

## **LIFE EXPECTANCY: ZERO**

The HOUR CLOCK is almost empty.

For Thora, the Sands of Time have all but run out.

Are down to the last grain.

Once Cosmic Agents John Marshall & Laury Marten risked their lives on the planet Tolimon (PR 51 & 52) to secure some life-prolonging serum for the Arkonide who was to become Rhodan's wife. But the supply from the secret laboratory of the Aras, the Galactic Physicians, has been exhausted...and now the life energy of Thora too is all but exhausted.

With sheer disbelief, misty eyes and a lump in your throat you will follow the events leading up to—

## **THORA'S SACRIFICE**

### **1/ SHROUD OF DEATH**

Dr. Villnoess, Chief of the Terra Clinic's Haematological Department on Venus, picked up another of the medical test reports, glancing unhappily at the stack of piled-up paperwork at his right which forced him each day to leave his lab and perform the administrative chores at his desk.

Dr. Villnoess had been appointed Chief Physician of the Terra Clinic's Haematological Department on Venus despite his youthful 30 years and many of his colleagues were disgruntled. But Villnoess was one of the 10 best haematologists in the Solar Imperium and he had already earned a reputation as a pioneer for his intensive research in the field of blood research for which the clinical tests were now underway.

Routinely he noted the most important results of the test:

*Diseased hyperplasmotic system, Ls, type F Arkon.*

*Irreversible.*

*Experiment 453/Ara: negative.*

*Life expectancy: zero.*

These were the highlights of the report and Villnoess was about to sign it off and put it at his left when something startled him.

Type F Arkon, he reflected, and began to surmise who the patient was whose verdict of death had just been pronounced: Thora, Rhodan's wife!

Once more Villnoess read in a subdued voice: "Ls, type F Arkon" and after taking a deep breath: "Experiment LS: Ara: negative."

LS stood for lymphosarcoma—cancerous tumour of a lymph gland—and the letter F indicated the degree of malignancy. The word Arkon that followed it explained not only that the patient was an Arkonide but also that they faced a type of cancer which puzzled even the Galactic healers and, for which there was no, cure in existence as yet.

Dr. Villnoess wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He was used to rely on the diagnosis of his colleagues but now he was seized by panic and began to doubt their judgment."

He quickly switched on the telecom and announced: "Will Drs. Gonder, Iltar and Vandebourg come to see me at once!"

When the 3 physicians entered his office a little later, the chief physician still held the report on Thora in his hand. He didn't even offer seats to his colleague and he himself was no longer able to sit still at his desk.

"Dr. Iltar," he began hesitantly, "I've no intention of questioning your diagnosis but..." he paused, shook his head and put the examination file down on his desk. His gaze wandered indecisively back and forth between his 3 assistants, who understood the dilemma of their boss but were unable to answer his unspoken question.

And now the Chief blurted out: "Gentlemen, I can't tell this to Rhodan! How do you imagine I feel about it?"

Dr. Iltar, who was responsible for the written report, faced his boss. "Chief, we know how you must feel. But the fact is that Thora is of Arkonide origin and that the tumour is a malignant Arkon sarcoma, type F. The Carcinoma Department of the Clinic at Terrania has confirmed only two hours ago that the granulocytes and monocytes have entered the bloodstream at a ratio of 5:100, the usual numerical increase of white blood-corpuscles on type F. This result doesn't leave much room for a mistaken diagnosis but..."

Dr. Villnoess leaned against his desk. Iltar's "but..." and the pause that followed predicted another complication. "What is it," Villnoess inquired gruffly. "Keep talking!"

"Chief, Thora has already been administered the life-preserving serum of the Aras from the planet Tolimon some time ago. You'll remember that John Marshall and Laury Marten got hold of a small quantity of this serum in a daring mission..."

"Yes, go on..." Villnoess insisted although he was reluctant to admit the suspected cause of Thora's disease. "Not that!" he kept thinking.

Hesitantly Dr. Iltar continued: "The Carcinoma Department at Terrania has hinted that the malignancy F Arkon was caused by the Ara serum because several granulocytes resemble in their damaged form the basic ingredient of the life-extending substance which has so far defied identification by the Galactic medical researchers."

"Iltar..." The chief physician was struggling to keep his composure, "...*who* has stated such a suspicion? Does he know that we're speaking about Rhodan's wife?"

"Dr. Eric Manoli, Chief..." Iltar didn't have to answer the second question.

Villnoess repeated hoarsely: "Dr. Eric Manoli! He's one of Perry Rhodan's oldest compatriots. He has remained young himself after receiving the cell-shower on Wanderer. There's no greater expert in the field of blood research in the entire Solar system and if Manoli raises this problem you can bet that he has arrived at the idea only after the most exacting investigation." Chief Villnoess sighed, and wiped his forehead again. "Am I expected to inform Perry Rhodan that the serum which was injected into his wife was a cancer causing poison instead of a rejuvenation? Iltar, call the Medical Centre at Terrania. I must speak to Dr. Manoli at once. That's where he is right now, isn't he?"

It took half an hour before the telecom connection was established and the scholarly, expressive face of Dr. Manoli appeared on the picture screen. He talked calmly, almost impassively, and swept away all objections which the chief physician of the Terra Clinic raised with his phenomenal knowledge of all aspects of this fatal sickness.

"We can't refer to the life-prolonging Ara serum from the Tolimon planet as a poison. All Arkonides are, prone, to leukaemia. I've not yet clearly understood whether this is a symptom of degeneration or a natural resistance against the body's tendency to reject death. It's difficult for me to contemplate the thought that Thora's days are numbered, especially since I know how much Perry Rhodan loves his wife in spite of her advancing age and that she is no less dedicated to him. But every matter has more than one facet, my dear colleague. By the similarity between the basic ingredient of the Ara drug and Thora's F Arkon illness I've been led to explore a new direction of approach to the life-extending powers of Galactic medicines which could be derived from the controlled proliferation of growth. Don't you agree, my dear colleague, that this is a highly interesting aspect?"

For the first time since Villnoess had taken up the medical profession he realized what it took to be a scientific research pioneer. Whereas he was still grappling with the problem of presenting the fact to Perry Rhodan that his wife was doomed to die soon, Dr. Manoli had already dwelled on the 'interesting aspects' of the case.

This was far from a callous attitude of Dr. Manoli but the scientist had accepted death as a part of life and nothing more.

After their medical consultation was over Dr. Villnoess had experienced some sense of relief. However when he tried to formulate his message to Rhodan, the Administrator of the Solar Imperium, all his former inhibitions were awakened again. In his third attempt to compose a message in which a note of human empathy was sounded, he limited himself to a text which contained only the facts and he chose to neglect mentioning Manoli's suspicion.

In the course of his conversation with Dr. Manoli he had learned that Perry Rhodan was on the planet Grautier at this time, conducting the surveillance of the Druufs. His coded report reached Perry Rhodan by way of the hyper-radio station at Terrania and was relayed by three more stations which were strung out throughout the vast space on heavy cruisers of the Solar Imperium.

Perry Rhodan shielded his thoughts with a superhuman effort. Not even a telepath was able to read them. Nobody was allowed to share his grief, his desperation nor his vain rebellion against a cruel and blind fate.

Nevertheless Perry Rhodan, the Administrator of the Solar Imperium, who had created the organization by the strength of his personality, was able—despite the enormous burden on his soul—to finish the conference in progress with a good result.

Only 3 hours later was Perry Rhodan's confirmation of the ominous message received on Earth from Grautier. It was routed again via the relay stations in space so that Arkon was prevented from tracking the communication and thereby locating the position of Terra.

Dr. Villnoess was not surprised that the "Chief", as Rhodan was generally known hereabouts, had not replied to him directly but had chosen instead to seek out Dr. Manoli as the best person to turn to.

However 24 hours later, Venus time, Chief Physician Dr. Villnoess suddenly left his lab against all the rules of his daily schedule. General Conrad Deringhouse had announced his visit and Villnoess dropped everything else. He knew why the General had come and who had sent him to Port Venus.

The tall, somewhat gaunt Conrad Deringhouse looked earnestly at the Chief Physician of the Haematological Department as he sat across from him and explained in non-medical terms the condition Thora was in.

Deringhouse had a haircut in the military style. Freckles enhanced his youthful appearance. His natural process of aging had been interrupted for 62 years by the cell-shower on the artificial planet Wanderer, the same treatment which had been denied to the Arkonides Khrest and Thora although Perry Rhodan had done everything in his power to obtain from the physiotron the wonderful present of additional life for more than 60 years for his Arkonide companions.

Dr. Villnoess had finished his briefing and Deringhouse said thoughtfully: "If I understand you correctly, it must be assumed that Thora's incurable disease has been triggered by the Ara serum from the planet Tolimon. I find this very hard to believe. The Galactic physicians..."

Villnoess interrupted him quickly. "I know what you're going to say, General but I must inform you that the Galactic medical experts are just as powerless as ourselves when it comes to treating sarcoma F Arkon. Thora has been much more susceptible to this blood disease than her compatriot Khrest, the Arkonide scientist, after they came to live in the Solar Imperium. We've made this discovery only from the last blood test of Thora. Please, General, don't ask to hear all the evidence whose evaluation has led us to this catastrophic diagnosis. The final result is tragic enough. And to hope that the Galactic medical scientists possess a drug or know any other way of combating the lethal effect of sarcoma F Arkon means succumbing to an illusion. Only 3 weeks ago the most eminent specialist of the galactic medical profession in the field of cortical brain reflexes, Uut-Cin, died from sarcoma F Arkon. You can be sure that this report and the cause of Uut-Cin's death are correct."

For a while the two men looked silently at each other.

"Doctor, how am I going to break the news to the Chief? I'm on my way to Grautier and Rhodan has asked me to stop on Venus in order to talk to you, Dr. Villnoess..." General Conrad Deringhouse jumped up and walked excitedly back and forth the length of the room. He who had flown the most perilous missions in cold blood was afraid of facing his Chief with the task of breaking the news that there was no longer a shred of hope left for the survival of his wife.

Deringhouse had witnessed from close observation how Thora, the almost unreal Arkonide beauty, and Perry Rhodan, the builder of the New Power and creator of the Solar Imperium, had gradually come together to form a human bond which culminated in a companionship where they achieved the highest

form of happiness that two people can give each other.

While Rhodan was fortunate to receive the gift of protracted life by the physiotron on the legendary artificial planet Wanderer and thus had arrested his aging, the process of growing old was suddenly initiated in Thora and could only be interrupted for a short period by the Ara serum and other medication available on Terra.

Rhodan had moved heaven and earth to save Thora from the terrible fate of becoming an old woman at his side while he remained an eternally young and virile man.

None of the remedies which had been subsequently administered to Thora had a lasting effect and each preparation had lost its efficacy more rapidly than the physicians had expected. It became more and more obvious that Thora mobilized all her natural forces to resist the medication. It was an act of nature itself.

And then—3 months ago—Thora became an old woman literally overnight!

She had noticed it one morning before she met Perry Rhodan at breakfast when they talked about their love. Thora had smiled at him and had gently touched his hand in a gesture of deep affection.

Two tears appeared in the corners of her eyes but her lips were adorned by a smile. And when she took his face in her hand and gazed at him with tender eyes, she said: "Perry, I mustn't cry. It would be so ungrateful of me. With you I've found great happiness and I want to think only of the joy our life has been in all these years together."

The same day Thora said goodbye to him and a ship took her to Venus where she retired to live in her cottage 'Arkon' in the foothills of the Valta Mountains.

In the 3 months which had elapsed since that day, Thora had changed from a swiftly aging woman into a patient with a deadly affliction: 24 hours ago the last blood test had revealed the dismal state.

\* \* \* \*

Now Deringhouse was pacing the floor of Dr. Villnoess' office. The hard-nosed General was afraid to tell his Chief and Thora's husband: Perry Rhodan, your wife must die!

"Doctor..." Deringhouse had stopped in front of Villnoess. "Rhodan is a human being and not a lifeless monument. What can I tell him? What's your advice, Doctor?"

"He knows the facts already," Dr. Villnoess answered. "He's talked yesterday with Dr. Manoli..."

"He knows...!" Deringhouse interjected excitedly. "Of course he knows it. But, Doctor, don't you see that he's not yet ready to admit the true facts to himself. They're husband and wife and they're in love. You never had the privilege I experienced to see the harmony in which they spent their lives together. Thora! The Arkonide princess from an ancient dynasty who was at first so proud and haughty and then became the kind spirit of the Solar Imperium! These are not mere phrases. I'm only saying what very few have known. Thora has guided our Chief, not with advice and even less with admonishments, she has

guided her husband by being his wife and by giving him the bliss he had dreamed about. And now all this must come to an end. Just now when the destiny of our tiny system is balanced on a razor's edge. Dr. Villnoess, there *must* be a cure for that sarcoma F Arkon..."

At this point the Chief Physician of the Haematology Department interrupted the upset General. Being greatly impressed by Deringhouse's words, Villnoess said, distressed: "General, death has always been a part of life."

"Is that all you've got to say?" Deringhouse asked harshly but quickly added: "Doctor, I've no intention of blaming you but..."

"In the case of Thora, General, there is no but."

"Then please—tell me at least how long you expect Thora to live."

"Today is the 4th of October." Villnoess took a deep breath. "Thora won't live to see the next spring."

"Half a year then?"

"Maybe."

"Can I pay a visit to Thora or are there any reasons which wouldn't allow me to fly to her cottage 'Arkon'?"

The Chief Physician reflected for a moment. "I don't wish to raise any false hopes in the Administrator but my colleagues and I are of the opinion that it would be beneficial if Thora could be entrusted with a meaningful task during the last months of her life before the sudden decay begins so that she won't have to spend her waning days in mute desperation and lethargy."

"How am I to understand your suggestion, Doctor? Are you implying that a responsible task would make it possible for a person of the Arkonide race to alleviate the suffering of death?"

"There's no difference in this respect between Terrans and Arkonides. However I regret that I must deny your wish to visit Thora for the time being, General. You're now on your way to Grautier. If you stop on Venus on your way back you could bring an important assignment to Thora. I can assure you that this would renew her desire to live."

"Does Thora know what's wrong with her?" Deringhouse inquired.

"She does since this morning. She called me earlier in the day..."

"And you told her? I can't believe that, Doctor!" It was the tone of a soldier but Villnoess was undeterred.

"I was, not prepared to take the responsibility for robbing Thora of the last dimly flickering spark of life. She knows that she is suffering from sarcoma F Arkon..."

"Doctor, I feel like. The usually restrained Deringhouse violently raised his arm.

"For heaven's sake", the Chief Physician thought, "how much Gen. Deringhouse must admire Perry Rhodan's wife to be carried away like that!" But he was not frightened by the impulsive movement which

threatened him with a blow. As a physician he understood this as a natural reaction for Deringhouse.

"General!" Villnoess replied. "Since this morning Thora is convinced that the effect of the life-prolonging serum has been nullified solely by her tumour. Don't you realize the psychological advantage of this knowledge for her? A woman will accept the scourge of aging much easier if brought on by an illness than by some inherent defect of her body to respond to biological cures. Would you please point this out to the Administrator?"

"I will, Doctor. And will you please forgive my rude behaviour and my remonstrations."

When Dr. Villnoess was alone in his office again, he pondered the remark. He warmly admired Gen. Deringhouse and the calibre of the men Perry Rhodan had been able to gather around him. They were honest men—men with virtues but not without faults. They could admit their mistakes with the greatest simplicity and he respected them for that too.

Villnoess left his desk and walked to the window. The weather was grey on grey. The intense colours paled behind a curtain of rain.

"Like a death-shroud..." Villnoess murmured, breathing with difficulty.

## **2/ CRISIS: RHODAN**

Gen. Deringhouse had finally gotten it off his chest.

Perry Rhodan turned his back to him. The room was filled with an oppressive silence and Deringhouse felt as if a burden were weighing with increasing heaviness on his shoulders.

He had reported his conversation with the Chief Physician of the Terra Clinic's Haematology Department at Port Venus almost word by word to the Administrator. If there was a man who had the right to learn the last details, this man was Perry Rhodan, Thora's husband.

Then Rhodan said abruptly: "Please leave me alone now, Deringhouse. I'll see you in an hour at the briefing. Thank you very much."

The door had hardly closed behind the General when Rhodan called the telecom centre. "Please have Reginald Bell answer all my calls. I don't want to be disturbed."

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Grautier, the 7th planet of the Myrtha system which was comprised of a total of 49 planets, became with each passing day a stronger base of the Solar Imperium. Many billions had already been invested to build a bristling fortress in the vicinity of the overlap—front between the Einstein-and Druuf-time-planes.

Located only 22 light-years from the egress zone where the 2 time-planes overlapped and the transit-funnel became constantly more stabilized, Perry Rhodan regarded the planet as the most important springboard for the imminent actions.

At the moment there was nothing for him to do but to wait. Time was working in his favour as the Arkonide war fleet and Druuf Space Forces conducted merciless battles against each other.

Both sides were apparently equally strong and suffered tremendous material losses which were replaced hourly by new reserves. Neither the Arkonides nor the Druufs considered their casualties with undue concern as long as they were not scraping the bottom of the barrel.

