

RED ALERT!

6562 LIGHT-YEARS from Earth, the Solar Empire's base on the former colonial world Grautier is in a state of alarm as the Spacefleet of Terra prepares to battle the hordes of Druufon.

Out around Grautier, two time-planes are beginning to stabilize—Earth's Einstein continuum and that of the alien universe of the Druufs.

Perry Rhodan, Atlan, Bell, watch developments expectantly and Rhodan develops a bold plan.

Atlan is more than apprehensive for already 10,000 years ago this Prince of Arkon fought the monstrous foe.

A scarlet geyser of blood must surely erupt again as conflict flares in—

CRIMSON UNIVERSE

1/ MYRTHA SECTOR ALERT!

I WAS DEEPLY IMPRESSED.

They were more industrious than bees in a hive and more unrelenting than a pack of starving wolves on the trail of an exhausted elk.

Without fanfare or show they worked with a natural eagerness. Every switch and control was set, all calculations had been checked out and each man knew precisely what he was to do in the next moment.

In spite of their unquestionable initiative they were so well coördinated that each individual effort became a concerted part of the overall action, without duplication or any serious competitive conflicts.

They accomplished everything with such a good-humoured *esprit de corps* that difficulties seemed to take care of themselves; and the general rapport between scientists, officers and crewmen was so easy and relaxed that to any outside observer this appeared to be one big family working in unison.

There was a teeming hustle and bustle and a roar of industrious activity such as could only be seen and heard at a great spaceport and interstellar shipyard.

One hour before, the chief engineer of Armament Wharf 14 had begged me to vacate the upper cupola of the new superbattleship *Kublai Khan* so that I would not get in the way of his technicians. I had left the dome with a slight sense of outrage. After all, I was the one who had been brooding all day over the problem of dismantling the tele-transmitter from the old battleship *Ganymede* and reinstalling it in the weapons room of the *Kublai Khan*. By the time I reached the small personnel lock some 3900 feet below, my feeling of resentment had subsided.

One thing you had to grant these barbarians: they were straightforward and frank! Being accustomed to subject my actions and feelings to severe self-criticism, I was forced to reflect later that I had really been standing around in the way of the qualified personnel from the shipyard. Scientists were supposed to lay out a specific plan for the specialists, and since I had completed my calculations and recommendations I had actually become superfluous in the area. Even without precise direction, the engineers from Michel's team knew how to anchor the transmitter and install the power plant.

So here I sat on a plastic case that I had selected some 30 minutes ago as a safe resting place. From this position I had a fairly good view of the arching hull of the giant spacesphere, which measured just about one mile in diameter. They had named it the *Kublai Khan*. Evidently Perry Rhodan placed great store in the famous Mongolian who had once carved out an entire world empire for himself.

I laughed silently to myself. What Rhodan still did not know was the fact that I had known the Khan very well. At the time I could not have dreamed that one day a giant spaceship would be outfitted which would bear the name of the warlord.

These Terranians seemed to be extraordinarily interested in their own history. If it had been up to the men at this space dock area I would have had to recount my long life at least four times a week. But I avoided such narrations as much as possible because I was all too familiar with the consequent pains of my extra brain. Once its memory sector was fully awakened the normal course of my thinking processes was shut off.

A barely perceptible pulsing made me aware of the biological cell activator that was suspended against my chest. I frowned in some surprise and puzzlement. The mysterious, egg-sized apparatus always stirred into activity when my cellular tissues were in need of certain stimulus impulses. Was I merely tired at the moment or was my body undergoing that process again which had once been described by a Terranian biologist as 'a timely regeneration of cells which would otherwise have atrophied long ago'... ?

I shrugged it off. I would probably never solve the mystery of the microactivator that had preserved my youth and vigour for practically 10,000 years. The only entity or being who could have enlightened me on the subject had disappeared after the trouble on the synthetic planet Wanderer.

It had expressed an intention to merely rest up a bit and catch its breath for a few moments but in accordance with its own time standards. What this could mean for such a disembodied intelligence I could well imagine. Perhaps in 50 years I might raise the question as to whether or not those 'few moments' had passed. In this respect I did not deceive myself.

The nearest landing strut of the *Kublai Khan* was about 100 yards distant from me. The towering support cylinder partially blocked my view of the vast groundlock area which opened like an inverted abyss to swallow up a countless stream of men and material. No doubt, like myself, the men had required weeks or perhaps months to overcome their agoraphobia or claustrophobia, depending on the individual's point of view. After all it was no light matter to be constantly aware of all those millions of tons of Arkon steel looming close overhead. If just one of the extended struts were to collapse, or if a support pad were to sink through the pavement underneath, it would result in a major catastrophe.

I started suddenly as I became aware of a shadow. Someone had approached me silently from behind. It was only in the nick of time that the logic sector of my brain reminded me that there were no enemy assailants here and so my rather 'jumpy' constitution relaxed again.

"Hello there," I drawled casually. "Are you trying to give me heart failure? You shouldn't sneak up on a human bundle of nerves like a cat in the dark, you know." Meanwhile, I turned slowly to observe the visitor.

Dr. Michels, Chief Engineer of Wharf Sector 14, gave me a broad grin. His straw-blond hair dangled carelessly from under his crumpled service cap and his uniform looked as though it had been retrieved from a disposal tank.

Taking a breather for the moment, he rested one foot on the oblong plastic case and wiped sweat from his brow. "This is a real grind, isn't it?" he remarked. "Considering everything that's expected of us, hm-mm. . ."

"Oh quite!" I ventured to say. "Practically a dog's life!"

Michels nodded sombrely. There was something up this fellow's sleeve—I could sense it! These Terranians were capable of a brand of humour that could drive an Arkonide to the brink of madness. I was always taken in by their characteristic playfulness in spite of my long experience among humans.

Five other men were approaching us. Gliding soundlessly behind them was an antigrav platform used as a cargo loader. One of the men guided the massive vehicle through the air with casual indifference, holding the remote-control apparatus in his hand like a half-eaten sandwich.

When the newcomers became aware of me they began to grin like a triumphant commando squad. I frowned as I sensed a certain uneasiness rising within me. Once more I regretted that I was not a telepath.

Michels stood close beside me, providing welcome shade. It was shortly before the noon hour and the cloudless blue sky of the former Gobi Desert arched above me. From this location, nothing could be seen of the towering structures of Terrania, the capital city of Earth. Here the mighty silhouette of the *Kublai Khan* was overpowering, completely dominating the field of vision.

"Are you guys ready for this?" said a shavetail lieutenant from Security. He was attached to the 5-man transportation detail.

I glared at him sharply, not realizing that my heel boots had begun to tap nervously against the side of the plastic case I was sitting on. That is, until Dr. Michels quietly addressed me again. "May I advise you, Admiral, that you happen to be sitting directly over the fuse mechanism of a 500-megaton catalysis bomb? So if you would be good enough to. . ."

By that time I was already on my feet and running pell-mell away from the place. Behind me a roar of laughter rose up from the men. These youngsters didn't seem to have a nerve in their bodies. Now I realized why the armed guards in the area had regarded me so strangely when I had originally sat down on that confounded case. They hadn't even bothered to apprise me of my hair-raising mistake. And besides—how could they just leave containers of nuclear devices lying so casually about in the spacedock area?

Final armament phase, dummy! This was the laconic reprimand I received from my auxiliary brain.

At any rate I did not halt my mad dash until my tormentors were out of sight. Panting from my exertions, I leaned back against the switch box of a remote-controlled automatic tester device which was capable of irradiating all kinds of goods and materials with test beams in order to detect manufacturing defects.

Since I almost became a subject for examination, I was soon chased from that area, as well. Obviously the armament dockyard was no place for me. Actually I had not experienced such a stir and bustling of men and arms and equipment flow since the Great War of 10,000 years ago. In those days my people battled for the survival of the humanoid races and our bitter enemy was a non-Arkonide species of methane breathers from the nebula sector of the Milky Way.

However, that was all long ago. Today there were other problems involved. Once more the galaxy was in turmoil but this time there had been no attack from poison-gas breathers. The aliens who had emerged from another time-plane had simply been dubbed the Druufs. Aside from Rhodan, there were still very few people who knew anything about how the name had originated. Shortly after the first penetration into the other time zone, some kind of creatures had been met whose peculiar calls sounded like a muffled 'dru-u-u-f'. And right away some whimsical lieutenant of the Solar Fleet had come up with the name—and it had stuck. In such things these humans were characteristically adept.

I shook off the last traces of vexation and was about to call for my aircar when my wrist visiphone came to life.

In the viewplate, no larger than a thumbnail, I recognized Gen. Deringhouse, one of Rhodan's oldest battle companions, who had been rejuvenated by means of a cell-shower treatment on Wanderer. His freckled face was arresting by its startling lack of expression.

"A message from the Chief, Sir," he announced curtly. "Could you come immediately to Intelligence Head-quarters?... OK... thanks very much."

I watched in perplexed amazement as the small screen darkened again. Deringhouse had already cut off. That had been a very strange request!

I was aware of the fact that Rhodan was presently located with a large contingent of the Terranian Fleet in the Myrtha System. The planet Grautier, 7th world of that distant star, had been converted during the past 10 months into a Solar Fleet stronghold.

We knew full well that a Druuf-generated overlap zone would soon appear in the Myrtha vicinity but this time we were not going to wait around until calamity overtook us.

I could imagine what it looked like on all those depopulated worlds of the Milky Way. The same thing had happened there that I had experienced 10,000 years ago in my capacity as a fleet squadron chief.

Ten minutes later I landed on the skyscraper roof of my destination. I was soon brought into a briefing where the responsible people of the Solar Empire advised me succinctly that tremendous overlap zones had been sighted, as expected, in the region of the Myrtha System. During the discussion I was introduced to a giant of a man who had wiry blond hair and a wide-awake pair of penetrating blue eyes.

He was a colonel named Marcus Everson. One glance at his medals and campaign insignia was enough to tell me that I was looking at a very seasoned space veteran who had proved himself a 1000 times over.

"Pleasure to meet you, sir," he said.

"Effective immediately, Col. Everson has command of the *Kublai Khan*," explained Deringhouse briskly. "Let Marc tell you what he experienced during his return flight from Eppan. His only assignment there was to pick up our cosmic agent Goldstein and bring him back."

Everson laughed ironically when he recalled the adventure. "A certain man who called himself Mataal and pretended to be an Eppanian native developed a sudden interest in taking over my guppy. Do you know of any race in the galaxy whose members look like giant bats? The creatures are capable of making molecular transmutations. This particular customer was able to paralyse my men, one by one, but he finally made one mistake. It was his last one."

He ended the short account with a reflective nod and I remained silent although I had a vivid mental picture of what must have happened on board the small scoutship.

Deringhouse distracted us with a further announcement. "Michels reports that the installation of the tele-transmitter has been completed. We'd like to request that you two take off at once in the *Kublai Khan*. It's just now being manoeuvred clear of the dockyard. You should be quite satisfied with Everson's command, Admiral. He is completely familiar with our new super giants."

A closer look at the man served to convince me entirely of his qualifications. Everson had shared with Perry Rhodan the rise of the former New Power from the ground up. In that earlier period I had still been determined to give humanity a bitter lesson.

Times had changed. On the three Arkon worlds of my former homeland a robotic brain had come into power whose influence was despotic and overwhelming. Apparently its programming circuits were insufficient for conducting a major space policy in a reasonable manner.

A few minutes later I was discussing the possible capacities and applications of the *Kublai Khan* with the colonel when a hypercom dispatch came in from the depths of the Milky Way. The coded pulse-burst transmission had emerged from the Myrtha Sector, 6562 light-years distant from Earth.

When the deciphered message came out of the hopper I noted that Deringhouse suddenly paled. Glancing at me in some uncertainty, he handed over the tape strip without a word.

Condition POTOMAC activated. Emergency phase starting 1 Aug. 2043, hrs 24:00, alert procedures henceforth in effect. Fleet movement per instruction A-3. Commercial traffic ban until further notice. Atlan return this base. Signed: Rhodan, Chief of Solar Fleet, First Admin. Solar Empire.

I needed a few seconds to absorb the import of the message. So it had finally happened! Our calculations concerning the statistical probability of a total dimensional overlap near the Myrtha System had proved to be accurate.

I placed the plastic strip on the table and looked at each of the officers who were present. The new emergency regulations now in effect as a result of this action were going to entail some inconveniences for

the population of the Earth—not to mention a few urgent questions which we would not be able to answer directly in view of the required secrecy.

With these facts in mind I was forced to remark:

"Condition *Potomac*, is it? That means that the time fronts have interlocked. Gentlemen, you're going to have your hands full trying to convince large segments of the populace that you have not become the willing subjects of a heavy-handed dictator. Lots of luck, Deringhouse!"

Again his look was uncertain for a moment but then he straightened up. "We'll see," he said with a new composure. "Sooner or later it had to come to this. Sir, you are to take off at once. Apparently your presence is more urgently required in the Myrtha System than on Earth. We'll manage here on our own.

Twenty minutes later I stepped out of my aircar as the tremendous hull of the super battleship loomed above me again. The *Kublai Khan* was cleared for takeoff.

The First Officer of the flying behemoth put in an appearance at the boarding lock. I was received with all the pomp and ceremony that Rhodan's orders demanded. On a discipline basis it could not have been otherwise, especially since similar regulations had been in effect in the old Arkonide fleet.

I caught a last glimpse of the battle-ready units of the planetary defence squadrons which were under Deringhouse's personal command. Among the ships that were to remain behind to protect the Solar System were the two older super giants, the *Titan* and the *General Pounder*. In addition there were numerous battle cruisers of the Solar class as well as heavy and light cruisers of new design. It was astonishing what the Terranians had brought into being in the relatively short timespan of only 70 years or so.

I listened to the muffled thunder of several State class cruisers as they took off. Before the warm shockwaves reached us I was already in the antigrav lift of the main lock. Overhead was the vast bulk of the *Kublai Khan*, a spaceship which incorporated all the technical advances of the modern age.

Marcus Everson greeted me by touching a hand to the peak of his light service cap. In the great Control Central of the super battleship there was a stimulating atmosphere of seemingly incomprehensible industry, which always captivated me. Messages came through in rapid succession from the machine and power rooms. Deep beneath the deckplates the monstrous reactor generators of the multiple power plants began to rumble into life. It was a sound that could arouse every last nerve fibre in a man of my background and training. Fascinated, I watched the great screens of the panoramic observation gallery. The vast scene of the sprawling installations at this greatest of Terranian spaceports still glittered and gleamed in spectacular 3-D but seconds later the circular picture changed.

Actually the only non-visual sign of the *Kublai Khan*'s takeoff was the deep-throated thundering of the colossal propulsion engines. Although operating at only 2% of maximum power, the resulting thrust was sufficient to send the 1-mile spaceball hurtling upward into the noonday blue of the heavens.

I knew that all personnel at the spaceport had long since taken cover. The shockwaves generated by the big interstellar type vessels were justly famed, although every commander exerted a reasonable caution to make his departure under the lowest possible flight power. However, with a ship the size of our *Kublai Khan* an extra order of magnitude could not be avoided. So it had become a standard operating procedure for the super battleships to take off from the remotest launching pads available.

Thanks to the G-shock absorbers we were not aware of the resulting inertial pressures. Thus I was not

subjected to that law of acceleration which had almost killed Perry Rhodan during his first flight to the moon. Rising lightly on gleaming pillars of impulse energy, the mighty steel sphere raced with a seeming effortless into its spatial element.

Breathing a sigh of relief I leaned back comfortably in my flexible contour chair. Now the time had come at last! The ancient enemy who had destroyed my fighter squadron 10,000 years ago was about to learn a bitter lesson.

No—I had not fought and suffered in vain! This fleeting train of thought caused my memory sector to turn on immediately. It was as though my auxiliary brain had only been waiting for such an impulse from my waking consciousness in order to start the painful pressures of recollection.

I exerted every power within me to regain my self-control. At the moment it would have been pointless to narrate these things of long ago. The ancient Arkonide Empire no longer existed in its original form. Today my powers belonged to the inhabitants of Earth—an Earth which I had once known in its earlier geological configuration.

The thundering of the 18 high-powered propulsion engines increased. After travelling the lunar orbit, the *Kublai Khan* was picking up speed. But still I sensed nothing of the heavy acceleration because of the excellent Terranian inertial absorbers.

Marcus Everson smiled at me. He gave an impression of trustworthiness. He came close to reminding me of my old instructor and commander of the *Tosoma*, Capt. Tarth.

2/ PROJECT GALACTIC POWER

But Everson proved to be a bit impetuous. There was no need whatsoever to traverse the great distance in a single transition jump. All at once we found ourselves having leapt through the 6562 light-year abyss to the Myrtha System in a flash—which in other words meant that the pains of rematerialisation were correspondingly more agonizing. Although such a journey through the superior plane of hyperspace was mentally conceivable, the experience could never be explained in practical terms, since it dealt with the 5th dimension. The whole affair had a way of cracking up strong men or giving weak individuals a sense of exhilaration or a feeling of power. There was no way of predicting how one man or another might react to the process of dematerialisation.

As for myself, I felt as though completely bruised and beaten, both in body and mind.

A nervous-looking engineer was busy checking the function of an advanced mechanism known as an R-E damper, or residual energy trap. This device had recently been developed as an improvement over the hyper-compensator and was used to absorb any last traces of ether shockwaves due to transition, so as to elude any possible enemy detection.

I glanced over at the coordinate screen of the auto-pilot and noted that the green blips were clear-cut and right on the line. It was a sign that Everson had lucked in and come in right on his destination target.

