

OPERATION: DESTRUCTORS

DESTROY the Robot Brain!

The Mechanical Mind... the Positronicon... the soulless Regent of Arkon.

This is the mission of the Recruits for Arkon.

But it is a task that cannot be undertaken nor rushed into madly. First mock battles must be fought and won, severe training undergone, commando war tactics perfected in a special Battle School.

Naator!

The staging arena for the conflict to come is—

CONFLICT CENTER: NAATOR

1/ RIGHT MAN, WRONG ADDRESS

THE GIANT RED SUN stood high in the sky and shone down on the desert landscape. The sparse shrubbery cast very few shadows across the sandy ground which rose gently in this area and gradually became more rocky until it climbed abruptly over the steep slopes of a mountain range. When looking at this extensive chain of ridges from the West one would have been hard pressed to discern any breach or pass, yet there were valleys here through which merchant caravans had found their way in more peaceful times. They had been modern caravans, of course, with tractor vehicles and heavy cargo gliders.

It was no time of peace now, however, on Zalit, the 4th planet of the Voga System. Nor was it a time of actual war. But just the near proximity of the Arkon System was threat enough. After all, what was a mere distance of three light-years?

Under the rulership of a giant robot Brain, the stellar empire of the Arkonides was in need of fighting men. It obtained them from the colonial worlds which dared not offer any resistance to its demands. Arkon was reinforcing its mighty war fleet in order to attack an unknown planet that lay more than 30,000 light-years across the void. Unknown, that is, except for its name: Terra!

On Zalit were many hiding places where able-bodied men of draft age had retreated in order to elude the search patrols of the Arkonides. There they lived and waited, not knowing when they might return to their homes again. But they had time on their side. As long as friends brought them food, they preferred the restrictions of a voluntary confinement to the Arkonide training camps on a world that would be alien

to them.

Arkon's war did not concern them but they did not dare to make an open rebellion. They knew full well that their own weak spacefleet would have no chance against the Arkonide superships which were mostly manned by robots. Moreover, they could not rely on their Zarlt. The ruler of the Zalites had already grown old and maintained a good relationship with Arkon because he had no other choice.

High up on one of the mountain peaks stood the lookout, a young man who exhibited the usual copper-hued hair of the Zalites. His skin was more red than brown and his clothing appeared to be too large for him. He had a good view of the desert toward the West and about 500 kilometres away in that direction lay Tagnor, the capital city of the planet. But the Arkonides and their robots were in Tagnor also. At the spaceport was their mobilization centre and boot camp for Zalites who had been drafted into service. From here the recruits were evacuated to Arkon where their final training took place.

Arkon's representative on Zalit was the Arkonide Admiral Calus, a shrewd and capable man but at the same time cruel and pitiless when it came to carrying out orders of the robot Brain. All of the hatred of the Zalites had been focussed upon this one Arkonide official.

The lonely sentinel on the mountaintop removed his gaze from the western horizon, beyond which lay Tagnor his hometown. His sharp eyes scanned the desert below but failed to discover any suspicious movement there. A few animals grazed on the slopes where there was still some grass.

He stood on a small plateau area that was enclosed by a low wall. A rocky overhang concealed him from any curious eyes that might be above him—and it was very seldom that the gliders of the hated Arkonides patrolled low above the mountains in search of deserters.

The Zalite smiled grimly to himself. So far his group had been very lucky. They numbered some 200 men, all of them draftable age. Chance had thrown them together and now they were determined to stay with each other until the Arkonides departed from Zalit.

He tensed suddenly as he heard a noise on the rocky path that gave access to his position but then he relaxed when he realized it must be his relief guard. They had not yet chosen an official leader among them, since reason alone had thus far held them together and governed their existence. But if it had come to a vote it would certainly have been Cagrib, the man who was now coming to relieve him, who would have been selected as leader.

"You happy now?" asked Cagrib as he came around the rock shoulder and satisfied himself with a glance that all was in order. "I hope the watch wasn't too long for you, Rhog."

"Under the clear, open sky it would never be too long for me," declared the lonely guard, and he shook his head. It was a gesture which meant the same on Zalit as it would have on Earth. "As long as the weather holds up..."

"We have some new information," the other interrupted him calmly. "Admiral Calus has just finished speaking." The Arkonide admiral spoke almost daily over all television transmitters on Zalit, always-announcing new and drastic measures he hoped to employ in the attainment of his goal. "Now even the older men are supposed to show up for conscription. Nobody is safe from them any more."

Rhog narrowed his eyes. "We're safe here—but is that enough? Do you think we should just stand by and look on while our countrymen are subjugated and the young men are carried off into slavery? Why don't we do something?"

Cagrib's eyes suddenly narrowed also. "What *can* we do? In your opinion do you think it would maybe be enough to assassinate this Calus? You have talked along those lines before. Don't you also think that they'll replace him with somebody else—somebody maybe worse than he is? So what could we gain from that?"

Rhog leaned against the improvised parapet. "I don't know, I really don't. I'm only saying that we shouldn't remain idle. We ought to do something, even if its only purpose is to show our countrymen that they are not alone."

Cagrib looked out at the clear sky. Only on the horizon was there an accumulation of clouds, as though it was about to rain there. "So it's Calus, is it...? Maybe he should really be done away with. I'll discuss it with the others. It wouldn't be too difficult to send one of us back into Tagnor..."

"I'll go!" Rhog exclaimed, offering himself eagerly.

But Cagrib rejected this. "No, Rhog, you're too hotheaded. They'd catch you, and you know anybody the Arkonides cross-examine with their psycho-detectors isn't going to keep any secrets. Hold off awhile—we have to consider this calmly and carefully."

Rhog nodded and took leave of his friend, walking down the narrow pathway which led to their cavern hideout. He knew that a start had been made. At last this was the end of idle waiting. Something was going to be done!

However, he failed to suspect that his group was on the verge of making that kind of fateful mistake which always precedes a catastrophe.

* * * *

It was a strictly private mistake within the group, after a thorough consultation, to still dispatch Rhog to carry out the planned assassination. He knew Tagnor and its hiding places best and had always claimed to have good connections with the Zarlt's palace. Some of his friends were supposed to be members of the ruler's private guard. Through them he could get some valuable tips as to the current location of the Admiral.

Actually the fatal mistake lay in the fact that they were preparing to eliminate the greatest friend the Zalites had. Of course these conscientious objectors could not know this because they were logical thinkers—yet their logic didn't reach far enough.

It took them a full day to change Rhog's outward appearance. Although it was true that even oldsters were not protected anymore from the reach of the military draft board, a younger man would have been much more likely to cause suspicion. Rhog's pass was altered also, and although it was still made out in the same name as before, the carrier's age and description could have been that of Rhog's grandfather.

Another problem was the trip to Tagnor. The underground tube train couldn't be used because there were constant checkpoints at the exits which would make discovery a strong likelihood. The rebels had no personal vehicles at their disposal. So the only thing remaining was the caravan route that lay some

200 kilometres to the south. There it might be possible that someone would give him a lift.

"You'll have to get a move on," advised Cagrib matter-of-factly and he shook his head. "Let's hope the exertion won't be too much for you. Unfortunately we can't risk the only glider we've got. It's our only means of contact with the outside world."

"I could set it down outside of Tagnor," suggested Rhog.

"What—and lose it?" Cagrib continued to shake his head. "Besides, that way they'd be able to trace you more quickly. No, you'll have to choose the hard way. You would be less conspicuous in a caravan and that's the way to get into the city. I don't see any other alternative."

Rhog submitted to the plan. He had to accept it if he were to avoid having them withdraw the assignment. Because he wanted to be the one to free Zalit and his people from the tyrant.

Three days after the brief conversation on the mountaintop, Rhog set out on his way, a lone traveller with meagre provisions. He turned toward the south where the mountain pass was to be found and the merchant caravans came through. It was the only place in this region where there was a passable valley. 200 kilometres lay before him.

To the right at a distance of 500 kilometres lay Tagnor. To the left, over the mountain tops and beyond the desert, was Larg. There Rhog also had friends but he did not know whether they were already on their way to Arkon or not. Help...? No, he shouldn't count on it too much. He was left to his own resources.

The reddish gleaming sun crept above the mountain range and climbed swiftly higher. His bundle of provisions began to weigh heavily. He also felt the weight of the small weapon in his pocket. He did not know how Cagrib had gotten possession of it, nor had he questioned him about it. It was probably of Arkonide design. The small energy accumulator in its handle would be good for 2 or 3 deadly ray shots. After that the needle beam pistol would be worthless if a refill cartridge were not available. And *therewas* no refill!

To his right the desert stretched out to the horizon. It appeared to be endless, as though it kept on going forever, yet just beyond it lay Zalit's greatest city with 3 million inhabitants and the greatest spaceport on the planet.

Rhog kept close to the mountains in order to be able to take cover quickly in case an Arkonide air patrol should appear. He would be able to get into the nearby rocks and disappear with just a few steps. Maybe it would be better to travel at night, he thought, because he could hardly go astray if he followed the edge of the hills. The whole chain ran precisely in a north-south direction. But at night the bloodthirsty Hhrack were also about. They were 4-footed beasts of prey and had often been used as such in the fighting arena. Once he had seen such a cat-like monster tear a gladiator apart and since then he had not gone back to the arena.

Noon passed and evening came. He searched for one of the numerous eaves where he might spend the night. He calculated that he had put a good 40 kilometres behind him today. Within another 4 or even 3 days he would be at his destination. Then he would only have to travel west on the caravan highway where he was sure he could get a lift. Nobody would ask him what he wanted to do in Tagnor. And there was little fear that Arkonides would attack them here in the desert.

He slept restlessly and awoke several times because he thought he heard noises. Finally he saw the

dawn light in the cave entrance and proceeded to prepare a light breakfast, after which he got under way again. In his heart was a burning desire to be a hero to his people by saving them from the Arkonide admiral. Even if it should cost him his life...

On this second day he put more than 60 kilometres behind him but he sensed that he was going to have to have a longer rest period if he didn't want to break down somewhere on the following day. The long time of waiting made itself felt. One tended to get out of shape.

It was dark already when he began to search for a cave. It was possible that the terrain was unfavourable and that no caves would be found here. A steep cliff wall towered upward several hundred meters before it sloped back.

Rhog groped along this wall in the hopes of finding a sheltering crevice of some kind where he could sleep without fear of being devoured by the Hhracks. To his right the last glimmer of the setting sun died out. The first stars of the evening only dispensed a feeble light. No moon was to be seen.

Rhog stopped. Wasn't that a noise—a sound that quite definitely had not been imagined? A hoarse panting, the scraping of claws on rock...? He stood there motionlessly, leaning against the cliff and listening. As though of its own accord, the small weapon had glided into his hand. Before falling victim to some beast of prey he would expend one of the gun's valuable energy charges.

Silence. The darkness of the night deepened around him. Yet he knew that after a brief transition it would grow brighter. Zalit's sun, Voga, was close to the centre of the galaxy. The night sky would be ablaze with enough stars to cast dim shadows.

There was no sound to be heard. He must have been mistaken.

Rhog moved forward again. His left hand lightly brushed along the face of the cliff wall, which seemed unusually smooth. No sign of a cave. If he had only started looking for a shelter before nightfall! Now he could possibly wander around here for hours.

He almost fell when his hand suddenly found no resistance and pushed out into emptiness. He transferred his weight just in time to keep his balance. The rock wall receded here and 5 meters beyond the indentation he found that it continued endlessly. In between, however...

Rhog had almost given up hope of finding even a small niche in the wall but here was something quite unexpected. He readjusted his pack of provisions and groped his way into the narrow passage, which turned out to be a small canyon. He had expected to get to the end of it quickly but was in for a surprise. True, the walls converged slightly, leaving a 4-meter gap between them, but then they fell away from each other—in fact very far away. Rhog could no longer see them although the night had brightened considerably.

Instead of a closed wall of rock, from what he could make out he was facing a wide, flat area. It lay here in the mountains like a deep basin surrounded by cliffs. Above was a circular section of sky where thousands of stars could be seen. The locked valley had a diameter of at least 500 meters.

Was that a fire flickering over there? It must be burning inside a cave because there were only flitting shadows to be seen.

Rebels? Conscientious objectors? Perhaps some of his friends?

He was seized by a sudden hope. Throwing caution to the winds, he moved toward the flickering fire. He had to admit that this group had selected an excellent place of concealment. It was sheer coincidence that he had discovered the entrance at all.

Then suddenly he knew what they were: freight vehicles such as were used for transporting merchandise through the desert. Using such equipment was the only alternative to the more expensive method of transport by air.

He had chanced upon a caravan camp.

But he had also come to a stop. A caravan?—here, so far north? The wide valley that was the regular pass through the mountains still lay a good 100 kilometres to the South. Why should a caravan make such a detour merely to spend the night?

There was something strange about this caravan, that was for sure.

But caution was only necessary in regard to Arkonides. The most he could encounter here would be some extension of Zalite civilian authority from which nothing was to be feared. There was only one way to find out what was going on. With his right hand on the butt of his weapon, he crept toward the fire which was still hidden from direct view by outcroppings of rock.

A loud voice suddenly rang out close behind him: "If I were you, friend, I'd stand still and put my hands in the air, real slow. It's much too dangerous to sneak up on a campfire at night without announcing yourself."

Rhog stiffened. Slowly and carefully he pulled his right hand out of his pocket to show that it was empty and he raised it simultaneously with his left hand. Somebody stepped up from behind and relieved him of the needle beamer.

"Very good, my friend. But now we must still find out who this is who travels by night in the desert. You'd better think up a very likely story. All right, get moving...!"

Rhog stumbled toward the rock outcropping that obscured the flickering fire.

* * * *

The city of Tagnor had the semblance of an armed camp. Everywhere one encountered the robot patrols of the Arkonides. Whoever was caught without a valid draft card would have to expect to be arrested. Actually there were only a few men to be seen. Pedestrians in the streets consisted mainly of tall, slender Zalite women with reddish-gleaming hair.

To the right of the broad avenue leading to the cone-shaped palace of the Zarlt, the arena lay empty and deserted. No war games had taken place here for a long time, even though the arena's entrepreneur and manager had not been conscripted by the Arkonides. This man, named Garak, still apparently made every effort to scare up wild animals and gladiators wherever he could.

