Oor 3 or 4; and they had wondered whether or not the shock might be enough to blow a few tubes and fuses in the robot Regent's innards.

And now? As to the robot fleet heading for Latin-Oor, what did it have to do with him and his present situation?

Chellish went back in the catalogue and compared the data pertaining to Ronson Lauer's star with those related to Latin-Oor. Lauer's chosen destination, by extrapolation, lay just above the plane of the microfilm, whereas Latin-Oor was elevated over its own film plane to such an extent that it almost reached into the previous sheet's area. Lauer's target star was in an angular area of Theta 89:50 to 90:00. An intervening sheet inclosed the area of Theta 90:00 to 90:10, and next to this came the Latin-Oor sheet, embracing the angular area, Theta 90:10 to 90:20. The vertical distance between the two suns was not greater than 10 light-years. Since the horizontal or Phi values were at some variance, the total distance amounted to something like 16 light-years, or 5 parsecs.

Suddenly, scales seemed to fall away from Chellish's eyes. He remembered what Lauer had answered to his question, as to whether or not they had any definite goal in mind:

"...Main thing is, don't put us in a hotspot. Give any Earth spaceships a wide berth..."

That was it. *Earth* spaceships were to be avoided. He should have realized sooner that Lauer had emphasized the word.

On the other hand, Arkonide ships would not be objectionable. On the contrary, Lauer had studied the catalogue beforehand and was aware of the fact that his target star was only 16 light-years away from Latin-Oor. This is why he had chosen it, because he wanted Arkonide ships nearby when Suttney was ready to carry out his intentions.

There could be no further doubt as to what those intentions were. Suttney was looking for an Arkonide contact. On the other hand the Arkonides wouldn't want anything to do with him—for fear of complication—unless he brought them something that would make the risk worthwhile.

The position of the Earth!

Gunther Chellish needed no intercom now to tell him where Lauer and Suttney were at the moment or what they were doing there. They were in the computer bank room and were no doubt raking through the data stored there in order to figure out the galactic coördinates for the Earth. That was not a simple

task. As a result of security measures, the Earth's position data were not retained in any such memory registers. Even in the Galactic catalogue there was no sun to be found anywhere designated as Sol. But of course it was possible to arrive at Earth's location by making use of coördinates related to neighbouring stars. For that, however, a very complete knowledge of astronomy was necessary. Chellish didn't doubt that Lauer had such knowledge but he was not skilled in the interpolation of position data and even if he himself were armed with all figures and factors affecting Earth's neighbouring stars he would still need several hours in which to work out a program for the positronicon.

Chellish began to figure out how much time he had. An hour and a half maybe for them to get their data and still another 3 hours for the program to be set up. The rest would run off in a few seconds; the computer handled such items swiftly.

So it would be 4½ hours altogether—that is if Suttney decided to send out the position data at random instead of first making contact with the Arkonide ships. If he were going to wait for the arrival of the Arkonides, another couple of hours would be involved. Perhaps 4 or 5 hours.

Taken altogether, this was quite a bit of time, but in spite of it Chellish began to get nervous. He had to figure out something he could do to thwart Suttney's plans. He had to let the men on Grautier know where the stolen Gazelle was located but he didn't know how he might contrive to do it. Four and a half hours or still more hours were not much time in which to come up with a really effective idea.

He turned to look at Roane. Oliver Roane still sat in the same position as though the gun had taken root in his hand and he stared at him somewhat stupidly. Chellish smiled but Roane's face remained unchanged.

"Aren't you afraid, Roane?" he asked.

His thoughts were not organized yet. He had to think of something that would throw a monkey wrench into Suttney's calculations and he had the curious impression that his mind would work better if he had somebody to talk to in the process.

"Of you, maybe?" growled Roane.

"No. Of being caught and shot."

There was a troubled expression on Roane's face when he registered what Chellish meant.

"Don't be an idiot!" he answered gruffly. "Nobody's going to catch us."

The theory worked. Chellish felt his wits revving up swiftly. "Do you think it's right, what Suttney has in mind?" he asked while his grey matter began belabouring a new idea.

In his slow-witted way, Roane laughed suspiciously. "Don't poke around, Chellish. You're just pumping me for information. You don't know a thing about what Suttney has in mind."

Lord!—thought Chellish. He's slow as an ox! "Why of course I know what he plans to do!" he insisted.

Roane guffawed somewhat ponderously.

Chellish kept a straight face while acting extremely serious. "I'll tell you what he's planning," he said. "He plans to set us down on an unknown planet and subjugate the primitive people there. What else would he

be thinking of?"

Roane's heavy-lidded eyes opened wide, fairly threatening to pop out of his head. He leaned forward and stared at Chellish incredulously. It took him a few seconds to register what Chellish had said, during which Chellish figured that if his idea wasn't exactly ingenious it was at least worth a try.

Oliver Roane started to laugh then. He fairly shook with laughter over Chellish's apparent stupidity and the control room rang with the booming echoes. Chellish grasped the opportunity by swinging about in his seat and swiftly manipulating two closely-spaced controls nearby.

Roane caught the swift movement. He interrupted his laughter abruptly and narrowed an eye at Chellish suspiciously. He came to his feet. "What did you do just then?"

"Nothing special," Chellish answered casually. "I just turned up the air-conditioning slightly. It's getting a bit too hot in here for me."

* * * *

In the ship's computer, circuit card 225 was the impulse distributor for control stage 17. This was a part of the standard circuitry connecting the hyper-compensator with the hyper-drive section of the propulsion units. The integrated circuit board was normally designed for handling precisely formed triangular pulses having a 3-volt positive amplitude and a base time ranging from 5 to 100 microseconds. It could only process this kind of input, which consisted of classification sorting and distributing the outputs through the 20 output channels which it served.

There was just one exception built into the circuit logic whereby another type of impulse could be processed. It would also accept a sequence of square-wave pulses having a 10-volt positive amplitude and durations of 10 microseconds. This was the so-called emergency-pulse signal which became memory-stored rather than broken down and distributed and thus caused all 20 output channels to be blocked. But in order for card 225 to be able to receive an emergency pulse train of this nature it was necessary for a change of potential to open a special threshold-gate on the input side.

In this instance the emergency pulses arrived at the input without the necessary voltage change in the gating circuit. Distributor card 225 refused to accept it, obeying its built-in safety logic against operational errors, which could be electronically dangerous. During a short timespan of fractions of a second the threshold-gate finally received its required potential change and so the distributor circuit had no other recourse than to accept the high-tension jolt internally. Unfortunately, this was a reverse sequence of events for which it was not designed. It had no time to block off the 20 output channels. The built-up square-wave impulses raced into these channels before circuit 225 could react.

Some of the equipment connected to the 20 output leads remained unaffected by the impulses since the latter had been somewhat attenuated. For example, when they reached the control mechanism of the hyper-compensator they were virtually in a 'dead' circuit because the compensator had been safety-blocked by another security gate. However, there were a few places where some chaotic reactions could occur—especially in highly inductive circuits. In spite of attenuation through the output distribution, the impulses were still 5 times in excess of what the standard circuit channels were designed for and thus 5 times the normal self-induction was generated. As a result, a certain coil mounted on

plastic foil became partially melted down.

From there on the control connection was interrupted. Of course this was only in one particular location but since this circuit was at a highly critical point the break was sufficient to put the entire control stage 17 out of commission.

* * * *

Oliver Roane was suspicious. Chellish observed that he was struggling mentally over what he should do in this case.

"No kidding—just the air-conditioner?" he asked almost stupidly.

Chellish nodded.

Roane still couldn't make up his mind. It was obvious to him that he should report the incident to Suttney but in that case he'd have to leave the control room since the intercom had been disconnected.

Roane looked around uncertainly, trying to see if he could detect a change in the air-conditioning. But it was still just as warm in the room as ever.

Meanwhile, Chellish had turned back again to the console with his back to Roane, apparently unconcerned. Roane finally shrugged, thinking that he'd simply have to report it to Suttney when he returned.

But Chellish was staring at the little back-lighted instruction plate under two coloured switch buttons. It blinked at him with the following message:

ERROR—DISTR H-COMP SECTION—SHUTDOWN REQUIRED—SIMULTANEOUS
ACTIVATION BOTH SWITCHES

This he had not done. He had activated the one on the left first and then the one on the right. He knew there was a circuit failure in the indicated area of the control system but he still didn't know what the effect of his erroneous operation of the buttons might be.

* * * *

The Terranian fleet was under way. The major vessels formed a widely deployed net but the space between them was tightened up by the Gazelles and Guppy-type auxiliary craft belonging to the larger ships. Gen. Deringhouse, a rejuvenated veteran from the beginning days of the Solar Empire, led the massive manoeuvre from his command station on board the *Barbarossa*, a superbattleship of the Empire class. There was only one ship that was not subject to Deringhouse's commands. This was the *Drusus*, a late model ship of the same class, which was the flagship of the fleet under command of Perry Rhodan

himself.

The plan governing the search action had been worked out by the mathematicians. It involved a series of possibilities and variables on the basis of which the first trace of the lost Gazelle might be discovered. A 24-hour schedule of uninterrupted operation was assigned to all equipment which was capable of any kind of detection: visual observation, electronic search, detection of energy sources, fuel residue tracing and analysis, and detection of any space warpages in the Einstein continuum.

One thing seemed to be impossible: that the missing scoutship would ever be detectable as a result of a transition space warp. Each transition produced an energy shock-wave. Although the energy thus released was of a complex nature in itself, its propagation followed the relatively simple laws of the 5th-dimensional continuum. Hypersensor equipment was capable of detecting such emanations at almost any distance from the area of the transition. Unless, of course, the hyper-transiting spacecraft possessed a hyper-compensator, which trapped the shock-wave energy in a specially generated 'cavity' where it expended itself in such a manner that nothing—or at least almost nothing—could escape into normal space. In which case there was nothing left for the tracking sensors but the residual fields, which were about 10,000 times weaker than the actual shock-wave itself. Nevertheless, these residual vibrations combined with resonant factors of a compensator served to propagate a pattern of faint energy which was unique to each individual vessel, known as the resonance frequency. The only equipment that could detect these faint residual fields were the high-precision sensors developed by the Swoon, the race of micro-technologists. However, a spaceship in transition could also render these residual fields ineffective if it also possessed a frequency absorber, also known as a 'damper'. This equipment was capable of absorbing even the residual field energies so that not the slightest trace of the transition was left for sensing equipment located anywhere in normal space.

The Gazelle in question happened to have both of these pieces of equipment: the hyper-compensator and the frequency absorber. If anybody hoped to detect any space warpages or transition shock-waves generated by the stolen scoutship they would have to believe in miracles.

But there was the glimmer of just such a hope in the mind of Perry Rhodan. Because if 1st Lt. Chellish were still alive there was a chance of things happening for which there was no accounting in the normal, predictable course of the search.

3/ THE LONGEST VIGIL

The following article appeared in the *Terrania Times* under dateline of 8 October 2042:

It appears that our report of Oct. 5 concerning the disappearance of a Gazelle scoutship from the new Fleet base on Myrtha 7, coupled with our remarks aimed at the Information Ministry's somewhat irresponsible attitude toward an open Press policy, has occasioned considerable uneasiness, which to some extent is difficult to understand.

Certainly the incident is more serious than the Ministry cared to admit. Certainly the public deserves to be better informed than this at a time of danger. But on the other hand it would be foolish to believe that the loss of one Gazelle could cause the outbreak of a deadly war somewhere in the far reaches of the galaxy or that the sudden departure of major Fleet units from

the planets of the solar system has any connection with the mere defection of three servicemen. Some simple arithmetic should make this self-evident. A Gazelle costs the Government about 45 million solars. That's just about how much they would have to write off the books if such a spacecraft were lost, for whatever reason. However, to this hour the current Fleet manoeuvre has already cost 1000 times that much, or about 50 billion solars.

Like many of our fellow citizens, we are of the opinion that the ministries of this capital are not particularly infallible but we do believe that we shouldn't accuse them of shortcomings in the commercial area of straight economics. Neither a fool nor a madman would institute a manoeuvre representing possibly a total cost of 100 billion solars just to recover an object costing at the most only 45 million.

According to reliable sources, the present large-scale manoeuvre of the Fleet is a precautionary move designed to bolster our defence preparedness, which will be routinely continued in the course of years to come. There may be some variance of opinion concerning the additional cost of such measures to the general public but certainly this is not something to start people running for the hills nor should anyone give credence to nonsensical, trouble-making rumours.

* * * *

"Anything special happen while I was gone?" asked Suttney as he entered the control room.

Oliver Roane got to his feet, grumbling to himself. "I don't know," he answered peevishly. "Once he turned something on the panel and claimed it was the air-conditioning."

Ronson Lauer stood in the doorway. Both he and Suttney were watching Chellish sharply but Chellish noticed that Lauer seemed to react with a start, suddenly crouched as though to spring like a cat while staring intently at him.

Chellish knew that he was the most dangerous of the three—quick and unscrupulous.