Everson's brow furrowed ruefully. "That was cutting it pretty close, wasn't it?" he remarked.

The engineer retorted something that escaped me, although it did not seem to be particularly complimentary. Everson laughed, undisturbed by it, and so once more I perceived that the rapport between underlings and superiors was completely open and frank.

With a groan, I straightened up in my contour chair. On the gallery screens fully 5 planets were visible. Far ahead was the gleaming ball of an alien sun which, by our computations, could be none other than the star Myrtha. I staggered over to the flight control consoles and sat down in the deputy commander's seat. Before I had really collected myself, the *Kublai Khan* was already going in for a landing.

I was familiar with the Earth-like planet Grautier, as the result of an episode involving the pursuit of several treasonous deserters. At that time the robot Brain on Arkon almost obtained the galactic position of the Earth from the defectors and only the counteraction of a capable officer had prevented the probable destruction of the Solarian worlds.

As we penetrated the thick atmosphere and the howling of the compressed air masses became audible, we received our first radio contact from a very powerful ground station. The transmission was in normal light-speed UHF, which meant they didn't want to take a chance with the more widely detectable hypercom.

Rhodan's face appeared on the viewscreen. He waved a hand in greeting. His weary-seeming smile bothered me—merely a routine gesture, an absent turn of the lips without any conscious spirit behind it.

His aquiline face had become leaner. I hadn't seen him for months since I'd gotten the assignment to install the high-precision teletrans on board our spanking new *Kublai Khan*.

"Welcome," he said. It seemed to me that his thoughts were elsewhere. "Land on strip 3; they'll guide you in. And please—go easy on the fireworks. Your size pulse jets can radiate enough waves for detection, under certain conditions, when using a 5-D energy tracer."

This remark shook me into a new state of alertness. Since when had this kind of danger come into the picture? "But that's only if the receiving tracker is closer than 4 light-hours!" I countered, tensely.

His vacant smile vanished as his lips suddenly tightened. "You're on the beam, Arkonide. It's possible that several alien ships may be scouting the outer limits of this star system just now. So land if possible only with the use of the antigrav shield. That's about it. See you soon. Over and out!"

The viewscreen darkened. I heard a shrill, off-pitch whistle from Marcus Everson. The self-satisfied expression had vanished from his broad face. "Did *you* get that?" he inquired, almost rhetorically. With his right hand he cut in the ship's intercom, and while I was still formulating an answer the Power Control Central answered him. "Gate all power into the antigravs," he ordered in a level tone that seemed almost indifferent. "The Chief doesn't like hard-energy impulses. Confirm!"

Then he repeated his question to me. I looked at the big screens which now revealed the familiar landscape of the former colonial planet. Rhodan had developed it into a remote base for the Solar Fleet. In the new currency of the small stellar empire, it represented an expenditure of some 70 billion Solars.

As the surprisingly vast installations of the spaceport became visible far below and the *Kublai Khan* began to cushion itself on its antigravity fields, I finally got the point of Rhodan's instructions.

Apprehensively I said: "Does it seem possible to you that the Robot Regent of Arkon has failed to notice

any trace of the zonal interlock between the two dimensions? No... ? Alright, then, there's your answer. From what I know of that overgrown think-tank, its completely one-track logic circuits are incapable of intellectualizing over a situation like this—so what does it do? It falls back on its old timeworn tactic of sending out a giant fleet. Slug it out with the enemy as usual and attempt to force them into submission as new subjects of the Empire. The Brain can never understand that the situation is different this time. In a mechanical sense it simply doesn't have the faculty necessary to comprehend the significance of another time plane. So on the basis of that we have to face the possibility of at least a few scout cruisers putting in a sudden appearance around here. And naturally Rhodan would not be happy about his base on Grautier being discovered immediately after its completion. What that could mean you can well imagine!"

Everson offered nothing more. *Hecouldn't* imagine it!

Minutes later the retro-engines in the great skirt ring of the *Kublai Khan* began to thunder. The point had been reached where a braking action could not be avoided, considering the incalculable weight of the descending giant. The sound was painful to my ears. Everson grimaced his annoyance as the crew members in the Control Central watched us in consternation.

"Set her down, dammit!" yelled Everson.

But then it was over with. The landing pads on the extended hydraulic struts contacted the plate-hard pavement of the new launching strip. The thunders subsided. We were still holding our breaths as we listened to the dying rumble.

"Could be very interesting," said somebody, expressing a presentiment over my previous remarks. I turned to see a young officer who wore the insignia of the new Lunar Academy on his uniform.

"That's the understatement of the year," I answered, unconsciously falling back on an Earthly colloquialism. I walked slowly toward the bulkhead door of the Control Central, knowing that Rhodan would be waiting.

* * * *

The behavioural patterns of an electro—positronic robot brain equipped with semi-organic circuits is only predictable when one is fairly familiar with its basic programming. We didn't know precisely what my long dead ancestors had stored in the giant robot's logic registers some 15000 years ago by Terra reckoning. But one thing was certain: the so-called Regent no longer knew what he was doing!

Apparently limited by his purely mechanical short-comings, he was taking measures which might only be considered understandable if this were to be regarded as a normal colonial war between different intelligences of the Milky Way. But to me it seemed a fundamental error to apply the same principles to a life form that had not even originated within the Einstein universe.

We were on board the new cruiser *California* at a distance of about 10 light-hours from Grautier. Since that planet was the 7th world of the Myrtha sun we had not even reached the outer perimeter of the tremendous system. Before us lay the orbits of the outer planets, icy, uninhabitable gaseous giants devoid of any perceptible sign of life. Altogether, Myrtha possessed 49 planets, but only two of them had been settled.

We had glided through the 10 light-hour distance in powerless free fall—that is, after they had given me a brief demonstration, shortly after our takeoff. They had wanted to show me the stop and start capability of the new State class light cruisers.

We had come to a breathtaking halt in the middle of interplanetary space, at a braking rate of over 600 mps², and of course the acceleration rate proved equally spectacular; but in the domain of relativistic velocity more fuel was consumed than would have been used by a battleship in 4 full transitions.

The *California* belonged to the class of advanced, lightning-fast scoutships whose armour and weapons had been greatly restricted in view of their oversized propulsion units and power plants. So the Terranians had also learned that special capabilities could be achieved through a form of compromise. Apparently the *California* demonstrated an axiom originated among old-time seafaring fleet designers: 'Faster than the more powerful ships but more powerful than the faster units.'

I had taken a look around in the engine and machine rooms of this spacer. Practically considered, it was a flying bomb, or you might say a scantily clad giant power plant with which one could easily chase a mighty battle cruiser through the void.

At any rate the *California* was something more than a straight compromise. Its sphere of duty was specialized and therefore limited but it could make an appearance anywhere with incredible swiftness, strike quickly and disappear in a flash. Whether or not it could inflict any serious damage was a matter for the future to decide. Nevertheless I was very satisfied with the 300-foot diameter sphere. It gave one a feeling of security, provided that its bridge were occupied by a commander who wasn't out to prove himself a reckless hero. In which case the very fragile defence screens of the special cruiser would very quickly come down on his head.

We were in the fairly spacious Control Central, whose tracking instruments were showing us the cruiser's target destination. I had never before seen a better operation. The large panoramic viewscreens were an outsized luxury by cruiser standards but they were revealing something now which made me catch my breath: the glittering and scintillating might of the galaxy was there!

My auxiliary brain pulsed hard and painfully to lure me into a mood of narration. What I saw before me reminded me too vividly of events that had occurred during the so-called Methane War of 10,000 Earth years past. It was only with a strenuous effort that I could shake off the spell that was pressing upon me. This time I didn't want to relate past adventures but to consciously experience the present one.

Reginald Bell, Rhodan's Second-in-Command, was leaning with both arms on the back of the Commander's chair. He stared upward with narrowed eyes at the viewscreens, which worked on the principle of trans-light pulsing and echo-pattern evaluation. We could not actually see the ships as though they were directly before us because they were some 20 light-years away. Nevertheless we could deduce from the size and dimensions of the green light blips the massive presence of spaceships of every type and class out there. There was nobody on board who would not have been able to construct a clear mental picture from the 3-D echo patterns.

"I'd say there were at least a 1000 units of the *Stardust* class out there," said Bell tensely. "I don't get it! It looks like the Robot has mustered out every ship he's got in those underground hangars on Arkon 3, wouldn't you say?"

I smiled ironically at the stocky, wide-shouldered Deputy Administrator. Bell had a very false concept of the Greater Empire's power. "Not so!" I corrected him, although it was with no feeling of triumph

whatsoever.

Rhodan's lean face turned to me, a question in his eyes. "Not so...?"

I nodded regretfully. "One tends to underestimate the capacity of a stellar empire having more than 100,000 industrialized planets. There are spaceship construction yards everywhere, and everywhere building is constantly in progress. Certainly it's according to some sort of schedule and rate of expansion but it's a continuous process! So if you showed me 100,000 ships out there right now it wouldn't surprise me in the least."

Rhodan studied me doubtfully.

Bell laughed, somewhat restrainedly. "That's crazy!" he exclaimed.

I knew better but remained silent. It was useless to attempt to depict the Empire's output capacity to these Terranians.

The tracking centre was heard from. John Marshall, Chief of the Mutant Corps, was on the intercom. "We estimate, sir," he announced, "about 30,000 units of various types and sizes. And they're not just fooling around with scattered engagements any more—it's turned into a full slugging match out there, no holds barred. The hyperscanners are about ready to jump out of the bulk-heads. I've never seen such a collection of shockwaves in my life."

Rhodan's fingers played nervously over the firing keyboard. The relatively small *California* did not have a remote fire control centre for its weapons systems. "30,000 units, is it?" he repeated tonelessly. "Your comments?"

A few seconds passed before I realized that I had been addressed. I kept looking over at the hypersensors. On their coordinate screens was an uninterrupted flickering of impulses but they were not caused solely by the countless hypertransitions of spaceships. The constantly visible wave patterns approximated the appearance of space-warp shocks but in a sustained sequence which meant something more. These were not the mere impacts of shockwaves produced from surge spikes of excess energy—they represented rather the menacing spatial overlap of another and almost incomprehensible space-time continuum.

The overall evaluation was staring us in the face. It was clear that this time we were no longer dealing with a passing relativity front but rather with a so-called discharge zone—in fact, one which had remained stabilized now for at least 36 hours of our standard time.

"Your comments?" Rhodan repeated stubbornly.

The men in the room were only recognizable now by their silhouettes since all illumination had been cut down for the clearest possible observation of the hyper-indicators.

"My comments?" I echoed, tensely. "Alright, here they are. You know my experiences of the past. The last calculations we made showed a time-lapse differential between our temporal rate and that of the Druufs—which yielded a ratio of 72000 to 1. So in a sense that conflicts with my choice of words when I say 'the past'. The ages which have rolled by since my ancient defensive battle against them only represent at the most maybe two months for those characters. So that's one point to help clarify the present situation."

Not a muscle twitched in Rhodan's face. He had pulled on his mask again—a mask of absolute self-control. "So what's the rest of it?"

"The time has passed for the hit-and-miss sort of relativity fronts. In my former experience with this I ran across a similar situation where we would see funnel-like structures of energy forming apparently in empty space. These turned out to be discharge zones, by means of which the different energy levels of the two universes were balanced out. The funnels acted as perfect conductors through which the force differentials found a common level and were equalled out. This was entirely a natural phenomenon, having nothing to do with any control or guidance by thinking intelligences. Yet in the present situation you seem to have a worse condition."

I remained silent for a moment in order to study the almost linear curve of the sensor graphs more closely, as the shockwaves continued to build up. "Considering that 7200-to-1 time-ratio and the mass displacement of the Druuf-plane's centre of gravity, it's evident that the factors emerging during my past experience were but the forerunners of what we are seeing now. Too bad we can't make an optical observation, since normal light hasn't yet bridged the distance of 20 light-years. If we could, you would see a series of red-gleaming funnel openings intermingling with each other, gradually assuming the form of a relatively narrow cleavage in the blackness of the Einstein continuum. That's the new, stabilized discharge zone, which according to our arbitrary time measurement had its beginnings about 10,000 years ago. That this chronology *doesn't* apply to the Druufs should have become clear to you in the meantime. It's my guess, Barbarian, that from here on you won't have to use all your complicated equipment to generate warp fields as a means of entry. Now you can fly through the zone completely unhindered—that is, if they*let* you fly through."

I couldn't avoid the last barb although I didn't mean to vex my friends unduly. Nor did Rhodan take offence.

But when he answered, his tone was rather dry. "Thanks for the briefing, Admiral. In the meantime our findings have confirmed as much. By the time we land at the base our first remote-controlled spaceprobes should be back, the ones I sent into the critical zone prior to your arrival. They'll even give us the normal optical reconnaissance we're after. The plan and purpose of this flight was simply to find out what the Robot Brain's reaction was to this suddenly emerging danger. Naturally it sent out a super fleet, since it doesn't understand other alternatives."

There was a note of reprimand in his voice but I suppressed my anger. Instead, I scowled at the grinning mutant, Wuriu Sengu. "And what alternatives would *you* suggest, little barbarian?" I asked disdainfully. But the question was really aimed at Rhodan.

The latter yawned and touched a hand to his mouth. He blinked. "Who, me...?" He stood up slowly and contacted the engine room. Moments later, with a monstrous thundering, the *California* picked up speed. It was only barely possible to hear one's own voice in the ensuing clamour. This flying speed bomb was of a design that the most daring shipbuilders would have considered insane. "We will go over there and have a very careful look around," he continued. "We'll be good friends and shake hands—that is, provided those over yonder happen to have any hands. But you, my friend, will have to join the crew that will be under my command when we penetrate that rip in the Einstein curtain and enter the Druid plane. Hm-m-m? Did you say something?"

No, I had said nothing. He smiled at me, adjusted the safety of his weapon belt and disappeared into the computer room.

But I asked myself what it was this man had done that could be so great and significant. At the moment,

he almost seemed to be but an audacious adventurer with the limited mental capacity of a knight of Camelot in King Arthur's court; but then I thought better of it.

Perry Rhodan, former major and test pilot for the legendary U.S. Space Force. In his basic nature he was an ingenious gambler who usually knew just when to play his trump cards. But if by chance he didn't happen to have a good hand he would bluff. Just now he didn't have a single ace up his sleeve, yet here he was with a perfect coolness, entering into a perilous mission which had come to be known as 'Project Galactic Power'.

I also got to my feet and took a last look at the reactivated viewscreens which were connected with the outboard cameras. I could not suppress a remark to Bell: "Do you really think that you can conquer an entire stellar empire with a handful of super battleships and cruisers?"

He frowned thoughtfully and brushed a hand through the red stubble of his hair before he candidly replied: "No offence, old boy, but your calcification is showing." So that was the kind of answer I got to a very serious question.

Pucky, the oversized mouse with the ludicrous beaver's tail, broke into a loud and squeaky peal of laughter. As though stunned, I stared at his bared incisor tooth while a cold chill ran down my spine. But not because of that incisor, not by any means! When I thought of Rhodan's intentions, and the answer his Second-in-Command had just given me, I became slightly ill. What were these savages thinking of, actually? I felt like reminding them that without the help of my venerable race by now they would not have developed much more than a ridiculous thermal reactor for their space propulsion. Maybe they might have been on the track of a photon drive by this time but I could guarantee them they wouldn't have had the slightest notion of a trans-light propulsion system.

I swallowed my retort, however, and went to the bulkhead door. So according to Bell I was stiff in my bones, was I? I would soon show them what an Arkonide fleet admiral was able to do!

3/ THE SUPER SPYSHIP

The new fleet stronghold on Myrtha 7 resembled a teeming anthill. The heavy fighting ships kept appearing daily out of the sky. The Terranians, who in a fit of megalomania had named their little planetary system the Solar Empire, were on the brink of demonstrating their habitual impudence by facing up to the greatest power in the Milky Way. In fact they had gone so far as to erect a military base practically under the guns of a huge space fleet, believing that they could remain undetected.

Rhodan's intent was clear. He planned to be the hail-fellow-well-met on all sides, shake hands with everybody and become the profit-taking power in the background. It was a matter of 'You two fight and I'll hold your coats.'

I couldn't be blamed for being plagued by doubts whenever I took a close look at what was going on. If Rhodan wasn't sticking his neck out too far this time, my name wasn't Atlan!

This man who usually had such a clear head on him had even become inclined lately to underestimate the robot Regent of Arkon. And still more disturbing to me was the fact that these Earthlings were regarding

the other life forms in the galaxy as a negligible factor. Their momentary rash of self-conceit was a malady that was rooted solely in the presence of the mutants. They relied on them too heavily, while forgetting that other intelligences could also learn from experience.

Out of all these considerations I developed the view that these swiftly-rising humans were still a long way from maturity. Rhodan's early successes had been the result of unprecedented surprise action. I suspected that he was in for a painful head-knocking now. It just wasn't possible with a few battleships and cruisers to take on an empire whose industry had been dedicated to waging galactic wars for thousands of years.

There were others besides myself who warned him. Rhodan probably saw my arguments but he still thought he was ready to face the unquestionably looming dangers ahead. If only he had refrained from setting up his forward base on Grautier, of all places!

So it was that Rhodan and I had had some serious disagreements, although of course there was no actual animosity involved. On the other hand it wasn't my natural temperament to continue being a calamity howler. They would just have to watch their step in this whole affair.