He had just returned from Larg where he had gotten a few things under way which would certainly have

interested Admiral Calus very much. Satisfied with both himself and Zalit, Garak hurried down into his subterranean hideout in the catacombs of the arena. He took a careful look around before disappearing into the broad passage that led steeply into the depths.

Here it was dark and he had to turn on his small hand lamp in order not to miss the place he was looking for. Then, finally, he stood before the secret door. There was no sign of such an opening in the smooth rock wall but a slight pressure with the flat of the hand was enough to cause the wall panel to slide suddenly aside. Garak was bathed in light as the door closed again behind him.

He stood in a spacious rock chamber that had been subdivided by low walls. Zalites sat there or stood about and looked toward him curiously. In fact one of them approached him.

"Well, Toffner...? How did you do?"

The man did not speak the usual Zalite language, which was a slight variation of Arkonide, but instead spoke purest English. And now all at once Garak had become Toffner. In fact, Jeremy Toffner was a cosmic agent from the Earth.

"So far so good, Major. Our friend Hhogka in Larg has organized a caravan and is sending it this way through the desert. It started out day before yesterday and ought to reach the cave by today. After going through the, regular mountain pass it has to go north a hundred kilometres. They're waiting for us in that boxed-in canyon.

Maj. Rosberg was a Solar Intelligence specialist for transmitter installations. Now he nodded, satisfied. "That's great! I sent out my hypercom dispatch to the *California* yesterday. The cruiser is on standby for us, and so tomorrow morning, Earth time, it ought to be delivering the stuff we asked for. That's also tomorrow morning, Zalite time, incidentally."

In these few words the major outlined a very comprehensive program that was not without its dangers. It was true that the *California* would only emerge from transition for a period of one minute and it only needed to switch on its five matter transmitters in order to transmit the materials requested but this one strategic minute could lead to a catastrophe. All space around Zalit had been blocked off by Arkon ships.

Something moved in the back of the subterranean chamber and then someone approached. This 'someone' was just one meter tall, was covered with a rust-brown pelt of hair, looked like a giant mouse and was also provided with the wide, flat tail of a beaver.

This creature straightened to its full height before the two men and spoke to them in a squeaky voice. "Then don't you think it's about time that we turned on the transmitter's receiving station in the cave?"

Maj. Rosberg and Toffner nodded in mutual agreement.

"That's right, Pucky," said Rosberg to the remarkable creature, who spoke flawless English. "But early tomorrow morning will do just as well. You can make your jump then with the three men."

The term 'jump' referred to Pucky's mutant capability of teleporting. But in addition to this the mouse-beaver was also a telepath as well as a top expert in telekinesis. In actuality he was *the* most talented parapsychic in the Solar Imperium—and he took no little pride in the fact. Pucky wobbled his big ears, revealed his incisor tooth in a friendly grin and retired to his corner of the room with a waddling strut that was characteristic of him.

Toffner watched him with amusement. "If we didn't have Pucky we'd lose a lot of time," he commented. "And everything would also become more dangerous."

"Rhodan must have his reasons for leaving Pucky behind with us," said Rosberg, confirming the other's sentiments. He went with Toffner to a table where they both sat down on a rough-hewn bench. "Betty Toufry advises us that some big transport ships will be taking off for Arkon in the next few days. Let's hope they get to go with this shipment."

'They' referred to Rhodan and his 150-man team. Disguised as Zalites, they were presently in the Arkonide's mobilization camp. They had succeeded in obtaining key positions of duty and rank among the new conscriptees and now they waited to embark for Arkon along with the regular Zalite draftees, who of course were by no means volunteers. The impending transfer of troops placed Arkon somewhat in the position of ancient Troy on Earth, because Rhodan and his men were the conquerors who figuratively remained hidden within the belly of the 'wooden horse'.

"Why shouldn't they go this time?"

"Today they shipped out 50,000 troops, Toffner, and Rhodan and his men were not among them. Do you have any idea of the size of this operation?" As Toffner remained silent, Rosberg changed the subject: "What did Hhogka have to say about your proposition?"

I went to him as soon as I arrived in Larg. At first he was sceptical but what convinced him was the good job we did on the fake I.D. passes, which even carry the signature of Calus. The caravan is at the cave today and by tomorrow it can be all loaded and get under way to Tagnor. We should be able to expect its arrival in three days."

"And that's the crisis!" put in Rosberg. "We have to join it before it's stopped by the robots at the edge of the city. Maybe we'll grab an Arkonide officer to help us. We have the necessary means at our disposal so that we can lay a hypnoblock on him. Then he'll do exactly what we want him to do. Maybe we should get hold of the fellow we've treated already, the one you encountered a few days ago outside in the passage. Try tomorrow to find him in Tagnor and bring him here. Using him it'll be a cinch to get the caravan into the city. Then under cover of night it should be easy to guide it down here in the catacombs."

Toffner rested his chin on both hands with his elbows propped up on the wooden tabletop. "I've been the only Earthman on Zalit for the past three years and although I'll admit it was lonesome duty I always felt comparatively secure. Today I'm no longer alone—but don't think I haven't felt safer."

"Toffner, you know that the robot Brain—the Regent of the Arkonide Empire—is planning to destroy the Earth. Rhodan wants to steal the march on him by making a preventive attack. It's the only choice he has if he wants to save the Earth."

"I know," acknowledged Toffner.

But for the rest of the day he was somewhat silent.

* * * *

A fire actually *was* burning inside the cave. Rhog made out nine Zalites in its flickering glow. Some of them were lying on blankets along the wall and they sat up as he stumbled in over the threshold and came to a stop. Others sat directly around the fire and looked up at him curiously.

"Just take a look at what I found outside," said the man who had brought Rhog into the cave. "He says he found this place by accident. He's also armed with an Arkonide hand-beamer. Suspicious, don't you think?"

A bearded Zalite got up slowly and came to the prisoner. "Who are you?" he asked.

Before answering, Rhog looked carefully around. He couldn't quite figure out what kind of a situation he'd stumbled upon by chance. This did not appear to be any normal caravan. In the centre of the wide cave was a remarkable object. It consisted of two principal parts—a metal block base that appeared to be very inert and heavy, and a cage. It truly looked like a cage but at his first glance Rhog knew it had to be something else. The glistening power cables connecting the cage to its base were enough to lead one to this conclusion.

"I am Rhog, from Larg," he said finally. "My vehicle broke down and I've been walking about 20 kilometres, until I found this canyon. I don't understand..."

"Larg? We're also from Larg. Wouldn't we have had to overtake you en route?"

"Maybe we missed each other."

"Hm-m-m. Not very likely." The bearded one seemed to be thinking it over. Then he held out his hand. "Do you have papers?"

Rhog hesitated. It was unusual for a Zalite to ask for his pass. However, they must have their reasons and he did not care to attract any more attention or raise any more suspicion. So he reached into his pocket and pulled out the pass. The bearded one took it and carefully examined it.

Finally he held it up against the firelight and shook his head a few times. Then he handed it back to Rhog. "Why was your birth date altered, Rhog?"

Rhog tensed with alarm. Now everything was lost, if this caravan had anything to do with the Arkonides. But lying seemed to be useless. Anyway, he didn't have to tell the purpose of his trip to Tagnor.

He finally replied as calmly as possible. "I wanted to get out of being drafted. If I look old to them they may leave me alone."

"Could be," the bearded man nodded and he sat down again by the fire. "Come and sit down here. Let's talk a little bit more."

The man who had captured Rhog disappeared outside into the night in order to take up his rounds again. Rhog sat down next to the bearded one. The other Zalites had lain down again as though they were not concerned with the matter. Only three other men crouched by the fire. They stared into the darting flames and seemed to want to leave the whole affair in the hands of the bearded man, who must have been acting more or less as their leader.

And the latter was short and to the point: "So now let's have the truth, if I may."

Rhog realized that he didn't have any choice if he did not want to make his situation unnecessarily difficult. "Can I trust you?"

"That I'll guarantee," replied the other, nodding.

Rhog looked into his eyes and believed that he could believe the bearded one. He did not look like a traitor. "I'm a fugitive from the Arkonides—so now you know!"

"I figured that much, my friend. But of course there's the question of why you want to go from Larg to Tagnor. There it's the most dangerous of all, for you."

"In Tagnor I have friends, which I don't have in Larg. They can take me into hiding with them. Sooner or later the Arkonides will have enough soldiers and they'll finally leave Zalit May I ask you something also?"

When the bearded one only nodded silently, Rhog continued: "Who are you? Is this a plain, everyday kind of caravan? How come you're not afraid of being stopped by the Arkonides or getting shoved into service in their spacefleet?"

"Who says we don't face such a risk?"

"Are you going to Tagnor?"

"Yes."

"Then you *are* in danger!" asserted Rhog. "You don't think the Arkonides would ever fail to notice such a prize catch of able-bodied men, do you?"

The bearded one thought a moment and then confessed: "Naturally we'd be conspicuous but we have good I.D. papers—better than yours, at any rate. They show that we've already been processed by the enlistment commission and have been found to be unfit for service. So nothing can happen to us."

Rhog leaned toward the other with new interest. "So you are also part of a resistance movement?" A new confidence and trust gleamed in his eyes. "You have an organization behind you that can produce false papers."

The man with the beard rummaged in his pocket and finally produced a heavily stamped document. "This signature here..." He indicated a name written under the largest stamp. "That's not false. Signed by Admiral Calus himself."

"I don't understand that," mumbled Rhog disconcertedly.

"You don't have to," retorted the bearded Zalite. "Main thing is, we'll take you with us to Tagnor. Of course it all depends on the three men that we'll meet here tomorrow. If they have no objections, you may come with us."

"Three men? Who are they?"

"You shouldn't ask so many questions," admonished the other man. "You know the old saying: ask me

no questions, I'll tell you no lies. You'd better look for a place to lie down and catch some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a rough day. We have to load up our land freighters and you can give us a hand with it."

Rhog looked around in the cave. Other than the curious cage-like affair in the middle, he could see nothing that might be loaded onto the carriers. Outside in the night he had only observed the vehicles, themselves. If they were empty and unloaded, then where the devil was the cargo that was supposed to go into them? Something wasn't right here. But what? Did it concern him at all?

The bearded one seemed to perceive his doubtful concern. His face brightened with a cheerful grin. "Don't rack your brains about it, my friend, you'll need them for tomorrow. You know if a man is going to really wonder about something he needs a head on his shoulders to do it with!"

Rhog could appreciate the logic of the statement and he finally curled up on the rocky ground to get some sleep. Whatever adventure might lie ahead of him, at least he was safe here in the cave, and no Hhrack was going to tear him apart.

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At just about this same time, six men sat at a table in a brightly lit room and whispered to each other. They spoke so softly that no one could have heard a word even two meters away. This precaution was appropriate to their surroundings since they were in a building that was located in the area of the spaceport of Tagnor, which was in Arkonide hands.

Although they all looked like Zalites, they were Terrans.

Perry Rhodan's hair glistened with a coppery sheen in the light of the lamps. His skin was like that of an American Indian. The biochemists of his special task force had done their best to change him and his combat commandoes into genuine Arkonide descendants, since the Zalites were the descendants of former colonists of the Imperium. Thanks primarily to the biochemical techs, Rhodan and his 150-man team were able to billet among the other drafted Zalites without being detected.

To his right sat Reginald Bell, somewhat short and heavysset but nonetheless an apparently genuine Zalite. To his left was Capt. Hubert Gorlat, with a quite normal native appearance. At present he was a Zalite captain who had presented himself to the Arkonides as a volunteer in the fleet of the Robot Regent. The other three men were Ras Tschubai the African teleporter, telepath John Marshall and Professor Eric Manoli.

Rhodan was saying: "... won't be very long now. The Regent is adamant about getting the troops into advanced training and not letting them sit around here on Zalit. We'll either go with the next transshipment or the one after that."

"Too bad Calus can't do anything about it," muttered Bell with a twinkle in his eyes. "He's been such a helpful fellow otherwise."

Rhodan gave him a warning look. It was superfluous, however, because if any one of their many secrets would be revealed, all of them would be lost. Nevertheless their secret concerning Calus, in regard to his

person or identity, was the most vital of all.

"Osega must not arouse the slightest suspicion," Rhodan whispered. "He's our biggest power piece in this whole galactic chess game, which makes him more or less the King, you might say. If he gets checkmated our mission will be wrecked."

"Osega plays the role of the Arkonide Admiral very well," Rhodan conceded. "In the meantime the real Calus must be sweating blood down there under the arena. He probably never dreamed he could be replaced by a double."

"Nobody dreamed of it," grinned Bell. "Neither the Arkonides nor the Zalites—and it's a good thing!"

"One day the Zalites will understand a lot of things, once they find out about it," said Gorlat. "I think maybe it's time for Ras to go."

Rhodan looked at his watch and nodded. "It's the time we've agreed on. OK, Ras, you can pay a visit to Calus now, so that we may find out when we can count on shipping out of here. We can't let down our line of communication. He should be alone by now in his room in the Zarl's palace—you're familiar with the location."

The teleporter got to his feet. "Any other instructions, sir?" he asked of Rhodan.

"None so far. At least you could ask Osega if the Regent is still holding back on details concerning his plans. After all, the leading officers of his fleet should be able to share the naked truth with him. That's all I can think of for now."

Ras Tschubai nodded and went into a corner of the room to concentrate on making his 'jump'. The others watched him openly. It was always fascinating to see a teleporter disappear. For Ras himself the procedure wasn't too much of a strain because he was familiar with his target area. He visualized Calus' room until he saw it almost tangibly in front of him, and at the same time dematerialised.

Almost simultaneously the visualization became reality. The walls of the room, the large desk, the bed, Calus himself—all seemed to materialize before him whereas it was he, himself, who had materialized. It was of course in the same second in which he had disappeared from Rhodan's view.

Calus was slightly startled but then he smiled. The biochem group had turned the Earthly Sgt. Roger Osega into a genuine Arkonide. No one would have recognized him in this disguise. Even the real Calus had been given the shock of his life when he first saw his mirror image before him, only to be kidnaped and taken away into the catacombs.

"You are punctual, Ras," said Osega, checking his watch. "But you could have saved yourself the trip. No news yet."

"The next troop ship? When does it leave?"

"You boys are really in a hurry to get to Arkon—and still nobody knows what you'll be up against. You may regret it someday, being in such a big hurry."