Walter Suttney had also turned toward him with a penetrating glance. "What about it, Chellish?" he asked.

Chellish didn't answer.

Suttney came a few steps closer to him. "Answer me, Chellish!" he ordered emphatically. "Was it the air-conditioning?"

"No," he answered calmly, while keeping an eye on Lauer.

"What was it then?" Suttney demanded.

"I don't know," he answered with as much indifference as he could muster. "I just pressed two buttons, that's all." Out of the corner of his eye he saw Lauer reach for his weapon that he carried in a belt holster.

"Why?" persisted Suttney.

"To gain some time," Chellish answered, rising to his feet. "What did you think?"

Lauer moved toward him silently with a murderous gleam in his eye and his gun in his hand.

"Well, the longer we're stuck here the better it is for me, isn't it," Chellish answered finally. "That's the whole bit."

Suttney revealed the first signs of confusion. He didn't understand how anybody who was completely in his power could dare go against him and openly admit it. Oliver Roane stood a few yards behind him, awkwardly ponderous, his mouth agape in obvious stupefaction. But Lauer moved toward him with a feline swiftness.

Chellish sensed his danger. He spoke with the last reserves of his composure. "Suttney! Look out for Lauer!" As Suttney turned, he added: "I'm the only man on board who can fly. this ship!"

Suttney saw what Lauer was intent upon. "Cool it!" he roared. "Lauer, stay where you are—and put that gun away!"

Lauer came to a startled halt but he obeyed. "He double-crossed us!" he snarled. "On account of him we'll maybe be stuck here for days."

Suttney turned back to Chellish. "I could kill you for that," he said quietly.

Chellish felt a sense of momentary triumph. "No, you can't do that," he retorted, "unless you want to lie out here forever. Of course you have a smattering of technology and Lauer knows a bit of galactic math; but the two of you together wouldn't be able to pilot a Gazelle."

Apparently Suttney had thought of this because he didn't seem to be surprised. He only nodded slowly. "So that's the score with you, is it?" He turned to the others. "What should we do with him?"

Ronson Lauer made a wild gesture with his arms. "Oliver! Go give it to him!"

Chellish noted Suttney's smile as he stepped to one side. "Yes," the latter agreed, "maybe that's the best idea. Oliver, put your gun down and try to convince him we're through playing games."

Oliver Roane dropped the weapon onto his chair and slowly approached Chellish, who was also standing. "Come here, sonny," he grinned at him. "Otherwise you'll get smeared across that console and wreck everything."

Chellish did not move. "Come and get me," he growled.

Lauer made a lateral movement, thinking that Chellish was totally absorbed by Roane's approach but Chellish was aware that he had slipped behind him and moved down several seats.

"Come here, I said!" insisted Roane threateningly.

Almost simultaneously Lauer let out a triumphant shout. "I'll send him to you!"

Having heard the running steps behind him, Chellish ducked swiftly to one side, allowing Lauer to

expend his full charge on empty air. At the same time he grasped the smaller man by his belt and collar and, using the other's momentum, ran forward with him and slammed his body against Roane's towering frame. The sequence of events had all been too fast for Roane, who had wound up a haymaker to meet him but instead the blow struck Lauer with its full force. Lauer spun around once and collapsed to the deck.

Following up the advantage while Roane's guard was down, Chellish lit into him rapidly with his fists, taking him by surprise and forcing him back a few steps. Chellish pressed him further with a heavy pummelling, causing the big man to reel and stagger farther backwards until he was stopped by a large switch panel. Chellish nailed him against it, prepared to put an end to the contest as swiftly as possible—but then he struck a snag.

He had forgotten about his wounded fingers which had been burned by a well-aimed shot from Roane's thermo-gun. The pain had gone out of them because a regenerative ointment had started a thin growth of new flesh over the wounds. But when he suddenly grasped his semi-unconscious opponent in an attempt to deliver a final blow, his right hand grazed a metallic protrusion on the panel, which tore open his wounds again.

A wave of burning pain swept through his body, causing him to reel back, blinded by tears of agony that shot into his eyes. Roane didn't know what had caused Chellish to suddenly let up on him but he heard his sudden outcry and rallied to take advantage of his opportunity. He whirled away from the panel. Chellish saw him coming at him, tried to defend himself but was too weakened by the shock of pain. Two heavy blows from Roane's heavy fists caught him full in his unprotected face. He was barely aware of a third crushing blow that followed because the searing pain from his fingers seemed to drown him in a sea of fire.

Then he sank into oblivion.

* * * *

His desire to fight for time was so intense that it did not even leave him during his spell of unconsciousness. When he came to he knew at once what had happened and realized there was nothing more stupid he could do than to immediately open his eyes and let them know he had regained consciousness.

He heard noises around him but his head was roaring so much that at first he couldn't distinguish them clearly. Finally he made out Suttney's words: "What did you get into the act for, anyway? Who told you to?"

Then Lauer's answer: "Nobody tells me what to do. I do things on my own. But so what? With me that space jockey's had it... just as soon as we don't need him any more."

"You lay off of him, Ronson!" retorted Suttney in half-suppressed anger. "We didn't pull this stunt just to go around bumping guys off!"

Lauer's reply came after a slight pause. "Oh yeah? Who are *you* to talk? I don't see any halo on *you*, Suttney!"

Suttney fell silent. Chellish heard somebody walk a few steps and sit down in one of the control room seats. Probably Suttney. It looked as though the latest episode had struck discord among the three deserters.

Suddenly he heard Suttney say: "If he hasn't come to within an hour from now we'll splash a bucket of water in his face."

Chellish decided to make the best use possible of the hour this gave him. Owing to his miserable condition it wasn't at all difficult to fall asleep on the spot.

* * * *

The *Drusus* cruised along according to plan in its prescribed area, which was a particularly vacuous region of space, 45 light-years distant from the blue dwarf star Vollaal. 75% of the auxiliary craft were deployed searching the sector assigned to the *Drusus* but the rest were held in reserve in case of emergency.

On board the *Drusus* was a contingent of those new recruits who had recently been absorbed into the Fleet: settlers from Grautier. A wall of suspicion and distrust had suddenly risen between them and the regular personnel, since after all the three deserters who had stolen the *Gazelle* and taken 1st Lt. Chellish hostage were also former settlers.

Among the former settlers on board was Horace O. Mullan, former leader of the True Democrats, and the man who had finally brought about the demise of Hollander. Horace Mullan's personal dossier reflected backgrounds and potentials which by far exceeded the dry memoranda pertaining to him, as furnished by the civilian courts on Earth, attributes which according to reports from Chellish and Capt. Bailey during the time of Mullan's leadership of the colony development had certainly been demonstrated, and which had been of special great interest to Perry Rhodan himself. Moreover, Mullan was practically the only one who was excluded from the general air of suspicion because no one could believe that Hollander's bitterest enemy could ever have any subversive connections with the latter's followers.

Mullan could thank Perry Rhodan's special interest in him for the fact that he had not been transferred into the Fleet at the level of lowest rank—or rather, it was due to Rhodan's insight into his abilities and potentials. He had been classified as an officer candidate with the proviso that the regulations could be bypassed in his case and he would be given a lieutenant's commission just as soon as he had demonstrated beyond all possible doubt that he had divested himself of his former antisocial and revolutionary ideas. At 30 years of age he would be fairly old for a mere lieutenant but in view of his obvious organisational capabilities it seemed that nothing would stand in the way of his continued rapid promotion.

When Horace Mullan received the order to report to duty on board the *Drusus*, he believed that the time had finally come to fully redeem himself. The *Drusus* had taken off with almost all other units on Grautier and it appeared that its first hypertransition had been a long one. All indications pointed to the fact that great events were at hand and Mullan was determined to distinguish himself.

It was one day after their departure that he learned what the mission was actually all about. A Gazelle had been hijacked—by Suttney, Lauer and Roane, three men who had been members of Hollander's police troops during the latter's reign of terror in Greenwich. Also on board the Gazelle was an unwilling hostage: Gunther Chellish, Mullon's friend, with whom he had captured Hollander and given a hotfoot to the Whistlers.

But this news had the effect of knocking Mullon's personal plans into a cocked hat. All thoughts of gaining personal laurels or racing to get a lieutenant's commission became minor considerations now. He could well imagine Chellish's current situation. He was familiar enough with the three who had stolen the Gazelle to know that Chellish could expect only the worst from them.

If the Gazelle were not located before the 3 deserters were able to realize their plans, Gunther Chellish would be lost. The ship had to be found. This was now Mullon's single, driving thought.

The personnel unit making up the transferred settlers was registered as Company 15, which for the moment was without specific assignment. These men were on board for training. They were given hard duty, of course, but for the time being it served no other purpose than to 'make men out of them', as Sgt. Delacombe had expressed it. With Delacombe's permission, Horace Mullon reported to the tracking control section. Since he had learned how to handle such equipment under Chellish's guidance, he was given duty at this station. He was assigned to the console section composed of the material sensors, or 'matter trackers', and after that nobody could tear him away from his instruments.

The one thought of finding Chellish banished from his mind all considerations of his physical needs. Over a period of 70 hours, Mullon had only 5 hours of sleep. When they wanted to force him to get some rest he insisted on stimulants so that he could remain at his post.

After 3½ days they transferred him to another console section having to do with hypersensor and ID frequency tracking. The hypersensor work turned out to be easier. The transfer had been made to keep him from having a breakdown but no one realized at the time that this transfer was precisely the move that would lead to a fulfilment of Mullon's driving desire.

* * * *

Gunther Chellish was rudely awakened by a deluge of ice cold water. He rolled away quickly to escape the rest of it, which Lauer was trying to dump on him out of a large bucket. His swift reaction angered Lauer, who gave him a kick. As Chellish jumped up he dropped the pail and drew his weapon, aiming it at him quickly.

"Come and get it!" Lauer snarled. "Go ahead—try something!"

After his short nap, Chellish felt considerably better than before. His headache had vanished almost completely and his fingertips itched, which was a sign that the wounds had begun to heal again.

When he saw Lauer he started to laugh, recalling that he had run straight into Roane's first haymaker. The signs of it were plainly evident. But his laughter only excited Lauer all the more and he noted that the latter's finger was slowly closing on the trigger.

"I'll wipe that laugh off your face!" Lauer practically hissed at him.

"Knock it off!" It was Suttney's sudden command, emerging from the rear of the control room. "Ronson, I warned you about that rattle-brain temper of yours!"

Chellish forced a grin and turned around as though Lauer's threatening weapon didn't concern him. As he saw Suttney approaching him he also noticed Oliver Roane, who lay back all splayed out in a chair. He breathed with an audible rattle and three-fourths of his face was covered by a welter of bandages that he had apparently put on by himself.

"You knock it off, too, Chellish," Suttney warned. "You've had it! From now on you'll get no further chances to give us any trouble. Sit down at your controls and find out what kind of damages you've caused."

Chellish followed the order. As he went to the pilot's seat he glanced at the chronometer. Three hours had been consumed during his period of unconsciousness and sleeping. But it appeared that this had still not been enough time for the search ships to find them.

He struggled to suppress his anxiety as he sat down before the flight console and took over those controls that had to do with the hypertransition. All he knew was that he had activated two switches in the wrong sequence. He hadn't the slightest idea of what damage this might have caused—or even if any damage had resulted at all. The only thing he knew was that the control system was an extremely complex setup. It wasn't just a radio set where a couple of conflicting controls could be activated without causing serious trouble. When you handled this system counter to operating instructions, anything could go out of kilter.

The question was: *what?*

His hands trembled as he went through the checkout. A bank of small parity and error lamps, more than 200 of them, all seemed to light up and indicate that so far nothing was wrong.

Up to a point. Two lamps remained dark. The rear-lighted instruction plate underneath these two announced the trouble: Distributor 225, section 17; 15 mh inductor, H-compensator.

He breathed a slow sigh of relief, hiding his reaction from the others. He had lucked in. The repairs involved only represented about an hour and a half of work, maybe even less. This time Suttney wouldn't be able to suspect that he was merely trying to gain time. And most important: Distributor 225 and the damaged 15 microhenry coil were located in the same maintenance shaft as the frequency absorber.

"So—what did you find?" Suttney asked.

Chellish pointed to the two darkened indicator lamps. "One pulse distribution card is down with a burned out coil."

"Is that hard to fix?"

"No chance of repairing the coil but the card itself can be fixed—maybe 2 hours."

Suttney's eyes went wide. "Are you trying to tell me that we can't budge out of here just because one coil can't be repaired?"

Chellish smiled, shaking his head negatively. "No. I didn't say that. The coil is a printed circuit element and can't be repaired. But you can replace it with a new chip—that's a printed circuit component for the card. We have plenty in stores, provided you didn't dump any of that stuff out the disposal chutes."

Suttney gave him an ill-tempered look of distrust. "Alright, cut the wisecracks," he snapped. "How long does it take to do the whole thing?"

"I told you—two hours."

"What about that coil?"

"For that, maybe two minutes—one to locate it and one to replace it."