* * * *

By now the men of Terra had succeeded in constructing the mysterious matter transmitters of the Ferronians, with the help of the plans they had at their disposal. Previous attempts had failed for lack of the proper kind of micro-power supplies, because these transmitters had a characteristic of requiring their own integral power source. Only in the rarest of cases had they been able to do anything at all with a separate or stationary power supply but due to technical factors it had been necessary to use extremely short cable leads. Why this was so could not be determined by any logical process of reasoning. Such transmitters were found to work without interference defects only when the source of power was integral to the device itself. Probably this was due to 5th dimensional effects of dematerialisation, where the force field of the power supply itself was also required for their generation.

All the major ships of the Solar Fleet were now equipped with at least one of these transport devices. So from now on it was possible to transfer personnel and supplies from one spaceship to another over great distances without having to go through a protracted approach and docking procedure.

My big, grey-eyed barbarian friend would not have been called Perry Rhodan if he had not at once applied this new advanced equipment to his overall planning. Just *how* he applied them, however, pushed me ever closer to what Bell might call a 'case of the hives'.

I was already toying with the idea of withdrawing my voluntary assistance to Terra in favour of going my own way again, when I received a call from the underground bunker headquarters of the base on Myrtha 7. At the time I was on board the *Drusus*, the Solar Fleet flagship, where Lt.-Col. Sikerman and I had been engaged in some penetratingly frank discussions.

The summons reached me in the small wardroom and messhall next to the tracking surveillance section. Rhodan's face appeared on the telecom viewscreen.

Instead of his normal greeting, he said: "Well, Your Eminence, have they succeeded in calming you down

a little?"

"Go to the devil, you—you pithecanthropus!" I retorted in sudden rage. "Just 20 light-years away from here are more than 30,000 spaceships. We know now that the Druufs coming out of the other time-plane have met with complete disaster. Not a single one of their ships got more than two light-minutes from the discharge opening. Perhaps that will convince you of the incredible might of the Greater Empire, even though it is presently ruled by a machine. Or do you actually presume that you and your mutants can just sweep such a major task force out of the way? They may show you that you have another think coming—that there is some limit, after all, to your vaunted influence. No one is invincible, not even you. I think it's about time somebody 'gave it to you straight', as you savages say. So what's on your mind?"

After a moment of silence, he gave me one of his inscrutable smiles. "Your considerations have been duly noted and accepted, Admiral. You know I'm not particularly anxious to lose the few ships I have. Nevertheless, I'm taking a hand in the game, with your permission."

"You can keep your sarcasm. I'm advising you to play your cards *very* close to the table. This time you may need them desperately to save your own skin." Of course these were pretty sharp words to give to a man who was accustomed to rake in success with a mere flick of the wrist.

Nevertheless, Rhodan continued to be objective. "Also noted and accepted, Admiral! The reconnaissance data from our remote-controlled spy probes have been evaluated. They show that we can definitely fly through the discharge zone without any need of generating a warp-field gate. How does that strike you?"

"Then you will make a thrust into the other time plane?" I asked.

"Precisely," he confirmed. "The *California* is fully equipped and ready for takeoff. For your information, for the time-being we've decided to take no part in the current conflict between the Robot Regent and the Druufs. We'll be observers behind the scene, so to speak, until we know just what we're dealing with."

"The most sensible statement I've heard for lo these many days!"

He laughed, and my tensions quickly subsided. So he was not crazy enough, after all, to make a drum-and-trumpet appearance on the battle front.

"We'll be lifting off in half an hour. If you wish, you may join us on board."

"In your primitive vernacular," I growled at him, "that's known as double-talk. You know very well I haven't any choice in the matter. You're *reordering* me on board!"

"Did I say that?"

He cut the connection and I turned to the commander of the *Drusus*. Baldur Sikerman politely lifted a hand to his mouth and cleared his throat gently.

"You know," I said, "about 8000 years prior to the New Age I should have permitted all you rascals to be swept away through the relativity front that was available to me at the time. Then I would have spared myself all kinds of headaches and ceaseless vexations. With your permission, my dear Lieutenant Colonel, you're getting on my nerves! Are you by any chance joining our little excursion?"

Sikerman's big face reappeared from behind his hand.

I regarded him as one of the most capable of officers and a bold man of action; yet he was also the sort of man who knew just when to use his intelligence. "I beg your pardon, sir—I'm not only going along; they've even placed me in command of the *California* ."

I took a deep breath. It was suddenly clear to me that Rhodan was staking his best men in this venture. If Sikerman was leaving the *Drusus* to take over a relatively unimportant reconnaissance cruiser, the plot was getting thicker, as you Earthlings say. Probably I was going to meet the elite of the human race on board the little ship.

This was now a stage of development where any further questions would have been pointless.. It was obvious that Rhodan was set on penetrating the discharge zone in order to find out what the real issues were inside the universe of the Druufs. Of course I had no objections to such a strategy, provided that he didn't get any wild ideas about playing the role of the strongman.

* * * *

Ten minutes later I left the ground lock of the flagship. A dark and stormy night brooded over Grautier. Here and there only a few stars peeked through the cloud covering. The great spaceport was quiet. A few hours before a ban had been issued for all takeoffs because alien spaceships had been detected in close proximity to the system.

I went on foot toward the barely discernible *California* . Her power plant was operating already but not a single ray of light emerged from her ports.

I was hailed by two armed sentinels before the open airlock. I was more or less speechless when I stared into the clearly fluorescing muzzles of the two energy rifles but finally I gasped: "Has everybody gone crazy around here?"

They demanded the password, which naturally I didn't know. A darkly scowling sergeant of the Space Commando unit came closer to look me over. It was only then that he lowered his murderous weapon.

"That's a bit careless of you, sir," he advised me. "We have orders to shoot."

"You what...!?"

"That's right, sir—shoot to kill. Unauthorized persons may not approach within 50 yards of the cruiser.

"What kind of cargo did you take on board—cosmic superbombs or galactic contraband?" I asked sarcastically.

He stifled a grin. "Not quite, sir—just a matter transmitter."

Transmitter? I frowned in thought as I was finally let through. What was so unusual about that? Lately such equipment was installed on all of the important vessels. I shrugged and went to my cabin. As it turned out they had reserved a room for me, so I knew that Rhodan had been counting on my presence

all along.

"The old rascal!" I whispered to myself.

Within 15 minutes he put in a personal appearance. He was accompanied by Reginald Bell and the likeable mutant John Marshall, whose reserved and courteous manner I had always appreciated. Almost unconsciously I strengthened my mental mono-block against this man's thought-probing and I saw Marshall promptly smile. He had detected my defence.

"Nobody's trying to raid your brain tonight," scoffed Rhodan. "Why are you so suspicious?"

I dismissed the subject without a word. It was an ingrained habit to watch and control my thoughts. I looked at Rhodan testily and as he stood there before me I realized that in spite of all our friendship we were still worlds apart.

"I plan to penetrate the time front," he said without preliminaries. "That means I'll have to do everything possible to keep from being detected. Our evaluation of the spy-probe data has come up with some amazing findings. It seems that the old Druuf time-ratio of 1-to-72000 has reduced itself to 1 over 2. It means that all of our movements will only be twice as fast as those of the aliens."

This came as a shock. It changed the situation decisively.

He continued: "So that theory of yours kind of falls apart, about two months going by for the Druufs since the events of 10,000 years ago, unless the new time adjustment has just occurred recently. However, the result will be some kind of displacement. Aside from a clarification of these things the phenomenon itself is interesting to me. But until we've had a chance to examine the situation at first hand it's useless to build up a whole complex of questions about it."

This sounded entirely reasonable to me and not nearly as wild as our discussions of a few days before. We didn't spend much more time on the whole affair because I also wanted to probe the mystery.

"I'm curious," he said, "as to what these characters look like. We may presume now, with a high probability, that this time we'll come into actual contact with the ruling intelligences of the alien universe. According to our construction of their celestial mechanics, the home centre of the Druufs should even be close to the overlap zone. Any further rebuttals?"

No, I had no further comments. But I asked about the addition of the transmitter which the security guards had mentioned.

The slightest glimmer flashed in Rhodan's eyes, so I knew he had something up his sleeve. "If we get a chance," he said, "we're going to set up a base 'over there'. It would be a neat trick if the transmitter enabled us to transfer our operation to the other zone without being caught in the act." He nodded absently, apparently absorbed in his lively imagination as he contemplated the daring plan.

I was also captured by the idea, since it didn't seem at all impossible. The matter transmitters operated on the basis of 5th dimensional force fields. The materials to be transported would be dematerialised in the sending chamber, formed into a beam and radiated outward as pulses of energy. In a precision-tuned receiver, the reverse process would take place. By this means it was practically impossible to detect a transmitter transmission or even to cause interference with it.

"So that's it—right?" commented Bell quietly before he followed Rhodan out of my cabin. Nobody

asked me if I were more reconciled to going along now, in view of the new set of circumstances. Rhodan appeared to read me very well.

Minutes later I arrived in the cruiser's Control Central. Sikerman had taken his place in the First Pilot's seat. Apparently Rhodan and Bell did not intend to occupy themselves with the direct operation of the ship.

As we lifted off under minimum power a heavy storm was raging outside. Grautier was giving us a grim parting salute. The *California* only picked up speed long after the thick atmosphere of Myrtha 7 was behind us. Our tracking equipment gave us an all clear. The alien ships which had been briefly observed had now disappeared. Apparently their crews had considered the Myrtha System to be of no tactical importance.

Rhodan handed me a mug of hot coffee and as he did so he had such an ironic look on his face that I felt my blood race hotly. Even without words, we understood each other.

"Just wait, you devil!" I said, highly provoked. "Some time they'll discover your presence here. What will happen then I can easily tell you now. Do you have an idea of just how many super battleships of the *Drusus* class the Robot Regent may have at his disposal? In a real emergency the two tele-transmitter's will hardly mean anything at all. If you are trapped in the crossfire of 20 such size, I'd estimate you would have a chance to make about 6 or 7 successful strikes with your superweapons. That would leave at least 13 ships facing you and you wouldn't make the 8th shot because by then you'd be destroyed.

Just take advice from an old Arkonide admiral. I've seen more space duels and all-out battles than you will yet experience."

"You-ah-spilled some coffee on your uniform," he replied.

I only studied him silently. Yes, maybe of late he had come to realize what the limits of his powers were. I remembered having read about his rise in the Terranian encyclopaedias. In that period he had perceived his limitations, knowing just how far he could go. Yet he had searched for and discovered a way of overcoming internal political resistances against the establishment of a world government.

Now he found himself in a similar situation, although the type and magnitude of factors involved were something else again. This time he was dealing with two galactic empires. In spite of the spy-probe data, however, I had the feeling that the unknown aliens from the other time plane were approximately equal in power to the Greater Empire.

Once more, the *California* accelerated at the mad rate of over 600 mps². I listened to the terrific thundering of the thruster engines, which continued to crescendo even after we had reached critical velocity. Four of the cruiser's large cargo holds were filled exclusively with extra fuel tanks. Every second at this rate we consumed about 45 tons of Bismuth isotope, which turned into a very high-thrust plasma after being injected into the pulse converters.

After reaching the approximate speed of light we went immediately into transition. I watched the tech engineers of the ECM Security team who were keeping close tabs on the new R-E dampers. If these residual energy traps failed to operate perfectly, the *California* would definitely be detected by the ships of the Arkonide blockade fleet.

One man raised his hand in a signal of readiness. Rhodan gave a quick nod. And that was it. The transition began with the pulling pains which always accompanied the whispering eeriness of 5th

dimensional hyperspace.

4/ INTO THE UNKNOWN

We represented nothing more than a small virus in the bloodstream of a giant. But when biologists seek to combat such microlife they must first discover that it is present before they can develop the antidote. In our case the *California* was the virus and the giant was represented by the most colossal commitment of fighting fleet units that I had seen in 10,000 years.

We had emerged from hyperspace at speol and immediately shot toward our destination. It was not possible to maintain a powerless free fall so close to the light barrier because this was too high on the relativity curve of the mass-velocity equation. To hold a speed of 98.8% velocity of light it was necessary to keep the engines blasting at full power.

The spherical shell of the light cruiser clanged and vibrated like a bell. Even the Terranian designers had not been able to eliminate the high-power resonance factors which would otherwise have resulted in a 'noiseless' ship. The hard radiation waves from the impulse engines were now perfect targets for enemy-tracking equipment. Added to this were the heavy plasma streams from our ion ejections, whose extra thrust was required at this velocity.

In the hurtling cruiser's red sector an inferno was raging. At 10° red vertical and 22° red horizontal, entire suns and worlds seemed to be exploding. It took on the appearance of some catastrophe of Nature taking place.

We could not directly observe the piercing bright fire of impulse cannons but each new shot caused a sharp echo spike to appear on the energy detection screen.

Within a distance of about one light-hour from our position the most tremendous battle was raging that I had ever witnessed in such close confines.

The crackling and roaring of the hypersensors indicated that an uninterrupted stream of major class spaceships were going in and out of transition. Other detection instruments were showing quite plainly that the alien extragalactic intruders were utilizing a trans-light flight technology that was unknown to any intelligences within the Einstein universe. Again we were seeing those mysterious flat shockwave echoes which could never have resulted from an abrupt transition. Such phenomena could only occur if they were flying through hyperspace in the true sense of the word.

Our 5-D mass trackers showed an incredible number of spaceships. Apparently the Regent's blockade fleet was bracing itself against a new attack. This provided mute evidence of how determined the unknown invaders were to take advantage of the stabilization front and make observations in our universe. They must not have anticipated such a resistance. Perhaps they had even thought that they could fly in unobserved and move about on their own at will.

Close before us, just about 10 light-minutes away, the deep blackness of the void was ruptured by an eerie phosphorescence. It was as though some mad artist of the gods had inexpertly slashed away with a titanic brush in order to colour the ubiquitous dark with dull red streaks and blotches. Here and there the

familiar funnel formations were to be seen. I recognized them from sad experience! For the most part, however, they had by now so coalesced and intermingled with each other that an irregular sawtooth crevasse had opened.

Out of it came the oppressive dark-red luminosity. The measurement data from the remote-controlled spy-probes had shown that the great discharge zone was variable in its nature. At the most its length wavered between 0.6 and 1.1 light-years whereas its width varied between 12 million and 60 million miles. Judging from this it appeared that mass factors of cosmic magnitude were at work to hold open this one small fissure which permitted the only means of unhindered ingress into the Druuf plane.

We had already put on our Arkonide combat suits because in this situation the normal spacesuits did not seem to offer adequate protection. We had slipped on our pressure helmets and were holding our thumbs on the contact switches of our defence screen projectors. The micro-reactors in our backpacks were operating. We had done everything reasonably possible to prepare ourselves for any sudden damage to the thin hull of the cruiser.

The tracking officer on duty had long since desisted from announcing his sighting coördinates in the usual manner. He spoke to no one on board the super-fast *California*. In my helmet speaker all I could hear was the rapid breathing of men worked up to a peak of suspense.

Rhodan's face was stern and uncommunicative. Perhaps only now he had come to realize what the Robot Brain could come up with. Now and then I could hear someone curse vehemently. These were expletives which always rattled my headphone whenever another near catastrophe flashed close by.

We couldn't make out the myriad of ships optically. Only the hyperspace tracker revealed to us that countless steel shapes lurked out there in the dark of the void, from whose flanks flashed a sustaining, atom-powered barrage of impulse and disintegrator fire.

The only direct observations we had were those of the ships being destroyed. If the light came from the right angle to reach us in time, our normal optical screens glared with a blinding burst of illumination. During the few moments since our reentry into normal space we counted more than 200 synthetic novas of this kind. There must have been considerably more but a direct pickup of all of them was hindered by the fact that we were outrunning the light they emitted.

Rhodan's voice interrupted the oppressive silence: "Attention, all personnel. We will reach the overlap zone in about 3 minutes. Tie down and don't release your belts till we've gone through. The fissure isn't deep. We'll probably make the passage in a matter of moments. We do not anticipate any attacks. Even in our own universe we're much too fast for any effective fire. No practical exchange of shots can happen unless we're below half speol. Right now we would outrun any energy beam. So much for the briefing. The only thing I want you to watch is your nerves. As soon as our sensors pick up on the other side, we'll have our hands full! That is all."

I looked about me in the dimly-lighted Control Central. The men appeared to sit apathetically before their consoles, yet they were all at a fever pitch of excitement. They knew what to expect from the effects of penetrating a discharge zone.

We could see our relatively weak defence screens by means of our outboard cameras and when they suddenly flared up in a rash of discharge streamers, blinding us momentarily with bluish lightnings, we knew that Rhodan wasn't exaggerating when he said that a ship at near light-speed couldn't be squarely hit. A murderous crack of thunder smote our ears. Strained to the last welding seam, the hull of the *California* resounded like the belfry of a cathedral.

"Accidental hit, not intended for us," I heard Rhodan shouting. Somebody let out a guffaw and from its gruffness I presumed it had to be Bell. "Quiet on board!" yelled Perry. He seemed to be on edge.

The discharge fissure which had appeared to be so harmless and unpretentious at a distance now loomed before us as a yawning abyss. We were no longer able to see its full extent. Before Sikerman's warning reached the men we were already shooting into the red-shimmering depths of it. The countless tracking impulses cut off so abruptly that it seemed there had never been an Arkonide fleet close behind us.

The last idling reserve power plants of the *California* now added their clamour to the dull thundering from the machine rooms. From then on we could barely make out even the radio traffic in our headphones. Sikerman shouted something that nobody could understand. Outside, our defence screens seemed to collide with an invisible wall of energy.

About 6 seconds after our plunge into the zone of equalization between the two universes, the warning indicators of power plant 3 began to flash. It was the last station to be activated. Its dull rumbling even increased as we watched but the flaming defence screens did not receive another spark of current.

