

After Perry Rhodan's fortunate return from Druuf captivity, the political situation in the Sol system had once more stabilized.

However, for understandable reasons it no longer seem advisable to officially seek a formal alliance with the Druufs, no matter how much they may also be enemies of the Regent of Arkon.

Then a plan offers itself that will not only lend itself to maintaining the continuing existence of the Solar Imperium but also will decisively weaken the two great competitors for mastery of the Galaxy, Arkon and Druufon!

The plan brings to the fore Julian Tiffloor—the "cosmic decoy"—once again, and Tiffloor, kept young like all the other leading personalities of the Solar Imperium by the cell renewal on Wanderer, plays a cosmic game of chess with skill and determination.

1/ TIFF ABDUCTED!

JULIAN TIFFLOR was certain that he had never seen the two men before. They were young, rather slovenly dressed, and each held a small thermobeamer in his hand. The weapons were aimed directly at Tiffloor's chest

Tiffloor thought over his situation and decided that there was nothing else he could do but do what the two gentlemen wanted—whatever that was. He was not afraid. He was in the middle of the great city of Terrania. He had just stepped out of the restaurant where he had eaten supper and the street lay broad and empty before him. It was too late for pedestrians. A few autos glided past on the trafficways but they were too far away for their occupants to be able to see what two holdup men were doing with the uniformed man at the edge of the street.

The situation was not at all favourable for Tiffloor. As he had left, the restaurant had had only a few customers. It would be some time before the next guest came out. But for the moment Tiffloor still thought the two men were simple bums. They were out for money and had thought they would have the best chance of finding a victim in the vicinity of a high-class restaurant. Tomorrow, when it became known that Col. Julian Tiffloor of the Terran spacefleet had vanished and the vast and powerful apparatus of the police was being set into motion, the two men would be overcome by fear and quickly let him go—if he had not thought of anything better by then himself.

When one of the two asked if the grey car parked at the curb belonged to him, he answered almost cheerfully: "Yes, of course. Nice car, isn't it?"

The man didn't seem to possess much in the way of a sense of humour. "Shut up and get in!" he ordered, motioning pointedly with his gun-hand. "In the back seat!"

Tiffloor did not move. "I am a colonel," he said dryly. "I take orders only from generals."

He had not been paying attention to the other man. He heard a quick step next to him, then felt a blow on his skull. He staggered and fell almost to the ground, when hands grabbed him roughly under his

shoulders and held him upright. As though from somewhere far in the distance, he heard an angry voice say: "We don't mess around with jokes! Now do what you're told."

Tifflor did not hesitate any longer. If they beat him unconscious beforehand, he would not be able to defend himself later. He freed himself from the grip supporting him and went to the auto. He opened the electronic locking system of the doors and motor, climbed through the rear door and sat down. It was good to sit down. The blow had been a hard one and Tifflor felt himself getting sick.

One of the two gangsters sat down next to him. The other sat behind the controls and when the small vidscreen of the microwave interceptor, which registered traffic on the beltway, showed that the way was clear, he let the vehicle move out. He drove directly to one of the fastest belts, which lay almost in the middle of the wide street, and there let the car be taken along the moving roadband as it would. Up to now he had chosen no driving program. That and the fact he had selected an inner belt convinced Tifflor that their destination was no small distance away, probably outside the city.

He tried to question the man next to him. First he asked direct questions and when he did not get even a single answer, he resorted to taunting and jibing him. However, the man seemed immune to every sort of psychological tactic. He sat as silent as a statue.

Tifflor pondered his chances of not being noticed if he attempted to pull out the weapon he carried in a holster under his uniform jacket. He tried once to reach into the pocket where a slit in the lining led straight to the butt of the small beamer. The man next to him suddenly came alive and held the barrel of his weapon close to Tifflor's face, saying quietly: "Keep your hands in your lap, buddy. We know all about how fleet uniforms are tailored!"

Tifflor gave up.

Some thoughts came to him relative to the opinion of the two men which he had formed when he first encountered them. They gave the impression of knowing precisely what they wanted. His rank and the certainty that in five hours at most they would have the police and the secret service hot on their trail did not seem to affect them. Tifflor was not so certain any more that they were really common thugs. He remembered the unrest that had reigned a few weeks before when Perry Rhodan was still thought dead. The unrest was past. It had quieted down the moment Rhodan had reappeared and explained to mankind that there was no reason to be excited. But there might still be hotheads determined to actualize their political beliefs—no matter how.

Had he fallen into the hands of such people? The thought struck him as absurd. Right—he was a colonel. But who, in heaven's name, would be so naive as to believe that Perry Rhodan and the Solar Council would change their decisions merely because their political opponents held a colonel of the Fleet as a hostage?

The situation was confused and unpleasant. Tifflor came to the realization that he would have done better if he had made more noise back on Goshun Road before being taken away.

It did not look as though he would have another such favourable opportunity to attract the world's attention to his abduction.

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Julian Tiffloor had experienced his most impressive adventures in the depths of galactic space. Earthly gangsters were something he had never run across before. He had an idea that the trip the two kidnappers were taking with him in his own car would end somewhere in the wilderness of the steppes at some old, tumbledown and wind-ravaged house.

And he was right. The house was almost exactly as he had imagined it. It looked as though it had been built 400 years before as a shelter for marauding nomads. Tiffloor knew that just 70 years before there had not been a single house in the entire region but that did not detract any from the impression which the strange building made on him.

He revised his opinion once he stepped inside the house. He thought for a second that he had come into a modern hospital. The halls gleamed with cleanliness and the illumination was bright and the room to which he was finally led was equipped with devices that were the most modern in the field of psychophysics.

Tiffloor realized what the equipment was going to be used for and decided that if he ever wanted to regain his freedom he would have to do something at once. If he was put under the influence of those devices he would no longer be in control of his own will; he would instead be forced by posthypnotic suggestion to do whatever he had been told.

The time *was now*. Although he saw that both of his abductors were more watchful than ever at that moment, Julian Tiffloor showed his courage by beginning to act.

When they entered the building, they had put him between them. Only once had they stopped on their way through the ground floor—and that was to remove the thermobeamer he carried under his jacket. There had been no possible way to prevent them from taking it.

He was still between them as they shoved him into the room packed full of psychophysical equipment. One of the two grasped him by the shoulder and led him farther into the room while the other remained a few steps behind and carefully locked the door.

This was the right moment. Tiffloor did not worry that the man next to him was looking at him closely and mistrustfully. He set his right foot behind his left and pretended to stumble, falling forward as he did so and causing the foreign hand to slide off his shoulder. He came up again, propelled by the force of all his anger. Clenched fists were not necessary, the impact of his shoulder alone knocked his guard two steps back and—sent him falling. Tiffloor knew what was necessary to guarantee his safety, he leaped behind the fallen guard, yanked him to his feet and held him in front of him as cover from the second kidnapper at the door.

The man he was using as cover was stunned but not unconscious. When he understood what was happening he made an effort to make it difficult for Tiffloor. He turned under the hard grip and tried to kick Tiffloor's shin. With a sudden jerk Tiffloor pulled the man to one side and banged his head against the metal base of an encephalograph. Then he slugged him and the man went limp under Tiffloor's fist.

Tiffloor stepped back a short distance. The arm with which he held the unconscious man began to hurt. Tiffloor looked up at the door and realized with a start that the second man whom he had thought would be there had vanished.

He whirled around, letting the unconscious man fall, and ducked between two large machines for cover.

Then he listened, hoping to hear some sound the other man might make and thus find out where he was.

All he heard was his own panting. He made an effort to suppress it. He opened his mouth widely so that he could breathe with as little sound as possible. But there was nothing beyond the pounding in his temples and the dull pain of the blow from which he had not yet recovered.

Tifflor wished he had a weapon. Any weapon. It did not even have to be a thermobeamer. A hand grenade, a rifle—or anything else.

He turned around slowly so as not to make any sound. The unconscious man lay two meters behind him and another two meters farther on lay the small beamer the man had had in his hand and dropped. Four meters! Tifflor began to move. He had come out from behind the two machines, which were both as tall as a man, and step over the unconscious man. He did it carefully and quickly, looking around constantly in the process.

What had become of the second man?

Julian Tifflor did not have a chance to find out. When he had come close enough to the ownerless weapon that he needed only to stretch out his hand to touch it, he was struck by a violent blow that set his entire body to vibrating painfully. Before he lost consciousness he was able to realize that it was the sort of pain caused by being hit by the impact of a shockbeamer.

He sank into a deep dark abyss.

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Then a bright light suddenly lit up in the darkness. It had no shape, it seemed unreal. Yet Tifflor had the feeling that his eyes were hurting unbearably.

He tried to move his eyelids. In doing so he realized that he had closed his eyes. He was not able to open them. The light, then, was not a normal one. It did not come from outside.

A voice began to speak. It came from the light but naturally the speaker could not be seen. "Julian Tifflor," said the voice. "Listen well!"

It spoke in a tone ridiculously deep and slow. Tifflor felt a sudden urge to laugh. But before he could laugh, the voice continued to speak. And the longer it spoke the more the slowness and the deep, full tone fascinated him. He could do nothing else, he had to listen. He soaked up the words like a sponge soaking up water, knowing that he would never forget a single word.

Besides, that which the voice had to say was most surprising—not to mention sensational.

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With his usual casualness, Reginald Bell entered the broad room from which Perry Rhodan had once more been guiding the destiny of the Solar Imperium since his return to Earth.

From his seat at the table, Rhodan could look out through a large window and see a vast section of the city of Terrania. The room was on the top floor of the tall administration building. Rhodan had attached great importance to having his office here. The view of the city was a constant reminder of the gravity of the decisions that were made in the room.

"Everything's in order," Bell announced, closing the door behind him. He seemed to be confident that Rhodan would understand what he was referring to.

Rhodan broke off from the work he had been doing. "What did he say?" he asked.

Bell grinned almost maliciously. "He knocked out one of the two guys before he knew what was going on, and the other one afterwards. Both of them are now undergoing treatment. But I think they understood how Tiffloor was feeling at the time."

Rhodan nodded smilingly. "What did Mercant's agents have to say about it? Did they observe anyone?"

Bell shrugged his shoulders. "They saw a few suspicious characters following Tiffloor's car up to the city limits, although not all the way to the Psychostation. Mercant has put them down on his list: they are possibly galactic spies, although they don't know exactly what's happened. They'll start to make sense of it when Tiffloor disappears. It looks as though everything's in fine shape."

Bell had come closer and sat down in one of the comfortable chairs that Rhodan had provided for his visitors.

"I still don't know what we expect to gain from this business, Perry," Bell continued.

Rhodan did not seem to have heard the question. He looked past Bell and out the window. The clear white winter's sun stood two hands' breadths over the horizon. It was 9 A.M. Half an hour before, frost had gleamed from the roofs. The year was coming to an end.

"There's much we can gain from it," Rhodan answered at length. "Like a serious weakening of the military potential of our two enemies, the Druufs and the Arkonides."

Bell cleared his throat. "I recall that just two months ago we intended to attack Arkon directly. Everything was ready for it. Only a small incident kept us from going through with it. Why don't we put the same plan into operation again?"

Rhodan looked at his friend. "What you call a small incident," he replied, amused, "came very close to costing us our lives as well as the lives of others. Have you forgotten so quickly? Don't you still remember how it looked when the entire planet Grautier exploded beneath our feet?"

Bell nodded. "Sure. It was serious for us. But in comparison with the scale of galactic politics, it was only a small incident. We lived through it and now we can take the plan up again, right?"

Rhodan answered quickly, "No, we can't. We've had to realize that we aren't ready to take the Arkonides' place yet. Our feet aren't big enough to fit their shoes, so to speak."

Bell leaned forward. "That's a colourful metaphor," he said irritably "but I don't think it applies."

Rhodan glanced in the direction of a stack of paper-thin sheets of plastifoil lying on the table in front of him. "It's no wonder you feel that way," he answered. "You haven't seen the latest data from the Venus Positronicon yet."

Bell stood up. "No," he affirmed, "actually I haven't yet. I didn't think Atlan worked so fast."

Rhodan smiled at him. "His people built the positronicon on Venus—10,000 years ago. There's no one who can work with that machine faster than he can."

Bell nodded. "All right, that's why you sent him to it. Now what does that positronic wonder have to say?"

"I just told you, our feet aren't big enough!"

Bell grew silent and reached for the plastifoil sheets. They were about the size of notebook paper and divided by thin lines into 20 narrow, vertically running areas. The sheets were covered with dots, crosses and small circles, symbols belonging to the machine code of Arkonide computers. Being able to read the symbols without the help of a positronic transcriber required practice but Bell happened to have had such practice.

He read some of the sheets and laid them back down. He looked out the window, as though thinking heavily about something.

"The Arkonide Imperium is in an uproar," he finally said, putting what he had read into words. "The Robot Regent is mobilizing its last reserves so that it can overcome the Druuf threat. It doesn't know—and isn't even able to understand—that the Druufs will be a threat only for a very short time to come. The overlapping front where our universe and the Druuf universe meet is diminishing and is drifting towards the centre of the galaxy. Once the overlapping front has disappeared, then there will be no more natural means of going from Einstein Space to Druuf Space or vice versa. That means that from then on, the Druufs will no longer constitute a threat to us." He glanced to the side and regarded Perry Rhodan. "I didn't read any farther," he admitted, "but the conclusions are pretty obvious, aren't they?"

"I'll be able to answer that if you tell me what you think."

"The Robot Regent on Arkon," Bell continued, "has mobilized its entire realm. That means it has at least 80,000 warships under arms. It is not able to comprehend the actual phenomenon of differing rates of time. It's limited to what it can understand—the Druuf spaceships coming into our universe from time to time and the overlapping zone through which its own ships can penetrate Druuf Space. When nothing more is heard from the Druufs because the overlapping zone has disappeared, the Regent will take that for a trick of some kind and continue its vigilance because it believes the Druufs could reappear at any moment."

He paused, running his right hand through his hair. He did not look at all happy. "Whoever attacks Arkon," he went on, "now and in the near future, will have to deal with a fleet of 80,000 units, which doesn't count the new ships constantly pouring out of the factories. When you consider that the Terran fleet consists of only a few thousand ships... yeah, then you certainly do come to the conclusion we'd better stay out of this business for awhile."

Perry Rhodan was silent. Bell, waiting for an answer, asked after awhile: "That was what you meant,

Perry, right?"

"Yes, that's what I meant. We're too weak and we've realized that only at the last moment. When you take the number of ships alone, the Robot Regent is superior to us by a ratio of 20 to 1. That says nothing about morale, however. Ours is better than that of the allied races serving the Arkonides. That's beyond all doubt. Nevertheless, our situation is even worse than that of Frederick the Great in the Seven Years War. And... naturally we can't count on a miracle like the one that saved old Frederick from destruction back in the 18th Century."

Bell turned and went to the window. "Do you think Tiff's mission will help us any?"

"Tiff is only a small stone in a vast mosaic. From now on the Earth will limit itself to dealing out such small blows. We can reach our goal only step by step. We have to gnaw away at the Arkonide Imperium like mice at a cheese. One day the little mice will have entirely eaten away the big cheese."

"While I don't particularly like the analogy you've used," said Bell, "I think you're right."

He went back to Rhodan's table and picked up the rest of the sheets which he had not read.

2/ THEFT OF A STARSHIP

The man had a swollen chin and claimed to be named Franklin Lubkov, 27 years old. Tiffloor could not vouch for his name and age but the fact that the man had a swollen chin was beyond dispute.

Franklin Lubkov was a lieutenant in the Terran spacefleet and now that he had the first, unfriendly portion of his mission behind him, he showed his superior the proper respect. When Tiffloor ordered him to take his hand away from his chin and assume a friendlier expression, he obeyed.

"It still hurts, sir," he said. "I wouldn't have ever thought you could hit so hard."

Tiffloor changed the subject. "Tell me all you know about this whole business," he requested.

"There isn't a whole lot to it," Lubkov replied. "Sgt. Fryberg and I were given the assignment of picking you up on the evening of 10 December after you had finished supper at Tai Wang's restaurant, and to bring you to a building whose location was described exactly to us. We were also instructed to make the pickup 'gangster-style'. Then our faces were disguised with makeup and we were given shabby suits. We were told how important it was for everything to look genuine."

"But *who* told you to do all this?" Tiffloor interrupted impatiently.

Lubkov made a wry expression. "Marshall Mercant, sir. In person and well-identified with credentials and IDs."

Tiffloor whistled through his teeth. "And so all you had to do was obey, eh? All right. After you had brought me here... what was to happen then?"

"That wasn't part of our mission, sir," Lubkov answered. "We were to lay you out on the table there, tie you down, and disappear. Marshal Mercant told us that someone else would take care of you."

"And you never had the feeling that what you were doing was unlawful and under certain circumstances could cause no small amount of harm to the Solar Imperium?"

"No sir. For a feeling like that you would have had to assume that Marshal Mercant's brains had gone spaggy (21st century slang for "Flipped His Lid." Spaggy derives from spaghetti.). Besides, when the order was given, Marshal Freyt was present, too. I had no doubts about what I was doing."

Julian Tifflor turned away and paced a few steps to and fro. "Well," he said finally, turning his back to Lubkov, "now what?"

"That I don't know, sir. We were told we would receive further instructions from you."

"Where are the others?"

"Down in the cellar, sir. They're waiting for departure."

Tifflor turned around. "Go down to them and tell them that we're taking off at 20:40 hours. That's an hour and a half from now."

Franklin Lubkov saluted and left. In a uniform and with the makeup washed off his face, he left a much better impression than he had the night before when he and Sgt. Fryberg had waited together outside Tai Wang's restaurant.

Tifflor sat on the edge of the bed on which he had lain during the some hours-long psycho-treatment. The sight of the bed alone called up unpleasant memories but there was no other place to sit in the room.

