

IS THE CHIEF DEAD?

A DARK AGE seems to have begun for mankind with the death of Perry Rhodan's beloved Arkonide wife Thora.

Is Rhodan himself dead?

The fear spreads like wildfire as 500,000 men wait in vain for a command from their Chief.

Discovering that the positronic Robot Brain on Arkon is, even beyond the menace of the Druufs, in actuality the greatest danger to Earth, the Solar Administrator has ordered the entire massed might of the Terranian Spacefleet to stand in readiness for *ablitzkrieg* aimed at destroying the threat of the non-human ruler of Arkon.

But Perry Rhodan is on the secret base on Grautier when that planet dies—and Rhodan with it?—in

THE ATOM HELL OF GRAUTIER

1/ SURPRISE ATTACK

The moment the *Rigel* came out of transition, Paul Brackett saw fleeting green flashes flit across the oscillograph screen. Brackett was still wracked by the pain of the hypertransition but he knew at once what the flashes meant.

The *Rigel*, battlecruiser of the Terran Fleet, was on its way back to the fleet base on the planet Grautier. In the vicinity of the overlapping zone where the time-planes of the Druuf Universe and the Einstein Universe met, the *Rigel* had discharged supplies for the secret base on the planet Hades in the Druuf system, transporting them by means of the matter transmitter. The operation had required several hours, hours in which fully half the 800-man crew was kept busy keeping a watch out for the ships of the Arkonide blockade fleet. Arkon was maintaining a constant patrol around the overlapping zone, throwing back the Druufs each time they attempted to cross-over into the Einstein Universe. The Terran fleet base was unknown to the Arkonides and for the time being it was Terra's chief concern to keep it that way. That meant that Earth ships had to make use of every possible security measure for traffic between Grautier and the overlapping zone, which was only a few light-years away and at the same time the theatre of operations for the Arkonide blockade fleet, so that the Arkonides would not learn where the base was.

That had succeeded in the past weeks—a masterpiece of the tactics of throwing the hounds off the trail, as everyone had to admit. However, Paul Brackett was convinced the catastrophe was now beginning.

The flashes had crossed the screen of the oscillograph towards the right and disappeared. The entire incident had not lasted any longer than 2 or 2½ seconds. But the Robot Regent on Arkon had its spies listening everywhere, and with the close attention they paid to every unexpected or unexplained signal, an even briefer one would not have escaped them.

Paul Brackett's oscillograph was connected to the *Rigel's* frequency damper, which prevented the energy radiated by the ship's hyper-engines at the beginning and ending of each transition from being discharged into space. Instead the energy was absorbed within the ship.

If the damper had functioned flawlessly, Paul Brackett would not have been able to see green flashes. Since he had seen them, the damper was not operating properly. The residue of energy from the transition had been released into space and at that moment, somewhere within a range of at most 5 light-years, an Arkonide tracking specialist was occupied with interpreting the strange signals. As a consequence of its 5th dimensional structure, the wave field of the energy discharge radiated at an immeasurably high speed.

There was no doubt about it. In a few minutes at most, the Arkonides would know what to make of the signals; Two minutes later they would have fixed the point in space from which the signals came.

That point was Myrtha, central star of the Grautier system, only 20 Astronomical Units away; once the Arkonides had determined that much, they would know where to look further.

Brackett gave the alarm. The howling of sirens filled the ship, penetrating even the most remote corners. Conversations died away. Crewmen got moving and hastily slid into their places.

Brackett picked up the intercom microphone and explained to the crew what had happened. At the same time, the communications officer sent a brief report to Grautier.

"It can mean *anything*," Brackett concluded, "up to and including the appearance of an Arkonide battlefleet of 10,000 ships sent to Grautier to destroy the base there."

The mass takeoff was well under way. One ship after another raised itself from the ground and shot with roaring engines into the blue sky, the mighty colossi of the superbattleships lifting off and flying as lightly and gracefully as the shining spheres of the light cruisers.

The Terran Fleet was on its way from Grautier to Arkon, on its way to demonstrate in no uncertain terms what Terrans thought of allies who thought only of their own advantage.

This was a red letter day for Perry Rhodan, this 23d of October, 2043. The combined power of Terra was winding up for the pitch against Arkon; the Earth was preparing to show the galactic powers what role it intended to play from here on in.

Under the command of Gen. Deringhouse, the units of the fleet assembled at a point far from all travelled space routes, about 500 light-years from Grautier. Only 23 ships remained on Grautier itself, along with the minimum number of men necessary to maintain the operation of the base, for a few vessels were still out in space either on the way to or returning from the overlapping zone from which the base in the Druuf Universe, on the planet Hades, was being transmitted supplies.

The *Rigel*, for example, was still out in space.

Besides the base personnel, four important men were also left behind on Grautier. They had a number of important affairs to attend to and would join the waiting fleet later, shortly before the moment the attack on Arkon was to begin. Those men were Perry Rhodan; Atlan, the Arkonide; Reginald Bell; and the mutant Fellmer Lloyd.

In a deep bunker away from the area of the base proper, they were occupied with calculating the final details of the action against the Arkonide Robot Regent with the help of a large positronicon.

They began with the work shortly after 1100 hours, Terranian Time.

At 1134 hours, a battlecruiser named *Rigel* commanded by Maj. Paul Brackett had finished its task in the overlapping zone and, observing all security measures, was on its return flight to Grautier.

The four men on Grautier had divided the work among themselves and laboured with the utmost concentration of men who wanted to complete their work as quickly and as thoroughly, as possible.

The first interim report came from Reginald Bell. In front of him lay a sheet of computer printout paper, covered from top to bottom with letters and numbers, he read it through carefully, then cleared his throat.

"We have to put off Zero Hour for at least 4 hours," he said. He continued to stare at the sheet of paper, not looking around. However, he was certain that the others had interrupted their work to look up at him.

"Too many alternate possibilities?" asked Rhodan.

"Right," Bell answered. "The computer came up with 2433 different branch possibilities. Each branch divides in the middle into 5 subpossibilities, which partly come together again towards the end." Then he looked up and continued. "All this information has yet to be programmed into the ships' cybernetic sections. We could certainly put the program itself together in half an hour but it would take us longer to distribute it among all the ships."

Perry Rhodan had turned his seat and now sat with his back to the programming counter. On his right was Atlan, who sat with his left elbow against the counter top, supporting his head in his left hand. The Arkonide looked thoughtfully at Reginald Bell.

"I suggest we delete all branch possibilities and their sub-branches with less than 0.4 probability," said Atlan. Rhodan smiled faintly. "I see the Admiral is renouncing his usual caution and is declaring himself ready for taking simplified steps," he said mockingly; but there was no mirth in it.

Atlan turned his head. "You know we can't delay the Zero Hour as long as we might like. The Regent has ships everywhere. It'll know the score as soon as it discovers an assembling of Terran ships and after that it'll be too late for us."

Rhodan nodded. "I know that. But if I eliminate all branch possibilities with less than 0.4 probability, I'll be taking an enormous risk. 0.4 is not a little when you consider that a figure of 1.0 makes a certainty out of the possibility."

Atlan shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's take a clear look at this for once," suggested Reginald Bell. "The probability calculator of the

positronicon has found all together about 5000 stem possibilities—in other words, 5000 different ways in which the Regent might conceivably react to our attack. All these 5000 together have a probability of 0.98—which means that whatever the Regent does will most likely be one of those 5000 possibilities. The remaining 0.02 left from an absolute 1.00 is divided into 10,000 more possibilities which the computer does not list in detail because they are too unlikely. We've discarded all stem possibilities with a probability of less than 0.06. That reduces the number of stems to 17.

"Let's say that one of the stem possibilities is that the Regent will react to our attack by removing the blockade fleet. Then we'll have more than 10,000 ships on our backs inside of a few minutes. This stem possibility has a probability of 0.13, so it's one of those we have to take into consideration."

"Now we come to the branch possibilities. One of these is that the Regent will order the blockade fleet to form a defence ring around Arkon 3 instead of attacking us. We're prepared for that too. This branch possibility has the probability of 0.44, so it lays above the boundary Atlan set. It's just as probable that the Regent will have the fleet attack us. There remains a probability of 0.12 for some other branch possibility, if not several. For example, the blockade fleet might land on Arkon 2, take important materiel on board, perhaps even dismantled pieces of the Regent itself under certain circumstances, and then fly off thumbing its nose at us. According to Atlan's suggestion, we'd have to ignore this branch, possibility." He sighed and rubbed his hand over the stubble of his hair. "I don't think we can afford to do that."

"I agree," said Rhodan earnestly. "The idea is good but the suggestion itself is too sweeping, ignoring as it does important possibilities. We'll eliminate all branch possibilities of less than 0.1. How many branches are left now?"

Bell figured. "35," he answered.

"That's enough. If we do the same to the sub-branches how many of those are left?"

"41."

This time the calculation lasted somewhat longer.

"0.937."

Perry Rhodan struck the counter top, making a slapping sound with his hand. "That'll satisfy us," he decided, "even if you take in account the fact the Regent will make every effort to calculate the least likely reaction possible."

"Fine," agreed Bell. "Then we don't have anything more to do than to make up a master program. One for each unit?"

"2," said Rhodan.

Atlan and Arkonide had not changed his position. Chin cupped in hand, he stared reflectively into space. "Don't you agree, Admiral?" asked Perry Rhodan as he turned his seat around.

Atlan shook his head, which could mean 'No' just as much as it could mean the question had not been properly stated. "The thing is risky," he murmured. "I wish I could prove it to you, Perry, but right now I don't know where the snag in this is." He looked up. "I mean, we needed a few more months yet. Are you quite certain that it wasn't your bitterness over Thora's death that drove you into this plane?"

Rhodan had a ready answer on his lips. Then he considered for a bit and replied only somewhat later. "Not*quite* certain, Arkonide," he admitted, shaking his head. "Perhaps Thora's death really is my motivation for this. But so what? Haven't we thought every little thing over 100 or 1000 times? Haven't we made our plans as carefully as possible? Haven't the positronicons flawlessly calculated that under the given circumstances the chances of our assault succeeding are more than 90%? Does it really matter what the actual motivation was?"

Atlan shrugged. "I think it does matter. Plans someone devises while in a state of excitement generally have an error somewhere. And naturally the existence of an error does not depend on whether you see it or not."

"The positronicon would have discovered it," said Rhodan. He felt oddly disturbed that Atlan did not fully concur with his plans. There had been almost no differences of opinion between them since they began to work together. This was their first major disagreement. Rhodan briefly reviewed in his mind all the reasons that had led him to the conclusion that now was a favourable moment for the attack on Arkon. He could find no errors and since the positronicon had not found any either, he decided that Atlan was simply a pessimist. The fact that Arkon was his home, even though under the regency of a powerful robot, might have had something to do with it. When one's homeland is involved, sentiment is always a considerable factor, but the Terran Fleet naturally was not troubled by any such sentiment.

Perry Rhodan glanced at the chronometer.

It was now 1133 hours.

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The ships could not be seen on the panoramic vidscreens but on the luminous dark green surface of the radarscope they showed up as radiant points in a fine-meshed, symmetrical net.

Gen. Deringhouse looked at the image reflectively, almost in awe. Thousands of ships had assembled here, ready to teach the Robot Regent some respect for its Terran 'ally'.

A gigantic fleet—by Earthly standards. The more Deringhouse looked at the image, the more he felt he could sense physically the immensity of the power contained within the ships. He already knew how much power was there, of course, and was well aware that if used irresponsibly, the total energy commanded by the entire fleet would be enough to shatter and utterly destroy an entire solar system.

Well, at its heart, even the Arkonide realm was only a solar system. Ringed by a series of strong fortresses, true, but still only a single system. The difficulty was, he thought, penetrating the system as deeply and as quickly as possible. If they succeeded in that, then the Regent had lost the war before it had even begun.

The strike will succeed, Deringhouse thought. We'll be on top of Arkon while the Robot Brain is still occupied by the Druuf problem. And thereafter the situation in the Galaxy will be different. We will be able to move around freely and we won't have to depend on elaborate ruses to keep the location of the Earth and our important bases a secret.

We should have done this a long time ago, he decided as his musing continued. We know that from a technical standpoint the Regent has not advanced any in the last 70 years. We are superior to the Regent in quality, and so that quantity alone does not decide the issue, we must be able to bargain from a position of strength.

He knew that the responsible officers did not think any differently than he. The attack on Arkon had been pending for two years and in the past few months the men had found their impatience difficult to bear. When the order to start had come, the entire fleet had given out a yell of enthusiasm.

Deringhouse looked again at the radar screen: 500,000 men were feverishly awaiting their chance to show what they were made of.

Arkon, watch out!

At 1136 hours Terrania Time, the flagship radar station picked up an impulse originating from the transition of an unknown spaceship 500 light-years away. Gen. Deringhouse was informed of it but he paid the matter no especial attention. The Arkonide blockade fleet was waiting 500 light-years away for the Druufs to attempt another intrusion. One of the Arkonide ships had probably made a short transition and thus given off the brief impulse.

It was nothing to worry about.

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Paul Brackett had been instructed to leave the Grautier system as fast as he could. The base commander on Grautier had come to this decision without alerting Perry Rhodan but it was clear that in this case Rhodan could not have made any other choice. The Arkonides must not discover Grautier. That was assured only if the *Rigel* left the system again and did not speed directly towards the base.

Maj. Brackett started into transition once more within a few minutes. He knew that his frequency damper was out of order and that the Arkonides would be able to detect the second transition as well. He hoped it would confuse them, even though that was basically a rather suicidal hope. Confusing the Arkonides meant drawing them after the *Rigel*, and only the dragon-headed, scaly-skinned god of the old Topides knew what they would do with a single Terran ship when they found it.

The transition put the *Rigel* almost exactly 30 light-years away from Grautier in a direction that led neither to Earth nor the assembly point of the warfleet under Gen. Deringhouse.

The men stood ready by the ships energy guns. Brackett had let it be known that if attacked, the *Rigel* would defend itself against even the most overwhelming odds.

But they were not attacked. The Arkonides did not come.

What came were the clearly evident impulses of at least 1000 transitions following one another in rapid succession 30 light-years away.

There could be no doubt about what that meant. Paul Brackett felt his mouth go dry.

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The intercom sounded.

Perry Rhodan looked at the chronometer.

1134 hours.

On the small vidscreen, Lt.-Col. Judson's face betrayed more than he could have explained with 100 words. Judson's eyes were wide with fear and small shining beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Alarm, sir!" he gasped. "An Arkonide fleet is attacking the base! We still have—"

Perry Rhodan interrupted him. He reacted like a machine. No sign of surprise, terror or fear could be seen in his expression. He understood the situation in a fraction of a second.

All he lacked was knowledge of how it had come about.

"How did it happen?" he asked tersely.

"The *Rigel*," Judson groaned. "The damper broke down—it was detected immediately."

Perry Rhodan needed only a second to think through all the possibilities remaining to him. There were not many.

"Attempt to repulse the Arkonides!" he ordered. "Have all the defence posts occupied. And keep the ships where they are! Effective immediately, no ships are to take off. We still have a slight chance that the Arkonides will fly past Grautier and go on to Peep. How much time do we still have?"

"10 minutes, sir," Judson answered quickly. "If they haven't changed their course by then, they'll be able to make out the base with their naked eyes."

"What did the *Rigel* do?" Rhodan asked.

"It went into transition again, following my orders, sir. I thought it best that the ship leave the system as quickly as possible."

Perry Rhodan remembered swiftly: the *Rigel* was under the command of Maj. Brackett. Brackett was not someone who would fly with a disabled damper to Earth or anyplace else where there were important secrets. There was no need to be concerned on Brackett's account.

"Very well," said Rhodan, ending the conversation. "Keep us informed as things develop."

He turned around even before Judson had switched off. Atlan, Bell and the mutant Fellmer Lloyd were looking at him.

"It looks bad," said Rhodan quietly.

The Arkonide moaned. "I knew there was something wrong in this!"

Perry Rhodan smiled bitterly. "Nothing that could have been reasonably foreseen," he replied. "But you're right of course: that doesn't change anything now."

They were quiet for a few moments. Then Rhodan stood up and went to one of the doors leading to the hallways that connected the large computer room with the other rooms in the bunker complex. At the door, he turned and looked at the others. No excitement was evident in his voice as he spoke.

"It just occurred to me that given the right circumstances the Arkonides might assume Grautier is the Earth. Not if they look very closely, of course, but they may be too nervous to do that. So the possibility is rather large that they'll drop a whole series of unpleasant bombs on us. Arkon Bombs, for example, which ignite unextinguishable atomic fires. I'd advise you to put on spacesuits."

He went out. They heard his hard steps on the corridor floor grow fainter.

During the exchange with Judson, he had correctly judged the situation. He could now completely concentrate his attention on what lay before him. Of course the Arkonides would find Grautier. There was no use in calling for Deringhouse and the entire fleet. They would be able to repulse the Arkonide attackers but would suffer losses thereby. The Earth could not afford to lose a single ship. And above all, there was one thing Deringhouse and his fleet could not do: prevent the Arkonides from dropping their bombs if they had such a course of action in mind. He would come too late. So it was better that he remained where he was.