Illuminated lettering appeared on a small instrument screen: *AUTO-ALARM-Power unit 3 switched to inertial absorption banks* .

Sikerman's hands flew into feverish activity. It was obvious that the *California* had been gripped by a braking force of such magnitude that the power demand of the neutralizers could not be handled by the auxiliary equipment alone.

I noted that Rhodan's face was drawn with brittle tension. A report came from the machine rooms that the maximum capacity of the reactors had been reached. Sikerman ordered emergency power.

Within 20 seconds our loss of velocity was apparent. Within a matter of moments we had dropped to 79% light-speed.

Furious lightnings of discharging energy raged before the cruiser's spherical hull. We had plunged into something that we could neither clearly comprehend nor technically control. It was as though the maw of Hell had opened up and was swallowing the tiny ship, man, strap and bolt.

The mutant, Ralf Marten, accidentally released his crash-button with his involuntary arm movements and was thrown clear of his belt. I saw him slide straight across the Control Central and collide with an astronautic calculator console.

The ensuing clamour of commands and reports became an incomprehensible blur of sound. When I turned on my suit's protection screen, the Control Central appeared to be filled with a phantom-like St. Elmo's fire. The air outside our combat suits had apparently become electrically charged because otherwise my defence screen would not have been visible.

This is it, I thought—too high a gamble...

In the same instant the rumbling ceased so quickly that it seemed we had imagined it. Only the fully loaded reactors of the main power units were still generating a residual level of sound.

Close before me the small instrument screen brightened again: *AUTO-ALARM-power unit 3 switched*

back to defence screens .

It was the first time I had a chance to look around the room. About 30% of the communications viewscreens had ceased operating because of the unprecedented shaking of the ship. My wide open helmet radio was about to burst my eardrums. Rhodan's voice was coming in like a hurricane. Groaning aloud I cut down the volume. The same was happening to the others because they had tried to hear the voice traffic during our entry flight.

"...are through. Take a look at Marten. He seems to have hurt himself. Otherwise, everything secure?"

I released my safety strap and got up from my seat with a grunt of pain, just as an announcement came through from the power room.

"Our deceleration reached a peak of over 650 mps-squared. The inertial shocks were overloaded."

"How come?" asked Perry, breathing heavily. "Our automatic probes didn't show that."

I didn't have to deliberate much to find a believable answer for the phenomenon. "Gravitational differential. The equalization zone is still too new to be entirely stabilized. We should have waited a few more weeks."

The technical team was already at work repairing damages. From the lower airlock room we heard an announcement that there was a hole in our outer hull. Otherwise the *California* still appeared to be sound.

"Take a look at that!" said Sikerman almost breathlessly.

I turned about swiftly, looking up at the panoramic viewscreens. What I saw there would have caused other men to curse aloud but my own reaction was to have my heartbeat slow down. The blood in my arteries seemed ready to stop its flow.

"Ship cleared for combat!" ordered Rhodan tonelessly over the small cruiser's P.A. system.

While the sirens started to howl and the instruments showed our speed to be half that of light, I stared in stupefaction at the large viewscreens.

Reginald Bell spoke up. "Actually we should have figured that the Druufs would also set up a home-guard fleet *on their* side. Do you think maybe they can take a joke?"

No, they obviously were in no mood for jokes. After their bitter experience on the other side of the discharge zone, they had probably lost every last vestige of humour—that is, if they had ever been capable of it at all.

The long, rod-shaped spaceships were so close that we could clearly make out their images on the hyper-scanner. Normally, if they had been at any great distance from us, we would have seen only the usual green blips.

Sikerman worked as though in a trance. His hands moved with an incredible speed over the keyboard of the manual controls. Thenceforth I knew precisely why Rhodan had temporarily turned over the command of the *California* to him!

We ran head on into the first broadside salvo of a battleship that must have been 1000 feet long. A volcano of energy burst upon our defence screens once more but this time the deadly beams were being generated by the unknown enemy.

In a fraction of a millisecond the *California* became a lightning-shrouded steel ball whose weak defensive armament gave up the ghost at the first exchange of fire. Of course we had had the bad luck to fly practically into the guns of a very powerful-looking ship.

When I became aware of the infernal thundering, and piercing light from the viewscreens threatened to blind me, I was also thrown off my feet. A tremendous force whirled me across the smooth plastic deck surface of the Control Central until I was finally able to stop myself by holding onto the bolted framework of a scanner operator's chair.

There was a wild bedlam of shouting and howling, roaring and raging—a confusion and tumult of sounds transmitted from my ears to my brain. I knew that we had received at least four thermal-beam hits simultaneously, a bit too much for the small cruiser whose only strength lay in her engines.

Moments later the ship spun on its transverse axis. The gloomy red void of the alien universe and all its numerous stars became a whirling pinwheel of fire. I had just about given up all hope when the *California*'s interrupted power plants sprang back to life. Only now was it possible to unleash the titanic power of the propulsion units without fear of being torn to shreds by the forces of inertia. A piercing pain shot through every nerve fibre of my body. The G-shock absorbers had come on with a tiny millisecond's delay.

In the same instant the bright iridescence of our collapsing defence screens was extinguished. If the Druufs could accelerate as swiftly as we, then there would be no salvation. But they failed to match us by far. We raced wildly out of the crossfire before another ship had a chance to shoot us down.

The automatic gyro-stabilizers stopped our spinning motion. As the vernier adjusters hummed into operation I was able once more to view the alien universe. At last it seemed to be standing still. In the place of the velvet darkness of our own universe was the pervading red gloom of an alien continuum. The stars gleamed as brightly but their light seemed vaguely distorted.

"Short transition!" I demanded with a groan of pain. "Quickly—we have to get out of here! We're racing right into the enemy's deepest phalanx. What are you trying to do, you crazy devil, tweak their noses? Insolence never pays off. Your mutants will die in the gunfire just as easily as anybody else. Hyjump, you fool!"

Rhodan heard me but apparently my words had not been necessary. Sikerman was already shoving the so-called crash-jump lever into place. Which was the beginning of an uncalculated transition. Only the distance traversed could be approximated, not the direction.

I was overtaken by the pains of dematerialisation while in a prone position. Although the applicable principles involved should not have been affected by the position I was in during the process, it seemed that even in this respect the Druuf universe was full of surprises. Before I could mentally assimilate this I knew that we had committed a second error! Anybody in his right mind should take care not to apply the laws conforming to an Einstein universe to an alien continuum without making allowances for essential limitations. It was a miracle that we escaped into hyperspace at all.

I missed hearing the usual murmur and whispering that normally followed the dematerialisation process during a transition—but the pain remained. It seemed as if my sensitive nervous system had failed to

dematerialise as well.

We were still yelling at the moment of going into the manoeuvre but what came then was beyond endurance. It was probably a blessing in disguise that I was able to sink into oblivion.

What fools we were! What purpose could the best and fastest ship serve if the men it carried did not measure up to its capabilities? It was the same old problem, always overlooked in spite of the lessons of experience: the advancement of technology and the perfection of one's equipment tended to tranquillize the natural instinct of fear and self-preservation. What fools we were!

5/ HOME OF THE DRUUF!

I was the first man to awaken on board the *California*. Somehow my Arkonide constitution seemed to have survived the shock. In fact this was astonishing because many another situation had shown the Terranians to have the stronger reserves and staying power.

I sat up with an effort. A whole island universe seemed to be whirling dizzily before my eyes. In a subliminal fashion I was aware of the heavy throbbing of my activator. The device seemed to be at a peak of activity in order to give my cellular tissues the necessary stimulus impulses. After a few moments I felt better. My sense of sight returned to me.

Rhodan lay in a cramped position on the deck. Sikerman who had activated the crash-jump into hyperspace was slumped forward in the grip of his safety belt.

It had not gone any better with the other men in the Control Central. While I dragged myself over to the next seat I pondered what I should do now. I did not have to concern myself directly with the unconscious men because our medical robots had already appeared from the narrow access shafts and were moving out into the Control Central area.

I wondered whether or not the drugs being dispensed to stimulate the circulatory system would be of advantage here. If we were so much in the dark concerning the physical laws of the Druuf universe then perhaps our knowledge of bio-physiological effects in this environment might be equally inadequate or even dangerous. At any rate I hoisted myself out of the chair with trembling arms and went over to Sikerman.

As I released the buckle on his safety belt, he fell forward. I dragged him out from between the command chair and the horseshoe-shaped master console. I left him lying there and then took over the manual flight controls myself.

At only half speed the *California* was gliding through the void in free fall. After completion of the emergency transition, all engines had cut off automatically. On the gallery screens a giant red star was gleaming at me and I saw that it had a greenish-looking companion sun. This binary star could not be more than 2 light-years from the discharge zone because our short crash-jump could not have covered a greater distance than that. So at least the distance controls had worked, in spite of the strange effects that had resulted.

I listened to the clear bell-tones of the astronomical mass scanner. Then I activated the large telescopic screen in front of me. Measuring the celestial bodies ahead with hyper-fast scanning pulses, it provided me with a very clear echo pattern. Eight planets appeared immediately and the automatic analyser traced out their astrophysical data on a rolling line graph.

I had rarely ever seen such crazy and eccentric orbital patterns! The numerous planets of this apparently gigantic system wound their way partially between both suns, which undoubtedly caused catastrophic weather conditions. At the same time there were still other worlds which orbited both suns without going between them and this I considered to be more favourable. After 10 minutes the automatic mass-probe analyser had indicated the presence of at least 58 planets.

But there were phenomena here which forced me to new alertness. Among other things the gravity-field analyses were indicating that many planets possessed numerous moons. On the vernier screens for individual observation the steady pattern of regular echoes was persistently interrupted by sharp spike pulses on the overlay graphs. Unquestionably the larger moons possessed their own satellites, in turn, which were moving in adverse directions.

However, the most serious discovery was that we were already deep inside the system! Apparently we had made the hyperjump right into the middle of it. The red giant's disc already filled the green sector of the forward position screen.

By a supreme effort of will my still somewhat foggy brain finally began to function more clearly. I came to realize that we had simply hyper-jumped right over the most dangerous concentration of planets. If I was reading the mass-probe analyser correctly, more than 40 planetary orbits lay behind us.

The green companion of the mother star slowly emerged from behind the latter's tremendous bulk. The light that now reached the viewscreens was a spectroanalytical curiosity and I became sharply aware of the fact that we were definitely in alien territory! Capping this climax came an urgent humming sound from the automatic energy sensor. The planet now coming under surveillance on the data graphs and vernier screens was designated by the analytic computer as number 16 of the binary system. The entire vicinity of this celestial body registered an uninterrupted intensity of high-energy patterns.

If the analysis equipment hadn't gone crazy, this number 16 had to be the central world of this entire family of planets. At least all of my previous experience indicated that any celestial body with such a heavy component of energy radiation had to be an inhabited and highly technological world.

Home of the Druufs!

So said my extra brain with an electrifying suddenness. I actually had no reason to doubt the veracity of my logic sector. The indicated lightnings and bursts of energy occurring uninterruptedly around the hemisphere facing me could only be generated by spaceships constantly taking off or landing. They were hard radiation impulses which clearly indicated the operation of advanced propulsion units. All of which could prove to be very interesting!

Behind me the medical robots were busy at their work. I could hear the industrious hiss of their high-pressure hypodermics yet neither Rhodan nor any of the other men were stirring out of their strange paralysis. I called to the various ship sections over the videocom but only the automatic tapes responded. Which informed me quite graphically that the entire crew had been knocked out.

From then on my reasoning powers came into sharp focus. Not for anything in the world would I have risked another hypertransition in order to escape from this obviously dangerous region. There was still the

possibility that the *California* had not been detected. If we had been traced, the aliens would have been swarming about us long before this.

But then there was still another question that bothered me with an increasing persistence: just how was it possible that we had managed to emerge precisely within the Druuf system? Was it coincidence...? I pondered over this until, as expected, my logic sector responded:

Mass laws—celestial mechanics of the Druuf universe. An uncontrolled and uncalculated hypertransition results in a restriction of flight that narrows the direction toward stabilized matter at the highest centre of gravitational attraction.

It was a logical answer to the mystery yet it might not be as simple a conclusion as my auxiliary brain had just purported it to be.

Moments later I told myself that for the time being the *California* could not be better concealed than in the lion's den itself. Because I was already half-convinced that with the 16th planet I had actually discovered the mysterious home world of the Druufs. The many takeoffs and landings could be regarded as nothing more than the regular spaceship traffic there. Also the moons of number 16 appeared to be unusually busy.

I raised a hand hesitantly to activate the quiescent engines of the cruiser but I finally desisted when I remembered the measurement data from our remote spy-probes. According to their findings the former time and velocity factors had been reduced to a ratio of 1 to 2. If we had carried over our own time rate, then our present half-light speed must be just as fast as the Druuf ships at their highest velocity.

So I rejected the idea of making us a perfect tracking target for the unknown enemy. Our pulse-wave radiations would have probably hit the 16th planet like a bomb. There was, however, another reason for leaving the engines silent. Close ahead of us, perhaps less than two million miles, a Mars-sized planet was swinging into our flight direction.

I requested readout data on it from the auto-analyser. It turned out to be a so-called 'static axial' type since it required a complete orbital cycle before completing one axial revolution—meaning that its day was as long as its year. This caused it to keep the same hemisphere facing both suns, a situation which was also common in the Einstein universe.

Naturally the climatic conditions on this celestial body were probably extremely bad. But this meant without question that such a world would never have been colonized. It was number 13 in the system. Considering its relative distance from the giant red star, its dayside must be stifling hot.

These and other considerations moved me to carefully correct our course by means of intermittent thrusts from the auxiliary plasma engines. The automatic approach equipment took over the First Pilot's job from then on. All there was left for me to do was to adjust the destination cross-hairs so that their point of intersection zeroed in precisely on the clearly visible disc of the planet

Using the electronic optical system I pulled in world number 13 for a closer look. As the planet suddenly filled the viewscreen, I shuddered. It did not appear to have an atmosphere. The mean temperature hovered around 335°F. The hemisphere on the eternal nightside must have been close to zero Absolute.

At any rate it had a 'twilight' zone of sorts, which must have varied greatly due to an unusual libration. That's where I decided to land so that I could enjoy a relative sense of security while waiting for the crew's worrisome paralysis symptoms to wear off. It would have been senseless and totally irresponsible of me to continue meandering into the sovereign territory of these alien intelligences.

My limbs ached painfully as I got up from the pilot's chair. The small medical robots had ceased their activity. It indicated clearly that unknown symptoms were involved here. Laboriously I bent down to look into Rhodan's widely staring eyes. His face was terribly distorted. My own medical knowledge was insufficient for me to make a diagnosis. Still, I thought it possible that this benumbed condition was not a true state of unconsciousness. I had seen men in similar situations where they were mentally active even though they couldn't move a muscle. Rhodan's musculature was tensed as hard as a board, just as if he'd been shocked by a beam from a paralysis gun.

I leaned down still closer to him and said aloud: "It's possible that you can hear me and understand. We have to wait until the numbness goes away of its own accord. We've flown right into a big solar system and I'm landing on planet 13—an uninhabited orb with no diurnal rotation. Our energy detectors don't show anything here. I'll bring the ship into the twilight zone and will attempt to camouflage it as much as possible. Can you give me a sign that you understand?"

I looked attentively into his open eyes but there was nothing there that I could interpret as a confirmation. Although filled with inner despair I forced a reassuring smile to my lips as I got up again. The auto-pilot sounded. It was time for the approach braking manoeuvre.

This time I had no alternative but to put the powerful main engines of the *California* into operation. The plasma drive units were not strong enough to reduce our half speed within the time limits allowed. I took the risk because I had to. The impulse converters came on with a roar. The G-shock neutralizers gave me a green light on the console board.

I braked down at top power, knowing full well that at least one alert tracking operator somewhere would think a pack of fireworks had gone off in his energy-sensing equipment. But possibly our power burst would go unnoticed in the heavy traffic generated by planet 16. There were many possibilities, no doubt, but I didn't have the necessary factors for grasping them in a mathematical sense.

Like a fire-breathing dragon, the light cruiser raced toward the hot planet which I had dubbed Hades. It impressed me as being analogous to the underworld of Greek mythology. If there was anything I had a distaste for, it was the so-called 'twilight' zones of such desolate worlds. These libration strips were always only a partial phenomenon which neither alleviated the burning heat of a nearby sun nor the true darkness and coldness of the void.

Close to the surface, the *California* attained its landing speed. I held the ship in a braking ellipse while observing that Hades did seem to indicate some trace of an atmosphere. Evidently the residual gases had precipitated in the form of ice on the night side, whereas altering conditions in the twilight zone caused them to evaporate. So it was that violent storms were here also, raging along the shadow's edge. This was precisely what I had pictured in my worst imaginings.

I had my hands full to hold the cruiser steady on its antigrav fields but with the help of the auxiliary nav units I finally landed on a broad and fairly even surface of rock that was, at the time, in the twilight zone.

On the horizon the vast corona of the flaming red giant could still be seen. Its green companion was insignificant in a meteorological sense, since its heat energy wasn't sufficient to cause temperature

changes. But when it appeared over the horizon the same greenish illumination occurred which I had noticed during the landing manoeuvre.

It was a truly hellish planet I had landed on. I did not relax until the landing pads of the telescopic struts had dug firmly into the ground. Outside everything was silent. The storm I had noticed previously had abated as suddenly as it had come. Shivering slightly, I got up from my seat. The joints of the *California* snapped and crackled as was typical of the support structures of all spaceships after having been under a maximum strain. The plates cooled down very swiftly.