Lt. Lubkov, Sgt. Fryberg and 12 other men—they comprised the commando team with which he was going to take off for a daring adventure, following orders that had come straight from the top. He knew how he was to go about doing what he had to do. He was familiar with his own situation and that of his men. Right now, at that very moment, the newspapers in Terrania were filled with reports of 14 men under the leadership of a known and highly-placed fleet officer who had turned their backs on mankind and Perry Rhodan's goals and had become traitors. It was believed—or rather the newspapers believed—that the deserters had already succeeded in taking over a spaceship and leaving the Earth. Nonetheless, it was reported, they were still being searched for on Earth.

Col. Tifflor knew now that every police officer had the right to shoot at him as soon as he was seen and recognized. He was an outlaw and the 14 men waiting in the cellar were outlaws along with him.

Everything had been carefully arranged. If the Arkonides had their men on Lubkov's trail, they would come to the following conclusion: originally there had been only 14 men who wanted to leave the Earth behind, being Lubkov, Fryberg and 12 others. They had needed a leader and chose Col. Tifflor. Naturally Tifflor had no intention of betraying the Earth, so Lubkov and his men had to 'condition' him first. They slipped him into their hideout far from the city and worked him over so that he had no choice but to accede to Lubkov's wishes. When the building blew up a few minutes after they left it, some debris from the furnishings would remain behind to convince even the best spies that Lubkov had sufficient equipment to make the most loyal man into a traitor.

So far, so good. Julian Tifflor really had been conditioned. The plan on which the entire operation was

based had been imparted to him by mechano-suggestive means. That had taken several hours. Every detail of the plan was now as firmly anchored in Tiffloor's brain as if he had thought of nothing else since his childhood. In Tiffloor's opinion, the plan was so perfect that absolutely nothing could go wrong. He estimated the number of experts who had worked the plan out conservatively at 100 and the time it had taken them 3 weeks. Moreover, they had made use of positronic computers.

True, Julian Tiffloor took no pleasure in what he was about to do but he was an officer in the Terran Fleet and an order was an order. He also understood that if the plan was to be perfect, there was no other way for it to be carried out than this way. He missed only one thing: a few personal words from any one of those responsible for the mission and who had burdened him with it.

Tiffloor had served for more than 60 years in the Fleet. He belonged to the chosen individuals who had received the life-maintaining cell-renewal process on the artificial world Wanderer. He was now about 80 years old but his appearance, the elasticity of his skin and his mental vigour were that of a 30-year-old man. The aging process had stopped cold when Tiffloor underwent the cell renewal. He was a wise man with 80 years of experience behind him but even with all his wisdom he still would have felt happy if someone said to him: "Don't worry, Tiff! We're keeping our eye on you!" Or something like that.

He lay flat on the bed and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling.

Then he suddenly heard the strange voice. Or rather, it was not really so strange. He had heard it before and knew to whom it belonged. Surprised, he sat up and looked around but besides him no one was in the room, nor did the voice come from a loudspeaker.

It was Perry Rhodan who spoke and the words sounded from within Tiffloor's mind.

He lay down again and listened.

"You require an explanation, Tiff," Rhodan spoke, his voice friendly. "I know that and I'll give it to you. Don't be surprised at the way I'm talking to you. You are a deserter and naturally I can't come to you directly and talk with you in person. This message was recorded and imparted to you by mechano-suggestive means. With it came a post-hypnotic order to allow your mind to play it back, so to speak, at a certain time. I assume that you're experiencing the quiet before the storm at this time, so you have the time to listen to me.

"To put it bluntly, Tiff, Terra is in a bad way. We have internal peace but Arkon is in the full vigour of its strength and as soon as the Robot Regent learns where we are, Earth will experience the same fate as Grautier a month and a half ago. Soon the Druufs will be blocked off from coming into our Universe. The overlapping zone is shrinking and moving away. Then the Robot will start to concern itself with the Earth. We must be alert to every chance that we can use to win more time for ourselves and disadvantage Arkon.

"Such a chance is now available to us for as long as the Druufs are not completely cut off from our universe."

"I don't have to tell you anything about the plan, Tiff. You are already familiar with it in every detail. You can depend on the men you have with you. They belong to the elite... even though you have never seen most of them before. They have been conditioned. Even if the plan falls through and they fall into the hands of an enemy, they will not be able to damage the Earth's status—just as you will not be able to, either, Tiff. You could say we've taken out insurance. We had to, because we're standing alone against a power vastly superior to us. The collective being on Wanderer, the only force which could help us, has

not been heard from. We have no possibility of forcing it to help us.

"Don't consider this operation as just another routine patrol, Tiff. A great deal depends on your success. That's why we'll keep our eye on you. Two battleships will be constantly in your vicinity. You are still bearing the telepathic signal broadcaster which will enable our mutants to locate your position within a range of 2 light-years. You aren't going to be lost to us, Tiff.

"Well... that's about it. Break a leg, Tiff! Come back soon and in one piece!"

The voice faded out. Tiffmor sat up and said, lost in thought: "Thanks a lot, sir."

It was pointless. Perry Rhodan was not around. Rhodan could not possibly have heard him.

Nonetheless, Tiffmor suddenly felt much better.

He smiled and went down into the cellar to speak with the 14 men who were to fly with him to meet the Druufs.

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Besides Lt. Lubkov and Sgt. Fryberg, with whom Tiffmor had so recently become acquainted, there were 4 other acquaintances among the 14 men: teleporter Ras Tschubai, suggestor Andre Noir, telepath John Marshall and telekineticist Tama Yokida. Tiffmor was surprised. Perry Rhodan had taken the most capable mutants out of the Mutant Corps for the duration of the secret mission. Together, Marshall, Tschubai, Noir and Yokida were a force that could hold its own against a well-equipped regiment.

With that in mind, Tiffmor felt considerably relieved. Mutants were of incalculable worth—especially in this situation for Arkonides and Druufs alike were helpless against paramechanical and parapsychological powers.

From 19:30 hours to shortly after 2,000 hours, Tiffmor explained the plan to his men. He especially emphasized that everything had been amply prepared for and that there was nothing to fear so long as they were still outside the overlapping zone, more than 6,000 light-years from Earth. It was necessary to say that, for the first part of the plan was nothing more and nothing less than stealing a spaceship from the repair yard of the Terran Spacefleet.

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At 2000 hours, Sgt. Cooper relieved the guard who was watching over the spacecruiser named *Newborn*. Normally there was only one guard for the entire yard area, the watch officer up ahead at the main entrance. It was not necessary to watch closely over ships in need of repair, for the very fact alone that they needed repairs was excellent insurance against their being stolen.

It was different with the *Newborn*. Work on the ship had been finished that day but too late to move the cruiser back to the spacefield. Thus it had been assigned an extra guard.

Sgt. Cooper had not been agreeable to that—especially since he of all people had been assigned to guard duty and now he had to walk back and forth for two hours in the shadow of the ship on a cold pre-winter night. Moreover, the *Newborn* was an utterly obsolete ship. It was sphere-shaped and had a diameter of 90 meters. These days, ships no longer were built in that size, which fact alone was enough to give an indication of how old the *Newborn* was. She had weakly-powered engines which supplied an acceleration of a mere 17,000-normal as opposed to the 50,000-normal mustered by modern equipment, so the *Newborn* needed 15 minutes to bring her speed within the usual .02% of the speed of light for going into transition. True, she had hyper-engines but in this day and age every space yacht had them too. By itself, that was more than enough to make Sgt. Cooper feel his task was of much importance.

Cooper marched angrily back and forth, 20 steps this way, 20 steps that. After awhile he noticed that each 20 steps required 15 seconds. When he had gone back and forth twice, a minute had passed. He began to count the minutes—73 minutes now remained before his shift was finished and he was relieved by Duncan.

Poor Duncan! He came from Florida and would freeze all the more.

Cooper suddenly stopped. He heard a noise that sounded like a large car. The noise came from the direction of the main entrance and surely he would have seen headlights. But he had seen nothing.

Cooper stepped out of the *Newborn*'s shadow and waited. Whatever kind of car it was, the officer of the watch had let it pass through and so Cooper did not have to concern himself about it.

Finally a personnel transport emerged from the darkness and stopped a few meters away from Cooper. The truck bed was covered and Cooper could not see who or what was to be found there. Someone climbed out of the cab and walked towards Cooper. Cooper saw his gleaming rank insignia. He could not quite make out what rank it was but the man was no doubt a staff officer.

Cooper saluted. To do so he took his hand from the strap of his rifle and brought it against the edge of his helmet. The officer had meanwhile come close enough that he could clearly see his insignia, it was a colonel. Cooper felt even more respect.

Then he recognized Julian Tiffloor. Sparks blazed in his mind. He remembered having heard something about Julian Tiffloor early that morning, something incomprehensible and unbelievable. Now what had it been...?

Cooper needed five seconds to remember it. Or rather, he would have needed five seconds. Tiffloor did not let him have them. Cooper was no danger to him as long as he stood there with his hand respectfully on his helmet.

Tiffloor unexpectedly struck out, hitting Cooper directly on the chin. Tiffloor put enough force into the blow that he would not have to hit the man a second time. Stumbling, Cooper fell to the ground. The gun slid from his shoulder and dropped nearby with a clatter.

All of a sudden Lt. Lubkov stood next to Tiffloor. Tiffloor saw his white teeth shining in the darkness. "Excuse me, sir," said Lubkov apologetically, "I just wanted to see what it looks like to be an innocent bystander."

Tifflor smiled. "There's been a lot of violence lately," he admitted, "and innocent bystanders have been getting the worst of it. This man won't remember me too kindly when he wakes up again."

"That's the purpose of this undertaking," Lubkov declared.

Then he returned to the transport and banged his hand against the rear covering. "Everybody out!" he called in a muffled tone. "We're here!"

Tifflor was no longer at Lubkov's side. He had gone to open the small man-sized hatch at the south pole of the spacesphere and switched on the emergency lights that would show Lubkov and the others the way.

Lubkov and the others, Tifflor thought with a smile. No doubt Ras Tschubai was already in the control room!

Boarding the ship was a process that lasted no longer than 10 minutes. Julian Tifflor was last to get aboard. First he had lifted the unconscious form of Sgt. Cooper into the back of the personnel carrier, drove a few hundred yards towards the main exit of the shipyards, then returned by foot to the *Newborn*.

Thoughtfully, he climbed through the hatchway, closed it behind him and took a slow, outmoded antigrav lift to the central deck.

The second part of the plan had succeeded: the 'rebels' were in possession of a spaceship. The way to the Druufs stood open.

* * * *

The vidscreen lit up blank for that which spoke was nothing that needed to be seen. The mechanical voice was deep, powerful and skilfully modulated. No one who did not previously know that the voice belonged to the Robot Regent of Arkon would have guessed that he was dealing with a non-organic being at the other end.

It was one of the odder facets of galactic politics that the Robot Regent was always ready to receive a message from Perry Rhodan even though Arkon and Terra were enemies and trying to cause damage to each other whenever possible. Even their enmity was rather peculiar, it did not prevent Arkonide and Terran ships from fighting together against a common enemy while a few thousand light-years away an Arkonide robot fleet prepared to bombard a Terran base.

Rhodan believed he knew why the Regent was so willing to exchange messages, messages were sent by hypercom. Hypercommunications offered the possibility that the sender could be tracked and located, and the Robot Regent's top priority at that moment was learning the Earth's galactic position.

Naturally, Rhodan had taken care that the Robot Regent would at least not find it out this way. The conversation he was having with the Regent was transmitted by 12 relay stations before it finally went on to Arkon. From the Earth it went over a directional beam to a station 2,000 light-years away. The

hypercom wave-bundle had a diameter of just 40 meters. The opening of the bundle consisted of about 3 ten-millionths of a second of arc. That meant at a distance of 2,000 light-years the bundle had increased from 40 meters to 30,000 kilometres, a diameter not more than a few percent larger than the planet on which the relay station was located. This in turn meant that the planet had to be precisely 'aimed' at. Indeed, the bundling of the beam and the directional sighting of the antenna was a masterwork of directional beam technique and something that had long been considered impossible. The fact that in hypercom traffic, values other than 4-dimensional distances, in this case 2,000 light-years, were used, did not lessen the achievement of Terran technicians at all.

The important thing was that an enemy observer could overhear a message so transmitted and track down the sender—with some ease under these circumstances—only if it by chance passed through the directional beam. The probability of such an event was so slight no one took it into consideration.

So Terra's security was insured. The transmittal of the conversation from relay station to relay station followed the same principle. The Robot Regent had no chance of learning anything about the Earth's galactic position in this manner.

The Regent replied with a common all-directional sender. He would not have known in what direction to aim a directional beam.

The conversation that Perry Rhodan had with the Robot Regent on the evening of 11 December 2043 was brief but significant.

"I find myself in an unpleasant situation," Rhodan explained. "A top officer in my fleet has revealed himself as a traitor and with a few like-minded cohorts he left the Earth in a stolen spaceship. I don't know where these men will go. I would be grateful to you if you would let me know as soon as they fall into the hands of one of your ships, if it happens that they do. It's not that the men are especially important, they don't even have any vital information that could damage me. It's the principle of the thing that I'm concerned about: a deserter must be punished."

The Regent acknowledged that and promised his help, and since in spite of all modulation—no emotions could be detected in his voice, there was nothing in it to suggest that it considered Rhodan's motivations spurious.

A man does not call a person a 'top officer' and then immediately say he is not important. The Robot Regent was certain that if he could get hold of the deserter, that 'top officer' could be of much value to him.

The Regent then took note of the descriptions of the 15 renegades that Rhodan arranged to have given to him.

Once that was done, Rhodan added: "Maybe I can give you a hint that will make the affair easier for you. I talked with the deserting officer a few weeks ago. At that time he was of the opinion that the time was ripe for the Earth to make an alliance with the Druufs against you. He seemed to be obsessed with the idea of an alliance. I would suspect, therefore, that he will make an attempt to penetrate the Druuf universe."

The conversation had been conducted in Arkonese. The Robot thanked Rhodan for the hint and closed with the usual formal Arkonide phrase for ending a conversation. "Gova Dorani."

Immediately thereafter he activated his logic sector and analysed every bit of the news just received. As

he expected, the probability that Perry Rhodan was up to something was not exactly small. Nevertheless, the probability that his request was genuine was higher, and with it the probability that a top officer in the Terran Fleet really had left the Earth with 14 men for traitorous reasons.

No matter what the conclusions of his logic sector, the Regent was convinced he could not go wrong if he sent ships to chase after the deserters. The Arkonide blockade fleet in the vicinity of the overlapping zone, through which the Terrans would have to pass if they wanted to reach the Druufs, was 30,000 units strong. The fleet could be reinforced by another 10,000 ships and half of the total, 20,000 ships, then, could be sent after the deserters.

Rhodan could not know that the Robot Regent had finally decided on such a move. He hoped he had however and smiling rubbed his hands together.

* * * *

Ras Tschubai actually was already in the control room when Franklin Lubkov came in with the first of the men. Tschubai was a teleporter. He had the ability to transport himself and—if they held onto him tightly enough—others over considerable distances. The power that enabled him to do so came from an additional portion of his mutated brain and was on call at any time. Necessary to making a ‘Jump’, as he modestly termed it, was only a certain amount of concentration and a general image in his mind of the place he wanted to go. Also, this ability was linked with an inherent safety factor, if it should happen that Ras Tschubai would materialize within solid matter, he did not solidify but returned to his starting point. It worked automatically and followed the First Law of Physics: two objects cannot simultaneously occupy the same point in space.

In addition, Ras Tschubai was an experienced astronaut. When Col. Tiffloor walked into the control room of the *Newborn* a few minutes later, the engines were already warmed up and the ship was ready to go.

Tiffloor knew that a considerable amount of confusion would be stirred up on the spacefield when a ship was seen taking off from the repair yards. The yards had not been constructed for takeoffs. Under the boiling streams shooting out of the ship’s corpuscular engines, the yards’ plastic flooring would break up and melt. From over on the main field, observers would see a magnificent display of fireworks.

Tiffloor had been informed that in that evening’s spaceport activity certain security measures had been taken to insure that pursuitships would not take off after the stolen vessel with the usual alacrity. The *Newborn* would have a good head start. It would not be too large a one, or otherwise the manoeuvre would have been too transparent. It would be important to make the most of the advantage they did, have in achieving a maximum of safety.

Tiffloor directed his men to their places. They knew what they had to do. Lt. Lubkov functioned as First Officer and copilot. With two other men, Sgt. Fryberg watched over communications, radar and tracking equipment. No pursuit craft on their trail would escape their notice. The mutants remained in the background. If there were no other alternative, Ras Tschubai would teleport himself to one of the pursuing craft and instigate utter confusion until the *Newborn* was safe.

The entire operation was a matter of about 15 minutes. In 15 minutes the *Newborn* would reach sufficient velocity to make a transition and thus pass into hyperspace.

For a quarter of an hour they would be in fear for their lives. Then they would be secure.

While his hand was resting on the main control switch, it penetrated Tiffloor's consciousness that that was a false conclusion, from now on until their return, they would never be safe. The pursuit by Terran fighters was an amusing little game in comparison to what would happen if the Arkonides got on their tail, or what the Druufs would do once they found out what the Terrans really had up their sleeves.

Tiffloor threw a glance at the chronometer. What sense was there in holding to a predetermined timetable? He could just as easily take off at 22:14 hours as at 22:15. It made no difference. He would have time to figure out their actual course once they were out in space.

He pushed the small button built into the handle of the switch. The takeoff sirens howled into life. Seals clicked over the hatches as the crew checked each one out. Boots scraped across the floor—and as the sirens died away, breathless quiet reigned over the ship.

Tiffloor gave the lights on the control panel one last practiced glance. Everything was in order... But what good would it do him that everything was in order if a fusion rocket from a fighter struck them, or the disintegrator beam of an Arkonide battleship? The *Newborn* dated from the early years of the Terran fleet. Her defence fields did not belong to the latest products of Terran technology.

Then he yanked the switch down. It did not bother him any what happened to the plastic covering on the ground below. It could explode into a million pieces for all he cared!

White flashes blitzed across the vidscreen. The engines were in operation but nothing could be felt in the control room. The antigrav absorber was doing its job.

The *Newborn* was airborne—and space-bound.