However at this particular time when Deringhouse had confirmed to Perry Rhodan what Dr. Manoli had only hinted at during his last conversation, his mind didn't dwell on the murderous space battles or on the exposed situation on the Grautier planet.

Rhodan's thoughts were concentrated on Venus. Before his inner eye he seemed to see the Valta Mountains and the little cottage Arkon nestled at the foot of the hills. 'Thora...'

With his arms stretched before him on his desk and his hands clasped, the mightiest man in the Solar Imperium sat with a bowed head and railed against his fate. He longed for his wife and felt the temptation growing stronger that counselled him: Abandon everything!

The human feelings of Perry Rhodan came to the fore—the distraught man who was unwilling to face the truth that he would live on for many decades while his beloved wife was felled by a dreadful illness.

"Thomas... Thomas!" The face of his son emerged before his eyes—their son, Thomas Cardif, who was now 23 years old.

But the son had rebelled against his father. He had grown up as Cardif and had learned only after passing his exam as lieutenant of the Solar Spacefleet that Thora and Perry Rhodan were his parents. To this day his son Thomas couldn't forgive him that he had grown up without knowing the love of his parents.

"Thomas, my boy..." he kept whispering. He ached to be with his son in this hour of sorrow so that they could together prepare for the day when they would have to bid farewell to wife and mother.

However just as swiftly as the picture of his son had been conjured up before his mental eyes it faded away again. He tried in vain to hold it back and the man who embodied the might of the Solar Imperium was distressed by the fear that he had lost his son long ago.

A feeling of loneliness closed in on him from all sides. The temptation to drop everything and to fly to Venus so that Thora would not be left alone in the final months of her life threatened not only to shake him but to overwhelm him—Perry Rhodan, the idol of myriads of people.

"Sir!" The well-known voice of the officer in charge of the hyper-radio station on Grautier jolted him to a return to the exigencies of his daily life.

He responded mechanically and lifted his head to the picture-screen where he saw the familiar face.

"Sir, since 10 minutes we've been receiving a message from the Robot Brain. I've informed Reginald



Bell but he has referred me to you."

"Thank you, Reggie!" Rhodan thought when he heard these words, realizing again how comforting it was to have such a good friend. Bell must have sensed what he was going through or perhaps Deringhouse had related his misery to him and Bell had acted in the manner which was typical for him.

"Sir," the radio officer continued while Rhodan's thoughts wandered off, "the message says: Personal Visit Requested! The call is being repeated every 10 seconds on the frequency of the Mammoth Brain and it is not addressed to any person in particular nor does it state a sender. Reginald Bell is of the opinion that the message is for you. Is this correct, sir?"

"Thank you," Rhodan replied, noting with astonishment that his voice had not lost its normal tone. "Yes, I've been expecting such a message. It doesn't require an answer. Thank you."

He was caught up again in his daily problems and his personal cares had to be put aside. He was certain that there was one person in the Solar Imperium who understood his motivation: Thora, his adored companion!

It was too difficult to get her out of his mind, he found, when he called his deputy Reginald Bell. "Reggie, is Deringhouse with you?" he asked his friend tersely.

"Yes, he's sitting right here. Do you want to talk to him?"

"I'd like to talk to both of you. Please come over before the briefing begins!"

When Deringhouse saw his boss again he was surprised how calmly Rhodan behaved. The only evidence of his strain was the deepened furrow of his brow.

With a gesture he offered them a seat. "Reggie, you're already informed about this but not Deringhouse."

Rhodan now looked at the General, who perked up. Whenever Rhodan's voice had that certain 'metallic' tone, he was talking about a new and dangerous operation. "Deringhouse, last September I submitted a request to the Robot Brain on Arkon 2 for acquisition of 100 spherical spaceships of Arkonide construction..."

"Acquisition?" Bell reiterated with a telling smile. "When I hear that I'm reminded of the way you acquired the *Titan* at that time. Didn't Pucky use the more common word 'grab' for it?"

Perry Rhodan saw through his friend's tactics. Bell had never been more serious than at this moment. With his jocular remark he merely wanted to make him relax the tension he was under.

Rhodan entered into the spirit of Bell's allusion. "Listen fatty," he replied, teasing his friend with a name which was not unusual even in the presence of the General. "I remember very well that it was *you* who expressed himself in this fashion and you might also recall the facts and circumstances which induced the positronic Brain to transfer the *Titan* to us."

However Bell was not yet ready to give in. "I beg your pardon, Perry, if I have made an inappropriate reference to that matter. Your plan for the acquisition of 100 Arkonide spaceships reminded me perforce of your acquisition of the *Titan*. We didn't pay anything for it either, or did we?"

Deringhouse's laughter was an affirmation that the earlier 'purchase' of the super-battleship Titan had

involved some procedures which had not been quite businesslike. And the General congenially winked an eye at Reginald Bell.

"OK, Reggie." Rhodan backed down and turned again to Deringhouse. "I have no intention of buying 100 spaceships from Arkon. Payment would not induce the Regent Robot to come across with the vessels. It will be a more attractive argument if I use the situation at the overlap-front, taking into consideration the fact that the Robot Brain is, due to his programming, incapable of understanding why an Einstein-and a Druuf-time-plane exist and why the phenomenon of the overlap-zone has occurred. It should make my proposal for an armed alliance against the Druufs more palatable to the Regent. But I can tell by the frown on your face that you have some objections."

The general replied sarcastically, "I'd rather have the devil himself for a partner in a treaty. He would be more honest than the positronic brain on Arkon 3. Did it ever honour an agreement, Chief?"

Rhodan seemed to skip the question in his reply. "I want to get 10 super-battleships of the Imperium class, diameter 1500 meters, twenty 500-meter battlecruisers, 30 heavy cruisers, measuring 200 meters in diameter as well as 40 light cruisers of the state class. Don't look so surprised, Deringhouse. After all, such a fleet of 100 warships is not a major force for the Great Imperium. And you mustn't lose sight of another point, Deringhouse. If we can pull off the deal, the Giant Brain will be convinced that it has merely lent these ships to the Solar Imperium. It will feel sure that it will be able to take them all back some day—and the Solar Imperium with them. The positronic Brain must act this way because that's how it has been programmed. We constantly make the mistake to consider this giant apparatus as a living organism, because it reasons, draws logical conclusions and makes errorless decisions. This compels humans with a certain instinct for honesty to feel that the Brain can be treated as a partner. To the contrary! The super positronic on Arkon 3 is the greatest enemy of our Galaxy because it was programmed by its creators to see everything in an Arkonide perspective and has been instructed to safeguard the existence of the Great Empire by all means. Ethical considerations were not infused into the Brain! And we have to approach Arkon with this basic tendency in mind when we make the request to enter into a military alliance with the Solar Imperium. I'd never contemplate negotiating in such a devious manner with an intelligent being regardless of its outer appearance but where the Robot Brain is concerned I've learned to disregard such scruples."

Deringhouse was highly pleased since he shared the attitude of his boss. He suppressed a quick wily grin and asked in a serious tone: "And you want ME—?"

Perry Rhodan's nod was final.

"OK, Chief. I'll do my best to acquire these 100 warships from Arkon. May I make an additional suggestion?"

"Please, Deringhouse," Rhodan replied agreeably.

"Yes, Chief..." began the general and it was obvious that he felt uneasy. "Chief, my suggestion... well, it concerns... wouldn't my flight to Arkon also be in the domain of your wife as Arkonide princess...?"

"This is completely out of the question, General," Rhodan rebutted him brusquely, turning white from the shock.

"Sir, it was only a suggestion," Gen. Deringhouse apologized, silently deploring his cockeyed idea.

However Reginald Bell refused to remain silent. He challenged his friend head-on in his typical manner.

"Since when are you such an egoist, Perry?" he asked tersely, looking him straight into the eye.

He bit into granite with his question.

"No!" Rhodan decided, clenching his fist and pounding on his desk so hard that the pens and pencils danced.

Reginald Bell was not in the least intimidated by this. He considered Deringhouse's suggestion to be excellent.

"H'm... this is a fine way of getting rid of your wife!" Bell had the temerity to say to his friend's face.

At this moment Deringhouse was ready to surrender his rank of general if he could have left the room.

"Mr. Bell..."

Although Perry Rhodan addressed him in a quiet tone in this formal manner, Bell blurted in a loud voice: "You and your Mr. Bell, *Perry!* His voice sounded sincere and alarming; he was so full of empathy for his friend when he said "Perry" that his hands, which he stretched out toward Rhodan couldn't make it much clearer: "Perry, old friend, come to your senses!"

Yet Perry Rhodan failed to see and hear it. Bell's terrible accusation rang in his ears: "... a fine way to get rid of your wife!"

"What did you say...?" Perry Rhodan wanted to rise up but his burly friend was quicker. In one leap he planted himself before Rhodan. "I've told you this as a friend, Perry! It was my duty to talk to you so brutally. Nobody else is allowed to talk to you in this manner, no matter how much they might feel like it. Deringhouse can make a short stop on Venus and take Thora to Arkon. Did you forget already that Arkon was her home?"

Bell had put his hand on Rhodan's shoulder and looked down into his eyes. He smiled but his tone was serious. Then he paused and looked expectantly at Rhodan.

"Reggie, the way you have reprimanded me is..."

But Bell didn't let him finish. "Shock therapy, old friend. Don't you know me any better, Perry?"

Now Rhodan got up and Bell stood waiting without making another move. Rhodan walked over to the window and stared outside under the watchful attention of Bell. They appeared to have forgotten Deringhouse's presence in the room.

The general coughed discretely and tried to find a way to leave.

"Please stay here, Deringhouse!" Bell requested him. "Would you please repeat once more what Dr. Villnoess said about Thora? How beneficial it would be if she could be entrusted with a meaningful task?"

At this moment Rhodan turned around. He had come to a new decision and his tense features were more relaxed. The firm creases around his mouth seemed to be less rigid. "You're right, Reggie," he said to his friend and then addressed Deringhouse. "You may fly to Venus and invite my wife to join you on your trip to Arkon. I'll prepare her for your visit before you arrive at her cottage. But before you go to see her you must drop in again at Dr. Villnoess' and discuss with him the kind of a task you have in mind

for Thora. It'll depend on his judgment whether she can see Arkon for the last time. Deringhouse, my wife..."

The Administrator of the Solar Imperium impulsively extended his hands to the general and exclaimed when they were seized by Deringhouse: "I couldn't think of a better friend!"

Bell, who had used the sledgehammer method against Perry Rhodan, couldn't suppress a sentimental feeling. He was overwhelmed by his admiration for Rhodan, who had said more to Deringhouse in one sentence than could be expressed in 100 phrases.

"Sir," the general replied with deep emotion, "I'm glad that you've honoured me with this task."

"Now, Deringhouse, we must lay out our strategy of the best way to persuade the positronic Brain that our proposed treaty is worth more than a hundred new battleships. I've already consulted Atlan and we're of the opinion..."

By the time he received the call on the telecom that all staff officers had arrived for the briefing, Perry Rhodan bid his general goodbye

The two friends were left alone. They exchanged glances without saying a word. The two men had never felt closer to each other in their lives. Their friendship had withstood a severe test that day.

"Come with me," Rhodan said finally. The daily routine with its decisions and deadlines had taken over again.

When he appeared with Reginald Bell before his more than 30 aides, nobody could see any sign of the crisis he had been through. With inimitable precision and without a written text he opened the meeting and presented in concise language all the vulnerable pressure points which had been exposed during the last day.

And at this same hour Deringhouse flew back to Venus.

### **3/ ARKON BOUND**

The airglider coasted to a landing in front of the 'Arkon' cottage.

The long-stretching, pastel-coloured building harmonized with the slope which rose behind the cottage and ended in a peak more than 4000 meters high. The Valta Mountains formed a chain of soaring rugged peaks and were interspersed by numerous active volcanoes whose smoke plumes rose straight up into the atmosphere on windless days like this. The retreat was situated at an altitude of 2000 meters where the climate was most pleasant on Venus. It was the ideal location for a sanitarium in pure air.

The glider touched the ground lightly 30 meters away from the terrace which was empty despite the beautiful calm day.

The virgin forest had been pushed back around the cottage as far as 500 meters. Invisible energy-grids

protected the park surrounding the house from the Venusian monsters which abounded on the planet.

Gen. Conrad Deringhouse saw only one robot standing guard at the edge of the wide terrace. His optical lens-system was turned toward Deringhouse as he started to bear down on him in the typical gait of the robots.

This mechanical man was far from harmless but he brought his power into play after going through a series of controls. His main function was to protect Thora from all dangers.

As a member of the Solar Spacefleet he was accustomed to the ubiquitous presence of robots. He stated his identification number and it took the robot less than a second to check the positronic memory bank and to receive the confirmation that the visitor was permitted to pass. And even as he granted his consent to pass in an almost human voice, he performed, aided by his lens-system, the final checks. Before Deringhouse could take the first step toward the terrace he had been investigated in more than a dozen different ways.

The wide glass-doors were closed. Not a window was open. The cottage looked deserted in the rugged beauty of the Valta Mountains.

When Deringhouse approached the entrance, the door-wings swung out and opened the way to the house. Deringhouse was already familiar with the place, as he had been Thora and Perry's guest on numerous occasions for many years.

The solarium, brightly illuminated to the farthest corner, yawned at him in emptiness. He couldn't resist the feeling that he had walked into an uninhabited house. Deringhouse looked around, unable to suppress a slight chill.

He crossed the solarium and entered the parlour behind it which Thora had furnished to her own taste. It was a mixture of Arkonide and Terranian styles which blended harmoniously.

Then he knocked at the door of the library. He was certain to find Thora there since it was her favourite room in the house. However nobody answered his knock.

For a moment Deringhouse hesitated. He suddenly remembered the warning of the Chief Physician: "You must pull yourself together, General, when you see Thora!"

He turned left to an arched stairway leading to the western side of the spacious cottage and walked up the soundless steps with a feeling of dismay. At the top of the stairs he stepped directly into a room with walls of glass facing the outside.

And there he suddenly stood before Thora without expecting it! But—could this be Perry Rhodan's wife?

An inner voice called out to Deringhouse again: "You must pull yourself together, General, when you see Thora!"

"Deringhouse, you...?"

He heard her voice and recognized her by its sound as he stood gazing at an ancient woman with a withered small face and thousands of tiny wrinkles. Her blood-drained, wizened lips attempted to smile as she extended an almost transparent hand covered by a skin resembling parchment.

*My God!* Deringhouse thought, shaken more by compassion than horror, as he pressed Thora's hand, *she was so young and beautiful only a year ago!*

"What a pleasure it is for me that you come to visit me, Deringhouse. Please sit down!"

He was unable to force a conventional smile. The situation made Deringhouse feel extremely uncertain. Had Rhodan neglected to prepare her for his visit despite his assurance?

"Oh yes," she said, "my husband has promised me a surprise. It would have something to do with your visit. What's this all about, Deringhouse?"

At this moment an amazing change came over Thora. The pale colour of her face and her hands began to look more normal. Almost from one second to the next the multitude of little wrinkles on her face seemed to diminish. She blossomed out again and the faint reflection of a glow in her gorgeous Arkonide eyes inspired the still doubt-plagued Deringhouse.

When he saw this wonderful and astounding metamorphosis of Thora, Deringhouse exclaimed with almost youthful enthusiasm: "Thora, I've come to fly to Arkon with you. Perry Rhodan thinks you're the right person to negotiate the purchase of 100 battleships from the Robot Brain."

Deringhouse, who could fly the smallest pursuitship as well as a super-battleship of the Imperium class, had not been promoted to general because of his friendly relations with Rhodan. He had earned his rank by hard work and was at home in every science except the psychology of women. Here he felt as helpless as a baby.

Yet he had unconsciously acted with so much skill that many a psychologist would have been envious had they been able to witness his conversation.

The tone in which he said it sounded so true and appealing and his words were enhanced by his beaming freckled face.

"I can go to Arkon...?" Was Thora aware that she had spoken in her mother tongue? She was gripped by exhilaration which tended to make her the young, fascinating and beautiful woman again who was admired without guile as Perry Rhodan's companion by billions of people.

Dr. Villnoess had also foreseen this condition and had provided Deringhouse with recommendations for coping with such a case. "General, be careful that Thora undertakes her task with equanimity. Don't forget that she is exhausted and that too much excitement can be dangerous for her."

With this in mind Deringhouse continued with instinctive finesse. "Thora, the flight to Arkon and especially the negotiations with the Giant Brain won't be easy. May I give you a brief outline how your husband..."

She shook her head and put her hand on his arm. "Deringhouse, you can't imagine what it means to me that I can assume a new duty and make a worthwhile contribution to our cause!" She laughed like a young girl as she confessed her feelings. "Suddenly I don't feel tired anymore. I can move my arms without effort. I don't think I need Ishy to help me up. Would you offer me your arm, General?"

The last question was asked half in fun and half in earnest. Thora leaned forward to rise up. "No, thank you, I can do it without your assistance," she declined the help he rushed to offer her.

She got up and stood erect by her own effort like a healthy person. "Now I'll take your arm, General!" She no longer called him Deringhouse as she had done until now and emphasized instead the title General with laughing eyes.