"Perry, can you hear me?" I asked, bending over him. His face remained as immovable as a stone mask. If he could still think, see and hear, his internal anguish and pain must have been a nightmare to endure.

6/ SURPRISE ATTACK

I still had to wait a few more hours until the first of the Terranians came to. Rhodan was the 5th man to find his legs again. The ones affected the most were the mutants, whose slightly altered brains were apparently more sensitive than those of other men.

Finally the entire crew became active again. There had been no actual casualties but our ship's medico, Dr. Skjoldson, who had been transferred from the *Drusus*, had ordered a strict schedule of rest.

After a discussion with him I also learned why I had regained my faculties and mobility so quickly. I had a different brain structure. As it was explained to me the others had been spared any sensation whatsoever during their period of paralysis, so my fears in that respect had been groundless. What might happen during any future transitions, however, no one dared to ask!

It was now definitely known that we were about 2 light-years away from the discharge zone. Prior to the landing I had been able to observe it clearly as a well-delineated line in the void. But if we avoided making a further transition we could look forward to at least a 2-year journey before reaching the fissure again.

Owing to the time-dilation effect of the present continuum, probably only a few days had passed for us; but on another plane of reference the time-rate would have remained stable. We didn't allow ourselves to think of what must have happened at the Fleet base on Grautier. Certainly they would regard us as dead men by now!

So it had now become our most urgent task to find a workable protection against the dangers of another hypertransition. Bell had been for hours in the computer room with the mathematician, Kenius, and he finally maintained that conditions in the Druuf universe would become more stabilized with each passing day. The paralysis effects had been the result of a disturbed balance between the forces of Nature.

Since it appeared that we weren't able to discover a biochemical remedy for the effects, we agreed to stay on Hades as long as possible. Each passing hour would contribute to the final stabilization of the variable states of energy. But in case of an emergency a transition would have to be made in spite of conditions. If everything went wrong, I was supposed to carry out the hyperjump myself and after regaining consciousness I was to try to keep the *California* from being destroyed.

However, if I had assumed that these madmen of Terra would be crushed by the morbid appearance of things I would have been properly deceived! What did they do after getting onto their feet again? Instead of being concerned about their physical recovery, they had nothing on their minds other than to start setting up their so-called 'transmitter base'.

Dr. Skjoldson had been reduced to cursing his way through the ship looking for his patients but they were so clever about eluding him that he hardly ever caught a man unawares. Skjoldson's 'armament' was an auto-hypo containing at least 500 cm of deep-sleep narcotic but it proved ineffective because he could never find a victim.

I myself had only been able to escape the hypodermic by means of a glib reference to my alien Arkonide physiology.

After Skjoldson came close to being cut in half by the sudden closure of an armour-plated section hatch, he finally gave up the chase. From then on there was a sign on the door of the ship's clinic: *Entry permitted only to patients who are crawling on hands and knees.*

It was the physician's revenge, except that unfortunately no one came crawling. I was convinced these fellows would take out their own appendices before they'd crawl to Skjoldson. Normally these typical chicaneries of terrestrial spacemen would have occasioned hilarity to the point of tears if our overall situation had been less desperate than it was.

This was the state of affairs eight days after our landing on the planet Hades, which meanwhile we came to recognize as an actual hell—eight days, that is, of *standard* time in our own universe!

* * * *

All that remained to be done was to install the big transmitter with its slightly more than 2-light-year transport range, and for this the large cavern had been prepared. These Terranians certainly believed in direct action! They had lost no time in moving the *California* to the base of the very mountain range that I had taken care to avoid during the landing.

Rhodan had dubbed the sprawling massif the Hope Mountains. The craggy cordillera stretched straight across the 50-mile twilight strip. Eastward from our position it towered into the merciless sunlight and westward the last peaks disappeared into the eternal darkness of the icy night side of the planet.

However, the massive cliffs were defenceless against Rhodan's personal onslaught when he turned a medium-calibre impulse cannon toward them and burned a tunnel-like opening in their flanks. The resulting gases from the melted rocks were then ionized so that they could be trapped in a magnetic field. Far beyond the libration zone these vapours condensed and were scattered over the surface in the form of 'rain'.

The high entrance opening was spray-filled with armour plastic material and provided with a relatively small airlock. Prior to this, of course, we had moved the bulky transmitter into the tunnel cavity, which was 60 feet high and almost 150 feet deep.

Now the men were busy with the task of camouflaging the synthetic outer entrance wall. Again they vaporized natural rock so that a force beam could compress it against the metal plastic wall. As a result of the excellent cohesion thus obtained, the 'plastering' job was so rugged and natural looking that I could only nod my appreciation of their work. These barbarians certainly knew how to take care of themselves without any outside direction. If only they were not so abysmally hair-brained in some of their actions and decisions! By my reckoning we should have taken off a day before this and attempted a transition. My careful checking had revealed Bell's calculations concerning the stabilization process to be actually quite valid. But no: first this damnable transmitter had to be installed!

The libration of the planet was more pronounced than we had assumed originally. Already within three days it could be observed that the giant red sun was thrusting more and more above the horizon. This caused an expansion of the daylight zone in our direction—which was totally unwelcome.

In our immediate area it had gotten lighter. The detailed contours of the mountains could be seen clearly now and it was possible to read fine print outside. Along with the increased brightness came a hint of the giant's fiery heat, which would soon be overwhelming us. We didn't take the pains to carefully measure the exact duration cycle of the axial aberration because Hades didn't interest us that much. It sufficed to know that it was slightly under 4000 miles in diameter, having a surface gravity of 0.35. It was quite similar to Mars, other than its slow axial rotation.

I stood in the pale shadow cast by the *California*. Hanging low over the ground were thin wisps of gas, a precipitation caused by a thawing out of the atmosphere. We had even picked up traces of oxygen here but its percentage was far too small for any practical use.

We were wearing our heavy spacesuits equipped with automatic defence screens. Also, by means of antigrav equipment we were fairly flightworthy as well as being protected against our hostile environment. A special instrument on my wrist indicated that the temperature was fluctuating. It continued to become hotter as the glowing edge of the sun moved higher above the flat horizon.

Out there only a few miles distant lurked a deadly heat. There all elements with a low melting point were already boiling and the desolate region was so hot that no one could walk there without special armoured boots. I had previously made an attempt to inspect the desert somewhat nearer to the deadly eye of the sunball but I had quickly abandoned the excursion, particularly because it served no practical purpose.

I drew back suddenly when a small impulse cannon from the *California* began to thunder. Apparently Bell was still not happy with the already 3-foot thickness of the cliff plastering. A few minutes before he had spoken to me by radio, observing that there was still some slight danger of our camouflage being detected.

I waited resignedly until the sun-bright beam of energy subsided. Only then did I move across to the now perfectly camouflaged cliff wall in order to enter the small airlock. The installation of the transmitter had been completed. A small emergency power plant was already providing illumination and was also capable of heating the place if required. All that was lacking was the air supply. On the following day the oxygen and air-conditioning units plus the recycling equipment were to be installed.

This was why the two steel hatches of the airlock were standing open when I finally reached the cliff wall. The planet's gravitational pull was so light that I was hardly aware of my ponderous spacesuit.

To my great surprise I met Rhodan and the mutant Fellmer Lloyd in the large tunnel. They were inspecting our main problem child—the transmitter's connections and power plant plus the related vernier adjustment elements. It was the plan to use this station for receiving other transmitter parts so that further

assembly could be accomplished inside the stronghold. If everything worked out as desired, one day the Terranians would have a hidden fortress in the very heart of the Druuf system.

"You must be completely out of your minds!" I called to them through my helmet transmitter. "In case you didn't notice it, 10 minutes ago Reginald Bell was bombarding this mountain with an energy beam, putting his own finishing touches to the camouflage."

Rhodan turned completely around to have a look at me. Lloyd merely chuckled. His mutant faculty had only consisted of being able to detect the presence of alien brainwaves until in the course of his special training he had also learned to be a telepath. He was an unprepossessing type, apathetic-looking, dark-complected, with shrewd eyes and a heavy-set muscular figure. I rather liked the fellow because he had never tried to break through my mono-screen in an attempt to probe my consciousness.

"That figures," replied Rhodan calmly. "But here inside we didn't feel it. Where are all those other sleeping beauties, anyway?"

I took a deep breath. This barbarian probably thought that other people could go without sleep for 48 hours. "If it's alright with you, I've sent them all to their bunks. How much do you think they can take? They aren't robots, you know!"

His tired, red-rimmed eyes blinked behind his faceplate. Then I detected a faint smile on his lips.

"OK—granted," he answered softly. "Tomorrow we bring the air equipment into the cave. And then we'll see if your theory of energy balance in this continuum is valid. I don't want to go through that paralysis bit again, do you understand?"

Yes, I understood only too well. The terrible appearance of his face during the last spell still lingered vividly in my memory.

Faint sounds reached us from the outside. The traces of atmosphere in the place transmitted soundwaves well enough to make at least the heavier noises audible to our ears. Over our radios we received a warning not to leave the station. The cruiser's specialist team was adding still another layer to the outside cliff wall.

After 15 minutes they had finished. Before the open lock doorway a wall of molten rock had been built up that almost blocked the entrance.

"Pretty neat job," remarked Lloyd. "Anybody else would have gummed up the exit and buried us."

On the other hand I thought it was most charming of the *California* crew to leave us at least a small crawl-hole. It was wildly reckless of Rhodan to remain in the tunnel during the process.

Just as Rhodan placed his special test instrument on the cavern floor, an inferno struck outside. A shockwave shrieked so violently through the small entrance hole that all three of us were gripped by its force and hurled backwards. I could still hear Lloyd's shrill cry as a torrent of pain from my spine rendered me half unconscious. I could only grasp that the unexpected attack had nevertheless occurred—and quite differently than we could have imagined.

I heard Rhodan's voice bellowing in my earphones. I registered neither his command nor the superfluous volume of his shouting—only the pain of it all.

"Take off! Immediate takeoff, Bell—Sikerman—take the ship up for immediate transition. We'll wait here till the *Drusus* transmitter gives us the green light. Get moving—leave! That's an order! No time now to come on board. You will take off..."

I was vaguely aware of his repeating the command several times, until the deep thundering of the powerful engines was heard. By that we could infer that the light cruiser had only suffered light damages. Sikerman departed under full power, which almost made the tunnel collapse. The resulting earthquake caused me to groan aloud in agony. At the moment it was immaterial to me whether or not the *California* took off without us. I was only thinking of the possibly serious injury I may have suffered as a result of my hard fall. There was no way of opening my hermetically sealed spacesuit to examine a bone break.

Lloyd's voice aroused me from my panicky thoughts. "They've gone! My God, they made it!"

Rhodan got up laboriously. Close outside the lock opening a blinding heat-glow was visible. Evidently an impulse beam had been aimed at the cruiser.

In spite of my pain I couldn't resist remarking: "Well, Barbarian, what do you say now? A neat little surprise, eh? Would you please take a look to see if I've broken my spine?"

7/ UNDER INHUMAN EYES

"When I see you like this, it seems amazing that the mother of my son is an Arkonide." Rhodan appeared to be speaking so loudly that I could hear him in spite of our helmets.

Evidently the shockwave had filled the tunnel with a heavier gas mixture. Outside a light wind was blowing. Apparently the sun-hot thermal beam of the enemy had accelerated the beginning process of atmospheric thaw. At any rate, I could hear Rhodan directly, which indicated that a sound-conducting gas medium was present.

I lay flat on my stomach with my back facing Rhodan. Fellmer Lloyd crouched close to the entrance and peered out at the undulating rocky plain where the *California* had stood only 15 minutes before.

A few seconds after the emergency takeoff we had received a message over normal voice com. Since the cruiser had already hurtled out into space because of its usually wild acceleration, the communication was barely comprehensible. Ultra-short waves were badly distorted by the particle radiations of the engines and we did not have hypercom equipment with us.

Bell and Sikerman had informed us that they had succeeded in breaking through the enemy blockade. They were going to risk the hyperjump, go through the fissure

Into the Einstein universe and come back with the *Drusus* by hook or crook.

After we had received this tattered message, the radio connection was finally broken. No doubt the *California* had already made the transition, because they only needed 5 minutes to reach the relative speed of light.

Whether or not Sikerman would make it out of the Druuf time-plane was another question. However, the gravitational upheavals within the discharge zone must have largely subsided by now. If we were very lucky, the *Drusus* could be here in the realm of the Druufs within a few hours. Since there were three excellent transmitters on board the super battleship, it would then be possible to make use of our own transmitter and get ourselves out of this cave.

Rhodan pressed his fingers again into my back. I could barely keep from moaning aloud in my pain. Fellmer Lloyd turned toward us and I saw his sweating face in the light streaming in from outside. I attempted to smile, as a morale booster for the other two—who probably needed it more than I did.

Rhodan had whispered to me that the mutant had been suffering for several hours from the preliminary symptoms of dysentery. He hadn't reported the sickness immediately because of Dr. Skjoldson's 'come crawling' policy. Of course it had been sheer foolishness not to have gone to the doctor right away with this unpleasant condition.

After the departure of the *California*, Lloyd had been doubled up with painful stomach cramps. I was put somewhat to shame when I saw how manfully he had suppressed his agonies. For the moment he seemed to be better, because he at least attempted to return my smile.

But we didn't know at the time that the sanitary equipment in Fellmer's spacesuit had ceased to function. Apparently it had been damaged by the heavy jolt he'd received during the attack by the aliens. So in addition, now here was the dysentery, which normally Dr. Skjoldson would have been able to take care of with a single injection. There was no way we could help the mutant. He had to rely solely on the meagre store of medications contained in his helmet supply capsule but certainly that would contain no relief for intestinal cramps. He was going to have to stand some awful pain and discomfort.

From then on I kept a straight face, with no grimaces, until Rhodan finished his examination: He had to feel my back through the thick material of my suit and uniform, which was a highly unsatisfactory method.

"What's the verdict? Are you familiar with my bone structure?"

"To some extent. Since you don't have a normal chest cage, I'd say you've cracked the bone disc where my lower right rib would be. What do you have in this area?"

He probed into the focal point of my pain and I complained loudly. At least I found I could still move without going crazy from the agony. If I had only cracked a back disc, the damage was only half as bad as I had thought. The strong but highly elastic tissue regenerated itself swiftly. I probably only needed a few hours of rest.

"Some physician you are!" I groaned, finally getting to my feet. "Ok, let's take a look at our situation."

I walked carefully to the small airlock which was hidden from the outside by a high wall of stone. Now we could only see beyond it through a narrow fissure. The former disadvantage of the closure was now an advantage.

If the Druufs had had a spark of sense they would have asked themselves what the crew of such an unknown, super-fast cruiser had been doing on this world. If they had not captured or destroyed the *California* in outer space they would undoubtedly attempt to search out some clues. But they would only find them where the ship had been standing, which was 600 yards from our cave opening—and the latter had been about 75% closed up by molten rock.

We did not deceive ourselves as to what might happen if they really made a painstaking investigation. As a result of the very excellent camouflaging the great wall of rock plastering before the tunnel could no longer be seen at all. I also believed that any instrumental detection of the false covering would be out of the question, unless they thought of bringing their equipment very close to our excavation—but that might be practically by coincidence. However, there was a very real danger from another direction, even though at some distance. These were the places where we had melted down the rock cliffs for the purpose of obtaining our covering material. Wide, glassy surfaces had been left there, from which they might draw inferences.

Under certain circumstances it would have been possible for human intelligences to draw the right conclusions but just what the Druuf capacities were in this regard we were still undecided about. Perhaps they would not be able to imagine the purpose of all this rock melting. That was our only hope, because that there would be an investigation was as certain as the fact that the Druufs existed.

We crawled into the lock and worked our way to the steep wall of the cliff. The rift in the frontal curtain of rock before us was only about 16 inches wide. In an emergency a person might force himself through it but whether it might be taken for an opening from the outside was another question. It probably blended so inconspicuously with the rugged face of the outer wall that it would only attract the attention of someone at extremely close range. But under the circumstances it was not our intention to make contact with the Druufs.

I pressed my helmet against Fellmer Lloyd's in order to speak better to him through the conducting material. He was moaning faintly. His stocky frame was trembling. Evidently he was suffering another painful attack.

"Take it easy, boy," I called to him loudly. "In a few hours the *Drusus* will make a thrust into the Druuf dimension. Our transmitter has been hooked up perfectly. It's going to work without a hitch."

"Sir, I'm sorry I have to even mention this unpleasantness but I'm only human and my body..."

"That's understandable; you don't have to be sorry about it," I interrupted, deeply moved—not by his illness but that he had thought it necessary to apologize for it. "You'll have to hold out, Lloyd, there's nothing we can do. The cave is practically empty of air. What's the reading on your sanitary pack? Maybe we could manage to clear it out for you. But you just take it easy, OK?"

"Yes sir, I'll have to. Only—I don't think there's anything to clean out..."

I hadn't at first noticed that Rhodan had his helmet pressed to mine. He seemed to be able to guess the rest of the problem. Seconds later, Lloyd gasped out a confession that his sanitary pack had somehow been put out of order by the shockwave.

Far from being a humorous situation, I well knew that it was more like a catastrophe. To the experienced spaceman, such conditions were no joking matter. With his type of illness his breathing air could very quickly be poisoned. Owing to the lack of outside air pressure it was necessary for his suit to maintain a minimum internal pressure of at least 1500 millibars, or about 8 pounds per square inch. This, under a contaminated condition, could be dangerous.

"Hang in there, Lloyd," Rhodan tried to reassure him. "The *Drusus* will soon be here."

For the moment I could find no words that would not have emphasized the gravity of the situation.