"Don't give me any nonsense," the African retorted, perhaps more sharply than he meant to have it sound. "The operation is committed and it can't be held up any longer. You know that as well as I do. Is there anything else? The Chief wants to know if the Regent has passed out any top drawer information

yet."

"Nothing, Ras. During the next few days there'll be a continuous traffic of troop ships for bringing the recruits to Arkon. The conscript lists are sent with the ships. I have no influence with the registry section. The only thing I know is that Rhodan's team is up for transshipment this week."

"Thank you," Ras replied, evidently satisfied. "At least that's something. By the way, the I.D. passes bearing your signature are working miracles—I mean, that is, the signature of the real Calus, if you will pardon me! He signs anything now without hesitation. Evidently Dr. Linkmann has given him a very effective injection. I think Calus would even sign his own death sentence now."

"If he only would!" said Osega. "Then I'd be the only Calus around."

The African grinned in amusement. "For a sergeant I see the Admiral's rank sits pretty well with you," he kidded. "I have to get going. So it's tomorrow at the same time. Farewell, Admiral Calus, sir, noble Arkonide by the grace of the Robot Regent..."

And so the false Calus who was smoothing Rhodan's way to Arkon was once more alone. He was a sheep in wolf's clothing—at least for the Zalites, who did not know that the man was apparently their greatest enemy was in actuality the greatest friend.

2/ TROJAN HORSE ASTRAY

The new day dawned in the East. The morning sun raised its great red disc above the horizon and began its long climb into the cloudless sky. The fire in the cave had long since died down and had to be fanned into life again by the guard. Soon after that, water was boiling in the pot and the stimulating aroma of 'kagarak' rose up toward the rocky ceiling.

Rhog awoke as someone gave him a nudge.

"Time to get up, my friend," said the bearded one as he pointed to the fire. "Breakfast!"

Rhog sensed relief. He knew that he was safe and that he would make it all right to Tagnor. The only thing was, they must give him back his needle beamer. Without a weapon he didn't know how he might carry out his intention.

Even at breakfast Rhog saw no signs of the imminent departure. Where were the wares and merchandise to be loaded up? Did everybody have so much time on their hands that they could dawdle away at breakfast as long as they pleased? And he remembered the three men who were supposed to come here. Where would they come from and why—here in the middle of the desert between the two cities?

They shared their breakfast with him so that he might stretch out his own meagre provisions. In general they were all very friendly with him. Even later when they had all eaten and the bearded man invited him to take a walk with him, there was no change in the new relationship. The other men remained behind in the cave.

They went out to the waiting vehicles of the caravan, which were covered over with tarpaulins. From the tracks in the sand Rhog could see that the machines could not have been here longer than yesterday, which tied in so far with the bearded man's story. The only thing that bothered Rhog now was the three men who were supposed to come here.

"When are those three men you were talking about going to get here?" he asked. "Maybe they're coming in by means of a glider?"

The bearded one looked at his watch. "I don't blame you for being curious about that but I'm not going to be able to tell you anything. To be frank, I don't know much more than you do. I was simply told to wait here at this cave for the three men. You must have noticed the strange machine in the cave by now. Do you know what it is?"

"No," Rhog answered, hoping that at last he would learn something. But he was disappointed. "I don't know either, Rhog I was merely informed it would be here in the cave when I got here. And that's where the three men are coming from, plus all the materials that are going to have to be taken to Tagnor."

"From the machine?" Rhog was incredulous. "How can anything travel in a machine that is firmly anchored to the ground?"

The other man smiled. "I'm getting good pay for the transportation, and besides I've received some very vital identification papers—so that's why I'm not asking as many questions as you are. After I get back to Larg I'll be able to relax and just wait for the Arkonides to pull out of here. So what does that machine in there matter to me?"

Rhog now realized that a bigger organization must be operating here than he had previously imagined. He knew he was lucky to have run across it—but he decided that he would tell no one about his own plans.

"What about my pistol?" he inquired. "Will I get it back when we get to Tagnor?"

The bearded man looked at him askance. "What do you need it for?"

"My own security is all. My papers aren't as good as yours, you know. If the Arkonides grab me I prefer to go down fighting rather than stand there and be shot as a helpless prisoner. Can you understand that?"

"Yes, I understand," said the bearded one, reaching into his pocket. When his hand emerged it held the small needle-beamer. He handed it to Rhog. "Here you are—but just don't get any dumb ideas. You can see I'm trusting you."

"Aren't we all Zalites?" replied Rhog. "That automatically puts us in one camp, doesn't it?"

The other man nodded slowly. They had come almost 200 meters from the cave entrance by now and were quite close to the narrow passage that led out into the desert. Rhog could imagine that the tractor equipment must have had a hard time forcing its way through here.

A long drawn-out cry echoed from the cliff walls. The bearded man came to an abrupt halt. He looked back. A man stood in front of the cave and beckoned to him. There was no mistaking his arm signals.

"Let's go, Rhog. I think our friends may have arrived."

Rhog followed him in silence. How could the three men have arrived in this box canyon without having passed them on the way in? Had they actually travelled here with a machine that stood motionlessly in the cave?

Three Zalite strangers were already waiting for the caravan leader. At least they looked like Zalites but in reality they were from the Earth and belonged to Rhodan's special commando task force. Pucky had teleported them here one at a time. To the amazement of the men in the cave, they had suddenly appeared in their midst out of nowhere. Pucky himself had not been observed because each time he had jumped back at once to Tagnor.

The bearded one reached his hand out to then "Hhogka has sent me to bring you into Tagnor." This was the password. "Where is the equipment that we're supposed to load onto the transports?"

Sgt. Miller responded by shaking hands with him. "I am Thar, my friend. These are my two companions, Regul and Prezl." He pointed to cadets Rudolf and Kranolte. "In about a half hour—I hope—we'll be able to start with the loading operation." As the bearded one only stared at him incredulously, Miller nodded in confirmation. "That's right, you heard me—but it seems you are not familiar with matter transmitters. They're well-known on many worlds. Here in the cave we have such a transmitter. It has been set for receiving and in a few more minutes you'll see some action..."

On Zalit there were no matter transmitters although something was known of their existence. The bearded one began to suspect that very powerful people must be behind the Hhogka operation. Matter transmitters!

Somebody came out of the cave, yelling at the top of his voice. "Witchcraft! The friends of darkness are loose. I There in the cave, that machine...!"

Sgt. Miller shrugged and checked his watch. "Pretty darn punctual, I'd say. Right on the dot." He walked past the bearded one into the cave, followed by his companions.

Rhog felt the hard metal of his weapon in his pocket. Matter transmitter or not, he knew what he had to do. In about three days he should be ready to act.

* * * *

Gen. Deringhouse made certain that all was in readiness.

Timing and transition coördinates, velocity—everything checked out according to the computer readings. There was just one more switch, which would commit the whole action. And this was in his hand.

The *California* had picked up the hypercom message from Zalit. The supplies and equipment requested were already in the transfer fields of the five transmitters down in the cargo hold. There also, only one button would have to be activated, as soon as they materialized over Zalit.

When Deringhouse threw the switch for program commit, the light cruiser converted itself into a pulse of

extra-dimensional energy and vanished from the normal universe, yet the entire process of its transition through hyperspace lasted but the fraction of a second. When Deringhouse again observed the immensity of the void around him, many lightyears of distance lay between him and the point where he had been only microseconds before.

The Arkonide blockade fleet was not asleep but neither were they fast enough to keep Deringhouse from fulfilling his mission. Even as the spherical spaceship ripped through the upper strata of Zalit's atmosphere, the five transmitters were already functioning. The stacked up materials and equipment in the transfer fields vanished in a matter of seconds. Simultaneously the *California* hurtled out into space again and raced for the transition position that the computer had calculated.

By the time the pursuing robotships of the Arkonide fleet managed to open fire, their searing energy beams sliced through nothing but empty space. Under the anti-tracking protection of its residual energy dampers, the *California* dematerialised. Since it left no trace, its course and position now were beyond detection.

The only report the Regent of Arkon received was a terse dispatch informing the Robot Brain that an unidentified ship had been spotted and that it was being pursued.

* * * *

In the secret cave on Zalit, all the provisions and equipment that had been transmitted arrived unharmed inside the receiver cage. The whole swift process was especially frightening to the one particular Zalite who seemed to believe in fiends and sorcery.

Rhog merely stood in the cave entrance and witnessed the incredible. Out of the open door of the grid cage spilled crates and packages as though invisible hands were unloading them. The three strangers stood nearby and did nothing. One of them grinned broadly. The bearded man had opened his mouth but said nothing.

Finally the man who had spoken before turned to the latter. "You can start loading now. You are to be back here in one week or else send us another team. A second caravan will be needed."

The bearded one signalled to his men and they fell to work. "In one week?"

Miller nodded. "For another transport load, my friend. You will be paid well for your trouble."

While the bearded man attended to the loading operation and Rhog assisted his men, the three Terranians withdrew into one corner of the cave.

"All this isn't going to do it," said Miller to his two Subordinates. "This caravan can't take it all. We have to still stay here and stand guard but that's a lot better than going along with "Rhodan to Arkon."

"I'd rather ship out," grumbled Cadet Kranolte. "You know—get into the action." With a little moan of disappointment he sat down on a rock that had already served the others as a bench. "We're sitting around here like helpless puppies!"

"But every dog has his day," grinned Cadet Rudolf, ribbing him. "Maybe yours is coming up."

"What are you talking about?" asked Kranolte suspiciously. He was not up on his proverbs, apparently. "What day is that?"

Sgt. Miller knew that one of those endless debates had begun which was typical of life in the barracks—the kind where there is much talk without really saying anything. Before he could interrupt, Kranolte spoke again. "Besides, who's a dogs!?"

"Come on, Kranolte, that's just a way of—!"

"And please use my coverup name—remember? They call me Prezl beret"

"That's no improvement," remarked Rudolf maliciously.

"Alright, knock it off!" exclaimed Miller finally. "Were going to have a whole week for sprekking (21st Cent. slang for "yakking"; English corruption of German "sprechen", "to speak"). At least wait till these Zalite boys have gotten their caravan rolling."

Rudolf suddenly noticed something. "By the way, have you guys noticed that there are eleven Zalites and not just 10 of them as Toffner reported to us? Who's the 11th one?"

Miller nodded in acknowledgment. "At least you can count, Rudolf. So? 10 or 11, what's the difference? Maybe they've picked up somebody who's asking for a ride to Tagnor. Hhogka will have made sure that no unkosh characters get into this outfit. I don't think it's any concern of ours."

Basically he had a point but if Sgt. Miller had known the misfortune he might have prevented he might not have spoken so glibly.

Within three hours the caravan got under way, leaving the three Terranians behind in the cave, where a goodly amount of freight still waited to be transported.

And Rhog continued with the caravan—toward Tagnor...

* * * *

Two days later when the caravan was still in the middle of the desert, a fleet of freighter transports landed at the Tagnor spaceport. Its commander had been commissioned to bring all remaining 'volunteers' on Zalit to Arkon.

For Rhodan the hour of decision had arrived.

More or less at the last moment, he and his men had managed to obtain strategic positions of rank and responsibility among the troops. In this secret action the mutants had played a major role. Most of the Arkonide officers had received a hypno-block and thus were no longer a source of danger. Moreover, it had been so arranged that these hypnotic states would fade away of their own accord, once they had landed on any planet in the Arkon System.

Of course it had not been possible to foresee that the new officers coming in with the transport fleet would be carrying new orders. There was no time now to also bring these officers under hypnotic influence. They came in the name of the Regent and they brought his instructions with them. There was no way of going against these instructions without causing suspicion. Even Admiral Calus was powerless in this case. So at the moment it was of no help to Rhodan whatsoever that this particular Calus happened to be one Sgt. Osega.

It was evident from the immediate bustle of preparations that the evacuation of the Zalite troops was to begin this very day. The newly arrived officers were all unusually alert and active Arkonides. They started in immediately with the task of troop dispositions and assignments and they soon let it be known that their decisions were final. Nevertheless, through a process of adroit manoeuvring, Rhodan succeeded in providing that his 150-man team was all assigned to one spherical freight ship so that they would not be separated. Of course he could not help the fact that they would be travelling together with another 3000 or so genuine Zalite conscriptees. So the danger of discovery was held off again for the time being.

The time for embarkation was only a few hours away. They had been issued their full equipment and were now waiting in their billet for the order to go on board the freighter transport.

The atmosphere was not exactly cheerful. Before them the dark mists of uncertainty. No one could guess whether or not the robot brain had already seen through their "scenario" and was letting them fall into a trap from which there would be no escape. Assuredly their disguise was flawless. The biochemical techs had changed Rhodan and his men into completely genuine Zalites, their papers were in order and their accent was perfect. But one circumstance or another might have betrayed them without their knowing it.

Rhodan turned to Capt. Hubert Gorlat. "Captain, you take over the C.O. spot for me here. I'm going with Ras to pay a last visit to Rosberg and his boys. Marshall, you keep in telepathic contact with me. If anything happens here, let me know and I'll get back at once."

The African teleporter took Rhodan's hand in order to establish the bodily contact that was necessary for this mode of transportation. John Marshall merely nodded his head in confirmation of the order but Gorlat looked worried. It was true that there was little danger of an Arkonide stepping into their quarters just now, yet it was not beyond the realm of possibility. He breathed a sigh of relief when Ras Tschubai and Rhodan disappeared.

In the catacombs hideout under the arena everyone was pleased by Rhodan's visit, even though it signified his final departure. Once more and in vain, Pucky strove to change his friend's mind so that he could be taken along. But Rhodan remained adamant.

"Out of the question, Pucky! Even disguised as a pet it wouldn't work. Although the Zalite troops are allowed to take a few personal items with them, in your case you know you are not without a certain fame among the Arkonides. In the past if you had refrained from always being out there in front with your tricks your discovery would be less likely. But anyway... you are needed more urgently in the present position. After all, what would Maj. Rosberg be without you?"

"We can't do without a teleporter!" said the Major, gravely following Rhodan's cue. "How would we have been able to get Sgt. Miller and his two cadets into that cave if we didn't have Pucky with us?"