After all, only a single base was at stake. And it wasn't even an important one. There was nothing to lose on Grautier except 23 ships, which were small and meant only for transport purposes. The major part of the fleet stood 500 light-years away, unnoticed by the Arkonides. No, Earth and mankind were not in danger.

However, there was the danger to mankind that Perry Rhodan in all probability would not survive the next 5 hours.

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Perry Rhodan's unshakable calm had rubbed off on Lt.-Col. Judson. With skilled movements of his hand, he set the Allround intercom in operation so that all men, even those off in closed rooms somewhere, could see and hear him, and he gave his instructions.

The orders were terse, and precise. "Everyone is to stand by at his post. There will be no leaving this planet unless you are ordered otherwise." Judson then wound up his communication. "We have some difficult hours ahead, men," he said, "but we'll live through them."

When he said that, it was 1151 hours. At 1153 hours, Judson and the radar station were both convinced that the Arkonides were heading straight for Grautier. The planet was directly in their path and they were braking their ships drastically.

Mike Judson gave the missile stations orders to fire as soon as the Arkonide ships had approached within 2000 kilometres of Grautier's surface.

The enemy ships crossed the limit at 1158 hours. At exactly 1200 the first surface-to-air missiles struck their targets. Above Grautier 10 brightly shining fireballs appeared, bathing the landscape in harsh light and then dying out. Mike Judson picked up the intercom mike, pressed a series of buttons and waited until Reginald Bell's face appeared on the vidscreen.

"The attack has begun, sir," he reported. "We shot down 10 Arkonide ships on their first flyover."

A smile flew across Reginald Bell's face. "My the Lord have mercy on your optimism—the way I hear it, there are 1000 ships in all."

That Judson could not deny. The radar had supplied the exact number in the meantime: the attackers' fleet consisted of 1200 of Arkon's largest spaceships.

"We're doing our best, sir," Judson assured him.

"I don't doubt that," Bell replied. "We're on our way up to help you."

Judson's eyes went wide in astonishment. He wanted to say something in answer but at that moment a flash of unbearable brightness blinded him. He saw Reginald Bell's face disappear in a chaos of iridescent, glowing rings. Then the broad glassite window, through which Judson had been able to see the broad landing surface of the spaceport from his control board, shattered in a reverberating crash. It seemed to him that a giant's hand raised him out of his chair and slammed him against the rear wall. He screamed in pain. He lay for a few seconds half unconscious on the floor. Then, to his surprise, he was able to stand up without any difficulty.

The room in which he had been sitting earlier was no longer in existence. Next to him lay a broken chair. Walls and ceilings had been blown hundreds of meters away by the force of the explosion, piled up with other rubble into heaps of debris.

From the middle of the landing field rose the incandescent flame of a nuclear bomb. Judson felt the heat radiating from it. He was glad that at the critical moment he'd had the glassite window in front of him. Without the window he would have now been a greyish brown lump of human ashes. Now the window was gone. The next bomb would catch him unprotected in an open area and complete the work of the first. He looked around. The explosion shockwave had spared a number of low, barrack-like structures in the distance. They stood a little tilted now but they seemed otherwise undamaged. He ran towards them. Oddly enough, he felt no fear. All he wanted was an intercom so he could stay in touch with his men.

While he ran, a defence missile took off from the ground in front of him and to the right. It shot almost straight up into the sky, riding on a glowing beam of nuclear particles. Judson stopped to watch it, astonished. He was still staring when high in the sky a brilliant, glaring fireball from an explosion appeared, dazzling him. He had not heard any sounds, neither from the missile's takeoff nor from the roaring of its engines. He raised his right hand and snapped his fingers next to his ear. Nothing. All was silent. He had lost his hearing. Whether it was only temporarily or permanently, he could not determine. In any event, nothing worse could have happened to him at a time of extreme danger when he had to give orders and receive reports. Helpless and uncertain, he started to move again. The nuclear bomb had blasted tons of dust into the air and the spreading dust cloud was now starting to obscure the sky. It was

growing dark. Brilliant, blazing missile trails flashed through the twilight like lightning in a colossal thunderstorm. Stumbling, Judson reached the first of the barracks. The front door was jammed but he opened it with a forceful kick, throwing into the blow all his anger over his helplessness.

It was dark inside. The bomb seemed to have knocked out a part of the base's energy supply. Judson felt his way to the intercom and switched it on. The unit was furnished with current from another source. The vidscreen and the instrument lights lit up instantly.

Judson thought over the question of what he should do now. The world around him lay wrapped in an oppressive, dangerous stillness. He seemed to be alone on the entire planet. The flashes of missile launchings, the blowing dust, the crouching figures of men running here and there in the gloom—all those were things that were taking place in another universe and had nothing to do, with Mike Judson.

He pulled himself together. He had to do something. Those men out there were waiting for his orders. He tried to estimate how many of the 23 ships which had remained behind were still intact and came out with about 15. The nuclear bomb had torn apart, overturned, flattened or melted the other 8.

Judson called the radar station. The red and sweating face of a man appeared on the vidscreen.

"Listen to me!" Judson exclaimed. "I'm deaf—I can't hear you at all. When you answer my questions, do it with gestures or write on a piece of paper. Is that clear?"

He saw the man nod and say something, though he could not hear it.

"Where is the enemy now?" Judson wanted to know.

The radar officer bent to the side and busied himself for a few seconds at his task. Then he raised a sheet of paper and Judson read in hurried scrawled letters:

"Spread out all over the whole planet. Average altitude 1500 kilometres."

Too high, then, for the stationary disintegrators, Judson decided, depressed; and above all, the ships were too widely dispersed for a massive bombardment.

"What are our losses?"

Again a short pause. Then a new sheet of paper.

"8 ships, 84 men wounded or dead. Increasing radioactivity threatens more losses."

The spacesuits, Judson thought in confusion. Why hadn't they put on their spacesuits?

Then it occurred to him that he was not wearing one himself. Too much had happened in a few minutes. No one had had time to think of anything but his own surprise.

"Take charge of passing on this instruction for me," he ordered the officer. "Spacesuits are to be put on at once! This is more important than anything else. And let me know as soon as some new development takes shape. The Arkonides are laying low at the moment, aren't they?"

The officer nodded and Judson ended the communication.

He knew that they could not hold the base. It was only weakly protected with defence weapons. That was because at the time of its construction no one had expected the Arkonides to be operating in the near future with a gigantic fleet only a few light-years from Grautier. The base's most effective defence was that the Arkonides knew nothing of it. If they had discovered it a few days before, the Terran fleet would have been on hand to repulse any attack. Now there were only a few small unarmed transport ships exposed defenceless to the next attack. There had been 23 in all; 8 of them were now ready for the scrap pile.

At the far western edge of the landing field another missile shot into the sky. It was equipped with an internal guidance system. Within a few seconds it would hit its target and make it a radiant cloud of glowing gases. The Arkonides knew that. Why didn't they strike back?

Judson looked out the slanting window into the darkness. What was that strip of yellow light in the northwest? A fire?

Nonsense! How could a chromeplastic landing field catch fire?

Judson rubbed his eyes. But the yellow strip of light did not vanish. It grew brighter and larger and seemed to be coming closer. Judson called up the radar officer for a second time. Before the vidscreen lit up, he saw out of the corner of his eye how the men in the nearest missile-launching post climbed out and ran across the eastern edge of the field to the storage building in the rear. In a quarter of an hour at most they would all be wearing the ordered spacesuits.

The officer's face was even redder now, due to the excitement, and sweat poured down his cheeks.

"What kind of fire is that in the northwest?" Judson asked.

The officer forgot what Judson had told him about his ears and answered vocally. Judson saw his lips moving and gestured irritably. "Write it down!" he snapped.

Seconds later he read the paper:

"Cause still unknown. Atomic fire caused by Arkon bombs is suspected."

Judson whistled through his teeth. He had his plan ready in a fraction of a second. "Pay attention," he told the officer. "Turn off your radar and don't worry about it anymore. We have more important things to do now. Tell the men that they are to get aboard the remaining ships as quickly as possible and get off Grautier. There's nothing to be gained by staying here. Understood?"

The officer did not nod. He bent to the side and wrote a new message: "Where are the ships to go?"

"Anywhere," Judson replied. "If they can get through the Arkonide net at all, they should go to Peep or any other planet in the system where they can hide out until the Terran Fleet picks them up." When he saw that the officer was hesitating, he added: "Quick, man! Hurry! We don't have a second to lose!"

Nevertheless, the officer wrote a new comment. "What about you?" Judson read.

"Don't worry about me!" he exclaimed to the officer. "I'll get out of this alright. Over and out!"

Still, he was glad that the officer had been concerned about him.

Everything's in order, he told himself. In a few minutes the men would be leaving. Grautier. Now you've got to go get yourself a spacesuit!

He stood up and went out. Outside, a violent storm had developed. The air was hot and sticky; Judson was almost sick to think of how many radioactive dust particles it must contain.

He pulled himself together and ran. Despite the strip of light in the northwest, the darkness was so complete that he feared losing his way to the storehouse. He kept an eye out for other men but either they were running more than 10 meters away from him or had already been supplied with their spacesuits.

Judson now knew why the Arkonides were doing nothing else. They had dropped their Arkon Bombs all over Grautier and were now waiting for the atomic fire to spread. They had nothing further to worry about from the Terran missile defence. One of the bombs had hit in the vicinity of the landing field. It was now only a question of minutes before the fire front overran the missile posts. Besides, they were robot ships. Their instinct of self-preservation was of a purely mechanical nature and subordinated to tactical considerations.

The storm made Judson stagger. As it finally blew him against a hard building-sized obstruction he cursed the pain on his forehead. But he was happy to have reached his destination.

No one was inside any longer. Judson pushed against the inward-swinging door, requiring all his strength to shut it again against the force of the raging storm. Then he leaned against the wall and took time to catch his breath.

The darkness did not bother him. He knew his way around the storage building. In less than a minute he found the closets in which the spacesuits were hung on racks. He took one down and opened the closures.

It cost him two minutes to put on the heavy suit and properly seal it. During these two minutes he saw through the broad windows five points of light rise over the yellow wall of fire and disappear in the sky above. Five ships had taken off, bringing the men to safety away from the atom hell of Grautier.

On his way back to the door, Judson ran into the small table on which the intercom stood. It suddenly occurred to him Reginald Bell had said 15 minutes before—or had it been 2 hours?—that he, Rhodan, and the Arkonide would come up to help him. Good heavens! They had no chance of finding him, let alone helping him.

With his stiff, clumsy glove he picked up the microphone. He pressed the wrong buttons three times in a row but finally punched the deep bunker's number correctly. The vidscreen lit up but showed Judson nothing but the red waiting symbol. The connection was open but no one answered the call on the other side.

Judson was filled with frantic terror. They were on their way up! Rhodan, Bell, the Arkonide and the mutant. If they chose the wrong exit, they would come out right in the middle of the fire!

That must not happen!

Mike Judson made his way back. Step by step, he retraced the path which he had come. Now that he wore the heavy spacesuit and helmet, he felt nothing more of the heat the storm carried with it. But the wind was strong and he had to bend forward in order to make any progress.

The yellow wall of light had grown, spreading subdued brightness through the dust. Judson kept to the right, to the north actually, so that he could reach the bunker exit that lay in the vicinity of his former command post. He did not know exactly what he should do to warn Perry Rhodan and his men of the chaos on the planet's surface but it seemed to him a good idea to go down into the bunker and make the rounds of the circular corridor on the uppermost level which connected all 15 exits.

From time to time he saw pale balls of light climb into the air to the left and in the west: the engine exhausts of ships taking off, distorted grotesquely by the heat and the storm. He was filled with a grim joy over the successful escapes of his men. He hoped fervently that none of them would be so stupid as wait with the last ship until he, Mike Judson, was on board. Moreover, he hoped that the vessels would succeed in passing unnoticed through the Arkonide net.

Debris appeared in front of him: the remains of the building that had stood near the command post. He recognized the oval foundations of what had been a watertank. The tank itself had been ripped away by the shockwave but its anchoring had stayed behind.

Judson stumbled. The storm threw him to the ground and rolled him a few meters farther on. He painfully struck something hard and pointed. As he stood up again, his chest hurt as though he had broken a rib.

Not that! he thought, horrified. The bunker entrance is still 200 meters away at least! I've got to reach it!

He saw that the yellow wall of fire had grown to the height of a good-sized house. It stretched without end from north to south. It must have long since reached the middle of the landing field. But it did not grow any higher into the air. Judson saw that its luminosity was much less at its upper edge than at the bottom. Without really wanting to, he remembered what he had learned about Arkon bombs: set to the electron number of one or more elements, they brought the atoms of those elements into the nuclear reaction and detonation, igniting an atom fire of sorts which could be extinguished only when the 'fuel' had been exhausted.

Since the blaze raged only along the ground and was not spreading into the atmosphere, that meant the Arkonides had not set the bombs to elements 7 and 8—nitrogen and oxygen. The bombs affected heavier elements.

Judson felt his breath threatening to give out on him. The pain in his chest became unbearable.

Imust! was the only thing he could still think about. He stumbled onwards, no longer knowing if he were still going in the right direction or not.

After an endlessly long time the flat remains of a building appeared in front of him. He recognized it: it had been one of the messhalls. From here on he had to move to the left, straight for the yellow wall of flame. He had gone too far to the east. The portion of the wall still standing served him as a welcome support. As long as he walked along it, he saved his strength and was even able to move a little faster ahead.

50 meters still remained to the bunker entrance. Judson did not think of how the temperature of the area rose with each step he took. Nor did he think that the suit he was wearing would give up the ghost when the temperature was in excess of a certain level. He thought only of the 50 meters and that he had to cross them.

Gasping, sweating and groaning in pain, he worked his way through a world in which chaos raged and

yet was completely silent. He was no longer aware of the irreality of the situation. He was possessed by the thought of reaching the bunker and warning Perry Rhodan. He no longer looked at the blazing nuclear firewall advancing across the ground towards him, nor did it penetrate his consciousness that the temperature of the firewall was high enough to cause dangerous things to happen: like, for example, melting together two formerly separated catalyst halves of Uranium.

When Judson had put behind him 25 or 30 of the remaining 50 meters, his strength was exhausted. He could not take another step. He simply fell forward and braced himself with the rest of his strength against the murderous storm threatening to blow him away.

Only a few moments, he thought. Then I'll go on. Only a few moments.

Reason triumphed over his body. Judson got up again and staggered on, even though he hardly had enough strength left to move his legs and fight the storm.

He saw the small shed housing the bunker entrance emerge from the gloom of the radioactive dust ahead. The consciousness of being so close to his goal gave him new strength. Stumbling, panting and reeling, he worked his way forwards, meter by meter, foot by foot. Then a glowingly hot gust of wind hit him and threw him 20 meters back. He fell heavily to the ground and lost consciousness on impact.

Just in time to avoid seeing the inferno breaking out at that moment over the Grautier base—which would swallow up Judson, too, in a few seconds.

* * * *

At 1249 hours, Terrania Time, the wall of flame ignited by an Arkon Bomb rolled over Missile Post 17 at the northern edge of the landing field. Just half an hour before, one of the missiles had been readied for takeoff and was made 'live' and ready to explode. Then Lt.-Col. Judson's order for putting on spacesuits had been given. Then men obeyed the order, leaving the missile where it stood. When they had put on their suits, the men boarded one of the waiting transport ships.

No one concerned himself about the 'live' missile any more.

The fire melted the two halves of the catalyst together, uniting the two pieces of uranium into critical mass. Amid temperatures of millions of degrees, the missile's fusion warhead exploded.

A fiery ball of nuclear force rose above the Grautier landing field, for a few seconds rendering even the radiant brilliance of the yellow atomfire pale in comparison.

At 1249 hours Terrania Time, the Terran base on Grautier ceased to exist.

When the shockwave of the atomic bomb explosion shook the bunker, Perry Rhodan knew that he had lost the game on Grautier. The Arkonides were attacking. They had not missed their target. And the base had not been equipped with an effective defence or even designed for one. Its most important weapon had been the secrecy in which its galactic position had been shrouded. One tiny, ridiculous chance event, a defect in a small device—the damper aboard the *Rigel*—had knocked this weapon out of the Terrans' hands. Grautier was being given up almost defenceless to the overpowering enemy attack. And the Terran fleet stood 500 light-years away—too far away to be able to intervene in the events with any chance of success.

What was more, Perry Rhodan now did not even have the possibility of calling on the fleet: the large hypercom connecting Grautier with the universe at large had broken down with the explosion of the atomic bombs. There were still a number of smaller units but they were scattered somewhere through the supply rooms and offices.

The single unit belonging to the bunker's emergency equipment was not powerful enough to penetrate the almost one-kilometre-thick layer of ground above the bunker.

15 minutes after the beginning of the attack, Rhodan learned from the radar officer that a yellowish wall of flame was advancing towards the landing field from the northwest. The officer expressed the same suspicion to Rhodan that he wrote down on a sheet of paper for Mike Judson a few minutes later: the Arkonides had dropped Arkon Bombs.