The mutant turned his head to laugh at us sheepishly though his face was distorted by his agony. I had once experienced amoebic dysentery so I could appreciate what he must be suffering while closed up inside of his pressure suit. The calamity overtook me while I was in the war camp of General Wallenstein. It had been a plague for which we had had no remedy at the time.

"Where in the devil did you pick up such an infection?" asked Rhodan. "There has to be a cause for it."

"Maybe it was the water on Grautier, sir," replied Lloyd weakly.

It was an assumption that had to be accepted for the time being. If he had been tempted to drink the clear-looking spring water there, he could have picked up a contagion. I determined that I would advise the Fleet Medical Corps to provide all spacesuits with a more effective selection of universal-type antibiotics in the future. Lloyd's case of dysentery could only be the infectious variety, I was certain. This meant he had to have gotten it from the outside somewhere. The ships of the Solar Fleet were antiseptically clean. Their sanitary provisions were superior to anything I had ever seen even on board the Arkonide vessels.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him why he had not gone to the doctor at the first signs of the malady but I gave it up. It would be senseless to discuss something that couldn't be changed now. He'd no doubt be cursing himself for his shortsightedness, anyway.

Without a word, Rhodan began to break off some knife-sharp spikes of rock on the edges of the fissure. I watched him for a while, realizing that during my talk with Lloyd my own pains had almost been forgotten. They were not so serious that they hindered me much in my movements.

"I'm going outside to see how good our camouflage is," he said. "Stay here and keep your eyes open, OK?"

A few moments later, Perry forced himself through the narrow opening. The material of his armoured spacesuit was so strong that it would have taken much worse treatment to make a tear in it. So I wasn't overly concerned as I watched him go out between the rocks.

In my hands was a heavy-duty thermal raygun which the Terranians referred to as an impulse beamer. Although here any resistance would have been senseless I was nevertheless determined to give him good fire coverage.

Outside the brilliant sunlight had finally reached our stronghold. The sparse shadows disappeared and a few minutes later I was half-blinded when I looked out at the broad desert landscape. The axial aberration of the planet must have swung us right to the edge of the twilight zone.

As Rhodan advanced, however, he again gained the shadows. From that point onward the terrain had the effect of dropping into a pitch-dark abyss in which nothing could be seen.

"It's alright now, sir," the mutant informed me. He pressed his helmet still closer to mine.

I nodded to him silently. Maybe it would be good for him to be mentally active so as to distract him from his misery.

After about three minutes my helmet receiver came to life. Rhodan was reporting by radio.

"Have you lost your mind?!" I interrupted him at his first words. "We can be traced!"

"Ridiculous—I'm sending with only two-tenths of a watt. Besides, there's nothing to see in all directions, so what could trace us? I'm a little over half a mile away in the shadow of the twilight zone. How does it look from there?"

"You mean from our point of view?"

"What else?"

"Miserable, if you want to know the truth," I mumbled. "But relax—we can't see you or anything else out there. The sun blasts our vision terribly. From where I sit, that's a midnight blackout over there."

"Excellent. From here your cliff wall is an unreal faded outline because I can't look directly into the blinding sunlight. No matter how hard I try I can't see a trace of the tunnel wall and I only know where the fissure is because of definite landmarks. I'll take all bets that they won't be able to find us."

"Just keep transmitting for another half hour and they'll have us."

"OK, I'll shut my mouth, you old pessimist. Uh-uh! Calm down now! I know we should have gotten out of here a day sooner and we would have spared ourselves all this. So? Lloyd, how are you doing? Would you like to come out here? Maybe it'll do you some good."

"I'd rather not, sir," I heard Fellmer answer faintly. "I feel like a dog. Could you maybe spare me a little of your oxygen?"

I sensed that I had turned pale. Oxygen...? Why was he asking for that? It was the strictest regulation to refill the ultra high-pressure regenerator equipment and recheck it daily. Had he even neglected this most basic and important of all rules? No, he couldn't have!

Rhodan seemed to be equally perplexed. "Oxygen? Lloyd, that doesn't make any sense! The regenerator is built into the inside of your suit. We wouldn't be able to reach it. What's the matter? Are you having a hard time to breathe?"

I turned to look at the sick man. When he became aware of my surveillance he seemed terribly embarrassed. It made me suspicious.

"Wel-l, n-no sir," Lloyd stammered in response. "My equipment is still OK. But can I risk blowing out my present pressure through the control valve? I'd have to take a new air-charge from the tank then."

"But for Heaven's sake, why?"

I spoke gruffly into my helmet mike. "Don't ask childish questions! His breathing air is simply used up, don't you get it? With dysentery and a broken down sanitary pack, what do you get? It's alright, Lloyd, blow out your suit. Normally your oxygen supply is good for 8 days, Terra time. Set yourself up for only 4 days more and you'll make it. So let it go—get rid of that poisoned air!"

I helped him to open the control valve on the back of his helmet. The pressure sank rapidly. When the gauge reached the danger mark I released fresh oxygen from the high-pressure tank into his regenerator circuit. These containers made of light Arkonide steel had a 10,000-pound test strength.

Rhodan scolded bitterly to himself. It wasn't Lloyd that got to him but the general situation.

I cut in sarcastically: "Strange that you should be cussing now. Is it possible in all of your frolicsome space conquests you may not have run into a situation like this? You're going to run into some setbacks after all that beginner's luck of yours or my name isn't Atlan—since I do happen to know something about the galaxy, my friend!"

"Hold your tongue, Arkonide!"

"Not yet. You'd better see to it that you get back into this tunnel. I'm telling you that a Druuf ship could land out there any minute!"

He said nothing more since there was nothing more to say. But then I saw him dashing with amazing speed out of the shadows. A brilliant glow of light had appeared in the dark sky.

"He knows no fear but run he can," I murmured to myself.

Lloyd laughed restrainedly. I found him very likeable. Rhodan staggered up to the fissure, panting hard, and I yanked him through without ceremony. His face was bathed in sweat. With a touch of my finger I shut off his transmitter.

Minutes later bright sunlight flashed from a jet-black monster of a ship that sank toward the ground on flaming pillars of impulse energy. We could clearly hear the deep thundering of its engines and the impact of its retro-thrust caused the mountains to tremble. I looked with concern at the wall reinforcement of our excavation but none of it showed the slightest crack from the strain.

As the Druuf ship entered the shadow of the Hope Mountains, it could only be seen in silhouette. They had landed in the twilight zone, just as we had expected them to. No rational beings would have set themselves down in the direct sunlight.

"Just right!" said Rhodan softly but our helmets were so close that I heard him. "Now they'll have a look around."

I had a look myself but at the multiple meter device on my wrist. The sun's rays had completely engulfed our location. Within a few minutes the temperature had risen to 150°F. Outside it must have soared much higher.

Our protective spacesuits were designed to withstand more than 900° of heat, due to a high rate of reflection plus the efficiency of our air-conditioning units. However, if it became much hotter, our defence screens would have to be turned on and there was little doubt that the generator fields would lead to detection by means of energy tracers. I hoped we wouldn't have to use them. It was bad enough for the micro-reactors to just be generating the normal current demands.

Fellmer Lloyd bent over under a new attack. In his condition he was of little practical use as a telepath. I followed Rhodan's gaze but the green signal lamp on the matter transmitter was still not activated. We exchanged significant glances. What had happened to the *California*? Had she gotten through? If so, why hadn't the *Drusus* put in an appearance yet?

With slow deliberation Rhodan drew his impulse beamer from the holster at his belt. When the weapon's red charge lamp came on I knew that that he was not inclined to go into Druuf imprisonment without a fight. But then we were not at all certain as to whether or not these creatures even took prisoners.

During the great Methane War of 10,000 years ago, very few prisoners were taken. Neither of the contenders had the means to provide the proper life-support conditions for a conquered enemy. If the methane breathers had breathed oxygen, or we methane, it might have been easier. But that was another matter.

We waited. The half-rounded bow was all that could clearly be seen of the vessel where its 1000-foot hull towered up out of the twilight zone into the dark sky. The Druuf marauder stood on wide-spread retractible tail-fins which had evidently been extended just prior to landing.

"I'd give a lot to see their hyper-drive setup," said Rhodan calmly.

The Barbarian bad nerves of steel! At the moment I couldn't have cared less about their engines. The issue here was survival, which was once described by a wise man as the 'art' of intelligence. And of survival I wasn't so sure, although I imagined myself to have a modicum of intelligence.

There was still nothing moving out there on the broad plain. The more intensely we watched, the more the outlines of the alien ship seemed to emerge from the shadows of the twilight zone. Our eyes were gradually adjusting to the strange light conditions.

Fellmer Lloyd was only half conscious. His last attack had just about broken him down. Where the enemy was concerned, Rhodan's telepathic faculty was too weak to obtain any definite impressions. He of course 'listened' for the Druufs in deep concentration but he could not get any identifiable reading out of the brainwaves he did detect.

"In any case," he announced after awhile, "they are completely inhuman. I can't unscramble any of it. When are they ever going to come out?"

They emerged a quarter of an hour later, probably after having carefully scanned their surroundings with tracing and sensing equipment. They were using their brains, alright, or they wouldn't have thought of sparing themselves the hazards of trekking across the sunlit area on foot. All we saw was a number of flat, elliptically shaped vehicles which apparently moved over the ground on some sort of magnetic repulsion cushions. There were no wheels or tractor belts to be seen.

Which served to convince me again that these creatures were backed up by a tremendous technology. Naturally they knew what to expect from any environment in their own solar system, so they were capable of applying whatever equipment was suitable to the applicable circumstance.

We held our breaths as three of these gliders moved slowly across toward our fissure. I noticed revolving antenna and the red glow of camera lenses which obviously were part of an optical viewing system.

We covered them with our weapons until they passed our position. Three hours later the alien ship lifted off with a thunderous roar. After the last sound had faded away I heaved a mighty sigh of relief. Rhodan replaced the gun in his holster.

"OK, so much for that," he said. "They won't come again. If I were in their shoes it probably wouldn't have occurred to me, either, that the stronghold of an alien race was more or less sitting right under my nose. Such an unheard of insolence would be a bit hard to imagine, don't you think?"

Of course I could certainly agree with him *on that* point!

The next thing we did was to check the mutant's condition. His air was getting foul again. This was going to use up his oxygen at a faster rate. We looked wistfully at the transmitter but the green lamp hadn't come on yet. It meant that nobody had activated a receiving chamber for us so far.

I finally went across to the landing area where the Druuf ship had been, hoping that I might find some items of abandoned equipment.

Other than a glassy patch of ground that was still glowing from heat, there was nothing to be seen.

8/ MONSTER WORLD

Three 24-hour periods went by while we waited, half drowsing in our sleeplessness, hoping for a signal from the transmitter. Nothing but the longed-for glow of the indicator lamp could satisfy our burning desire now.

But on top of it we had Lloyd's illness to face. Although it was only an indirect threat to his life, it weighed constantly upon us. His air-pressure had to be renewed too often. We had found no way of recycling the poisonous gases. Even the air regenerator system had not been designed for such cases, which was unquestionably an oversight in the construction of this type of space-suit.

Fellmer Lloyd had enough oxygen for just about 12 more hours. If by that time he was not able to get out of his suit, he'd have to be given up for lost.

Then, at an unsuspected moment, the panel lamps on the transmitter started to flicker. In a matter of seconds they were glowing with such bold clarity that it seemed they had never been dark!

We did not hesitate long. If the *Drusus* had finally broken through, then certainly not a moment was to be wasted. Rhodan and I jumped up quickly from our makeshift sleeping mats which we had put together from leftover packing materials. Lloyd lay apathetically at our feet. His face was pale and drawn. He seemed to have lost his last spark of energy.

"Lloyd, on your feet!" Rhodan yelled at him. "Lloyd, the lights are on! The *Drusus* has opened a receiver channel—come on!"

Then Lloyd demonstrated that from time to time a human being can call upon tremendous reserves within himself. It was as though an unused miracle engine had awakened in him, drawing upon some mysterious source of power. Suddenly his eyes became much clearer. Behind his faceplate I could see a hard-drawn face with deep lines between the eyes and the mouth.

"OK," he said simply. He was at a peak of concentration, pouring every last strength he had into this one moment.

We didn't have to help him. He sprang lightly to his feet and moved to the rear of the tunnel, where the high-precision transmitter almost touched the ceiling. Rhodan had already set the power supply into operation. We had made all preparations. There were just a few more controls to manipulate in order to have the equipment fully activated.

The transport coördinates were calculated to the last decimal point. During the past three days we had monitored and made corrections for the incoming data affected by energy and gravitic displacements between the two universes.

Rhodan was the first to walk onto the metal platform between the circular grating bars. The latter towered high above our heads to give support to the coppery shining canopy. From this parabolic surface overhead the dematerialising force field would descend upon us. With trembling hands I shoved Lloyd's feet into the contact grips of the deck cleats. Then with the touch of my hand I closed the entrance.

Now it dawned on me why the transmitter was specially equipped with its own built-in power source. In our case we wouldn't have had any other energy plant at our disposal.

Rhodan connected the first-stage circuits. It only took a few moments before a gentle hum in the yard-thick base of the platform rose to a raging thunder. A pale-red wall of energy glided down the grating bars to join the glowing force field at the base pole.

We could still think, talk and feel—but in the moment before the start of a transmitter jump one's rationality becomes clouded over by uncontrollable fears welling up from the depths of the unconscious. One's individual sensitivities tend to fight against dematerialisation. The stronger the instinct of self-preservation, the easier it is overcome by the process.

We held Lloyd between us. The glowing force field around us seemed to be like the gaping maw of Hell. Rhodan was exceptionally calm. I strove to maintain my own presence of mind. I had never before experienced a transmitter jump across two light-years—at least not in equipment that had been built on Earth.

I was thinking of the instability of the Druuf universe. If we had suffered so much from a normal hypertransition, what would be the effect of this physical-mechanical method of transportation? Rhodan seemed to be thinking the same thing. Whenever his face was as expressionless as it was now, it meant that he was brooding over very grave considerations.

The bell signal sounded three seconds later. To me the ringing notes seemed to last for an eternity. Lloyd was staring at me. The dark eyes in his hard-chiselled face glowed like a pair of burning coals. He seemed to pull himself together with all his remaining strength.

I attempted to smile but failed. Since the transmission release button was on my side of the cage, I depressed it with my thumb.

My last fleeting concern was for the transmitter's enormous energy output. It could not be detected with normal hypersensors. But if anyone had meanwhile developed a suitable instrument...

The pains of dematerialisation struck us so penetratingly that I even heard my own outcry. It was as though a surgeon had begun to operate before the anaesthetic had taken effect. I had one last impression of Rhodan's tense figure. At the moment of the beginning transmission, his body had become angular and widely distorted. Then all I could sense was the burning pain. It was due to the Druuf continuum, which apparently had not yet stabilized itself completely.

Finally there was nothing more. Perhaps my sensitive nerve tissues had finally dissolved. It was a physical fact, actually, that when one's organism was resolved into its separate atoms one shouldn't be

aware of the slightest sensation. So the resultant effects were all the more incredible. I seemed to fall away into a phosphorescent spiral of fire.

* * * *

The burning and pulling in every nerve fibre seemed to have also been transported. When the rematerialisation started in the receiver chamber, a remnant of the dissolution sensation lingered within the new experience of the return shock. Although I was now a physical entity again, I couldn't see. Nor could I hear the expected sounds of the receiver transmitter—not even the dying hum of the collapsing force fields. Either we'd already been standing on the platform for some time in a semi-unconscious state or there was something wrong with the equipment.

At any rate I could move my hands and arms. I groped about me, at the same time becoming aware that somebody was trying to get hold of me. The hand that gripped me was that of Fellmer Lloyd. It was a firm grip, so I knew that he, too, was getting back into some kind of shape. A red haze undulated before my eyes. I was gradually coming to hate that colour.

Then I thought I heard shoutings and loud yelling. It was some time before I made out my name in the vague tumult. Right after that I also began to see. Lloyd's face loomed out of the nebulous haze. Then I recognized Rhodan, who was sitting on the platform deck, groping uncertainly for the fastener cleats on his feet.

But wait! There *were* no fastener cleats! Nor were we standing on any circular platform base of a Terranian transmitter. The plastisteeel soles of our boots contacted what appeared to be polished stone slabs. A dull, pressing pain spread through my brain. It seemed to flame up when my logic section awakened, then disappeared swiftly.

Wrong coördinates! Alien environment! Not a Terra spaceship! Thus my auxiliary brain gave me its warning.

This served to bring me fully out of my stupefaction. The sounds I was now mistaking for the thundering of force fields were being generated in my ears by the powerpack on my back. My helmet grav-meter revealed a compensating differential of 0.95 g. This meant that we were on a world or inside a spaceship where the full gravity had a value of 1.95 g.

It brought me to instant alertness. Humans were not alone in the capacity for swift and almost involuntary reaction in such a situation. My thermal gun flashed into my hand faster than Fellmer Lloyd could reach for his own weapon.

"What's going on?" he asked hastily. His voice sounded muffled inside his pressure helmet.

Meanwhile, Rhodan had followed my example. He too appeared to have been jolted into sharp awareness.

It was then that I had a chance to really look about me.

We found ourselves in a very large chamber, dimly lighted, with a seamless, domelike ceiling. Facing us

beyond the platform cage was an arched gateway leading off somewhere. In that direction it was darker than the room we were in.

The only installations we saw, other than the apparatus we were standing on, were strange, mammoth machines around the walls. We were in a grid-like construction that didn't have any recognizable closure hatch. We were standing on bare stone, which transmitted neither a sense of warmth nor a feeling of security.