"Good! Then get busy! Do you need tools or equipment?"

"Plenty," Chellish smirked.

"Then get them together. And don't think you can pull anything on us again. Ronson will supervise your work. Ron—you go with him!"

"With the greatest of pleasure!" Lauer eagerly replied. From equipment stores Chellish selected a few instruments such as an oscilloscope and a signal generator, which he gave to Lauer to carry; also such smaller items as a soldering gun, an assortment of wire leads, tweezers, solder flux and an instrument tool kit. While searching for everything he needed, he took his time with a slow deliberation. He wasn't particularly bleeding with anxiety to complete the repairs.

From parts stores all he needed was the chipboard containing the small coil for replacement plus a few fasteners and lead clamps.

Then he opened the crawl hatch in the main corridor which led into the K-shaft and climbed down the ladder. Lauer followed him at a distance of about 5 rungs above his head, taking care to leave the hatch cover open.

Rows of conduits ran down the wall of the shaft. So far, Chellish hadn't come up with anything to help his plan along but suddenly he had an idea. Most of the power cables in these conduits carried high tension direct current at potentials exceeding 2000 volts. If he could manage somehow to cause Lauer to come in contact with an uninsulated spot, then maybe...

The ladder rungs ended about 25 feet below the crawl hatch. From this point the shaft ran horizontally, like a tunnel, to the hull of the ship itself. He spotted the card drawer where the damaged distributor circuit would be. Pulling it out slightly, he ejected the card and lay it on top, finally locating the element chip containing the damaged coil. At the same time he noticed nearby the slender, gleaming cylinder of the frequency absorber, which was the main thing he'd been searching for. It was located only a few feet beyond the card drawer.

"Move it!" complained Lauer uneasily. "Give me some room!"

Chellish obliged him, moving just beyond the card drawer and placing his equipment and tool kit on the floor of the tunnel close to the silvery absorber tank. "I have to work in a couple of places in this area," he answered in a cooperative tone. He pointed out a few pretended work areas which included both the region of the frequency absorber and the actual distributor card. "Make yourself comfortable where you

can keep an eye on me."

At first Lauer blinked at him in astonishment but when he realized Chellish was being sarcastic at his expense, his face reddened in anger.

Chellish made a project out of laying out his gear while unobtrusively taking note of where Lauer located himself. He had shoved the oscilloscope and signal generator a yard or so along the floor ahead of him and was now squatting on the deck plates with weapon in hand.

Chellish's first strategic move was to expose a red insulated main power line. He worked with a safety stripper and put on such an air of nonchalance that Lauer could not suspect he was fooling with a high tension line. He was satisfied with the results. He had stripped bare about 3 inches of finger-thick cable so that at the right moment all he would have to do would be to snip it in two with an insulated pair of cable cutters and bring the hot end of it in contact with a spot where the high voltage would be conducted to Lauer.

Then he busied himself with actual repair of the distributor circuit card. Once he had the signal generator and the oscilloscope connected up, he perceived the trouble immediately. He couldn't raise a pulse at any of the test points nor was there any voltage supply coming through. When the coil had burned out the distributor circuit had shut down, operating as its own safety cutoff. Three solder points were shorted and one of the integrated circuit elements seemed to be out also. He had a supply kit for the repairs; he set to work. He repaired the solder points and replaced the inactive circuit element with a small resistance, for test purposes. Then he ran a new check with his instruments and discovered that the distributor was still not functioning. He had no other recourse than to fault isolate the card point by point, which was a tedious procedure.

The time dragged on. Chellish turned several times to glance at Lauer, who didn't appear to be especially comfortable. He noticed that the latter moved his head several times to look around him restlessly. Then invariably he would collect himself with a start and return his attention to Chellish, as if he were convinced he didn't dare let him out of his sight for a second. But at no time did he do what Chellish was waiting for: there was no place where his bare skin came in contact with metal.

Chellish had observed, however, that close to Lauer there was a single vent tube for the air-conditioning that ran vertically down the shaft. It was made of uninsulated plastic metal, which was an excellent conductor. If Lauer were to grip the tube just once in order to brace himself... There was a metal cross-brace which held the vent to the wall. It projected over to him just above the card drawer.

He began to become impatient. Three quarters of an hour had gone by already. He decided that if Lauer didn't touch the vent tube within another half hour he'd have to think of another plan. Meanwhile he kept on working with the distributor circuit. His incessant thought was that this would be his last chance. If he didn't make use of it he was a goner. And what was much worse: there'd be nobody left to prevent the galactic war that would result from the Robot Regent of Arkon knowing the actual location of the Earth.

He broke out in sweat and started to mentally curse Lauer. He glanced at him so often that the latter finally noticed it.

"Keep your nose in your work!" Lauer snapped at him. "We're running out of time. You turn your head this way once more and I'll let you have it!"

"Oh yeah?" retorted Chellish angrily. "So you could melt down a couple of heavy high tension lines, right? Then you'll see where *that* gets you!"

Stirred by new suspicion, Lauer responded immediately. "Is that what you're banking on?" he snarled in a vicious rage. "You think I don't trust myself to shoot for fear of fouling something up? Alright, you just wait and I'll show you what I can do!"

Suddenly here it was—the one chance! Ronson Lauer stood up. He held the thermo-gun with the barrel lowered and looked for a position from which he could fire it without damaging the conduits anywhere. In the cramped quarters, standing up wasn't so easy. Lauer finally grasped the air vent tube to help him get up and he did not let go of it after he was on his feet.

Chellish cried out, "Don't shoot!"

Actually his voice rang with triumph more than fear. While Lauer braced himself for a shot, Chellish ducked to one side and quickly snipped the high tension line at the uninsulated section with his safety cutters. Grasping the cable where it was insulated he bent it inward under cover of the card drawer. Lauer was momentarily confused. His gun was well aimed but now the card drawer was in the way. However wild his fit of rage at the moment, he knew that it would be his own neck if his shot caused damage to any important equipment.

He hesitated—and that was Gunther Chellish's great moment!

Swiftly but with care he shoved the live end of the power cable toward the cross-brace and finally made contact. Simultaneously, Lauer let out a yell of unbridled terror. He kept on yelling until Chellish removed the end of the wire from the metal strap. For a full second, Lauer had been unable to release his grip from the vent tube but now his hand fell limp and he dropped unconscious to the deck.

Chellish didn't delay more than half a second. With a sure hand he brought the cable back to its original position. Then he got busy with the frequency absorber.

He disconnected the input and output leads from their contact points and connected them with another piece of wire. Cutting this new wire in two, he inserted a resistance unit between the ends, calculating that it would be equal to the resistance of the absorber's internal circuits. Then he lifted this arrangement above the absorber and concealed it against the wall behind it.

For this he had needed hardly a minute. When he had finished he straightened up and listened. He had figured that Lauer's outcry would have been heard in the control room and that Suttney would appear almost at once at the hatch opening. But so far this had not occurred. He looked sceptically at Lauer and listened again. Everything was quiet up above.

He quickly installed the new coil in the distributor card and checked it out. When it was in working order he snapped it into its slot in the card drawer and closed the drawer. Then, carefully but swiftly, he repaired the high tension cable break with a length of flexible plastic metal. After that he pulled the insulation sleeving back down over the uncovered section and sealed it tight. When he had finished he inspected his work and was satisfied that nobody would detect anything wrong here unless he knew precisely where to look—which was unlikely.

Lauer was still unconscious.

He stepped over the motionless body and climbed up the ladder. At the top he set up a hue and cry of alarm. "Hey... Suttney! Roane! Lauer's fallen unconscious!"

Nobody heard him. He crawled through the hatchway into the main corridor and ran forward to the control room while still shouting. The door was closed but it opened automatically as he came within a few yards of it. Inside, Suttney was busy applying fresh bandages to Roane's face.

"For cripes sake are all of you deaf in here?" blurted out Chellish breathlessly. "Lauer's passed out down below. He must have touched a high voltage lead somewhere—so give me a hand with him!"

Suttney stiffened with suspicion as he stared at him. "Are you sure," he asked, "that you didn't monkey around with the power cables long enough to be able to give him a shock?"

Chellish gave a polished performance, appearing to be dumbfounded. "That would have been impossible," he answered, still panting hard. "How could I get away with a thing like that? Just tell Lauer to be a good sport and put his finger on the nice hot wire?"

Without wasting any more words, Suttney strode past Chellish into the outer corridor. Chellish followed him.

* * * *

Horace O. Mullan had fallen into a trance-like routine. His movements were no longer monitored by his conscious mind. He manipulated the controls unconsciously, moving each switch or dial according to training habit, without deliberation.

By now it was 4 days since he had slept, excluding the 5 hours at the start of his duty; nor had he eaten very much. His physical body was animated by the last dregs of his energy reserves. It was easy to see that it would only take a few hours at the most before Mullan broke down and became a candidate for hospital treatment.

Still, they let him have his way. It was his own choice and wish to stay at his post.

He worked the compensator tracker whose leisurely rotating antenna covered the 360° sweep of space every quarter of an hour. He was fully familiar with the working principle of the antenna as a result of previous training sessions, and the operation theory now seemed to voice itself in his head like a dull catechism in an echo-chamber: Owing to the 5th dimensional nature of the resonant frequency energy fields, the antenna did not function like ordinary tracking sweeps. At a position of reception that was 180° out of phase with an incoming signal, normal intensity was about 30% and of course when the antenna pointed directly at the source of propagation the intensity was 100%. The operator was expected to immediately turn the antenna in the correct direction after receiving a low-percent signal so that the following signal, resulting from a ship's emergence from transition, would then be picked up at full intensity on the tracking screen, causing the positional data to be captured with a maximum exactitude.

Mullan had sat at this particular screen for 10 hours without detecting the slightest blip. The dark green fluorescent screen raster with its complex coordinate grids stared back at him with blank obstinacy. All he noticed on it was a lightning dot or flicker of light every few minutes which lingered briefly with a faint afterglow, only to fade. Mullan knew that these were simply interference blips caused by cosmic rays.

But when a brilliant spike of a partial wave-form suddenly glared at him from the screen, he knew it was

an unequivocal signal. Instantly, Mullon broke from his automaton stupor. He noticed that the wave-spike rose only partway toward the maximum scale on the screen and he reacted without looking, activating the switch that would orient the antenna to maximum reception. The beautiful spike paled and disappeared, as expected, but a few seconds later it came back in full glory, in fact brighter than before, and its amplitude exceeded the top of the scale.

"Got it!" he yelled, and his voice cracked in the process. "Position spike on the C-tracker! We've got 'em!"

After which he sank limply away from the console, fell out of his seat and lay motionlessly on the deck.

4/ TANTALUS

Under dateline of 10 Oct. 2042 the *Terrania Daily News* announced:

Effectively the entire Terranian Space Fleet is presently engaged in large-scale manoeuvres in an area which is close to the centre of the galaxy. The objective of the massive exercise is to test our defence readiness capability. In the opinion of the Fleet Admiralty, the greatest importance is attached to the undertaking since it is the first manoeuvre of its kind to involve the entire fleet. The war game plan is designed principally to test the effectiveness of coordination between fighting and supply units. We are standing by to keep our readers informed as to the further development of these manoeuvres.

And a few days later the *Terrania Times* was heard from:

Instead of reporting on the progress of the current fleet manoeuvres, which have little meaning for the man in the street, the Ministry of Information and Public Opinion should be able by now to tell us something about the stolen Gazelle and the 3 deserters. It is understandable why the Fleet itself may have abandoned this chase in the mean-time—reasonable decision in view of its relative unimportance. But this does not justify using the greater event for placing a veil of secrecy over the lesser one.

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Everything had gone smoothly. They got back to Ronson Lauer just as he was regaining consciousness. Fortunately, he was unable to recall what had happened just before he passed out. Naturally he went to every extreme to shove the blame onto Chellish for his mishap. But Chellish reported, accurately enough, that Lauer had attempted to shoot him and that he had gone for cover. Suttney appeared to give more credence to his report than to Lauer's raving accusations; or at least he took no note of the latter. As a result of his experience, Lauer was ill. Suttney and Chellish worked together to get him out of the shaft and bring him to a cabin, where they put him to bed.

Then under Suttney's supervision Chellish went back to his regular tasks and completed them within 15 minutes. Suttney was quite satisfied. Of course he had done some snooping down below to see if there were any signs pointing to Chellish's guilt in the matter of Lauer's accident but Chellish had repaired the high tension line so well that he did not discover anything. He didn't even ask a single question.

When Chellish made a second checkout of the control board, all signal lamps responded properly. He then turned to the appropriate controls and took the ship into its second transition. It lasted longer than the first one and was fairly unpleasant in its effects. Chellish was only half conscious by the time the dematerialisation ended and the pains of distortion faded away. But when he looked around he saw that it had gone much worse for Suttney and Roane. Suttney was just slowly coming to and from appearances Roane would still be unconscious for awhile.