Deringhouse presented his arm to Thora, who clasped it happily and walked proudly at his side with light steps.

"Deringhouse..." It was the first time she had spoken to him in such an intimate tone. He glanced at her sideways and was again assailed by doubts.

They descended the arched staircase and she had no trouble walking down the steps. Thora continued speaking. "I believe there was only one time in my entire life when I was as happy as I am today: the moment when I became aware to whom my heart belonged. It's a pity that Perry's not here and that I can't tell him this personally instead of on the awful picture screen. Please, Deringhouse, let him know every word and how strong I feel today... oh, Deringhouse... to die happily is a beautiful death! But why did you shudder? Because I spoke of my death? Well, am I going to fly with you to Arkon?"

He hastily answered her last question. "Yes, Thora. We'll take the *Burma*. It's a light cruiser of the State class."

They paused when they came to the library below. Thora's hand rested lightly on his arm as she gazed at him. "...and there's no need to lie to me on our trip, Deringhouse. Do you know Dr. Villnoess?"

He simply nodded.

"So do I. And I've learned from him about sarcoma F Arkon—the cancer of a type which can affect only Arkonides. But I can see that you too know already all about it and it's therefore unnecessary to conceal my condition... Oh!"

A door had opened noiselessly and suddenly the dainty Japanese telepath Ishy Matsu stood before them. "Thora!" she smiled.

The telepathic girl, who could read the thoughts of the Arkonide woman, was beside herself with joy over the aboutface which had occurred in the moribund woman. She made no effort to constrain her emotions and although they were unable to understand the flow of Japanese words, they could easily comprehend the ecstatic delight of her expressions.

"Deringhouse, when do we start?"

The mutant girl, who didn't dare read the thoughts of the general, looked at him in amazement.

He smiled. "Tomorrow, we'll take off from Terrania. And you..." he turned to Ishy Matsu, "are going to accompany Thora."

Those in the Mutant Corps who could remember the time when there was only an arrogant and proud Arkonide Thora, who regarded the Terrans as barbarians, had now to admit that Thora had developed into a charming woman, free of conceit or similar ugly faults, of character.

"But of course Ishy will go with me, Deringhouse. May I introduce my friend to you...?" And now Thora could laugh heartily when she saw that the young and graceful mutant girl turned red with embarrassment

and pleasure as she bowed before her.

Gen. Deringhouse spent the next hour chatting pleasantly with the wife of the Chief while in the other rooms things were packed for the trip.

#### 4/ MYSTERY MESSAGE FOR ARALON

The *Burma*, a cruiser of the State class, measuring 100 meters in diameter with a complement of 150 men, stood ready to start on the huge spaceport of Terrania. Only one hatch was still open. They waited for Gen. Deringhouse to come aboard as the last man. The starting time of the ship had already been delayed 30 minutes and the programming for the first transition of the light cruiser had by now become inapplicable.

Deringhouse had been called back as he was on his way to the *Burma*. Now he sat across from Marshall Freyt with a message from Perry Rhodan on the table between them. It was as usual short and succinct.

CHANGE PLAN TO FLY DIRECTLY TO ARKON. PROCEED TO FRONT OF BLOCKADE SHIPS AND CONTACT RO-BRAIN AFTER EMERGING. CODEWORD GARYLOON 010 ARKON. RHODAN.

Deringhouse had just put down the message and now gazed pensively into a corner. Marshall Freyt, Rhodan's deputy on Earth during his absence, cleared his throat. Deringhouse looked at him questioningly.

"What do you make of it, Deringhouse?" the Deputy asked.

The two men had mutual respect and knew each other well enough to talk frankly. Notwithstanding, the general was hesitant. He failed to understand the meaning of Rhodan's surprising instructions and they caused him a great deal of concern. Without Thora aboard he would have worried little about it but now each doubt weighed twice as heavy.

"Thora?" Freyt asked tersely.

"That too." Deringhouse was not very loquacious.

"Blockade front? Or what bothers you about this order?"

"Do you understand it, Marshall? I don't.

At this moment a light cruiser fell—in the literal sense of the word—on the spaceport of Terrania. With a tremendous roar the whipped-up masses of air in the wake of the landing spacesphere thundered with the force of 10 hurricanes across the capital of the Solar Imperium.

Freyt and Deringhouse looked at each other. By the manner of the landing they had recognized who the pilot of the cruiser was. Among the thousands of people who belonged to the Spacefleet there was only



one who could not always repress his urge to perform such an act of bravura: Reginald Bell.

The telecom clicked and before his picture appeared on the screen, the voice of Rhodan's deputy bellowed: "Freyt, is Deringhouse still there?"

"Yes, sir..."

"Tell him to wait for me. I'll be there in a minutes!"

Freyt switched over to the Space Observation Station and inquired: "This is Freyt. Did you monitor from which planet Bell's ship departed?"

"From Grautier, Marshall!" came the instant reply.

"Thank you!"

"Hm..." was Deringhouse's taciturn comment. Then they waited. Being soldiers, they were used to it.

With the same swagger Reginald Bell had brought in his cruiser he entered Marshall Freyt's office. "The Chief sent me," he announced buoyantly and sat down. "Deringhouse, you're to break through to the overlap zone and stop short before it. The Ro-Brain has interceded again and insisted that Rhodan call him from there before he makes the leap to Arkon. As soon as you arrive at the front you'll call the super Positronic by hyperradio. You know the code word by which the computer brain will recognize you as Rhodan's representative. But I didn't come to Terra in this tour de force because of such bagatelles. Deringhouse, the Robot Brain on Arkon has always been a treacherous liability in my opinion. I don't believe that Rhodan or Atlan know how I feel in my heart about it. And this soulless monster has changed its behaviour during the last 24 hours very erratically. The main station on Grautier has intercepted almost 100 radio messages from the Positronic Brain and was able to decipher them thanks to the Solar Intelligence Service. Either the gigantic apparatus has cracked up or it is in great trouble. There's no other way to explain its behaviour. Orders... orders countermanded... the retracted orders issued again... and so on and on. I almost feel sorry for the Arkonide robots because of the confusion the Brain has created for hours. Of course the Druufs have quickly realized that there was something awry at the blockade front and they've put an enormous spacefleet into the field. We must reckon with the possibility that the Druufs will pierce the front during the next few hours and roll it up from behind. Well, this is point #1 and now comes point #2, gentlemen. Until the situation at the front can somehow be stabilized, all traffic between Grautier and the Solar system must be suspended. Radio communications are permitted only with your written orders, Marshall. The duration of the action should be limited to a few hours. You, Deringhouse, have to be prepared that the Ro-Brain accepts your proposals at one moment and rejects it the next. You're responsible for Thora's condition of health. Don't expose her to undue strains but don't let her notice that you want to spare her. I don't envy you this job, General! And now the reason why I've come to Terra, Deringhouse. We have received a message on Grautier which was unfortunately very garbled. It came from an agent on Aralon..."

Deringhouse and Freyt exclaimed simultaneously in astonishment: "From Aralon?"

Aralon was the central planet of the Aras, the galactic medical scientists. These people of Arkonide descent were by sheer numbers a most powerful nation in the Great Empire and the sole producers of medicaments.

A whole society had made a lucrative business out of its citizens' natural talent to discover the complexities of illnesses. For thousands of years they had sold their preparations throughout the known

world of the Galaxy for cold cash. Their attitude could not be condemned although it was not compatible with the ethics of Terranian physicians. However in order to promote their pharmacy business these Aras had not shied away from schemes to perpetuate diseases and infections on a global scale.

A few times Perry Rhodan had come down hard on these galactic medicine peddlers and taught them a lesson which they were not apt to forget in the next 1000 years. But the distrust of the Aras smouldered with undiminished force in the minds of humans on Earth.

"From Aralon!" Bell repeated grimly, making no secret of his feelings about that world. "The message from the agent stumps us because it's so garbled. Perhaps we're already seeing ghosts on Grautier but Perry Rhodan... gentlemen, you know the boss... he claims that the message has something to do with our visit to Arkon. Here, this is the message!"

It consisted of 4 words, only one of which was complete: ... CHIRU... ORD... ENCEPH... ARKON...

Suddenly Deringhouse felt hot under his uniform. "Sir," he said excitedly. "I've been given a few lessons in medicine during the past days... ENCEPH... this is medical lingo for brain." He jerked his right shoulder as if he wanted to throw something off. I can't explain it but I'm also convinced that this telegram has some connection with the flight of the *Burma* to Arkon. I can't help feeling that the monstrous Positronicon is planning a dastardly act—brainwashing and the like. The way I figure it, the Robot Brain demands that we appear at the blockade front because it doesn't know as yet that I'll visit him in place of Perry Rhodan. This eliminates the danger that our ship will be destroyed by their guns the moment we emerge from hyperspace but it doesn't reduce the danger that we'll be shot at. Afterwards they can explain the damage to a terrestrial spaceship by a chain of unfortunate accidents. In the meantime our crew can be killed while the most important persons aboard can continue on their journey to Arkon in an unscathed condition and be subjected to brainwashing. And to think that Thora is aboard my ship!" Deringhouse stopped abruptly. His eyes wandered back & forth between Bell and Freyt.

"Can you read thoughts, Deringhouse?" Bell asked.

"No. Why sir?" the general inquired, bewildered.

"Because Perry Rhodan has drawn the same conclusion from the garbled message."

"And he hasn't changed his mind about Thora's flight to Arkon with me?"

"He trusts you completely, General."

"Thank you!" Deringhouse replied but the look he gave Bell was more eloquent.

"Yes, General..." Bell got up and began pacing the floor. "Today I shot off my mouth at Perry Rhodan. I know what you're trying to say with your look at me. I told Rhodan the same thing and do you know what answer he gave my remonstrations? 'Deringhouse won't jeopardize the *Burma* nor will he expose Thora to any unnecessary hazards. I can't be so selfish to tell my wife that her mission must be cancelled because it isn't completely safe. I don't want to reproach myself forever after that I've cast her from a vibrant mood into the dullest lethargy. If I didn't know a man like Deringhouse, I'd feel compelled to do just that. But I'm fortunate to have such a man and I'm not willing to hold up the start of the *Burma*.' What do you say, Gen. Deringhouse?" Bell asked finally, looking questioningly at him.

The general also rose from his seat. "If one is aware of a danger that is awaiting him, it has already lost

most of its sting, sir. I hope that this proverbial rule also applies in our case. Very well! The *Burma* will lift off immediately."

"Good luck!" Reginald Bell said but he was obviously downhearted.

"You've got my best wishes, Deringhouse!" Freyt called as Deringhouse left and left the two men alone in the room. Bell and Freyt stood at the window and watched the *Burma* blast off. The vessel soared with amazing speed into the cloudless sky.

"The dice are cast..." Bell murmured and the words that followed revealed his inner turmoil. "Why didn't I go to the *Burma* and say goodbye to Thora? I'm a coward..."

The two men avoided looking into each other's eyes. The realization of what Thora meant to mankind on Earth had just begun to dawn on them to its full extent—now that they were bereft of any hope of ever seeing her again.

And before Freyt realized what he said, he asked Bell: "Has the son been informed?"

The burly figure of Reginald Bell spun hastily around, wild anger flaring in his eyes and fists doubled up. "No! And I'll tell you why, Freyt. Because this creep refuses to listen to his father. In the whole Solar Imperium there's only one obdurate lout who dares to say to Perry Rhodan: *Go to hell! I'll have nothing to do with you!* And the one who has that impertinence is his son. Any other questions, Marshall?" he asked in a sharp tone.

"No, sir!" Freyt replied and wanted to give him a military salute.

"Oh, cut out this nonsense, Freyt. I always blow my top when I'm reminded of what that miserable Lt. Thomas Cardif had the nerve to tell me. It must have been rotten how he abused his own father. Well, let's drop the subject. I've got to go back to Grautier. See you soon, Freyt!"

"So long, sir," Marshall bid him farewell and was alone again.

## 5/ THORA RADIANT

Joe Pasgin, First Officer of the *Burma*, had already begun to worry about the prolonged absence of Deringhouse when the general entered the Command Centre of the light cruiser and stopped with a troubled expression before the switched-off observation screen.

"Start the ship, Pasgin," Deringhouse said without turning his face to him. "And to tell you the latest first of all: our first stop will be the blockade front of the Arkonide robotships at the overlap-zone."

Joe Pasgin was about to touch the synchronized switch when his hand paused in midair. He remained motionless as did all the other men who were present in the Command Centre. Each looked questioningly, surprised and confused, at their commander.

Conrad Deringhouse kept standing there with his back to his men. He could feel their eyes concentrating

on his back but they could not force him to turn around. "Pasgin, who is the Fire Control Officer?" he inquired.

"Big Alden, General. He's been transferred from the Titan where he was in charge of the gun turrets at both ends."

"That's a tiny plus for all of us. Is everything shipshape?"

"Yes sir!"

"Then up and away, Pasgin! You can reach me in my cabin if you need me."

He finally turned around with a faint smile on his lips. It was a small sign but one which made his men feel easier.

As soon as the hatch closed behind him, the Command Centre was buzzing with voices. "We're going to see some terrific action..."

"If Big Alden becomes #1 on the *Burma* with its measly armament, I don't relish getting into my spacesuit..."

"But we've got Thora aboard," a third one reminded. "We can't... heavens, stars and comets... when I begin to think of the blockade front!"

Joe Pasgin's sharp-featured face studied them all. He was worried too. The detour to the blockade front on their way to Arkon foreboded complications and the general had given every indication that they had to be prepared for the worst on this mission.

But the order to start which Deringhouse had given made him put aside his apprehensions. He had to take action.

"Start in 5 minutes!" Pasgin commanded.

The seat of the co-pilot was held by Hendrik Olavson who had come to his post fresh out of the Space Academy. Pasgin had already been in 3 spaceflights at the side of the young lieutenant and had observed him very closely. However he had already determined on the first trip that the co-pilot seat was the wrong place for Olavson. He belonged in the command seat of a spaceship in the Imperium class, since Hendrik Olavson and a spaceship did not simply represent Man and Technology—Olavson and spaceship were a unit welded together! He was a natural talent when it came to steering a spaceship and where others had to use immense concentration for this task, he performed it with the greatest of ease. Like a game.

"Olavson, take over blastoff!" Joe Pasgin said casually and added with a chuckle: "Don't be too rough on Terrania!"

Hendrik Olavson appreciated the joke of the First Officer in good humour. He knew what was going on in the mind of Pasgin. The *Burma*, a 100-meter sphere with a crew of 150 men, belonged to a class of ships which possessed an incredible potential for acceleration. It was able to reach the velocity of light within 5 minutes. Of course other features had to be sacrificed due to the size of the extremely powerful drive-aggregate which was on a scale between those of the Heavy Cruisers and the vessels of the Solar class, features such as strong armaments that were commonplace equipment on the heavier units.

These light ships of the State class were not designed for the offensive. They were on the order of fast reconnaissance ships with moderate arms which had to rely on their speed to appear suddenly on the scene and deal violent blows by surprise after which they had to retreat just as quickly by using their fantastic acceleration.

The novel body-frequency attenuator prevented that their transitions could be registered by the compensator-monitors of the Arkonides. They were also equipped with another secret weapon which was strictly defensive, the matter-transmitter which, however, could be used only when a corresponding station was within its range. This range was also limited to a certain distance.

The powerful machines of the *Burma* began to whine. The motors we're already warmed up long ago and now their output was stepped up to a higher magnitude. Olavson lifted his hand off the main switch.

His work was done. All else was taken over by the automatic pilot that had received its order through him. Now that the ship took off with roaring engines each operation was performed in a continuous smooth flow. The thrust-absorbers automatically increased their function and compensated for the sudden leap of the G-values. The gravitational forces inside the *Burma* were kept on a constant level despite the phenomenal acceleration which was, nevertheless, normal for the ship. The *Burma* was a gigantic conglomeration of machines, made evident by the noise in the background, and barely left enough room for its crew to live and breathe.

"Transition in three minutes!" The announcement reverberated through the entire ship, and was heard by Deringhouse in his cabin.

Suddenly Deringhouse was overcome by a fear for Thora. He ran out of his cabin and he had to hurry not to be caught on the way by the transition as Thora's room was located not only on the opposite side but also two decks lower.

When he arrived at her door there were only 35 seconds to go to the big jump. He announced himself but instead of Thora he saw Ischy Matsu's face on the small picture screen. "General? Please..." he heard the voice of the mutant girl who had been assigned by Rhodan as a steady companion for his wife.

Deringhouse hastily stepped inside and stopped in astonishment at the door.

"Deringhouse, sit down quickly!" Thora exclaimed in an animated manner. Her magnificent hair shimmered in the soft light as in former times when her striking appearance distinguished her as the radiantly beautiful wife of Perry Rhodan. She pointed to a chair. He had barely time to sit when the shock of the transition hit him. The *Burma* had left hyperspace again when Deringhouse cringed slightly under the pain of re-materialization. But Thora showed no disturbance. The hyperjump didn't affect her in the slightest.