Far above our heads, close to the arched ceiling, a reddish glowing metal ball hovered weightlessly in the air. This was the source of the obnoxious illumination. The cage construction enclosed a circular surface that was about 10 yards in diameter but the bars were so wide apart that we could quite easily slip between them.

It was typical of Perry Rhodan, in unexpected situations such as this, to make a diversionary observation. "This air is breathable!" he said, so loudly that I could hear him clearly. "Lloyd, tip your helmet back—this is what you've been waiting for!"

I looked quickly at my automatic analyser, which had never failed to function accurately. It was true. Here there was oxygen, nitrogen and surprisingly high quantities of the inert gases. Helium and argon were almost in super-abundance. The outside air pressure was considerably above 1 atmosphere but Lloyd would have to risk it in order to stretch out the precious small supply remaining in his tank.

He was standing close to me but failed to act so I struck the magnetic lock release on his helmet. It swung back soundlessly. The stale, noxious air in his suit surged out through his collar ring.

As though unaware of my action, the mutant raised a warning cry. "Let's get out of here! We've landed among the Druufs. Someone is approaching us. I can't exactly grasp what he's thinking. Too alien, too inhuman in every fibre. It's like listening to a half-intelligent beast wearing a superimposed mental aura. Let's get out, sir!"

I also tipped back my helmet. The air was surprisingly good but I had to accustom myself to the higher pressure. My ears rang. I rubbed my dried-out eyes to moisten them. For an Arkonide it was uncomfortable to be too long inside a spacesuit.

Rhodan was the first to press between the bars and get out of the cage. He made a wide jump to the floor beyond the platform base. I called to him quickly to tell him to look at his g-meter and that's when he first noted that we were under a force of 1.95 g. Lloyd dragged himself wearily after me, apparently ready to give up. I knew what he had been through and couldn't blame him. Once inside the cage, he simply stayed behind Rhodan and leaned his back against the wall. I went to the opposite side of the entrance to take cover.

"Where could we have landed?" whispered Rhodan.

I gave a slight shrug. "I'm not so much concerned with *where* we came out as I am with the *why* of it." I answered, also in a low tone. "There can be no doubt that the transmitter adjustments were in order. Even the green light was on, so another station must have been switched to the reception mode—and that means exactly at our own hyper-frequency."

"What do you mean another station—it's this one!" He looked gloomily about at the strangely shaped equipment.

"Why so? There are a billion possibilities," I said irritably. "There's something wrong about all this."

"Like there was about our hypertransit landing us right in the middle of the Druuf system. There must be powerful interference frequencies jamming here of a kind we don't know enough about. Maybe this machine was on the air for an entirely different purpose. I'll guarantee you they weren't right on our own transmission channel. When we put out our contact signal it may have heterodyned just the right harmonic or differential to trap us on their beam. And here we are in the wrong place. One thing sure—the*Drusus* was never there at all. A freakish coincidence."

It irritated me that his typical Terranian mentality should draw such a conclusion. According to our research and experiments there could be no room for coincidence.

"It's coming closer," whispered Lloyd, who seemed to be staring through the wall. "I can't get the gist of the thoughts as well as I could if it were human. It's more like a grouped train of impulses that seem to express the idea of expectancy. *What* is he expecting?"

Rhodan's eyes narrowed as he apparently toyed with an idea. "He's expecting whatever this Druuf transmitter was supposed to bring in. That's why it was in operation! Through some beat-frequency of interfering force fields it happened to activate our green light. So these fellows are on to 5-D transmission. Interesting."

"I don't think too much of this equipment. Looks more like an experimental research setup."

It was Rhodan's turn to shrug. Neither of us knew the exact answer and we didn't have time or the right test instruments for making a thorough investigation.

"Watch it!" hissed Lloyd. He had suddenly drawn his own weapon, which in his case was only a shock-gun.

"Try your shocker on him first," advised Rhodan swiftly. "If it doesn't work we can always attack with our impulse-beamers."

Outside in the darker hall we could hear the sound of heavy, awkward-sounding footsteps. It sounded as though someone were setting his feet down with unnecessary force.

The natural effect of 1.95 g, announced my extra brain.

Rhodan was also aware of this. Did he also suspect that we were probably dealing with very large and powerful creatures? In my own experience I always found that when a heavy-gravity planet was inhabited it produced intelligences who were very sturdily constructed. After all, they had to be able to move and breathe freely in their heavier environment.

A few moments later we saw the Druuf! When we peeked cautiously around the edge of the entrance we could make out in the background of the passage a dark, shadowy silhouette that was so squarish in shape that my eyes watered in my excitement—a characteristic of my race.

Slowly, too slow by my own standards, the creature plodded toward us. It was at least 9 feet in height. This seemed strange until I recalled the time-differential between the Druuf plane and the Einstein continuum.

Swiftly I whispered to my companions: "Remember, he's only half as fast as we are. By his own

standards he's probably moving with considerable speed. Lloyd said he was in a state of expectancy, which means he'd be hurrying his pace. So if that's a fast walk I'd say we had an advantage over the Druufs."

When the light from our own chamber finally reached the Druuf we were able to see him clearly. In spite of his weird physiology I observed him calmly, whereas Lloyd emitted a moan of horror and even Rhodan started briefly. In such situations my Arkonide training as a psychologist specialized in alien races came to the fore. I had long since ceased to wonder about the strange forms of life that Nature could produce in all her multiferous prodigality.

"Glord!" the mutant groaned. Then he fell silent as I gave him a reproving look.

The Druuf was actually 9 feet tall but almost equally as broad. He came nearer on his weirdly shaped, pillar-like legs. But at least he was a biped, which was in some small measure reassuring. His two very powerful arms terminated in startlingly thin but well articulated claws, which were nevertheless somewhat humanoid in their appearance.

But from that point on, all traces of human similarity vanished. The frightening part was his spherical head, measuring about 20 inches in diameter, dominated by 4 large eyes in which the light was now reflected. Two of them were where one would expect to see them but the other two were located where a human would find his temples.

The nose and ears were missing. Nor was there any hair at all. Finally it was the triangular shaped mouth that gave me the clue. Undoubtedly these creatures had developed from insects. It explained the probable reason why Lloyd had been unable to clearly understand the thought-impulses.

It was well that the Druuf had given us the opportunity to see his monstrous, clumsy body first. In spite of his weird shape, he wouldn't have seemed very fearsome at all without that horrible head. But I knew human reactions and I could well define my own feelings. Even though reason dictated that any being was to be judged by its mind rather than its outward form, nevertheless the instinct was repelled by such a sight.

Especially humanoids of my own kind became suspicious whenever aliens were markedly of insect or reptilian evolution. Something in the human psyche couldn't accept such alienness where higher intelligences were involved. It was only through the powers of the clearest reasoning faculties that one could suppress his aversion, distrust and hate—and reason didn't always go that far.

I observed Rhodan unobtrusively. As expected, he appeared to be fighting his own reactions. He was of course probably telling himself that the Druufs were not responsible for their appearance—we were no doubt equally hideous from their own point of view. Rhodan recovered very quickly from his first impression but revulsion was written all over Lloyd's face. However, this might have been based on his special faculties. He could certainly grasp more of the Druuf's true nature than I could.

We drew back out of view again, since the alien obviously was equipped with a sharp sense of sight. He moved through the semi-darkness with the same confidence as we would have in bright sunlight.

"Take a good aim, Lloyd," I whispered quickly. "He will not be able to speak as we do—probably on another principle entirely. Don't give him time to call for help."

Lloyd nodded tensely with an expression of repugnance. The heavy footsteps were silent for a moment but then they continued. The Druuf moved slowly into the wide entrance and I saw then why the opening

had been arched so high.

I pressed back against the smooth wall and saw Rhodan do the same. When the pillar-like legs of the thing came into view I observed that this race possessed a brownish black, leathery skin that looked like an elastic sort of exoskeletal armour. The Druuf's closely fitting garment was almost transparent and I found it strange that these creatures should even consider any artificial covering to be necessary.

Lloyd hesitated so long with his weapon that I was just about ready to attack with my thermo-gun. But then I realized that the mutant was trying to sample the monster's thoughts at close range. At the same time the Druuf came to an abrupt halt. I saw that his laterally located eyes rotated forward. He stood motionlessly in one spot and stared at the gleaming bars of the platform cage. I suspected that he missed seeing what he had expected to find there. It was time for Lloyd to make his move!

As I heard the loud report from his shock-gun, I was about to follow with my own weapon. But I refrained from doing so when the massive body crashed to the floor like a felled tree. I broke the fall of its head so that the spherical skull would not be damaged.

Rhodan moved forward quickly. The alien's big eyes were wide open. Lloyd staggered closer with an effort. His twisted expression suggested that he was on the verge of another attack of dysentery.

He spoke to us in a pain-choked voice: "I held off long enough to try reading him further. He was thinking something I couldn't quite grasp—something about a freight package. He seemed concerned about a box or a large carton. I..." He stopped suddenly and dropped to his knees with a loud moan. I dragged him quickly to one side and laid him on the floor near the entrance. His suffering was excruciating. I thought fleetingly of the possibility of contagion due to the opening of his spacesuit but it made no difference to me.

As I was returning to Rhodan, the mutant groaned out another warning: "Careful, sir! That fellow must have sent out something—like an alarm pulse—though it wasn't a true telepathic message."

Rhodan pointed silently to the small appendages on the creature's rounded brow. At present they seemed to hang limply against his dark skin.

"Feelers or antennas, take your choice," he said.

"Could it be that they communicate with ultra-high frequencies?"

"Ultra-sound?" I answered. "It's quite possible. I know of intelligences who substitute this method entirely for the normal articulatory organs. I mean, for them it is an organ of speech, just as naturally as the vocal cords are for us. If Lloyd couldn't pick up any purely telepathic signals, you could have a point. According to that, we wouldn't be able to sense or understand any Druuf 'speech' without the aid of appropriate instruments. So anyway, now what happens?"

He was startled when I finished so abruptly. He gestured toward the platform cage. "Can you operate that thing? Our habitation on Hades would be preferable to here."

I knew that without some thorough testing I wouldn't be able to make heads or tails of the unutterably alien machines. I couldn't even guess where the power source might be.

"It would be foolish to even try!" I answered.

Rhodan got up slowly. He stared fixedly at the body of the dark-skinned giant, which had become stiff as a board. "They could easily crush us with their arms," he observed, matter-of-factly. OK, let's get him secured. Since he passed out so fast he seems to have a real sensitive nervous system. At a guess I'd say he won't recover for several hours yet. By then our situation should have been decided, so in other words we won't have to tie him. Besides, I don't have even a scrap of cord in my pockets."

"That would never happen to a story hero," I laughed humourlessly. "Let's scout around in the meantime. Lloyd, the best thing you can do is lie here near the doorway. Defend yourself with your shock-blaster as long and as best as you can. How do you feel?"

"Miserable, sir. I would never have believed it could be this bad. Luck to you, sir. I'm picking up alien brain-waves again—this time a whole pack of them. They sure take their time to show up." As we were checking over our thermal weapons, he added: "Sir, if you could just get that monstrosity away from here!" There was a hysterical undertone in his voice.

We dragged the Druuf's giant body deeper into the chamber. Lloyd smiled at me gratefully. His antipathy was too natural a reaction for me to consider it strange.

On the other hand, Rhodan spoke to him grumpily. "Knock it off, man! He only looks a little different."

"Just the same, sir, when I look at him I have to keep thinking of Hell. That's the last one of them that's going to get in here so easily."

I refrained from advising him how simple it would be for the Druufs to come in. What could he do with only a shock-gun? Actually even with our more deadly weapons we hardly had a chance.

He waved at us a last time and then we left him. We felt it would be superfluous to crouch low to avoid detection here so we moved onward in a normal upright position. Rhodan knew as I did that we had played out our hand. No one had bothered us or made an attack but we were quite certain that we'd never come out of this without a real miracle.

With complete objectivity, Rhodan announced: "I believe we're deep below the surface of a planet. The gravitational pull is enormous. It could be that we've landed on number 16 of the Druuf system—in other words, on their home world where you detected such an energy output. Up ahead of us there must be some machinery in operation."

I had also begun to hear the muffled thumping. After about another 100 yards a tremendous room opened before us but this time there were numerous entrances or exits. Here it seemed they had never heard of doors. Everywhere I saw the open archways.

The assigned purpose of the equipment before us was self-evident. Even the Druufs had to build their atomic reactors more or less as we did. On the other hand, we saw no coupled converter banks. The machines here were colossal. They employed wireless, field-isolated energy conductors, whose ultra-violet illumination brightened our surroundings considerably. The gloomy red glow was not apparent here.

We stood there in silence, observing the master power station. Seconds later, even Rhodan's weakly developed telepathic faculty enabled him to sense the approach of the Druufs.

"Those are fear-inducing impulses," he said. "No wonder that Lloyd got uptight so quickly. If we were reasonable fellows now, we would go to the nearest archway and hold our hands in the air while waiting

for these people."

I looked knowingly into his grim face. "But *are* we reasonable?"

He glanced at me darkly and shook his head. "Over there is a good cover. I'll take the reactor base on the right side." Without another word, he left me.

I picked out a good spot and sought to examine the general situation. Close behind me was the passage from which we had come. While passing through it we had not seen any other openings in the walls. So we could probably stay here awhile, only to return eventually to the transmitter room with its giant energy grids. And there the inevitable end would probably come.

I thought of Lloyd, of my friends on Earth and of my turbulent past. I had experienced many a hopeless situation but this one was really it. If we had only found an acquaintance here somewhere or at least somebody who could have given us the slightest clue to the Druuf technology, we might have chanced it and tried to break through to the surface. But we were simply left sitting in the mousetrap, waiting for what was to come.

I might have made a final effort if I were sure of having one of these creatures' spaceships and if I knew I could operate it. But there was little chance of that, so I soon refrained from fantasizing. I would probably have stood helplessly before the controls, anyway, and would have ended with my hands up in surrender.

But surrender we would not. If the Druufs had been humanoid, then maybe! However, if they were anxious to obtain our healthy carcasses for research purposes, then they'd better come and get us—and where we chose to wait for them.

I looked over at Rhodan, who had also found a good position. Naturally our resistance was meaningless. Sooner or later they'd have us. Actually one shouldn't attempt something if he knows full well that there's not the slightest hope of success. But then—what hasn't man done for no good reason! For us it would be reason enough to just be free to breathe this exceptionally good air for another hour. That, at least, would be something!

9/ A STRANGE VOICE CALLING

Altogether we had four entrances to cover. The fifth archway opened behind us. Only a few moments before, the gateway to my right had been hit by the sun-hot beam of my thermo-blaster and was now a glowing mass of molten rock. Underneath it lay the melted down remains of two metal robots which had been of a weirdly unusual design.

The Druufs had not, themselves, appeared in the line of fire, but they had also not made any serious attempt to drive us from our cover. The advance robot detail did not even seem to represent the specialized type designed for combat. It seemed more likely that they had made a preliminary thrust with mere maintenance robots, in order to see how we would react to their appearance.

Well, we had certainly expressed our reaction. Translated in universal terms, we were saying: not one

step beyond those archways!

In this action my conscience was clear because I had previously succeeded in delivering to the Druufs a quite official declaration of war. In the final analysis, Rhodan and I were representatives of a major galactic government, whose applicable laws drew a definite line between murder and military acts of war. So by this time the Druufs should know where they stood. It was up to them to adjust themselves accordingly.

The insulated butt of my thermo-weapon had become fairly warm. In its miniature fusion chamber a tiny catalytic charge waited for the next electric ignition spark. A fractional part of the released energy was then absorbed by the micro-converter, which generated power for focussing the force fields in the reaction chamber as well as for the rectification process. Otherwise a small atom bomb would have exploded in my right hand, because the catalytic charge worked by a cold fusion process at an ignition temperature of about 7200°F.

My target, which was the farthest archway to my right, must have been about 100 yards from us, but we still felt the heat released from the shot. Evil-smelling smoke fumes pervaded the large chamber. The machinery around us had been shut off shortly after I first opened fire so we were able to hear the hissing and bubbling of the glowing lava quite clearly. The sharp odour came apparently from the burnt out remains of the robots.

Rhodan was the first of us to start coughing.

I looked across at him with my eyes streaming tears from the irritation and tension. "A couple of real heroes we are!" I complained. "All this beautiful air for a change—and we're polluting it already!"

He waved off the criticism and fought an impulse to cough again. Then he shouted back: "Do you gather that they don't want to damage their power plant? If this is a vital energy source, then we're squared away pretty good!"

I laughed ironically at his optimism. But that's the way they were, these little barbarians. The whole world had to come down on their heads before they would surrender.

Shortly before my first shot I had risked calling Fellmer Lloyd over the helmet radio. He had answered at once and informed me that he had succeeded in cleaning out his spacesuit. The sanitary section was so badly damaged, however, that it wouldn't be possible to repair it without special tools. Otherwise he was getting along fairly well.

It only served to convince me that he was feeling miserable, which he would naturally conceal from us under the circumstances. The stunned Druuf was still stiff and numb, which again emphasized that these behemoths really had a sensitive nervous system.

I looked upward at the ceiling, where I was sure there must be exhaust shafts for some kind of air-conditioning system. I finally detected a few openings there but the now almost unbearable fumes were not being sucked out. It was evident that the Druufs had also shut the air system down.

It had become dark in the room, although there was still some illumination from the glowing red spheres that hovered near the ceiling. I assumed that these apparatuses were some kind of antennas.

Rhodan's shout of alarm crashed into my deliberations. I ducked my head so quickly that I struck my chin on a protrusion from the foundation base before me. Angrily I dropped to my knees and again raised

my weapon. This time the robots appeared simultaneously in all three of the remaining entrances.