On the viewscreen the light-point that Lauer had selected from the catalogue now stood out in shining prominence. The Gazelle was still 25 astronomical units distant from it, or about 2.5 billion miles, and was now approaching it with a residual velocity of about 125 miles per second. When he gave these figures to Suttney he was ordered to increase his speed. According to this star's spectrum classification there was a high probability that it possessed planets, and Suttney was evidently intending to land on one of them in order to carry out his plans from a safe location.

By the time Chellish had brought the ship up to Suttney's specified velocity of 1250 miles per second, Oliver Roane finally regained consciousness—which Suttney had apparently been waiting for. He didn't give him a chance to collect his wits about him but instead grasped him by the shoulder and shook him while shouting at him. "Come on, you stupid ox! Wake up and grab your gun. You have to keep an eye on Chellish!"

It came as a surprise to Chellish. Up to now he hadn't noticed Suttney's new state of agitation. His voice sounded strained and irritable. He acted as though he was afraid of missing his schedule if he could not get Roane onto his feet as quickly as possible. In all he seemed to be extremely high strung and Chellish noted that his hands were actually trembling when he let go of Roane. Something had triggered him suddenly to this new mood but it had come on so swiftly that Chellish hadn't yet figured out the possible reason for it.

Roane got up sluggishly. His swollen eyes peered out from his bandages as though they were incapable of recognizing his surroundings. It was obvious that Roane was not quite himself. He stood weakly on his two legs and looked dubiously at the weapon that Suttney had pressed into his hand.

Suttney shoved him around so that Chellish was in his range of vision. "There! Chellish—get it? Watch him!"

Roane grumbled something that could be taken for a grunt of anger just as well as for a sign of acquiescence. But now he stood there more solidly and held the weapon aimed at Chellish, who didn't feel very comfortable about it. As long as Roane was still not in full possession of his diminutive reasoning faculties he could possibly press the trigger without intending to.

Suttney remained a few more seconds beside Roane but when he believed that Roane was aware of what he wanted of him he went straight across the control room to the hyper-transmitter console.

Suddenly Chellish knew what he planned to do. He wanted to advise the Arkonide fleet near Latin-Oor that he wished to be picked up and that he was in possession of vital information. Chellish shuddered inwardly although he had long realized that Suttney was intending to betray the Earth.

This was the moment in which the great act of treason was to be perpetrated.

Anything subsequent to this was of secondary importance. It was *now* that Suttney was going to tell the Arkonides his purpose—that he had come here to tell them where the home planet of the Terranians was located and perhaps to also advise them as to approach points of highest vulnerability.

Suttney turned on the transmitter. He operated the controls with a swift certainty as though he had often practiced it in preparation for the present moment. When the equipment began to hum, he paused to look across at Chellish.

Chellish could restrain his scorn no longer. "You lousy traitor!" he yelled at him. "Where is it going to get you?"

Suttney didn't answer. He turned away swiftly as though he were unable to look Chellish straight in the face. At the same time, Roane took a step closer with threatening intent. Chellish shut up and turned back to the flight console.

Come on!—he prayed, his mind on the Terranian Fleet. Shoot us out of the blasted ether before Suttney...

He braced his elbows on the console and put his head in his hands. He closed his eyes and heard Suttney flip the microphone switch. There was a rattle of paper. Suttney had written out his message.

Chellish heard him clear his throat and draw a deep breath before he began. "To all Arkonide ships! This is Walter Suttney speaking, a fugitive from Terra!" His Arkonese sounded awful but the Arkonides would be able to understand him. "I have an announcement for you—an important announcement that has to do with the position of the planet Terra. You will have to hurry if you wish to obtain this information. This message is also being picked up by Terranian ships and they will try to kill me before I can transfer the data to you. As soon as I land I will give you my bearings. I repeat: To all Arkonide ships! This is Walter Suttney speaking..."

Altogether he sent out the message 5 times. Then he fell silent but he was panting as though he had just been through a heavy exertion.

Chellish knew exactly what Suttney was thinking about now. He knew that the Arkonide ships were only 16 light-years away—a distance that a hyper-transmitter could bridge without any time lapse. Moreover, across 16 light-years the location of the transmitter could be pinned down within far less than a mile. Those Arkonide ships were robot units. They would react with the typical swiftness which was characteristic of automatons and would set out instantly to find him.

Everything was in order—as long as Earth ships were not in closer proximity than the Arkonides. Suttney was depending on this but he couldn't be sure of it. His calculations depended on any Earth fighting units being at least 100 light-years distant. Over 100 light-years it was proportionately more difficult to get the bearings of a comparatively weak transmitter such as the Gazelle was equipped with. First of all, the signal intensity fell off exponentially so that the results of a bearing fix would be 5 or 6% erroneous at such a distance. This meant a variance of 5 or 6 light-years. So an Earth ship picking up the transmission would not be able to tell with any degree of certainty whether the transmitter were located in one or another of several different solar systems.

Walter Suttney was depending upon that margin of error. The Terranian ships *had* to arrive too late. Otherwise he was lost.

For awhile he stared at the deckplates under his feet as though now he were ashamed to look anybody in the eye. Then he got up and approached Roane but he was startled when Chellish spoke to him hoarsely.

"Why did you do it, Suttney? What good is it going to do you?"

Suttney came to a stop. It was apparent that the question had taken him by surprise.

"What good?" he asked in bewilderment. "None at all, naturally. I'm not doing this for personal advantage. You know what I think of the present form of government in the Solar Empire. That regime must be abolished, so if we can't do it on our own we have to call in some alien assistance."

"And you aren't concerned about how many besides yourself hold this view? I mean—doesn't it mean anything to you that you're just about the only one left who believes such nonsense?"

Suttney smiled thoughtfully. "Of course not. Something that's true and correct doesn't depend on a maximum of believers. Don't forget Galileo..."

"Leave Galileo out of this!" retorted Chellish in bristling anger. "That's something else. You can't betray the Earth to the Arkonides just because *you* don't happen to agree with Rhodan's method of government!"

"But I can!" The discussion seemed to be helping him to recover his self-confidence. "You see that I'm already doing it!"

"Do you know what will come from this? The Arkonides will attack the Earth. The Earth will defend itself. There'll be a war the likes of which the galaxy has never experienced. It won't matter who comes out of it the victor: the misery and destruction will be immeasurable!"

"But freedom will reign again on the Earth!" retorted Suttney with a fanatical gleam in his eyes.

Chellish sighed wearily. "What a marble-brained fool you are! You're just sick in the head, that's all. Think of what will happen if the Arkonides subjugate the Earth. Would you rather be a subject of the Robot Regent?"

"From what I've heard, he doesn't take away anybody's personal freedom," Suttney answered calmly.

Chellish waved his hands in a helpless gesture and turned back to his work. He knew there could be no purpose in talking to Suttney about things that he had held as the Gospel truth for 5 years or more. He hadn't opened the discussion with any hope of dissuading Suttney at the last moment but only because he had been overcome with anger.

He read the indications on the matter tracker and noted that in the meantime 3 planets had been detected. They moved at orbital distances of 0.6, 2.8 and 10.3 astronomical units from their central sun. It was some satisfaction to Chellish that none of them could be similar to the Earth. Since this alien star had about the same radiation intensity as Earth's sun, the innermost world would be a molten ball, much hotter than Venus or Mercury; and the two outer ones, on the other hand, would be colder than Mars.

In this system there was not one place that invited a landing. And the longer the Gazelle remained in outer space the greater would be the chance of their being overtaken by Terranian ships before Suttney

could complete his act of treason.

* * * *

The Terranian Fleet went into formation.

Three minutes after Mullon's discovery the transition point was located from which the second resonance-frequency field had been propagated. Nobody knew so far what the identity of the ship was that had been detected but the fact that only the compensator tracker had responded and not the hypersensor was a clear indication that an Earth ship was involved, because the Arkonides did not have resonant-frequency absorbers.

This single clue was sufficient to plunge the entire search fleet into feverish activity. Through a blanket telecom broadcast, Perry Rhodan declared a condition of top alert and ordered the ships' commanders to push onward to the destination point as swiftly as possible.

The *Drusus* itself did not take time to take its auxiliary craft on board. It took off immediately. The Gazelles were instructed to follow by the fastest means. A separate order affecting the guppies told them to stay where they were and wait for the return of the mother ship.

Within about a quarter of an hour after the first bearings were taken on Mullon's signal, the *Drusus* emerged out of hyperspace at a distance of 10 light-minutes from the coordinates obtained. This occurred precisely in time to register the broadcast that Walter Suttney was sending out to the Arkonide robot fleet in the vicinity of Latin-Oor. Within only a few seconds the residual speed of the giant ship was absorbed by its mighty retro units. The *Drusus* hovered almost motionlessly in space, moved only by the gravitational pull of the yellow sun.

Feverish excitement pervaded the entire ship. Rhodan had announced that the arrival of an Arkonide fleet was to be expected at any moment.

The other Earth ships appeared one after another, surrounding the targeted area. They reported their positions by short-pulsed signals which would have meant nothing to Suttney or his accomplices even if they had accidentally left their hyper-receiver open.

The stolen Gazelle itself could not be located at present. Its approximate position was known as of the time Suttney sent his message but the direction the ship had then taken was not known. It was too small an object to be detected by the matter trackers. The gravity fields emanating from the alien star and its planets completely jammed out the Gazelle's small field.

Perry Rhodan was relying on Walter Suttney to send out his locator signal, as he had announced he would, as soon as the Gazelle landed somewhere to wait for the enemy. Of course he would probably radio beam his coordinates because he had undoubtedly chosen this area in view of its only being 16 light-years removed from Latin-Oor and the Arkonide fleet. But all beamed transmissions generated peripheral and dispersion fields which could be detected by sensitive equipment at great distances, also making it possible to get a bearing on the location of the sender.

The ships of the Earth fleet were deployed in such an arrangement that the Arkonides would find

themselves surrounded by Terranians no matter where they emerged from in the general area. Rhodan considered this to be the optimum strategic formation because he knew that the Arkonide fleet consisted of about 4000 fighting units. This gave the enemy an advantage over the Earth fleet's fighting force in a ratio of 4 to 3. One did not wait for a superior enemy in random positions. It was more prudent to establish a formation in which the opponent's superiority could at least be equalized during the first moments of the engagement.

If anyone had asked Perry Rhodan at this time whether or not he anticipated a battle for the possession of the *Gazelle* and the secret of the Earth's position, he would not have been able to answer. He did not know just how much value the Robot Regent of Arkon placed upon the data concerning Terra's location. It could well be that he was so hot to get it that he would not shy away from an attack on the Terranian Fleet.

In any case it was well to be armed and ready.

During all the commotion that filled the vast interior of the *Drusus*, no one had paid any attention to Horace Mullon, at least initially. He lay near his console chair, flat out on the deck in a state of unconsciousness due to utter exhaustion, having given every reserve of strength remaining to him. It was only after the *Drusus* had come to a hovering position that a team of medical orderlies brought him to the ship's hospital bay. There they gave him an injection which served to bring his energy system back out of shock, and finally his state of unconsciousness was converted to one of deep and healing sleep.

At about this time the first series of shock waves produced by the Arkonide ships was registered on the hypersensors. The disturbances originated 16 light-years away but their cracklings had hardly faded from the consoles before the second series came through—this time in the immediate vicinity—which produced a 'furioso' cacophony of sound that was like a sudden tropical storm. Each shock-wave of energy hit the sensors with a thundering amplification until finally the tracking section had to activate the acoustic suppressors to keep everybody from being incapacitated by all the roaring and thundering and crackling that was going on.

After 20 minutes the noise subsided. A total of 4115 individual hyper-shocks had been counted, which indicated the exact number of units in the Arkonide robot fleet. They had reacted promptly to Suttney's call.

A few yellow-gleaming light points appeared on the *Drusus*'s viewscreens out of the glittering sea of stars in the background. These represented those ships of the Arkonide fleet which were closest to Perry Rhodan's superbattleship.

The same picture must have presented itself on the telescopic viewscreens of the Arkonide vessels. For the robot crews or any allied troop personnel from the Arkon-subjugated alien races who may have been on board, it was no doubt a great shock of surprise to emerge in the midst of a battle-ready Terranian fleet.

Would they now construe Suttney's call as having been a trap?

A tense period of waiting now began on board the Terranian ships, while Horace O. Mullon lay recuperating in his sleep of exhaustion.

* * * *

Following Suttney's orders, Chellish had increased the Gazelle's velocity 5 times over its original pace. At more than 60,000 miles per second they approached the innermost planet of the system, which Suttney had selected as a landing place. Chellish had informed him that they'd find a fairly unpleasant environment there since its mean daily temperature exceeded 155° Fahrenheit. But Suttney knew as well as Chellish that the outer void was a very unsatisfactory hiding place for a spaceship. He would rather land on a boiling hot planet than take the chance of being captured by Terranian ships.