"There, you see?" said Rhodan, smiling down at the mouse-beaver. But then he changed the subject. "Our contact with each other is going to be interrupted now. The Arkonides haven't put a ban on

carrying our watches, however, and I'll have the micro-transmitter in my wrist band, so in case of the most extreme emergency we'll still be able to communicate. We have to avoid it as much as possible because of the danger of a signal trace but I know it's reassuring to both of our teams not to be out of touch entirely. The usual frequency, of course. Well, that's about it. How's it going with the *California* ?"

"She was able to get through clay before yesterday and skrag out again after transmitting the stuff we ordered into the cave. Toffner organized the caravan and that's due in here tomorrow. Were sending one of our 'conditioned' Arkonide officers to meet it so that it'll be able to get through the checkpoints without further inspection. So you can relax on that score, sir."

"I'd certainly like to do that," replied Rhodan with a fleeting smile. "I believe that we'll be taking off today for Arkon. Good luck to you, Maj. Rosberg—I'm depending on you!"

"Luck to you, sir! Here's hoping you all come back safe & sound!"

"Don't forget to give the robot Brain my personal greetings," said Pucky, not without a note of malice. "Tell him he can be glad I couldn't make the trip!" The mouse-beaver seemed to be holding the Regent personally responsible for the fact that he had to remain on Zalit. "Anyway, I'll gradually get used to serving at a line base rather than at the front."

"Who knows what can still happen here?" Rhodan answered him with a seeming casualness but even he did not suspect how prophetic his question was. "Ras, let's jump. The others are waiting for us." He made one more gesture of farewell to those remaining behind and then grasped the teleporter's hand and signalled him to go.

After the two men had dematerialised, Pucky stared for some time at the empty spot where they had been. Then he turned and waddled back to his section of the room. For him the Arkon phase of Operation Troy appeared to be a closed book.

* * * *

But the 'Trojan Horse' was on its way!

The conscripted Zalite troops were herded on board the transport ships by Arkonide officers and robots which had not yet been secretly conditioned and reprogrammed by Rhodan's specialists. The members of the combat commando team were not completely at ease in their Zalite 'skins', even though for the moment there was no fear of being detected.

Before boarding, however, all I.D. documents had to be presented again for inspection. The names were compared with troop assignment lists. But this particular operation was hardly anything for Rhodan and his men to be concerned about. Their papers were Terranian works of art.

The greater difficulty was to be able to remain together. The troop billets on shipboard contained no more than 100 men each. Rhodan was with a group of 49 of his commandos who had to share their temporary home with 50 genuine Zalites. In the coming hours it would be impossible for them to speak freely with one another. There might even be a traitor or a special agent among the Zalites who would report every suspicious-sounding word to the Arkonides in order to feather his own nest.

On the other hand, Atlan was in a better situation since he was assigned to an adjacent billet along with the remaining 99 members of the team. At least he could converse quietly with them without fear of being overheard. Since John Marshall was also assigned to his group, the mutant would always be aware of what was going on in Rhodan's quarters. Perry was enough of a telepath to pick up the gist of any mental messages from Marshall. So this separation did not entirely break off their communications.

Of course none of them were able to know what was happening outside of their quarters but at the moment that didn't seem to be strategically important.

Two hours later the sound of increased traffic in the corridors indicated that preparations for takeoff were getting under way. John Marshall reported telepathically to Rhodan that their Arkonide commander had gone into a last minute conference with Admiral Calus and had given him an order from the Regent. This was to the effect that in the coming weeks he was to draft still more Zalites and to use force if necessary. He was in fact supposed to issue the corresponding instructions during his TV appearance that very day.

The takeoff occurred 10 minutes later.

The 'g-shock' resulting from the tremendous acceleration was so well absorbed by the inertial compensators that they hardly noticed any additional pressure. Rhodan could see that the Zalites present had apparently resigned themselves to their inexorable fate. Singly or in small groups, they sat along the walls and stared apathetically into space. In their minds they probably all saw themselves somewhere on a space warship, flying toward an unknown target destination where they would certainly be attacked by an overwhelming foe. Rhodan wished very much that he might be able to give them a word of encouragement or some sort of consolation but it was too dangerous. No one must know that he was a Terran—in fact a member of that very race against which Arkon intended to wage war.

It only took seconds for the hypertransition, after which the deceleration began. Up in the Command Central they should already be in sight of the Arkon System—the central point of a mighty stellar empire that was hastening toward its irrevocable destiny. The 3 main planets of the system circled their sun in a single synchronous orbit, in the pattern of an isosceles triangle. Rhodan was fairly certain that their ship would land, on one of these planets, though perhaps not on the most important of the three. On that sphere was the robot Brain, the Regent of Arkon, who was the prime target of the present dangerous mission.

Three hours after the takeoff from Zalit there were new stirrings on board the ship which indicated they were approaching destination. They must have emerged from transition somewhere inside the star system's fortified defence ring because the brevity of their passage through the outer perimeter could not be explained on the basis of normal flight at the speed of light.

In the bulkhead of the cargo hold that was their billet a hatch door banged open. A robot appeared and announced in a cold, metallic voice: "All units will disembark in 30 minutes. You will pack your gear together and stand by for further orders over the speaker system." The towering machine went out again, closing the door behind it.

Rhodan sat in a corner among his men. He sent out a mental call: *John Marshall! Is everything OK with you?*

The soundless answer returned at once. *All OK here. As soon as we leave the ship let's try to stick together.*

You're on! was Rhodan's terse reply.

For some time now he had ceased to be as calm inwardly as he pretended. The suspense was now at its high point. He was sure that before they set foot on Arkon they would be processed through another inspection. He didn't have the slightest idea of what methods might be used at the new checkpoint. It could be simply a personal interrogation or even something of a technical nature. Or even a medical examination! In the latter case, of course, they would face the greatest danger of discovery.

The freight transport landed with a light jolt. Almost at the same time a voice boomed from the loudspeaker near the ceiling. It said that the Zalites were to remain in their billets until they were mustered out. The instructions of the robots were to be strictly obeyed.

A strange feeling came over Rhodan. He had never experienced it before and yet it was a quite normal reaction under the circumstances. Something unknown lay before him but now he could exert no further influence over the course of events. Whatever might happen during the next few minutes, either hindering or accelerating the situation was out of his hands. For an indeterminate period of minutes or hours, he, Perry Rhodan, would be totally without responsibility.

A strange feeling, indeed!

He was startled out of his thoughts when the hatch banged open once more and the robot returned to blare out a command. "This unit out—single file!"

Rhodan took his time. First the real Zalites exited the cargo hold and formed up in the corridor, five abreast. The robot began to count step. When Rhodan left the large room he was in time to see the other 100 men of his commando team marching away. His own group followed directly behind them.

They went through long corridors until they reached a main cargo bay. The individual groups were left to themselves or allowed to mingle, so Rhodan succeeded in getting his men together. They were finally in a closed unit and were determined not to be separated again.

Slowly the batch of the loading lock swung open. A breath of cool fresh air streamed into the room. Outside in the distance could be seen several low, rambling buildings under a dark blue sky that was slightly on the violet side.

Somebody coughed.

Gorlat stood next to Rhodan and whispered in Zalite: "That air is pretty darn dry—and poor in oxygen. Does that jibe with the data we have on the main planets of Arkon?"

Rhodan did not reply but his eyes narrowed. The atmosphere of the three Arkon planets was similar to that of Earth. However, what he was breathing in now wasn't much more than an improved version of the atmosphere of Mars. What the devil—?!

His thoughts were abruptly interrupted again as a robot voice sounded from the hatchway: "Forward by fives—march!"

Rhodan had no reason for holding back any longer. He gave his men a signal and they fell into step with the rest. A broad ramp led down to the planet's surface. A robot stood on either side of the hatchway and counted the 5-man rows.

To his right, Rhodan saw the sun in the sky. It had to be the Arkon sun, no doubt about it. But it was smaller than he remembered having seen it before. His growing suspicion was fully confirmed when he looked to his left beyond the buildings and became aware of a vast, faintly shining sphere—a planet!...

A shock of dismay gripped him like an icy hand. They had not landed on one of the three main planets. They were not on a planet at all but on a satellite with hardly a breathable atmosphere!

To his great consternation, Rhodan perceived that the robot Brain was not taking the slightest risk in this operation. Before the monster let anybody get near Arkon they had to be gone over with a fine-toothed comb. And whether or not the Terranians could stand up against this new inspection was another question. But everything depended upon the answer.

* * * *

The caravan ground its way laboriously into the storm. A wind had come up suddenly and now blew steadily from the West. It drove the sand ahead of it which caused new dunes to form. The 11 Zalites had tied kerchiefs or scarfs to their faces in order not to be suffocated by the fine dust that filtered through the narrowest cracks in the driver cabs.

Rhog sat next to the bearded man who was driving one of the desert rigs himself. "Murgo, I hope we don't get off the road in this storm."

The caravan leader harumphed. "If we do, so what! You can hardly tell it from the desert, anyway. Besides, we have bearing and tracking instruments. We keep driving west, sooner or later we'll come to Tagnor."

After a period of silence, Rhog asked: "How far is it from here?"

Murgo glanced at him searchingly. "How is it you're in such a hurry to get to the capital? Out here in the desert you're much safer than you'd be in Tagnor. I don't quite understand your big rush, my friend."

Rhog realized he'd have to be more careful if he didn't want to arouse suspicion. One day sooner or later didn't make any difference—as long as Calus died.

"This sandstorm got me a bit worked up," he said evasively. "If we got stuck in the sand..."

"That's an impossibility!" exclaimed Murgo, laughing heartily. He pointed to the ponderous tractor treads of the vehicle, clearly visible through the side windows of the cabin. "They don't make dunes big enough to stop these brutes! But if it's any consolation you can keep in mind that there won't be any Arkonide air patrols in this kind of weather—so we can travel in peace."

After all, that was a plus factor, thought Rhog with some satisfaction. He thought of his companions whom he had left behind in the mountains. What would they likely be doing now, just waiting? Waiting around for the sensational news that might never come? Rhog could well imagine that the Arkonides might put a blackout on the news of Calus' assassination, if that would serve their purposes.

Thus he realized that if the Admiral's death were to be known he would have to kill him right out in public. Which of course increased the risk for him, perhaps to the point where he'd have no hope of escape.

"What are you cogitating about?" asked Murgo, breaking into the spell of silence. "Maybe you're worried about your future—which is the same future for all of us. Well, you might as well figure that our chances in general don't look too good, Rhog. It doesn't mean anything to the Arkonides, what happens to us. They need troops so they grab them from anywhere they please, not just from our world alone. There's a big war involved somewhere—I don't know who with. But it must be a very powerful enemy if it's big enough to threaten Arkon. Up till now the Regent has always been able to take care of such threats without our help but now his robot armies aren't enough to handle it. He's putting men on the battle line."

"That very fact could actually be a source of consolation—to know that there is somebody who is stronger than the robots of Arkon. We should keep that in mind when we're brooding about the future. It means there's still hope."

"For the race of men, for our people eventually, yes—but what about us in particular? What about our personal lives? Don't you think the Arkonides will find us all soon enough and be getting around to drafting most of us? Don't you think that Zalit will be half-depopulated before the Arkon Empire collapses?"

Rhog smiled coldly. "In the mountains and deserts of Zalit, many men are hidden who will one day be prepared to reconstruct their world. The Arkonides won't be with us much longer."

Murgo watched a whirlwind of sand as it passed in front of them. "What makes you think so, Rhog? Do you have any special reason to believe that Arkon will soon be able to get by without us?"

"No, of course not. I was just hoping, that's all."

As Murgo looked straight ahead into the sandstorm his lips quivered slightly. "I see," he said and then became silent.

This suited Rhog. The monotonous roar of the engine helped him to hide his thoughts. He was worried. The big idea that had come to him so easily back at the mountain camp had gradually turned into an insurmountable problem. Admiral Calus would surely be heavily guarded and it would probably be impossible to get close to him. The robots would be protecting their master's life and would not let anyone get through their security blockade.

But then later toward evening when Murgo turned on the video receiver to hear the Admiral's daily harangue, Rhog had a new idea. He looked askance at the small viewscreen and watched Calus' cruel and arrogant face.

With his hatred came a new confidence that he had found a solution—a way to get rid of the tyrant once and for all.

* * * *

The air was cuttingly cold.

They stood in front of the line of transport ships and waited for orders from the robot guards. By now the Arkonides had dropped their masks completely and given the Zalites to understand that they were to regard themselves as prisoners. None of the Arkonide officers that had been on Zalit had come along, so Rhodan and his men not only faced a brand new environment but also a completely new set of enemies.

Rhodan was standing between Atlan and Bell. The pivot man on the right end of their 5-man squad was Gorlat, and John Marshall was on the left.

"Where do you think we are?" whispered Rhodan who wanted his suspicions corroborated. Two with the same opinion was better verification than thinking solo. "Bell, you know this system as well as I do. I'd say by the size of Arkon's sun..."

"My guess is... the 5th planet out," replied Bell in equally low tones. "We're on a moon of the 5th planet. According to our information the name of the planet..."

"I remember it now," Rhodan interrupted. "And here we are on its satellite. Number 5 is a giant planet. This moon is called Naator—almost the size of Earth, thin atmosphere, mostly desert, some mountains—all in all it's far from being a luxury spa. But security it has! Nobody gets out of here except by a ship of the Regent and with his direct knowledge of it. A nice, beautiful trap!"

"I wouldn't say that, Perry. Sounds better to call it a springboard to Arkon. If it just weren't so cold around beret"

Atlan murmured almost inaudibly: "Those buildings over there are the barracks. If I'm not mistaken, Naator is some sort of troop training centre. Arkon has military schools on a cosmic scale for all its colonial races. Here they get their advance training. I think we're on the right road here on Naator."

"I'm trying to remember," said Bell. "Isn't the 5th planet inhabited?"

Rhodan nodded almost imperceptibly. "By the Naats—they're like Cyclopes but with three eyes. They're basically harmless and completely submissive to Arkon. The Aras use them as guinea pigs for their medical experiments."

The Aras were descendants of early Arkonide settlers thousands of years ago—a very unusual race which made its living through the art of healing others. Their other 'art' in the matter had been to make a very good business of it. In fact there had been one time when they had deliberately infested other planets with a plague so that they could extract a forced profit from the resulting 'hospital services' on an interplanetary scale. The Aras were very thin, highly intelligent and not at all good-natured.