From that moment on, there was no more hesitation. If the bombs dropped had been set to include Element 14, silicon, in the fusion process, then the atomfire would eat its way into the ground and within a short time reach even the deepest part of the bunker.

The only thing to do now, was escape, and if the fire was coming from the northwest the most logical direction of flight was to the southeast. There was an exit from the bunker leading in that direction, coming to the surface 15 kilometres from the south edge of the landing field. That was far enough to be safe from the reach of the atomfire for at least an hour.

Reginald Bell expressed his considerations. He had promised Mike Judson to come to his aid. Thereupon Perry Rhodan personally attempted to reach Lt.-Col. Judson over the intercom and tell him that the battle was lost. The men of the base were to be instructed to get away from the landing field or to leave Grautier in the small transporters, if any had withstood the explosion of the first bomb.

No one replied. Reginald Bell had witnessed for himself during his conversation with Judson how the shockwave of the explosion had flattened the Lt.-Col.'s small command post. The connection had been broken off and Judson had saved himself in the open air, as the radar men knew. It had to be assumed that he had given the order for evacuation on his own. Nothing more could be done for Judson and the men on the base. If Rhodan and his companions did not want to be caught in the atomfire, they would have to get to safety by their own efforts. With the same calm prudence that made him stand out among other men in such situations, Rhodan collected from the bunker's emergency supplies everything that a 4-man team would need on an atomfire-devastated planet—above all, a minicom, a few measuring instruments, food and weapons.

Then they made their way upwards, quiet and pensive. A swift transport band took them through deserted corridors to the southeast elevator shaft and the lift climbed the 950 meters to the surface in less than 3 minutes.

The elevator shaft ended 20 meters below the actual exit, opening onto, the ring corridor that connected all the bunker exits with a number of rollbands of different speeds. Even the ring corridor was deserted. The men who had been here when the alarm sounded for the appearance of the Arkonide fleet had gone to their posts above at the missile ramps or gunposts. The bunker was empty and its last four inhabitants, to whom it had up to now given protection from the murderous power of the Arkonide bombs, were also in the process of leaving it.

The escalator leading up to the exit was still functioning. Inside the small exit shed a row of vidscreens and loudspeakers relayed a picture of the outer world: a hurricane of unheard-of strength blasted across the grassland eastwards down to the jungle. The wind ripped an impenetrable barrier of dust and smoke along with it and nothing more of the bright sun was to be seen. An inferno of noise raged in the loudspeakers.

The men closed their helmets. In spite of the violent storm they had to go out. There was only one destination available: the deserted settlement of Greenwich, which lay about 4 kilometres away, on the bank of the Green River. There were vehicles there which the settlers had left behind when they emigrated. If the men did not succeed in reaching Greenwich, they might as well head directly towards the firewall, pushing towards them from the west and let themselves be engulfed by it.

As they opened the door, the wind blew it out of their hands. Rhodan went out first, hesitated a bit, then took a long step and disappeared. Bell and Atlan let out a cry of surprise but Fellmer Lloyd, radarite and telepath raised his hand reassuringly.

"Nothing's happened," he said calmly. "He's up ahead somewhere. The storm blew him along with it a ways."

A few seconds later, Rhodan himself was heard from. They did not see him in the darkness but they heard his voice over their receivers.

"First of all, don't even try to walk upright. We're going to *crawl* to Greenwich!"

* * * *

Even Gen. Deringhouse was taken aback by the series of more than a thousand different impulses picked up by the receivers aboard the flagship *Drusus*. He had not concerned himself with the first impulse but the series meant that an entire fleet was in motion somewhere. Terran ships could not be involved because the Earth did not possess 1000 warships in addition to those which had quietly assembled in space. So they had to be Arkonide.

Naturally if was possible that the Robot Regent was relieving a portion of its blockade ships or else reinforcing the blockade fleet but something about the matter did not seem right to Deringhouse. Perhaps it was the previous single impulse that led him to the thought that out there a lone ship was being followed by a whole pack of Arkonide units.

After some hesitation he had a brief coded message sent to Grautier and when he did not receive a reply he knew that something else had developed than was foreseen in the plans of the Terran Fleet.

Grautier did not answer.

Gen. Deringhouse came to his decisions instantly. He transferred command of the waiting fleet over to the next officer in line aboard another spaceship and had the *Drusus* prepared for transition. The astrogation sector was instructed to cross the distance to Grautier in a single transition. Fifteen minutes before transition Deringhouse sounded the alarm, he took 5 minutes to explain to the crew that the *Drusus* would probably materialize in the middle of an Arkonide fleet and that the men of the ship were to destroy as many enemies as possible without being hit themselves. He made no secret of the fact that the base on Grautier had in all probability been lost.

The one matter he kept to himself was that Perry Rhodan had been on Grautier at the time of the attack—assuming there had been an attack at all. If all the other indications proved correct, then so was the one that Perry Rhodan had paid for the ambush with his life.

At 1251 hours on 23 October, Terrania Time, they reached the minimum velocity necessary for transition and disappeared from Einstein Space. In the same minute they emerged from hyperspace a few astronomical units from the star Myrtha. The spring had been calculated precisely. Grautier was so close that the ship's telescope could make out details on its surface. They saw the shining mushroom cloud of a gigantic nuclear explosion, the yellow expanse of the atomfire and the spreading dense smoke which was well on its way to engulfing the entire dayside of the planet.

They saw something else: the tiny gleaming points that were more than 600 ships, dispersed over the planet's surface, openly waiting at a safe altitude for the atomfire to devour all Grautier.

Conrad Deringhouse gave the order for attack. He knew that even a ship like the *Drusus* could not engage more than 1000 robot units of the Arkonide fleet in battle with any hope of success. But it was a kind of psychological necessity to undertake a lightning attack and pay the enemy back in kind, at least to a limited extent, for what had been done to Grautier, to say nothing of the fact there might still be survivors on the planet below for whom a blitz attack by the *Drusus* would be a source of renewed courage, convincing them that they had not been given up.

Conrad Deringhouse was in a state of gloomy depressed anger as he issued the order to strike.

Up to now no one besides the highest officers aboard the flagship had known that Perry Rhodan had remained behind on Grautier when the Terran Fleet was assembling at the prearranged place for the blow against Arkon. But from mysterious sources came a rumour that spread among the crewmen that more had been lost on Grautier than just a base. The order to attack the nearest Arkonide ship was taken as a proof of the rumour's veracity.

The Arkonides did not give any sign of having noticed the Terran ship. They stayed in the waiting positions, seeming to have nothing more in mind than to stay put until the end of the burning planet.

The calm was deceptive, however. When the *Drusus* neared the nearest ship at high speed and came within 2000 kilometres of it, its defence screens began to glow under the defensive fire of the Arkonide ships. The *Drusus* shot towards the enemy as a flaming ball of concentrated energy, shaking off the fire of 20 enemy ships cannons like troublesome flies, firing in its turn only when it had reached the minimum distance from the opposing ship.

The Arkonide ship was an average-sized vessel, hopelessly inferior to the *Drusus*. Its defence fields made useless efforts to absorb the vast energies of the disintegrator and thermoray blasts; the ship blew up after three seconds, disappearing in the glowing white fireball of a nuclear explosion.

As he watched the Arkonide ship explode, Gen. Deringhouse felt a grim sense of satisfaction. Coolly and deliberately, as though involved in nothing more than a training mission, he had the *Drusus* speed 10,000 kilometres past the target, accelerating continuously so that it could finally go into transition and disappear from the Arkonide range of action.

But the satisfaction did not endure. What was one ship in exchange for Perry Rhodan? Besides, it had probably been a robot ship. Conrad Deringhouse did not even have a reason to be proud of his success. The ship had been considerably outclassed by the *Drusus* and, when one looked at it objectively, fishing it out of the middle of a powerful fleet had been more tactical stupidity than an admirable feat.

Deringhouse forced himself to be calm. It cost him some effort to realize that his was not a situation which could be considered from the standpoint of feelings alone. True, Perry Rhodan was presumably dead, and the death of a friend makes everyone mourn. But here, neither Perry Rhodan nor Conrad Deringhouse's sadness were at stake: at stake was the safety of the Earth. New instructions had to be issued. At the moment, an attack on Arkon was out of the question. More reasonable would be a massive attack on the Arkonide fleet besieging Grautier.

What would be the point of the latter? To wreak revenge? Could any of those who died on Grautier be restored by an act of revenge?

No Deringhouse rejected that plan as well. And in the middle of his ponderings he became conscious of something he had overlooked up to now: he alone was from now on responsible for the Terran Fleet. There was no one left whom he could ask for advice and no one whose inborn genius could set right any mistakes he would make in these circumstances.

Deringhouse was on his own. At least until things had been rearranged on Earth.

There was only one thing he could do for the moment: wait at a safe distance from Grautier and see if at least one person had survived the unexpected attack and was hoping for rescue before the planet dissolved into a glowing cloud of plasma. If he had a minicom or even a larger hypercom unit, that person would send out a distress call.

The *Drusus* assumed a waiting position five light-hours from Grautier. The rumour that an important man had remained behind on the planet, possibly even Perry Rhodan himself, thickened almost into certainty.

Conrad Deringhouse impatiently watched the hours tick by. Nothing happened. Grautier was silent. Deringhouse knew that he need wait no longer than three days. If no one called by then, then no one was alive. The atomfire would need no more than three days to finish its work of annihilation.

* * * *

The weight of the spacesuits almost crushed them but it was their only defence against the raging storm threatening to blow them away. The suits were equipped with antigrav generators, which allowed the wearer to reduce his own weight and that of the suit to a certain degree. Feeling smashed down by the weight of the suit, Reginald Bell had switched on the generator for only one short second. The storm picked him up and blew him 50 meters away. Bell lay unconscious for 15 minutes, then needed another

half hour to find his way back to his companions in the almost impenetrable darkness.

Perry Rhodan crawled at the head of the little group. The thick clouds of smoke driven from the west caused such a complete gloom in even the middle of the day, Rhodan could barely see one step ahead. He laboriously tried to orient himself to every small detail in the landscape remaining in his memory from previous days but the farther they went away from the base, the sparser those memories became, and finally Rhodan had no choice but to take care that they proceeded straight ahead and did not veer off into a curve or even more in a circle.

Perhaps they would have missed their destination anyway but as they had covered about half the distance something happened that Rhodan had not counted on: they encountered a kind of roadway that connected the base spaceport with the settlement Greenwich. The road crossed the path Rhodan and his companions were following almost at a right angle. The proved that in spite of all their precaution they had in fact veered off in the wrong direction. Now the question was whether they should go right or left along the road. Rhodan chose to go right and a few hours later was proved to have made the right decision.

Meanwhile the darkness gave way to a yellowish red twilight. The atomfire was moving along out of the west, approaching at an increasing speed. There had long been nothing more to be seen of the fireball from the missile explosion that had ignited the blaze, but the yellow wall of flame was now beginning to shine through the thick smoke, outlining the western horizon as a hair-thin line of threatening, deadly luminosity.

They had no more time to lose. The fire was moving at a speed of about 5 kilometres an hour equally in all directions. That meant it would reach Greenwich in a short time: at most, 2 hours.

The measuring instruments showed that the radiation had risen to a level that would have killed an unprotected man within minutes. The external temperature was 180° and the storm had reached such a strength it was no longer measurable on devices designed for normal wind conditions.

Crawling along and tightly clutching the ground with their thick gloves, Perry Rhodan and his men forced their way into the settlement—or that which had once been the settlement.

The houses no longer stood. The storm had knocked them down and taken them with it. Shattered foundations standing against the wind marked the sites where the small primitive prefabricated dwellings of the settlers had once been. The street was covered with broken pieces of glassite.

Perry Rhodan stopped and turned around carefully. He did not dare raise his head more than a hand's width from the ground: his feeling that if he raised it any more the storm would rip him away encouraged his caution.

"If there are any vehicles left," Rhodan said, "they'd be either where the town hall stood or at the northern exit of the village, along the river. We'll split up, then. Bell, you stay with me. Lloyd, you and Atlan crawl to the river—and be careful that you don't lose your direction!"

Lloyd and the Arkonide, crawling at the end of the party, could barely be made out in the gloom. They gave a quick confirmation and then disappeared into the darkness. Rhodan and Bell went on towards the former centre of town, where the settlers had once built a large structure from the parts for two houses and dubbed it 'town hall'.

The distance was no more than 100 meters but they needed a quarter of an hour to cross it. The power

of the storm grew by the minute a sign of the speed the blazing atomfire was approaching the town.

Rhodan tried to remember the place where the town hall had stood. He had been in Greenwich only 2 or 3 times before and with all the houses gone it was difficult to get his bearings.

Hopefully the storm hasn't blown away all the vehicles too, was Rhodan's only thought.

He crouched in the protection of the remains of a foundation, which was no more than half a meter high. He raised himself halfway and took the trouble to switch on the lamp built into the forehead portion of his helmet.

The bright beam of light cut a white swath through the twilight. The greyish-white remains of plastic building materials emerged from the gloom. The lamp's shine gleamed onwards, reflecting in the shattered pieces of glassite lying on the ground, and disappeared in the whirling dust when Rhodan turned his head far enough to look down the street.

There was no sign of any vehicles.

"Perhaps we haven't gone far enough," said Bell.

"Possibly," Rhodan replied. "Alright, let's go on!"

He switched off the lamp and let himself fall forward.

He carefully pushed himself out from behind the cover of the foundation and in that moment he saw it.

It was no more than a shadow, unreal in the dusty gloom, but conspicuous by the haste in which it moved—and by its direction. It moved against the storm. After no more than half a second, the shadow had disappeared.

Rhodan pressed himself flat against the ground and stopped. Bell pushed himself up against him, not having noticed the shadow.

"There's someone up ahead of us," Rhodan whispered. "Atlan or Lloyd?" Bell asked.

"Neither. They're down at the river!"

Suddenly he heard Atlan's voice. "What's going on with you two? I heard my name."

"Where are you, for heaven's sake?" Rhodan demanded.

"Down by the river," the Arkonide answered. "But there isn't any river anymore. It's dried up."

"Is Lloyd with you?"

It sounded as though the Arkonide had to look around first. "Lloyd? Are you here? Yes! He's lying two meters from me. We haven't yet..."

"Listen carefully to me!" Rhodan interrupted, urgently. "Someone besides us is in the town! I've seen his shadow! Be careful. If it were one of our men he would have overheard our radios and called a long time ago..."

"Assuming he's wearing a spacesuit!"

"If he didn't have one on he should have been dead for hours by now. *It must* be an alien."

Atlan was quiet for a moment. "Well then, now what?" he asked calmly.

"We'll keep on looking," Rhodan decided. "Hold your weapon ready in your hand and shoot when you see something."

"Right," the Arkonide answered.

At that moment Fellmer Lloyd called. "But I can't sense anyone, sir," he declared. "If there's somebody in the town I should be able to make him out."

"Not if he's a telepath himself or a robot," Rhodan answered. "Better not depend too much on your paranormal abilities."

"I understand, sir," Fellmer Lloyd said. "I'll depend on my confidence."

Rhodan smiled to himself. If they could still make light-hearted comments, then not all was lost.

He looked around for Bell—and gasped for breath when he found he had vanished.

He became angry. The idiot! How could he make it through a situation like this one alone?

"Reggie, you idiot!" Rhodan commanded. "Come back immediately!"

For some time there was no answer. Panic climbed in Rhodan's mind. The shadow—had it taken Bell with it?

"Reggie!" Rhodan called for the second time. "Where are you?"

Then—a weak answer suddenly came.

"Perry Over here! Help!"

The voice sounded small and plaintive, almost a whisper. Perry Rhodan started to move. Bell could not have covered more than 10 meters in the few moments in which he had been talking to Atlan and Lloyd. So Rhodan needed only to search the immediate vicinity in order to find him.

"Help...!" it came again with a choking voice.

The storm, Rhodan thought. It must have blown him away and thrown him against a wall.

He crawled across the street. In his haste he raised himself a little too high once—and the storm caught him and picked him up, knocking him headfirst against a low remnant of a wall on the other side of the street. Instinctively he raised his arms to absorb the impact. Stabbing pain ran from his left wrist high up into his arm.

In the incident Rhodan had lost his direction. "Reggie?" he called.

"Here!" came the weak voice. "Help!"

"I'm coming!" Rhodan answered. "Hang on, Reggie!"

He crawled over the wall that the wind had thrown him against and it took all his strength to keep from being blown away again. His left arm hurt almost unbearably but the pain made him angry and his anger in turn gave him new strength.

"Here... help...!" the voice whispered, prodding Rhodan into redoubling his efforts. He was now behind the wall and for the moment at least did not have the storm to contend with. He wanted to raise himself up and switch on the lamp when the voice came again: "Perry... here! Help...!"

Rhodan listened. The voice seemed to be coming nearer. Bell was moving towards him. If he could still move, why was he crying so pitifully for help?"