Chellish had taken it upon himself to give names to the system and the particular planet they were concerned with. He had said nothing about it to Suttney because the latter was in no mood to be receptive to suggestions from his prisoner concerning any dubbing ceremonies. But from then on, to Chellish the alien sun was Caligula and the hot inner planet was Tantalus. He had no inner qualms about relating Caligula to Ronson Lauer, who seemed to share many traits of character in common with the tyrannical Roman emperor, although his imagination was a bit more primitive. As for the name Tantalus, it was nothing more than the expression of a hope that the modern version of Caligula, who now lay in his cabin nursing his wounds, might meet no better fate in the future than that mythological betrayer of the gods.

Ever since Chellish had argued with him over his reasons for his act, Suttney had fallen into a curious, staring funk. But Chellish did not dare hope that the result of his broodings would be a decision to abandon his traitorous plan. Suttney seemed to be in the position of a man who has determined to commit murder but finds himself repelled at the last moment by the sheer monstrosity of the deed. Nevertheless, he would murder—or translating the analogy to the actual case: he was still going to betray the Earth.

Oliver Roane was equally as silent as Suttney but in his case it had nothing to do with mental preoccupations. He had meagre equipment for meditating. His most pleasurable occupation seemed to be to merely sit there and do nothing.

The quiet spell was welcome to Chellish. Nobody seemed concerned about the tracking instruments. The hypersensor was shut off and was therefore a blank as far as what was going on in surrounding space was concerned. Otherwise the indicators might have stirred a suspicion in Suttney's mind that a few ships other than Arkonide vessels could be snooping around in the area.

In order not to be completely blind in this regard, Chellish sought to discern any possible changes in the viewscreens. He was finally successful, just as he started his retro manoeuvres within 30 million miles of Tantalus. It took a practiced eye to recognize the little dots of light that suddenly appeared and to differentiate them from the ordinary stars. Even Chellish found this difficult but he was certain that some of those dots out there were ships. Whether of Earthly or Arkonide origin he couldn't tell yet.

He noted that they seemed to hover almost motionlessly in space, which led him to believe that they had not yet detected the comparatively tiny Gazelle. Locating such a small object in interplanetary space was a difficult chore because of all the interference factors involved. Those ships out there, whatever their origin, would have to wait for Suttney's location signal if they wanted to find him.

Altogether, Chellish could make out 35 light points which were definitely not distant stars. These would be ships within a range of 1 million miles from the Gazelle and which were also in such a position as to reflect the light of Caligula. There must be many more than just these 35—behind him, in front of him, close in, above and below. It was an eerie experience to be flying through such a mighty formation of

vessels without seeing more than 35 of them.

Tantalus emerged into the field of vision. Under the effects of a high velocity approach it was fascinating to see the planet change within a few minutes from a point of light to a disc, from a disc to a ball and from a ball to a great yellowish-grey mass, which moments later expanded beyond the edges of the screen.

The colour of the planetary surface gave Chellish some food for thought. From a distance, any planet ordinarily reflected the light that came to it from its sun. If the sun was yellow, then the light from the planet would appear to be yellow. However, at close proximity it should begin to take on characteristic colour tones of its own. For example, at this distance the Earth would have appeared to be greenish blue in colour. That the surface of Tantalus was still yellow, interspersed with a dirty grey, indicated that the planet did not have much in common with the Earth as far as the surface was concerned.

Chellish dropped the ship into the upper layers of the atmosphere. Then he changed course and dove toward the surface at a steep angle. Meanwhile he observed what lay beneath him, noting that Tantalus did not seem to have any diversity of markings. Beneath him everything was the same yellowish grey, from one horizon to the other. In some places the grey predominated and in others the yellow tones were accented but Chellish couldn't yet determine the significance of it. During the first 10 minutes of his observations at a lower altitude he only once made out a variation, which was a straight black line running a few hundred miles across his field of vision—probably a flat mountain ridge.

Suddenly someone was standing beside him: Walter Suttney. He had not heard him approach. Like Chellish, he stared at the screen, his eyes reflecting his dejection.

"Desert!" he muttered. "A wilderness waste!"

Chellish agreed. There was no other explanation for the monotonous surface colouration. Tantalus was one giant desert—a colossal sea of sand with the air above it boiling from heat.

Meanwhile the automatic analytical instruments had registered what else there was to know about Tantalus. It had a diameter of almost exactly 6200 miles, which made it somewhat smaller than the Earth; it turned on its axis once every 21 hours and 5 minutes; and its orbital velocity was just under 24 miles per second. The readout on the atmospheric composition was 68% nitrogen, 29% oxygen, 2.3% Argon, 0.7% carbon-dioxide, water and helium. So the air was breathable but whether or not the lungs could withstand the temperatures at which the relentless sun maintained the atmosphere was another question. As the Gazelle moved along above the surface, the thermocouple revealed that the sand of Tantalus stood at a temperature of over 200° Fahrenheit.

"There!" said Suttney abruptly. "Land there!"

A second black streak or strip had appeared on the viewscreen. The Gazelle's present altitude was approximately 18 miles. It was now fairly discernible that the streak consisted of a strung out grouping of mountains-fairly low in contour. It was one of the few places on Tantalus where there were any shadows cast at all.

Chellish noted one other fact: the oncoming edge of night was only about 120 miles away from the mountains. In less than an hour it would be dark down below.

He took the ship into a wide curve and then approached the low mountain chain from the West. At a steep glide angle he lowered to an altitude of 500 yards, at the same time ascertaining the fact that this was the maximum height of any of the hills. He reduced speed to a minimum and waited for Suttney to

select a landing spot.

"No difference," muttered Suttney. "Might as well go into that canyon there."

The opening between two low hills was more like a deep, narrow ravine. Its opening was just wide enough to admit the passage of the Gazelle. Chellish was pleased to note that the locality favoured his own chances. Suttney knew from what direction the Arkonide ships would be coming and would send out his bearing data over the radio beam, trusting that this would reduce risks to a minimum. On the contrary, however, the walls of the ravine would serve to cross-multiply the residual effects, thus making the beam more traceable than would have been the case normally. And this was important in case any Terranian ships were already in the area.

Chellish let the ship glide into the ravine about 200 yards before he lowered it carefully for a landing. As was his habit, he set it down without the slightest jolt.

Suttney turned around. "Roane!" he called out sharply. "Keep an eye on him!"

Roane got up and drew his weapon again.

For the second time, Suttney went over to the hypercom console and fired up the transmitter.

* * * *

It was determined that the Arkonide fleet had emerged from hyperspace in a compact formation. The more than 4000 warships in such close proximity to each other actually created a new centre of gravitational force, so great was their combined mass. The swiftly processed calculations of the positronicon soon revealed that this fleet was made up of typical Arkonide units and groupings which flew in a spherical formation whose diameter was not over 120,000 miles. Under normal conditions it might have been a favourable formation but here where the units of the Terranian fleet were widely deployed waiting for them it was not quite so practical.

The Arkonides had ended their transition at a distance of 6 astronomical units from the central star of the system. From that point on the alien fleet proceeded toward the yellow sun at a speed of only about 6 miles per second. It was easy to observe that they were in a state of bewilderment because they obviously didn't know what was happening around them. Each enemy ship could detect the tracking blips of Terranian ships on its screens as easily as the Terrans could see the light points representing Arkonide vessels but so far they'd had no chance to estimate the size and strength of the opposing fleet. The Terranian ships were too widely deployed to generate a discernible gravity field and every attempt to send out a hyper-tracer resulted in the entrapment of the search beam in the Earth warships' energy-absorbing anti-detection screens.

Two hours went by without any decisive move being made by either side. Rhodan considered it an appropriate tactic to keep the Arkonides guessing. It served to spread confusion throughout the enemy fleet and it also gave the leading robot commander no information as a basis for reevaluating his position or making new plans.

The complete radio silence that reigned out there for two hours in that small universe of opposed fighting

ships was almost eerie. The Terranian ships were held to silence in order to prevent any disclosure to the enemy as to the strength of the Earth fleet. On the Arkonide side, such a waiting lull was of no consequence to the robot crews because they had nothing to say to each other. They were mechanical receivers of commands—from the 'Leader' down to the lowest soldier.

After more than two hours of waiting, the silence was finally interrupted when Suttney began to send out his location bearings. A wave of relief swept through the radio com stations of all Earth ships. But not only there. The fact that Suttney was beaming his signal was an indication that he knew nothing yet concerning the presence of the Terranian fleet. Otherwise he would have waited if possible for a more favourable time. He would not have betrayed his position. So this made Perry Rhodan's task much easier. He didn't have to get involved in an uncertain waiting game, at least not any longer. So he, too, gave a great sigh of relief.

He gave the Fleet a prearranged signal, whereupon the widely deployed units got under way again and regrouped themselves around the central portion of the system. The location of Suttney's transmitter had been determined to be the innermost planet, which revolved about the central star at a mean distance of 0.6 AU or about 36 million miles.

On all telescopic viewscreens the general picture changed with a startling abruptness. Now at the decisive moment, Perry Rhodan was not at all averse to demonstrating his strength to the enemy. The ship's engines emitted high-speed quantum particles. Gleaming fountains of light shot out of the mighty jets, bringing the giant fleet into motion. The sharp brilliance of the particle exhausts caused thousands of glittering light points to appear on all viewscreens.

The Arkonides began to stir. Their vast spherical formation dissolved into a wide, flat configuration of squadrons which also thrust forward toward the innermost planet of the system.

Rhodan let them carry on, to a point. But when the Drusus came within 6 million miles of its destination and the lead ship of the Arkonide fleet was only 10 million miles from the planet, Perry hailed the alien commander by radio. He was certain that there was a living, organic commander, even though in reality he might have nothing to command, receiving his orders as he must from a robot.

Apparently the Arkonide had been waiting for such a call because the swiftness of his response was almost instantaneous. Rhodan's hunch turned out to be correct in that the Arkonide ships did carry Arkon-subjugated aliens as an organic supplement to the robot crews. A few seconds after he had signalled he saw on his viewscreen the upper portion of a giant Naat, one of the 3-eyed creatures from the 5th world of the Arkon system. The Naat's triple gaze held balefully on Perry Rhodan. Its round, hairless head glistened in the fluorescents and its wide, thin-lipped mouth appeared to be drawn into a fixed grin. But Rhodan knew that it was not a grin at all. As far as being able to read the creature's emotional state by its expression was concerned, he might as well have been looking at a polar bear.

Since the Naat waited for him to speak first, Rhodan began, using an informal, colloquial form of Arkonese:

"Naturally I can't forbid you to bring your fleet into this particular system but I wish to draw to your attention the fact that 3 deserters from my own forces have landed on the innermost planet in a stolen spaceship. And I'm expecting you to keep your fingers out of this."

The Naat looked down off screen involuntarily, observing something that was not within Rhodan's range of vision. 'Keep your fingers out' was as acceptable an expression in Arkonese as it was in English. But the Naat was no doubt regarding his own hands, which had claws instead of fingers. Rhodan understood

the inferiority complexes that the Arkon-subjugated races often suffered. For example, if they said, "My hair is standing on end," they would only do so because forced to speak the language of their rulers, even though they had no hair.

After the Naat had observed his hands for awhile, he answered: "We are here in response to a distress call. We always come to the aid of those who ask for help."

The reply was given in desperation because obviously the Naat had not yet received any instructions from his robot superior.

"Alright, you can stop the double talk," Rhodan told him gruffly. "I picked up that so-called distress call myself. It was beamed out by the 3 deserters. What I want to know is whether or not you are going to stay out of this affair."

The Naat looked down a second time. Although Rhodan could not see what he was looking at, he was certain that an instruction card had popped out of some kind of ejection slot, transmitting to him what the robot wanted him to reply.

"We will take measures according to the situation," said the Naat.

"Fine," retorted Rhodan menacingly. "Then let me clarify your situation for you. If any of your ships approach the innermost planet within a perimeter of 60,000 miles, we will commence firing. I trust that is plain enough for you. We have no intention of letting you mix in the internal affairs of our fleet. Over and out!" He broke off the connection before the Naat could say anything.

The Terranian ships drew in closer to their destination. Rhodan ordered his commanders to guard the line of limitation which he had prescribed for the Arkonides. So at a distance of 60,000 miles from the desert world a huge cloud of ships began to form, both Terranian and Arkonide.

A new period of waiting began. Walter Suttney's bearing signals had ceased. On board the *Drusus* a Gazelle was made ready for flight. It had been assigned the task of going down to the planet's surface and searching for the 3 deserters and 1st Lt. Chellish.

* * * *

During the one hour period in which Suttney transmitted his coördinates to the enemy, Chellish fairly trembled with mounting excitement. At any moment he hoped to see a Terranian spaceship drop from the sky and land at the entrance to the ravine.

Then he rechecked his figures and came to the conclusion that such a fast response was quite impossible. If the Earth ships had picked up and analysed their resonance frequency during the Gazelle's last transition, and if the fleet were say 5000 light-years away at the time, without question it would be led to the alien solar system that the deserters had selected but it would still be a long while before they knew where the Gazelle was located within that system. When dealing with distances of hundreds and even thousands of light-years, one often overlooked the fact that a spatial plane of 'only' 60 billion square miles, represented by even as small a system as this one, was an almost endless region in which a ship like the Gazelle could hide at will. When the Earth ships arrived in the Caligula System they would still be

faced with a large-scale search operation. And even if they picked up Suttney's bearing coordinates it would require some time before they could manoeuvre in around Tantalus and prepare for a landing.