The delicate little telepath Ischy stayed in the background of the room. Deringhouse openly showed his happy amazement about Thora's wonderful condition. She exuded an aura of health and seemed to undergo a recurrent rejuvenation. Deringhouse would have been overjoyed by the belief that the process had a lasting effect. But to his sorrow he couldn't forget Dr. Villnoess' warning: the healthier Thora appears to be all of a sudden, the worse she'll feel afterwards. It's hardly more than an unconscious resurgence of all her physical energies—a last burst of the flame of life. But we can't foretell how and when death will occur."

Just as Deringhouse opened his mouth to give an explanation, he was interrupted by the telecom. As the

sound came from the loudspeaker the picture screen lit up. "The Chief wishes to talk to you, Thora!" the Communications Officer called from the radio room.

Deringhouse listened in surprise. What made Rhodan take the risk of getting in touch with his wife? He was alarmed by the thousands of possibilities which existed to intercept the hyper-radio connection. The electronic smokescreen provided by Grautier could be blown away in one stroke or the Regent on Arkon could learn before they had intended that Thora of Zoltral was assigned to replace Perry Rhodan for the visit. What could have caused Rhodan to disregard all these dangerous possibilities?

Perry Rhodan's prominent face appeared on the screen and the picture of his critically ill wife was transmitted to his receiver.

Deringhouse was astounded by the light-hearted, almost youthful laugh of the Administrator of the Solar Imperium as he heard him say to his wife: "Thora, it's a pity that I can't share this trip to Arkon with you. See you soon, Thora!"

"Perry..." she cried but Rhodan could hear her no longer. The hyper-radio connection from the depth of space to the *Burma* was ended. The picture screen in her cabin was grey again and the control lamp under the tele-optic was turned off.

Despite his apprehensions and doubts Gen. Deringhouse smiled at Thora and managed to look mischievous. He concealed his own bewilderment and didn't give Thora a chance to voice her anxious questions. "Thora, I've made a mistake. My timing was off," he said, assuming the role of a scapegoat. "I've waited too long to inform you about the latest change concerning our flight. Let me fill you in quickly and you'll understand why your husband has given you such a pleasant surprise..."

Sprinkling a few compassionate lies in the truth he brought her up to date as far as he deemed it advisable. He didn't mention the garbled message from the agent on the planet Aralon with a single word nor did he volunteer any information about Bell's hurried flight from Grautier to Terra. He invented a few embellishments and emphasized Perry Rhodan's role to allay any suspicions Thora might harbour. "...as a result the Chief wanted to relieve you of this task, Thora, but on second thought he realized that your trip to Arkon would not involve irresponsible risks with the possible exception of our required presence at the blockade front. Finally we both agreed that he would send you a short greeting as soon as the situation at the overlap-zone was stabilized. I can only regret, Thora, that I've done such a poor job of directing... He said it with a grin and hoped that it looked genuine.

Then his gaze veered to the telepath Ischy Matsu who stood behind Thora off to the side. The face of the young Japanese girl resembled a mask. She had read the thoughts of the general and realized the perilous nature of the *Burma*'s mission.

"Deringhouse..." Thora took his hand in hers and her Arkonide eyes beamed with delight and rapture, "I know how sick I am but I haven't felt so full of vigour and ambition in years... and this only because your direction was a little off. Those little words 'See you soon' have made a young girl out of an old woman. How long has it been since I've seen Perry laugh as heartily as a young boy? Would you mind leaving me alone for awhile?"

Both Deringhouse and Ischy Matsu left Thora's cabin together. Once outside in the corridor the general brusquely asked the telepath: "Ischy, did you track my thoughts?"

"Yes, General, against your orders..."

"Oh, forget it. Now you're aware that we might be in for a lot of trouble with the *Burma*. You know that I had no idea that the Chief would call Thora. She must under no circumstances be allowed to suspect that I've lied to her. Take care of her, Ishy, and ask the three medical officers to go to Thora and give her an examination in about an hour. I don't care what pretext they use."

He was in such a hurry to leave that he rushed to the antigrav elevator without waiting for her reply. He went up to the Command Centre and when he passed the radio room the officer on duty saluted. It was a sign of Deringhouse's pressure that he ignored the formalities and inquired urgently: "How did that message come in?"

"Through the new Swoon scrambler, General, at 45,000 impulses per second and condensed in..." he turned around to read one of his scales, "...one micro-second."

Deringhouse paid no attention to the figures. "Where did it come from?"

"From a light cruiser, General. If our tracker is accurate, it's 800 light-years from Grautier, as we see it, measured by the coordinate Phi, which..."

"Thank you!" He walked to the entrance of the Command Centre and paused before the hatch, mulling his doubts. Did Perry Rhodan strain the health of Thora too much with his unexpected call? Was her body still able to cope with the seething emotions released by the joyous surprise?

He entered just in time to stop the last preparations for the third transition. Joe Pasgin, the First Officer of the *Burma*, looked at him questioningly.

"We've got to exercise more caution because of Thora's state, gentlemen!" he informed all the officers present in the Command Centre. "Our ship's physicians are going to give her a thorough check in one hour and let us know how many transitions she can stand without injury to her health."

He motioned the First Officer to look at the star chart with him. "We're now about here, Pasgin. Over there is the transit zone and this is the depth where Arkon's robotships have thrown a blockading line. If the physicians advise us to restrict our transitions then we must take 3 jumps to the overlap-zone from our present position without using our own frequency-attenuator. Arrange it in such a manner that the last jump covers a distance of no more than 3 light-years. I don't want the *Burma* to be dumped into a cluster of robotships."

"Didn't they notify Arkon's fleet of our arrival?" Pasgin asked perplexed and visibly worried.

"I hope so. But if you take into consideration how many contradictory orders the Robot Brain on Arkon 3 has issued during the past hours..."

They were interrupted by the radio centre. "Message from relay station Omega 17!"

First they heard the characteristic sound of the scrambler and condenser and then a sonorous voice announced in an official tone: "The following orders by the Arkonide Regent have been intercepted and deciphered. The Positronic has concluded its evaluation. TOTAL RETRENCHMENT OF ALL ARKONIDE SQUADRONS. POSITIONS AT FRONT EXTENDED FROM .7 TO 3.0 LIGHT-YEARS. ARKON IS IN THE PROCESS OF BRINGING IN TREMENDOUS REINFORCEMENTS. DRUUF SPACESHIPS ATTEMPTING TO BREAK THROUGH IN SPACE-SECTOR PANTHER 76 and 73A. KEEP CLEAR OF PANTHER 76 AND 73A. ALL OTHER FRONT SECTORS QUIET AT THIS MOMENT BUT ATTACKS BY DRUUF MUST

BE EXPECTED ANY TIME."

There was a sharp click. The hyper-radio message from a spaceship of the Solar Imperium, stationed far away from Grautier, had transmitted crucial information and clarified the situation for Deringhouse. Now he knew that the Robot Regent on Arkon continued to act with ice-cold logic as before and thus remained the same old treacherous partner.

What Reginald Bell and the other officers of the Solar Imperium who were stationed as observers on Grautier with Rhodan had considered to be contradictory orders were in reality ingenious strategic moves of a positronic brain whose 'reasoning' was based on logic.

Finally he received the report from the ship's medical officers. Although they didn't have the benefit of the immense experience and special knowledge of the Chief Physician Dr. Villnoess at the Haematological Department of the Terra Clinic on Venus, their collective opinion confirmed that Thora's condition had reached a dangerous stage where the worst could be expected. However they regarded the effects of the transition as negligible.

"Proceed to the front in three transitions!" Deringhouse ordered. In spite of the medical test and recommendation he preferred to avoid any risk.

"I hope we don't arrive with a corpse on our hands," Joe Pasgin remarked, disclosing how little enthusiasm he could muster for the expedition.

The computer brain of the *Burma* was fed the transition data. Hendrik Olavson's nimble fingers adjusted the settings on the instrument console. Failsafe controls prevented human errors but Olavson's operation didn't cause an automatic cancellation.

Then the countdown began to tick off the seconds and the intercom informed the crew of the imminent transition. Everything was quiet in the Command Centre but for a few terse commands.

Deringhouse reassured himself once more. "Is our auto-frequency attenuator disconnected?"

"Yes, General!"

Quite unconsciously a mysterious smile appeared on his lips. The device, developed by the Swoons, had solidly blocked the most intensive efforts of the Robot Regent to detect the galactic position of Terra. Even before Arkon had learned of its existence it had made all the secret efforts of the gigantic Arkonide industry obsolete by the time the Great Empire had constructed its compensator-detector. The latter was designed to pinpoint the structure disturbances of transitions by their auto-frequencies and regardless of the application of structure-compensators for the purpose of camouflage.

In order to mislead the Robot Brain with its built-in suspicions and to keep it from determining that its compensator-detector was not an effective apparatus for discovering Earth, the Terranian spaceships voluntarily permitted the rangefinder station of Arkon to observe their emergence from hyperspace. But only when they were far enough away from Terra.

In two tremendous leaps which shook the structure of the universe, the *Burma* raced to the blockade front. It entered normal space again at a distance of three light-years from the closest of the Arkonide battle formations strung out near the overlap-zone.

Deringhouse, who had remained a spectator throughout the entire manoeuvre, now heard Joe Pasgin's



instructions to the radio officer: "Call Arkon fleet unit in space-sector Tiger 46. Advise the commander of our arrival in 15 minutes. Code etc..."

Pasgin now switched to the Fire Control Officer of the lightly armed *Burma*. "Alden, all out alarm! Transition in 14 minutes and 35 seconds! The jump will cause a minimal shock to your men. Orders to shoot will be given by me personally."

"Yes sir!" Alden acknowledged from his Fire Control station. Ten minutes before the transition every man aboard the ship was directed to put on a spacesuit and they all realized that the *Burma* was on the verge of a hazardous venture.

And then came the short transition spanning three light-years. The picture of the cosmos on the huge observation screen faded and the *Burma* dematerialised as the ship passed through hyperspace in 'zero-time' and emerged again with all its contents in the same state but causing a minor shock of pain for every man from Earth.

"This is hell!" Joe Pasgin exclaimed frantically. He could already envision the *Burma* evaporating in a cloud of gas when Hendrik Olavson achieved the impossible and took evasive action by a drastic change of course out of the path of the lethal rays in which they had landed.

The *Burma*'s formidable acceleration was matched by its powerful thrust absorbers. The roar of the power generators, engines and absorbers penetrated all sound-insulators. Eight murderous shafts of energy streaked past the *Burma* thousands of kilometres away.

Now the protective shield of the little spaceship began to reverberate and two huge cascades of fire sputtered away in the black void.

"80% of resistance capacity!" Joe Pasgin shouted excitedly.

The energy field around the *Burma* had withstood the impact of the foreign energy assault which was instantly followed by a frontal hit.

"What's going on? Why the bombardment?" Joe Pasgin shouted into the mike to the radio officer as Olavson bolted away in another tight turning manoeuvre pulling the ship off its course.

"Code signal jammed!" the loudspeaker blared.

Deringhouse looked over the shoulder of the officer at the sensor panel. Three enormous spaceships of the Imperium class bore down on them with frightening speed, ships with a diameter of 1,500 meters! Their firepower could turn planets into suns—and the *Burma* measured only 100 meters.

"Be careful!" Joe Pasgin bellowed but his warning was not so much directed at the crew to gird against the attack from the battleships as at Hendrik Olavson to use restraint in his abrupt twists and turns because he was reluctant to reveal the acceleration potential of the *Burma* to the Arkonides.

"Attack from yellow 43.78... the rest was drowned out by a triple blast of fire and the light cruiser owed its continued existence only to the fact that the disintegrator beam from the Imperial ship had merely grazed its energy shield.

The gauge dial showed a magnitude of 100% which normally was the breaking-point of the energy mantle. Even Deringhouse, the general who lived through hundreds of catastrophic situations, became

visibly nervous as the *Burma* was shaken to its core.

But a fraction of a second later the dial had already dropped from the maximum limit. With a deafening roar inside the *Burma* all its energies were thrown into the outer breach and the defence screen was safeguarded.

"Radio operator... radio operator!" The First Officer tried, with cracking voice, to get the attention of the radio room.

Didn't the Fire Control Officer hear his call or did he start speaking at the same moment? He asked the Command Centre in the loudest tone: "Why don't I get orders to start firing?"

Hendrik Olavson, the man who had just come from the Space Academy, was in his element. He played with the *Burma* like an artist on his instrument. He had saved the lives of his mates half a dozen times already. Olavson seemed to sense from which direction the attacks came and spontaneously dodged the lethal beams.

All of a sudden the officers of the light cruiser realized that they had jumped into the middle of a tremendous battle raging between the Arkonide robot-ships and the Druufs.

Small suns exploded on the wide observation screen of the *Burma*, furiously spreading out in all directions but their brilliance soon was swallowed up in the darkness of space—battleships which had disintegrated in atomic holocausts.

Luminous streaks lunged menacingly from all directions in hues of green, yellow and pink. The light cruiser of the Solar system seemed to have plunged into pandemonium.

"Let's get out of here!" foe Pasgin yelled.

His young co-pilot tersely confirmed: "Tiger 32!" He couldn't have formulated it more succinctly. The *Burma* was to be yanked out of space-sector Tiger 46 and he wanted to reach sector Tiger 32. These sectors were designated by the Solar Fleet and divided the entire area of the overlap-zone and the blockade front in identifiable units. The power generators and transformers of the *Burma* howled through the ship which had only inadequate sound-proofing. The propulsion jets located in the equatorial bulge spewed out glaring streams of impulse-waves which spurred the Terranian ship in the direction of Tiger 32 when three gigantic spaceships of the Imperium class were spotted approaching head-on.

"We were recognized!" the voice shrieked from the loudspeaker. It was a call from the radio room of obvious significance. Hendrik Olavson reacted at once with his inherent talent for steering a spaceship. The transformers were cut back and the power generators reduced to 1/8th of efficiency. The gravitation-absorbers continued their task of, eliminating the suddenly released force of the thrust which was produced by the abrupt change of acceleration.

"Elmes?" Pasgin called the officer standing at the positronic, following the events on the observation screen. He questioned him with a glance.

The officer understood what Pasgin wanted to know. "Positronic data bank in unsecured state!" he replied.

Deringhouse smiled grimly. The unsecured data bank of the *Burma*'s positronic brain was a precaution which had to be taken to prevent an unfortunate accident enabling the Arkonide Imperium to acquire the

Galactic coördinates of Terra's position. The unsecured state would allow all data stored in the bank to be wiped out at the first sign of danger to the light cruiser and thus all references that could lead to the discovery of Earth. As he thought about this possibility Deringhouse was inclined to call the Robot Regent every name in the book.

The hatch of the Command Centre slid open. Deringhouse and Pasgin turned around at the same time and were surprised to see Thora enter the room.

As the hatch rolled shut again the radio officer announced: "Message from robot-ship *IgDro 34*, Imperium class. Proceed to..." Then followed a rush of coördinates which were immediately picked up by the positronic computer. "The three super-battleships will escort us. What shall I answer?"

Deringhouse leaped to the mike. "Deringhouse. Switch the call to the Command Centre!"

The connection was established without delay and the rigid 'face' of a robot appeared on the picture screen. However before the general could utter a word there was a blinding flash at starboard. A battleship of the Druufs had broken through unnoticed and tried to blow the *Burma* to smithereens.

None of the people in the Command Centre was able to see it but the three robot-steered super-battleships of Arkon had taken action at the same moment the attack of the Druufs occurred. Under the blistering fire of their combined weapons of destruction, the hostile battleship from the other time-plane went up in bright-red smoke.

But the enemy had succeeded in hitting the *Burma*. Thanks to Hendrik Olavson's incomparable mastery he had once more evaded a square hit. The absorption capacity of the protective screen had been saturated by the glancing shot up to 95% and only a mere 5% had kept the energy beam from smashing into the armour plate of the *Burma*.

The expanding cloud of red-hot gas, the pyrotechnic spray of the Druufs' battle-ray together with the barrage of retaliatory fire from the three robot-battleships, had turned this small space-sector into an inferno of solar heat and deadly violence.

Despite the blinding light Deringhouse finally was able to focus his eyes on the optical lens-system of the robot commander who examined him like an object. "I'm Gen. Deringhouse of the Solar System and I am authorized to speak on behalf of Perry Rhodan. Why were we subjected to the attack by Arkonide ships despite the fact that we've advised the Regent of the arrival of a Terranian ship?"

The 'Soul' of a positronic robot is the X, the unknown number—the unfeeling logic. With his metallic voice the commander of the super-battleship *IgDro 34* stated his identity number and replied: "The order of Arkon's Regent to repulse the attack the enemy is waging on three fronts has priority over all other instructions, Terranian. Now move up closely so that we can escort you safely out of the battle zone!"

Politeness was not on the program of the positronic battle-machine. The robot commander switched off and now Deringhouse finally found time to devote himself to Thora and the purpose of her presence in the Command Centre. "Thora..." he began but when he looked at her, astonishment took his breath away. He could hardly recognize Perry Rhodan's wife. Before him stood the proud Arkonide Thora of Zoltral and what she had once upon a time represented in the Great Empire before the positronic mammoth-brain had taken over the ruling power over a decadent Galactic nation. The Imperial Commander had entered the Command Centre of the *Burma* and her radiant appearance made a mockery out of the medical diagnosis of the physicians.