"Reggie?" said Rhodan impatiently. "What's going on?"

But the answer that came back was only the usual "Perry... here... help!"

In the shelter of the wall, Rhodan got up on one knee. Something was moving in the darkness in front of him. "Is that you, Reggie...?"

In answer came only a half-choked groan. Rhodan bent down, seeing the shadow before him grow larger. Over the muted exterior microphone he heard the howling of the storm breaking over a new hindrance.

At that moment Rhodan realized he had walked into a trap. Whatever it was that was coming towards him, it was not Reginald Bell. It was a monster able to move upright in the middle of a glowing hot storm as a planet died without being thrown off its feet. Rhodan saw nothing more than a pale shadow at least 2½ meters high but that was enough for him. His hand closed around the grip of the small, light thermobeamer. He needed only to point the barrel a slight degree upwards and press the button.

He had overestimated the distance. Just in front of him something exploded violently. Rhodan saw a blinding flash of light and felt the heavy blows of debris from the explosion striking him. He was knocked backwards and over the wall. On the other side, the storm caught him and blew him some distance away.

That was his salvation. Although he had rammed his head against a remnant foundation with such force that he lost consciousness for a few minutes, he had nevertheless escaped the deadly heat radiated by the glowing remains of the exploded monster.

An urgent voice brought him back to consciousness. "Perry? Answer me? What happened? What was that noise?"

Atlan's voice. Rhodan raised himself carefully and looked around. A reddish fire burned 10 meters away in the darkness. Numbed and terrified, he thought at first that the atomfire had reached the town in the meantime. Then he remembered the monster he had shot and sighed, in relief. Added to the pain in his left arm was now an almost audible throbbing in his skull but his fear for Bell's safety made him quickly forget all his pain.

He carefully turned around and crawled towards the place where the glow was gradually fading and at

length died out. On the way, he answered Atlan.

"I'm alright," he said. "The Arkonides seem to have set robots down on Grautier. One wanted to lure me into a trap but I spotted it in time. That was the noise you heard. But what's worse is the fact Bell's disappeared. The robots are probably responsible!"

"I know that I won't be able to convince you, barbarian," Atlan answered earnestly, "but the atomfire will reach the town 20 minutes sooner than we expected. We can plainly see it from here and if you would take the trouble to look at your thermometer you'd believe me. Meanwhile we've found an old Quad the storm seems to have overlooked. The Quad is perfectly flightworthy and it has a powerful course stabilizer so the storm can't affect it. So we can come pick you up and then see to it that we get out of here as fast as possible, but..."

"But' is right, Admiral," Rhodan answered grimly. "I'm not leaving here until I've found Bell. He *must* be around here someplace. So wait 10 more minutes! If I haven't found him by then, you can get out of here. No one will hold it against you."

"But sir," Fellmer Lloyd spoke up quickly, "I'd hold it against *myself*!" Suddenly he became angry. "I'm coming over to you, sir, and if Mr. Bell isn't already dead, I'll be able to find him 10 times faster than you could. Besides, what do we have the Quad for?"

All of a sudden there was light, mocking laughter. "Alright then, barbarian," said Atlan. "All for one! We'll be there in two minutes."

Rhodan breathed easier. Lloyd's idea had been the right one. If Bell were still around and still alive, then Lloyd the telepath could perceive the emanations from his brain and find him.

He crawled on. The red glow from the devastated robot had gone out. Rhodan looked at his thermometer: just exactly 424° Fahrenheit.

He called Bell's name a few times but Bell did not answer. At best he was unconscious. That meant it had not been Bell who had earlier called for help. The robot had called. A special robot with programming covering the English language.

A bitter grin twisted Rhodan's face. They had thought of *everything*!

He pushed his way past the robot—or rather, what the explosion had left of the robot. On the other side of the robot was an astonishingly well-preserved and long remnant of a wall. Rhodan made use of it by raising himself up and allowing the beam of his lamp to shine through the gloom.

At that moment Fellmer Lloyd's voice was heard. "We're almost there, sir! We'll find Mr. Bell in 5 minutes." It sounded reassuring. Rhodan smiled and beamed the ray of his lamp on a fleck glistening and shimmering, standing out from its surroundings, some distance away.

"Don't hurry too much," he answered. "I just found Bell. And judging from the way he's lying, it looks like the robot gave him a nerve shock."

* * * *

After Maj. Brackett had waited for 10 hours without anything happening, he sent out an emergency call. It was a single signal, simply modulated and compressed to a few nanoseconds. Only a Terran receiver would react automatically to this signal. An alien would do so only if the radio observer chanced to overhear it and decided it had a deeper meaning than was apparent.

Naturally Brackett knew the danger existed. Tens of thousands of Arkonide ships had gathered in this sector of the galaxy and on board each ship was at least one man stationed at the hypercom listening for suspicious signals.

When Brackett decided nevertheless to risk beaming out a signal, he did it because he was convinced that all hell had broken loose on Grautier in the meantime and because he felt it was pointless continuing to wait idly with the *Rigel* .

The signal was received simultaneously on many sides. The ships of the Terran Fleet noticed the emergency call. The *Drusus* heard it. And a number of Arkonide communicators heard it, as well, immediately bending to the task of cracking the message's code and stretching it out to the original length. Then they tried to determine the spot from which the signal had come. They were all difficult operations and needed several hours to accomplish.

Meanwhile, the *Drusus* , waiting for calls for help from Grautier, did not move from where it was, but two battlecruisers detached themselves from the Terran Fleet and after a quick transition reached the *Rigel's* position. Over normal radio Brackett gave a brief report of the situation. He suggested that the crew of the *Rigel* be transferred to the two ships that had come to help and then blow up the *Rigel* . Considering the uproar in which this sector of space now found itself and the fact that the appearance at any moment of Arkonide ships attracted by the emergency call had to be reckoned with, there was no more reasonable suggestion than this. With the limited means available on the three ships, repairing the damaged frequency damper was not possible. Installation of a new damper would have taken at least five hours but transferring the 800-man crew, which had practiced such manoeuvres often enough, would on the other hand require no more than an hour and a half.

Brackett gave the necessary orders. He remained behind aboard the *Rigel* up to the last, arming the nuclear charge himself so that the valuable ship would not fall into the enemy's hands. He did it with sweating hands and a lump in his throat. He had commanded the *Rigel* for no more than 6 months but she was *his ship* .

As a small auxiliary craft brought him on board the battlecruiser *Bilbao* he did not say a word. Lt.-Col. Huyghens, commander of the *Bilbao* , was wise enough to understand his pain and do nothing more than silently shake Brackett's hand.

Brackett witnessed no more of the end of his ship. The two battlecruisers started as soon as he was on board the *Bilbao* .

But others saw what happened to the *Rigel* . Arkonide ships emerged out of hyperspace just as the two Terran battlecruisers had disappeared. One of the Arkonide ships had enough time to come alongside and discharge a number of robot-manned auxiliaries to occupy the *Rigel* and bring it under their control.

While the robots were still occupied with opening the large main hatch, the bombs exploded. The *Rigel* , the robots and the Arkonide ship vanished in a bluish-white fireball

* * * *

Reginald Bell was still alive—there was no doubt about that. But he was stiff as a board and it cost them more effort than they ever could have imagined to get him inside the Shift. The storm had risen to unbelievable fury.

The brightness around them grew steadily and quickly. The western sky was a solid yellowish radiance against which the sadly mangled walls and torn foundations were grotesquely silhouetted. Once Rhodan took the time to glance at his armband thermometer. The exterior temperature had increased to 430° and was climbing higher at a rate of about 4° every 10 seconds.

The howling of the storm was lost in the subterranean thunder that seemed to come from the depths of Grautier and made the ground vibrate. They expected the earth to break apart at any second and gush forth with glowing white streams of magma and they knew well that such a catastrophe was well within the range of possibilities. At temperatures of millions of degrees, the atomfire fused the atomic nuclei of elements and the energy liberated by the mass deficiency of the fused nuclei raised the temperature all the more and kept the fire from going out. A large number of variations was allowed to the fusion of atomic nuclei, for the effect of Arkon Bombs was not limited to fusing silicon nuclei with silicon nuclei, or sodium nuclei with sodium nuclei, or calcium nuclei with calcium nuclei. Though of somewhat less probability, fusion of two different nuclei, like that of a silicon nucleus with a sodium nucleus, was entirely possible. Nevertheless, the fire spread out quickest in directions in which it found the most homogeneous fusion mass, where the composition was most completely of a single element. If, somewhere in the west, the fire came across a vein of copper that came to the surface at one point and then stretched to the east underground, the fire would proceed to eat its way along the subterranean vein with more speed than it would through the unhomogeneous mix of various elements on the surface. There was no sign which could be recognized of whether or not the atomfire might even at that moment be raging beneath their feet, under the foundations of the former town of Greenwich. Only when the fire reached a less stable ground layer would the monstrous heat force its way upwards, rip the surface apart and spew into the air the unimaginably hot reaction products of nuclear fusion in the depths.

The Quad stood out on the street. They had to lift Reginald Bell over the wall remnant he had been lying behind. For that they needed all of a quarter of an hour. The firewall in the west climbed ever higher. The darkness had long given way to radiant brightness. But now the wind blew more violently than ever, and each time they thought there would be a brief respite, it picked up again and threw them back.

Over on the other side of the street, one of the remaining foundations broke apart with a loud noise. Bright sparks sprayed on all sides. Fellmer Lloyd leaped involuntarily for cover, letting go of Reginald Bell. Under pressure of the storm, Bell slid back up against the wall over which they had just lifted him.

They had to go back. Rhodan felt his headache threatening to tear his skull apart. His left arm, which he had sprained, was tortured by hot waves of pain, driving sweat down his face. His lungs were getting no more air. When he opened his mouth like a choking man to pump air to his chest, a shooting pain stabbed near his heart, bringing him almost to the point of madness. He screamed, calling Fellmer Lloyd a fool because he had let go. But Lloyd did not hear because he was screaming without interruption himself. Even Atlan, the Arkonide, had long lost his composure, reacting to the sensation of fear gripping at his throat.

They finally did it. The wall of flame had reached the outskirts of the town. Whatever plastic building material had withstood the storm till now melted into glowing pools or exploded with loud bangs. The Quad began to totter. With a final exertion of all their strength, they yanked Reginald Bell's body off the ground and pushed it through the open manhole of the small hatch into the interior of the vehicle. After that they hardly had enough energy left to climb through the hatch and press close together because the airlock was designed for two, at most three, men. They closed the seal.

The hot air was pumped much too slowly out of the Quad and replaced with fresh, cool air from the reservoirs. When the green light lit up, Rhodan simply let himself fall to the side, striking the inner hatch door with his right shoulder. The hatch came open and Rhodan stumbled into the passenger room. With his last ounce of strength he grasped the armrest of the pilot's chair and pulled himself up into the seat.

With mechanical hand movements he set the engines into operation.

The vehicle obeyed readily. In seconds the glowing outlines of the building remains grew smaller and finally disappeared under the all-covering carpet of the atomfire. Like a machine, Rhodan regulated the Quad's course. Altitude: maximum. Speed: maximum. Direction: east.

The course stabilizer operated at full power. The higher the vehicle climbed, the lower grew the velocity of the storm from the west. For that there was now a vertical element in the wind speed. The air masses climbed straight up from the hot expanse of the atomfire. Rhodan chose not to compensate for that factor completely. He compensated only enough to allow the Quad to be steered with full control. The remaining upwards-driving force he used to raise the vehicle even faster than the engines could have managed on their own.

After 10 minutes he knew they were safe—temporarily! The radiant expanse of the atomfire was left behind in the west. The Quad had reached an altitude of 15 kilometres and at that height the air temperature was still only a few degrees above the usual figure.

The sun was no longer in view, in any event. The unleashed nuclear power had thrown masses of smoke and dust high enough into the sky that Grautier would be forever hidden from the sun—or at least for the next 3 or 4 days, when the planet would forever cease to exist.

For the first time Rhodan took time to look around at his companions. Bell and Lloyd lay motionless on the floor. The shock of acceleration, which the vehicle's weak antigrav could only partially neutralize, had evidently thrown Lloyd down and his landing had been anything but gentle. The same seemed to have happened to Atlan the Arkonide but now he was getting up between two of the seats. Rhodan saw him smiling behind the smudged glassite faceplate of his helmet. It was a tired smile, one that hardly fit in with his sunken red-rimmed eyes.

"Did we do it, barbarian?" the Arkonide asked in a low voice.

Rhodan nodded. He wanted to say something in reply but his voice failed him. He had to swallow a few times and then his tortured lungs freed themselves in a minute-long attack of coughing. After that, his voice was back. It was painful to speak but the words came out understandably. "For now, Admiral, but you know we won't have succeeded until we get off this planet."

Atlan pushed his way between the seats and sat down next to Rhodan in the copilot's chair. "I've been thinking about that Arkonide robot," he said. "It surely wasn't alone."

"Certainly not," Rhodan agreed. He was too tired to be curious about where the Arkonide was leading.

"The robots have no doubt come from one of the Arkonide ships in a spaceworthy auxiliary, right?"

"No doubt. But we don't have any more time to go looking for their auxiliary, not to mention the fact they've probably left Grautier already."

"Alright, but perhaps they're looking for us again... in a place still far away from the atomfire."

Rhodan looked to the side at Atlan and managed a weak smile. "Well then, Admiral," he answered with emphasis, "we'll certainly want to consider their auxiliary craft in time to make use of it."

Atlan nodded thoughtfully. When, somewhat later, he spoke again, his voice had a different tone. "To come back to our immediate problems," he said, business-like, "what are we going to do now?"

"A lot of things," Rhodan replied. "First: find a halfway safe place where we can have some hours of rest."

"I'd suggest an island," said Atlan.

"I'm glad our thinking coincides on this matter as well," Rhodan responded with friendly sarcasm. "The atmosphere of Grautier is not involved in the atomfire. We can therefore assume as certain that the Arkon Bombs dropped here don't affect Elements 7 and 8, nitrogen and oxygen. One of the typical bomb settings is to No. 10. When all the elements whose number is greater than 10. begin to react, that's enough to destroy the solid core of a planet. The atmosphere is annihilated automatically along with it." He looked at Atlan, who seemed to assent.

"That means," Atlan said, taking up Rhodan's thread, "that water, since it's made up of the elements hydrogen and oxygen, will not be drawn into the reaction at first."

"*At first*," Rhodan repeated emphatically. "The atomfire won't quite come to a halt on a seashore. The heat at the edge of the firefield will be enough to vaporize the water and gradually expose the seabed. But the process will be braked. It will move through the ocean at a speed slower than on land by a factor of 10. However, there exists the danger that in the meantime the fire will eat its way underwater up to the island. Instead of being in safety, the islanders may be sitting on top of a potential plasma volcano."

"Quite right," Atlan said. "But since we're forced to follow up even the slightest chance, we'll land on an island."

"We'll undertake a few observations," Rhodan continued, "to see if the Arkonides are still there. If not, we'll send out an emergency signal and be picked up within a few hours."

"And then?"

The question hung heavily in the air for some time. In spite of his weariness, Rhodan had not failed to notice the odd undertone in Atlan's voice.

"And then," he answered quietly, "we'll carry on with our preparations for the attack on Arkon." He added: "I'm not thinking of revenge. This is not a personal grudge match between me and the Robot Regent, it's a question of the Earth's existence. The only thing that's changed in the past hours is that we've lost a base and a lot of good men. What hasn't changed, on the other hand, is the necessity in bringing the Regent on Arkon to reason!"

Atlan stared stiffly ahead. He answered only after some minutes had passed. "I believe you're right, barbarian. And I admire your tenacity!"

* * * *

The Quad moved at a speed of 500 kilometres per hour. The engines did not allow for anything faster. It was designed for expeditions which had no choice of the terrain over which they had to move after the landing of a spaceship on an alien world. Its designers had not had any intention of building it in the shape of a racing vehicle, either.

The four refugees, two of them still unconscious, needed just three hours to reach the east coast of the continent, about 1400 kilometres from the base. A narrow peninsula stretching towards the south was separated from the east coast by an arm of the sea 80 kilometres long. On the other side of the peninsula began the large central ocean, measuring nearly 7000 kilometres in width. Hundreds of small and tiny islands were scattered throughout the ocean. Rhodan picked out one nearly in the middle of the central sea as most suitable.

During the flight over the eastern portion of the continent they had come to realize the full scope of the catastrophe the Arkonide attack had unleashed on Grautier. They had flown over the fire expanses of five different Arkon Bombs. The planet was in turmoil. At various places the atomfire had already eaten its way deep into the planetary interior, bursting out again in some other place with the united fury of 10,000 volcanos. Columns of glowing white plasma streamed into the sky out of their eruption sites, broadening out at the edge of the stratosphere into gigantic mushrooms. Seas of molten lava covered the surface of the planet where steamy green jungle had grown just the day before. The rivers had vanished. Winding walls of steam marked the paths they had formerly taken. The Quad's exterior mike picked up the unceasing, murderous explosions, cracklings, hissings and bubblings of the disaster, well underway to engulfing an entire planet within a few days.