3/ TSCHUBAI'S TASK

Fate seemed to be conspiring against Julian Tiffloor and his men. The *Newborn* needed 3 transitions to put behind it the more than 6,000 light-years between Earth and the overlapping zone in the vicinity of the Myrtha System, and when the ship emerged from hyperspace for the third time, a colossal spaceship evidently of Arkonide origin stood less than 20,000 kilometres away. The *Newborn* was moving at only a slight residual velocity. The Arkonide ship spotted it within seconds, fired a warning shot and ordered them to stop. A prize crew would then come on board to take over. Julian Tiffloor protested energetically against this sort of treatment but without success. The Arkonide ship repeated its warning with disheartening indifference, and since it was a sphere 800 meters in diameter, against which the *Newborn* would not have the slightest chance, Tiffloor finally gave up and stopped, which meant he equalized the *Newborn's* speed with that of the Arkonide ship.

With that a situation had arisen which, if the mission was to be a success, should have been avoided at all costs. The Arkonides would know that a Terran ship filled with deserters was on its way to the Druufs. But they must under no circumstances capture it.

Tifflor manoeuvred the *Newborn* towards the Arkonide ship until a distance of 5,000 kilometres separated the two vessels. The voice with whom he had spoken had been unmistakably mechanical. It spoke Arkonese and evidently assumed that the Terran commander understood it as well.

The Arkonide craft was a robotship. At most it had a 50-man crew on board and these 50 men had subordinate roles. The piloting of the ship and the issuing and receiving of orders were left to the motionless, built-in robots. The actual fighting force aboard consisted of mobile Arkonide robots. The commander of the ship would be some tired Arkonide or perhaps even a member of an Arkonide offshoot race. In any case, he had nothing to say. He was there to reassure the human crewmembers if their misunderstanding of technology caused them to be afraid of the many robots aboard.

That then, was the state of affairs on board the Arkonide ship. Tifflor knew that much. He did not know, however, how he could use his knowledge to get the *Newborn* out of her difficulties. The possibility that a spaceship would emerge from hyperspace in the immediate vicinity of a second ship was so improbable that Tifflor had not prepared for it. Several valuable minutes went by before he had worked out a new plan—a rather desperate plan but the only one that could work in this situation.

Nothing was to be seen of the prize crew that would probably consist of Arkonide robots. The Arkonides believed the *Newborn* was safely in their grasp and were taking their time.

Tifflor turned to Sgt. Fryberg. "Have they opened their mouths yet?"

Fryberg understood who was meant. He shook his head and a contented smile spread across his broad face. "No sir. Not a peep out of them!"

"Good! Keep listening!"

The Arkonide ship was convinced that it could handle the matter alone. Being a robotship, it logically considered that informing some other ship would be superfluous. It would give the information to its highest commanders once the action was completed and the crew of the *Newborn* was in captivity. Robots are logical and economical. On that Julian Tifflor based his plan.

* * * *

Panjel Dreeb was an Iriam-man. In Earthly measures, he was 1½ meters tall, rather hairy and had an egg-shaped head. Just on the basis of his body alone, Panjel Dreeb could not believe in the old fairy tale that claimed Iriam-people were descendents of Arkonide settlers. However, Panjel Dreeb could not deny that he found himself serving aboard an Arkonide ship. Panjel Dreeb did not know what was going on outside around the ship. The ship had an antigrav absorber—not that Panjel Dreeb knew what it was, he knew only the name—and one could not tell if the ship were moving or standing still. Panjel Dreeb's job was to pick up any trash lying around and throw it into the converter. It was a task considered too unimportant to occupy a robot with it. A man like Panjel Dreeb was just right for it.

Dreeb was not unsatisfied with his new profession. He had been a member of the crew for only a few Iriam-days and still found the ship enormously interesting. He was afraid of the mechanical men but fortunately he did not encounter them too often.

Panjel Dreeb rode through the deserted corridor on a rollband. In one hand he carried an automatic collection unit and with a skilled movement he picked up everything in the way of trash that lay on the floor near the rollband. There was not much, here and there a piece of old plastifoil, a metal screw or something of that nature. Panjel Dreeb had little trouble with his work.

Nevertheless, he missed by a hair the place from which he had to jump down from the rollband, for a few meters farther on another corridor intersected this one. Panjel Dreeb considered whether he should go to the right, to the left or continue in the same direction, and as he was still considering, a strange man suddenly stood before him.

Yes, really, a man was indeed standing there. He had not fallen from above nor had he climbed up from below—he simply stood there. Panjel Dreeb shivered with fear. His bluish-red face grew green with terror.

For a few moments his fear was so intense that he could hardly see anything. Then he noticed that the stranger looked like an Arkonide—by and large. He was three heads taller than Panjel Dreeb and very broad-shouldered. The suit he wore was one familiar to Panjel Dreeb. Only one thing about the stranger was distressing, the colour of his skin was black.

"Don't be afraid," said the black man in Arkonese. "I won't do anything to you. Tell me where I am."

Panjel Dreeb began to stutter. Only after a few aborted attempts at speaking did he have his tongue in enough control to express himself coherently. He said that this was an Arkonide ship but that did not seem to interest the stranger, who interrupted him and said: "I know that already. I meant, where is the control room?"

Wheels began to turn in Panjel Dreeb's small brain. Who was the black man? Why was he inquiring about the control room? Did he want to do something to the ship?

"Come on, tell me!" urged the stranger.

Panjel Dreeb stretched out his arm to point the way. "There," he said fearfully.

"Above or below?" demanded the black man.

Panjel Dreeb answered readily. He was in fear for his life. In a short time the black man knew the way to the control room precisely.

It won't hurt anything, Panjel Dreeb thought. As soon as he leaves I'll sound the alarm. They'll get him right away.

"I thank you kindly, sir," said the black man. "You have been of immense help to me. Unfortunately, I'm going to have to hurt you a little bit, otherwise you might give me away. Don't be frightened—nothing is going to happen to you. You're just going to go to sleep for awhile."

Panjel Dreeb wanted to cry out but he did not have any opportunity. The black man suddenly had a small, glittering thing in his hand and pointed it at him. Panjel Dreeb felt a hard blow and a burning pain run through his body. Then it grew dark around him and he knew nothing more.

* * * *

Feverish tension reigned in the control room of the *Newborn*. The boarding crew had not yet shown itself. The Arkonide ship shone quietly and threateningly, a tiny, dully illuminated point in the shimmering sea of stars.

Julian Tiffloor's plan had been put into action a few minutes before. It could only succeed if the Arkonides remained quiet. Sgt. Fryberg had examined the recording made by the comreceiver of the order from the Arkonide ship to heave to, and found that the energy used to transmit the message had been so weak and limited that 100,000 kilometres farther away it could not have been understood. That meant the blockade fleet did not know one of its vessels had captured a Terran cruiser.

Tiffloor was hardly able to control his excitement. Again and again he looked from the shining point of the Arkonide ship to the red, cloud-like fleck that was the overlapping zone (which was, despite precise hytrans calculations, still two light-years away), and back to the Arkonide ship once more.

The Arkonides would need 10 minutes to get the boarding party underway. Would Ras Tschubai succeed in acting faster?

Ras Tschubai had no intention of making his way to the control room by foot. He knew the direction. After he had hidden the little Iriam-man away where he would not be so quickly found, Ras concentrated for a few seconds, trying to picture his goal in his mind, and sprang.

He landed exactly where he had wanted, although he had imagined it rather differently than the way in which he found it.

He materialized in the middle of the room and in the first second collided with something hard and sizeable. He fell back, opened his eyes and saw that he had run into an Arkonide battlerobot. The machine whirled around and aimed one of its weapon-arms at the intruder. Ras Tschubai tensed his muscles in expectation of something that did not happen. The weapon remained aimed at him but the robot had evidently been given no orders for shooting.

The control room swarmed with robots. Since one of their number was seeing to the intruder, the others did not concern themselves any longer with the incident and continued with their work. Besides Ras Tschubai there was only one other organic creature present: a tall, white-haired man who sat in a deep and comfortable chair. He looked as though none of the activity around him affected him.

He was unmistakably an Arkonide, probably the nominal commander of the ship. Ras Tschubai looked at him over the robot's weapon-arm—but if the Arkonide had taken any note of his appearance at all, he was no longer interested in the phenomenon. His intelligent-looking face gave a bored, almost disgusted, impression.

When Ras Tschubai realized that for at least the time being the robot was not going to do anything to him, his reason began to function again. He wondered what purpose such a group of mechanical beings crowding the control room could serve, since the control room was really the realm of the central positronicon that steered the ship.

He soon found out. He noticed a few unscrewed deckplates and saw two robots disappear into a large wiring shaft. Then he knew what had happened. Considering his own situation, it was ridiculous,

something in the Arkonide ship was not working. The robots were occupied with repairing it.

With the robots' activity in full swing, the room was filled with noise. He had to shout to make himself understood to the Arkonide. "Could you tell your robot to leave me alone?" Ras demanded in Arkonese.

No one besides the old Arkonide took notice of his question. The hypothetical captain slowly turned his head and looked boredly at Ras. "As far as I can see, it doesn't seem to be bothering you any," he said. Ras understood more of the reply from reading his lips than from actually hearing it. The Arkonide had made no effort to raise his voice above the room's noise level.

"I mean, can't you send him away?" Ras yelled.

"No, I can't, my boy," came the reply. "I don't know why but the robots obey someone other than me."

Ras gave up. The Arkonide was out of the game entirely. Ras had to depend entirely on himself if he wanted to win. That would be difficult. The robot with the raised weapon-arm did not take its optical lenses away from him. Ras Tschubai knew that there was no possibility of diverting its attention or, for that matter, of overpowering it.

Nevertheless, Ras Tschubai had no intention of giving up his mission. He knew how much depended from his success. Quite simply, *hehad* to succeed.

He looked around and suddenly realized how he could start. The idea he had was not any too rich with chances of success but it was enough for Ras Tschubai that it offered a chance at all.

There was nothing to be accomplished here. He had hoped—or rather, it had been Col. Tiffloor's idea to find the control room empty, and had that been the case he could have disconnected the central robot and turned the ship's guidance system over to manual control. Then he would have sent the ship into a transition so far beyond the outermost limits of the galaxy that it could neither call for help nor ever return. A ship's energy supply was limited, if it squandered it all on a single transition, the ship emerged in a place from which it could never again move under its own power. That had been Tiffloor's plan. It was impossible to carry out. If Ras Tschubai made a single step towards the manual controls, the robot would blast him down on the spot at once.

There was only one possibility left. Ras Tschubai closed his eyes. He did not know if that would rouse the robot's suspicions. He waited tensely for a few moments, and when nothing happened, Ras Tschubai began to concentrate. He was familiar with ships of this type of construction. He knew where the engine room was.

* * * *

Sgt. Fryberg leaped up. "A message, sir!"

Tiffloor whirled around. "Coded?"

"No, sir. Normal. Plainly readable." He handed Tiffloor the diagram page he had taken out of the receiver.

The connected writing mechanism had printed a series of Arkonide letters on the sheet. Fryberg did not understand Arkonese, but he knew that the writing mechanism would not have been activated at all if the message had been coded.

"Positronicon damaged," Tifflor read. "Main circuit broken down. Request technical assistance."

Tifflor gave a start. Was this Ras Tschubai's doing? If yes, then why hadn't he done what he was supposed to do? Why was the Arkonide ship still standing in the same place?

And more—why had a robotship used Arkonese for making its plight known to other robotships? Robots usually communicated with one another using short impulse signals. What was the point of the detailed message in a human language?

"Have you picked up anything else, Fryberg?" he asked the sergeant.

"Yes sir. Also a series of short impulses."

With probably an identical meaning, Tifflor concluded in his thoughts. They had sent their message twice, once for robot antennae and the second time for Arkonide ears. What Arkonide played such an important role that he had to be informed of the ships' every move?

He dropped that line of thought. He could find an answer to the question only after some reflection and he did not have the time for it. Besides, it was unimportant. The important thing was, what was Ras Tschubai doing over there on the Arkonide ship? Would he be successful?

The damage to the positronicon incidentally explained what had been delaying the boarding party, although 20 minutes had gone by since the *Newborn* had been captured. If the main circuit had broken down, that meant they possibly might not be able to open any of their hatches.

Or was it a trick? Did they want to lure the *Newborn* into making an attempt to escape and then destroy it while it tried to get away? That was a plausible thought. A defect in the positronicon would put some, but by no means all, of the ship's guns out of action. Perhaps they expected the crew of the *Newborn* to take that into consideration and make an attempt to escape.

Tifflor smiled mockingly. That kind of favour he would not do for them.

* * * *

Ras Tschubai worked quickly, trying not to think of his inhibitions. When he had seen that the engine room was empty except for the collection of gigantic machinery installed there, he had thought for five minutes about whether he dared do what he had in mind. He had to reach back into his memory and recall that the fate of mankind was involved. He had to realize that the Robot Regent might well be able to learn the secret of the Earth's galactic position from one of the *Newborn*'s crewmen. He imagined what it would look like if a fleet of 50,000 Arkonide ships attacked the Terran solar system and annihilated one planet after the other.

After that, he was determined to carry out his intentions.

For someone skilled in galactonautic technology, it was an easy task to turn the huge fusion reactors up to full power and block the most important outlets so that the reactors—to put it in graphic terms—filled themselves up with energy. Large as they were, a quarter of an hour would pass before they would be full and their controlled fusion process would be turned into an uncontrolled one. The enormous amount of energy would blow the Arkonide ship apart with the force of 100 hydrogen bombs.

The robot he had escaped from had probably sounded an alarm up in the control room. In all likelihood there was even now a search for him underway, trying to find out what damage he was in the process of wreaking.

But there was a defect in the positronicon. The robots would have to search every room separately, one after the other, and by the time they reached the control room... well, they would never get to it. The ship would have blown up by then. Now that the positronicon was no longer functioning, no one up in the control room would realize that the reactors were well on the way to choking on their own power.

Ras Tschubai took one last look at the connections he had altered. He seemed like an improbable dwarf at the feet of the gigantic machinery, and doubt whether he had acted rightly overcame him anew.

It was idle speculation. Ras Tschubai had no further effect on the fate of the Arkonide ship. Its destiny was fixed and Ras could only get away from it as quickly as possible.

He closed his eyes and concentrated for the spring. But instead of the *Newborn* appearing before his mind's eye, he saw instead that little man he had met on one of the lower decks and who had shown him the way to the control room. Ras had promised that nothing would happen to him as he shot at him with a shockbeamer. The little man would never know that Ras Tschubai had had the best of intentions and that it was only the pressure of circumstances that prevented him from keeping his promise.

Ras drove the picture out of his mind. Ten of the 15 minutes had already ticked by. Since the time of the explosion could not be precisely calculated to the minute, it was becoming increasingly dangerous for him the longer he stayed aboard the Arkonide ship.

Finally the image of the *Newborn* succeeded in appearing in his brain. He stared at it, letting the picture grow until he almost believed he could see the control room through the hull.

Then he sprang.

* * * *

Julian Tiffloor paid no attention to what went on behind him. He sensed the developing disquiet and heard someone take two quick steps. But his eyes were trained on the vidscreen where the dully-shining point of the Arkonide ship could be seen. What formerly had been only a tiny spot in the depths of space, distinguishable from the stars only by the odd way it shone, now suddenly ballooned in size, increased in brightness and became a radiant sun. A glaringly bright disc twice the size of the full moon seen from Earth suddenly stood in the darkness and Tiffloor had to close his eyes against the glare.

No sound could be heard. A man accustomed to the roaring thunder of an explosion could not at first understand what had happened out in space. A spaceship had exploded. It had vanished in a bright, silent nuclear inferno, destroyed in a blaze of incredibly vast amounts of energy.

Tifflor wiped his hand across his forehead and looked around. Two paces behind him stood Ras Tschubai. Those had been his steps Tifflor had previously heard. The African returned his glance guiltily, explaining: "I couldn't do anything else, sir. The control room was filled with robots. They were repairing something. I couldn't have moved my little finger without one of them noticing.

Tifflor nodded. "In a case like this," he said thoughtfully, "it's not easy to say 'You've done a good job', but nevertheless, you have. No doubt about that."

Ras Tschubai sighed in relief.

Blast it all anyway, thought Tifflor angrily, what's wrong with me? The Arkonides blow up whole planets without losing any sleep about it and I'm worried by my conscience because one of their ships exploded?

He shook the thought away from him. Before it blew up, the Arkonide ship had called for technical assistance. The assistance could show up at any second now and it would doubtless be better for the *Newborn* if it were some distance away from the scene of the disaster.

The call for help would incidentally provide a plausible explanation to the approaching ships for the explosion of the spacesphere. It had reported positronicon damage. In such a case, anything could happen, including the reactors going out of control. No suspicion needed to fall on the *Newborn*.

So the third stage of the plan had succeeded. The fourth and most difficult now lay before the *Newborn*. It had to penetrate the overlapping zone and play its part for the Druufs.

Tifflor set the ship into motion. He accelerated towards the vague red cloud and went into transition as soon as sufficient velocity had been attained. So far there had been no sign that a second Arkonide ship had spotted the Terran vessel.

If only things continue to go so well!

4/ VOLUNTARY CAPTIVITY

By Arkonide standards Door-Trabzon was a remarkable man, even though he looked exactly like an Arkonide—or perhaps because of that. One would have expected that after taking command of the 20,000-unit search fleet he would have turned all his duties over to the robots and installed himself on a nice, comfortable couch to watch a stimulating program on the fictive projector.

Door-Trabzon took command but otherwise he did nothing that was expected of him. He was an Ekhonide. The Ekhonides were descendants of Arkonide emigrants and had the same language and physical appearance as their forefathers. And yet they were different from their cousins, the true Arkonides. The Arkonides, after millenniums of peace, prosperity and galactic power, had become a race of decadent, bored aristocrats without ambition. The Ekhonides, on the other hand, had retained

their energy and competence. Door-Trabzon was a high officer in the Ekhonide fleet, which consisted of 300 units, and no better offer could have been made to him than command of an armada of 20,000 ships. Door-Trabzon had every intention of carrying out his assignment, and then some. He arranged to be informed of everything that went on within the area of the search fleet and he wanted to make at least half of the necessary decisions. The other half had to be made by the central positronics but that could not be avoided.