"General... gentlemen! I believe the time has come for me to participate actively in the negotiations. Please don't let my presence disturb you." She walked smilingly toward Deringhouse. As critically as he studied her, he could find no trace of tension or fatigue.

Behind him Joe Pasgin and Hendrik Olavson saw to it that the *Burma* joined the three Arkonide battleships of the Imperium class to escape the furious fighting in this space-sector with their guardians.

Deringhouse offered Thora the only free chair in the Command Centre. She thanked him and asked so softly that only he could hear her: "Deringhouse, am I really ill? I can hardly believe it myself!"

He remembered her condition when he had met her in the cottage at the foothills of the Valta Mountains and couldn't forget the urgent warning Chief Physician Dr. Villnoess had pronounced. And now he faced Thora—not as a young woman but as a lady who knew how to accept the first hardly detectable signs of beginning age with inimitable elegance.

Deringhouse no longer found it difficult to smile back at her as he said with a full heart: "Thora, I admire you!"

The crass reality disturbed these moments of intense feelings. The radio room announced: "The Robot Regent wants to talk to you, General!"

"I'll take the call here," Deringhouse answered.

Thora put her hand on his forearm. "Wouldn't it be better if I conduct the negotiations now, Deringhouse?"

At this moment the garbled message from the agent on Aralon flashed through his mind and he felt troubled by a vague fear for Thora. Therefore he replied: "I think it would be a smarter tactic if you wait to put in an appearance on Arkon 3. Please, move a little to the side where you'll be out of the camera's range!"

The picture screen of the hyper-radio transceiver began to flicker. As always the connection with the Regent was preceded by a mind-boggling display of coloured patterns and followed by a picture of the metal dome that housed the main elements of the gigantic circuit installations"

Without further ado the Brain asked: "Where is Rhodan?" He simply ignored Deringhouse's presence, who was already accustomed to the peculiarities of the giant positronicon.

"He's unavailable at this time, Regent," the general responded in the same brief manner. "Code word Garyloon 010 Arkon."

"Your knowledge of the code word still requires a check of your identity. Proceed to Arkon 3!"

Although the general knew that his objections were a mere waste of time and that the Robot Brain only seldom changed his mind after a decision, he remonstrated: "Regent, I'm already known to you as Terran Deringhouse. My partner in the negotiations."

The huge switchbox merely reiterated in a monotone: "Proceed to Arkon 3. Identification is necessary. Prepare to discuss trade of 100 spaceships."

And as abruptly as the Brain had begun to talk, it ended the communication in its authoritative

declarations. Thora was the only person aboard the *Burma* beside the general who was experienced in the direct and blunt approach typical of the Robot Brain.

Deringhouse looked dubiously at Thora who stood near the empty chair where she had followed the short conversation with great interest. "I don't like the attitude of the Regent, Thora. The order to appear on Arkon 3 for identification is transparent..."

"But we want to go to Arkon, Deringhouse!" she exclaimed in bafflement.

"Of course and I wouldn't mind his tone of command either if he hadn't stressed his willingness to enter into negotiations. We know from bitter experience how convenient it is for the big positronic to lie... and its readiness to talk business concerning the 100 vessels is a lie!"

Thora shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't agree with your opinion, Deringhouse. Maybe you worry too much about me."

Deringhouse had trouble remaining calm: He had to hide the truth from her. Without Perry Rhodan's wife on board he would have worried one-tenth as much and if she had been well he would have faced the future events with a great deal more confidence but under the prevailing circumstances the outlook for the crew of the *Burma* was bleak.

Nevertheless he acted as if he didn't have a care in the world. "I hope to be convinced very quickly that I'm wrong about the Brain and that you can judge it better than I."

For the next three hours the *Burma* skirted the blockade front under the escort of the three super-battleships. Twice during that time they had to evade unexpected and determined onslaughts by the Druufs but Joe Pasgin and Hendrik Olavson refrained from giving the slightest hint as to the acceleration potential which was concealed in the light cruiser.

Then came the curt message from the *IgDro 34* that the escort was terminated and the robot-ships of the Arkonide Imperium disappeared without bothering with formalities.

## **6/ ESCAPE IMPERATIVE**

The last transition left the *Burma* in the middle of the stellar cluster M-13.

The spherical agglomeration of stars had a diameter of 99 light-years and more than 30,000 celestial bodies had converged in this region. They were the inner core of the Great Empire and the realm had every reason to feel big.

The observation screen of the *Burma* reflected a fantastic spectacle. Sun stood next to sun and the density of the concentration created a sparkle, glitter and iridescence of a magnificence beyond compare. The soft shimmer of the Milky Way had disappeared as if it never existed. Instead the picture screen in the Command Centre of the light cruiser was flooded by a show of scintillating colours which evoked the admiration of the most hardened space travellers.

M-13 was the seat of the immense Arkonide Empire—a grandiose act of creation where the stellar configurations crowded together with such cascades of light that it was impossible to isolate a particular sun by eye.

The *Burma*, although built on Earth, was a further refinement of Arkonide construction and due to this fact its navigators were able to cope with all galactonautic problems with apparent ease despite the confusing multitude of planets. The masters among the astrogators could only take a silent bow in recognition of the Arkonide technology and hyper-mathematics.

While the men in the Command Centre were thrilled and transfixed by the incredible splendour of colours of the 3-D picture, the positronicon of the light cruiser computed the distance to the Arkon system.

Its central star was a very large sun shining glaring white. It had 27 planets. Three of these planets had a special significance. They circled their sun in the arrangement of an equilateral triangle. Their name was the same as the stellar configuration and they were differentiated by the numbers 1, 2 and 3.

Arkon 1, or the Crystal World, with a gravity similar to Earth, was the planet where the Arkonides resided. The administration of the Great Empire was located on Arkon 2 which was also a transit place for the trade throughout M-13.

Arkon 3 however had probably no equal anywhere in the Galaxy. Larger than 1 and 2 it was one big place for manufacturing weapons and armaments. Here the gigantic Arkonide warships were produced in a constant flow. It was the heart of the Arkonide war-machine—military administration, fleet and war ministries—and the Robot Regent.

Deringhouse breathed heavily when he thought about the immense switch-complex. Once again he was struck by the grotesque fact that a positronic computer had been designed many thousands of years ago by the leading scientists of Arkon who had the foresight to program it during a few centuries for its task to take over the government of Arkon. It had assumed power several decades ago—Terra time—and nobody was happier about it than the decadent Arkonides who lived in a state of over-indulgence which was incomprehensible to the population of Earth. From that time on the Arkonides abandoned all restraint in their reveries and lost all awareness of how degenerated they had become.

Deringhouse called Thora on the intercom and her expectant face appeared on the picture screen. "Thora, may I ask you to come to the Command Centre? I want to talk to the positronic Brain in a few minutes."

Thora agreed and Deringhouse switched to the Communications Centre. "Contact the positronicon on Arkon 3!" he ordered.

"Structure disturbance!" the Monitor Officer reported. "Five ships!"

The transition jump into star-cluster M-13 had also been performed without damping the auto-frequency of the *Burma* and the vigilant Arkonide space surveillance stations had picked up the structure disturbance caused by the Terranian vessel with their compensator instruments. Five warships were immediately dispatched to scrutinize the visitor from hyperspace.

At the same moment the Communications Centre started flashing the identification signal of the *Burma* in a constant stream as triggered by the automatically present data.

Against the background of the multitude of stars the outline of three heavy Arkonide cruisers, that threatened to ram the little *Burma*, became visible. Suddenly they veered from their course and pulled alongside the *Burma*.

The Communication Officer switched through to the Command Centre and the screen lit up. The face of a robot that was speaking appeared on the screen but there was no sound.

Then the radio room announced excitedly: "Positronic Brain fails to answer our call but has established communication with one of the five Arkonide spaceships!"

Now the sound of the message was restored. The suspension of the sound had been deliberately induced by the radio officer to keep the information he had given Deringhouse from reaching the outside world.

Thora entered the Command Centre but again the General had no time to turn around. However he didn't request her this time to move out of the camera's range when she waited at his side.

"...escort to Arkon." She had just come in time to hear the last words. Then the connection was cut off by the robot before Deringhouse could say a word.

"It doesn't look good," the general commented apprehensively. "We can't get through to the robot Brain although he talked to one of the robotships. Escort, my foot! It sounds fishy, Thora!"

"General!" the radio officer said anxiously. "KK-o-76398 demands that he take charge of directing the *Burma*!"

KK-o-76398 was the robot commander of one of the five Arkonide warships. He had told the general he would escort his flight to Arkon.

"I'll talk to him," Deringhouse said with icy calm. The First Officer Joe Pasgin gazed at him and noticed with satisfaction the grim smile on his lips.

Once more the impassive face of the robot appeared on the illuminated screen.

"My friend!" Deringhouse exclaimed, "you can tell your Regent that we're no Arkonides but Terrans—and Terrans don't like to have their ships steered by robots!"

Deringhouse made a point of showing that he could be just as impolite as a robot although he was aware that these mechanical men could not be affronted by virtue of their built-in programming.

Joe Pasgin and Olavson had their hands full maintaining the *Burma* in the centre of the warships' closed formation that was supposed to take them to Arkon. They had no intention of colliding with the other units although there was no danger of damage by a direct impact which was made impossible by the powerful protective fields which surrounded each ship. Nevertheless they would have been loath to give the appearance of being amateurs by flying in closed formation.

"How do you like their gall, Thora?" Deringhouse asked sarcastically.

"Robots!" she replied dismissing it.

"THE Robot!" Deringhouse contradicted. "The Mammoth Brain. And if anyone in the Great Empire

knows how Terrans react to a restriction of their freedom, that 'lovable' Regent ought to know!"

Despite their situation's uncertainty Thora laughed. Her health had worsened again. "Deringhouse... although I am a member of the Zoltral dynasty and was born on Arkon 1... the Robot Regent is in my eyes the same monster as in yours. Maybe I don't challenge him with the same energetic determination as you Terrans despite the fact that lately I have to remind myself frequently that I'm not a child of Earth."

She was suddenly interrupted by the astrogator Merck. "General, we're deviating from our course. At Psi we're off 0.57 degrees. I've never seen such a discrepancy in robot navigation."

"0.57 degrees," Deringhouse repeated. "This is still in the Arkon system, Merck. For which planet could we be heading on this course?"

Thora listened attentively. As the former commander of a big space exploration ship she was an expert in such matters.

Merck grimaced. "The system has 27 planets. It's difficult to make an instant prediction. We better wait about half an hour."

Deringhouse was anxious to avoid any risk with Thora aboard. For this reason alone he instructed the radio officer: "Radio our present position to the closest relay station and advise them of the deviation from our course that has been forced on us. Details will follow."

Relay stations were those Terranian spaceships which were positioned according to a carefully devised plan at certain places in the Galaxy for the purpose of maintaining radio contact with Rhodan's agents. The messages they picked up were relayed to the next station and so on in an intricate pattern until they finally reached Terra. This complicated but safe procedure served to keep Terra's location a secret.

"Further course deflection on coordinate Chi, General, 1.18 degrees. We appear to be moving in the direction of Mutral!"

The light cruiser *Burma* was a compact sphere of machinery and its crew of 150 men was above the average of other ships. They were highly qualified people and more than 2 dozen of them who held the lowest rank aboard the *Burma* were among the best experts of Terra in their particular fields.

"Merck, you know your colleagues who must be alerted. I'll know for sure in 10 minutes." Then he turned to Pasgin and asked quickly: "How much longer?" His question referred the time it would take to reach Arkon 3.

"5 to 6 hours if we maintain our velocity 0.89 speol, General."

Deringhouse switched to the radio room again. "Did you listen in?"

"Yes, General!" was the brief answer.

"Hold back message to relay station. Get it off the moment precise evaluation has been received!"

Then Deringhouse glanced again at Thora, who had sat down in a chair. The confident poise she had shown heretofore was now gone. The orders issued by the general in response to the divergent course on the coordinates Psi and Chi had made her apprehensive. "I just don't have the same old drive anymore," she said in a resigned tone.



They heard the hatch to the Command Centre roll back. For the first time since the *Burma* had taken off from Earth the girl esper Ishy Matsu entered the Command Centre. Without Thora becoming aware of it, Deringhouse passed on his thoughts about his serious concern for Thora to her. His mind was open to read for Ishy.

Ischy gave him a sign with her hand and Deringhouse turned to Thora again. "You must've overdone it a little, Thora. Why don't you take a rest till... till we know where we're going to land." He had decided at the last moment to tell her the truth since it was impossible to deceive an experienced spaceship commander like Thora in this respect.

She thanked him with a girlish smile and didn't seem to be surprised to see Ischy stand at her side although she declined her help when she got up.

Did she feel the gaze of the men when she rose? Why did her face show such an unhealthy red colour? Was it the inner excitement or the physical exertion?

Leaning gently on the arm of the pretty Japanese girl, she left the Command Centre. As soon as the hatch door was closed behind her, Deringhouse exploded in his roughest tone: "Gentlemen, if you dare once more to stare at Thora with your misplaced pity, I'll give you a piece of my mind you won't forget! Thora is incurably ill and she knows it. But she doesn't want to be reminded of it by your probing eyes. I hope we understand each other!"

He sat down before the huge panoramic observation screen of the *Burma*, which showed the 5 heavy Arkonide cruisers escorting them as sharp points standing out from the background of the glittering stellar cluster.

"Object approaching!" the officer on duty at the structure-sensor called. "Echo from 2 ships, probably Titan class, heading from yellow in our direction near speed of light. Distance 1.43 light-minutes."

Now the communications centre came in: "Intercepted exchange of scrambled and condensed communications on hyper-frequency of Regent. Now..."

At this moment the voice of the radio officer was replaced by the Robot Regent himself: "...force to land on Mutral. To be restrained from starting again!"

The message from the gigantic positronic Brain was ended. Thanks to a miniaturized device built by the Swoons, which analysed the scrambling impulse and condensing pattern instantaneously, they had been able to listen in to the call from the Arkonide positronicon.

The emergence of the two gigantic spaceships was only of secondary interest to the men in the Command Centre. Their eyes turned to Deringhouse, who sat calmly in his chair watching the big panoramic screen. He seemed unable to take his eyes off the spectacular display of fiery suns. But now he narrowed his gaze.

Two points appeared. Two closer points swung out left and right; they were the two heavy cruisers forming the tail of the escort which now made room for the gigantic spaceships roaring in almost as fast as light.

"They're gaining on us!... They still keep coming! Distance less than 4,000 kilometres... 2,000! 1,000! Now manoeuvring to fall in line with the super-battleships. Slowly braking! 600 kilometres... 300!" And

then came the final announcement with a hint of relief in the voice: "Flanking manoeuvre completed. Ships took up position in yellow 80 kilometres aft!"

"Routine," was the only comment Deringhouse made.

The fairly young crew of the *Burma* still had to gather much experience. There were more than 5000 Arkonide monitoring stations which made it impossible to slip through unnoticed, and furthermore the Regent insisted on escorting each arrival vessel for reasons of sheer self-preservation. That Deringhouse didn't volunteer any commentary on the conversation with the robot Brain they had intercepted was simply the result of his inability to take countermeasures at the moment and not a sign of a careless attitude.

The amplifier clicked and the communication centre reported that the message had been transmitted in code to the relay station Sigma 82.

Deringhouse leaned back in his chair and said jovially: "Gentlemen, we'll soon be sighting Mutral but I don't think I'll like it any better than Pluto."

It was plain enough to what he alluded. As the 27th and last planet of the Arkon system Mutral's icy climate resembled Pluto's inhospitable environment. Since the advent of Arkonide space travel, Mutral had served as a planetary citadel and in its 15,000-year history had crushed many an attempt at invasion from the Galactic space at the fringe of the planetary system. What the formerly bold Arkonides had built there seemed to last for all eternity.

Due to his thorough hypno-training it was unnecessary for Conrad Deringhouse to consult the reference data on Mutral. He doubted no longer that the *Burma* would be compelled to land there and his main concern hinged on the fact that the robot Brain had declared its willingness to negotiate and why it had picked Mutral as the place for the planned deal.

Now the robot commander called once more from one of the 5 heavy cruisers, repeating his demand without asking questions.

Deringhouse left the decision to Joe Pasgin, and the First Officer of the *Burma* responded in the same manner as the general who had denied the demand before. "Report your data. We refuse to let robots pilot our ship! How many more times do we have to explain this to you?"

Pasgin's last question was a waste of breath. The lifeless robot commander simply replied: "Data will be provided immediately."

The computer brain of the *Burma* converted all measurements without delay into Terranian values and graduations and the light cruiser followed the instructions for the course, so that all of a sudden the planet Mutral appeared on the observation screen.

Situated too far from the sun of Arkon to nourish life with its light, Mutral was nothing but a rugged and desolate world of ice whose 8,000-meter-high mountains were also buried under the deadly cold armour. Grey, almost black, only faintly reflecting the light from the M-13 suns, the globe hovered like an eerie menace in space.

"What a pleasant welcome this is!" Pasgin exclaimed. He was glad to leave the chore of safely landing on this icy hell to Hendrik Olavson.

The navigational data kept coming in without interruption and finally they picked up the radio beam of Mutral which simplified the approach.