No sign of the pain, fear and panic suffered by the animals of this world in that hour reached the altitude at which the Quad moved. The imaginations of the men seeking to find safety high above the raging elements below was not enough to conceive of the misery spreading over Grautier.

They reached the coast towards sundown. They knew that it was time for the sun to go down. They did not see it.

Fellmer Lloyd came to, complaining of a headache, shortly after they flew over the peninsula. Rhodan sent him to the medicine chest. He could use some pills himself: his head felt no better than Fellmer Lloyd's and the pain in his left arm had grown so he could barely use his hand.

After his body had overcome the worst effects of the nerve shock Reginald Bell came to an hour later. He did so in his usual dry, dramatic fashion. He sat up half-way, groaned and at length complained: "What kind of hospital is this where they leave the patients lying on the floor?"

3/ STARSHIP TO THE RESCUE

The propagation of hyperelectromagnetic alternating fields, as it is used for communications traffic without any loss of time through the immeasurable vastness of space, is a perfect example of how modern physics cannot be pictured by the human mind. Of course, hyperelectromagnetic vibrations can be mathematically depicted by formulas similar to those which describe the electromagnetic phenomena of classical electrodynamics. Yet, even here a number of unimaginable features are inherent, and hyperelectrodynamics, at least from the standpoint of an outside observer, has done nothing more than to elevate the unimaginable to a postulate and allow what little could still be pictured to disappear. The human power of imagination is not suited to forming a conception of a vector which can be divided into five axial components and periodically changes its size in 5th dimensional space. Beyond that, it requires a new physical theory to explain that in this 5th dimensional space, called hyperspace, the limits of relativity mechanics are no longer valid, and passing time must be measured with a new scale, which comes out to the fact that all events in hyperspace occur at an immeasurably faster rate than in normal or Einstein Space. This phenomenon is made use of in space travel in terms of 'hypertransitions' or 'hytrans' to as great an advantage as in hypercommunications technology.

Nevertheless, hyperelectromagnetic waves, hyperwaves for short, have much in common with the electromagnetic ones—and not only insofar as representations in the form of formulas are concerned. As for those waves, there are materials which they can penetrate or be absorbed or reflected by. In addition, there is about as much energy inherent in the hyperwaves used for normal communications as in x-rays in the electromagnetic spectrum between 10 and 100 angstroms. This fact enables hyperwaves to produce effects already familiar to us from x-rays: hyperwaves can ionize and excite atoms.

The highly developed hypercom tracking technique is based on this effect. Imagine a sphere consisting of a material which absorbs a high percentage of hyperwaves. The sphere is further imagined to be so thick that even the most energy-laden hyperwaves are unable to penetrate any farther than the sphere's centre. Result: a hypercom tracking antenna. The sphere is divided into thousands of tiny, narrow sectors, cones then whose points are at the centre of the sphere and whose bases lie on the surface. This gives the spherical antenna a faceted surface. To remain with the familiar picture, the narrow cones are nothing more than ionization chambers consisting of solid matter. The ionization created by an incoming hyperwave can be measured. The direction from which the wave comes can also be determined. Moreover, if the tracker has mastered the complicated mathematics of radiated output and the input received wave resistance of the vacuum and all the matter lying between the sender and the receiver, the distance between those two can be calculated, so that finally all the tracker needs to locate a sender is available: the two angle coördinates in Theta and Phi and the amount of the radius vector.

However, the tracker still has problems. As with all measurements, the measurement of a sender contains an unavoidable amount of error originating in the resolving capability of the apparatus, called the 'uncertainty factor' by trackers. If the distance between the sender and tracker is r , then the uncertainty factor grows according to the tracker's rule of thumb at a rate of $r^{1.6}$. This means if a tracker can pinpoint the position of a sender one light-year away to within 1000 kilometres plus or minus, then at a distance of 10 light-years the uncertainty grows to 40,000 kilometres, and at a distance of 100 light-years, 1,600,000 kilometres. Since the volume of space that has to be searched through is proportional to the 3d power of the uncertainty (the uncertainty is regarded as the radius of the sphere within which the sender must be sought), the amount of time which the tracker must spend in order to really pinpoint the sender grows at the , average of $r^{4.6}$. To clarify that in a quantitative example as well, it will be assumed that the tracker needs on the average one minute to actually find a sender located as being one light-year away. The distance of approach is not figured in, only the time required to search for

the sender in the target area. Therefore the tracker receiving a signal from 10 light-years away would need 40,000 minutes, or about 28 days. It has also been assumed that only one signal was received and that the sender did not transmit again during the search in the target area.

Naturally, these assertions are rather one-sided. They have for example too many assumptions, such as the one that holds the tracker would use the same equipment for a distance of 10 light-years as he would for one of 1 light-year, and not something better which would reduce the uncertainty and the search time, or something worse which would increase them. In practical calculations these things have a perceptible effect, of course. The important point is, however, that the tracker located farther away from a once-spotted sender must spend considerably more time to actually find it than the tracker standing closer to the sender at the moment of transmission.

Such considerations as the foregoing are not only useful for allowing aspiring communications officers in the spaceflight academy to get used to hypercom technique, they could also—in a decisive moment—change the course of galactic history.

* * * *

From above the island appeared on the infrared screen like an old pancake with turned-up edges. As the ship sank lower, it could be seen that the up-turned edge was a mountain chain of an average height of 2000 meters encircling the island like a ring. It was the strangest island that any of the vehicle's four occupants had ever seen in their lives. But for the stay on Grautier during its final hours before its eventual destruction, it was well-suited. The encircling mountains would block off all the tidal waves crashing towards the island from the enraged ocean.

As it sank toward the pancake island, the Quad seemed to be at the end of its strength. During the more than 10 hours of its flight it had used about 20 times more energy for course-stabilizing than for the engines themselves, and the dials on Rhodan's control panel showed that under the present circumstances the energy supply was at most enough for a flight of another 50 kilometres.

Apart from that, the four occupants of the vehicle felt more comfortable than the circumstances would seem to permit. A scanning taken two hours before had revealed that at least over that part of the planet within range of the instruments there were no more Arkonide ships. There were no Terran ships, either. The enemy had pulled back. He had seen what he had wrought with his bombs and evidently was convinced that Grautier was no longer a threat to him and never would be again.

Fellmer Lloyd had emptied the medicine chest, finding something for everyone. For himself, Atlan and Perry Rhodan he found a pain-killing medication. For Reginald Bell he found a preparation that drove the rest of the nerve-shock out of his pain-filled limbs.

They waited anxiously for the moment when they could send a distress call from a solid position on the island and then await the arrival of a Terran ship.

Rhodan landed the Quad precisely in the centre of the circular island. He sat quietly for a moment, letting his glance slide across the undisturbed brushland filling the island hollow outside, then looked at the device measuring the radioactivity outside the ship. The figure was close to 60 rem per hour. That was more than a reasonable man could expose himself to for even a few minutes.

Sighing, Rhodan switched off the infrared lights. The vidscreen faded out. The small Quad cabin seemed to be entirely closed off from the dark outside world where an entire planet was dying.

"We're staying here," Rhodan decided. "There's no point in sticking our noses outside."

He gestured to Fellmer Lloyd, who picked up the small carrying case he had loyally carried over his shoulder until he and Atlan had found the Quad, and placed it in front of Rhodan by the control panel. Rhodan yanked the plastic closure back and stared thoughtfully for a few seconds. at the small control plate that came into view underneath.

What would happen if the transmitter no longer worked? was the only thing he could think in that moment.

Then he raised his hand decisively and pressed the green button in the lower right corner of the plate. The button lit up instantly and the high-pitched hum of the device seemed to all who heard it like the most pleasant sound they had heard since the day before.

There was not much more to do. As Rhodan did not have any way of directing the minicom antenna in the manner of a directional beam towards the point at which the Terran Fleet had assembled for the attack on Arkon, he could only broadcast a signal that radiated in all directions. The distress call was encoded, specially programmed into the sender. A second press of the button was enough to release the signal and send it on its way.

It clicked softly as Rhodan pressed the button, then clicked again as he let it spring back. "It'll be another 30 to 80 minutes," he said dully. "They should be here by then."

* * * *

Andre Larchalle was a young man with a firmly anchored inferiority complex. In the opinion of his teachers he was almost a genius; in his own opinion he had never accomplished anything very well, with the exception of attaining the rank of Lieutenant in 6 semesters instead of the usual 8.

Andre Larchalle was the officer on watch in one of the communication rooms aboard the *Drusus*. As was his custom, he was operating a machine himself instead of sitting back in the comfortable watch officer's seat and waiting until his shift was over.

When the signal came in, Andre Larchalle was on his feet in a single leap. Even before the grey-haired sergeant sitting at the computing devices three places farther down had noticed that anything had happened at all, Andre Larchalle was behind him, demanding: "Quick! What are you waiting for? What's the evaluation?"

The sergeant stared unhappily at the machine. "The evaluation of what, sir?" he asked, unruffled. Simultaneously a row of lights in front of him lit up.

"*Of that!*" Larchalle answered angrily, "Hurry up! It might be the signal from Grautier."

That signal. It could only mean one thing: *Help! Come pick us up!* For more than half a day, the entire *Drusus* had been waiting for that one signal.

The grey-haired sergeant needed no more than a second to change from his sleepy comfort to a maximum activity. His fingers sped amazingly fast over the rows of calculator keys. From inside the machine before which he sat came a clattering and clicking noise. A small positronicon was on hand to digest the information delivered by the spherical antenna and draw the important conclusions from it.

Then the positronicon had the data. Andre Larchalle grabbed the tape with the results on it impatiently out of the sergeant's hand and ran three places farther on to give the tape to a young corporal who with nimble fingers shoved it through the narrow slit of a small box firmly screwed into the countertop in front of him. Then the corporal pulled a few switches installed in the counter itself at the base of the box and leaned back.

"How long will that thing take?" Larchalle asked.

The question was completely superfluous for he knew the answer himself: between 10 and 2000 minutes, according to how good that section of the catalogue was that dealt with the data from the evaluation.

Andre Larchalle returned to his seat and forced himself to be calm.

He considered whether or not he should inform the control room—even before the signal's point of origin had been determined. Just as he was on the verge of pushing the intercom call button, he considered it once again. At that moment the signal chime sounded. With one bound he was by the side of the young corporal, ripping from his hands the plastic sheet on which the catalogue-positronicon had printed its answer.

Only a few numbers stood out on the small sheet, reading:

Myrtha System, Orbit 6

±1,225,000 meters

Now that Andre Larchalle held the result in his hand and saw that it was what he had been hoping for, all his excitement suddenly dissipated. He glanced around and his men, looking at him expectantly, saw that his eyes were shining. "We have it, men," he announced. "Proof that somebody's still alive on Grautier."

Then he went back to his seat and notified the control room.

* * * *

Even here, the ground vibrated.

Inside the mountain ring, the storm still possessed only a fraction of the strength with which it was raising hell outside.

They had left the ship to go out in the darkness. When the spaceship came, they would be able to get on board quicker if they were on foot than if they attempted docking with it in the Quad. Of the 30 minutes in which they could expect rescue at the earliest, 15 had gone by. They would have been happy, rejoicing in the coming rescue, but they recognized in the trembling of the ground that the atomfire had already reached the roots of the island. They did not know if disaster would allow them another quarter of an hour before breaking loose or not.

Rhodan had slung the minicom strap over his shoulder and connected a wire from the receiver to his helmet. He waited for an answer although he knew that he would not get one if the commander of the spaceship racing to their rescue was not an utter idiot. In a situation like this one, even minimum radio traffic was risk enough.

Nevertheless, Rhodan waited.

They hardly spoke to one another. They sat on the boulders scattered through the brushland, their feet braced against the ground, and listened to the trembling rumbling coming from the depths below. The exterior temperature lay just under the boiling point. Rhodan glanced at his watch. Twenty-five minutes had now gone by. In 5 minutes he would send out a second signal to guide the ship.

He let his arm sink and began to count the seconds. He had reached 32 when something knocked the stone he was sitting on into the air. Like a hard-kicked football, Rhodan flew away. He vaguely saw the shadows of the bushes coming towards him. He stretched out his arms to break his fall. Then he fell into a confusion of cracking branches, twigs and hard leaves, which served to moderate his impact. He ripped the bush that had caught him into two parts. He was only slightly numbed. In two seconds he was back on his feet, trying to find the direction in which he had come.

Then a harsh flash of light blinded him. A fraction of a second later the thunder of a huge explosion roared in the loudspeakers, making his ears ring. He reached for his helmet and turned down the exterior microphones. A violent shockwave swept towards him but in the brilliance of the yellow glare he saw the bushes moving like ocean waves and got himself under cover just in time.

Something threw rocks and chunks of soil at him, almost covering him. Thorny bushes scratched their way over his spacesuit. Something struck him heavily on his left shoulder, awakening the old pain.

Rhodan raised himself up and began to shout, screaming the names of his companions. From somewhere came an answer. But he could not understand it.

To the right, not one kilometre away, a glowing column climbed into the black sky. It roared and raged, propelled by the force of hundreds of thousands of degrees, shooting gas and plasma into the air, ripping the earth apart even further and breaking new openings from which other fiery streams spewed.

The atomfire had reached the island. The island was bursting apart!

Rhodan stopped where he stood. There was no more point in it. There could be no rescue now.

Someone was still screaming. Rhodan paid no attention.

This is the end, you old fool, he thought grimly. You thought you could make the Earth into the Milky Way's leading power inside of 80 years. Well, here's the bill for it. You have to pay it. There's no way out now.

He looked around calmly, almost idly, as he had done for his entire lifetime.

From the one plasma column which had begun the island's destruction there had grown 20, 40, 100.

In the middle of the island there was still a narrow, longish spot that so far had been spared from the calamity. The bushes there were burning but the ground seemed quiet. Should he run over there and extend his life by a few more miserable seconds?

While he was still pondering the matter he saw a crouching, running figure appear between the bushes, moving in a grotesque manner. He was making springs of four meters at a time, whoever he was—Bell or Atlan or Lloyd. He had turned on his suit's antigrav and thus reduced his weight. He Was running towards the place the chaos had not yet reached.

It surprised Rhodan. What use was it to run for your life if you were doomed anyway? He narrowed his eyes so the glare would not bother them and in that moment he saw it. Illuminated from below, shining, powerful and indistinct in the haze.

The spaceship!

* * * *

Gen. Deringhouse did not have to be awakened. He had vowed to be awake all the time that there was any hope left of saving someone from Grautier.

Deringhouse was at the intercom himself when Andre Larchalle gave his report. With the matchless speed his men admired him for Deringhouse made the *Drusus* ready for action.

The *Drusus* took off at top speed. The radars remained quiet. There seemed to be no Arkonide ships in the area but Deringhouse had been in his profession too long to trust appearances. He urged his radar crew to maintain utmost vigilance. He knew how difficult it was during a swift flyby to spot a ship lying quietly a few million kilometres away with its engines still and giving off no radio signals.

It was Deringhouse's suspicion that saved the *Drusus* from destruction. The giant ship had approached within 2,000,000 kilometres of Grautier when Arkonide spaceships began to burst forth from the inky darkness. The radar picked them up as they began to accelerate in the direction of the *Drusus*. Within a few minutes they had reached firing range.

It was a fleet of about 100 units. Deringhouse clenched his teeth and gave the order to fire. No matter how many Arkonides stood in his way—he had to reach Grautier!

* * * *

Perry Rhodan began to run. He switched on the small antigrav unit and felt his weight lessen immediately.

He leaped with all his strength from the ground, described a wide arc over a deep chasm suddenly opening up in the earth below, and landed five meters away. He made a second leap, then a third. As he was readying for a fourth, the spaceship extended its telescopic landing legs and pressed them firmly into the shaking ground.

From the left stumbled and ran two more figures. They reached the oval-shaped area, less than 100 meters long, which the cataclysm had so far spared, at the same time as Rhodan. The spaceship had landed in its centre. The cover for the bottom hatch opened up, the opening was no more than four meters wide but it offered rescue. It was five meters above the ground, much too high for anyone to reach it in a single jump. The man whom Rhodan had first seen running stood with outspread arms beneath the hatch and looked up at it. The front of a rollband appeared in the opening, slid out and came down.

When the band reached the ground, all four stood together: Rhodan, Atlan, Bell and Lloyd. Suddenly, after all their haste, they had time to glance encouragingly at one another. The cavalry had arrived in the nick of time.

One after another, they stepped onto the narrow band which carried them upwards. It took them through the hatch opening and set them down inside. Then it tipped upwards, rapidly sliding into a slot in the floor that served as the rollband's resting place. The outer hatch lid closed.

They were saved!

They fell into each other's arms, stammering senseless words.

They had escaped death at the penultimate moment. Some minutes went by before they recovered from the first onrush of overpowering joy and they began to realize that they did not want to spend the entire trip in the lower airlock; they wanted to go up into the control room and thank the commander, whoever he might be.

They started towards the inner hatch door and had not yet reached it when it opened of its own accord. In the doorway stood a colossus robot.