"Are the Naats intelligent?"

"Not especially, Bell. We could hardly have anything to fear from them. Of course, though, some of them have been used as ship's officers."

On the giant field of the spaceport, by now more than 50,000 Zalites had fallen into formation and were being guarded over by patrolling robots. The small, distant sun of Arkon gave very little light at this distance, much less any warmth to speak of. A dry, icy wind blew in sharply from the desert and Rhodan was thankful that he was wedged somewhere in the middle of the human swarm. The Zalites on the edge

of the field must be half-frozen by now.

Suddenly there was a stirring and whispering that spread through all the 5-man squads. Across from them on the broad side of the main building a giant viewscreen flamed to life. On it appeared the face of an Arkonide who wore an Admiral's uniform. Simultaneously a widely spaced battery of loudspeakers blared forth with the Admiral's voice so that every man on the field could hear him. "Zalites!"

Rhodan was thinking of how much the Arkonides looked to their own comforts and convenience. Somewhere inside a warm building the Admiral sat at his ease and addressed the newly arrived recruits. Perhaps this was a daily chore for him which was purely routine but at least he did not have to freeze in the process. He sat at a desk with a microphone in front of the video camera.

"Zalites!" he repeated. "In the name of the Regent of Arkon, I welcome you to Naator the distribution centre for the Imperial fighting forces. Here you will be trained and allocated to the units of the Fleet. You are soldiers of Arkon, Zalites. You are pledged to the Regent and thereby you are obligated to fight for him and if necessary also to die in the performance of your duty! You are fighting for Arkon but this means you are also fighting for Zalit, your home planet. A powerful foe is threatening our existence. Once we have defeated him, you will be taken back to Zalit. Until then you must do your duty. Obey the orders of the officers and robots until you, yourselves, are appointed to a command position. That is all I have to say to you today. I am Admiral Semekho, Commanding Officer of Naator. And now you will be assigned to your quarters."

Another face appeared on the screen. "Your billet locations are to the west of the landing field. In each conical building there is room for 1000 men. One robot will take over each 1000-man group and direct them. Note your robot's serial number because from now on you will direct all questions to him. He is responsible for his troop unit."

It was a simple but effective arrangement. Nevertheless another two hours went by before Rhodan's team marched off with 850 Zalites. They were led by robot #574.

To the left and right of the broad avenue, Rhodan noted that radar monitors had been placed at regular intervals, which made it impossible for anyone to leave the camp colony and get away. He was sure that the troop training area was surrounded by still more effective detection equipment but they were probably completely superfluous because any fugitive would sooner or later succumb to the barren desert.

The conical buildings came into view, just barely distinguishable against the background of eternal twilight. The Arkon star sank beyond the horizon but it did not get much darker. The sky remained dark violet. Millions of stars gave enough light to cast faint shadows. The Arkon System was located in the centre of a spherical star cluster and the splendour of the blazing stars far exceeded the human imagination.

Their building had 7 levels and 150 Zalites were assigned to each of them. On each level there were smaller quarters, each of which could house a 25-man crew. Only the bottom level was smaller, being restricted to just 100 men. They constituted the guard detail, which was to be rotated every 3 days.

The robot assigned crews to quarters and then announced the mess schedules and KP routines. From each level a detail of ten Zalites was assigned to take over these duties.

Rhodan took a look around the unadorned billet room he was in. Along the wall were simple cots and narrow chests of drawers. The windows facing the outside were not barred because more sophisticated

obstacles to escape were utilized elsewhere. They were on the third level and had a wide-range view of the spaceport installations. Nearby were the low academy and training buildings.

In spite of their relative security here, Rhodan remained cautious whenever he had to talk with any of his men. It could be assumed that not a single Arkonide stationed on Naator had ever heard an English word in his life; however, there were no doubt excellent deciphering apparatuses available. Nevertheless Rhodan considered it best to use English for strategic matters rather than Zalite.

"Lt. Wroma, you take 9 men and pretend you're in the commissary crew. Listen in on conversations among the Zalites. We have to know what their attitude is."

The African saluted and turned to his task.

Bell was sitting on one of the beds. "Reminds me of my boot camp days!" he sighed, slapping the mattress. "Do I have to go through all that again? And of all things—with a robot for a topkick!"

Atlan went over to him and laid a hand on his shoulder. "What have you got to complain about, my portly friend? I'm an Admiral and I have to act like a buck private. To be truthful, I find it rather amusing."

Bell grumbled something unintelligible and stared up at the ceiling resignedly. It was not cold in the room and they wouldn't freeze in here but for the moment that seemed to be the only comfort they were going to be favoured with.

"Well, you know we're not going to be here forever," said Gorlat consolingly. "Let's consider Naator as a rest station."

Bell let out a mock whimper. "Rest, he calls it! The only time for relaxation will be when we've defused that robot Brain—but that takes getting to the main planet first!"

Rhodan motioned him to be quiet. "We have to be more careful. Only say what absolutely has to be said and then keep your voice down. I'm afraid we have a strenuous day ahead of us. And don't forget our one goal: Arkon! There lies our main task. This here..." He indicated the beds, the wardrobe chests, the windows "This is just an episode that will pass, sooner or later."

Suddenly Marshall spoke into the ensuing silence. "I've finally made contact, sir! As they looked at him expectantly, he added: "Telepathic contact with Admiral Semekho. We'll soon know what were in for."

The Japanese mutant who was a signal tracer whispered to them. "And I'm going to probe around a bit in their radio transmissions."

"Do that, Tanaka Seiko. We can use every scrap of information." Rhodan sat down on his bed. "For the moment my only concern is what we're going to have for supper. An army runs on its stomach, you know."

"I'm not going to be much good around here, even when I'm full," grumbled Bell from the background. Boot camp held no more charms for him.

But Rhodan was satisfied. They had made a beginning. Now all that was needed was the final step—the 7-leagued boot stride to Arkon...

3/ THE MEDIC-MASTER MENACE

The first day on Naator was without event. Of course Rhodan was able to look out the windows and observe several columns of Zalites as they were conducted to the administration buildings and later brought back but he estimated that today not more than about 3000 recruits had been processed through.

Toward evening they were visited by robot 574 who announced that their particular contingent would be expedited through registration on the following day.

For a number of hours John Marshall the telepath had done nothing but sit on his bed with his back against the wall and his eyes closed. No one disturbed him because everybody knew that the Australian mutant was trying to pick up a contact with the top echelon people at Naator in order to gather information.

But now he opened his eyes, which focussed on Rhodan. His mute signal of readiness was unmistakable. Even Gorlat and Bell came over to his bed. At the moment, Atlan was somewhere in another troop billet.

"What is it, Marshall? Did you pick up something?"

The telepath nodded slowly. "The first 3000 Zalites were given a medical examination today. No—I can see what you're thinking. This wasn't like the exams on Zalit. There it was just a farce. If the men were warm and had a pulse they were given a fit-for-duty classification. Here on Naator we get the full treatment, an examination right down to the bones. I traced down their leading physicians and was able to read their thoughts."

"Down to the *bones*?!" whispered Bell, suddenly aghast. He saw his fears reflected in Rhodan's eyes. Even the skill of their plastic surgeons and camouflage experts would not shield them now from discovery.

Marshall continued: "But that's not all. I was able to learn that these examinations are not based alone on medical grounds. In fact their sole secret purpose is to neutralize any penetration of disguised espionage agents into Arkon. They are alert to the possibility that Earth agents have been able to change themselves into members of other races by plastic surgery and other means. They are thinking that there may be such agents among the enlisted Zalites."

Rhodan had momentarily forgotten to breathe but now he let out a big sigh. "So they have suspected exactly what's happened... amazing! And now what?"

"Unfortunately that's still not the end of it," said Marshall and he continued with his discouraging report. "The examining physicians are exclusively Aras!"

This time everybody was struck dumb for the moment.

Of all times it would have to be the Aras who were getting their fingers into the action again. They not only knew Earthmen, they hated them like the plague. It had been Rhodan who once ruined their

profitable monopoly in the galactic medical business. They were fully familiar with the skeletal structure of Terrans. The first X-ray would blow the whole masquerade.

Finally, Rhodan found his voice. "Well, what now, friends? Does anybody see any way out? I don't believe that we can avoid the examinations—that would immediately raise suspicions. So we have to face up to the Aras and we have to get through it somehow. To be frank with you, at the moment I'm at a loss."

Gorlat made a suggestion: "Best thing we can do is to run through all the angles and possibilities. If everybody will express his ideas we can work out a common plan. So the objective here is to deceive these Ara medicos. What can we do besides putting Noir onto the job?"

Bell shook his head. "Noir is an excellent hypno but he doesn't have enough time, by tomorrow, to work on a dozen or more Aras and put them under a mind-block. I'd say maybe Ras Tschubai should jump into their midst and put them out of action."

"Rhodan objected. "We couldn't make a greater mistake than trying something like that. But anyway, Bell, you've given me an idea. Ras and Noir together might make a team who could accelerate things. Under such a situation the hypno-block operation might be pulled off in time."

Gorlat beamed. "See now what I mean about pooling our ideas? Out of two separate ideas that were unusable by themselves we've put a new one together that is entirely applicable. Just a few details and we've got ourselves a war plan. For example, how would it be if we were to divert this Admiral Semekho's attention from his main task so that he wouldn't have time to worry about the Zalites—including us?"

"And how do you figure you're going to do that?" asked Rhodan.

Gorlat smiled. "Son Okura is able to see as well at night as he can in the daytime. If he works with Ras Tschubai the two of them will be like shadows—fast, invisible and dangerous. They could pull off some kind of sabotage that would make it look like the work of the Naats."

"Just a minute now!" exclaimed Rhodan shaking his head. "I think that would be overshooting the target. It isn't our purpose to agitate things here on Naator we're trying to get to Arkon. Of course I will admit that a straight line isn't always the shortest route to a goal Our most immediate and urgent task is to put the squeeze on the Aras—and in such a manner that they themselves will not be aware of it. Not to mention the others, naturally."

Marshall was forced to upset the apple cart. "In just one night it's not possible for a complete hypnoblack because I can't trace all of them down all at once. So maybe it would be good if we could gain time. Gorlat might not be so far off the track with his idea about keeping Semekho busy with other distractions."

By the time Atlan returned 2 hours later the plan had been studied through coordinated and finally completed. All they had to do was brief him on what they had decided.

* * * *

Son Okura had a delicate build and a slight limp. When he was changed into a Zalite this had to be taken into consideration but the alteration had succeeded so well that no one could tell him from a genuine inhabitant of Tagnor. Capable of a so-called wide-band vision, he could recognize any object in absolute darkness. Even the infrared range was completely within his scope of vision. He could detect the heat imprint of objects removed from a place hours before.

From a physical standpoint teleporter Ras Tschubai was the exact opposite of Okura. His mighty frame was like that of the Naats, except that the African naturally had only two eyes instead of three.

These two mutants comprised the first commando team that was to go into action as night fell.

Ras knew that it was very risky to make a jump into unknown territory. If he had been by himself he would have worried less about it but he also had the Japanese mutant with him. Of course, even with this extra load it would only take him a few seconds to dematerialise again in case he should have to escape quickly from some threatening danger. But Rhodan had drilled it into him that he was not to arouse the slightest suspicion. Nobody must get the idea that there were teleporters loose on the satellite.

"Ready!" said Son Okura as he grasped the African's hand.

Ras Tschubai concentrated on making a short jump that was to take him in the direction of the administration buildings and supply depot. He did not know his immediate target area but that didn't stop him. He simply 'envisioned' it.

When they materialized, at first Ras Tschubai could not see a thing. The stars shone as brightly as ever but in contrast to the light from the troop buildings they were dark.

"Good shot!" murmured Okura, whose eyes had made an immediate adjustment. "We're fairly close to the first of the buildings. There's a guard on patrol over to the right—a Zalite. They've already assigned recruits to sentinel duty.

"You going to go around him?"

"We'll make a direct jump into the area in front of us. You know what we're looking for?"

In the darkness Ras could not see Okura nodding in response. He jumped again.

This time it was totally dark and the stars were absent.

"Where are we?" asked the teleporter.

"We're inside a warehouse that contains military supplies. Uniforms, as far as I can make out. Over there behind them are lightweight space suits, all stacked away neatly on shelves."

"That's good to know in case we get too cold but just now we're looking for something else, Okura. Let's go."

The Japanese led Ras through the darkness, progressing with such confidence and certainty that it was short of uncanny. But the African trusted the mutant's special vision. He knew he didn't have to fear stumbling over some object or bumping his head against the wall.

"Here's a door—ah, it isn't locked." They went farther. "This is a corridor with doors everywhere. Which one should we try?"

Ras did not answer him. He had heard a noise farther up ahead. Footsteps! Someone was approaching them. But the sound of the steps indicated that the unknown person ahead was tired. His feet fairly shuffled along the floor.

"A guards!" whispered Ras. "Can't be a robot, maybe a Zalite. Quick, through the next door!"

It was sheer coincidence but whenever they tried to explain it that way later their assurances were taken for modesty. When they came into the room beyond the door and Okura let out a gasp of astonishment, Ras knew they had entered something more than a clothing storeroom.

"Weapons!" whispered Okura. "Hand grenades, rayguns, small time bombs—a rebel's Paradise!"

"And that's what we'll make out of Naator Ras whispered back, happily. "How come they didn't have this door locked?"

"The main entrance is impassable, Ras. Energy field. Nobody can leave this building. Even the guard is locked in."

Which of course explained it all.

Outside they could hear the watchman's footsteps but they were soon gone.

"Dam it all!" complained Ras. "Why can't I see anything in here?"

"Because it's dark," was Okura's not overly profound explanation. Then he laughed softly. "But it would sure warm the cockles of your heart, Ras, if you could see what I see. Exactly what the doctor ordered. We're so lucky it's shameful!"

"Great! So let's get a move on. We can bring a good supply of this stuff into our quarters so we can operate from there. Three or four jumps should do it."

* * * *

One hour later Ras teleported into the base hospital with Okura and the hypno-mutant André Noir and promised to pick them up again in exactly two hours. Although laden with a beautiful assortment of mini-time bombs, some hand grenades and an energy beamer, he vanished before their eyes. Now they were able to build up their reserve supplies of all the weapons and sabotage gear that could be fitted inconspicuously into their uniforms or small field kits, in preparation for their mission on Arkon itself.