The shock absorbers of the light cruiser began to hum as the *Burma* reduced its speed. Not once did its slowdown exceed the deceleration potential of the escorting Arkonide ships. Sometimes it even lagged behind and threatened to collide with the protective screens of the Arkonide cruisers due to its apparently inadequate ability to retard its velocity.

With a grin Deringhouse admonished the youthful Olavson to cut out his antics. It was his last chuckle on this flight to the Arkon system.

The *Burma* now entered the landing lane at an altitude of 4,000 kilometres above the interplanetary fortress of Mutral. The five heavy cruisers escorting their ship banked away but the two remaining super-battleships followed close behind.

Out of scientific interest Deringhouse had focused his magnifying instruments on the open muzzles of the Arkonide impulse- and disintegrator-cannons and it was plain to see that these two 'escort ships' were also ready for combat.

It was clear that the entire planet was in a state of readiness for defence and that the automatic tracking stations of the fortress followed each movement of the *Burma*.

For some reason the memory of the garbled message from the agent on Aralon kept constantly cropping up in Deringhouse's mind. Despite his efforts Deringhouse was unable to shake off the thought of the four truncated words it contained.

At a height of 10,000 meters above the surface of the planet, Olavson let the ship drop straight down and brought the antigrav field into play after it had plunged 8000 meters, balancing the forces again.

A low rumble reverberated through the ship as the telescopic support legs slid out and the Terranian ship floated down, led to its landing by the guide beam. Thus the spot where they had to touch the ground was strictly determined. The two Arkonide vessels of the Imperium class which continued to 'accompany' them, followed them like a double shadow.

Suddenly enormously bright searchlights flared up. Their glaring light exposed an area of 10 square kilometres and revealed what a bizarre and hostile world the outer planet of the Arkon system was.

The illumination also showed the crew of the *Burma* that the numerous dark dots in the glittering ice were by no means dirty spots but the open muzzles of several hundred artillery pieces. The light cruiser of the Solar Spacefleet had landed smack in the central sector of the interplanetary fortress Mutral. The robot Regent couldn't have picked a more secure place.

"Protective shield to remain activated!" Deringhouse ordered.

The situation remained unchanged for more than 10 hours. Calls to the robot Brain found no echo. The mammoth positronicon took its time but Deringhouse's patience was not inexhaustible. After 10 hours it had reached its limit.

While Thora still rested in her cabin in an oblivious state under the influence of a sleeping pill, Gen. Deringhouse entered the radio room and took a seat in front of the hypercom picture screen. Then he turned to the technician and ordered: "Put me on the hyper-frequency of the Brain! I'm going to call that

Regent and..." He didn't finish his sentence but the expression on his face made the rest clear.

The connection with Arkon 3 was established but the Brain failed to stir. The confusing, flickering lines which signalled the arrangement of the radio contact failed to appear notwithstanding the fact that Rhodan's agents of the Solar Intelligence Service had conducted extremely perilous investigations and determined that every call on the frequency of the robot Brain did indeed get through automatically.

"Regent!" Deringhouse said into the mike, "I've landed my ship on Mutral but not without first reporting this fact to Perry Rhodan. It should be very detrimental to our upcoming discussions

"Wait!"

This totally unexpected answer startled the tough general but the surprise didn't affect his presence of mind the slightest. He replied just as curtly: "But not another 10 hours, Regent!"

There was no answer and he waved the radio technician to switch off the hypercom.

When the general entered the Command Centre he found his entire staff at their posts. Ever since the *Burma* had landed 10 hours earlier the ship had been in a state of alarm.

The impulse propulsion system was kept running at idling speed. Although it used up energy, the knowledge of being ready to start instantly was reassuring. The energy feeding the powerful engines in the circular bulge around the *Burma* had only to be stepped up by the flick of a switch to make the ship shoot out into the universe like a flash of lightning. This was the superior feature of the little ship and its team knew that Arkon had nothing to compare with it. That a few hundred cannons were aimed at their vessel bothered them very little as they had hundreds of small but extremely effective interference devices aboard to jam the delicate tracking instruments of the Arkonide impulse-, thermo- and disintegrator-cannons.

"There's a call for you, General!" the radio officer announced and put it through. The picture of an Arkonide who looked condescendingly at Deringhouse appeared on the screen.

"Taa-Rell, Chief Commander of Mutral, Terran!" he introduced himself in the most refined Arkonide language. "I expect your visit. Please come at once before I look at the next simultan-play!"

Conrad Deringhouse didn't lose his composure. He knew these Arkonides who had no longer anything in common with their adventurous predecessors. They had become biologically unstable and as a result of their decline considered it the purpose of their lives to devote themselves without inhibitions to leisure and inertia, shying away from all responsibilities. Totally depraved, they looked down on other beings as creatures of a lower class and let them feel it.

The puffy face of the Arkonide with a cynical smile around his effeminate lips remained motionlessly on the screen and Deringhouse studied it intently. This seemed to annoy the Arkonide and in contrast to the characteristic indifference displayed by his race he declared in a miffed tone: "Terran, do I have to tell you again who I am?"

The general sat unperturbed in front of the camera. "Arkonide," Deringhouse replied, feeling somewhat indulgent, "what do you have to brag about if you are the commander of this chunk of ice? I'm a general of the Solar Spacefleet and my commander is Perry Rhodan!"

For a moment it looked as if the Arkonide had been prodded out of his lethargy but then all he could do

was to utter with contempt: "Rhodan... who's he?"

Deringhouse didn't get a chance to answer him. The bloated face disappeared from the screen to make room for a robot. "GD-78-P-45623, sir!" the machine stated. "It is my duty as commander of the robot units on Mutral to warn you against any attempt to leave. The 'Great Cöordinator' has given orders to keep you on the planet Mutral. We've taken appropriate measures to prevent you from starting, by force if necessary."

The connection broke off and the screen went dark. Deringhouse looked at his officers. "I believe this has clarified our situation. However I can't see any immediate danger. We'll have to wait 'til the 'Great Cöordinator' is ready to bargain with us."

When the door opened, Deringhouse expected to see Thora enter; instead the exquisite Ischy Matsu came in and caused him to feel concern. He looked at her sharply, almost imperatively.

"General, during the past hour I've been receiving an increasing number of ominous impulses. Is it possible that the Aras are haunting this icy world?"

Her question alarmed Deringhouse considerably. *The garbled message from our Aralon agent*, he thought. The menace made him shudder but he merely said to the mutant: "Ischy, please come with me!"

They went to his cabin and sat down to talk.

"What kind of dangerous impulses did you get, Ischy? You must keep in mind that Rhodan assigned you to protect Thora." Deringhouse opened a barrage of questions but Ischy remained steadfast.

"What I've picked up was full of threats. I was unable to read the thought-impulses clearly and I couldn't find them again... as if the mass of the planet Mutral had shifted between me and the others. I can't explain it, General."

The intercom interrupted them with a report from the Communication Centre. "The robot Brain was carrying on a conversation with somebody on Mutral. Unfortunately our interceptor failed to identify the other party in this case. There were only three short impulses transmitted from Arkon."

Deringhouse had to think of the suspicion the mutant girl had voiced earlier. "Do you know which station was involved on this planet?"

Without hesitating the radio officer replied: "The antipode station, General. Do you wish to know the exact location?"

"No, thank you!"

The speaker was silent again and Deringhouse exchanged glances with the young girl.

"I can no longer allow Thora to involve herself in this mission under any circumstances," the general decided.

But the telepath objected heatedly: "If you do that you'll have to carry Thora back to Earth in a coffin. She'll never survive such a disappointment. Do you realize that it is your fault, General, if Thora feels ill and looks old again?"

"Why my fault?" he asked defensively, unable to stifle a feeling of guilt.

"Because you requested Thora to move out of the camera's angle and insisted on confronting the robot Brain alone."

The intercom clicked again. "General, the robot Brain wishes to talk to you again. Thora is waiting for you in the Command Centre."

Deringhouse took this as a good omen. "Come with me, Ishy, and keep an eye on Thora. I'm going to let her conduct the negotiations but let me know if the haggling over the 100 spaceships becomes too strenuous for her so that I can take over. —What's the matter with you?"

Ishy Matsu's face had suddenly turned pale on her way to the Command Centre. The moment Deringhouse asked his question he realized that the girl had received a new telepathic message. Her contact with the brains of the strangers lasted only a few seconds and during that time her face looked like a mask.

Now that she turned to Deringhouse again there was no sign of her extrasensory perception. "Some Aras have landed on Mutral. They've come in connection with our arrival. I'm sorry I couldn't find out any more."

"Positive or negative?" Deringhouse inquired although he could guess the answer.

"Negative. I've seldom encountered such hateful thoughts as in this last contact. Aras? Aren't they the medical experts of the Galaxy... ingenious scientists in the field of pharmacy?" She was more talking to herself than asking her companion.

Deringhouse replied in an emphatic tone: "But the Aras never recognize their moral duties as physicians. They are descendants of the Arkonide race and just as depraved plus with a criminal bent."

They had reached the hatch to the Command Centre, which put an end to their conversation. Deringhouse couldn't remember when he had entered into negotiations with such terrible misgivings.

He was unable to brush off the thought of the unintelligible message from Aralon which had been received by the hyperradio station on Grautier. Nevertheless he made a cheerful face as he greeted Thora and sat down next to her in front of the picture screen.

As usual Ishy Matsu remained unobtrusively in the background. She turned her head to the side so that nobody could observe her face and she concentrated her telepathic powers in order to intensify the extremely weak contact in an effort to read the thoughts more clearly. However she soon lost the contact again which made it more obvious to her that the planet itself stood as an obstacle between her and the elusive persons.

As Deringhouse sat in anticipation before the picture screen he gazed at Thora. Her slightly reddened face betrayed her inner tension. Then he studied her fetching uniform which distinguished her as battleship commander of Arkon.

Thora, heir of the Arkonide Zoltral dynasty, endeavoured to gain the respect of the Robot Regent with her impressive uniform. But was it possible to awe a positronic switchbox covering something like 10,000 square kilometres?

With the insignia of her ancestral clan on her left shoulder patch, she sat erect and conscious of her past as a proud Arkonide as she waited for her encounter with the robot Brain. She had lowered her eyes and thus failed to notice Deringhouse's admiring glance. He began to doubt again the diagnosis of all the physicians who had been consulted in her case. The regeneration of her physical and mental powers and the so obviously excellent state of her health could, in his opinion, hardly represent a last flicker of life's dying flame.

Perhaps she didn't suffer from that form of leukaemia or from the effects of the sarcoma F Arkon? Or had the task that gave new meaning and importance to her life created a medical miracle?

Deringhouse heard some whispering. He looked around and saw Pasgin, Olavson and Merck standing together talking apparently about Thora. The faces of the three men also reflected amazement and they were greatly pleased that Thora looked so fresh and healthy as she concentrated on the imminent confrontation.

Suddenly the screen erupted in a splash of psychedelic colours preceding the familiar picture of the metallic dome and the most important edifice of the positronic mammoth.

The automaton stated its position squarely: "Terra's offer is unacceptable. Under certain conditions the Great Empire will consider putting 40 light and 30 heavy cruisers of the latest type at your disposal in addition to 20 warships with a sphere 500 meters in diameter as well as 10 superbattleships for immediate delivery. In return the Great Empire demands the assignment to its authority of 1,000 Terranian spaceship commanders, 1,000 ranking officers, 2,000 specialists for impulse-propulsion systems, impulse- and disintegrator-weapons, and 5,000 officers of the Terranian Spacefleet with training in jobs to be specified later."

Cool and uncompromising, Thora, Princess of Zoltral and wife of Perry Rhodan, challenged the Regent in a sharp tone: "And what is the precise meaning of your phrase *Assignment to the Authority of the Great Empire?* "

"The situation at the blockade front makes it necessary for the Great Empire to man the most important positions on our warships with Terranians."

"What will be the position of a Terranian Spacefleet commander after he's assigned to a heavy Arkonide cruiser, Regent?" Thora inquired unimpressed.

Deringhouse, sitting at her side, was unable to hold back his admiration for Thora's majestic countenance. Spontaneously, he put his hand on hers and pressed it lightly. Gratified by his mute support for her conduct of the discussion, she responded with a slight nod of her head.

"Terranian commanders will serve as First Officers on our warships, Thora of Zoltral!" the automaton replied.

"These are conditions which I find totally unacceptable. It would be contrary to the nature of a Terran to recognize a robot as his superior."

The voice of the positronic mammoth seemed to have acquired a jeering undertone as it replied: "This assertion lacks any proof. The Great Empire is in possession of studies concerning the mentality of Terrans which refute such interpretations as yours."

"With this answer the Regent revealed for the first time that he had conducted such research on human

beings of Earth as must have led to certain death for its victims.

"I don't intend to dwell on such unessential points," Thora brushed his repugnant arguments off with the greatest of ease. "However we're prepared to consider a firm agreement putting our commanders in sole charge of Arkonide warships."

The silence which followed became oppressive. Thora and Deringhouse didn't dare look at each other but she had no intention of giving the automaton a breathing spell to consult the military intelligence backlog of its computers concerning her proposal. Therefore she quickly demanded: "Before we can continue any further debate of the subject, we must insist that you countermand your orders which prevent the free movement of Solar Imperium representatives, Regent!"

"Permission to start will not be granted, Thora of Zoltral..."

"I'm Thora *Rhodan*, Regent!" Thora dressed him down in a huff.

At the same moment the robot Brain broke off the connection.

"I acted too impetuously," Thora admitted in dismay.

Deringhouse shook his head and denied it, saying: "It doesn't make much difference if the negotiations break down 10 minutes earlier or later. Now we'll have to make the Regent believe that we're stupid enough to make an attempt to start. It wouldn't be much of a bet that it'll be an exercise in futility. OK, Pasgin, Olavson! It isn't every day that a commander of the Solar Spacefleet is willing to make a fool of himself. Let's show this mechanical monster and his sleepy-headed subordinates how weak the *Burma* is!"

Joe Pasgin and Hendrik Olavson sat down in the pilot seats and announced the start over the intercom. The computer brain of the *Burma* responded instantaneously and delivered the necessary data for the start to all instruments, simultaneously evaluating Olavson's starting operations.

Control lamps flickered and two warning whistles alerted the entire ship. The simmering growl of the stepped-up machinery rose to a shrill howl in a cacophony with the thumping of the propulsion engines in the equatorial bulge that now was transformed into a strident hissing.

"Start with normal thrust!" Pasgin called to his copilot.

Normal thrust was the performance minimum valid for every regular ship in the class of the *Burma*.

The ship vibrated slightly but failed to budge. Powerful forces held it down—a potent suction field generated by projectors located under the ice kept the light cruiser in invisible chains.

In answer to Deringhouse's question the officer at the control panel reported: "The suction field was twice as strong as our normal thrust, General, but it didn't react particularly fast."

"Alright! Hold attempt to start! Wait two minutes and apply *aninstant* thrust at normal level. Men, we must make another try! I believe that the automaton will be waiting for us to call Perry Rhodan for help but we won't give him that pleasure."

Olavson pulled the main lever back to the zero mark. When he abruptly stepped it up again for the second start, the *Burma* jumped up like a bouncing rubber ball but before it reached the height of 100



meters the suction field caught up with it by pitting twice the energy against its presumable burst of maximum power. The *Burma* was not merely brought to a halt but was forced to come down again in a landing which could be handled by its telescopic legs only with great difficulty.

With the exception of Thora and Deringhouse, whose spirit was boosted by the effort, the crew had a sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach.

The placidity of Mutral's Arkonide commander seemed to have been disturbed by the demonstration. He announced over the telecom that he had sent a robot commando team to the *Burma* to investigate the incident.

Thora swiftly went before the telecom screen. "Taa-Rell, I believe you know me!"

The Arkonide with the puffy face stared at the proud woman in the uniform of a commander. "Milady..." he stuttered and tried to make a bow.

"Taa-Rell!" she rebuked him in a brittle voice. "Call off your robot commandos at once!"

The Arkonide—somewhere in a subterranean fortress squirmed. "Milady, the Great Cöordinator has given me his orders. I'm not in a position to withdraw the commandos since the robots have been put under the direction of the Regent by their programs. I beg you a thousand times..."

With an impulsive gesture Thora cut off the connection. She laughed bitterly and cried out in sorrow: "Poor Great Empire!"

Big Alden, the fire-control officer, of the *Burma*, alerted them over the telecom: "50 heavy fighter robots coming out of the ice. What are your orders, General?"

Joe Pasgin focused on the formation of fighting machines that advanced across the cracking ice. The robots leaped over meter-wide crevices as if they were lightweights instead of tons of steel, Their armour which was able to withstand 30,000° and was impervious to the lowest temperatures, shone in the glaring light of the lamps.

"The Robot Regent is sending his minions aboard!" Pasgin shouted to the fire-control officer of his ship. Big Alden acknowledged the news with a bloody curse.

Deringhouse suddenly felt that someone sought his attention. He turned around and saw Ishy Matsu, whose presence he had forgotten, giving him a sign that she was anxious to speak to him. However the situation required his immediate attention and he was unable to follow her urgent request.