Rhodan, foremost member of the group, stopped dead in his tracks as though rooted to the ground. Half in a trance, he watched the robot open its hideous mouth and he heard the words of its mechanical, inhuman voice saying in Arkonese:

"Welcome aboard the *Lan-Zour*, a ship in the fleet of his eminence the Regent of Arkon!"

* * * *

The *Drusus* moved at high speed through the ranks of enemy ships coming at it from all sides. There was not one Arkonide ship which matched the size of the *Drusus* and that meant a single enemy vessel could not have any destructive effect on it. Only the combined fire of a number of ships would be able to damage the Terran flagship.

The defence screens of the *Drusus* lit up in an unending storm of captured energy discharges but Gen.

Deringhouse and his men were never in any serious danger. On the other hand, the flagship gunposts shot down 10 of the enemy ships like ducks in a shooting gallery and damaged another 25 so badly that they would never be able to leave the Myrtha system under their own power.

The *Drusus*'s most effective defence lay in its enormously high velocity. Deringhouse paid no more attention to the rules that governed the movement of large spaceships through a planetary system. Trusting his equipment completely, he pulled everything out of the engines they were capable of. He did not have a second to lose. Grautier stood on the verge of breaking apart.

The Arkonide ships, on the other hand, were piloted by robots. The robots had their instructions as to what manoeuvres they could risk in the immediate vicinity of a large planet. So the Arkonide units remained an entire order of magnitude slower than the *Drusus*—which the organic beings surviving the battle were to remember as a fire-spewing monster bringing death and destruction with it. To fight against it was hopeless.

Deringhouse hardly noticed that the barrage gave way and finally ceased altogether. He was in constant communication with the communications centre, seeing on the vidscreen before him Andre Larchalle's face glowing with eagerness as the two of them waited for the survivors on Grautier to send their first tracking signal. One of Larchalle's radiomen were unceasingly broadcasting appeals for Grautier to come in. If there were someone down there with a hypercom unit, he would certainly hear the appeals and respond to them.

But it could hardly be imagined that someone was still alive on the glowing globe that had expanded to 1½ times its original size. As the *Drusus* braked at full power so that it would not rush into the overheated atmosphere at an interstellar velocity, the scale of destruction became evident.

There was still a slight hope that somewhere down there a small piece of solid ground had endured and someone equipped with a spacesuit had managed to stay alive on it up to now.

But the receivers remained silent. They did pick up peculiar, unheard of noises from a wide range across the frequency bands but as they were hyperelectromagnetic shockwaves emitted by an exploding planet in its last moments, they had no coherency. They did not come from a transmitter operated by a thinking being.

The *Drusus* penetrated the glowing gas masses. Engines howling, it ploughed through the chaos, leaving behind it a glowing trail of ionized gases that shone brighter than even the columns of plasma shooting into the sky.

Deringhouse did not give up. Somewhere down there men had still been alive and called for help 40 minutes before.

Five times the *Drusus* orbited the dying planet, making each circuit at a different angle in relation to the polar axis. Even if down below there were a sender that had lost 99% of its transmitting power, the com centre would have heard it.

But it heard nothing.

Deringhouse wanted to go into a 6th orbit—when Grautier blew up. The instruments registered the suddenly sharply increasing pressure of the gas masses. Deringhouse correctly interpreted the signs and switched off the course stabilizers. The *Drusus* left the orbit it had been following at three times escape velocity and which it could maintain only with additional stabilizing and moved off at a tangent away from

Grautier into open space. The watchposts continued to keep a lookout for the Arkonides.

In the control room the panoramic screens showed a monstrous yellowish-white gas bubble expanding constantly. Red tongues of fire stabbed out from the depths of the gas sea and the excited hydrogen atoms in the uppermost levels of the atmosphere contributed a bright greenish tinge. Other colours were mixed in and Grautier died in a glaze of fabulous colours of an intensity never before witnessed by human eyes.

Deringhouse ordered a withdrawal. While Grautier's iridescent globe shrunk on the stern vidscreens, the ship reached transition velocity and with a short transition it left the system.

The *Drusus* rematerialised in Einstein Space in its former waiting place. Deringhouse ordered the ship to remain there for two hours. He wanted to see what would happen now in the Myrtha system.

He knew that there was no more point in it. No one was left alive on Grautier and whatever the Arkonides might do in the vicinity was no longer interesting for him.

After the din of voices and the uncountable orders that had been issued in the last 45 minutes, it was quiet once more in the control room. Deringhouse's officers knew that they had lost a battle, although many people, judging from the number of ships that had been shot down might have been of a different opinion.

4/ OUT OF THE FRYING PAN...

Reginald Bell was the first one to say anything. "Damn!" he grumbled. "I should have noticed it right off. This ship isn't 200 meters in diameter and it isn't 500. It's some kind of intermediate size which we don't have in our fleet."

The robot waited patiently.

As if that were still important now, Rhodan thought tiredly.

He looked around. Fellmer Lloyd was staring at the floor but Atlan openly returned his glance.

"Well," Rhodan said, "it looks like you're going to be seeing your old home pretty soon."

"This isn't quite the way in which I'd hoped," Atlan answered, barely moving his lips.

The robot spoke again. "It is an honour for Commander Lathon to be able to greet his guests."

That was a request to come along. Rhodan walked towards the robot, which thereupon turned and went out into the corridor which began just on the other side of the inner hatch doorway. The 'guests' followed it.

After the first few shocked moments, Rhodan's mind began to operate at full speed again. Naturally, the Arkonides regarded him and his companions as prisoners. The question was only what they intended to

do with them. Rhodan did not consider it a bad idea to calmly request to be taken to the nearest spaceport of the Terran fleet. The war between Arkon and Terra had not been officially declared and since according to Arkonide practice such a declaration was just as necessary to establish prisoner-of-war status as it was in Terran practice, it would be best not to mention the attack on Grautier to Commander Lathon and act as though it were a simple case of picking up victims of a shipwreck. Or in other words: the best thing to do was play dumb.

The control room of the *Lan-Zour* was almost empty, occupied only by two men sitting or half-lying in comfortable armchairs, and the medium-sized circular chamber, when one ignored the many instruments for the moment, gave the impression of a theatre lounge during the intermission of a poorly attended play.

As the robot and the four Terrans entered the room, one of the two men raised himself out of his repose into an upright sitting position. The robot allowed the Terrans to step past it and it announced impassively: "Four survivors from the exploding planet, Master."

The man in the chair made a bored hand gesture signifying understanding, agreement and dismissal. The other Arkonide evidently found the affair of so little interest he did not even bother to look around.

They were Arkonides—with all the lethargy and boredom of their race. Rhodan glanced furtively at Atlan and saw the Admiral's expression twist in contempt.

On the way to the control room they had taken off their spacesuits and left them behind in the vicinity of the decontamination hatch to have the radioactive dust removed. For the first time in many hours they were able to move freely and this relief alone raised their spirits and energy considerably.

The Arkonide who had sat up looked his guests over for some time. In the meantime the robot had left the control room. Rhodan tried to find out from the vid screens what was happening out in space but nothing of the *Lan-Zour*'s surroundings were to be seen.

"So," Lathon finally said in Arkonese. "Here you are."

Rhodan glanced to the side. For such deep discussions Reginald Bell was responsible, not he himself. Bell understood the gesture.

He nodded grimly and confirmed the Arkonide's comment. "That's right, here we are indeed. Thanks for the rescue!"

Lathon brushed it aside. "Duty," he answered tiredly. "Nothing but part of our duty. I see one of you is an Arkonide."

"You're seeing correctly," Bell answered in a friendly manner. "He's a survivor from the time when Arkonides could walk across a room without collapsing in exhaustion."

If Lathon understood the insult, it did not make any impression on him. "What is your name?" he asked, looking at Atlan.

Atlan clenched his teeth and did not reply.

Lathon was undisturbed. He turned his seemingly lethargic attention back to Bell.

"Where are you taking us?" Bell wanted to know. Lathon raised his hand and pointed languidly at the

vidscreens. "How should I know?"

That took Bell's breath away. With the last of his selfcontrol, he hissed: "I must have been under the mistaken impression you were commander of this ship!"

"Oh, but I am. Does that mean I have to know where the ship is going?"

Cheerfulness was an effective release for Bell's astonished agitation. He laughed loudly. "No, not at all," he said good-naturedly. "I only thought you might have known by chance."

Lathon made a sign of denial. Speaking seemed to be an effort for him but he seemed to find the conversation interesting enough to make that effort.

"We could try to find out from the guiding positronicon where it's directing the ship," Lathon suggested. "However, first I don't know if it would give us that information and second, we'll find out anyway when we get there, right?"

Bell nodded. "Of course. Quite right." He turned to Rhodan and added lowly and angrily in English: "You talk to the idiot! He's driving me up the wall!"

Rhodan turned to Lathon. "Nevertheless, I would be very grateful to you if you'd ask the positronicon," he told the commander. "It will make us uncomfortable if we don't know where we're going."

"I'll gladly fulfil your wish," Lathon answered. "I need only to call for a robot to ask the positronicon."

He pressed a button on the small control panel built into his chair.

"There are a few other things I'd like to know," Rhodan went on. "Like what happened to our men who..."

"Oooh!" Lathon interrupted him plaintively. "I don't think I can remember all that. You'd better ask that robot there directly."

He pointed to the hatch, which had meanwhile opened to allow a robot to enter.

"I'm ready," it declared.

"Go ahead and ask," Lathon directed. "It knows what to do."

Rhodan proceeded systematically. "First: at the time of the attack, the base on Grautier was occupied by 152 men, who tried to escape the exploding planet in light transport ships. Is anything known of where those men and ships are?"

"Second: two hours after the beginning of the attack my companions and I were held up by an Arkonide robot. Did that robot come from this ship, the *Lan-Zour* ?

"Third: where are we being taken?"

"Fourth: we wish to be taken to a small Terran Fleet spaceport whose coördinates I can give you. Can this request be granted?"

"Thank you—that's all. Are you able to repeat my questions?"

The robot did so. Then it crossed the room with heavy steps and stopped at one of the control panels where it made a number of connections. It seemed to be in direct contact with the guiding positronicon, for as it turned around again to give its answer, Rhodan and the others heard no other sound than the clicking of a control knob.

"Question 1," began the robot: "15 Terran transporters have been brought aboard Arkonide ships; 134 Terrans are now prisoners of the Arkonide fleet.

"Question 2: the *Lan-Zour* sent 3 robots to the exploding planet to rescue possible survivors." Rhodan smiled grimly as he remembered how Reginald Bell had been 'rescued'. "Two robots returned and the 3d was lost completely.

"Question 3: the *Lan-Zour* will arrive at its destination in a few minutes. Otherwise no answer.

"Question 4: the request cannot be granted.

"End."

Rhodan was staring at the floor. He had been already expecting a flat no in answer to his 4th question but what depressed him was the loss of 18 who apparently had been unable to leave Grautier in time. He thought of Mike Judson, the base commander. Judson was not a man who would leave his post as long as others were in danger. So Mike Judson belonged to the 18 who had met their fate on Grautier.

That hurt. Bitter fury rose in Rhodan's mind. The Regent had attacked Grautier without warning because it was in its way or it thought that it was the Earth. There were other ways in which Grautier could have been gotten out of the way, ways in which *all* could have been saved, but the Regent had gone to work with the soullessness and ruthlessness of a machine.

Rhodan looked up. "Thank you. I'm satisfied."

The robot trudged out. Hardly had the hatch closed behind it when it opened again to allow entry to another robot. It trained its eyes on Lathon and reported: "We are at our destination, Master. Another ship will take on our guests. We have been requested to hurry."

Lathon gestured tiredly. "Always this bothersome rush!" Then he stood up. "I'm so sorry that I have to lose such an interesting guest as you so quickly, Perry Rhodan." Rhodan gave a start at the mention of his name. Up to now he had not known that Lathon knew who he was. "I hope that you will have a good trip, Lathon said in conclusion.

It sounded like a mockery but it was not meant to be. Lathon meant what he said seriously. He was a tired old man who knew nothing of the things going on around him.

He bowed and Rhodan returned the gesture. Then the Terrans turned and followed the robot out. They returned to the hatch through which they had come half an hour before. The inner hatch was open and two tall figures in spacesuits stood in the small airlock, making impatient gestures.

Four more spacesuits lay ready in the airlock. Rhodan put one on. One of the two figures pointed impatiently at the helmet. Rhodan understood: he was supposed to turn on the helmet radio.

He did and a deluge of Arkonese words spoken in an odd dialect poured out of the speaker.

"...faster, blast it! We don't have any time to lose. It's swarming with Terrans outside. Hurry!" One of the Arkonides pulled a short-barrelled weapon out of his pocket and waved it around.

Rhodan tried to understand what was going on here. Terran ships were in the vicinity, so why were they transferring them here of all places? If he called for help now, would the Terrans then be able to get them out of this? The question could not be answered until he had a look out into space. Besides—the minicom had been taken away with the spacesuits for decontamination. It was certainly pointless to ask for them. The robots on board the *Lan-Zour* would not give them back.

Rhodan had sealed the spacesuit and Atlan and Bell were also ready. Only Fellmer Lloyd had difficulty with putting his on. Rhodan helped him and in so doing saw through the faceplate that Lloyd's face was dark red and sweat was pouring in streams down his forehead.

"Is something wrong?" Rhodan asked, taken aback. "Don't know, sir," Lloyd groaned. "Don't seem to feel well..."

"It looks like fever," Rhodan murmured more to himself and at that moment the terrifying thought occurred to him that Fellmer Lloyd could have swallowed too much radioactive dust. Under certain circumstances Gamma Fever, or 100 Rem Fever as it was also called, quickly appeared after being exposed to radiation between 50 and 100 rem. It was fatal only in especially severe cases but it was always an unpleasant, long-lasting disease.

"Hurry up!" he ordered Lloyd. "These men seem somewhat more energetic than Lathon. You'll be taken care of."

Lloyd did not even have the energy left to close his spacesuit. Rhodan had to do it for him.

"Ready?" asked one of the two aliens.

Rhodan nodded. They understood the gesture. The robot disappeared through the inner hatch, which closed after it, then the outer hatch swung open.

The view was the usual one: the sea of stars with so many more of them than in the Earthly sky that they formed a carpet of light in which single points were hard to make out. In the middle of the luminous expanse was a round dark hole: the aliens' spaceship. It was at least 10 kilometres away.

A small auxiliary craft was secured to the outer surface of the *Lan-Zour*. Rhodan and his companions climbed into the craft under the aliens' surveillance. One alien sat down in the pilots chair in front of them and the other sat down behind them.

Rhodan thought regretfully of the weapons they had taken with them from the bunker on Grautier and which were now still in the spacesuits they had left behind. It would be a daring but promising venture to take over the auxiliary and—

The craft moved out. The *Lan-Zour* quickly grew smaller on the vidscreen and at length was nothing more than a dark hole in space, appearing just as the aliens' ship had earlier. Meanwhile the metal hull of the latter gradually became visible, shining dully in the starlight.

The transshipping proceeded fast and flawlessly. The aliens, whoever they were, seemed to hold the

Terran fleet in great respect. The four Terrans were taken through a rollband corridor and up an antigrav lift to the control room of the ship. If the ship had taken off in the meantime, it was not noticeable.

In contrast to the one on the *Lan-Zour*, the control room of the alien vessel was filled with feverish activity.

There were a few small robots, nimble as weasels, apparently performing orderly duty, but organic beings were in the majority. Now that Rhodan watched them bustling about so busily and heard them talking with one another, it suddenly occurred to him who they were: they were Ekhonides, inhabitants of the planet Ekhas somewhere in the depths of the galaxy. They were emigrants from the Arkonide Imperium during its golden age and had retained the vitality of their—race up to the present.

Space was in motion on the panorama screen. Thin coloured haze spreading at the screen's edges showed that the ship was on the verge of plunging into the ranges of relativistic speed—probably to reach hyperflight speed as quickly as possible. Nothing more was to be seen of the *Lan-Zour*.

The largest part of the control room crew did not concern themselves about the Terrans. Finally two men—one of them was the captain, to judge by his rank insignia—walked up to Rhodan and his companions.

The commander opened the discussion with the statement: "You are my prisoners."

"By what right do you consider us prisoners?" Rhodan asked in return. He had taken his helmet off and could speak freely.

The commander laughed mockingly. "My orders are to bring you to a certain destination and there turn you over. The party employing me will take care of the legal problems."

"Our friend the Robot Regent," asked Rhodan sarcastically,

"I am not authorized to give out information, either concerning the reason for your being taken prisoner or its purpose. You will have 3 men and a robot to guard you. Give the robot your names and any other important data so that I can at least know who I have on board my ship, By the way, we'll be at our destination in 20 hours. If you still have any questions, you can ask them there."

Three men and a robot marched in from somewhere, the men looking as unfriendly as the robot. Rhodan noticed it in passing: something else had him considerably more occupied at the moment. "Give the robot your names!" Did that mean the commander had no idea who he had on board as prisoners?

The Ekhonide was about to turn away.