Since Door-Trabzon assumed office, the Arkonide ships no longer communicated only via short impulses over the hypercom but also transmitted each message in Arkonese at the same time so that Door-Trabzon could do something about it himself if he chose to.

Door-Trabzon's flagship was a spacesphere of the largest class. When he had taken it over, it bore the impersonal name KK-17. Now it was called the *Wa-Kelan*, named after the most famous general in Ekhonide history. Door-Trabzon was proud of the name and the ship that bore it, and kept his crew, which included half a battalion of robots, in constant activity.

He learned of the positronic breakdown that had immobilized a ship in the fleet about three light-years from the *Wa-Kelan*. It was not a pleasant thought to him to take a ship from its post simply because of a breakdown, but after all, he had no other choice. He sent an armed transporter to replace it.

A few minutes later the transporter reported that the damaged ship was nowhere to be found. Instead there was a thin cloud of rapidly expanding plasma at the place where the ship should have been. The crew aboard the transporter analysed the plasma and found that with only a few slight variations its composition matched that of a spaceship and crew. That meant the ship had blown up. Door-Trabzon cursed in Ekhonide but he did not get overly excited. He was commander of 20,000 ships and one less was no great loss. The crew of the exploded ship probably got what was coming to it: even with positronic damage, the reactors could be turned down and not allowed to run at full blast.

No, for Door-Trabzon there were much more important things than the loss of a single ship. He was on the track of a Terran ship. He did not precisely know why he had been given 20,000 ships to chase after one enemy ship but since the advantage was on his side it was all right with him. The Regent had assured him that although the fate of Arkon was not hanging in the balance, nevertheless a great deal was involved with capturing the Terran ship.

Door-Trabzon was convinced that the enemy would not elude him. The search fleet was not standing still. It moved constantly, crossing through every cubic kilometre of that sector of space.

Let the Terran ship try to get through!

* * * *

The transition had been completed. The dark red wall of the overlapping field stood huge and prominent on the *Newborn's* vidscreens. A few thousand kilometres away, the mouth of the discharge funnel was open, pointing the way into the Druuf universe.

Tifflor was going this route for the first time. He had been used to regarding the matter as a problem of natural science and mathematics but now as he looked at the yawning funnel, he did not feel altogether

comfortable. The glowing red, slowly pulsating mouth looked like the entrance to Hell.

At the moment the *Newborn* had yet another task. Its crew had to determine if a breakthrough to the other universe would be noticed by the Arkonides. To that end, the ship moved towards the funnel at a minimal speed and Sgt. Fryberg and his two men were busy listening in on empty space for suspicious hypercom messages.

That was mainly a mathematical undertaking. The message density of that sector of space was known to the Terran fleet. The number of hypercom conversations being conducted within the Arkonide fleet was almost constant. Shortly after the encounter with the damaged Arkonide ship, it was determined on board the *Newborn* that since the last recording made by Terran patrol ships, the message constant had risen by a factor of 1.333. It could have had nothing to do with the appearance of the *Newborn*, for the figure had not climbed to that level from a lower one after the *Newborn* had emerged from hyperspace but had been that high from the start.

Nor had it changed now. That could only mean that the number of Arkonide ships had increased by a factor of 1.333. In turn, that was a most happy omen for it meant that the Robot Regent on Arkon had fallen for the Terran bluff and was making an extra effort to capture the ship of the 'deserters'.

In addition, Fryberg took a few random samples. He decoded some of the messages that had come in and found that they concerned matters of little importance, instructions transmitted from one ship to another, routine reports and even private problems.

Everything indicated that the *Newborn* had not been discovered. No one seemed to suspect that the explosion of the damaged ship had been the work of the *Newborn*.

Tifflor's courage was renewed. Fate no longer seemed to be frowning on the Terrans.

He began to set the ship into full motion again when Sgt. Fryberg suddenly reported. "There's something in our vicinity, sir," he said uncomfortably, his voice uncertain. "But I can't quite make it out."

Tifflor's attention perked up. "Let me see it," he ordered.

Sgt. Fryberg threw a switch. On Tifflor's intercom-vidscreen appeared the image that showed on the radarscope and had startled Fryberg. At first Tifflor could see nothing more than the dull dark-green surface of the empty vidscreen.

"Up in the right, sir," explained Fryberg. "It's a pale, washed-out spot."

Tifflor turned off the lights shining on his control console and made another attempt to find the foreign object. In the upper right-hand corner of the vidscreen he saw what Fryberg meant. It was not even a spot in the true sense of the word—it was a barely perceptible tinge, as though the vidscreen glass was slightly fogged over. "What does the rest of the equipment say?"

"Nothing, sir," answered Fryberg. "The matter detector hasn't sensed it at all but that could be because the thing's too far away. It doesn't seem to be giving off any light and the area is free of fuel residue. Only the microwaves are picking it up."

Yes, thought Tifflor, it's reflecting microwaves just about like a handful of soot reflects light.

He determined that the object was moving. It was coming straight for the *Newborn*. If the radar could

be trusted, it was no more than 10,000 kilometres away. Here, right in front of the overlapping front where starlight shone only from one side, the object would probably not show up on the optical screen until it had come within a few hundred kilometres.

Tifflor tried to figure out what it could be. He thought of a small cosmic dust cloud but with its small size it would have had to have an improbable density to reflect microwaves with such intensity that a perceptible image showed up on the vidscreen.

Tifflor refused to believe that it was a spaceship. There was no way that a ship could be so perfectly hidden or camouflaged that it could not be clearly made out at such a slight distance. There must not be such a way Tifflor added grimly to himself, for a fleet of ships so equipped would have a dangerous advantage over its enemies from the start. Tifflor admitted that this was not a logical way of thinking. He tried to stay calm but he was not successful: the thought of such perfect camouflage was too terrifying.

He had to find out what was going on.

He alarmed the men at the gun posts. He told them that Fryberg had discovered a mysterious object and that the *Newborn* was now going to investigate it. At present there was no danger but they should keep their eyes open.

He knew that he was departing from his very strictly laid-out instructions. Once he had broken through the Arkonide front he was to do nothing other than proceed with the *Newborn* undetected into the Druuf Universe. What he was doing now could possibly lead to discovery by Arkonide ships and ruin the entire mission.

Nevertheless the matter had to be investigated. He had no other choice and the men who had written his instructions had not reckoned with an incident like this one.

Engines operating at low power, the *Newborn* began to describe a curve. Taking the discharge funnel as a reference point, then the unknown object was behind the Terran ship. The *Newborn* made a U-turn and as it took on its new course, moving slowly so that the engine activity was not too clearly visible, it headed towards the Arkonide blockade fleet instead of away from it as had been ordered.

For a few seconds Tifflor grappled with the thought that the weak radar image might be an Arkonide trick. He tried to imagine the reasoning of an Arkonide strategist and what kind of effect would be expected if in the vicinity of the discharge funnel there were something that caused a weak response on the radar screen aboard the awaited Terran spaceship.

There was no sense to it. If some sort of psychology was behind it, it was too subtle for Tifflor's understanding.

The *Newborn* flew along at a low speed towards the object. The object continued in the same direction as it had before. The *Newborn's* course had been so calculated that it would arrive at the same point in space as the uncanny object in about half an hour.

The thought of what would happen then troubled the men in the control room. Conversations died away. No one said another word. The low humming noise of the equipment, something everyone was used to, was the only sound in the circular room.

The pale fleck slowly approached the centre of Sgt. Fryberg's radar screen. Fryberg watched it, feeling his mouth grow dry. If the object was a ship, perhaps it would wait patiently until the *Newborn* trustingly

and imprudently approached within a few hundred kilometres and then tear its weak defensive forcefield to pieces with a single well-aimed salvo.

We wouldn't even have time to blink before it hit us, Fryberg thought.

He raised his hand and glanced nervously at the panorama screen. The image had not changed. On one side lay the dark red overlapping zone, on the other the luminous mass of stars. Nowhere was there a point that stood out by way of its unusual shine. Nowhere was there the dull shimmer of a ship's hull.

Maybe it isn't a ship, thought Fryberg. The devil with it! It'd better not be a ship! I don't want anything to do with a ship that can make itself as invisible as a piece of coal in a black sack.

He noticed that his nerves were about shot. He leaned back in his seat and breathed deeply. Air hissed through his teeth, sounding like an old steam kettle.

Pull yourself together, old boy, Fryberg told himself. It isn't any ship. It's moving on an inertial course. There isn't any sign of it being steered. It's a meteor made out of fibreglass or some such.

Then he suddenly shouted. His shout resounded through the circular room and brought the other men out of their seats.

"It's moving out of its course!" Fryberg cried, full of terror. It's coming straight at us!"

* * * *

It was a miserable feeling, seeing the object coming directly towards the ship and not knowing what it was.

At first it remained a washed-out fleck on the radar and in the place where it had to be, the optical screen showed only the usual picture.

Tifflor repressed his wish to whip the *Newborn* around and make a run for it at top speed. When he had directed the *Newborn* toward the object, he'd had to take into consideration the possibility it might turn out to be an alien ship. Now that he knew it was one, a retreat would make the whole matter meaningless, and meaninglessness was one of the things Tifflor hated.

He did not issue a fire-order to the gun posts, despite the looks on the faces of his men urging him to do so. They sat at their places, trying to hide the fact they were trembling with nervousness, and looked at him with wide, earnest eyes.

Tifflor knew what they wanted. Silently he shook his head and they understood.

The fleck came nearer and finally came the moment in which the astrogator cried out: "Something's wrong with our course! We're going off!"

Tifflor reacted instantly and instinctively. He shut down the engines and watched the needles on the instrument dials come to a stop. The speed of the *Newborn* remained at the value that had been

calculated by the amount of energy used.

That proved nothing—at least nothing about the actual speed of the ship. The astrogator had better figures in his possession, such as those relating to red shift and parallax displacement.

"Give me some exact figures as soon as you have them," Tiffloor said.

The astrogator bent over his equipment and worked feverishly. Tiffloor stared at the radar screen and realized in astonishment that the pale fleck had come to a stop. Fryberg noticed his glance. He knew the question that had to be asked and he answered before it was spoken: "Distance, 1,320 kilometres, sir."

Tiffloor looked up. As far as the panorama screen was concerned, the object still did not exist. Had it possessed the usual size of a spaceship, it should have been clearly visible at that small a distance.

Tiffloor felt even more at a loss. He had no more new ideas. The phenomenon was utterly alien.

"This much is certain," said the astrogator. "We're moving towards the discharge funnel along with the object."

Tiffloor listened attentively. This was something he could understand. The object seemed to be standing still because the *Newborn* was moving at the same speed and in the same direction. Without any influence from its own engines, the *Newborn* had changed its course. Instead of away from the funnel, it was moving towards it.

There was only one explanation for it: the object was towing them! It was radiating a tractor field that pulled the *Newborn* along behind it!

Tiffloor had no objection to this sort of treatment as long as the trip continued in the direction he had originally intended to go. However, it remained to be seen what measures the aliens would undertake to carry out their designs.

For cases like this there were the standard SA alarms, SA standing for 'sudden acceleration'. The alarms notified the ship's crew that they could expect sudden acceleration jolts until the alarm was ended. The jolts could possibly prove so violent that the antigrav absorber might be able to render them only partially ineffective. After giving the alarm, Tiffloor started up the *Newborn*'s engines again. With suddenly awakening strength, the *Newborn* fought against the pull of the tractor field, trying to free itself from it. Within seconds the engine power had climbed to its maximum. Tiffloor saw in the trembling of the instrument indicators the struggle between the engines and the tractor field. He also saw the needles jump suddenly as the *Newborn* broke out of the field and went its own way.

The astrogator let out a triumphant cry. With a hoarse voice he read in rapid succession a series of figures that showed Tiffloor that the surprise manoeuvre had been a complete success. The object had not reacted quickly enough to the sudden efforts of the *Newborn*. The *Newborn* had escaped from the tractor field.

Tiffloor did not want to hear any more. He turned the propulsion direction 180° and brought the *Newborn* back behind the alien object. He guided it to the place it would have been had it not escaped the tractor field, then let the field take it over again.

Meanwhile he tried to imagine the expression on the face of their unknown captor. He would have had to have seen how the captured ship escaped him and then came voluntarily back into captivity.

Tifflor doubted if he would be able to make any sense out of it.

* * * *

Tifflor was thoughtful while the *Newborn* was slowly drawn by the tractor field through the discharge funnel and neared its narrowest place.

The object had reacted very slowly to his escape attempt. The meant it was not robot-piloted, for otherwise it would have taken only a fraction of a second for it to become aware of the new situation and increase the strength of the tractor field. It was not a robot-ship, then, and so probably not an Arkonide.

But even if one assumed that an organic being was at the controls of the object, the being's reactions could only be termed slow—as though it were half asleep or not paying attention. Now, 15 minutes after the manoeuvring had taken place, Tifflor wondered why the answer had not occurred to him in the first place, for the reaction time was a rather obvious hint of certain characteristics of the being at the controls of the alien craft. Someone in his situation would not be sleepy or inattentive, he would have all his senses fully alert. If he reacted slowly, it was because he could not react any faster.

The reason was simple. The alien's personal rate of time was different from a Terran's. If a Terran needed one second, the alien required two, for he came from another universe, from another time-plane, and his personal rate of time differed from that of the Einstein Universe by a factor of two.

That was a description that applied to, all Druufs.

Tifflor had no more doubts that the unknown object was a Druuf ship. He did not know yet how the ship had managed to remain invisible to all equipment except the microwave sensor but he intended to find out.

For now, he decided, the most important thing was that the *Newborn* was going in the right direction.

* * * *

Excitement reigned beneath the brown sky of Druufon. A giant red sun and a smaller but brilliant green sun shone over a people who faced the future apprehensively.

A number of Druufon days before, the Druufs had believed that the way stood open into a new universe that would be theirs for the taking. Through a hole in, space they had, plunged into an alien universe and all the organic intelligences living in that other realm had fallen victim to them without any resistance.

Then came the day when an entire wall opened up to them instead of just a hole—and with that the Druufs' misfortune began. Each time the Druufs attempted to pass through the gateway into the other universe, entire fleets of alien ships fell on them and drove them back faster than they had come. The

Druufs held quiet for awhile, then undertook the same experiment once more—with identical results. The enemy lying in wait on the other side of the wall was superior. And worse yet: he was able to move faster than the Druufs could think.

Naturally the Druufs were aware of the phenomenon. The superior speed of their enemy was a result of the two different rates of time. If the Druufs had not gone to enormous efforts to overcome the phenomenon, they would have been hopelessly inferior to their opponents. Originally their rate of time was 72,000 times slower than the enemy's. In the time it took a Druuf to draw a breath, the enemy could assemble a gigantic fleet and scatter the Druuf ships to the four winds as soon as the Druufs emerged from their own universe.

The Druufs had been able to solve the problem up to a point. Their scientists created a time-field which could alter rates of time. It could slow down or speed up the passage of time relative to its normal speed, and the Druufs of course were most interested in speeding it up.

They were able to reach a rate of time half that of the enemy's. That was the time-field's limit. The Druufs had to grant the enemy the advantage of operating at twice their speed.

They no longer tried to force their way into the alien universe with large fleets. Their losses had been enormous. They sent single ships which, when the crews had been sufficiently trained, succeeded in breaking through the enemy blockade and making patrol flights through the other time-plane. After the terrible losses of the first massive attempts to break through the blockade, the Druufs were happy that at least the small-scale penetrations were effective and that so far the enemy had not launched a general attack on their universe.

That now seemed to have changed. The last ship to have come back from 'outside' reported large-scale fleet movements taking place near the overlapping front, near the opening. The enemy blockade fleet had been reinforced. Everything pointed to an attack. Only a few optimists among the Druufs, encouraged by the successful repulsion of the first attempts at penetrating the Druuf Universe by robotships, believed that the undertaking would end in failure for the enemy. Just in numbers alone, the relation of Druuf ships to those of the enemy was considerably unfavourable, and beyond that there was still the disadvantage of the slower rate of time.

It looked as though the Druufs had to fear for the continued existence of their empire.

Then, apparently at the last minute, a new bit of news reached the capital city of the planet Druufon. The experts studied it carefully and reached the conclusion that the final returning patrol ship was bringing a ray of hope with it, if not exactly a complete reversal of fortunes.

In the last analysis, the outcome depended on merely finding a few people able to react to an enemy attack as quickly as the enemy himself.

Those people seemed to have been found.

5/ AN OFFER HE COULDN'T REFUSE

It was a different universe. That could be seen in the colour of the background from which the stars shone in their usual glory. For Julian Tiffloor, going from Einstein Space into Druuf space for the first time, the view was something uncanny, almost terrifying.

Space should have been black, for it was nothing more than emptiness given shape. But this space was deep red. It was glowing, as though someone were heating it up from inside.

Tiffloor overcame the uneasiness that the sight of the alien universe had caused him and everyone else who was seeing it for the first time and kept his eye on the unknown craft ahead. It was no longer a washed-out fleck on the microwave screen. It had grown to a glowing point and even the optical screen showed a dully-shining red spot of light standing out clearly from the stars by virtue of its peculiar light.

The Druufs had dropped their camouflage.

The *Newborn* did not attempt anything. The Druuf ship had to know it had been identified. It had taken the Terran cruiser in tow. It was the one which should make the first move.

The tractor field was still in effect. However, the Druuf ship was braking, and an hour after passing through the funnel neck it had come to a complete stop. Another half-hour went by without anything happening. Tiffloor decided to radio the Druuf ship himself if nothing was heard from in the next 10 minutes. He did not have to wait that long. When only one of the 10 minutes had gone by, an entire squadron of long, cylindrical Druuf ships emerged from the deep red darkness and surrounded the *Newborn*. Tiffloor had ordered the gun posts not to fire unless there was compelling reasons to do so, and although their trigger fingers itched badly, his men followed the order to the letter.