Without wasting his time he issued the warning: "Alert all robots! Put 20 outside airlock #3 and 30 more machines to back them up. All others to stand by for action. Only three of the Arkonide robots will be permitted to come aboard." He switched off and added: "I'll be a son of a gun if I invite that gang of trouble!"

The rangefinder at the observation screen indicated 9 that the 50 fighter robots had reached the protective energy shield of the *Burma*.

"Let no more than three of them pass!" Deringhouse ordered. "Pasgin, watch out that the robots are prevented from suddenly lunging forward. I don't trust these machines. I've had too much experience with them in the past."

He took the first opportunity to glance at Ischy Matsu again. Her gestures conveyed her impatience. "Come at once!" she seemed to implore him.

Deringhouse made his decisions. "Pasgin, take over! I'll go to the airlock. No, I won't need anybody to accompany me, Thora, I must urge you not to leave the Command Centre under any circumstances. I'll explain later."

He sprouted a rapid fire of commands, a clear indication of the seriousness with which he regarded the imminent visit of the Arkonide robots.

Since the state of alarm was in force the Command Centre was in direct communication with all departments of the light cruiser so that every man aboard had heard Deringhouse's instructions.

As the general passed Ischy Matsu on his way to leave the Command Centre he said casually: "Hi, Ischy! Would you mind coming with me? I've got a little job for you."

As soon as the door was closed behind them he sprung his question: "What's going on?"

Ischy's lovely face looked pale despite her Oriental complexion. "The robot commando has orders to seize you and Thora by force and to take you away from the ship."

This assertion seemed so horrendous to Deringhouse that he asked her sceptically and full of consternation: "Where did you get that, Ischy?"

The telepathic girl remained firm. "When Thora talked to the commander of the fortress I received for the first time clear impulses. The Aras have come to assist Taa-Rell. They've been instructed by the Robot Regent to brainwash you or Thora and to interrogate you about the position of Terra."

Big Alden, the fire-control officer of the *Burma*, lent some support to Ischy's claims. "Gen. Deringhouse!" his voice blared from the loudspeakers in the corridor. "All armed forces on Mutral have been mobilized against us!"

At the same moment an inferno of fire broke out around the little *Burma* from all directions. Lightning-fast energy shafts, some as large as 50 meters, smashed the protective shield of the *Burma* on the first impact.

That the *Burma* didn't perish in the white-hot energy explosion was due only to the brief duration of the hail of fire which was not directed at the ship itself but only at the protective shield. However the *Burma* was no longer the same ship as before.

Deringhouse ran back to the Command Centre and heard the fire-control officer shout from the loudspeakers: "All weapons inoperative! Barrels completely deformed!"

The general, who had missed witnessing the disaster with his own eyes, couldn't understand why the *Burma* suddenly heeled over to the side.

The power generators and transformers inside the ship began to rumble and the engines whined.

The light-controlled hatch flew open and Deringhouse darted over to Hendrik Olavson. He knocked the control lever out of the pilot's hand and said in a calm voice as if he had a whole week to make the next

decision: "Don't be so hasty, gentlemen!"

Then he called into the mike of the telecom: "Gen. Deringhouse speaking! Do not open airlock #3! Inspect damage and report to your officers. Activate work-robots!" And to fire control officer Alden, who had no weapons left to fire, he added the message: "Report to the Command Centre for a special task!"

"Olavson, what makes the *Burma* list like that?"

"They must have shot away some of our telescopic supports," the young lieutenant replied in helpless fury.

"I take it that there was no direct attack on our ship."

"No sir. They had only one aim in mind. They wanted to annihilate our defence shield so the robots can get through and this our big friends have accomplished."

"For heaven's sake, Olavson, did that flash in the pan paralyse you? Why don't you step up the antigravitators to level out the *Burma* again?" Deringhouse was furious.

"Propulsion engines #4, 7 & 11 have been knocked out too, General!"

"Too? What else? The antigravitators?"

There was a signal from the telecom and the puffy face of the Arkonide commander appeared again. Thora hadn't left her chair and thus faced the commander once more.

"Milady," The Arkonide said subserviently, "I beg you not to resist the boarding of your ship by our robots. I implore you and your general to put on spacesuits and let the robots accompany you to my place for a conference. These measures have to be taken on behalf of the Great Cöordinator, Milady!" The last words sounded like an anguished cry.

"What does the Robot Brain expect us to do?" Thora asked in a trenchant voice and then accused him with a flushed face and flashing eyes: "You're lying to me! What do you intend to do to the general and me? I, Thora of Zoltral, demand the truth from you, Arkonide!"

*Good heavens, Deringhouse thought, more in doubt than ever, Thora is as healthy as anybody around here! She's getting younger every minute as if the life-prolonging serum were just beginning to take effect!*

Taa-Rell was stunned by Thora's accusation. His dilemma was reflected in his pasty face. But before he could open his mouth for a reply, the telecom was turned off by somebody else who had remained invisible in his room.

Thora looked at Deringhouse. "What are our chances?" she asked calmly; her voice had regained its old vigour. She was able to smile despite the situation fraught with danger. With inimitable grace she stroked back a strand of hair from her forehead.

"I've survived worse situations than this," Deringhouse evaded her probing question.

"So it looks pretty bad..." She was interrupted by the telecom's report: "The antigravitators are

functioning again!"

Thora jumped up. She seemed to burst with energy and determination. Her face showed a vivacious colour and the blood was flowing strongly through her hands, which had looked so transparent on Venus.

Hendrik Olavson succeeded in restoring the *Burma* to a level position again, which was quite a feat considering that one-third of the telescopic supports were missing.

"Propulsion engines #4 & 11 are back in operation," an officer announced from the ring of engines around the vessel. "Engine #7 is beyond repair."

"Deringhouse..." Thora put her hand on his arm, "...if the Robot Brain has any respect for a human being, it must be my husband!"

The time had come to tell her the truth. "It was our mistake to assume this, Thora. The mammoth Brain was constructed by the Arkonide scientists for the exclusive purpose of preserving the Empire of Arkon and has been programmed accordingly. The ethical concept of friendship is and will remain alien to it because it can't act contrary to its program. Such a decision would simply be outside the scope of a positronic brain, Thora. You and I have been summoned by Taa-Rell to undergo the brainwashing by the Aras. The automaton on Arkon 3 considers the verification of Terra's position of paramount importance. Despite the desperate situation at the overlap-zone it contemplates the risk of a massive attack on the Solar Imperium!"

"I suspected as much when I charged Taa-Rell with acting in bad faith. If you're right, Deringhouse, we've no alternative but to make a desperate attempt to escape. How high do you think we can go?"

The officers in the Command Centre exchanged appreciative glances. They were greatly impressed by Thora's courage and calm. In a most casual tone she had just inquired at what altitude the *Burma* would evaporate in space after the futile attempt to flee.

"First of all we'll have to do something about these. 50 fighter robots. It may be ridiculous but we can't take off unless these robots withdraw and they won't do that voluntarily without taking you and me with them. Or..." Deringhouse stopped to think hard. "Yes, that's what we'll have to try! Com Centre, connect me with the Robot Brain. Use the Urgent Code!"

"Yes sir," the radio officer answered, "Urgent Code."

## 7/ SENSELESS TRAGEDY

The connection with Arkon 3 could not be effected.

Taa-Rell called again to issue an ultimatum. He gave them 10 minutes. Fifty Arkonide fighting machines waited for admittance.

The antigravitators of the *Burma* droned even louder to keep the ship in horizontal position. Deringhouse kept a close watch. "Where did the robots take up positions outside the ship?" he inquired with

pretended calm.

The observation instruments at airlock #3 were still intact after the hurricane of unleashed energy and Deringhouse received the information on the spot.

"Is that so?" Deringhouse responded, to the disappointment of everybody.

Fire Control Officer Alden returned from his special assignment. The sweat dripped from his face but he didn't seem to mind as he reported happily: "All energy lines to the weapons sector have been channelled to the propulsion system. Our impulse-engine technicians have assured me that the propulsion ring assembly won't be blown away, General."

Deringhouse ignored the questioning eyes of his staff officers. "Seven more minutes. I think it's time we got busy, gentlemen. Pasgin!"

"General?" the First Officer looked expectantly at Deringhouse.

"Have all connections to the destroyed telescopic supports been severed?"

"Yes sir!"

"Very good. Now pay close attention to the following instructions. This is Gen. Deringhouse!" he called into the mike of ship's telecom. "All men are directed to take precautions against injuries by a violent change of the ship's stability. Make sure to remove all hazards from falling objects!"

Only Pasgin and Olavson seemed to have an inkling of the general's plan and they grinned with great satisfaction.

Next Deringhouse called airlock #3. "Assemble our fighter robots at your station. As soon as the ship has come to rest again they must launch a lightning attack on the bunkers of their opposite numbers!"

"Now I can see your strategy," Thora commented as she secured herself in her chair and the personnel in the Command Centre followed her example.

Five minutes before the ultimatum expired, Joe Pasgin timed the abrupt retraction of the remaining number of telescopic legs with the simultaneous cessation of the antigravitators' boost. The light cruiser hit the ground, toppled over and buried itself deep in the icy surface of Mutral.

A thunderous roar shook the body of the sphere. The ice was crushed with an infernal din and compressed under the impact of tons of steel. The sudden compression heated the ice and caused it to melt so that the *Burma* sank deeper and deeper till it finally settled on the rocks underneath.

The incidental reduction of 50 Arkonide robots into a pile of junk was a welcome side effect.

Unfortunately Deringhouse's calculations were erroneous in one respect: the *Burma* was so hemmed in by, the ice that it would be unable to free itself under its own power. Deringhouse saw his mistake at once and gave orders to disembark 30 more robots through airlock #1.

The men watching the action on the panoramic screen made bets as to how many of their robots would reach the entrance to the subterranean fortifications.

They were well aware that the planetary defence installations of the Arkonides could bring no more than one-thousandth of their potential pressure to bear against the intruders because the system was designed to repulse attacks from outer space and only a very small part of their artillery could be deployed against targets moving on the icy plain. However the Arkonides and their robots had already proven how much damage they could inflict by smashing the highly effective protective shield of the *Burma* .

30 Terranian fighting machines, soaring in the protection of their own antigrav fields, self-controlled and able to make their independent decisions, raced from three directions toward their goal although they had started from the same exit.

An energy beam fanned out broadly from one of the numerous dark openings in the ice of Mutral. Two robots went up in smoke and a third was cut in two by the devastating power of the ray and plummeted to the ground.

Two more ray cannons joined the fray with a deafening thunder, making the massive rock and compact ice shake as they sent their blasts out into space with the heat of a sun.

Four robots were caught together in the blasts of impulse-cannons and formed long white-hot trails in the sky.

"Disintegrator rays!" Hendrik Olavson exclaimed as two other mechanical men suddenly evaporated and made the aligned wave concentrations of the energy field discernible.

"Two of them got through Merck shouted triumphantly. Then he suddenly gasped when he failed to see any other robots in the air. Soon he realized that he had underestimated the resourcefulness of the robots. Those who were still in fighting shape had dropped down between jumbled ice formations and hugged the ground as they advanced like infantry.

"Attack from the right!" Merck warned loudly.

Eight Arkonide robots dashed out from a concealed underground bunker. The first got no farther than 5 meters before it perished in the heat of thermo-beams.

But then the situation became critical. Two other openings spewed Arkonide reinforcements out on the surface till more than 40 robots confronted their 20 equals from Terra. There was no room for courage or cowardice in their make-up: they only did what they were designed to do.

"Release second team of robots!" Deringhouse bellowed into the mike.

A few seconds later airlock #1 reported to the Command Centre: "Diffraction projectiles ejected, General!"

None of the staff officers had noticed the launching and they were reluctant to ask Deringhouse about it. Their attention was glued to the fascinating battle raging between robots bent on each others' destruction. The outcome could decide if they were ever to see Earth again"

Thora leaned forward and asked Deringhouse: "What's the purpose of the projectiles?"

Deringhouse answered ominously: "The Arkonides will be wondering about it too when their computers go berserk and feed the craziest data to the rangefinder instruments of their artillery."

Thora had been too much isolated from the constantly improving technology of the Solar Imperium and his answer didn't mean much to her. She asked another question but had to wait for his answer.

"Airlocks #2 & 4! Let the robots go!" Deringhouse was seized by battle fever but remained on top of the action. Nor did he forget Thora's question. "These diffraction projectiles are jamming devices which were built by the Swoons. They are even better than the ones Pucky's dearest friend Muzzel has supplied for the Drusus. Look, Thora!" The transmitters are already functioning. Did you see those three impulse-beams which shot almost straight up into space? I hope that the *Burma* won't get hit by accident."

Pandemonium had broken out on the icy world of Mutral. What first looked like a probing mission of the Terranian robots now had developed into a relentless battle of crunching steel colossi who were better suited than human beings by virtue of their positronic control and ability to react with instant accuracy.

Suddenly Deringhouse gained the impression that the artificial light had grown a little dimmer outside. Thora had noticed it even before him. "Three robots have spread out in the darkness. I wonder if they're knocking out the searchlights?"

Shortly afterwards their guess was confirmed when it suddenly went dark in the north. However the machines were still able to tell friend from foe.

Now the ground burst open. Tremendous flames licked the sky and violent explosions ripped through rock and ice as a small part of the subterranean bulwark dissolved in a red cloud.

"Glord!" Merck wondered aloud, "what are they shooting at?"

"Attack from outer space," the officer at the space screen sensor guessed before he looked at the instrument in front of him which could supply the information. The space sensor registered nothing at all. "What's the matter with those skony Arkonide target-trackers?" he added. "What are they shooting at?"

It was the same question Merck had asked but he was too puzzled to take notice of it.

More and more guns opened up and fired their deathly rays into the sky in a steady stream without varying their useless direction.

All around the *Burma*, lying slanted in the ice, the planet erupted and spewed out chunks of red-hot Arkonide steel. An atomic chain reaction appeared to be in progress at 7 different places.

Deringhouse wondered about the havoc the shockwaves of the explosions would cause throughout the subterranean fortifications and whether the commander of Mutral and the Aras who had joined him on orders of the Robot Brain would survive the inferno.

Ignoring the uproar around him, which devastated the surroundings of the *Burma* and made its hull reverberate like an enormous bell, Olavson tried once more to pull the ship out by applying the antigravitators to the hilt. He was overjoyed by his success and yelled lustily: "Up we go! The suction field is gone. More power to the generators... a little more... here we go!"

The 100-meter sphere bounced up, swayed back forth and finally settled down on its extended telescopic supports.

Deringhouse was on the verge of giving the order to clear out and to leave about 2 dozen robots behind

since their loss didn't matter very much. His mission to get 100 warships from Arkon had been frustrated in any case. But before he was able to issue the command to start, he noticed that three of their robots came running back. Each one carried in its metallic arms an Arkonide clad in a spacesuit.

"Wait a minute, Deringhouse!" Thora had put her hand on his arm. The pressure of her fingers was strong and although the tone of her voice was urgent it was no order but a plea to attract his attention to the three robots racing toward the ship.

Deringhouse looked at her in utter astonishment. He couldn't believe his eyes. Was this the same woman who was supposed to suffer from a disease like leukaemia?

But he had no time to reflect further on the thought as the robots had reached the *Burma* with their loads and ducked into its shade.

All of a sudden Mutral seemed to fly apart! A volcano of pent-up energy issued forth from the depth of the planet and tore it asunder. The *Burma* tottered under the convulsions of the ground until the antigravitators restored its balance again.

The tremendous explosion ripped through the powerful subterranean machinery installations which generated the energy for thousands of artillery emplacements. This sector of the planetary fortress of Mutral was so thoroughly demolished that it would automatically result in the intervention of the Robot Regent. The loss of the gigantic power stations was extremely serious.

Although the 27th planet was at the outer fringes of the Arkon, system, it bristled with weapons and was linked to Arkon 3 in a defence network which had stood the test of time for thousands of years. It was unthinkable that the mammoth brain wouldn't register the loss it had sustained without delay and the Terranians had learned from bitter experience how quickly it could react.

"Emergency start!" Deringhouse roared above the din of churning rocks which answered their collision with the unfettered torrent of energy with a noise that could be heard around the planet.

There was a report from airlock #2 which was drowned out by the frenetic turmoil.

The First Officer of the *Burma* yielded his seat to the general. Hendrik Olavson instantly slammed his controls on Start. The protective field generators whistled briefly with an intensity that surpassed everything else and the high-tension screen guarded the light cruiser again as it blasted out into space with maximum thrust.

"Eight units spotted at yellow, General!"

This was the answer of the Robot Brain to the destruction of one of its large power stations on Mutral. The giant positronicon had already mobilized 8 robot-battleships.

"14 units approaching from green and yellow!"

Now the *Burma* demonstrated its supreme power of acceleration and the superb coordination of all its aggregates. One minute had passed since the takeoff and the ship had reached 0.3 speol when the computer began to emit the transition data. Mutral had dropped away from the vessel like a stone but now the planet belched fire. A thermo-beam of incredible size missed the *Burma* by less than one kilometre, taking the breath away from the officers in the Command Centre.



The radio officer announced: "Call from the Robot Brain. Demands return to Mutral."