Noir was not very tall and had a pleasant appearance as a Terranian. As a Zalite he seemed more sinister and was not very trustworthy looking. However, his disguise had in no way impaired his special faculty of being able to subject alien intelligences to his will.

"The Aras are farther up ahead," he whispered and pointed into the dim darkness of the corridor. "I can

sense their thought emanations. They're asleep."

"Do you think you could pick out the head doctor among them, André?"

"I doubt it, Okura. They are sleeping—and in dreams every man is chief."

The Japanese grinned and started forward. "Then we'll take them one at a time. Here's the first door already."

Since the hospital—if such it could be designated—was also sealed off from the outside world by a curtain of energy, the inside doors were unlocked. When the two men stepped into the first room, only the Japanese could see what was in it.

Under the window in a corner was a bed, in which a man lay sleeping. To one side was a chest of drawers. Over the chair by the desk hung a few articles of clothing topped by a white smock, which was the typical professional mark of the active Ara physician.

Noir's eyes gradually became accustomed to the soft darkness. The window did not have curtains or drapes so that the starlight could come in unhindered. The man in the bed was unusually tall and shockingly thin. His face appeared sunken and ill but Noir knew that here the appearances were deceiving. The Ara before him was completely healthy.

Noir put his powers to work. Guardedly he probed into the Ara's slumbering consciousness and took possession of it. Since no resistance was encountered, his success was quick and easy. Then he awakened the man...

"What is your name?" The hypno asked the question softly but forcefully. The doctor's wide-open eyes stared at him at first almost in challenge but then they became dull and almost listless.

"Renol."

"Do you belong to the medical group that examines the recruits? Where is the head physician?"

"We examine the recruits. Chief Physician is Koris. He is a few rooms away from mine."

Noir was exultant. This was going better than he had expected. "You will get up now and come along with us. If we meet anybody on the way you will find an excuse for our being with you. You will obey all of my commands. You will receive further instructions according to the need and the situation. Show us the examination rooms.

The Ara got up mechanically and dressed himself. His movements were slow but regular and normal. He suspected nothing of the danger he was involved in. In the morning he would have forgotten everything.

They left the room and permitted Renol to lead the way. They passed through a normal-looking operation room and finally arrived in a wide hall which had been divided into a series of booths by thin partitions. In these booths were strange apparatuses, the purpose of which was not clear to Noir at first. However, when he gave a command to the Ara the latter began to explain.

Noir experienced a shock of fright when he saw the kind of trap they might have fallen into. Confronted by the instruments and machines located here, no Earthman would get through the inspections without discovery. In fact any individual who was not a Zalite would be unmasked.

The hypno was especially interested in the IQ tester. In outward appearance the apparatus consisted of a chair and a hood for the head, a few conductor cables and a positronic analyser. All the person being tested had to do was to merely sit down and the rest was taken care of by computer automation. The results of the test were then stored in a memory bank for data retrieval when required.

Noir knew that all Terrans—certainly those in Rhodan's combat commando team—had a higher IQ than that of the Zalites. Even if all other facets of the recruit examination were to have been innocuous, just this one operation would prove fatal for the specialized Earthman group. Their higher level responses would betray them.

"Who runs the IQ tests here, Renol?"

"Koris himself," came the answer.

The whole tour of the place required much time. Two hours later when they had returned Renol to his room, Ras failed to make his promised reappearance. They waited another half hour for him but when the teleporter did not appear they became uneasy. Without him they were locked in, unless Renol had a key for deactivating the energy curtain. But the possibility of that was practically nil because Noir had learned that the energy barriers were controlled from a central station somewhere outside the hospital and could only be shut off by Semekho's order.

Another 10 minutes went by.

"You wait here, Okura. While we're waiting around I'm going to give this Koris character the treatment. If we have the head sawbones on our side maybe we can get somewhere. I know where his room is."

Noir could see well enough to find his way without help from his Japanese companion. The door was unlocked so he stepped into the semi-darkness of the room. In the background he made out the outlines of the bed. The window was wide open and the curtain was fluttering lightly in the breeze.

Something alerted Noir to danger here. Before he realized that it was the thought emanations from the Ara, the latter spoke to him in threatening tones. "Whatever you may be after or whoever you may be—don't move. The muzzle of an energy pistol is aimed right at you. Now turn around slowly and put the light on. The switch is at shoulder level next to the door."

At the moment Noir realized he had no alternative other than to obey. Just now the Ara was far too active mentally to be brought under control so easily. Perhaps later...

The light came on. Noir saw that the Ara had not been bluffing. Of course he still lay in bed under the covers but the outlines of a heavy beamer were unmistakable. The muzzle was pointing directly at him.

"Answer, my friend," said Dr. Koris softly but in his calm voice was the certainty of self-confidence. "To what do I owe the honour of this night time visit?"

"May I ask you something first?" asked Noir, fighting for time. "How did you know I was coming here?"

The Ara sneered and laughed soundlessly. "I am the Chief Medical Officer on Naator," he replied promptly but the tone of his voice revealed the real reason for his willingness to comply. He was simply conceited. "I enjoy the full trust and confidence of Admiral Semekho—which is notable in view of the fact that the Arkonides are a suspicious lot. They trust no one. Not even their friends and allies, the Aras.

This is why I was given the little task of watching even my own physicians. There are direct audio pickups connecting my room with the other rooms occupied by the medical team members. When you visited Renol I was awakened. Thus I found out that Renol is a traitor since he revealed my name to you. This also alerted me to the strong possibility that I would be receiving a visit from you at some time during the night." His voice suddenly changed, becoming sharp and commanding. "But enough of your evasions now! Who are you. What do you want here?"

"Who am I...? Don't you recognize me?"

"A Zalite—I can see that! How did you get in here? The energy screens..."

Noir sent out a probe and sought to penetrate his opponent's consciousness. But the man was on the defensive. The slightest wrong reaction could cause him to press the trigger of his weapon.

"I managed to hide in here during today's examinations, Koris, and I waited for nightfall. To be honest about it, I don't intend to serve in the Regent's spacefleet. I wanted to falsify the records of my examination so that I would be sent back to Zalit."

Noir thought that the shock of his revelation was going to cause the Ara to lose control of his trigger finger. He felt a tingling sensation in the pit of his stomach which was just about the spot at which the energy beamer was aimed. Or was that actually a weapon under those covers...?

"You have attempted the impossible," said the chief physician with a note of irony. "The computers cannot be deceived. I'll have to call the guard and have you turned over to the robots." He threw back the cover and stood up. Noir saw that his hope of the moment was false. In Koris' hand was an actual weapon—a heavy energy pistol. The Ara had not been bluffing. "If you still have anything to say to me you'd better say it now. Later you won't get the chance."

Noir began to realize that his situation was anything but rosy. Outside in the corridor somewhere, Son Okura was waiting for Ras. But the teleporter hadn't shown up; perhaps he had also strayed into a trap of some kind. If they were to be cross-examined with the help of those psycho-detectors, Rhodan's plan would be wrecked. Deprived of their wills, they would simply blab out everything.

"You will not alert the guard!" said Noir decisively. "I shall prevent you from doing so." He tried again to gain control of the Ara's mind but the latter put up an unconscious resistance, instinctively fighting back with all the power he possessed. Noir knew that only a lightning manoeuvre of some kind could succeed—a shock of surprise, perhaps, that would startle the Ara to where he would let down his guard, if only for a second. "Or do you think," he said, "that I would have come to your room unarmed?"

"I don't see any weapon on you," retorted Koris.

"There are invisible weapons. If you were at this moment in the main examination chamber, you would know what I mean. The memory banks there happen to contain the readings of your own psycho-medical analysis—wouldn't you say?"

The chief physician threw on his white smock. He had not permitted himself to be influenced in the slightest by Noir's ruse. "Let's just have a look," he suggested, and he forced the hypno to turn around. At the same time he pressed the muzzle of the pistol into the mutant's back. "And may the gods have pity on you if any thing there has been tampered with! In that case you'd be very happy to be turned over to the guard—but that I will not do. You will die—and in the process you will curse the fact that you were ever born!"

Noir held back.

"Get going, Zalite!"

Noir stepped out into the corridor.

* * * *

Ras Tschubai's extra load deprived him of the mobility he would have preferred. When he materialized he did not move until his eyes had accustomed themselves to the dark. Under his feet he felt a vibration. He could make out the sound of transformers humming and the faint throbbing of other machinery.

He stood in a wide chamber which he estimated to be somewhere under the ground level. But farther below were other installations as was indicated by the rumble of the generators. Here was the central power station of the base. In view of the fact that the place was absolutely closed off from the outside, it was actually a complete impossibility for unauthorized persons or saboteurs to penetrate to this point. But Ras was determined to present the Arkonides with a riddle. Let them rack their brains over the question of whether their security installations were intact or simply inadequate.

The wall-mounted light sources emitted only a dim illumination. Ras could hardly make out the mighty shadows of metallic blocks of machinery and equipment or the narrow passages that led between them. Heavy cable conductors led to crackling and buzzing insulators from which point various distribution lines reached off somewhere into the darkness.

Ras moved farther into the maze of machinery and found one installation that appeared to be vital. To one side he discovered a small recess that was suitable for his purpose. He reached into his pocket and drew out an egg-shaped object. Carefully he groped with his finger until he located the timer key, which he depressed 3 times. This set the detonation for 3 hours hence.

He placed the bomb in the small recess in the face of the machine and hoped that it would do enough damage to knock it out of commission. At the same time he hoped that the wreckage wouldn't be of such major proportions as to turn the suspicions of the Arkonides and the robots in the wrong direction. The Naats were not capable of any large-scale action. Two pieces of sabotage in this particular installation would be sufficient. However, if another detonation 'were to occur at the same time and at some distance, the enemy wouldn't necessarily look for the perpetrator here in the camp.

Ras planted a second time bomb and then teleported himself outside to the surface. He materialized directly before the unblinking eye lenses of a ponderous robot whose energy weapons rose automatically to aim directly at the African's midsection.

* * * *

Son Okura pressed himself against the wall as he saw the door open through which Noir had disappeared. As his friend stepped into the hallway he was just about to run forward to him with a cry of relief on his lips when he noticed the weapon muzzle pressed into the hypno's back.

The Japanese mutant ducked into a shallow recess afforded by another doorway and it was just in time because at the same moment the lights came on. Now the Ara who was threatening Noir became visible. How the latter had escaped Noir's hypnotic control was puzzling to Okura. At any rate, from now on he must not let the two men get out of his sight.

And Ras Tschubai? What would happen if he suddenly returned to take them back?

Okura did not have much time to contemplate this possibility. If he didn't want to leave Noir in the lurch he would have to hurry. He stealthily trailed the two. The way was familiar to him.

They were headed for the main operation and examining hall!

But the cards were turned around here. The trumps were in the wrong hands. It would take a careful play now to get the advantage again. Okura's hand slipped into his pocket. It was lucky that Ras had left him one of the small mini-beamers. Although the weapon only held two charges, in a pinch that would be enough to handle a dozen opponents.

So far, however, there was only one opponent.

Who of course was making life a bit difficult for Noir. The unpleasant pressure of the weapon in his back was not particularly amusing. He kept on trying to find a weak spot in the Ara's consciousness but Koris was unusually resistive as though he had received some kind of special hypno-schooling. As Chief Medical officer of the Naator base, such a possibility could not be discounted.

They walked through the operation room and finally entered the place where the booths were, and the psychodetector machines. A modern torture chamber, Noir thought fleetingly.

The Ara medico came to a stop and ordered Noir to tell him, once and for all, what he had been up to. He appeared to be suddenly aware that he was not dealing with an ordinary AWOL or petty gripe case. Had something warned him?

"Let's have it, traitor! What are you really trying to do? Were you going to murder me? And if so, why? What would you gain by that?"

Noir tried one last thrust with his mind and will. He turned on all his power in an attempt to break through the screen that enveloped Koris' brain. It was useless! The Ara already had a hypno-block! And naturally it was one of Arkonide origin. Only some kind of shock could break it down.

"Look out, Noir! Duck!"

The voice seemed to come out of nowhere. Koris stiffened with alarm because he did not understand the language spoken. Yet this was not the main reason for his shock. It was of much greater concern to him that he was probably faced with two assassins. As he turned around he momentarily forgot Noir.

Noir recognized Okura's voice and instantly took his advice. He threw himself to the floor at an angle and rolled under a partition into the adjacent booth. He closed his eyes against the energy flash that came from the doorway and hit the overhead light. Koris had only turned on this one lamp, and now with one

stroke it was pitch dark.

"Throw me your weapon!" yelled Okura while instantly changing his position. Koris' beamer shot missed him by a good 3 meters. "It won't work, Koris—I can see you! I'm not kidding! No bluff! Why did you just now close your eyes—maybe to hear me better?"

Noir heard the Ara gasp aloud. "How is that possible? It's completely dark in here. You're lying...!"

"You think so? Right now, for example, you're aiming your pistol in exactly the wrong direction. That cabinet by the door makes an acoustic deflection, so it fools you as to the direction of my voice. All right—now you're aiming to the left—wrong again! But now maybe you at least believe me. I can see you!"

"Who are you?" Koris asked, apparently having forgotten Noir entirely.

And that was his mistake.

Noir sensed a lowering of his mental resistance and made a thrust. The Ara's brain literally lay open before him and all he had to do was dig in. Okura was occupying Koris with a problem he didn't seem able to solve. Even the Arkonide hypno-block meant nothing now as Noir struck home with all his force and brought the Ara under his mental control.

* * * *

Ras Tschubai reacted instantly and teleported into the darkness. When he was able to see again he saw the robot not 30 meters away, staring at the empty spot where he had just observed a Zalite.

Ras thought hastily: if he were to knock out a robot right here in the middle of the camp, that would really cause some brains to rattle. Besides, the fighter machine had to be destroyed. If it reported what it had seen...

Ras reached into one of the spacious pockets of his Zalite cloak and pulled out a small grenade. He knew the thing could be made to explode within 2 seconds. It was only necessary to press the main release button and then get to safety as fast as possible.

The robot turned ponderously around. It may have heard a suspicious sound. Ras ducked when the blinding beam of a searchlight illumined the night. The light emanated from the brow of the colossus. At the same time the thing's weapon ring began to rotate.