A few minutes after the appearance of the Druuf ships, the telecom sounded. Tiffloor switched on the receiver and said in English that he was willing to listen to anyone who wanted to speak to him. The vidscreen stayed dark. The Druufs either did not place any great value on conducting video conversations or their sender was not equipped with an image transmitter.

The seconds ticked sluggishly by after Tiffloor had declared himself ready to listen. He mentally pictured a Druuf aboard one of the newly-arrived ships speaking into a small device hanging at his chest and waiting for the device to relay his words, now translated into English, to the microphone sitting on a table in front of him.

Tiffloor reflected that the Druufs could not have known whether the ship they had captured was Arkonide or not. The shape of the spaceship did not offer any relevant clues, for with few exceptions the spherical form was almost exclusively utilized by ships in the Einstein Universe. It would be only logical if the Druufs took their captive for an Arkonide ship. However, they did not seem certain of it, or they would not have gone to so much trouble once they had passed through the funnel.

In the middle of his thoughts, Tiffloor was interrupted. The receiver began to crackle and then an inhuman voice spoke: "You are a Terran ship. What do you want here?"

Tiffloor was ready with his answer. "To warn you," he said after letting a few seconds go by. He delayed his reply in an effort to keep from overwhelming the more slowly moving Druufs with what would have seemed to them an instantaneous response.

"Warn us of what?" came the next question.

In astonishment, Tiffloor noticed that the translating device the Druufs were using was seemingly perfect,

at least as far as its capability with the English language was concerned. The sentences were, fluent and correct. Only the voice caused the listener to shudder.

"Of a massive Arkonide attack," Tiffloor answered. "One is imminent and I thought that you would be grateful if someone were to make you aware of it."

This time a few more seconds went by before the Druuf spoke again. No emotion registered in the voice, no emotion could in a mechanically produced sound. However, suspicion could be plainly read from the reply, "Are you expecting a certain kind of gratitude?"

Tiffloor had anticipated even that question. "In case you're thinking I was wanting to earn some money through treason," he said, unmoved, "the answer is no! Anyway, what's the point of this distrust? Do you want to carry on this entire discussion over the telecom?"

Again some time went by before the answer came. "Come with two of your men and unarmed aboard my ship. Do you have an auxiliary craft or should I have you picked up?"

Tiffloor grew angry. "In the first place," he declared bluntly, "I'll come as I am or not at all. I have a general issue beamer hanging from my belt and there it's going to stay. Do you think I want to conquer an entire spacefleet with one gun? In the second place, I do indeed have an auxiliary craft. You don't have to go to any more trouble except to show me which one of those dozen ships out there is yours."

The Druuf did not seem to have any objections. "I shall be expecting you," he said. "Your craft will be given a tracking signal to guide you to my ship."

Tiffloor broke off the connection. He turned and faced his men. "Now It's getting critical," he said. "Tschubai, Marshall... get ready!"

* * * *

It was reported to Door-Trabzon that not far from the *Wa-Kelan*, which was flying slowly towards the overlapping front, two alien spaceships had been spotted. Door-Trabzon's first reaction was confusion, for it was clear from the course of the two ships that they were flying together, and up to now Door-Trabzon had been expecting the appearance of only one Terran ship.

His confusion reached its height when the radar gave the first exact figures pertaining to the size of the two ships. They made Door-Trabzon's powerful ships look puny in comparison. They were space giants with a firepower that could temporarily surpass the energy output of an average star.

Somewhat hastily Door-Trabzon gave the order for the unknown ships to be surrounded and attacked. To be certain, he requested a squadron of 200 cruisers and battleships but hardly had they started to move out when one of the alien ships made radio contact with the *Wa-Kelan*, claiming it and its companion had come with peaceful intentions and their plans were in full accord with the Regent of Arkon.

That took the wind out of Door-Trabzon's sails. He rescinded his order and instructed the squadron of battleships and cruisers to await the course of events from a distance. Then he had the *Wa-Kelan*

proceed ahead so he could look things over.

Even before he got that far, he received a brief message from Arkon stating that the Terran commander, Perry Rhodan, had suggested that he himself take part in the search for the deserters' spaceship, and that this suggestion had seemed reasonable and desirable to the Regent.

That threw Door-Trabzon completely off balance. For one thing, Perry Rhodan was a name that had resounded throughout the galaxy for decades, and for another, Door-Trabzon was too familiar with the relationship between Terra and Arkon—or more accurately, between Perry Rhodan and the Regent—to understand why Rhodan of all people would be allowed to move freely among the ships of the Arkonide search and blockade fleets.

However, Door-Trabzon knew that the message from Arkon was to be considered as an order. He had no other choice than to act accordingly. He was of the opinion that Perry Rhodan would never search for a single escape ship unless there was some advantage for him in it. But this opinion was worth nothing as long as he could not convince the Regent of its logic.

He tried to do so but he seemed to have picked an unfavourable moment for it. The Regent did not even reply.

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Door-Trabzon did not know that at that time the Regent was occupied in issuing a series of instructions to the central positronicons of its blockade ships. The orders were rather close to what Door-Trabzon would have ordered himself—had he had the possibility of doing so.

The Regent remembered the suspicion expressed by his logic sector when it first learned of the fleeing ship from Perry Rhodan's information. A certain degree of probability that was too much to be overlooked indicated that the business with the deserters was very simply a bluff. So far, however, the logic sector had not been able to determine what the purposed such a deception would be, or at least it had come up with nothing substantial enough to form the basis for a definite course of action. To that end the Regent directed the orders it issued the positronicons. Their task from now on was to keep track of the course followed by the Terran ships and to report any manoeuvres they undertook to the Regent at once. For his part, the Regent waited impatiently for his logic section to be able to formulate probabilities on the basis of the now-incoming information. From such probabilities it would be possible to work out a plan of action that promised success.

The Regent had not forgotten that Terra stood or fell with Perry Rhodan and that just a few weeks before he had had Perry Rhodan almost in his grasp as a prisoner. Here a new opportunity offered itself. If everything worked out, this would be Perry Rhodan's last undertaking.

The Regent, even if humanized to the point of being referred to as 'he', was a robot. As such it operated constantly on the principle of maximum utility. It knew nothing of scruples.

* * * *

On the other hand, Perry Rhodan would have had to be a fool not to know that. The two battleships were in constant motion. During every second of the mission their speed was high enough to allow an immediate transition. Both ships were under maximum alert. A huge number of radar stations kept track of the movements of Arkonide ships, ready to sound the alarm as soon as enough of them had moved in close enough to the *Drusus* and the *Kublai Khan* to become dangerous.

However, such was not the case for the time being. Perry Rhodan had calculated rightly. The Robot Regent would not try anything as long as he did not know what the Terrans were up to.

But then he would strike, instantly and cold-bloodedly, with such a large number of ships at one time that the Terran defence screens would collapse under the force of the concentrated fire and the two battleships would be annihilated.

Rhodan knew that his life was not worth a centisolar if he relied on the Robot Regent's assurances. The Regent had spoken of a desire to work together and cooperate but Rhodan knew better than anyone that a huge positronicon can be programmed to be a perfect liar.

The presence of the two Terran battleships served a double purpose. The first was to come to the aid of Tiffloor and the *Newborn* as soon as help was needed and the second concerned the necessity to maintain contact with the Terran base on Hades, which lay in the Druuf Universe. No one would predict the developments that would ensue with the penetration of Druuf Space by the *Newborn*. It could turn out that at any second the base on Hades would have to take part in the confrontation, and since the base had few ways in which to keep abreast of events, the *Drusus* and the *Kublai Khan* stood watch.

Perry Rhodan knew full well the risk he was taking with this operation. He believed he had taken precautions against any and all eventualities.

He did not know that fast approaching him was the moment in which all precautions would prove useless.

* * * *

He had been told in advance that a Druuf looked like something from a nightmare but as he saw one for the first time, he had difficulty overcoming his shock.

The creature standing before him was more than three meters tall. Man has odd conceptions of size relationships. Used to the size of the largest buildings or other man-made structures, he does not consider an object three meters high remarkably large, no matter what it might be. However, when he runs across a fellow human being taller than two meters, he is startled at first, and a living intelligence more than three meters tall finds him with terror.

So it was with Julian Tiffloor as he entered the control room of the Druuf ship and the commander came towards him. The Druuf stood on massive column-like legs that by themselves were almost as long as Tiffloor was tall. The legs supported a cube-shaped body, from which a round head the size of a medicine

ball grew without the harmonious transition of a neck. The head had 4 eye-openings and a 3-cornered mouth. Otherwise the head was smooth and hairless, the head of a monster. From the cubical body hung two long, powerful arms which, Tiffloor knew, ended in delicate fingers. There was no hand as such. Now the slenderness of the fingers was not to be seen, for they were hidden by spacesuit gloves.

As Tiffloor expected, the Druuf had a small translator hanging from its chest. He had evidently spoken something into it beforehand, for when the three Terrans came into the room, the device came to life. "I am alone here but don't raise your hopes too much on that account. My men are standing at their posts!"

Tiffloor did not quite understand at first. It took some time for him to recover from his shock and size up the Druuf. Then he answered disdainfully, "Have no fear. We didn't come here to cause you any damage."

He looked around. The room's furnishings were strange, almost grotesque for Terran eyes. In the centre of the hall stood an object as large as a small summerhouse, evidently the control console to judge from the levers and switches affixed to it. A lever was as long as a crowbar and throwing a switch would have required two Terrans each pushing with both hands. Around the wall ran a huge panorama vidscreen, showing the dark red depths of the alien universe and its uncountable stars. Tiffloor could not recognize any of the equipment installed beneath the vidscreen. Druuf technology was too different from Terran.

All in all, it was a room in which Tiffloor believed he could never feel comfortable. He did not yet know that he would be forced to acquaint himself with it.

There was no place to sit in the control room. For the Druufs, who had an average body-weight of 400 kilograms, standing up was a laborious procedure. Only deep exhaustion could bring them to sit down on a stool and it was not uncommon for a Druuf to exhaust himself all over again just by standing up after sitting for awhile. The gravitational pull of their home world, Druufon, was 1.95 times normal, almost double Earth's. The same gravitational pull was probably in effect on board the Druuf ship but the Terrans were not aware of it. They wore modern spacesuits with an automatically reacting antigrav absorber which maintained them at their normal Terran weight at all times.

"You possess information showing that the Arkonides, as you call them, plan to attack us," said the Druuf, beginning the conversation anew.

Tiffloor looked at him. It was hard to tell in which direction the Druuf was looking, however. The Druufs had evolved from insects. The large optical surfaces of their eyes were divided into hundreds of small facets. Tiffloor felt rather uncomfortable. "Yes," he answered tersely.

"Where did you get this information?" asked the Druuf.

The words that he spoke into the translator were inaudible to Terran ears. The Druufs' speech organs produced sounds in the ultrasonic range. The Druuf language was a tangled and unlearnable confusion of high-frequency ultrasonic impulses.

"I was present at several negotiating sessions between Arkon and my world that were conducted over telecom," Tiffloor explained readily.

"What was discussed in these negotiating sessions?"

Tiffloor did not know how much the Druufs understood of human mimicry but in any case he made an effort to appear impatient and irritated. "Now listen here!" he said to the Druuf. "Danger is imminent.

When the Arkonide attack comes, it'll come quickly. And you're just standing there asking me questions as though you have half a year to waste. Are you even authorized to receive this information? I'd like you to take me to your home world so I can tell your government there what I know."

One could not tell by looking at the Druuf whether he was impressed or not. In any event, Tiffloor could breathe easier. He had just performed the most important part of his role—and he had done well, he was sure. No Earthly psychologist would have realized that he had pretended to be excited coldly and calculatedly and that he had been working towards the end of suggesting a flight to Druufon to the Druuf as unsuspectingly as possible.

After awhile the Druuf replied: "How am I to know if you really are a traitor?"

Tiffloor exulted. Resistance seemed to be weakening. *Hehad* to reach Druufon. *Hemust* make contact with Ernst Ellert whose incorporeal being inhabited the body of a Druuf scientist, and attempt to direct affairs from Druufon via Ellert. Only on Druufon itself could his mission to convince the highest levels of Druuf government of the Arkonide threat and the necessity of an immediate counterattack succeed.

"You can't," Tiffloor answered in return. "But you can keep a watch on me so that I can't cause any damage if I'm not what you think I am. By the way, I must say I was expecting a little more civility on your part. I've taken a lot of risks to warn you about the Arkonides."

That seemed to interest the Druuf. "Risks?" he asked. "You didn't have any escort ships to protect you?"

"Oh good Lord!" Tiffloor sighed. "Didn't the pilot of the ship that brought us here in the tractor beam have any eyes in his head?*Of course* we didn't have any escort ships to protect us! *Weran away* from the Earth—can't you get that through your head?"

"You ran away? Why?"

"Because otherwise we couldn't have warned you. Terra is still negotiating with Arkon. As I see things, they won't become allies but there will be an end to hostilities between them at least. It would be contrary to the Terran political position to warn you of the Arkonide attack, understand?"

"Not entirely. They say that on your planet there is something called freedom of opinion. Why can't you hold an opinion different from your government's and not be punished?"

Tiffloor looked around at John Marshall. Marshall was a telepath and should have picked up the Druufs thoughts. But Marshall shrugged and made an unhappy expression.

"I'm an officer in the Terran Fleet," Tiffloor answered cautiously. "Only the Fleet has ships with which one can reach your universe. But every member of the Fleet is responsible to the orders of the commander. According to the orders, strictest secrecy must be maintained concerning the negotiations between Terra and Arkon and the coming attack. Anyone who goes against that would be courtmartialled. We had to steal a spaceship and get away from Earth in the middle of the night. "That's the way it is but you come along and treat us like common thieves. I want to be taken to Druufon and speak with some responsible people there, not stay out here in the middle of space chatting with a mere captain."

The last remark was intended to stir up the Druuf into revealing his true thoughts. That would happen only if the Druufs were as vain as humans tended to be.

But they evidently weren't. The Druuf remained calm and answered evenly, "I am a responsible person.

I think I can convince you of that."

Tifflor heard a series of humming and rumbling sounds. He turned and saw that the control room doors had opened. Druufs came in, giant figures with black hides. There were 15 altogether. They formed a circle around the three Terrans and the Druuf commander. Tifflor had the feeling that something had gone wrong but he was not sure what.

The Druufs made no hostile moves. They simply stood there and no one could tell in what direction they were looking.

"Please answer a few more questions," said the commander. Tifflor registered with astonishment that the word 'please' had been used for the first time. "The main question is this: *why* did you go to so much trouble to warn us? For the sake of friendship?"

Tifflor narrowed his eyes. The question had been inevitable and he did not let himself be taken unawares. "No!" he gritted. "Because I hate the Arkonides!"

All of a sudden there was some movement among the Druufs. Heads turned. Faceted eyes sparkled. Tifflor was convinced that they were talking to one another but the sounds were inaudible to human ears.

Only after considerable time had passed did the commander turn back to Tifflor. The mechanical voice spoke from the translator: "In our opinion, you are speaking the truth. We are almost certain because we were already aware of the threatening danger before you came. All preparations have been made for defence against the Arkonides. You don't need to convince our government... It already is convinced."

"As a consequence, you don't need to make the long and difficult trip to our home world. We are grateful to you and certain that you want to help us. Thus we have a request to make of you, stay here and take command of part of our fleet. You are familiar with our inferiority against the Arkonides as regards our reaction time and even the speed of our ships. Stay here and help so that at least part of our fleet can react quickly enough to the enemy's manoeuvres to come through successfully. That is our request!"

With that Tifflor knew that his plan had fallen through.

There was no way out. It would have looked suspicious if he refused the request. The request was reasonable and he should have expected the Druufs to make it.

There was no turning back. He had to say yes. If he refused, he still would not reach his goal. The Druufs would be suspicious and certainly think no more of taking him to Druufon.

The undertaking had miscarried. Without the participation of Ernst Ellert no substantial success could be obtained.

Tifflor had difficulty hiding his disappointment. "Of course," he answered as steadily as he could. "Of course we'll help you defeat the Arkonides."

The plan had been to put the Druuf government in an uproar. There was no doubt that Ernst Ellert, in the form of the Druuf scientist Onot, would have been able to do this together with the alleged deserters.

The plan had been to lead the Druufs into making a sortie into the Einstein Universe—into making a move, then, that the Arkonides were not expecting anymore—and to bring to their attention all the different ways in which they could cause damage to the Arkonides. Attacking isolated bases, for example, or destroying trading outposts, or other single actions. Naturally the Arkonides would have retaliated but that was part of what the plan hoped to accomplish as well.

The purpose of the plan was fundamentally to cause the Arkonides to lose so many ships fighting with one another that Terra would remain out of danger and end up more powerful than either survivor.

The plan could not be carried out now. The Arkonides were not really planning to attack the Druufs in their own universe—or at least not in the foreseeable future. The fleet movements that had caught the Druufs' attention were the result of the Robot Regent wanting to capture a single Terran ship manned by Terran deserters.

It would not come to an all-out battle. At most, border skirmishes. The decisive weakening of Arkonide and Druuf fighting power would remain unaccomplished. Without the falsified information supported only by Onot's authority as a scientist that was to be supplied to Druufs and which indicated an alleged Achilles heel in the Arkonide Imperium, the Druufs would never undertake a drive into Einstein Space. They were now too convinced of their own inferiority to attempt it.

Tifflor's hands were tied. True, he could try to make the Druuf commander aware of different possibilities for plaguing the Arkonides but even the commander could not act without authorization from his government. The evaluation of Tifflor's suggestions would take up time—and time was something Terra no longer had.

In a few months the overlapping front would close. Then there would be no contact between the two universes and no more opportunity to set one enemy against the other.

Depressed, Tifflor prepared for his new role as commander' of a section of the Druuf fleet. He was convinced that he would never have to exercise any authority in that role. Why not? Because there would not be any battle. The Druufs were staying over here; the Arkonides would stay over there. Before the overlapping zone closed, there would be at most a few small border skirmishes.

But the plan had counted on a destruction of from 40,000 to 50,000 ships.

* * * *

Pucky the mousebeaver gave the roomy interior of the control room one last benevolent look although his vision of it was slightly hampered by the meshwork of the transmitter cage.