"Go to hell!" Thora Rhodan exclaimed in a vibrant voice. Her eyes gleamed as she followed the ever-faster turning dial showing the phenomena! Acceleration of the *Burma* .

"Over to Phi, Olavson! Deringhouse shouted fiercely. He knew that only Olavson's genius could get them out of this witch cauldron that threatened to engulf them.

The thrust-absorbers screeched and red lamps flickered on the instrument panel. Warning sirens joined in. Olavson shoved the main control lever up against the stop.

The *Burma* responded instantly to the seething forces and the acceleration leaped up on the scale as the light cruiser performed a sweeping curve at fantastic speed. A blinding deluge of energy raced toward the ship faster than the eye could follow. Four spaceships of the Imperium class had loosed broadsides against the little *Burma* but had failed to allow for the abrupt change of course. The energy shafts streaked past the protective shield of the *Burma* like a hot breath, out of hell and their slight touch was enough to push the field projectors up to over 100%. The warning lamps and howls of alarm combined to create a mad spectacle in the Command Centre as the *Burma* was in danger of flying apart or losing its ring of engines.

Mutral resumed its fire. Had they scored a hit? The hull of the *Burma* droned like a bell but the fear of an atomic explosion was averted, as it remained intact.

"Enemy object at blue..."

The field projectors of the protective screen had dropped to 100% again but the output of the propulsion system had risen to the magnitude of 107!

Deringhouse was bathed in sweat and his eyes burned. Watching Olavson operating with unnatural calm from the copilot seat didn't give him much relief.

At this moment the computer brain of the *Burma* began the countdown for the transition which was set to take place in 30 seconds. Arkon seemed to know when it was coming.

Mutral kept shooting with all guns at the fleeing cruiser from Terra while more than 30 Arkonide warships approached the *Burma* in concentric flight.

Olavson's hands flitted like shadows across the extensive control panel. He conducted more reckless evasive manoeuvres than any other spaceship had ever been forced to fly. Something or other was constantly taxed to the limit of its performance aboard the light cruiser or exceeded it—either the propulsion engines, the antigravitators, the protective shield projectors or the thrust-absorbers. It was a true miracle that the bulge around the vessel had not become separated from the hull by the strain.

"Transition in 10 seconds!"

Suddenly they were 'greeted' by a fortress in space—one of 5,000 such bulwarks which were part of Arkon's defensive system that stretched 20 light-hours far into space beyond the most distant planet.

Five impulse-beams streaked past the *Burma* . The course of the ship seemed to carry it to its doom.

Finally it was time for the transition! The moment they jumped into hyperspace they were struck by a

volley—a direct hit which caught the ship as it dematerialised.

The full energy of a disintegrator beam from the gun of an Arkonide superbattleship combined with the transition-energy of the *Burma*. Its destructive effect was eliminated but the transition-energy was multiplied enormously.

The crew was in the throes of the most painful transition shock and fought desperately to pull out of it. Only Thora was unaffected by any physical discomfort and she was the one who first raised the cry of alarm: "We're plunging into a sun!"

The panoramic screen of the Command Centre was inundated from all sides by a flood of brilliant light.

Once again it was Hendrik Olavson who reacted instantaneously. He performed an emergency transition without computer data and without asking questions.

Only after they had materialized again in the normal universe did he turn to Deringhouse, tapping his brow. "Should I have waited for your orders, General?"

Before Deringhouse replied he glanced at the panoramic screen where the sun which had nearly swallowed them up a few seconds earlier now appeared as a tiny luminous disk. "To fly with you, Olavson, is a hell of a torture." He put his hand on Olavson's shoulder in admiration. But the next moment he roared: "How was it possible that we got the wrong transition data and almost collided with a sun when we emerged from hyperspace?"

Deringhouse was completely unaware that the *Burma* had received a direct hit from the Arkonide battleship when it was just entering the stage of dematerialisation and had adjusted its energy to the dynamics of hyperspace.

Those of the men who had served Perry Rhodan for many decades in a variety of missions had learned to expect the most improbable incidents but to be hurled toward a sun upon return to their own cosmos was something new.

The computer brain was consulted for the purpose of orientation. At the structure-sensor the officer stared suspiciously at his scanning instruments. "There's nothing in our range, General... although we passed through hyperspace without using the auto-frequency attenuator."

He sounded confused and Deringhouse looked at him dubiously.

As they waited tensely for the information of the computer brain, the quiet was broken by a report from airlock #2: "The robots brought in the Chief Commander Taa-Rell and two Aras!"

"The boss will be tickled that we caught them!" Merck exclaimed impulsively.

Deringhouse bit his lip. "Some thrill for Rhodan!" he said in disgust. "I wish we could have come back with 100 new spaceships instead of an Arkonide and two Aras! Confound it! What are we going to do with these banicks? (21st Cent. Slang for "BUGGERS". Corruption of Badniks?) We can't take them back..."

"I'll take care of them!" Thora decided and left the Command Centre at once as the men followed her with their eyes. Several shook their heads uncomprehendingly.

Deringhouse only muttered to himself: "I wonder what these doctors have found wrong with Thora? If she's terminally ill we'll all be coffin candidates soon. I'll be damned if I understand it! I give up."

The computer brain also had its difficulties. It was unable to come up with a satisfactory result on the basis of the data it had received and it asked for additional information.

Now Deringhouse took over and directed the inquiry himself. His questions were markedly different from those of the younger officer. Although he had remained youthful in appearance due to the cell-shower treatment he had received on the planet Wanderer, he had gained considerably more experience than his officers had in the 60 years that had already been added to his life.

Nevertheless the computer brain had great trouble answering his questions since it took time to determine and digest the fact that the *Burma* had absorbed extra energy from the disintegrator beam at the very time it dematerialised and crossed the threshold of hyperspace. The additional energy was completely converted and augmented the force of the transition radically.

"If only somebody could tell me where we are!" the astrogator sighed, glancing surreptitiously at Hendrik Olavson.

But the young lieutenant failed to be disconcerted. "We got away alive and there are no more Arkonide warships in sight. I guess that's what matters most!"

At the moment the minds of the officers in the Command Centre were more occupied with the question of orientation than with the presence of Taa-Rell and the two Aras aboard their ship. The whole team surrounded the computer brain and waited for the result.

Finally the strip with the information was ejected and Deringhouse picked it up hastily. Sensing a feeling of consternation he sat down before he studied the strip whose symbols were as familiar to him as his own handwriting.

Suddenly he turned pale. He had trouble believing the statement of the computer brain and said with a grave voice: "Gentlemen, this is a problem for our physicist. Don't ask me how we survived it..."

Merck was the last to examine the answer. "This is... it almost is like somebody rushing out of a room and getting a kick in the pants to expedite him! This could have hit us between the eyes," he commented dryly.

It took 30 more minutes before they were able to ascertain their present position. They had set a new record by leaping a distance of 15000 light-years in one transition but could take no credit for the extraordinary feat.

As the Arkon system was located 34000 light-years from Terra they found themselves to be 49,000 light-years from the Solar Imperium and the stellar cluster M-13 was situated between their ship and Earth.

The impact of the disintegrator beam must have caused the *Burma* to deviate 180° from its course so that it traversed the hyperspace in the opposite direction. It was to be assumed that the Arkonide space-monitoring stations had registered the structure disturbance which had been created by the Terranian vessel but had failed to connect it with the *Burma*. The Arkonide robotships must be searching space everywhere else except 15,000 light-years behind their system!

"Now we'll have time to prepare for the next transition without being disturbed," Deringhouse directed, "but this time with the auto-frequency damper. I want to get back to Earth and then to Venus without such harrowing interludes. On Venus I'm going to have a little chat with Dr. Villnoess! Won't he be surprised!"

Deringhouse sounded very belligerent although he had every reason to be happy about the miracle which had happened to Thora Rhodan. On the other hand he also remembered his fears for Thora's fate because he couldn't forget Dr. Villnoess' warning: "The healthier Thora looks the sicker she can be!"

He got up and said to Pasgin: "You can take over the ship again. I want to take a look at our visitors."

On his way to Thora, Deringhouse ran into the physicians who came from her cabin. "Well?" he inquired tersely.

Dr. Brann made a helpless gesture. "General, my colleagues and I must be dilettantes or else we've been witnesses to a miracle. . .

"Nonsense;" Dr. Elslow interjected excitedly. "I don't believe in miracles. I still maintain that the symptoms of leukaemia and the so-called Sarcoma F Arkon syndrome were nothing but delayed reactions to the serum, which the mutants John Marshall and Marten obtained, from the Aras on Tolimon. That's the only explanation for it. You saw the blood test!" Dr. Elslow defended his opinion, vigorously and both his colleagues were visibly impressed.

But Deringhouse, being a layman, preferred to stay out of the dispute. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, just tell me one thing: is Thora sick or well? I'm a soldier and I'm not interested in questions of why and how."

"We've just examined Thora again. She's not only healthy. . . she's getting younger again. We performed cell-tissue tests, using the Ara analyser. Her tissue showed a resilience such as I have observed only in young girls under 20 years of age."

Dr. Brann was a little puzzled why Deringhouse suddenly patted him on the shoulder and left for Thora's cabin, whistling in a low key.

"General!" Dr. Elslow called behind him. "If you want to see Thora, you'll have to go to deck H. That's where she went to conduct the interrogation of the Aras and Taa-Rell."

Deringhouse turned around and went to the antigrav elevator which took him to deck H where the detainment room for prisoners was located. He noticed with dismay that, contrary to the security rules, the robot on guard duty was standing outside the door.

The mechanical sentry stepped obediently aside.

Deringhouse opened the door.

It all happened with unbelievable suddenness.

There was the flash of a raygun.

A bloodcurdling scream ran in Deringhouse's ears: "You traitor!"

Instinctively Deringhouse had his blaster out, of its holster and in his hand and fired at the long-legged

man with his back to him.

The Ara slumped to the floor.

Thora cried out—a cry terrible in its intensity, its implication. A cry not of fright but of injury—severe, serious.

Deringhouse nearly knocked Ishy Matsu down as he leapt over the body of the infamous Ara. Together with Ishy he saw a heart-stopping sight: Thora... deathly pale... hand clutched to her side in pain and bewilderment... swaying... sinking to the floor...

*Fatally wounded!*

"God! God!" Deringhouse shouted. "A doctor—*quick!*" He was utterly unnerved.

There was no alarm button in the prison cell.

Ishy raced from the room to summon help.

Deringhouse knelt beside this woman for whom he felt such a deep platonic love. He cradled her head in his lap, smoothed her long silky hair.

How young her face looked! Yet so pale... so frighteningly pale!

The lids rose tremulously, revealing Thora's luminous red-gold eyes. They regarded Deringhouse but they saw another in his place.

A wan smile formed at the corners of Thora's mouth. Deringhouse inclined his head, placed an ear near her pallid lips and heard her whisper: "Perry... My beloved husband. Why do I hurt so? What has happened to me? Oh—!" Deringhouse winced as the dying woman he adored grimaced in pain, grasped her side. "Perry! Take me in your arms! Hold me!"

Deringhouse was seized by a paroxysm of indecision. Should he play the part? The moment was holy.

He looked down at her, his vision blurred by tears. But it was not his tears alone that diminished the brilliance of her eyes: they were visibly dimming of their own accord as the inner light of her being burned low and near to extinction.

"Perry..." she murmured again, almost inaudibly.

"*Where are the doctors!*" Deringhouse cried out in despair.

Then Thora uttered the final words of her life. "Perry—it's been... wonderful... to be with you. You've done so much... for others... and for me. Our son Thomas—" An involuntary gasp. "Perry... Perry..."

At that moment Dr. Brann finally rushed into the room, Dr. Elslow hard on his heels.

All witnessed in choking disbelief the last feeble movement of Thora's head as her face turned toward the wall.

The doctors examined her fatal injury in shocked silence.

Her proud spirit was gone, at one with the universe and eternity.

\* \* \* \*

A short while later the doctors noticed the wounded Ara. There was nothing they could do for Thora but true to their medical code they began to treat the heinous murderer to try to save his life.

Overwhelmed by grief and loss, Deringhouse knelt beside the body of the amazing Arkonide woman whom he had adored so ardently, and wept unashamedly. He was at a loss to understand how the weapon could have fallen into the hands of the Ara nor could he understand what the physicians had told him only a few minutes earlier about Thora's remarkable metamorphosis and how she was growing steadily younger.

Heartbroken, he regarded the glazed eyes from which the gold had faded, the lifeless face whose lovely lips, pale as pink porcelain, still wore a yearning smile where a moment before had dwelt that mysterious spark of that unfathomable enigma called life.

Deringhouse swallowed painfully in deepest despair.

How was the impossible information to be conveyed to his commander?

The man whose name had been framed on Thora's dying lips?

"Perry—!"

## 8/ AFTERMATH

After briefly touching down on Grautier, they flew back to Earth in the *Burma* .

Ishy Matsu was aboard. The winsome girl bitterly blamed herself for Thora's death because the mad Ara had suddenly seized the weapon from her holster when she walked past him and had snuffed out Thora's life before the telepath could detect the murderous intention in his mind.

Perry Rhodan was alone with Thora, holding the deathwatch.

He had the strength to console Ishy Matsu and tried to make her see that Thora had been the victim of a tragic accident. But for himself there was no solace.

Sitting for hours, days, beside the embalmed body of his lovely Arkonide wife, he contemplated her young, ethereal beauty, the slim form, once so icy, later so warm, that had borne him his only son.

While Perry mourned, a mausoleum was erected on Terra's Moon at the site where Thora of Zoltral originally made her emergency landing in the Arkonide exploration ship she commanded. It was not an ornate monument; rather, its clean graceful lines gave it an imposing dignity.

It was a testimony in stone and steel meant to last through millennia to honour Thora Rhodan—the benign spirit of the young Solar Imperium.

\* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, had Rhodan closed his mind to the dangers which menaced the Galaxy from the overlap zone? Was the Administrator of the aspiring Imperium completely crushed by fate's cruel blow? His best friend Reginald Bell tried his best to help him overcome his completely understandable and all-too-human grief.

Khrest, who alone with Thora survived the Arkonide expedition stranded on the Moon, struggled to gain control of his emotions. Someone had claimed after the stopover of the *Burma* on Grautier that Thora had been seen to be a radiant young woman once again in a superb state of health... when she was incredibly slain. Khrest was concerned lest Rhodan should hear the rumour.

Noble intention but impossible of realization. Rhodan had learned the truth of the rumour and it made Thora's death even more tragic, more difficult to bear.

Thora's body, otherworldly in beauty even in death, was flown to the Moon.

Her husband and son Thomas stood mutely by her grave.

The eyes of the father—the mightiest man in the Imperium—begged, forgiveness of the 24-year-old Spacefleet lieutenant who had spurned him as his father, even rejecting his name. Perry Rhodan extended his hand hopefully to his son—but Thomas Cardif disdained his silent plea.

Rhodan's agony was doubled as the bitter, unbending youth stood stonily by his side, cold as the eternal ice of the planet Snowman. Thomas Cardif, flesh of Rhodan, blood of Thora, but his thoughts were his own, and though he stood within an arm's length of his father and scant feet from the mortal remains of his mother, his filial feelings were light-years removed from both.

Mercifully, Thora was spared witnessing this, the nadir of her husband's life.

Perry Rhodan slowly withdrew his proffered hand as he regarded sorrowfully his only son. Then he gazed at Thora's lovely quiescent face beneath the transparent protective enclosure.

Rhodan did not notice that the kind but impulsive Reginald Bell clamped his fingers around Thomas Cardif's wrist like a vice of steel and forced the young man to step behind his father and next to Khrest. Khrest regarded the youth with unconcealed fury and resentment and the only two words he uttered to him expressed a world of contempt. From his lips they sounded like the vilest curse: "*You Arkonide!*"

No one had an inkling that Perry Rhodan's thoughts were also occupied by Arkon. The Robot Brain had begun to obtrude, on his mind again, the monstrous computer complex that covered more than 10,000 square kilometres and ruled the gigantic empire of stars with inhuman logic.

Succumbing momentarily to his unbearable torment, a thought of wrathful hate half-unconsciously formed in Rhodan's tortured mind. But before he grasped its dangers it faded away again and gave way to a feeling of dismal loneliness.

When he raised his eyes again he saw his friend Reginald Bell standing at his side where his son had been and billions of mourners, who witnessed the entombment on their larger-than-life holo-screens, clearly observed a faint mellow expression flit over Rhodan's grief-lined features as he took a deep breath and snuffled his nose.

Perry's fellow Terrestrials, whether on Earth or Venus or in ships in the sea of space, discovered in their leader's most bitter hour that the Peacelord of the Universe was not a god, not an unbreakable superman, but a very human being.

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

WITH THE LOSS of his wife, will Perry Rhodan be able to carry on?

He must... for the sake of mankind, for our stake in the future, in the universe, and for the goal of galactic peace.

So 'tis to Grautier that he'll go, to combat a menace even greater than that of the Druufs.

On Grautier, the Grey Beast world, the Terranian Spacefleet—500,000 soldiers strong—will hold themselves in readiness to hurl their might against an inhuman enemy.

The next episode is no picnic.

It's the saga of—

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