Ras took the grenade in his right hand, depressed the firing button, and threw it.

There are circumstances where two seconds can be a very long time. To Ras, they seemed like an eternity. He had refrained from teleporting to safety because he wasn't sure at the moment he could do it. When he made his throw he also made a giant leap sideways into a ground depression that offered him shelter.

Even as he fell into the declivity the energy weapons of the robot were unleashed. The brilliant fingers of

death shot by so closely that he could feel the heat from them. But the robot had aimed too high. Its ravaging salvo dissipated itself in the atmosphere.

The grenade fell directly at the robot's feet. Ras could see it plainly. He ducked as low as he could into the depression, the original purpose of which escaped him. In any case it was man-made and was probably a drainage ditch.

The blast of the detonation was accompanied by a jet of flame, to be followed by a shockwave that swept over Ras' bowed back. Then came a violent percussion that shook the ground.

After that there was a deathly silence.

Cautiously, the teleporter raised up. After this commotion it would only be a few seconds before all hell broke loose. Among other things, all combat robots were in radio communication with one another.

In the place where the monster had stood was a crater. Smouldering metal fragments were strewn about as though a plane had crashed there. Of the robot itself there was not much to be seen.

Somewhere the mournful howl of sirens started up. The thunder of heavy robot feet began to shake the ground. A loudspeaker roared out sharp commands. Searchlights flamed alive and bathed the area with brilliant light.

Ras Tschubai realized that he had to disappear. Yet he also knew that if anyone saw him in the act of teleporting it would place the whole commando team in the greatest danger. If the Regent were to have the slightest hint of any paranormal trickery here, his suspicions would immediately focus upon Rhodan and his Mutant Corps.

The first wave of combat robots had swarmed into view and was coming toward the crater just as Ras dematerialised and jumped back into the hospital.

The first thing he saw was that the corridor was lighted and that Son Okura was creeping along it with every indication of extreme caution.

Without second thoughts, Ras simply followed him.

4/ TO HAIL WITH THE REGENT

Next morning the troops in the cone-shaped barracks building were awakened by a reveille siren. Soon thereafter, robot 574 announced the orders of the day in the billet where Rhodan and his men were located there was a deathly silence. Everybody waited tensely, wondering if the mutant action during the night had made an impact by now.

At first they heard a succession of routine instructions which were obviously the normal type for the start of daily operations—but then the metallic voice from the speaker announced:

"Medical examinations scheduled for today are hereby rescheduled for tomorrow. No personnel will

leave the building. After lunch the first instructions in weapons theory and ordnance applications will begin. Supper schedule: no change."

Ras Tschubai appeared to be quite satisfied with this development. When the P.A. became silent he looked at Rhodan triumphantly. "You see, sir? I was right! Those two demolition bombs in the power plant and knocking-out that robot was enough to start them scrambling. They have something else to think about now."

"But only one day of delay isn't enough," Rhodan replied. "So far there are only two Aras under Noir's control. As long as they're not all psyched over to him we still have to face the possibility of discovery."

Noir interjected: "But I'm familiar with the layout now. Tonight all I need is to go there with Ras and I know we'll finish the job."

"I hope so." The furrows on Rhodan's brow remained, however. "I think it'd be a good idea for us to be briefed on what's happening outside." He turned to Atlan, who had been quietly sitting on his bed and staring at the wall. "Would you do me the favour of fetching Tanaka Seiko from his billet?"

Seiko was the signal tracer of the Mutant Corps. Not only was his brain capable of picking up radio waves and locating their transmission point, he was also able to 'hear' them. In other words: the mutant did not need a receiver to intercept radio messages. He seemed to have a built-in tuning and detection circuit.

Atlan got up and left the room.

Bell moved closer to Rhodan. "Are you trying to say that their com traffic wouldn't be coded?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Among themselves the robots never use code. And even if they did, it shouldn't be hard for us to decipher it. In any case we have to find out what the action is now at the base in order to plan accordingly. You must never forget that we are sitting in the dead centre of a nice big trap. If the Arkonides catch us, we're not the only ones who will go down the tubes. It would be tantamount to the destruction of the Earth. Even though the outer war may have died down somewhat, the Druuf danger isn't over with yet. Still, there's been a slight letup and that gives the Regent some time now to dedicate himself to Terra. As you can see, he's moving in with the absolute consistency of a positronic brain! Let's take that literally and remember it. Only then do we have a chance because it'll keep us on our toes."

Atlan came back with the Japanese mutant. Tanaka Seiko was slender almost to the point of delicacy. A reddish scar marred the appearance of his left cheek, in spite of his Zalite makeup. His oriental eyes had been disguised and his red skin colour made him look like an Indian.

"If anybody's interested," said Atlan, "I'm hungry." He sat down on his bed again. Although he seemed to have no more important problem on his mind, those who knew him were well aware of his alertness to the situation. It was in the nature of the undying Arkonide to gloss over heavy concerns with mundane superficialities.

Rhodan smiled knowingly as he turned to Seiko. "We'd be interested in knowing what the Arkonides intend to do now. The main thing right now is, we want to know who they suspect was behind the sabotage in the power plant. What we do from here on in will depend on that."

"I'll be happy to tell you, sir," answered Seiko diffidently. "Where may I sit down?"

Bell indicated a bed that was directly under a window. "You can take my cot, Tanaka—you'll be undisturbed there. And if you hear anything on the wavebands let us know."

"Oh, I'm always hearing something," the mutant assured him with a faint smile. "Admiral Semekho has just put all security and combat robots on top alert. He wants every Naat who is in the restricted area to be picked up—"

"Exactly what we wanted to hear!" Rhodan broke in swiftly. He looked at Ras Tschubai. "It appears that your guess is correct. Semekho thinks it was the Naats who did it. The poor 3-eyes are to be pitied but we can't fool around. OK, Seiko, go on! What does the Admiral plan to do?"

The Japanese smiled gently. "It doesn't work that fast, sir. I require time to sort out the transmissions I have received and to process them in my mind. I believe that in about an hour I will be able to tell you more..."

They gave him clear up till noon and by then he had rounded out the picture. The situation was somewhat as follows:

Admiral Semekho was thoroughly convinced that the Naats were behind the sabotage. Only one year before, Earth time, a revolt on the 5th planet had been suppressed. The triclopes had been up in arms against the Ara practice of using specimens of their race for their scientific experiments.

Naats were also residing on Naator. They were used for cheap labour and also functioned as servants of the Arkonide teaching staff that was in residence on the satellite. Semekho had just given orders to have all triclopes moved out of the restricted area. He based his action on the theory that no further acts of sabotage would occur if the Naats were unable to get near the vital installations. From this it was clearly evident that he considered the indigenous race to be the perpetrators of this violence.

"Rhodan learned further that the balance of this day would be devoted to carrying out the new regulations and clearing the Naats from the area. Starting on the next day the regular schedules would be continued.

This meant that Rhodan had just 20 hours in which to either create a new diversion or bring all Aras under hypnotic control. For they alone constituted the only acute danger.

After noon mess call, the 1000 recruits assembled in the big hall on the ground floor. The robot conducted the lecture session. They were told things that they had long since learned about—at least where Rhodan's group was concerned. The robot outlined the beginnings of the Imperium and traced its rise to the present state of its might and power. The dark periods, difficulties and defeat of that long history were neatly omitted—not one word. And finally he emphasized that Arkon owed its present strength to the fact that it had excellent weapons and fighting forces at its disposal. The improvement of these two factors was supposed to be the main purpose and assignment of the Military Academy on Naator into which the new 'volunteers' were heartily welcomed in the name of the Regent.

Bell was standing close to Rhodan since there were no seats available. "If I had my druthers I'd like to put a cord in that thing's mouth," he muttered bitterly. "I haven't heard such a bunch of lies all in one place since my last talk with Pucky!"

"Lies are all a part of propaganda," returned Rhodan in an equally low tone. "But keep it down, will you? Some of the Zalites are looking at us!"

The hours passed. The long period of standing became uncomfortable but of course the robot could not sense this. It delivered its 'gospel' of dogma and finally signalled that the lecture had come to an end.

The recruits retired to their quarters and the evening meal was distributed.

When it was dark outside, Rhodan called for his two teleporters, Ras Tschubai and Tako Kakuta. Other than services performed back on Zalit, the Japanese had not yet been put into action but present circumstances demanded that he too would now have to make a contribution toward the success of their plan.

Rhodan looked at Ras as he spoke. "You have a rough night ahead of you. Since Admiral Semekho has barred all Naats from entering the restricted area, there's only one way to keep making them look guilty for further sabotage. You'll have to expand your activity to objectives which lie outside the Academy zone. Tonight I want to see bombs going off everywhere on this whole satellite, along with a proportionate amount of destruction. I want the whole Arkonide security system to concentrate on apprehending the saboteurs. I believe that will allow time for Noir to bring the whole bunch of Aras under his control—which has to be done if we're not going to attract attention during the medical examinations. The sudden restlessness among the 'natives' should keep the Arkonides busy. It ought to make them relax their watchfulness over us while they're looking for their opponents elsewhere."

"We can do it," Ras assured him while he gingerly passed a hand over the blanket on his bed. Underneath it lay a fair-sized arsenal. "With this gear here we'll blow up half of this moon!"

"Rhodan cautioned him: "Just don't overdo it, Ras! Naturally the Naats themselves could possibly get hold of bombs and hand grenades but they'd probably do a very primitive job with them. The Naats aren't very intelligent, even though the Regent gave them a few commissions in the spacefleet before their rebellion. So take care that you detonate a few bombs uselessly, that is in non-vital areas where they can't do any damage. Semekho's suspicions must only be aimed at the Naats and nowhere else. You can guarantee that automatically if sabotage acts occur on the other side of the moon—that is, on the dayside. No one man can be in two places at once.

"Except a teleporter," interjected Ras.

"*Almost* at once, even for him," retorted Rhodan, and he smiled thoughtfully. It was another way of saying that the briefing was at an end.

André Noir also received his final instructions and bits of advice. Ras was to teleport him into the hospital along with Son Okura and come back for them before dawn. During that time the hypno and the signal tracer were to be left to their own resources. But this would not be quite as dangerous as before because Chief Physician Koris and his subordinate medico Renol had already been subjected to an extensive hypnotic treatment, so that now they were allies although they didn't know it.

Half an hour after the briefings, Ras made his jump with Noir and Okura. Returning within 30 seconds, he took hold of Tako Kakuta's hand, who was to be his companion in crime this night. They made the first jump together. Each of them carried a package containing 2 dozen grenades and time bombs. Within one hour before dawn, all of them were to be detonated.

Somewhere on the satellite known as Naator...

* * * *

It was mainly to Tanaka Seiko's credit that "Rhodan was kept informed as to the success of the operation and was advised concerning counter-measures taken by the Arkonides. The mutant monitored radio messages all night long.

Once more, Admiral Semekho was awakened in the night. Alarms shrilled through the Academy compound when a time bomb exploded 20 kilometres away in a spare parts warehouse. The area was sealed off immediately and the few Naats residing in that vicinity were arrested. Ten minutes later they were set free when a second explosion occurred.

Semekho's suspicions were being strengthened to the effect that the passive resistance of the natives was stiffening. For this reason he gave the Naats their liberty in the hopes that they would mark a trail to their ringleaders.

Almost at the same time, however, he received alarming dispatches from the other side of the moon. Two heavy-class combat robots were shot down in ambush. Nothing like this had ever happened before on Naator. This was open rebellion! Semekho immediately got in touch with the Regent and requested permission for a broader scope of action against the native people. The Regent ordered him to arrest every Naat who had any kind of suspicious record.

In that very same night, robots broke into the living quarters of the unsuspecting triclopes and took them to a central detention camp. The action came so swiftly that only a few of the Naats were able to escape into the almost inaccessible wilderness of the moon where they went into hiding.

In spite of the arrests the wave of sabotage continued. Everywhere the time bombs were more or less well placed and they caused rather grievous damage. A number of relay stations for wireless transmission of power were put out of commission. A total of 7 more combat robots and two robot tanks were also destroyed. In not a single case had any witness of such encounters survived.

Admiral Semekho lost control of himself and flew into a rage. He kept in constant contact with the Academy's radio station, receiving the news of each calamity and issuing further orders. Meanwhile he also made reports to Arkon and asked for instructions. Although he had of course arrested the majority of the Naats he was Sure that the actual rebels had escaped his grasp.

Just so the new recruits from Zalit did not find out about what was going on! This thought led to an early morning order which had come from the Regent:

Examination and training of the fighting forces would be suspended for three days!

* * * *

When Tanaka Seiko picked up these instructions issued by Admiral Semekho the next morning and transmitted them to Rhodan, a big sigh of relief went through the ranks of those who heard him.

They had achieved their objective.

Shortly thereafter, Ras brought Noir and Okura back. The two had succeeded in bringing another five Aras under hypnotic control. The rest of the medicos could be processed during the coming night. The third night was reserved for the medico-psychological monitoring instruments. But for Rhodan it was enough to know that Koris would be under a hypno-block during the exams. He had a special plan whereby one of his technicians was to 'doctor' the IQ testers beforehand.

Three days and three nights went by. The sabotage activities suddenly ceased.

When on the fourth day robot 574 gave the order for everybody to line up outside the cone-shaped building in rows of five, and when the whole normal schedule of the Academy came back into operation, Rhodan and his Terrans were ready.

They had done everything necessary to prevent any discovery by the Aras. In a quite calm and collected fashion they marched with the first group to the hospital. At the entrance an Arkonide officer took charge of them and sent robot 574 back to his post. But even though this Arkonide was an unforeseen element in their program he no longer constituted a threat to them. John Marshall scanned his thoughts and was able to determine that the man suspected nothing.

They were admitted in groups of 10 and at one minute intervals. The quickness of handling was due to the technical perfection involved, so that the examinations went along as though the whole thing were a conveyor belt on an assembly line. Lower rank Aras of no significance guided the group meanwhile from one examination room to another.

Noir was well satisfied with the work he had done to pave the way. Whenever he entered one of these rooms, all he had to do was give a certain keyword or signal to the doctor in charge. He could be sure that the Ara would then carry out his post-hypnotic command—at least where the 150 camouflaged Earthmen were concerned. It had been arranged that the windup man at the end of the group would be Bell and he was to give the second keyword. Which would cause each Ara to carry on normally again.