Then he closed his eyes and pressed the button on which his paw had been resting for some time.

He did not feel anything. When he opened his eyes once more, he found himself in a large hall hewn from solid rock. There were several rows of machines similar to the one Pucky was in and to the one he had been in a few seconds before on board the *Drusus*.

He saw a few men standing in front of the transmitter cage door but he paid them no attention. He listened. He extended his telepathic tendrils and tried to pick up the signals broadcast by the man for whose sake he had come here to Hades.

And he picked them up.

They sounded like a gentle but clear chirping. They came from the depths of space and Pucky had no trouble learning from them that the man radiating them was enjoying the best of health, the signal transmitter that he carried in his body was a semi-organic device whose functional capability rose and fell with the bodily condition of its carrier.

Pucky was satisfied. Julian Tifflor was somewhere in the area, no more than a few billion kilometres away by Pucky's reckoning. The telepathic signal transmitter, which Tifflor carried around with him as a sort of parapsychological beacon, was working at normal power.

Meanwhile the men outside had opened the transmitter door. Pucky strutted out, his bushy beavertail—a most peculiar addition to a spacesuit—dangling behind him. The men smiled. Pucky noticed and replied with a scornful look. He was used to humans smiling at his appearance. He looked like a cross between a beaver and a mouse that had by mistake gotten too large. People had a large number of fairy tales and fables in which speaking and intelligent animals appeared but when those people encountered in real-life a mousebeaver, which could speak and think logically, then they didn't know what to make of it in their astonishment. So they smiled.

Pucky sat on his rear legs, supporting himself with his tail. He made an effort to give his large-eyed mouse face a look of importance and said, lipping, "I was told to get in touch with Capt. Rous immediately. Please inform Capt. Rous I'm here."

The men began to laugh but after a few seconds they stopped again. Captain Rous came down the corridor between transmitters.

"I'm already here," he said. "Our transmitters seldom get green lights. Something seems to be going on there, right?"

He knew how important it was to Pucky to be treated as a human, and gave him his hand. The mousebeaver returned the greeting with a cheerful, almost charming gesture. "You'd better believe something's going on!" he answered importantly. "A whole lot of things are coming off. Colonel Tifflor and 14 men have taken an obsolete cruiser and gone into the Druuf Universe to tell the Druufs of an imminent attack by the Arkonide fleet." As he spoke, he narrowed his eyes—just as he had seen humans do.

Rous laughed. "I don't quite understand it all," he admitted, "but surely you're going to tell me the whole story."

"Oh, of course!" Pucky assured him. "As soon as I have something to eat."

Marcel Rous made a wry expression. "Good grief!" he exclaimed. "We don't have any carrots!"

Pucky exposed his single large incisor, trying to produce something on the order of a smile. "That's alright," he said generously. "If I have to, I'll be satisfied with a can of whatever you have."

He excited good humour on all sides. Suggestions were made as to what to offer their guest and Pucky, who loved all kinds of playing, including word-games, did his part to keep the merriment going.

Meanwhile they crossed the transmitter hall and reached the section of the base where administration and personnel rooms were located, about in the middle of the complex. The entire base had been built in a gigantic mountain cavern. During that time, Pucky continually heard the chirping of the telepathic transmitter Tifflor was carrying, although the mousebeaver was hardly paying any more attention to it.

Pucky made it known that he would remain on Hades for a few days—until Tifflor's mission had been successfully carried out and the *Newborn* was on its way back to Earth. Pucky was shown his quarters and something to eat was brought to him there. Captain Rous gave him some company while the other men went back to their posts. Pucky took advantage of the opportunity to tell Rous what was going on out in Druuf and Einstein space and what was supposed to take place in the future.

The plan was obvious enough. Rous understood it quickly. He also understood that the base on Hades, one of the inner planets of the Druufon system, would play an important role if Tifflor was in danger or even if the entire operation threatened to fall through.

While he was occupied in such thoughts and tried to foresee future developments, Pucky calmly and with the best manners demolished the contents of two cans of food. With his meal he drank water from a large cup. He paid no attention to either Rous or the chirping signal from Tifflor's transmitter. He was hungry and when he was hungry he thought of nothing but eating. Rous had almost asked too much of him by wanting to be informed of the situation before Pucky had a chance to appease his hunger.

Now that he knew everything, he ought to be quiet.

"Say," Rous began after awhile, contrary to Pucky's expectation. "What's..."

Pucky heard no more. Rous was still talking but Pucky was not listening. Something had changed. He did not know what but since he was a cautious creature by nature he tried to get to the bottom of the mystery. It was as though a clock had stopped. The ear was so used to the ticking it no longer noticed it. When the ticking stopped, the change was immediately noticeable even though one might not at first know what had happened.

The comparison with a clock took Pucky down the right track. He suddenly realized what had happened, Tifflor's chirping signal had decreased in intensity. It was not coming in regularly. It had grown weak, fading out and then fading back in. That could mean only one thing, something had happened to Tifflor!

* * * *

Even before Pucky had left the *Drusus* by transmitter to begin his visit of several days on Hades, Rhodan had carried on a number of discussions with the Robot Regent on Arkon. The main topic of all of them was the search for the deserters' ship. The Regent wanted to know why, if the ship had been on the way

to the Druuf Universe, it had not appeared in the vicinity of the overlapping zone. Rhodan explained to the Regent that there was always the possibility the deserters had slipped through unnoticed the ranks of the blockade ships while on their way to give themselves over to the Druufs.

The Regent informed his logic sector of the last possibility and received the information that slipping through the blockade front was not at all impossible for a small, inconspicuous ship. In fact, the logic sector calculated a not inconsiderable probability that such an unnoticed penetration of the lines had already been accomplished by the Terran ship in the previous few hours.

The Regent suddenly found himself facing an entirely new situation. He had been out to capture a ship manned by deserters. He was not interested either in the ship itself or in the fact its crew consisted of deserters. What the Regent wanted was information about the galactic position of Rhodan's home world Terra, and it seemed likely to him that it would be easier to get such information from deserters who had originally planned to defect to the Druufs than from war prisoners, for example, who were captured by force and who remained loyal to their home planet.

The Regent had done everything possible to block the deserters' path and now he found out that even so there was still the possibility that they had eluded him after all. That meant they were already in the Druuf Universe.

The Regent began to seriously weigh the possible effects of an invasion of Druuf Space. Before he had shied away from the idea. He was a capable and competent positronic mechanism but his builder had either neglected to equip him with an understanding of the mathematical-physical theory of different time rates or else had not considered it necessary. At the time the Regent was being built, the theory was just being formulated and was considered as the useless product of fantasizing mathematicians. No one believed that a situation would develop in which the theory would be useful. The theory was not thought to have any practical value at all and the Regent was not burdened with it. The result was that the Regent had no 'feeling' for the passage of time. He was a machine, an immortal machine. He could count seconds, yes, but that meant nothing to him. He could not grasp the concept of 'time'.

Thus the Druuf problem had been incomprehensible, if not uncanny, to him from the first moment on. He had been forced to call on Perry Rhodan for help. When the overlapping front opened up, the Regent had posted a gigantic blockade fleet in front of the gap and was more or less satisfied as long as the Druufs did not succeed in forcing their way into Einstein Space.

In this case it was necessary to weigh two things against each other, the uncertainty about the consequences of a massive penetration of the Druuf Universe by the Arkonide fleet, as opposed to the possibility of capturing the ship of Terran deserters and in that manner acquiring information concerning Terra's galactic position.

After several hours of calculations, the Regent decided that the second point decided the issue. Assuming that the Druuf danger was stemmed by the presence of the blockade fleet, there was nothing of more importance to Arkon than learning Terra's position and so having a possibility of knocking this powerful and potential enemy out of galactic politics before it was too late.

The Regent had therefore decided to send his fleet into Druuf Space. He was of the opinion that the most advisable course would be not to send in the entire fleet but only that portion of it commanded by Door-Trabzon.

The two Terran superbattleships, the *Kublai Khan* and the *Drusus*, still stood at the entrance to the Druuf Universe and the Regent hoped to kill two birds with one stone: learning Terra's galactic position

and at the same time destroying the ship Perry Rhodan was in. That, if successful, would forever condemn Terra to galactic obscurity.

Of all this, Perry Rhodan of course knew nothing. Nothing compelled the Regent to keep his worst enemy up to date on his thoughts and plans. Rhodan could only hope that his hint that the *Newborn* could have slipped unnoticed through the blockade front would be enough to give the Regent ideas—even if not inspiring him to send his fleet into the Druuf Universe.

Just a few moments after Pucky disappeared in the transmitter, Rhodan learned that his calculations had been right. The Arkonide fleet was in motion, 20,000 ships were preparing to go through the overlapping front into Druuf Space. 20,000 ships were taking off on an adventure with uncertain consequences—and that only to capture a single Terran vessel and take its occupant's prisoner.

The alarm sounded aboard the *Drusus* and the *Kublai Khan*. The great game had begun. In a few moments the Arkonide ships would run up against the defensive front of the Druuf fleet. Rhodan's tactics were a prime example of how through carefully chosen hints even a master of logic such as a positronic robot brain could be induced to following the will of a human being.

The only question now was whether Julian Tifflor and the *Newborn* would find themselves in the middle of the conflict or if they were already safe on Druufon.

* * * *

Tifflor had given up the *Newborn*. He had done it with a heavy heart but he saw that he could do nothing else. The 12-man-crew led by Lt. Lubkov was taken on board the Druuf ship and some minutes later the *Newborn* was blown up according to plan.

There were two reasons for it. Tifflor was remaining on the Druuf ship so he had to bring his men over if this undertaking was to have even a slight chance of success, he needed every one of them.

On the other hand, he could not let the *Newborn* fall into the hands of the Druufs. No one could predict how much the Druufs would find out about Terran technology by dismantling the ship.

And so the *Newborn* was destroyed. Lt. Lubkov left the ship last and it was he who armed the bombs. The *Newborn* became a glowing white cloud of gas slowly expanding into space, its luminosity fading. Half an hour after the explosion there was not the least trace of the old cruiser.

The Druufs seemed to have no objections to that action. They were probably satisfied with Tifflor's explanation that he had not come to them out of sympathy for the Druuf cause but out of hate for the Arkonides. He played the role of a man who though having acted contrary to the will of his superiors still did everything he could to protect the homeland from which he had defected.

Tifflor had developed a new plan. If his earlier intentions had proved unworkable, he still did not want to go back to Earth empty-handed. There were two things that made a certain amount of risk worthwhile: the camouflage that made Druuf ships almost invisible and the mysterious engines that enabled their ships to fly faster than light without transitions and springs through hyperspace. Tifflor was convinced that the possession of both secrets would give the Terran Fleet technical superiority over the Arkonides.

He had been given the control room of the Druuf ship as a headquarters. A squad of Druuf robots stood ready to carry out his every order as quickly as possible and to man the equipment which he could not operate because of his unfamiliarity with Druuf technology. Since Tiffloor had taken command, no more Druufs had appeared in the control room.

Tiffloor understood the situation correctly. The robots were not there only to carry out or relay his orders, they also fulfilled the most important function of keeping a watch over him and his companions and preventing any misuse of the power assigned them.

The fleet section, whose command Tiffloor had been given, consisted of a total of 14,000 units. That was three times the total strength of the Terran Fleet

As before, Tiffloor was certain that it would not come to an all-out battle with the Arkonides. He had informed his men of his new plans and was waiting now for the first favourable opportunity to put his ideas in action.

Of course they were at a disadvantage now that the *Newborn* had been destroyed. They no longer had a spacecraft in which they could escape when it became necessary. They could not steer a Druuf ship by themselves and the robots would refuse to do it when they became aware of what kind of game the Terrans were trying to play.

Even so, Tiffloor figured he had a chance of making contact with the base on Hades and getting help from there when it was needed. The Druufs would inevitably find out sooner or later that their guests had nothing else in mind than stealing two technical secrets. At the same time they found out, there had to be a spacecraft from Hades lying somewhere near the Druuf flagship, ready to take the 15 Terrans aboard and transport them to safety. The chances of that being so arranged were not especially large but Tiffloor reasoned that the gains he might possibly make outweighed the risks he would have to take.

He knew nothing of the steps Rhodan was taking in the meantime to accelerate events, so he could not know that all his reasoning would shortly prove fruitless.

As yet he suspected nothing of the disaster rushing towards him.

* * * *

The cosmos experienced a spectacle of vast proportions.

The firmament began to glow when Admiral Door-Trabzon's Arkonide fleet broke through the overlapping front. The discharge funnel, till now a dull red, half-dark figure, lit up as the break-through of 20,000 ships interrupted and dammed up the equalizing flow of pulsating energy. The universe suddenly seemed to be divided into two halves, one dark, in which the light of stars seemed only a faint glow, and one glowing yellowish red, in which the energy of eons was concentrated and beginning to shine.

It was a sight such as the galaxy had never before witnessed.

Even Perry Rhodan was impressed. He had previously calculated that the break-through of so many

ships would affect the structure of the contact zone and cause a number of extraordinary effects but he had not believed that one of those effects would be so clearly visible as the bright glow of the entire overlapping front was.

It looked as though the universe had been ripped apart and through the hole one could see the fires of hell. It was a sight that none who saw would ever forget as long as they lived.

For more than an hour the orgy of radiant brilliance endured. Then the intensity of the glow began to fade and within a few minutes sank back to its original state. The overlapping front stood once more as a dimly glowing cloud in the middle of space.

Door-Trabzon's fleet had gone through. Remaining behind were 20,000 ships, half the Arkonide blockade fleet, as well as the two Terran spaceships, the *Kublai Khan* and the *Drusus*. Each of the Terran ships was powerful in its own way and abounding with energy but in case of trouble hopelessly inferior to the 20,000 Arkonide ships.

Ten minutes after Door-Trabzon's ships had disappeared, the mousebeaver Pucky returned via transmitter on board the *Drusus*, bearing bad tidings.

7/ UNIVERSE VS. UNIVERSE

Tiffloor was just about to familiarize himself with the technical equipment in the control room when one of the translator-equipped robots crackled: "Alien ships spotted! A large fleet of spaceships is breaking through the overlapping front! The Arkonide attack is beginning!"

Tiffloor whirled around. At first he was inclined to regard the alarm as a joke but then he realized that even the most complicated robot is, not capable of joking. In almost the same moment he saw a vidscreen on the wall below the panorama screen light up, showing uncountable, slowly moving red points on a blue background.

Tiffloor was familiar with the equipment. The vidscreen was connected with a radar system and an indexing unit. The radar functioned in the usual way and the indexer decided whether a detected object was identified or not—which in this case meant whether it was friendly or unfriendly. The detected object appeared on the vidscreen as either a red or a green point, depending on the decision of the indexer, which was constantly informed of the courses of all Druuf ships. A green point was friendly, a red meant danger.

Tiffloor did not waste any time wondering how the Arkonides had arrived at the idea of invading Druuf Space. Here they were and if he did not act quickly in his new office as a Druuf admiral, the Arkonides would overrun the Druuf fleet before even a single shot had been fired at them.

Tiffloor looked a second time at the vidscreen, attempting to estimate the number of Arkonide ships.

Eight of Tiffloor's 14 companions were present in the control room. The other six he had assigned to

flagship's gun posts and supplied them with translator-equipped robots so that they could make themselves understood and issue orders. He had thought that would be in keeping with his role. But suddenly it was not play-acting anymore. It was deadly reality.

Tifflor began to act. Now that he knew how to do it, he could read with no difficulty from the radar screen that at the moment the centre of the Arkonide fleet was nearly five light-hours away and moving at a velocity between 30,000 and 40,000 kilometres per second. The astonishingly low speed seemed to indicate to Tifflor that at the moment the Arkonides were not any too sure of themselves.

That gave the Druufs a chance.

"All ships ready to start!" Tifflor told the robot standing nearest to him.

To someone not involved in the situation, it would have looked as though the robot did not react at all. However, Tifflor knew that it was relaying the order over a sort of telecom transmitter and the commanders of the subordinate ships were receiving it in the same instant.

A bothersomely long time by Tifflor's standards passed by before the robot reported: "All ships ready to start."

Tifflor felt obligated to clarify his battle plan. The Druuf robots possessed that fantastic ability of two-track mental performance, enabling them to listen and to relay what they heard simultaneously. Tifflor knew that there would be no additional loss of time in the relaying of his explanation.

"We'll accelerate to ultra-light speed as quickly as possible. There would be no point in approaching the Arkonide openly and clearly visible. They would be superior to us in speed and reaction capability. We'll start to brake only once the forward units of the Arkonide fleet are behind us. That way we'll appear in the middle of the Arkonide fleet. The second we appear, we open fire. The Arkonides will be surprised but since most of the ships will be robotships, the surprise will not last very long. So we'll drop our speed only slightly below that of light and thus after firing a few shots we can immediately disappear again.

"That is all. Each of you will be more or less on, your own.

"And now... let's go!"

He tried to imagine how at that moment gigantic black-skinned commanders were standing at their telecom receivers in 14,000 Druuf ships, listening to his words. He wondered if it bothered them to be taking orders from a Terran. Tifflor did not believe he would enjoy taking orders from an Arkonide but perhaps this was a different matter entirely.

The Druuf ships were outfitted with antigrav absorbers similar in effect to those in use aboard Terran ships. One did not notice that the ship was in motion. Even the picture on the panorama screen did not change. The dimly shining points that were the other ships moved in the same direction and at the same speed as one's own. The constellations stayed the same. Finally, only the bright glow of the engine showed that anything was happening.

Lt. Lubkov had already found a place at one of the control consoles at the wall. He had trouble seeing over the edge of the console counter and even more trouble operating the huge lever and switch. But he knew what function was served by the single lever and switch and just then that alone was important.

"Tell Sgt. Fryberg we're on our way," Tifflor told him. "Have him make it clear to the Druufs that they're

to fire as fast as possible and keep their rate of fire that fast. Explain to him that we have about 20,000 Arkonide ships in front of us and that our very lives depend on how fast we can shoot."