"One more moment," Rhodan stopped him. "You know that I'll protest this treatment at the first opportunity that presents itself. And you can be sure that Perry Rhodan will see to it that..."

The commander made a scornful gesture. "Oh, Perry Rhodan!" he said contemptuously. "Don't you know yet that he was blown up with his base?"

Rhodan knew what he had to do at that moment but he found it difficult in that second of surprise to display all the necessary horror in his expression. "Rhodan...!" he exclaimed. "Blown up?" Then he forced a laugh. "Surely you can think of better things to do with your time than trying to intimidate us."

It did not seem to interest the Ekhonide, who answered: "Believe what you want to. It's not my affair. I pick you up someplace, I take you someplace else, and that's all I have to do with it."

"That still doesn't change the fact that your method of operation is a violation of galactic law," Rhodan answered coldly. "I'm a free Terran. Terra and Arkon are not at war with one another so no Arkonide or anyone else has the right to treat me as a prisoner."

The Ekhonide seemed to find the discussion unpleasant. "Go away!" he said roughly.

He turned away for the last time and returned to his post. The guards drew their weapons. The Ekhonide who had brought them there opened the hatch door.

At that moment the sirens howled into life. Rhodan stopped where he was, rooted to the spot. The noise ran through him with prickling excitement. Alarm for the Ekhonides meant that Terran ships were nearby. Ignoring the weapons trained on him by the guards, Rhodan turned and looked at the vidscreen.

In the middle stood a bright, bluish-white glowing globe. Far behind the Ekhonide vessel a bomb or a ship had exploded.

The sirens died and the excited talking of the Ekhonide's became understandable. Tracking results were being announced. Not being familiar with the Ekhonide coordinate system Rhodan could not make anything out of their data. He understood much better what had happened when someone loudly cried out: "That's the *Lan-Zour*! The Terrans have destroyed it!"

Yes, Rhodan thought, according to the direction it could well be the *Lan-Zour* .

Meanwhile the Ekhonide commander was giving instructions with a calmness that Rhodan was forced to admire. To reach escape velocity all the sooner, the ship was accelerating with the aid of an auxiliary engine. The radar operators searched feverishly for further indications of the presence of Terran ships but found none before their own ship went into transition.

The distortion pain was brief and not especially intense. Rhodan estimated the difference between the two points of the spring at no more than 10 light-years.

The Ekhonide, still a little numb, looked over at him. "We've escaped from the Terrans once more," he said. He did not seem to be proud of it. "Just once I'd like to have a ship large enough to offer them resistance!"

Rhodan nodded and turned away. The semicircle of guards closed in behind him and his companions and drove them through the hatchway.

On the way to the nearby cabin in which they were going to be quartered, Rhodan thought about the *Lan-Zour* . He had a suspicion and the longer he played with it the more he became certain of it.

Lathon had known who he was. The Ekhonide did not know. The Robot Regent on Arkon knew the Terran mentality and as a skilled tactician must have decided to keep a secret any information about Perry Rhodan's capture. It knew that the Terrans would take the galaxy apart to get the 'Chief' back if they had to when they learned he was still alive. If they continued to believe that Rhodan was dead they would remain quiet and, what was more, they would need another few years to take care of the resulting confusion.

It was best for the Robot Regent that no one in the entire universe knew that Perry Rhodan had been taken prisoner.

That threw a special light on the fate of the *Lan-Zour*. Lathon could not be prevented from learning the identity of his prisoners but he could be prevented from passing the information on to someone who was unauthorized to know.

No Terran ship had the *Lan-Zour* on its conscience. The Regent itself had issued the order to the guiding positronicon to blow itself and the ship up.

* * * *

After several hours of waiting, the *Drusus* at Gen. Deringhouse's order returned to the assembly point of the Terran Fleet.

The waiting had been in vain. Grautier was lost and Perry Rhodan was dead. Zero Hour—the moment when the attack on Arkon was supposed to begin—was already 6 hours past. Deringhouse had his plans ready when he returned to the waiting fleet. An attack on Arkon was now out of the question.

Gen. Deringhouse ordered a withdrawal. The units of the fleet were instructed to reassemble in the Vega Sector, just 30 light-years from Earth.

In groups of two and three or one by one, the ships started off on their way. Ten hours after Deringhouse's order, the sector in which Terra's concentrated might had been readying for the assault on Arkon was empty and deserted.

No more than three ships, a battleship and two heavy cruisers, had been shunted away from the rest of the fleet by Deringhouse for the purpose of maintaining contact with the base on Hades in the other time-plane without being noticed by the Arkonides.

* * * *

The robot took note of their names and then was never seen again, although the three guards asserted that it was stationed nearby. Of course, they had given false names. Rhodan called himself George Barrimore, Reginald Bell was Frederick O'Lannigan, Fellmer Lloyd had rechristened himself Walter Highman, and Talan-Nuur was the new name for Atlan. The robot had noted the alien sounds as impulse signs on a registration card and with that the requests of the ship's administration had been fulfilled.

The prisoners had been allotted three connecting cabins. One served as sleeping quarters, the second as a livingroom and the third as a combination bath and gymnastic setup. They had nothing to complain about in the way of lacking comfort, although the comfort was more of a symbolic sort: they had no idea how they were to make use of all these advantages of Ekhonide living culture in the 20 hours the commander had said the flight would last.

They very quickly determined that the livingroom and sleeping room very probably did not contain any listening devices.

However, in order to eliminate all risk they conversed only in muted tones so that any microphones that might exist would transmit only an indistinct murmur. . . Suddenly Lloyd lost consciousness. A doctor was called for, who hurried in and gave him two injections against Gamma Fever. . . Atlan spoke regarding the new situation. "*We must* do something. I don't think any of us have any doubt that the Ekhonides are bringing us by the quickest way to Arkon. The travel time confirms this suspicion. From Grautier to Arkon, a normal ship needs between 15 and 25 hours. But once we're on Arkon, there'll be no more hope for us. The Regent will make sure its prisoners won't be able to escape."

The answer was a silent nodding. Rhodan knew just as well as Bell that Atlan was not exaggerating. Landing on Arkon meant the end. If something was to happen to rescue them, it would have to happen here and now aboard the Ekhonide ship.

Whatever thoughts might come to them in the next minutes or hours, it seemed hopeless to fight for freedom against the ship's crew burdened with a bedsick companion. There was, however, one advantage Rhodan believed lay on the Terrans' side: the desire of the Regent on Arkon to have the prisoners delivered to it alive. For the man contemplating a large undertaking, the expectation that he will probably come out alive even if it fails is in itself an encouraging assurance.

* * * *

Thousands of light-years away, almost exactly in the geometric centre of Globular Cluster M-13, the Regent of Arkon was at that time occupied with analysing the information obtained from questioning the 134 Terran prisoners. The Regent had not hesitated to interrogate the prisoners with the most modern methods of psychophysics—wisely realizing that a Terran would be unlikely to betray important secrets unless he were under pressure.

In spite of the modern methods, the results were scanty. The Regent found that far-reaching precautions had been taken on the opposing side in case of just such a catastrophe as this one putting a large number of prisoners in Arkon's hands. In fact the only thing the Regent could learn with any certainty was the fact that the destroyed planet was not Terra, homeworld of the Terrans, as it had first calculated, but only a forward base. Even this information was of little value for the Regent possessed it even before the interrogation of the prisoners. Shortly before the beginning of the attack, the Arkonide robot ships had taken pictures of the planet's surface and no signs of intelligent life outside the immediate area of the base could be seen. Since no one could believe that the Terrans had built all of their cities without exception underground, that was proof enough that this world and Terra were not one and the same.

Thus the question now was of learning where the Terrans' homeworld really was. The prisoners were asked the distance between Terra and the destroyed base. At first they refused to answer anything at all, then as the torture was applied they named figures from 40,000 light-years all the way down to 10 light-years. The psychodetector showed that the figures were named without connection with any act of remembering, in other words, they were made up on the spot. The Robot Regent had to face the startling realization that Rhodan's men on Grautier had not known how far they were from their home planet.

They could say even less about the direction to it. They were technicians, the ground personnel needed at any fleet base. None of them knew even the slightest bit about galactic navigation or star positions or anything else of significance. So not one of them could give the angular coordinates from which the vector of the radius from Grautier to Terra could be determined.

The last question of the interrogation aimed at details of the Terran solar system. In spite of its previous failures, the Robot Regent was convinced it could locate Terra if, for example, the Terran system was a giant system of more than 100 planets or if Terra itself followed an extremely eccentric orbit around its sun. Such outstanding characteristics and oddities were specially noted in the galactic catalogues and Terra could easily be located on that basis. Unfortunately, judging from what the prisoners said, the Terran system seemed to be a textbook example of a typical solar system. Moreover, the prisoners contradicted each other about the system's size and other details. Their astronomical knowledge was extremely faulty and the Regent concluded that his opponent Rhodan had purposely kept them ignorant. The single success the Regent attained with the last question was the information that one of the system's planets—though the prisoners did not agree whether it was the 5th, 6th, 7th or even the 8th planet—had a ring around it. But even this success was only relative. It reduced the number of possible systems from several billion to several hundred million. About every 10th solar system boasted a ringed planet.

The first attempt to learn something of the galactic position of the enemy world had thus ended in failure for the Regent.

But the Regent had not yet played its best card. Perry Rhodan himself was on the way to Arkon as a prisoner. But while even the Regent doubted that Rhodan—of all Terrans—would reveal the position of his homeworld of his own accord, he would at least, if he were given a certain amount of freedom on Arkon, get in touch with his men. In doing so he would give the Regent some valuable clues.

With that the Regent succeeded in convincing itself that it was perfectly in control of the situation.

* * * *

The Ekhonide apparently intended to cross the distance to Arkon in several transitions. That had to be assumed when one considered the size of the ship but it was made a certainty by first the distortion pain and then by the operation of the engines accelerating once more for another transition, all of which could be observed on the vidscreens.

The prisoners were aware that something could be attempted only during the pauses between transitions. Once the ship had its last hytrans behind it, the situation would be hopeless.

Rhodan estimated the distance of the transition at between 5 and 7 thousand light-years, judging from the duration and the intensity of the distortion pain, and Atlan concurred with him. Since the distance between Grautier and Arkon was around 37,000 light-years and the place where they had transferred from the *Lan-Zour* to the Ekhonide ship was only a few light-minutes away from Grautier, it could be calculated that the flight to Arkon would be made in 5 to 8 transitions.

In accord with the power of the engines, there was an acceleration phase lasting 40 minutes between each two transitions. So it had to take place during one of those 40 minute pauses...

* * * *

Zachan cursed service in spaceship travel in general and ennui aboard the *Keenial* in particular. Zachan was one of the three guards watching over the four Terran prisoners. At the same time, Zachan was the only one who wondered why one of the Terrans looked exactly like an Arkonide. Zachan pondered the matter and most of all wondered why no one else aboard the *Keenial* took an interest in such an amazing coincidence.

Zachan walked up and down the corridor. He carried his long-barrelled shock weapon on a strap over his shoulder. He had pushed it over on his back, holding onto the barrel with his hands, because that was the easiest way to walk.

For walking was all the work that Zachan and the other two were doing. It was ridiculous to assume that the Terrans would attempt to struggle against their fate.

Zachan took 20 steps, then made a rapid about-face. For three hours his only pastime had been making quick and precise about-faces. On the way back one of the other guards passed by, also on the 20-pace march that finished at each end with an about-face and began all over again. Grinning, Zachan threw an insult at him, which did not go unreturned.

The third man, Olthaur, sat on a chair farther along the corridor where it was intersected by another passageway.

Zachan passed the door leading to the prisoners' cabins at the same time that the second guard made his about-face behind him. Zachan looked backwards to see if the other man had mastered the turnabout as well as he had. As he turned his head around again, he noticed that the door had opened a tiny crack. About halfway up the crack protruded a shining sheet of paperfoil. Zachan was at the door in two quick steps. He ripped the sheet away and through the crack saw the tall figure of the Terran who resembled an Arkonide. "Hurry!" the Terran whispered. "And don't let the other three notice anything!"

Zachan gave a start. The other three! There were two out here. He puzzled over it for a bit, then came to the conclusion that the Terran who looked like an Arkonide must have meant the other three prisoners.

In the meantime the door had closed again. Zachan stood before it with the sheet in his hand. The second guard had become attentive and even Olthaur bent somewhat forward from his comfortable chair to see what was going on.

Zachan opened the sheet and saw four rows of letters written on it. The letters were Arkonese and since Ekhonide writing used the same symbols, Zachan could read it without difficulty.

"Have important information for the commander. Must speak with him privately. Top secret. The Terrans must notice *nothing* of this. Talan-Nuur."

The second guard was looking over Zachan's shoulder. "Report this at once!" he hissed. "This thing looks important!"

Zachan was less gullible. This could also be a trick. He showed Olthaur the sheet. Olthaur studied it

suspiciously.

"I'll report this anyway," Zachan suddenly declared.

"That would be the best thing to do," Olthaur agreed.

An intercom unit was located a few meters down the corridor. While Olthaur remained sitting in his chair and the second guard, visibly nervous, took up the march once more. Zachan spoke with the control room. He muffled his voice so nothing of it could be heard in the prisoners' cabin. To Zachan's surprise, his report was considered so important in the control room that he was connected with Command Chollar himself. Chollar listened to what Zachan had to say. Then he promised to send an officer to pick up Talan-Nuur and bring him topside.

Zachan was satisfied with his success.

The officer appeared a few minutes later. He was a very young man, younger than Zachan, and was unarmed. "Bring Talan-Nuur out!" he ordered. "He is to accompany me to the control room. You'll come with me, I don't have any weapons."

How thoughtless, Zachan thought. I'll have to watch out for him.

Then he opened the door to the prisoners' cabins and called in: "The commander wishes to speak to Talan-Nuur!"

None of the aliens were in the frontmost room. At Zachan's call all of them except for the sick one appeared at the door leading to the next room. Zachan repeated his request, mustering the prisoners carefully as he spoke. He could determine nothing suspicious about them. He was now really convinced that Talan-Nuur had something important to say against his fellow prisoners.

Meanwhile the officer had enjoined Olthaur and the other guard to be especially watchful during Zachan's absence. Zachan would soon return, he explained.

Then they started off for the control room. The officer went ahead, Talan-Nuur in the middle, and Zachan brought up the rear.

The prisoners' cabins lay off a side corridor which after a few meters opened up on a rollband-equipped main corridor.

It was at this intersection that the confusion began so suddenly that Zachan did not understand what was going on for much too long.

The officer disappeared around the corner and Talan-Nuur followed him. Zachan made an effort to close up the ranks as quickly as possible so as not to lose sight of the prisoner for a single second. Just as he was about to turn the corner, however, there was a loud noise in the corridor behind him. Zachan stopped and looked around in surprise. The door to the prisoners' cabins had been opened. The largest of the Terrans stood in the doorway, gesticulating frantically. Olthaur and the second guard surrounded him, their weapons trained on him. The Terran seemed to be little disturbed.

Zachan didn't know what was happening. He remembered that his duty was to bring a prisoner to the control room, not to keep an eye on Olthaur and the other guard. He gathered his wits about him and started to continue on his way.

* * * *

This was the moment Atlan had been waiting for. In front of him the young officer stepped unsuspectingly onto the slowest rollband. The guard behind him was still hidden by the corner, and in the side corner as previously arranged, Rhodan raised a loudly protesting uproar.

In the corridor wall, so close that Atlan needed only to stretch out his hand to touch it, lay the circular pressure hatch of the compressed air shaft. As Perry Rhodan's loud voice became audible, Atlan glided to the side. His skilled hands took no more than a second to unscrew the hatch and open it. The airshaft had been designed as an emergency exit and emergency exits had seals that were simple to operate.

As the hatch sprang open, it hissed loudly. The young officer, now some meters ahead on the rollband, became aware that something behind him was not what it should be. He looked around and saw the Arkonide bending over and climbing hastily into the airshaft. The officer was paralysed with shock for an entire second and that second was enough for Atlan to disappear into the shaft and close the hatch behind him.

Dazzling light flamed on in the shaft. The long tube lay shining and smooth-walled before the Arkonide. No more sounds could be heard from outside. The hatch was airtight and soundproof. And above all, it could not be opened as long as someone was working its controls.

Atlan crouched on the round floor of the tube. It had been more than 10,000 years since he had last removed himself from the interior of a ship in this less-than-pleasant manner. For a long second he was struck with the memory of Tarth, that old warhorse, and how he had gotten away from him by way of the compressed air shaft on the stricken *Tosoma* when Atlantis went down.

Only for a second. Then he hit the luminous red button to the left in the shaft wall with his clenched fist. Noise began emanating from up ahead in the tube. Huge pumps sucked out the air, creating a lack of air along the tubular axis. Around the hatch it began to hiss. Compressed air streamed in and raised the pressure at the inner tube end. A howling storm raged around the Arkonide, blowing his hair wildly around his head. The blood shot to his head as he was violently thrust forward, then receded once more as he hit the air pillow that the compressed air had meanwhile inflated at the other end of the tube.