No, it was still too early to hope for a rescue. And this was quite aside from the fact that if Terranian ships were here at all they would certainly be hindered by the presence of an Arkonide fleet, since the enemy would not likely give up this rare opportunity to learn something about the galactic position of the Earth.

Which brought Chellish to another idea. What would happen if the Earth rescue ships saw they were outnumbered by the Arkonides? What action would they take in order to prevent the sacred secret from falling into the enemy's hands in spite of the latter's fighting superiority?

The answer was so simple and obvious that anybody would see it, including whatever spaceship commander happened to be involved with such a decision. One of the Earth ships would attempt to get past the Arkonides. It would shoot down toward Tantalus with the object of locating and destroying the Gazelle.

As simple as that. One bomb or a disintegrator salvo—curtains!

Chellish could feel the sweat popping out on his forehead. He looked up involuntarily toward the ceiling of the control room as though he could see through the metal hull and observe the Earth spaceship as it prepared to lob in a bomb or perhaps dropped the hatch cover from one of its mighty disintegrator turrets.

No, it was still too early for that. There was still a small time-span of maybe one or two hours. But whoever hadn't cleared out of the Gazelle by that time was a dead man.

While Chellish was thus preoccupied, Suttney had been unusually active. Since Chellish had heard the hum of the outer lock door he knew that the other had been outside somewhere. Now he came back with a plastic film case under his arm, which was recognizable as equipment from the data bank room. Chellish knew what it contained: microfilm data which would enable anyone to derive the galactic position of the Earth. In addition, Suttney had put on a protective spacesuit over his uniform. He was ready to leave the ship. Behind him came Ronson Lauer, who was also suited up.

"Go get yourself a spacesuit, Roane," Suttney growled.

Roane got up and left the room.

Chellish made an attempt to look surprised. "Are you going to leave the ship?" When Suttney only nodded, he asked, "Why?"

Lauer snorted sarcastically. "That's a dumb question, Chellish. If any Earth ship happens to be around here anywhere, what would it probably do as soon as it finds us?"

Chellish shrugged.

"It would blow us to Hell!" snapped Lauer. "To shut us up! That's why we'd prefer to go have a look around outside."

"So you're getting your nerve back, eh?" Chellish asked scornfully.

Lauer's face twisted into a mocking sneer. "I wasn't under the impression I ever lost it, Chellish!" he retorted.

With a swift movement he drew his weapon. Chellish jumped away but then saw that the blast was not intended for him. Lauer made a dramatic, heel-clicking turn and directed the glowing white stream of energy at the main control panel across the room. The concentrated beam split the metal panel in two. The metal vaporized with a hissing sound and spewed in all directions to settle sluggishly on the walls and condense again. Glass panels shattered in a series of tinkling crashes and a wild flurry of short-circuits stormed through the internal wiring. The control room was filled with heat and the stench of burned insulation. Within a minute the main switchboard was so demolished that no one could ever repair it again.

Lauer turned to him with a grin. He appeared to be quite pleased with his accomplishment. The weapon was still in his hand. "That's just in case you thought we'd let you make an easy getaway!" he laughed.

Chellish got the message. He looked at Suttney but the latter avoided his searching gaze. "You dirty coward!" Chellish exclaimed, disdainfully. Then he turned his attention to Lauer again.

"So this is the end of the line for you, Chellish," announced Lauer, apparently enjoying his part of the drama. "You've been enough trouble for us up till now. Now we're through with all that. Oh don't think I'm going to kill you—I'm leaving that little chore for your friends in the Fleet. I presume they'll make a thorough job of it. You didn't know you were going to stay here in the ship, did you? But you see I have to keep you from spying after us—you can understand that, can't you?"

Chellish hardly listened to him. He knew what was to come and his brain was trying to sweat out a solution. There was nothing close by that he could use as a weapon. Suttney stood near the exit hatch and Lauer prudently maintained a 5-yard distance from him. Leisurely, the latter now raised the thermo-gun and aimed it at Chellish as though this were the moment he relished most of all.

Chellish held his breath and tensed his muscles. He saw that Lauer was aiming high at his shoulder. Just as he felt that the other was about to press the trigger, he made a broad jump sideways. The shot hissed past him and hit the wall. Lauer was confused for a second but it was enough time for Chellish to turn and spring at him. Perhaps a man of less experience than Lauer might have been overcome by this daring manoeuvre—but Ronson Lauer merely took a short step back and fired a second shot before Chellish could reach him.

Chellish saw a blinding flash of lightning, which he seemed to run into. He did not feel the slightest trace of any pain. Something seemed to raise him gently and waft him away into an endlessness filled with wondrous light.

5/ TRAITORS' FATES

On 13 Oct. 2042 the *Terrania Times* reported:

We have occasion once more to carefully scrutinize a report concerning the concentration of the Terranian Fleet near the centre of the galaxy, which has been officially described as a manoeuvre

only. Now, however, our sources inform us that an Arkonide fleet has also appeared in that same sector of space. All indications are that no mere manoeuvre is involved but rather a joint expedition against a common enemy. The strength of the participating forces leads us to suspect that this is no ordinary local skirmish. It appears that a threat of considerable magnitude has emerged in that area of the Milky Way—danger that is of equal concern to both galactic empires—the Arkonides' and our own.

We should like to assume that the current flood of official news releases covering these distant events is an attempt on the part of the Ministry of Information to maintain the public status quo of calm, comfort and complacency. But as we have often pointed out and will reiterate again today, if the cool-headed and battle-ready support of Terranians is to be counted on provision must be made for keeping us informed of all important developments.

* * * *

One's last thought is held so tenaciously by the consciousness that it is the first part of perception when one awakens from the unconscious state.

When Chellish came to, he wondered that he was still alive. The soundless, blinding explosion, the weightless drifting through glowing and formless emptines—all that had appeared to be death, resulting from Lauer's thermogun. But suddenly there was neither light nor weightlessness nor floating. It was dark and he lay on something hard and a searing pain gnawed at his right side.

He raised up slowly. The pain was so severe that he couldn't keep his eyes from watering.

He wondered why it was so dark. Then he remembered that Lauer had shot the main panel to pieces. At that time there had still been bright daylight outside and since the viewscreens hadn't been attached to the main panel the light had flooded from them as though through wide windows. Now it was night. There was only a barely perceptible greyish glimmer marking the location of the panoramic screen.

He knew what had happened to him but it was some time before he could remember events prior to that. He recalled that Suttney, Lauer and Roane were about to leave the ship but a few minutes passed before it came to him *why* they had this in mind.

Danger! Disaster threatened! The first Earthship to detect the Gazelle would destroy it without hesitation.

This brought him fully to his senses. While trying to forget the raging pain in his hip, he brought his wrist-watch close to his eyes so that he could see the luminous dial. He knew that when Lauer had shot him it had been 8:40 Earth time. Now it was 9:15. He had lain here unconscious for more than half an hour. It was high time to get clear of the ship.

The control room door was open. After Lauer's demolition of the switch panel there had been no power to close the sliding hatch. It occurred to him that in such a case the two airlock doors must also be open. So he must be breathing the air of Tantalus. Strange: he had not noticed any difference, nor did it seem to be especially hot.

No wonder, he thought in the next moment. Tantalus must have its extremes of temperature and climate.

At night it probably became as bitterly cold as it was intolerably hot in the daytime.

He got up and staggered out of the room into the corridor, where he located the spacesuit locker. It was empty. The remaining suits were strewn out on the deck a few yards beyond it but when Chellish checked them over he didn't find one of them that was intact. They all had holes in them big enough to stick his head through. They had left him no chance for survival.

He was filled with a choking anger as he staggered onward to the open airlock. The outer hatch opening was only a few feet above the ground. He jumped out and then took a tumble because his right leg was not able to take the impact of the landing. He sprawled face first into the sand. Then he put his weight on his left leg and got up again.

The sand was still warm because it had not yet radiated all of the heat it had absorbed from the sun during the day. It would probably act as a heat reservoir for a few more hours but there was little doubt that toward morning it would be very cold.

Chellish looked about him. The sky emitted a milky glow which permitted his eyes to become oriented to the surrounding terrain. He tried to inspect his hip wound which turned out to be a hardened, brittle conglomeration of melted plastic, singed clothing material and burned flesh. Lauer's shot appeared to have only grazed him. The pain was excruciating but he could bear it. He had to.

He searched the ground and soon discovered the footprints of Suttney and his cohorts. He sensed some satisfaction when he saw that the trail led on into the ravine.

They apparently planned to hide in the hills where there would be protective cover.

As he followed their tracks he favoured his right leg as much as possible but he soon found that this was over-taxing his left side, which also began to pain him. At this rate he wouldn't be able to make much headway, at least not as much as Suttney, Lauer and Roane.

But meanwhile his rage had reached a stage where it blinded him to the dictates of reason. All he knew was that he *had* to overtake the three of them, no matter how long it took.

* * * *

At 8:55 ship time the tracking station on board the battleship *Barbarossa* detected that a small shuttlecraft had been launched from a nearby Arkonide ship. It was seen to penetrate the blockade zone that Perry Rhodan had established and head downward toward the planet with the obvious intention of either searching the surface areas or landing there.

The *Barbarossa* was under command of Gen. Deringhouse, who did not hesitate one second in exacting the penalty the Arkonides had been told they would have to pay if they were to cast Perry Rhodan's warning to the winds. When the small craft was slightly more than 40,000 miles away, the gun hatches of the *Barbarossa* opened and a beam of ravaging energy reached out toward the vessel. Within 10 seconds a hit occurred. The tiny ship disappeared in a bright, soundless explosion. The *Barbarossa*'s gun turrets became silent again. But its crewmen sat at the hypercom receivers and watched for any reaction from the Arkonides. Nothing happened.

A half hour after this incident, when it was seen that the Arkonides were not taking any further action, Perry Rhodan himself took off from the *Drusus* in a fully manned Gazelle. Gen. Deringhouse took over top command of the entire fleet, including the flagship.

* * * *

At first it appeared that the back wall of the deep ravine formed a blind alley for them. Ronson Lauer played the wide beam of his lamp across the rocks and just as he was about to give up he discovered a narrow fissure. It was 8 or 9 feet off the ground and seemed to lead into the clifflike wall. Upon closer inspection he found that the floor of the fissure led gently upward, apparently offering a passage up to the plateau.

He looked at Suttney questioningly. Suttney beckoned to Roane. Roane was the first to climb into the cleft. Then he turned and helped Suttney up because of his extra burden of the film case. Lauer followed them. In spite of the micro-transceiver he had hung around his neck he was fairly agile. Once inside the crevice he again led the way with his heavy duty flashlight.

As he climbed up through the narrow gully he heard the air-conditioning system in his suit click to a new setting. He looked at his sleeve thermometer and saw that the outer temperature had now lowered to, 105° Fahrenheit. He became pensive as he put one foot in front of the other, instinctively watching for any dangerous animals or insects—although he had consciously rejected the idea that any life at all existed in this world. The question that dominated his thoughts was whether or not they'd been wise to leave the Gazelle. He agreed more or less with Suttney that any Earth spaceship would destroy the ship if it found it. But could there really be any Earth ships in the area at all? How could they know of their present location? When Suttney sent his message to the Arkonides, it was so improbable that any units of the Terra Fleet would have been within even 100 light-years of the place that he had not even taken it into account. Naturally Suttney's transmission would have been intercepted by the Terranians but at such a remote distance that it would take them days to even search out the system where the Gazelle had taken refuge.

So why had they run away from the ship? It would have been much more comfortable to sit in an upholstered chair and wait for the arrival of the Arkonides.

He stopped and turned around, prepared to suggest to Suttney that they return—but just then something happened overhead in the heavens. At first all he saw was a brilliant flash, which illuminated the gully. He stared skyward and observed a rain of glittering light sparks which seemed to emanate from a spot close to the zenith and then spew out in all directions as they hurtled toward the ground.

He forgot what he had started to say and instead began to run. Puffing desperately, he chased through the gully toward the top without bothering about Suttney or Roane, and finally he reached the plateau where he had a clear view.

The shower of light sparks had come nearer in the meantime. But then something came whistling suddenly through the air and hit the plateau with a dull thud, several hundred yards away. In the twilight Lauer saw a dust cloud swirl upward and then drift back toward the ground. The impact had transmitted a powerful jolt through the rocky terrain where he was standing.

When he looked up again the rain of fiery particles had subsided. They had probably fallen to the surface elsewhere. He heard rapid breathing and panting behind him.

He did not even turn to see if it was Suttney or Roane but instead broke into a sprint, racing toward the thing that had ploughed into the ground nearby.