"Yes sir!" Lubkov answered. Then he stretched and reached up over the edge of the console to one of the huge levers protruding from the control panel. He grasped it as high along the upward slanting rod as he could, then raised his feet from the ground so that he hung from the lever with his entire weight. It began to slowly sink and Lubkov could move his hands a bit farther up the lever. He finally had it all the way down. Tifflor could see through Lubkov's faceplate that the man had sweat on his forehead. But he was smiling.

A vidscreen outside Tifflor's range of vision lit up on the console control panel. The round head of a Druuf appeared but when it saw that a Terran had made the call it disappeared and was replaced by Sgt. Fryberg's broad face, which was red with excitement. Lubkov repeated word for word what Tifflor had said. Fryberg nodded seriously and promised: "If they all shoot as fast as we will, then the Arkonides are as good as licked already. I'm afraid the outcome won't depend on us alone, though."

Tifflor heard his answer and admitted he was right. When they emerged in the midst of the Arkonide fleet, the Druufs would begin shooting—but what then? They would need more time to aim at their targets than the Arkonide robots would need to recover from their surprise and start offering resistance.

Blast it all, anyway—what possessed the Arkonides to suddenly launch a full-scale invasion of Druuf Space? Tifflor had been ready to assume a considerable risk by stealing two technical secrets and delivering them to Terran scientists. It was quite another matter being on board a Druuf ship, manned by a crew needing a terrifyingly long time to react to anything, and flying on to meet a monstrously huge Arkonide fleet. It was suicide.

Tifflor reflected on it while the ship continued to accelerate and the first colourful effects of the Doppler Effect began to show up on the panorama screen. The Druuf engines were powerful. In only a few more minutes the speed would reach the critical point and the ship would leave the four-dimensional continuum. It would begin to move through a higher space, yet without losing sight of the four-dimensional universe.

There was too little time and too many thoughts were storming at him at once for Tifflor to reach a definite decision on whether to continue with the present course or attempt to reach the base on Hades.

The only thing that was really clear to him was that in the original plan it had been seen to that the Druufs and Arkonides would tear each other apart. The original plan had not been workable but then that which it was supposed to accomplish had developed of itself anyway. The Arkonides were attacking and within 15 minutes a murderous space battle would break out. 20,000 Arkonide ships were racing towards about twice as many Druufs. There would be losses. Entire sections of both fleets would be wiped out—just as had been provided for in the plan.

Was it somehow important that 15 Terrans had been innocently drawn into the middle of the fracas? They had a mission before them. The Druufs, of late convinced of their inferiority, would give up the battle as lost too soon and pull back. Arkonide losses would be slight. Only when the section of the fleet commanded by Tifflor proved that it was possible to successfully fight against the Arkonides would the rest of the Druuf fleet be ready to take an effective part in the battle and inflict heavy losses on the Arkonides.

No, Tifflor decided, we can't take off now. This is what we were trying to arrange all along and if we don't get out of it ourselves it still won't have cost Terra very much.

He chose not to think any more about it and directed his attention to what was happening with the ship as it accelerated at maximum power towards the critical point.

* * * *

As an event it was not very impressive. The only thing that happened was a change of colour on the panorama screen. The deep red disappeared, replaced by a cloudy black against which the stars shone harshly.

The Druuf ship had left the four-dimensional universe and was speeding at a velocity greater than light towards its intended meeting with the Arkonide fleet. The sight of the enemy ships—the red points on the radar screen—had not changed. The radarscope functioned independently of the medium in which the ship moved.

Tifflor felt more at ease. He had anticipated the effect differently, as something more obvious and more disquieting. He had believed that he would have to command a ship whose course he could not watch and whose guidance he would have to leave to the alien robots. Just the fact he could see where he was going seemed to him a meaningful advantage.

On the radar screen the flood of red points came closer with dizzying speed. Tifflor tried to guess what the first manoeuvre of the Arkonides could be when they saw the enemy spaceships appear in their midst but his thoughts ran chaotically through his mind. He was not able to concentrate.

He glanced at Lt. Lubkov, who responded with a calm, considered smile.

At that moment the intercom sounded.

It was Fryberg on the line again. "I don't know if it's still important, sir," he said to Lubkov, "but near his gun port Cpl. Mainland discovered a lifeboat hanger. The hangar is..."

"No," Lubkov interrupted, "it isn't important anymore."

With one step Tifflor stood in front of the high console. "Keep talking, Sergeant!" he ordered before Fryberg could switch off. "This interests me."

Fryberg swallowed and continued. "There's a huge lifeboat there in the hangar, sir. Mainland cautiously asked a robot about it and found out that it's kept constantly ready for takeoff. A Druuf sits in the cockpit and keeps watch. He functions as a pilot when the boat's used. And... the boat probably has the ultra-light drive, sir."

Tifflor threw a quick glance at the radar screen. He estimated that it would be no more than a few seconds before the Druuf ships began to brake and open fire.

"Tell Mainland not to worry about it anymore," he said. "We'll take care of it. Tell all the men on the quiet that we'll take off with the lifeboat when things get sticky here. Lubkov or I will give the order. No one is to do anything on their own. Understood?"

"Understood, sir," Fryberg answered calmly and switched off.

Tifflor turned. He had made an effort to talk in a low voice and it seemed that the robots were too busy with their task of braking the ship and emerging back into the four-dimensional universe at the right point in time to pay attention to anything else. He waited a few moments and when none of the robots moved he turned to Ras Tschubai the teleporter, who had been sitting obediently on the floor.

"Tschubai, this is your job!" he said rapidly in a low voice. "Take Noir with you. He's to try to put the pilot under his control."

André Noir the suggestor had been leaning comfortably against the wall by the main hatch. When he heard his name spoken, he came over. "I can't guarantee that it'll work, sir," Noir pointed out. "Druufs have a completely alien brain."

"Try it anyway!" Tifflor told him. "No more discussion now. Hold on tight to Tschubai!"

Noir obeyed. He placed himself in front of Ras Tschubai, put his arms around his neck and allowed Tschubai to wrap his arms around his body. The African closed his eyes and a moment later both of them were gone as if dissolved into thin air.

Tifflor hoped the pair would reach their goal without incident. He turned his attention to the robots once more. Just then one of the mechanical beings faced him and declared with a metallic voice: "The time has come. The battle can begin!"

At the same time the dark red sky of the Druuf Universe lit up again on the vidscreens. Between the brightly shining stars stood the dimly glimmering light-points of the Arkonide ships.

They were like a swarm of grasshoppers—an enormously huge number.

"Open fire!" Tifflor shouted. "And keep shooting!"

One of the robots translated his words into the inaudible Druuf language. Tifflor kept his gaze trained on the vidscreen and waited with hammering pulse for the first light flashes. And they came!

Not far from the Druuf ship, a glaring sun lit up. A blue-white fireball came into being, growing in a matter of seconds to the size of the full moon disc, and dissolved in an expanding cloud of gas. A second fireball appeared nearby, reaching its peak of brightness when the first had dissipated.

Suddenly the dark red universe was filled with harsh, deadly lights. The Druuf fleet ploughed furrows of death through the ranks of the Arkonide invaders. The ray fingers of energy bursts reached invisibly towards the enemy, caught him and turned him into nuclear torches. Death and destruction were the order of the day in the Arkonide ranks. In a matter of minutes Arkon lost more than 8,000 ships.

Then the Arkonides adjusted to the new situation. They knew the positions of their enemies and their central positronicons had recognized that only an immediate counterattack would save the Arkonide fleet from total destruction.

They shot back. Fireballs lit up that were not destroyed Arkonide ships but Druuf ships that had suffered direct hits.

Tifflor ordered a retreat. The Druuf ships accelerated once more, following a course that ran

perpendicular at an acute angle to their original path and which carried them across the Arkonide front lines. About 12 minutes after they first appeared, the Druufs vanished again. During those same 12 minutes they had lost around 2,000 of their own ships.

Tifflor sighed in relief. The first blow had been successful. He knew that the rest of the Druuf fleet would not have the courage to undertake a similar move against the Arkonides. They knew how it was done: appear, shoot and disappear.

Even so, it was hard to say in whose favour the shooting would be. On the second attack the Arkonides would not need any three minutes to recover from their surprise and it had been observed that they were able to fire more quickly and more concentrated than the Druufs.

Tifflor allowed the ships to assemble again after being widely scattered by the battle. On the vidscreens showing the cloudy black background of super-space, the last glowing traces of destroyed ships could be seen, interspersed with small, faintly luminous gas clouds.

Tifflor decided to risk another attack. From the movement of the red points on the radar screen, it was clear that the Arkonides had not at all given up their intention to invade the Druuf Universe. Moving in a straight line, the ships were heading directly from the overlapping zone onwards towards the centre of the Druufon system. Their speed had increased. The Arkonides' velocity was now about 80,000 kilometres per second.

The Druufs did not make any objections to a renewed attack. Tifflor held his part of the fleet in a waiting position until the points lighting up on the panorama screen showed that the rest of the Druuf fleet had now begun to attack.

Only then did he let his ships, strike. Hard and unhesitating, as before.

He was almost too late. As his fleet emerged from super-space in a sharp braking manoeuvre and started to take part in the battle, the dark red universe was shining with the harsh light of thousands of artificial suns. More than three-quarters of the fireballs had once been Druuf ships, for the slowness of their crews had been their ruin.

But Tifflor's Rank attack gained time. The Arkonide fleet, attacked from two sides at once by a superior force, ripped apart and splintered into small groups. No longer were the Arkonides able to concentrate the fire of 10 or more ships on a single target and destroy its defence field on the first salvo. The Druufs were given a breathing space and the uncertainty that had befallen them with their first losses disappeared.

Tifflor's ship worked together with about 50 other Druuf ships against an isolated group of 40 Arkonide vessels. Tifflor knew that he was thereby running a risk. If the Arkonides were able to concentrate the fire of only 10 ships on a single Druuf ship, then the Druuf was lost.

And if that first target happened to be his own ship the Earth would not find out anything of the Druufs' hyperlight-drive in the foreseeable future.

What he was depending on at that moment was the battling Druuf units' surprisingly effective coordination, which, once they had practiced with it some, worked so well that it was as though all the vessels taking part were a single unit. It was more due to this than to Tifflor's superior reaction time that the Arkonides had suffered such high losses.

Tifflor opened fire when the Arkonide group was still 40,000 kilometres away. The Druuf ships had adjusted their speed to that of the Arkonides. The effect was as if all 90 ships were standing still in space.

First, new fireballs flamed into life. Their glaring brilliance outshone the flares far to the rear in the middle of the Arkonide fleet. The Arkonides seemed to be hopelessly confused. There was no sign of resistance.

Or so he believed until he suddenly lost the floor beneath his feet and was knocked into the air. He struck his head hard against the ceiling. His antigrav absorber slowly adjusted to the new situation and brought him back down to the floor. His skull throbbed and he felt ill. He heard shouting voices, recognizing Lubkov's among them, but he did not understand what they were saying.

He remembered the lifeboat. He glanced at the vidscreen and saw the flickering light of the collapsing defence screens. The ship had been hit. Not directly but enough to be out of commission. From somewhere came the grinding sound of rending metal. Tifflor felt a new shockwave and at the last moment held on to a lever for support.

Suddenly someone stood next to him. Through a whirling layer of pain he recognized Lt. Lubkov's concerned face. He saw Lubkov's lips move but he needed some time to understand what he was saying.

"We've got to get out, sir! The ship's breaking apart!"

Tifflor nodded and hoped Lubkov would know what he meant by the gesture. Lubkov let go of him and ran off. It looked as though he were running along the wall. Tifflor pulled himself together. He shook his head, trying to exorcise the pain, and walked towards the hatch. Besides the robots, no one else was in the room.

Something seemed to have happened to the floor. Tifflor felt like he was running up a rocky slope. He did not look around. He had only a single thought: *you've got to get to that lifeboat before the ship goes to pieces!*

He did not notice a robot getting up. The jolt had knocked it to the floor and damaged some of its circuits but it still knew what its duty was if the alien should try to do something that was forbidden.

It aimed one of its weapon arms at the hatch. And when Tifflor attempted to climb through it shot.

Tifflor felt a violent blow and a burning pain that spread rapidly through his body. He cried out, desperately trying to hold on to the edge of the hatch.

But his arms failed. They seemed to be no longer obeying him. His hands came loose and Tifflor rolled across the tilted floor to the nearest wall.

He was unconscious before he stopped rolling.

8/ "BY THE 8 DEVILS OF THE 8th STAR!"

Perry Rhodan knew very well what he had to do. If Tiffloor were in danger, he had to help him. Both the *Drusus* and the *Kublai Khan* had to plunge into the Druuf Universe and try to find Tiffloor.

He issued the orders for just that.

He did not know that the part of the Arkonide fleet remaining in Einstein Space was carefully registering every movement of the Terran ships and noticed immediately when they altered their course and headed for the overlapping zone.

The Robot Regent was informed. It decided the moment was a good one and ordered the attack. When the *Drusus* and the *Kublai Khan* had approached the overlapping front to within a tenth of a light-year, a squadron of heavy Arkonide units appeared in front of them and opened fire without warning.

Rhodan recognized his inferiority. He ordered an immediate transition, not even having time to pay any attention to determining a specific direction for it. The important thing was just getting out of range of Arkonide fire.

The *Drusus*' defence screens were glowing under the first salvo when the colossal ship undertook the spring into the 5th dimension and disappeared into hyperspace.

It was hardly more than a lucky chance that the *Drusus* and the *Kublai Khan* made a transition in the same direction and with the same distance. When they reappeared in Einstein Space, they were only a short distance apart. Swift measurements showed that they had put the overlapping zone more than 15 light-years behind them.

For the moment they were safe. But they could not remain where they were. Tiffloor was in danger and needed their help. They had to go back!

Rhodan lost no time in useless reflection. There was no point in reconsidering his responsibility to Julian Tiffloor. He could not shirk it, not even with the argument that he was risking two of Terra's largest ships in the attempt to go after Tiffloor.

There was no plan of battle that he could devise. There was only one thing he could do: strike out and try to find a hole in the Arkonide front.

Rhodan instructed the *Kublai Khan* to coordinate its movements with those of the *Drusus*. Two Terran battleships had an enormous firepower. They had nothing to worry about as long as there were no more than 15 Arkonide ships opposing them.

The problem was that the Arkonides knew that too and would send groups of more than 15 ships after the Terrans.

Nevertheless Rhodan ordered the return flight. The two ships took off and within a few minutes went into transition.

* * * *

The ship bucked like a wild horse.

In front of the gigantic control console stood the Druuf pilot, his gaze trained directly ahead at the dark vidscreen as though the confusion filling the small room behind him did not concern him in the slightest.

Next to him was André Noir, the suggestor. His face was frighteningly pale. His eyes were closed and shining, and thick drops of sweat stood out on big forehead. In spite of the tremors rushing through the ship, Lt. Lubkov tried to stay constantly nearby. He was worried about André Noir being able to hold out despite the terrible strains on him. His collapse would have meant catastrophe, for no one besides the Druuf would be able to take the lifeboat away from the dying ship and steer it on a safe course. If Noir collapsed and the Druuf awoke from the hypnosis, they could shoot him but then they could not save themselves.

Marshall, the telepath, was the last to come in. Nimbly he climbed up the ladder that ran through the belly of the lifeboat up to the control room, and the first thing the men heard him say was: "We're in trouble! Something's happened to Tiffloor!"

Lubkov whirled around. He knew that the telepath was able to tell from a considerable distance whether someone was awake or asleep or if he was sick or wounded or well. Marshall was able to tell from the person's radiated thoughts.

"Where is he?" Lubkov cried.

"Hard to say," Marshall answered quickly. "I'm only picking up unclear signals. He seems to be unconscious. Near the control room, I'd say."

A new jolt shuddered through the ship. Lubkov felt himself raised high into the air and then not very gently get down again. He fell and landed heavily.

"Tschubai!" he called, not paying any attention to his pain. "The ship's going to go any second now! Go look for Tiffloor! We've got to take him with us!"

Tschubai did not even take the time to answer. He made an effort to call the image of the large control room before his mental eye, and when he had it, he sprang.

* * * *

There was nothing to be seen of Julian Tiffloor. The control room floor was tilted and the robots were somewhere far ahead, occupied with repairing a piece of damaged equipment. The panorama screen was completely out of action. The lighting flickered, went out and then came back on. Even a fool could see that the Druuf ship was at the end of its endurance.

At least it had not been hit again. Tschubai would have liked to know what was going on outside, whether the Arkonides had been defeated or if in that very moment they were readying a new attack that would finish off the badly damaged spaceship once and for all.

But there was no way of finding out. The equipment was out of order and there was no sign of Tiffloor.

The robots paid the African no mind. They were busy with their repair work. Ras Tschubai did not think he had anything to fear from them. And that was probably Tiffloor's luck, for otherwise the African would not have climbed into the control room and casually looked around, and he would not have found Tiffloor, who lay unconscious between floor and wall where the declivity of the floor had allowed him to roll.

Tschubai slid down the floor and quickly looked Tiffloor over. It seemed to him that he saw his chest slowly rise and sink. Tiffloor was not dead. Something had apparently struck him but the odd thing was that there was not a trace of a wound anywhere on him.

The ship shook as though feverish, as though it had become a living being in its last moments and was defending itself against its inevitable death.

Ras Tschubai took hold of Tiffloor by the shoulders. He knew that he did not dare lose another second.

He looked around one last time. Up ahead, a Druuf robot approached with cautious steps over the tilted floor. Tschubai did not know why, but suddenly he was afraid of being seen by the robot. He closed his eyes, held Tiffloor's unmoving body tight and thought of the small control room in the lifeboat. When the picture stood clearly before his inner eye, he closed the contact that activated the extra portion of his brain and disappeared before the eyes of the Druuf robot.

The shot with which the mechanical being had intended to destroy him and the unconscious man he held tore a man-sized hole in the metal wall of the control room.

* * * *

When Tschubai returned on board the lifeboat, André Noir was lying on the floor. All his bodily strength had deserted him. The Druuf still sat stiffly at the controls, aware of nothing that went on around him. Noir's hypnotic influence was still effective.

The worst part of it was that no one could say how long it would remain effective.