I heard the deep thunder of Rhodan's blaster. The brilliant beam blinded me so that I could hardly see my target. I did not press the trigger until the cross-hairs of my reflex gunsight were directly over the spherical form of a robot who had moved with considerable speed into the broad passage between the giant reactors. He was still about 50 yards away when the finger-thin beam of energy struck him squarely. My ears were still hurting from the thunder of my shot when the ball-shaped thing exploded.

A blinding bolt of lightning shot toward the ceiling. Before the shockwave reached me I was already flat on the floor, gripping the base of the machinery next to me. There was a roaring and rumbling as though this unknown world were flying into pieces.

Rhodan fired again. I noticed that he made a strategic sweep of both entrances on his side with the ravaging energy beam. After I had taken up my position again, still more of the spherical robots streamed forth from the archway on my side.

I fired twice. The blaster kicked brutally in my hands and ahead of me was chaos. However, before another robot could explode the rest of them drew back so swiftly that I couldn't find another target. Holding the beam in a continuous firing mode, I traced it over the framework of the entrance, which caused the whole archway to collapse in a bubbling mass of molten masonry.

It was high time to close my helmet. The heat was unbearable and the smoke clouds were getting so thick that we could hardly breathe. My headpiece clicked sharply into its magnetic clamps and the oxygen system began to work automatically.

"That ought to do it." Rhodan's voice resounded in my helmet phone.

"Are you sure there are no robots hiding in here?" I asked.

"I'm pretty certain of it, from what I can see in all this blithering mess. I think we'd better make a slow pullback into the transmitter room."

"But that's crazy! We must hold the power station as long as possible. If the machines are so important to the Druufs that they don't want to destroy them, then—!"

Suddenly Lloyd's voice interrupted our conversation. His tone was remarkably calm. "The air is getting bad back here, sir," he announced. "I've tried but there's no way of closing off these archways."

I grasped a fact he didn't choose to mention. If he was forced to close his helmet too, he would have to draw more oxygen out of his reserve tank. As we had determined following our rematerialisation, he only had 6 hours left.

I could only see Rhodan's shadowy outline. Ahead of us the exploded remains of the robot were burning out. "OK, let's go," I replied dejectedly. "But it will be necessary to melt down the opening behind us so that the smoke fumes can't come through. Alright, Barbarian, you handle that part. I'm going back to Lloyd."

"I'm amazed that the Druufs haven't reached us by radio and demanded a surrender," he answered, changing the subject. "I'm transmitting with 5 watts of power. They should surely be able to receive me."

"You can count on it. But they probably can't make a thing out of your English. Perhaps they understand

Arkonide?"

"Ha!"

"Don't think you're the hub of the galaxy, my friend. Why shouldn't they understand Arkonide? Virtually billions of our people have been drawn into the Druuf plane over the course of time. By now they must have arrived at something like, for example, a translator machine. To my knowledge, no English-speaking humans have ever been swept up by the overlap zones."

He was suddenly speaking Arkonide but it didn't accomplish much.

"The air's getting worse!" Lloyd reminded us.

Rhodan moved slowly toward the opening behind us. After casting one last glance at the darkly illuminated machines, I followed him. For a moment I toyed with the thought of rendering them useless but then I realized how senseless such destruction would be.

When we were almost to the archway, the mutant started to shout. "Sir, somebody is trying to break through the ceiling of the connecting passage. Sir, Atlan, Chief—just listen! They'll be through any minute! They're behind you! I can sense their thought-waves plainly—I know their intentions!"

We were already running along the fairly straight tunnel, which was altogether about 150 yards in length. This time we dispensed with our former dignified walk and sprinted as fast as we could go. We turned on our powerful helmet spotlights, which brightly illuminated the way before us. At about the middle of the passage a large hole was forming in the ceiling but before anyone could fire through at us we had passed it.

We yelled to Lloyd so that he wouldn't mistake us for the enemy, and finally we staggered into the transmitter room. The mutant had not yet closed his helmet although here the air was already interspersed with fine wisps of vapour. I also flipped my head-covering back. Rhodan dodged behind the solid protection of the entrance framework. He was panting heavily.

"That was close, wasn't it?" remarked Fellmer.

I turned to look searchingly into his face. It was pale but for the moment he seemed to be enjoying some relief. "How are you doing?"

He made a disparaging gesture. "Not very well, sir. After the last attack I must have fallen unconscious. How long yet, sir?"

He referred to our present situation but I wasn't able to enlighten him very much about it.

"Sooner or later they're going to run out of patience," said Rhodan gravely. "If I were in their place and this were my installation, I wouldn't put up with it for very long. Atlan, we're only going to surrender at the last possible moment, is that clear?"

That sounded like a command. But I was in no mood to take orders nor was I obligated to do so as long as I was not on board a ship of the Solar Fleet engaged in battle, where a system of subordination was to be expected.

I looked at him appraisingly. "I'll think about it, friend! I don't particularly relish the idea of being

visected by a gang of overgrown beetles!"

Lloyd's face had lost all its colour.

I could hear Rhodan's teeth grinding. "Nevertheless, Let's take one danger at a time," he retorted, holding stubbornly to his point. "That way we may still have a chance to survive."

"Ridiculous! If we were back in the Einstein continuum and in the hands of a known race of people, I might agree with you. However—" I shook my head and turned once more to the entrance. Everything was quiet in the tunnel.

I was about to put a concentrate tablet in my mouth, from the food supply in my helmet, but just then the Druufs made another attempt. A bright shaft of light came from the hole in the ceiling. We listened, holding our breaths, to the sound of heavy rumbling.

"Sounds like a rolling tank!" whispered Lloyd.

"Or heavy fighting robots with built-in defence screens," I added. "If they send such machines after us, with our hand weapons we'll be helpless. OK, consider well whether or not you'll surrender. I'll decide that only at the last moment."

Fellmer's face was ghastly pale. Choking and struggling against an increasing nausea, he turned away from us. A short time later he lay crumpled against the wall.

Outside in the passage, debris was falling from the ceiling onto the floor. There were large rocks interspersed with thick chunks of the tunnel-lining material. They were widening the opening although it seemed foolish. Why didn't they just send their troops or, whatever they might be right through the power plant room? I gave up fretting about it. By now it didn't make any difference to us what direction they came from.

I lay prone in fighting position, my weapon set to fire. It was set again in full beam power. The thumb of my left hand rested on the closure button of my helmet.

Suddenly Rhodan shoved against me with an outstretched foot. His face reflected an unusual excitement. "Don't you hear anything? Somebody is calling my name!"

"Huh...?"

"I'm telling you, somebody is calling me by my name! It's a telepathic message!" He laughed uncertainly and turned to the mutant. "Lloyd, don't you hear it, too?"

"Yes sir, but very weakly," Fellmer moaned. "Somebody is calling 'Perry Rhodan'. Danger is approaching. The caller says he's sorry he caught us in the transmitter by mistake. It may have been fortunate, however, since he can now overcome his inner resistance. No, sir, he doesn't know who he is. I just asked him that."

Rarely had I ever seen such a perplexed expression. Rhodan seemed beside himself. As for myself, I considered the whole thing to be a bad joke.

"Who in the name of Heaven would know my name in this place?" he asked. "What kind of mumbo-jumbo is he giving us, anyway? He must know who he is!"

"Precisely!" I agreed, completely humourless. "It's nothing but a trick of the Druufs."

"Another message!" interjected Lloyd. "He says we should climb back into the cage. He wants to 'switch us back'. In fact he used the expression, 'back-channel'. But he still can't say where he knows your name from or why he wants to help us in the first place."

This time I became irritated. "Watch yourself," I snapped at Rhodan. "Something's coming through the hole."

I recognized the massive legs of a giant robot. It had been patterned after the Druufs themselves. It proved to me that this was a fighting machine. Almost every robot-building intelligence copied their own anatomical features in the design and manufacture of such weapon carriers.

I hesitated no longer. With a dull roar the blaster recoiled in my hands. The heavy energy beam struck the dangling metal legs—and rebounded in a sparkling spray. My second shot started the ceiling to melting but the machine sailed gently downward.

Red hot shock-waves blasted through the gateway. We didn't have to touch our control switches because the automatic thermo-circuits in our helmets reacted to the situation. I risked another surprise attack by fire but its impact only caused the robot to stagger back slightly.

Without a word between us, we jumped back into the large chamber. As the machine was just about to enter, the archway collapsed in the fiery breath of our atomic fire. The air which had still been usable until now was suddenly blood-red. The defence screen projectors in our suits began to operate. Actually it was insane to use thermal weapons in here.

"More messages," Lloyd told us through the helmet voice com. "He's urging us to get onto the platform. He'll switch us back at once. He says more robots are advancing toward us. Glord, sir, you should at least try it!"

I didn't know whether he was addressing me or Rhodan. I looked over at the energy-grid structure. I had no confidence in it whatsoever. But it was then that the heavy grid bars began to shimmer. Either this was because of the enormous heat or somebody had actually turned the transmitter equipment on.

"I'm losing my marbles!" muttered Rhodan, bewildered. "Is something happening there?"

"It's a bit risky," I scoffed, in spite of our desperate situation. "Who knows what'll happen to us in that thing?"

Lloyd staggered past us on wobbly legs. He approached the grid bars and then passed through them unhindered. For a moment we watched him breathlessly but nothing happened to him.

On the other side of the collapsed entrance we heard a thundering. Somebody was starting to clear away the white-hot mountain of debris with some kind of equipment.

"We have about one minute, Arkonide!" Rhodan's eyes fairly glittered at me. Then I got up and also went to the grid enclosure. He followed close behind me.

Lloyd was listening inwardly. "He wishes us luck," said the mutant. "Again he says it was a mistake on his part. He'd like to tell us..."

I didn't hear the rest as an invisible force gripped me.

10/ THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Our excavation on Hades was as dark and empty of air as before.

Once more we found ourselves inside our transmitter but we didn't know how long we had been unconscious. In fact, Lloyd was still out. Rhodan groaned in an effort to suppress his pain. We remained silent for some time, unable to find an explanation for the phenomenon.

My logic struggled to assimilate the incredible happenings we had come through. This sudden rescue in our greatest moment of need seemed like some sort of trickery or cosmic joke. Yet there must have been someone on that unknown world who knew Rhodan. But who? Was it a person who had one time been taken over by the relativity field of the other time-plane? My head swam when I attempted to unravel this train of thought.

Rhodan spoke suddenly over the helmet com. His voice sounded tense. "Lloyd has just about 5 minutes of air left—which means we were unconscious for more than 5 hours."

This was a shock to my nerves. It was probably why the mutant had not yet regained consciousness.

We tried to awaken him with shouts and by shaking him roughly. And this was why we almost missed seeing the transmitter's green signal lamp, which lit up as before. But this time rather than holding steady it blinked in an uneven cadence.

I required several seconds to realize that a message was being sent. By a process of on-and-off switching, someone at the other end was communicating in Morse code.

Rhodan began to slowly pronounce the letters: "D... R... U... S... Man, do you know what it's spelling?*Drusus* !" he shouted, with such force it hurt my ears. "*Drusus*! They're here!"

Still shouting wildly, he jumped to the transmitter and threw the switch to starting position. Together we strove to fasten Lloyd's feet in the contact cleats. Once this had been done, we pulled him up by the arms and supported him between us. Then I pressed the release button of the machine.

This time the pains of dematerialisation were welcome—whatever might follow. Before we attenuated, I caught one last sight of Rhodan's face. It was literally beaming.

* * * *

When we came to, we were lying between snow-white sheets in beds which were undoubtedly located

in the splendid ship's clinic on board the Fleet flagship *Drusus*. But Lloyd was nowhere to be seen. I got up on my elbows and looked wonderingly about me.

A stout-looking man with straw-blond hair and an oversized smock looked into my eyes. "Hello, Doc," I said. "Are we back home again?"

Instead of greeting me, he puffed out his cheeks and asked: "Where, by all that's holy, did Lloyd pick up that amoebic dysentery? He was half asphyxiated by the time we pulled him out of the transmitter."

It was a full confirmation that we were safe now. It was quite typical of Dr. Skjoldson to inquire first about the really sick ones among us.

"No idea, Doc, really. Lloyd thinks he may have picked it up from the spring water on Grautier."

"What? Here? Our own water?"

This comment shocked me into new alertness. "What do you mean—'here'? Are we by any chance on Grautier?"

"What did you think? You slept 14 hours. After circling about for a small eternity, waiting for you in that crimson universe of the Druufs, the *Drusus* has come back and landed a long time ago. So he thinks it may be the spring water, does he? Hm-m-m-m...?" He stroked his beardless chin and looked at me appraisingly. "Then I don't understand why he didn't come to me before our emergency takeoff. The infection must have been noticeable by then."

"You're right about that, Doc. Maybe you shouldn't have put up that sign in the *California*—remember? That thing about patients only coming to you on their hands and knees? These guys have an awful lot of pride."

This time he was sorely hit but he didn't have a chance to answer.

A howling pack of men invaded the sickbay. To begin with, there was good old Reginald Bell, trailed by the blond giant, Sikerman. I wasn't able to determine who the rest of them were. We were flooded with questions, which Rhodan answered though only half awake. On the other hand, I wanted to know what took the *Drusus* so long.

While Rhodan finally became himself again, Bell spoke to us gravely. "The *California*'s return hyperjump was a good one and we also made our breakthrough. There was no further loss of consciousness, so your theory about balanced forces holds good. But when we got through into our own space, we weren't able to bypass the robot fleet's blockade lines. If the *Drusus* had tried to reach us we would have risked being caught in the battle. Since a short time before there were more than 50,000 ships standing in front of that discharge hole. So we held off awhile and we thought you'd be OK because we were able to figure out the extent of your air supplies. Of course if we'd known about Lloyd's ailment and the grief it was going to cause you, we would have come back for you. But as it was, we considered the risk to be far greater than our chances of success.

"Anyway, we finally worked out the only possible solution. After a head-breaking tussle with our calculations, we figured what was necessary for making a big hyperjump out of there. But the problem had a simpler solution than we thought. We feared we'd run into insurmountable difficulties by making another hypertransition—but we didn't."

"How is Lloyd doing?" asked Rhodan weakly. I myself felt exhausted.

"Splendidly," replied Skjoldson. "The dysentery has already been arrested. You've all received a protective inoculation. In a few days he'll be completely recovered. We caught him just in time!"

"And the Arkonide fleet?"

"They've withdrawn with a large part of the Springer Fleet because just now the Druuf attacks have stopped," answered Bell somewhat impatiently. "But what was the matter with you? I worked almost 6 hours with the receiver gear, pumping out the ship's name in Morse code. After all, that's what we agreed on!"

"Agreed on?" I asked, astonished. "How is that? We didn't know anything about it."

"After the *California* took off, I sent the message to you."

"*Veryfun-ny*," grumbled Rhodan irritably. "We were just able to hear that you had gotten through the attack front. Beyond that you were too garbled—we didn't catch any more of it."

Bell made a long face. In the background the mousebeaver Pucky let out a shrill guffaw. He seemed delightfully amused over the squelching of his 'special' friend.

We ignored him. Fellmer Lloyd's words were still ringing in our ears. He had relayed the telepathic message of an unknown entity to us.

"Are we missing a man from the *California*?" inquired Rhodan.

The men who were standing around us looked at each other perplexedly. No, with the exception of ourselves, the crew had been fully accounted for.

"Give it up, Perry," I interjected softly. "That's something we'll probably never find out."

"Alright, so what's the story?" cried Bell.

"Later," mumbled Rhodan sleepily. "Later. But that's something I'm going to find out, I give you my word."

Dr. Skjoldson dispersed the curious men with some very hard words, thus invoking his undisputed authority as Chief Physician of the *Drusus*.

However, I pondered long over the meaning and sense of our undertaking. I had to concede that at least we knew whom we were dealing with in the other time-plane. These were the same intelligences who had destroyed my attack squadron incredibly long ago. They had forced me to lie in a biochemical sleep for millenniums.

It was their fault that since the golden age of the Roman Empire I had been forced to wander about on the wild and barbarous Earth—always striving to teach the Terranians so that one day they might finally possess the technical capability to at least build a hyperspace radio transmitter. It had been useless. No one had been able to help me and it wasn't the easiest of tasks to simply come up with a 5th dimensional field converter.

But now I knew where the perpetrators were to be found. One thing was certain: I had a very heavy account to settle with them.

With these thoughts on my mind, I fell asleep. The time had come to collect my strength for the trials to come. Rhodan's Fleet stronghold on the Myrtha planet Grautier was a crazy idea. But perhaps I could bring my warning to bear so that we would no longer be on this world when the imminent and inevitable came to pass and we were discovered.

Perhaps!

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

YOU ARE ABOUT to read an excerpt from our next novel.

The Druuf reflected again. The pause was unnaturally long and not because the Druuf required relatively more time to ponder; for him time only went slower, that was all.

"We want to conquer the realm of those who attack us," he explained at length. "As you said, those are your enemies. You wish to help us in destroying them. We are thus doing you a favour."

"Yes," said Rhodan slowly. "And what happens then?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Very simple. Once we've smashed the enemy together, will you continue the war? Against us? Have I

expressed myself clearly enough?"

"No, we will not do that!"

This time he is lying, came Harno's warning.

Rhodan had known it. They wanted to conquer the Arkonide realm and then bring all the intelligent races of the galaxy under their rule. And they would succeed unless someone took care at the right time that their advance was stopped.

That's what Perry's doing there,

UNDER THE STARS OF DRUUFON

By

Clark Darlton