The plateau was completely flat so that the crater caused by the impact could not be missed. Lauer saw that it was perfectly round and had a diameter of 12 or 13 feet. It was also just about as deep but he could not discover whatever it was that had fallen here. Apparently it had bored its way beneath the floor of the crater itself.

Lauer climbed down into it, finally slipping and sliding his way to the bottom in a great cloud of dust. He tore the micro-tran from him and tossed it heedlessly to one side. Then he began to shovel the sand away with his gloved hands.

It was an arduous task, especially since the sand was quite hot. After a half hour, Lauer's hands were heat-blistered in spite of his gloves but he finally came to a place where the sand had been melted into a hard lump. He struggled with this until he had shoved it to one side. Beneath this a piece of plastic material came to view which was flanged out and bent but was in the shape of a sharp point.

Carefully, Lauer grasped it, hoping to pull it out of the ground but he had hardly touched it before he let out a yell of pain. The metal plastic was still very hot—close to 1000° Fahrenheit.

Lauer stepped back and turned on the spotlight. Then he brought it within inches of the metal spike and examined the latter carefully. It reminded him of something. He was sure that he'd recognize what it was immediately if he could see it in its original form and not all bent out of shape by the fall and the heat.

Suddenly he heard Suttney's voice in his helmet phones.

It sounded hopeless and dejected. "That's the control pedestal from an Arkonide flying disc."

Lauer knew at once that Suttney was right. A control pedestal—that was it! He recalled the complete configuration from his hypno-schooling: a tube-shaped extrusion made of plastic metal from which various control protuberances extended for operating the Arkonide auxiliary craft. The protuberances were missing now because they'd been melted away. Even what was left had been distorted almost beyond recognition. But Suttney was right.

Lauer moved out of the hole, retrieving the micro-transceiver in the process. He was nonplussed. He had no idea why the control pedestal of an Arkonide shuttlecraft should have fallen to the surface of the desert planet.

Walter Suttney stood on the upper rim of the funnel-shaped depression. Roane had not arrived yet but Lauer saw him approaching across the plateau.

"So they came after all," said Suttney in such an undertone that seemed he was talking to himself.

"Who?" asked Lauer. "The Arkonides?"

"They got here, too, but I mean the Terranians."

Lauer caught his breath sharply. "You mean... they may have shot down an Arkonide ship?"

"What else?"

Lauer stared incredulously back into the crater. Then he looked up into the sky as though he could see the Earthly and Arkonide ships somewhere.

Suddenly, Suttney cried out, "Make the micro-tran ready for sending!"

Lauer whirled around to look at him. "What for?" he asked. "You're not going to..."

"Come on!" insisted Suttney. "We don't have any time to lose. In a couple of hours our own people will have found us."

Lauer became angry. "And what the devil am I supposed to do with the micro-com?" he yelled.

"We're going to tell the Arkonides what we know about the Earth's position—before it's too late."

For a moment Lauer was speechless. Even Roane drew his breath sharply at this.

"Have you lost your marbles, Walter?" Lauer finally blurted out. "If this transmitter lets one peep out of it, they'll locate us and 3 minutes later we'll be dead!"

Suttney was in deadly earnest. "Three minutes is enough to tell the Arkonides where they can find the Earth."

"And we? What do we get out of it if Rhodan hits us with a bomb?"

Suttney's tone of voice was suddenly scornful and derisive. "But Ronson, you are still a revolutionary, aren't you? You have sworn to destroy Perry Rhodan... cost what it might. Very well, then. Perry Rhodan is destroyed as soon as the Arkonides find the Earth. So what are you hesitating about? Is your miserable life worth more than the good of Mankind?"

Lauer gasped. "Leave me out of it!" he snarled.

Suttney held the microfilm case under his left arm. He remained motionless when he answered. "Ronson, you agreed to follow my instructions and that's exactly what you're going to do now. Get that transmitter on the air and give it to me!"

"No!" shouted Lauer.

"Do what I say or..."

"Or...?"

Suttney misjudged the situation. He thought he had time enough to place the film case carefully on the ground and draw his weapon. Which only made it easier for Lauer, who had his gun in hand and ready before Suttney had half straightened up again.

Lauer's eyes narrowed. His voice was calm. "You poor, frizzle-brained fool!"

He fired twice, one shot after the other.

* * * *

From a position that was still some 200 yards from the back wall of the canyon, Gunther Chellish observed the explosion in the sky. He interpreted it correctly and the knowledge that Terranian ships had finally shown up gave him new strength for continuing his painful march.

After awhile he reached the wall and discovered the crevice. Of course he couldn't be certain that Roane, Suttney and Lauer had used the narrow passage but since their tracks led nowhere else he took it for granted. He drew himself up into the gully but it was such a strain on him, and his hip flamed with such renewed pain, that he had to lie on the ground for several minutes to recuperate.

When he could finally bring his breathing under control, he listened for any sounds ahead of him in the darkness. Naturally the other three could have left him far behind by now if they had continued without interruption. But they could also have stopped somewhere up ahead in the gully to wait for him.

However, he couldn't hear anything, so he pulled himself to his feet and went onward. It was stifling hot in the gully. Only after a few steps the sweat was running down his face. He tried resting himself against the cliff wall beside him but the stone surface was hotter than the air. He trudged onward and looked up along the fissure in the hope that it would open again into a clear area.

Suddenly, he heard a humming and whistling sound behind him. It came as such a surprise yet was so familiar to him that he lost his footing in a transport of pain and delight, all at once, and fell to the heated ground. The sound grew mightily, causing the ground to tremble. Chellish started to shout with joy and in the vain hope that he could attract attention but his voice was drowned in the loud hissing that suddenly mixed in with the swish of the propulsion units. Seconds later the gully was bathed in a brilliant blue-white light and shortly afterwards the thunder of a tremendous explosion swept over Chellish and away into the night.

Chellish could not make out the phantom shape of the Gazelle as it streaked low over the plateau because he was blinded. The glaring explosion of his ship, in which he'd been lying unconscious only an hour before, raised a spangle of brightly coloured dancing lights in front of his eyes. He groped around and found a small rocky projection which he used to help pull himself up on. Reeling and staggering, filled with disillusionment, he pushed onward up the incline.

As expected, they had destroyed the spacecraft. It filled him with bitterness that they had shown no consideration for himself. If Lauer had tied him to anything in the control room he would not be among the living now.

But then—they would naturally have to disregard him. The Earth itself was at stake, so what was just one human life? Maybe they had also figured on his being smart enough to get away somewhere to safety in time.

At any rate, they were here! They had flown by close overhead and if he'd been carrying a transmitter he could have drawn their attention to him.

They'd be landing here somewhere in the area in an attempt to find out if Suttney, Lauer and Roane had left the Gazelle prior to the explosion. If he were lucky he'd be able to spot their ship early in the morning, as soon as it became light.

With his heart pounding, he pushed onward in a mixture of happiness and remorse. In a few hours he would be safe—in a bed, being cared for by a friendly doctor. Just a few hours more—

When he reached the plateau he considered whether it would be better to sit there in the sand or to follow the trail of Suttney, Lauer and Roane. The upper plain lay clearly before him under the glittering stars. He could see the footprints ahead of him for at least a quarter of a mile.

Finally he decided to follow them. Perhaps the Gazelle crew wouldn't have any idea of where the 3 deserters were located. But if they were to discover him, instead, he'd be able to guide them.

A few minutes later, several shapes emerged out of the gloom—a large one and a small one. The large shadow evolved into a crater and the small shadow was Suttney. There was a deep, ugly wound in his chest and he stared up through his faceplate into the night sky with wide, lifeless eyes.

Chellish was not able to imagine what had happened here but of course he didn't put it past Ronson Lauer to be able to kill either one of his companions if it seemed to serve his purpose; but he couldn't quite figure what the purpose behind killing Suttney might have been.

He shoved Suttney's lifeless body to the edge of the crater and let it slide down into it. At least the crater might serve as a grave for him after the wind had blown enough sand into the depression.

After that he continued on the trail of the others.

* * * *

Suddenly the night was swarming with elliptical Gazelle shapes. After discovering the lost ship and destroying it, Perry Rhodan had ordered them to join him.

The tracking job had not been difficult. Suttney's Gazelle was more or less the only significant mass of metal on the surface of the planet. There, where the micro-wave tracer had shown its first reaction, Rhodan had shot downward and discovered what he was looking for.

However he was certain that Suttney had been shrewd enough to get clear of the ship in time and it was very probable that he had not come out of the danger zone with empty hands. All information concerning the galactic position of the Earth could be easily contained in a cubical case that measured 4 inches on each side. Suttney had no doubt kept the microfilm package in readiness and had taken it with him. At least that's what would have to be surmised.

The Gazelle had been hidden in a deep ravine or canyon of some kind that cut into the hills slightly more than a mile. If Suttney and his companions had left the craft they would have gone eastward or deeper into the hills. To the east of the canyon was a wide, clearly visible plateau where the fugitives would not be able to conceal themselves very readily. They had either crossed it already or had turned northward or southward along its rim.

In order to block off this part of the mountain ridge, Rhodan had called in a squadron of Gazelles and instructed them to land at the foot of the hills. He took his own Gazelle into a hiding place on the eastern edge of the plateau. The entire manoeuvre stretched out until the first light of dawn. By then it seemed certain that Suttney, Lauer and Roane would fall into the trap—dead or alive.

Rhodan started to seek radio contact with Suttney: "This is Rhodan, Suttney, come in!" His call went out uninterruptedly from sunrise on.

* * * *

"Down here!" panted Lauer. "Dammit, snap into it!" Roane's ponderously slow gait had whipped him to a blind fury. He shoved the other in the back, pushing the heavy man more rapidly than he had intended so that he slid down into the rocky depression and lay there groaning.

Lauer followed him with agile steps. In addition to the micro-com he also carried the microfilm case but in spite of this he moved with lightfooted sureness.

They had seen the glare of the explosion that had signified the end of the Gazelle. From a safe spot on the eastern edge of the plateau they had seen Rhodan's ship pass over and a few minutes later they observed the squadron of Gazelles as they plunged downward out of the night sky and disappeared beyond the tops of the hills.

Ronson Lauer had interpreted the situation correctly: they sat in the middle of a trap. From the eastern rim of the upper plain a steep rocky slope dropped into a broad, sandy valley. The slanting rock wall offered innumerable places of concealment. Lauer knew that there was no further use in remaining on the march.

So now they sat there watching the sky gradually brighten. Rhodan's crewmen would soon be starting their search. They would come searching here where the rocks formed multiple hiding places and they would keep at it if it took them 3 days to find him and Roane.

So this was it. The trail ended on a dry dusty planet that didn't even have a name.

Lauer's anger welled up anew within him. Those damnable fools, the Arkonides! Why had they not come sooner? Then he and Roane would be sitting now in a comfortable cabin and enjoying deferential treatment while presenting to some Arkonide commander the secret that they had stolen from Rhodan. Instead, here they were sitting between two yellowish brown boulders waiting for the sun to come up so that Rhodan's men would be able to find them.

Unless—He suddenly had an idea. Right in front of him was the case containing the microfilm. There would be no further opportunity for handing it over to the Arkonides. But he could do what Suttney had intended to do: over the micro-com he could tell the enemy that Earth's solar system was so far away from this point and that they should look for it in such and such a direction. Of course it wouldn't be a complete set of directions but it would be sufficient for the Arkonides to be able to find the Earth in at least a couple of years.

Not that he actually intended to let the Arkonides get hold of such information just yet. But he could threaten Rhodan with it!

* * * *

For an hour now, no one had responded. Perry Rhodan began to wonder. He had been certain that Suttney and his henchmen must have gotten out of the Gazelle before it was exploded by the disintegrator shot. But now this silence on the wavebands seemed to contradict his assumption. If Walter Suttney were still alive he couldn't possibly be stupid enough to think he had a chance.

Rhodan did not know that Ronson Lauer was even then in the process of formulating his answer.

It wasn't until an hour after sunrise, at 20 hours ship time, that Rhodan's receiver came to life and a nervous voice spoke swiftly to him:

"You're talking to Ronson Lauer, Rhodan. Suttney is dead. I've taken over in his place and I want to make a deal with you..."

* * * *

By sunrise, Chellish had crossed about half of the plateau area. During the past several hours it had been terribly cold but once the sun lifted a hand's breadth over the horizon the heat swung to the other extreme and he was already fondly wishing for the cool of the night.

In spite of his efforts it seemed that he approached the crags and rocky outcroppings of the eastern rim with an unbearable slowness. He kept stopping repeatedly to wipe the sweat from his brow. He had an impression that he was walking on a treadmill in one spot without actually making any headway at all.

The footprints left by Lauer and Roane led straight as an arrow across the yellow sand. Chellish could even see where the tracks ended on the rim of the high plain but it was still more than a mile away—a hot and dusty stretch which was much too far for a man who couldn't stand for even a second on his right leg and who had not had anything to drink for at least an eternity.

There was no sign now of all the Gazelles whose engines had filled the night with their hummings and roarings for more than half an hour. Apparently they had not considered the sandy plain to be a good place to land.