The exit airlock hatch lay before him. Numbed, he got up and manipulated the opening mechanism.

Now came the decisive moment! At least 5 other airshafts coming from all possible directions opened onto this airlock. If the young officer had been quick enough, he had alarmed the ship and given the order to occupy the lock as fast as possible. If that were the case, then a few grim Ekhonides already stood behind the hatch, waiting with ready weapons to receive him.

Nor was that all, If there were no spacesuits in the airlock, then even without the urging of ready weapons he might as well turn around and go tell Perry Rhodan his plan had fallen through. For it to succeed he needed a spacesuit.

Impatient and full of excitement, he watched the hatch slide to the side. The airlock chamber was brightly lit and empty but on the walls hung at least 12 spacesuits and other pieces of equipment.

Atlan put a suit on as fast as he could. The inner hatch of the airlock had closed automatically. Atlan opened the outer hatch and breathed more easily. As long as the outer hatch was open no one would be able to enter the airlock from the ship. Now he was safe. No one could hinder his plan now. He needed only to carry out the rest with same degree of skill, and freedom was as good as won.

He checked over the small reaction unit built into the spacesuit. It worked flawlessly. From the variety of equipment hanging on the walls he picked out a plastic rope whose length he estimated at 300 meters, and hooked it to his belt. The other end he fastened to a ring in the inner airlock wall that had been provided for that purpose.

Then, letting the rope slide through his hand, he stepped outside. The ship's artificial gravity field no longer affected him the moment he left the airlock. The acceleration seemed to rip the *Keenial* past him at a terrific speed but the reaction unit was in operation, the tiny antigrav made the pressure bearable and the rope was not burdened beyond its length.

Atlan floated slowly across the gleaming hull of the ship towards the equatorial rim, where the blue flames of the corpuscular engines stabbed into the darkness of space.

The shrill noise of the alarm sirens engulfed corridors and rooms throughout the ship. Rhodan stopped shouting at the two guards in English, and Olthaur and his comrade looked around in confusion.

Rhodan made an effort to conceal his triumph. Atlan had succeeded in escaping. Now if only the rest of the plan would unfold as well.

The sirens died away. The silence that followed was ghostly. Olthaur glanced uncertainly at the prisoners, then retreated to the intercom post. Rhodan remained standing in the doorway, eyeball to eyeball with the third guard and the threatening muzzle of a shockbeamer.

Olthaur's conversation was brief and excited. Then he put the receiver down and announced in a nervous voice: "The prisoners are to be brought up to the control room!"

If he had known how much effort it took for Rhodan to conceal his relief, he would have been suspicious. However, he heard only Rhodan's formal protest: "We can't move the sick one!"

Olthaur seemed to grow angry chiefly because of his own uncertainty. "Yes you *can* move him!" he cried in rage. "Now get going and no more objections!"

Rhodan went back into the cabin. Unseen by the guards outside, he glanced encouragingly at Bell.

Fellmer Lloyd had meanwhile recovered consciousness. He was feeling better; the medication had begun to work. He claimed he could go to the control room on his own two legs but, ignoring his protests, Rhodan and Bell supported him between them and dragged him out.

The two guards stood watchfully and ready to shoot. "This way!" Olthaur declared energetically, indicating with the barrel of his weapon down the corridor.

* * * *

Atlan knew the ship like the back of his hand. He had commanded the same type millenniums before when he erected an Arkonide colony in the Larsa system. He knew how the cross section of the jets and the engine were coupled. He knew that on the ship's hull, near the jets, there were small mechanisms which could be operated by hand to cause changes in the jet lumens.

It sometimes happened that the control mechanisms operated from the control room broke down. A ship that could not regulate the jet tubes and thus the engine was incapable of manoeuvring and so there were manually controlled devices which allowed bypassing of the automatic control system when it broke down.

It was rather like the old Terran automobiles: they had both an electric ignition and a handcrank in case the ignition failed. Atlan remembered such vehicles out of his own experience and was reminded of them as he was working his way towards the equatorial rim where the corpuscular streams flamed out into space, hardly more than 20 meters away. Only a few steps separated him from the first regulating mechanism.

He pulled on the rope. When he had pulled enough of it in, he felt the resistance of the rope pulling on the ring. That was good. He would need the help of the rope as soon as he began to work. The help of the reaction devices, the rope and the antigrav.

The manual control mechanisms were not connected with the ship's acceleration absorber. When he altered the jet lumen the *Keenial* would begin to buck like a young horse.

* * * *

Chollar was angry beyond all bounds but he had no time to vent his anger on the prisoners.

Rhodan sensed the disquiet filling the control room. One of the prisoners had disappeared by an unusual, seldom utilized way. He had left the ship. At that moment he was floating somewhere outside in free space.

Why? For what purpose?

Chollar had set his men on the search. The main corridors of the *Keenial* were closely watched. Perhaps the prisoner would attempt to reenter the ship through one of the main airlocks. The other half of the crew prepared to leave the ship. Collar could not imagine at that point what damage a single, unarmed prisoner might be able to cause from outside the ship but he had to take everything into account, even things he might not at the moment be able to foresee. The three prisoners stood in the background of the large room, closely watched by their two guards. Rhodan had counted the occupants of the control room. Counting the two guards, there were 17 men here. That was an unhappily large advantage. Only time would tell how they would react to the surprise. Rhodan raised his arm carefully. Olthaur gave a start and bent his finger around the trigger of his weapon. But Rhodan smiled cheerfully and pointed to his watch. He only wanted to know what time it was. 1853 hours. It was evening in Terrania. But that was not the most important thing. The important thing was that Atlan would begin to act at 1855 hours.

* * * *

Atlan glanced at his watch: 40 more seconds.

In his right hand he held the small control mechanism's switch. He had tried to move it a millimetre this way and that. The switch obeyed freely.

It would not cost him any effort to so alter the first three jet lumens with a single pull that the engine power would drop by 40%.

He looked up—or rather, in the direction his sensations told him was up at that moment. The large freight hatch had not opened yet. So far no one seemed to have got the idea of searching for the escaped prisoner on the ship's outer hull.

10 more seconds!

* * * *

There it was!

First a violent jolt that sent the stomach hurtling into one's throat, then a bursting crack as the unsymmetrically functioning engines drove the ship into a curve.

It came as a complete surprise to Chollar's men. They were thrown out of their seats, rolled helpless across the floor and knocked against the walls, banging their heads, shoulders and legs. They cried out in terror.

It was bad enough for the two Terrans who had been expecting it. The first jolt knocked Fellmer Lloyd to the floor and he lost consciousness. With one leap Rhodan and Bell ploughed into the middle of the chaos of falling and yelling men and began without any hesitation to do what they had planned.

As Rhodan commandeered his first weapon, a shock beamer, and used it on a man lying in front of him, the *Keenial* was still rolling and swaying. It seemed ridiculous to him that the business would be so simple but as he uncertainly got up again and attempted to make up for the pitching of the ship by keeping his knees loose and yielding, he had already put 7 of the 17 men out of action.

As though possessed, Bell worked in the background firing two shockbeamers simultaneously at the fallen men, hitting them with paralysing bursts of energy before they had a chance to understand what was happening.

Nonetheless, a part of the crew had already been eliminated from the contest by falling too heavily. At no later than 1902 hours, Bell and Rhodan were the sole masters of the *Keenial's* control room. They collected the weapons of the unconscious men and bolted the hatches leading outside. The control room

became a fortress.

For Atlan, the extinction of the white glowing engine beams was the signal that the attempt to gain control of the ship had succeeded.

* * * *

Absolute silence reigned over the ship. Officers had called the control room and learned from Perry Rhodan himself what had happened. They were warned against making an attack on the control room. Rhodan did not conceal the fact that the control room's unconscious crew were considered hostages.

Atlan returned through an airshaft that led directly from the emergency exit to the control room. Rhodan had simply pressed his hand, not saying anything. It was no time for words but they all knew what a great feat the Arkonide had accomplished.

Rhodan set to computing the data for a transition to a sector patrolled by Terran spaceships. The Ekhonide positronicon caused him some difficulty.

His progress was slow, making him impatient. The longer the *Keenial* floated free in space, the better ideas would occur to the Ekhonides out in the ship's corridors waiting for the enemy to betray some weak point.

For some time Rhodan had been expecting one very definite move on the Ekhonides' part, something which would be simple to accomplish and endanger no one. It would only prevent Rhodan from setting the ship in motion again and making a long hytrans to bring himself to safety. Rhodan was surprised that none of the Ekhonides had so far thought of it: they could disrupt the power supply to the control room. All they had to do was pull a switch. From that moment on the control room would be a dead space: no light, no heat, no air supply. Only one small device would continue to function, for it possessed its own generator: the emergency transmitter. And then...

Rhodan and Bell felt their way through the darkness. The stiff bodies of the Ekhonides did not give them much trouble. They laid them against the way between two bolted hatches.

"Keep your ears open, Admiral!" Rhodan admonished. "And don't shoot at Lloyd when he comes to. He's lying in the other direction!"

Then he returned to the pilot's seat. The small control panel of the emergency transmitter was just to the left of the pilot's switchboard. Rhodan felt for the main switch, found it and pulled it down. Five small lights came on, emitting so much luminosity he could make out the control panel.

While he put the transmitter into operation, he considered what kind of message he ought to send. It had to be composed so that it would not attract the attention of Arkonide ships at all but excite that of Terran ships to a high degree.

The message had to take the form of a routine transmission and yet make it clear to the Terran fleet that Terrans were in trouble.

After some hesitation Rhodan reached a decision. LAMIRA 11 CALLING YNLISS. POSITION GOSHUN.

The next was transmitted in Arkonese. Only the name 'Goshun' could not be translated into Arkonese; Rhodan hoped that the Arkonides who overheard the message would assume Goshun was the name of some planet and pay no further attention. Certainly none of them knew that Goshun was the name of the lake on whose shore stood the Terran capital city Terrania.

Rhodan picked up the microphone and repeated the text three times in rapid succession. It was his intention to repeat the call every 10 minutes until help came.

* * * *

The constellation Terra-Grautier-Arkon constituted an irregular triangle with a very wide angle at the Terran corner and a very narrow one of only a few degrees at the Arkonide. From Grautier the *Keenial* had set out along the long side of the triangle towards Arkon. That meant that after two transitions, covering a total distance of about 12000 light-years, they were still not much further from Terra than they were when they had started out. Rhodan was calculating that Earth ships coming from the Terra Sector would need 5 to 6 hours to find the *Keenial*, assuming that they started into space as soon as the message had been received. The air supply of the isolated control room would last at least through those 5 or 6 hours. And if all hope had truly been in vain, then there was still the possibility of sending out a genuine distress call that would bring ships racing in from all directions. Those ships would in all probability be Arkonide. For the time being the crew of the *Keenial* was quiet. The waiting went on.

* * * *

Suddenly there was movement in the ship. Shouts rang out; the singing of energy beams were heard through the walls. The *Keenial* began to tremble.

In the control room the three Terrans were on their feet at once. Shots and yells—that could only mean the Ekhonides regarded those trying to board the ship as enemies.

Enemies of the Ekhonides—those could only be Terrans!

The hostages were still unconscious. Since Rhodan had transmitted the first message, three and a half hours had gone by. The Terran ship must have been far from the Earth when it received the message; otherwise it could not have come to the rescue so quickly.

Outside the noise came closer. Bell strode impatiently through the darkness toward one of the hatches and stopped next to it. He pressed his ear against the wall and attempted to hear what was going on outside.

The sounds were indistinct. In any event a murderous drama was being enacted on the decks and in the

corridors of the ship. Whoever the newcomers were, the Ekhonides seemed to be offering the utmost resistance.

"We should open the hatch," Bell suggested, "and make the Ekhonide boys fight on two fronts!"

Rhodan refused. The idea was too risky. "We'll wait!" he decided.

* * * *

The noise of battle increased. The ship shook.

The resistance of the Ekhonide crew seemed to be collapsing. The noise came closer. When Bell put his ear to the wall, he could indistinctly make out the rumble of running feet hastening over the corridor floors outside.

Minutes passed. Rhodan looked at the luminous numbers in his watch. The battle for the *Keenial* had lasted more than an hour.

Then there was a sudden banging at one of the hatches.

Atlan and Rhodan slid into cover on the other side of the hatch. The hostages were forgotten.

"Don't open it!" Rhodan ordered. "This is a trap if I've ever seen one!"

The banging stopped. Rhodan used the time to beat signals against the hatch in rhythmic order, three to a group. However those on the other side did not seem willing to learn the rhythm. After awhile the banging began again, this time so loudly and angrily that the three Terrans drew back a few steps.

The situation was unreal. They found themselves on board an enemy ship and in a single room cut off from all others. They had transmitted a distress call and there—after waited for a Terran ship to come pick them up. So they had expected that someone outside would bang on the hatch and cry out: "Open up!"

Instead, whoever was outside said nothing and the blows shaking the hatch were much too powerful for even 10 human fists.

A terrible suspicion began to form in Rhodan's mind.

"Open up!" Rhodan ordered tersely. "And keep your weapons down!"

The hatchbolts came loose with a clanging and metallic ringing. The heavy metal rings slid to the side. Glaring light fell in from outside and outlined the shape of a figure whose form froze the Terrans' blood.

A lump—a cube-shaped lump standing on two powerful pillar-like legs. From atop the lump grew the hairless sphere of the head. The faceted eyes shone even in the half-light and the pointed opening of the triangular mouth was wide open as though to swallow the Terrans. The arms hung to the side of the lump, thick and powerful, ending in hands with ridiculously delicate fingers.

The being was a Druuf.

* * * *

After the first moments of shock they realized that the Druuf was armed and in addition carried a small speaking device of the sort which the Druufs used to imitate the sounds of human speech and to perceive them.

The three-cornered mouth suddenly moved. It had nothing to do with speaking. The Druufs used other bodily organs for propagating the ultrasonic vibrations of their unintelligible language. However the small speech device came to life in the same moment and, with an impersonal, mechanical voice, explained: "We have heard your call. We came believing that you were in trouble and we wanted to help you. Our ship stands at your disposal."

Rhodan had not needed long to regain his self-control.

A Druuf ship had been in the vicinity when he had sent the call for help. Whether or not they had understood the word *Goshun*, they had come to look the matter over. They had shown the crew of the *Keenial* no mercy. They had shoved out of the way anyone opposing them.

A thought raced through Rhodan's head like a bolt of lightning: the Druufs would insist that he, Atlan, Bell and Fellmer Lloyd come aboard their ship. Due to the odd relationship that divided Terran and Druuf more than it united them, it was to be expected that the Druufs would regard them as prisoners.

That was not as bad as it might have at first seemed. Nevertheless, Rhodan tried an experiment. "We are very grateful to you," he assured them, "but while we appreciate your kind offer, we must reluctantly turn it down. Our own ship will be here in a few hours."

The translating unit needed some time to convert the words into the Druufs inaudible language. While that was going on, five more Druufs appeared that were visible from the control room.

"I don't think this refusal would please our commander," said the first Druuf bluntly. "We insist that you consider yourselves as our guests."

How can you keep a straight face when you lie like that? Rhodan thought grimly to himself. He knew that there was no other way out. The Druufs outnumbered them. They would have to go with them.

On Grautier they had gone from the frying pan into the fire—and now it had happened again. From the hands of one enemy they wound up in the hands of the other. Terra's progress seemed to have turned off into a deadend—a galactic dead-end.

Rhodan raised his hand, making an agreeable gesture. "Alright," he said, "we'll go with you."

The Druuf waited until the device had translated the words, then turned and walked out.

* * * *

The ship was one of those giant cylinders the Druufs seemed to consider the last word in spacecraft design. The prisoners were treated politely but coolly. They were shown a series of cabins and some Druufs were posted as guards in front of the doors.

The ship, whose name consisted of a group of unpronounceable, whispering sounds, resumed its course shortly after taking on the prisoners, a fact which was evident from many different signs. Rhodan did not doubt that the Druufs would return to their own time-plane as fast as possible through the overlapping zone near the Myrtha system.

Mildly amused, Perry observed the depression of his companions, who had hardly exchanged a single word with one another or with him since the appearance of the Druufs. Rhodan did not share their despair. True, he could not deny that they found themselves in a substantially less pleasant situation than they had anticipated while making plans to gain their freedom aboard the Keenial. But even so, they were still better off with the Druufs than when they were on the way to Arkon.

There was still a slight hope yet.

A small gleam of light, shining at the end of the deadend street.

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THE ATOM HELL OF GRAUTIER

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

PERRY RHODAN—dead?

Has the Peacelord passed on to his reward?

It sure looks that way after the atomic holocaust loosed on Grautier.

If so, the interregnum governors of Earth agree that the world must not yet know. It would be too great a blow for the home planet of the young solar to absorb at this stage of its development.

Meanwhile, in the weird other-plane of the Druufs, strange things are happening.

Deep things.

You might even say—cavernous.

It all takes place in PERRY RHODAN #80—

Kurt Mahr's

CAVES OF THE DRUUPS