For Lt. Lubkov, who had taken command, Ras Tschubai's return was the signal to take off. He bent over André Noir and shouted: "Let's go now! At once!"

Noir blinked for a second. That was the only sign indicating that he had understood.

Moments later, the Druuf began to move. With powerful arms he pulled down a crowbar-sized lever. The delicately-membered fingers pressed huge switches. The floor began to vibrate. The vidscreen glowed into life and showed the interior of the large lifeboat hangar.

The lifeboat glided towards the hatch. Lt. Lubkov had never before seen a Druuf hatch in operation. The one through which he had come aboard the Druuf ship had been standing wide open. It fascinated him to see how the huge wings on each side of the hatch slid away and he did not think that the airlock could have been pumped empty of air when the outer hatch slid to one side and gave passage into open space.

He saw the upper right edge of the hatch suddenly tip to the side. The Druuf at the controls did not react

to it. At high speed the lifeboat shot through the open hatchway and left the Druuf ship behind.

Lubkov glanced back at the panorama screen. He saw that he had not been deceived. The falling away of the hatch edge had been no hallucination. In that moment the Druuf ship broke up—just as the lifeboat exited the hangar hatch. The escape had been accomplished at literally the last second. A moment later the lifeboat would have been crushed by the wreckage of the huge ship and whirled out into the depths of space with it.

Lt. Lubkov made a motion with his hand that seemed to mean he had wanted to wipe the sweat from his brow but the helmet of his spacesuit was securely sealed and his hand wiped uselessly across the upper edge of his visor.

Once Lubkov had overcome his fear, he began to keep a lookout for the Arkonides. To his astonishment he noticed that in the vicinity of the lifeboat there were far fewer of the dully-shining points, distinguishable from the stars by their type of glow, than he had actually expected. Far in the background the fireballs of destroyed ships still blazed and every second a few more were added. But the sector through which the lifeboat moved was amazingly quiet.

Lubkov was unfamiliar with the Druuf equipment. He searched in vain for an instrument similar to the radar screen that had been on board the large ship. He could have had Andre Noir find out what he wanted to know from the Druuf but any question meant an additional burden for the suggestor. Lubkov decided not to press it.

He assumed that Noir had already instructed the Druuf where to take the lifeboat. Otherwise he could not have explained why the Druuf manipulated the controls so determinedly and constantly increased the speed of the lifeboat in the direction of a definite point in space.

The weak light-points that were ships—Arkonide or Druuf, enemies in either case—gradually fell back. The lifeboat left the area of the largest spacebattle in which A Terran had ever taken part. Lubkov had no way of learning the outcome of the battle or what losses each side had suffered.

For the moment he was satisfied that the lifeboat was out of danger.

Or so he thought!

Ten minutes after takeoff, when the lights of the stars on the vidscreen began to show their colour, André Noir gave up the ghost. With a weak, barely audible groan, he relaxed and lost consciousness.

At the same moment, the Druuf began to stir. He seemed to remember that he had never been ordered to unconditionally obey a group of Terrans.

He turned and looked at Lubkov. Lubkov was not skilled in reading Druuf expressions but he thought sure that the Druuf was determined to resist.

* * * *

They had made three attempts to break through the front and three times they had been thrown back.

The *Drusus* had been hit once—not seriously but it had knocked out one of its defence field generators. That meant from now on the *Drusus* would have to be even more cautious. On Earth, the generator could be repaired within a few days, but out in space there was no way it could be done.

The fourth approach was used to ship Pucky via transmitter back to Hades. A time was arranged in which the *Drusus* or the *Kublai Khan* would be standing near the overlapping front, ready to take Pucky back on.

In the meantime, they waited. Pucky was assigned to finding out what had happened to Tifflo. There were three possibilities: Tifflo's body-sender was operating again at the usual strength, it was still weak and disturbed by static, or it no longer functioned at all. The first and the last cases would mean that the involvement of the two superbattleships was no longer necessary. The second case meant they would have to try to break through the front and enter the Druuf Universe a fifth, a sixth and, if necessary, a hundredth time.

The Arkonides did not by any means limit themselves to waiting for the Terrans in the vicinity of the overlapping zone. Around 10,000 ships, at least half the blockade fleet, were constantly in motion, searching through the adjoining regions of space, ready to engage the Terran ships when they were found.

Rhodan took care that each transition of the *Drusus* and the *Kublai Khan* brought them at least 10 light-years away from the discharge funnel, knowing that the Arkonides would not follow them so far away.

The minutes remaining until Pucky's return passed with feverish tension. The nervousness on board the two superbattleships grew.

Nothing made people unhappier than, being able to do nothing in a critical situation.

* * * *

The Druuf possessed no translator nor did the Terrans have one.

Lt. Lubkov did what he felt was necessary, he posted four of his men with drawn weapons in front of the Druuf, hoping that the Druuf would understand what was meant.

Then he stepped next to the Druuf, lay hold of him as high as he could along the Druuf's cube-shaped body and tried to turn him back to the way he had been standing when André Noir was still conscious, in front of the control console, busy with moving levers and switches.

That was clear enough. It meant, go on! It was not possible that the Druuf could misunderstand it.

Whether the Druuf did not understand after all, or if it did not want to understand—in any case it made only a slight motion with its body and let its arms follow. Lt. Lubkov received a brutal blow and was knocked clear across the room. He hit shoulder-first somewhere and cried out with pain. But he was quickly on his feet and saw that the Druuf had turned and was reaching towards the levers.

Since the Druuf had hit him, that could mean only one thing: he wanted to change the lifeboat's course!

Lubkov raised his weapon and fired. His weapon was a small disintegrator with enough energy in a single shot to destroy a man. But the Druufs knees buckled and no more.

It was deathly still in the control room as the Druuf fell to the floor with a rumbling din. Everyone seemed to share the same thought, how are we going to get anywhere now?

Marshall's shout suddenly resounded through the control room, freezing the blood in their veins. "Careful! Leave him be! He's thinking... and I can understand it!"

* * * *

When Pucky landed on Hades, the loud chirping of Tifflor's telepathic sender struck him like a shock. Pucky had come to Hades filled with all manner of fears but the possibility that everything might have gone all right again for Tifflor in the meantime had not occurred to him at all.

Hastily he informed Capt. Rous of the purpose of his second visit. He explained that evidently things were in fine shape for Tifflor now and that he had the feeling that Tifflor was approaching the base on Hades, although he could not give any explanation of how that could be possible.

Hearing that, Capt. Rous instructed his radar stations to turn their attention to the sector of space in the direction of the overlapping front, and the radar, thus trained on a specific target, needed only a quarter of an hour to perceive an unknown object approaching Hades at a considerable speed. Through a comparison of the observations made by the radar with what Pucky was telepathically sensing, it could be determined that Julian Tifflor was with high probability aboard the unidentified ship. How he had gotten there, what he was doing there, why he was on the most direct route to Hades—no one knew.

The space battle at the edge of the Druufon System had been watched from Hades, although the base had held quiet and not intervened in the battle. The single light flashes of exploding ships had been recorded on film. Later, the films would be evaluated and information over the development and the outcome of the battle would be obtained. At the moment, of course, no one knew what had happened out there and what the results would be.

Everyone's interest was now in Tifflor, who was apparently on his way to Hades in a Druuf spaceship.

* * * *

It had not been simple but they had done it. Lubkov had pretended to manipulate the controls and the wounded Druuf had mockingly thought: "He's going to blow the ship up if he does that!"

Marshall had been able to pick up his thoughts. The pain that the Druuf felt and the anger that had been growing within him had broken the barriers that previously had prevented telepathic communication

between Druuf and Terran. Marshall was a skilled telepath. He did not let the Druuf know he was listening to his thoughts. Each time he understood a thought, he muttered it to Lubkov in a low undertone.

So Lubkov took his hands off the levers the Druuf had thought would blow up the ship and took hold of others.

"Blast it all!" thought the Druuf. "How did he find out those are the right ones? Of course, he isn't completely correct. He has to throw a switch, too!"

Which switch, Marshall did not find out, but he told Lubkov what he had overheard and Lubkov began to search among the switches. That he did until the Druuf thought angrily: "By the 8 devils of the 8th star! Now he's found that one, too!"

In that manner the Terrans learned step by step how to operate a Druuf ship. When they had understood it, they exceeded the speed of light and approached Hades in a super-light flight through super-space.

The braking manoeuvre proceeded perfectly. The angry Druuf, who in his pain and rage never realized that he himself had told the Terrans how to guide the ship, was an inexhaustible source of information.

After they had come down from super-space, Tifflor came to. He needed a few minutes to orient himself in the new situation. Then he took over the command from Lt. Lubkov, who made no bones about his happiness at being relieved. All he had to do now was keep watch over the levers and switches.

Hades finally appeared on the bow portion of the panorama screen. In less than two hours the lifeboat had travelled a distance of nearly 12 billion kilometres—no small feat, since it was piloted by Terrans who two hours before had not understood Druuf astronautics in the slightest.

However, the most difficult part of their mission seemed to lie yet before them: the landing on Hades. Capt. Rous would recognize the lifeboat as a Druuf craft and probably fire on it. He did not dare allow a Druuf ship to come too close to the entrance of the cavern base. Tifflor had any number of ideas as to how such an error could be prevented—unfortunately, most of them would have taken too much time. For example, Tifflor thought that the lifeboat could fly in a course that spelled out Terran letters, such as R or S, at least until Capt. Rous got the idea. Or, one could find out from the Druuf how the ship's radio functioned, in the same way that piloting the ship had been learned.

There were a hundred different things that could be done. But while Tifflor and Lubkov were discussing which of them promised the most success, John Marshall suddenly spoke up.

What he had to say was sensational. Still a few hundred thousand kilometres from Hades, he had received Pucky's telepathic call. Pucky was on Hades and had observed the approach of the Druuf ship. The hatch doors of the Hades base stood open to take in the lifeboat.

The mission had been a success!

* * * *

At the agreed upon time, the *Drusus* and the *Kublai Khan* stood ready with their transmitters to take

Pucky on board from Hades. At precisely the right second, Hades requested the green sign and received it. A moment later Pucky found himself back aboard the *Drusus*, about 8 hours after he had left it.

The news he brought was significant and exciting. Not only was Tifflo out of danger but he had taken a Druuf prisoner and captured a spacecraft outfitted with the mysterious ultralight-drive engines of the Druufs.

On Hades, Capt. Rous had recognized its importance at once and instructed his men to take the lifeboat engines out as quickly as possible and dismantle them into easily transported sections. For that they had needed almost exactly six hours. At the moment that Pucky reappeared in the *Drusus*, the machinery, which had originally weighed 15 tons, was now scattered among single pieces each weighing about 200 kilograms, waiting to be shipped to the superbattleships the same way Pucky was and flown to Earth.

When Pucky had finished chattering his hasty report, the central radar announced that it had picked up a battle squadron of about 100 Arkonide units flying towards the current position of the two superbattleships. In 12 minutes the Arkonides would be within firing range.

Even so, Rhodan decided to take the risk. Getting the new engines into the Earth's possession was to important not to do so.

Hades got the green light. Marcel Rous had already loaded all the transmitters in the base so that there would be no loss of time from his side.

The *Kublai Khan* was informed of what to expect and then the loading began. Piece by piece, the separate parts of the engines crossed the distance from Hades to the waiting ships. Labouring frantically, men and robots cleared the receiving transmitters of incoming shipments and readied them to bring in more pieces. Marcel Rous on Hades knew nothing of the pressure of time under which the men of the *Drusus* and the *Kublai Khan* were working but he did his best to speed things up.

The crew of the *Newborn* were transmitted along with the engine parts, and at last appeared the wounded Druuf.

In 10 minutes it was all over. The Arkonide squadron was going into attack formation. But even before fire was opened, the two superbattleships took off. The Arkonides tried to follow them but, before they had quite understood what was going on, Rhodan ordered the transition. Both Terran ships disappeared before the surprised eyes of the Arkonide commanders.

It might be said that Perry Rhodan had just thumbed his nose at the Robot Regent!

* * * *

They had hoped to accomplish entirely different goals but in the last analysis they had to be content with what they had actually done. They had wanted to arrange for the Druufs and the Arkonides to make war on each other and not stop until they were completely exhausted, or at least almost exhausted. The Terrans had hoped that with one single action they could create a situation in which Terran power was on a par with Arkonide strength.

In that they had not succeeded.

According to careful estimates, the Arkonides had lost 18,000 ships. That was a great many, considered by Earthly standards, but it was not enough to bring Arkon down to the Terran level.

The Druuf losses were just as high but no one on Terra was concerned with that. The positronicon on Venus had stated that the overlapping front would soon close and that from then the Druufs would no longer constitute any danger.

It was left to Terra to continue its observation of the great events of galactic politics from a considerable distance. The moment had not yet come in which Terra could step forward and put in action the will of mankind by force if necessary. Terra's great day had not yet dawned. This realization was one of the most important to come out of Julian Tiffloor's mission.

On the other side of the coin, two successes could be listed: the capture of a Druuf ultra-light engine and the taking prisoner of a Druuf who could be questioned about the technical development of his race.

The Earthly scientists and technicians attacked with breathtaking enthusiasm the engine that the *Drusus* and the *Kublai Khan* had delivered into their hands. Their task was a double one: thinking their way through an alien technology and learning the manner in which a device functioned whose principle they did not even know.

But after four weeks they had discovered the principle and it could not be much longer until they could duplicate the engine.

One of the best-known explanations of the way in which the ultralight-drive of the Druufs worked came from Prof. Lawrence of the Terranian Technological Institute. The explanation attempted to explain the inexplicable in terms of familiar examples and basically it was as follows:

"You can heat a piece of solid matter. You can conduct warmth to it and for every calorie conducted to it, its temperature increases accordingly a certain amount, depending on the specific warmth of the substance. But eventually you will reach a point in which the added warmth is no longer used to increase the temperature of the test substance but to change its physical state.

"As a familiar example, take a piece of ice—H₂O in a solid state, to be more precise. At 10°C, we'll start to heat it. The more warmth we provide, the higher the temperature of the ice will be, until we reach 0°C. When we conduct heat to ice at 0°, it does not get any warmer at first. Instead, it melts. It stays at a temperature of 0 until it has entirely converted to water, or liquid H₂O. Only then will the added warmth serve in raising its temperature. The amount of heat which we have added at 0 without raising the temperature of the test sample, we'll call the melting warmth of ice relative to the melting temperature.

"You ask me, future galactonauts that you are, what melting ice has to do with your profession as space travellers. Let me explain that to you.

"You conduct energy to your ship's engines and the engines increase the velocity of your ship. This principle does not operate without its limits, as you know. We have, up to now, believed that there was a very definite limit, namely the speed of light, which we could not surpass in this manner.

"The Druufs do not believe that any longer. Like us, they conduct energy to their ships' engines to increase their speed. But then comes the point at which the additional energy is no longer used to increase the speed but to change the material state of the spacecraft—call it the solid state of matter for

the sake of analogy. Naturally, a liquid ship does not result from a formerly solid ship, as with ice, but the state of the ship changes in that after the addition of a certain amount of energy the ship is no longer relevant to the four dimensional continuum but belongs to a higher level of space.

"It is thus similar to the situation of ice: the function which describes the increasing temperature per unit of mass and per unit of energy in connection with the temperature, runs continuously up to the melting point. Then there is an interruption, a peaking. Addition of a certain amount of energy is now necessary to effect a small change in the temperature, you could say.

"So it is with the Druuf spaceship: increase in velocity per unit of mass and per unit of energy, assumed as a function of the velocity, is a continuous function—to a point. Then there's a peak similar to a delta function. It marks the place in which the additional energy is used to transform the ship into another state of being.

"Please, gentlemen, consider this as no more than a comparison. It lacks in many places. The structure of the energy fed to the engine must be considered, along with the type of propulsion—and many other things as well. What I have said should be considered only as a graphic illustration to help you visualize the process. Remember that you are operating in a realm of science for which lack of demonstrable proof is unavoidable. The attempt to project a model image borders close to the limit of what is permissible."

That was Prof. Lawrence's comparison. Although Lawrence had not expected it, his words went into the technological textbooks, where they remained unchanged for several centuries.

* * * *

The questioning of the captured Druuf produced only a few bits of knowledge concerning the means by which the camouflage device of the Druuf ship that had towed the *Newborn* through the discharge funnel operated.

The Druuf knew that the device was still in the developmental stage—which explained why Terran ships had never had any trouble tracking Druuf ships before. Only a few ships were equipped with the new device and among them was probably the ship that had taken the Terran prisoners from the Arkonide ship that had captured them on Grautier sometime back.

Moreover, the Druuf also knew that the effect of the device depended on the fact it absorbed two definite and quite narrow wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum. The wavelengths were the visible part of the spectrum, wavelengths from 4,000 to 7,500 Angstroms, and a narrow band in which the typical frequencies of Terran radar systems lay. If another radar frequency was used, then the Druuf ship was clearly visible on the screen. As far as detection by microwaves was concerned, the new device offered an advantage only when the men at the radarscopes did not alter the frequency of their equipment or, as was the case with most of the old radar systems, if the frequency could not be altered at all.

For Terra, this knowledge meant no great achievement. What could be learned about the device's principle was turned over to the high-frequency technicians with the instruction that they should mull it over. No one thought that anything useful would come of it very soon.

After three weeks on the Earth, the Druuf died. He had refused to let a doctor look after him. His

wound was greater than the authorities had believed, otherwise they would have paid no attention to his refusal to be treated, at least once they had interrogated him.

Terra had come a step farther along. She possessed the ultra-light drive of the Druufs. And the Terran scientists began the work of taking another step in the direction of overcoming Arkon's superiority.

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CHECKMATE: UNIVERSE

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

A FATEFUL PERIOD in this history of humanity.

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On Terra and on the far-flung colonial worlds of the Solar Empire, few realize the tempestuous events that the next 12 months will bring.

WAR throughout Earth's domain could come at any moment—for a flame has been smouldering for 73 years in the alien star-system of the Topides.

What will the answer be when the word goes out—

TOPIDE PLANET, PLEASE REPLY!

By

Kurt Brand