Chellish dragged his way along but he had begun to doubt that he would ever reach the eastern rim. He was governed by fear now and it took every last shred of his strength of reason to keep him from simply lying down in the sand and giving up.

* * * *

"There are only two methods you can use, Rhodan," said Lauer hurriedly. "You can communicate with your men either by Telecom or by Normal radio and I can receive both. I assure you that the instant you start using your transmitters for any purpose other than talking to me I'll start passing my information on to the Arkonides. You keep that in mind while you're thinking over my proposition."

Rhodan knew that Lauer meant what he said. He would begin reporting the galactic position of the Earth to the Arkonides as soon as anyone attempted to take a bearing on his own position or utilize it for directing the Gazelles to where they should drop their bombs.

Rhodan and Lauer found themselves in a situation where each was confronted with but one alternative. Each only had one move to make. Any other choice, for either of them, would lead to ruin—end of the game!

Lauer had declared that he would keep his strategic information to himself in return for having a Gazelle placed at his disposal, in which he would be allowed to take off after the departure of the Fleet. Naturally such a proposition was unacceptable because Lauer would then simply fly to Arkon and make his treason complete.

The traitor had given a 3-hour time limit. If by the end of that period his proposition had not been accepted, he would begin to broadcast his data. And Perry Rhodan's hands were tied. He could not move in any direction without paying the ultimate price—the Earth.

The yellow sun raised its blazing face higher into the bluish white glare of the sky. On board the Gazelles anyone would have given his kingdom for just a good idea.

* * * *

...left foot... right foot... left foot... now drag the right!

Don't look at the sun. Don't think of water. Here is the trail.

In Gunther Chellish's eyes the sand was glaring white and the foot prints in front of him seemed to be black holes. A colourless world of black and white and merciless heat.

He no longer knew how far he had to go before he would reach the shade of the rocks. He didn't trust himself to raise his head because then he would have to look at the sun. He didn't want to look at that swollen orb of Hellish Heat.

Nor did he look up when he heard a howling sound behind him. It made no difference to him what it might be. It grew louder and swept nearer to him but he did not stop and he refused to turn for fear that he would never get started again once he came to a standstill.

He noted that the tracks before him were suddenly erased. They blurred before his vision and then were

there no more. He blinked his burning eyes to get rid of the hallucination but the footprints were gone. In front of him was nothing but trackless sand, which some inexplicable force drove to the north in long, rippling streamers.

He finally came to a stop and looked about him when a darkness came over the area. But there was nothing more that he could see. He was enveloped in a murky brown cloud. Sand flew into his eyes and into his nose and mouth. The howling he had heard was that of a sand storm.

He raised his arms in front of his face and pushed onward. He thought he knew in what direction the footprints had led before they disappeared. With an automatic sort of logic he realized that if he wasn't careful he'd be making a curve to his left because of favouring his wounded right leg all the time. So he compensated by keeping to his right, and he let the wind drive him along.

He couldn't even see two steps ahead at a time. Whenever he clenched his teeth, he felt and heard the grittiness of the sand. But it was all the same to him whether he chewed sand or cooked in the heat. One thing was as bad as the other. He stumbled along without any sense of time. His brain sent automatic commands to his legs... left... drag the right... left... drag the right. Chellish wasn't even aware of the process anymore. He was like a machine that kept on going for the simple reason that somebody had forgotten to turn him off.

Suddenly he stumbled over something. It could have been his own feet that tripped him. In which case he would have fallen into soft sand but this was no soft landing. His head struck something hard and it brought him to his senses. He looked up and saw before him a rock that was about as tall as a man. At first he could not believe his eyes but when he ran his hands over the rough surface he tore his fingers and drew blood. It was the blood that convinced him. He had made it. He had reached the rim of the plain. When the storm died down and the sun came out again, he would find protective shade behind this boulder.

He crawled around it and pressed himself against the stone in the lee of the wind. He noted that the ground sank rapidly away within several steps of his present position. His tired brain signalled the possibility that there might be a valley somewhere below.

He pressed his hand to his mouth and drew in air between his torn fingers. He needed air—even if it was as hot and dusty as this.

He felt the storm shake the very rock behind him.

* * * *

Ronson Lauer saw the brownish cloud of the sandstorm shoot out above him from the edge of the cliff and he heard the mournful howling of the wind. He felt uneasy. The storm offered Rhodan an excellent opportunity in which to sneak up on him unobserved.

They had to change their hiding place!

"Roane!" he shouted above the shriek of the wind. "Move it! Come on—over there!"

Roane didn't understand why but he obeyed. They crept along the steep slope between the rocks. Lauer kept the micro-transceiver open but Perry Rhodan maintained a waiting silence.

One and a half hours had passed of the 3 hours allowed.

* * * *

The brown cloud began to fade as the howling of the wind subsided. Chellish looked into the sky, searching for the sun. It shone through the dust pall like a dim and dreary ball of light. From its present appearance it was difficult to believe that it could burn a man alive.

His field of vision broadened. He was now able to observe the steep declivity before him for a distance of several yards. But nothing presented itself there other than a greyish surface and a mottled covering of rocks. Nothing else worth looking at.

Then the storm ended suddenly, as swiftly as it had come. A ragged dust cloud moved away sluggishly to the east.

Suddenly Chellish heard sounds below him. He dropped to his side and pushed himself to the edge of the declivity. The storm had rattled him into a state of wakefulness.

And now he saw Ronson Lauer and Oliver Roane scabbling along the steep slope between the boulders! They were about 30 yards to his left and were moving toward a spot beneath this present position.

Chellish drew back. He was afraid. He didn't want Lauer to discover him. The man would shoot him on sight. He crept to the other side of the rock, which was necessary anyway because the shade was there.

In pressing hard against the boulder he suddenly felt it move slightly. Not being firmly anchored in the ground, it had leaned away from him. Chellish suddenly recalled how the wind had caused it to tremble.

A fascinating idea gripped his mind. Here was a wobbly boulder—and there was a very steep slope across which Lauer and Roane were struggling.

He shoved himself up the rock into a standing position and placed both hands against it, attempting to move it. A quick glance beyond its rim revealed that Lauer and Roane had come another 10 yards closer. He leaned his left shoulder against the stone. Using his right leg as a brace he strained against the weight of the boulder and the raging pain in his hip gave him additional strength.

He noticed that the rock began to lean farther toward the dropoff. He heard Lauer and Roane crawling across the face of the drop. The clank of metal against stone told him that they were exactly beneath his position. The fear of being too late gave him the last spurt of energy he needed in order to topple the stone. The man-sized chunk of rock plunged forward, slid to the edge and beyond it, kicked up its lower end and pounded down the slope.

Chellish crashed to the ground. He heard a wild cry of terror and used his elbows to pull himself forward to the edge.

Far below him he saw the boulder bounding toward the valley in a trail of dust. About halfway down the incline he made out two dark blue dots against the grey background of the mountain. Lauer and Roane. The falling rock had caught them both and had carried them a few hundred yards along its hurtling course.

But in Lauer's first instant of terrorized shouting he had dropped the micro-com, which now lay only a few yards beneath the rim.

Chellish crawled toward it, oblivious now of the sun that was glaring down on him unrelentingly. It seemed to be hours before he reached the tiny instrument. It was still in operation and out of it came the confident tones of a human voice:

"Lauer, what we can suggest to you is the following: Amnesty plus your freedom but you will not be allowed to ever leave Earth again. I'm waiting for your answer, Lauer. This is my last offer."

As Chellish broke into a smile, tears ran unheeded down his face. He drew in a deep, shuddering breath-filling his lungs with the burning hot air of Tantalus—and then spoke into the microphone:

"This is... 1st Lt. Chellish, sir... I think... the danger is... it's—it's taken care of. I'd appreciate it... if you could... pick me up now."

Then he fell forward and shut off the micro-com as he did so.

* * * *

The Arkonide robot fleet finally withdrew and the Robot Regent perceived his double defeat: the Latin-Oor deception plus the fact that Perry Rhodan had beaten him to Tantalus. A day and a half later the following conversation took place on board the *Drusus* between Atlan and Rhodan:

"From now on we're going to have to expect similar incidents at any moment," said Rhodan reflectively. "You know how it is, Admiral: Bad examples set the pattern... regardless of the outcome."

Atlan agreed. "I'm surprised you've held onto your secret even this long," he said. "Any time somebody takes a notion to feather his nest, all he has to do is take a nice ride in a Gazelle and flit over to Arkon. I feel quite certain that my austere Lord and Emperor..." a mocking smile was on his face... "will demonstrate his gratitude with a generous clink of coins. He's programmed humanly enough to do it. But by the way: how is it that Suttney didn't go straight to Arkon or at least fly to Latin-Oor? That would have offered him greater security, don't you think?"

Rhodan shook his head negatively. "No way! To get to Arkon he'd have to cover a stretch of some 30,000 light-years and a Gazelle can't make such a hop in a single jump. Apparently Suttney was afraid of taking such a risk. Because *with one* jump, that's *some* chance; but *five* jumps makes five times the gamble. Suttney knew very well that he couldn't trust Chellish. Every second of additional time gained by Chellish would be an increase of the risk he was taking.

"And Latin-Oor was out of the question. What was there was simply a robot fleet. If a Terranian Gazelle

had shown up there unexpectedly, the first reaction of the robots would have been to fry their hides. Suttney wouldn't have even had a chance to deliver his little speech.

"No, his best route was to get off somewhere into an unknown system and then put out a call to the Arkonides. This way his proposition would have a chance to percolate with them so that they be more likely to make a deal than to merely cook his goose. Another thing Suttney was counting on was that when he sent out his contact message over the hypercom none of our ships would be within 100 light-years of him. On the other hand he knew the Arkonide fleet was only 16 light-years away, which made a big difference in the accuracy of tracking down his position, once he gave his bearings. His Achilles heel lay in not knowing what had happened to the resonance-frequency absorber. On his main hyperjump after that, we were able to spot him."

Atlan had been looking at the viewscreen. "Well," he said quietly, "the bottom line of it is that you are to be congratulated because of that first lieutenant of yours. Without him..."

"What first lieutenant?" Rhodan interrupted, appearing puzzled.

"I mean Chellish. What other first lieutenant was involved?"

"Oh, Chellish!" replied Rhodan. "He's a captain now even though he doesn't know it yet."

* * * *

Walter Suttney and Ronson Lauer were dead. Fate had spared Oliver Roane. When they found him, he was merely unconscious. The boulder had completely crushed his right leg and it had to be amputated. But Oliver Roane would live, to be tried and convicted back on Earth.

Gunther Chellish had been on the brink of death. The medicos on board the *Drusus* declared that they had never seen such a severe case of total exhaustion in their lives.

Three days went by before Chellish regained consciousness. By this time the *Drusus* had long since returned to Grautier. When he opened his eyes and turned his head to look around, he saw a very familiar face on the pillow of a cot adjacent to him.

"Mullon!" he murmured weakly. "What are *you* doing here? Were you in the Tantalus operation?"

Mullon laughed. "No. I guess I was a little too tired to get into the action. But they tell me you did all right on Tantalus—getting yourself the order of the Blue Comet and all. May I offer my highest respects, *captain!*"

* * * *

On the 15th of October, 2042, the *Terrania Daily News* added the following editorial comment to an

exhaustive report on events in the Tantalus Sector:

Once again it has been demonstrated that there are different kinds and qualities of reporting. Any information obtained by a responsible journalist is not simply dumped upon the unsuspecting public without a proper predigestion. Such data are usually sorted out according to their importance and their possible public impact. Above all, the true journalist will not seek to invent stories which serve no other purpose than to confuse the issue, and certainly the professional newsman will not stoop to lending false credence to his reporting by alluding to his 'informed source?' without first naming those sources. These 'informed sources' are generally located in the back room behind the editor's desk where they suck up 'news items' through their pencils and ballpoint pens.

Precisely the situation we have just reported on is a case in point, which clearly shows how the machinations of that 'other' kind of journalism can be foisted upon the public, either for personal gain or for the purpose of a larger circulation. It is our opinion, both now and in the past, that painstaking and responsible reporting is always to be preferred over that other practice which has deservedly earned the opprobrium of yellow journalism.

* * * *

It was anticipated in all Terrania that the *Terrania Times* would loudly demand equal space for a rebuttal, since the editorial was obviously a sharp criticism of their policies.

However, without showing the slightest reaction, the *Terrania Times* continued to carry on its daily business as usual.

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

RENEGADES OF THE FUTURE

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE DRUUF DANGER.

All sentient beings in the Milky Way are threatened by it.

Hence an expedition to Eppan is ordered by Perry Rhodan. At first it is mere routine, a simple precautionary measure to discover what the Robot Brain of Arkon is up to and if it has dispatched any agents to Eppan.

But then-!

When one of Rhodan's telepaths boards the K-262, bound for Eppan, his mind is assaulted and he finds

himself in the thrall of a terror that has no name.

No name... unless it can simply be referred to as

THE HORROR

by

William Voltz