Rhodan was in the first unit of men going through. With him were Noir, Atlan, Marshall and Gorlat. If everything went smoothly with them it would be a guarantee that it would also go smoothly for the following 14 units of 10 men each.

"Hail to the Regent!" said André Noir. After about two hours of processing they had reached the big room where Koris was in charge of the tests.

The Chief Physician looked up and met the hypno's gaze. A curious glint leapt to his eyes but only for a second or two. Then the Ara's expression went blank. "Hail to the Regent!" he responded, while giving a signal to his assistant.

But that was superfluous since Noir had also brought the assistant medico under his control.

What next occurred in the medical centre on Naator was nothing but a farce, as it certainly would have appeared had any pickup cameras or microphones been handy.

The IQ tester functioned 'perfectly'. Only one intelligence quotient was higher than that of Rhodan or the other Terranians, and that was Atlan's—now disguised as Captain Ighur—which made the reading stand out considerably above the average Zalite, of course. Yet even so it was unlikely to arouse suspicion and

Atlan did not have to fear any re-examination—the reason being that since he was an actual Arkonide he had all the internal physical characteristics of a Zalite, even to the bone structure.

The computer registers collected all the examination results, which were to be evaluated by the Arkonide medicos and acted upon accordingly.

It was close to noon by the time the first group was able to leave the hospital and march back to the barracks. One minute later the next group of 10 men followed.

When the examination by Koris had ended for Bell's group, he said: "Hail to the Regent!" While he and his 9 companions were being led out of the room by an Ara and guided toward the exit of the hospital, this key signal was having its effect. The hypno-block that Noir had placed in Koris' brain became neutralized. His normal thinking processes returned to him but were coupled with a pre-planted false memory.

This happened not only to Koris but to all the other medicos as well.

It was the noon break. They had examined 1000 recruits. By order of the Admiral they had gone more slowly and carefully than usual. Normally they would have processed at least 1500 men during a morning run.

Yet they had encountered nothing extraordinary or suspicious.

The Ara, Koris, shrugged his shoulders as he left the examining room to go back to his own quarters. After lunch the work would begin again. Monotonously unchanged as always.

What unexpected or unusual thing was he supposed to look for? What could go wrong...?

This was something that Rhodan also asked himself as he learned from Bell that the final group had passed the tests successfully. Now the most difficult part of 'Operation Troy' lay behind them. There was hardly any more fear of being discovered.

To this extent Rhodan was correct but at the moment, he had failed to include another factor in his considerations. He was reminded of it when he heard the faint buzzing of the tiny hypercom receiver that was concealed in his ear. A certain finger-pressure enabled Rhodan to turn on the apparatus, which also put out a confirming signal that he was ready to receive. Contact with Maj. Rosberg was established.

"Forward station V-4 reporting, sir, something terrible has happened here..."

Rhodan's voice was brittle: "Give me the report."

And Maj. Rosberg reported...

5/ RIGHT ADDRESS, WRONG MAN

By the time they approached Tagnor the sandstorm had abated.

Over the desert a clear sky was visible once more. The red sun of the Voga System continued its unrelenting pace toward the western horizon but Murgo gave assurances that they would still reach the capital before dark. Isolated aircraft went by at great altitudes but none came lower or attempted to land.

"Do you think maybe they won't stop us for inspection?" asked Rhog, daring to hope.

But the bearded caravan leader shook his head. "We shouldn't count on it," he replied. "Nobody gets in or out of Tagnor without going through a checkpoint. Road blocks and cordons everywhere—and the actual main control point lies ahead of us."

They fell into silence and stared straight ahead at the lowering sun. Just beyond the near horizon lay Tagnor. No one without a clear conscience ventured into Tagnor but there was not one of the eleven Zalites in the caravan who didn't have something to hide.

The outlines of the city slowly emerged from the desert. On their left they began to make out the spaceport and its installations. They saw the silhouettes of spherical spacers as well as the slender merchant ships of the Zalites. Standing nearby were several cruisers.

"Now it gets critical," muttered Murgo, pointing ahead.

In the waning light Rhog recognized the familiar reflections from armour plating robots. Standing at intervals of 100 meters, each of them only had to cover an area of 50 meters on either side. It would be impossible to find an opening through their line. With one hand, Rhog grasped the butt of his weapon, which was of little use to him here. With his other hand he fingered his poorly falsified I.D. card. Would a robot be able to notice the alteration...?

Murgo brought his vehicle to a stop as the two nearest robots came marching toward them with raised weapon arms. He climbed laboriously out of the cabin and went to meet the representatives of Arkon. Rhog couldn't catch a word of the conversation but he knew that Murgo was trying to explain the purpose of his caravan to the robots, letting on that it had come directly from Larg. The confab seemed to be getting along all right.

But then Rhog's heart seemed to skip a beat as he saw other shadows emerge from the darkness. An Arkonide officer with four combat robots joined the group.

You couldn't fool an Arkonide as easily as you could a robot.

Murgo was also sweating because he realized this as well. He had been depending on a mere robot-controlled checkpoint but to have an Arkonide show up at a time like this was fatal.

"You will order all of your men to line up here," said the officer briskly. "They are to bring all personal documents with them."

Murgo sensed the threat of a possible calamity but he pulled himself together. He reasoned that not much could happen to him and his 9 men because they were carrying the special passes signed by the Admiral. Whatever might happen to Rhog could be of no consequence to him, other than the fact it *was* a bit sticky to have a man in the outfit with a doctored up I.D. However—

"Hurry it up!"

Murgo was jolted by the barked command. He went hurriedly to the line of parked caravan vehicles.

"Everybody out!" he shouted. "Bring your papers with you!"

This still wasn't so bad, he thought to himself. But hopefully the Arkonide wouldn't get the idea of inspecting his cargo. Of course he didn't know, himself, what was in those crates but he could well imagine that it was not intended for the eyes of any Arkonide. Just the mysterious setup in that cave alone was enough to convince him of that.

The officer took a careful look at every pass card and inspected the special credentials with obvious interest. Rhog made an attempt to outsmart the procedures but the robots were too alert for him. When he was about to go back with the already-processed Zalites, he was stopped.

"You have not yet presented your pass," said the robot who held him. The towering machine's voice was stridently metallic.

The officer turned to him. "Come here, Zalite!" Your pass!"

Rhog saw his mission going down in flames before it got started. In his pistol were 2 charges—at the most maybe 3. He could kill this Arkonide but how would that help him? The 4 robots—not to mention many more of them in the vicinity—would simply kill him in return. Not only himself, perhaps, but all members of the caravan as well. He would be pulling them into destruction with him and would have accomplished nothing.

He let go of the weapon in his pocket and instead drew out the pass, which he handed to the Arkonide. In vain he scabbled in his brain for an excuse but he finally had to admit that there wasn't any!

The officer took the pass and inspected it with narrowed eyes. He finally looked up. In his reddish-albino eyes was a glimmer of surprise as though Rhog's presence here were not in his program. In fact the Arkonide appeared to be slightly at a loss.

"This pass has been falsified," he said finally but his voice sounded neither triumphant nor malicious. It also carried the same note of confusion. "I have to take you with me. The caravan may pass."

Murgo breathed a sigh of relief. Apparently they were not going to hold Rhog's presence against him. But he sought to avoid being caught in another circumstance like this because the next time somebody might want to look at the cargo.

"May I have some kind of voucher or receipt for this inspection?" he asked.

"What for?"

"In case I'm stopped again. That way I can avoid any further delays and not have to attract the attention of the Arkon robots unnecessarily."

The officer nodded as though he could appreciate the logic of the argument. He drew a slip of paper out of his pocket and gave it to Murgo, who looked at it briefly and then tucked it away. He gave an almost imperceptible nod to the unhappy Rhog shrugged his shoulders and then returned to his vehicle. The other Zalites were already sitting in their driver cabs. Seconds later the caravan rolled through the blockade point and soon found itself heading through the main avenues en route to the downtown area of the city.

But Rhog remained behind.

"Come along!" ordered the Arkonide, who had neglected, however, to have him searched.

For this piece of negligence Rhog was grateful. Perhaps he might still be able to attempt an escape. Within the city there were enough hiding places.

The two checkpoint robots had returned to their original positions. Without further delay the officer took Rhog by the arm and marched away. His 4 positronic escorts brought up the rear and covered him. Rhog guessed that, at this moment, there were at least 8 beamer weapons aimed at his back, so any thought of escape was thereby nipped in the bud. It would be plain suicide.

The streets of Tagnor were empty. Only infrequently did Rhog see a Zalite but every one of them ducked swiftly into a side street or alleyway whenever he caught sight of this patrol unit. No free Zalite seemed to have a clear conscience, even when carrying the special documents signed by the Admiral. This was a situation which should have caused Rhog to ponder the matter more deeply, but who could blame him if all he could think of was flight? For he had a mission to accomplish even if it cost him his life. If he were to be sent to Arkon instead, all would be lost.

Opportunity came sooner than he had hoped.

On the way to the Zarlt's palace, where the Arkonide admiral also had his headquarters, the group happened to pass the area of Tagnor's great war games arena. Rhog was familiar with it from previous times and he knew that precisely in this region there were many side alleys and passages and hiding places.

Before he could think of what to do, a chance incident came to his aid.

20 meters ahead of the Arkonide officer, two Zalites made an appearance as they came around a corner from a side street. They halted in surprise when they saw the patrol unit. Had they gone quietly on their way they might not have caused any suspicion. In fact Rhog wondered that the officer even noticed them. Thus far he had already passed up a number of questionable people without stopping them. Or maybe it was because in this case the two Zalites were too close to ignore.

When they turned on the spot and ran back into the other street, the Arkonide came to a halt. He turned to the robots. "R-56 and R-763! After them and hold them for me!"

Two of the robots responded by running after the suspicious fugitives. When they vanished around the corner, Rhog made a lightning move.

He would have exactly 20 meters head start or at the most 3 or 4 seconds if he hurried. It was unlikely that the officer would be able to give orders to the two remaining robots any faster than that.

Rhog went into a top burst of speed. When the lifesaving corner he was running for was only two meters away he felt the searing heat of a glancing shot. Ahead of him he saw bubbles boiling out of the wall of a house. Then he made a side dash into the safety of darkness. Behind him he was aware of the heavy footsteps of the robots and the shrill shouts of the officer echoing through the deserted streets.

A narrow side alley—Rhog ducked into it.

When the robots turned the corner they could no longer see the fugitive. Their searchlights swept over house fronts and closed doors.

The Arkonide joined them, panting and out of breath. "Where is he?" he demanded of the robots. "He must not get away."

"Disappeared!"

"Search the houses—quickly!"

While a few dozen Zalites were roughly awakened from sleep only to find to their relief that their own credentials were not in question, Rhog crept through a basement, found a rear exit and finally reached a small enclosed court. Here he discovered a suitable hiding place where he could safely wait until daylight.

By no later than the day following, he hopes he might carry out his plan to completion.

* * * *

On this particular evening it had been Pucky's turn to teleport into the palace of the Zarlt so that he could exchange information with the false Admiral. As usual at this hour, 'Calus' was alone. He had taken the precaution to lock the door to his chamber so that no unwanted visitor or courier might interrupt him.

This was the one brief time during the day when he could take off his mask and return to his true identity as Sgt. Osega—that is, as far as his nature and mannerism were concerned.

"Aha, so it's you!" he said as the mouse-beaver materialized and at once waddled toward the bed. In one small jump, the latter was on top of the pillow. "Can't you find some other place than that to sit?"

"Let's get something straight," said Pucky reproachfully. "I'm a lieutenant and you're just a sergeant—so it would be more polite if you would show a little more respect when you talk to me. And then after all, this is Admiral Calus' bed, not yours. What's more, I feel more comfortable on a bed."

Osega took it all with a grain of salt. "Alright, you just made your three little points," he said calmly. "So I'll make mine. First, look who's talking about paying respect to rank! You smart off to them all, whether they're privates or generals. Second, *Ido* happen to be Calus and that makes the bed my property. Third, I don't mind your using it if your paws are clean."

Pucky gasped. "Here the Earth is facing a matter of life and death—yet *you* are worried about a few smudge spots on your pillow!"

"That's right—I'm the one who has to sleep on those smudges," Osega reminded him gently. "But let's get with it! What's new?"

Pucky sighed. "It's awful the way you can switch the subject so fast. Oh well... What's new? Hm-m... oh, yes, the caravan came in with the backup supplies from the *California*. Everything worked like a charm, No hitches! The transport crew will leave again tomorrow and go after the second load."

"Well thank heaven for that! Couldn't you bring me a few items of food from the good old Earth? Even in cans! I'm sick of this Arkonideersatz food."

"Whatever are you thinking about?!" retorted the mouse-beaver indignantly. "There'd be the devil to pay if anybody found wrappings or empty tins in your wastebasket with a label like Genuine Imported Bavarian Mushrooms!"

"I'm not interested in mushrooms," Osega admonished him but he should have chosen his words better because Pucky flared up adamantly.

"I don't care if it's mushrooms or smoked herring, you aren't allowed to have any! Rosberg's orders! Any slightest suspicion against you could jeopardize all our plans." Then he slowly winked and exposed his incisor tooth in a sly grin. "But maybe I can do you a personal favour, old buddy. Tomorrow I'll sneak a little something to you."

"You're a good little fellow." Osega had sat on the bed beside him and praised him now by stroking his fur. But again he changed the subject. "I wonder how Rhodan and the others are doing?"

"Search me, Osega. We can only hope that it's going OK. If they'd struck a snag we'd know about it by now. So we should just make sure everything goes according to plan right here on Zalit. Oh—that reminds me: just to be safe, we sent somebody out to meet the caravan at the checkpoint—an Arkonide officer with a hypnblock and 4 reprogrammed robots. According to Toffner the caravan crew was made up of just 10 men but when the officer stopped them there were 11 of them. Since one of them had a falsified pass, the Arkonide detained him. He wanted to bring him to us separately but on the way to the catacombs the fellow got away. Well anyway it's not so important but it's keeping you up to date. If you hear anything about the affair you'll be able to act accordingly. Probably just another Zalite who's a fugitive from the Arkonides."

"The poor guy," said Osega, not realizing who the object of his sympathy really was. "But I don't think I can help him if they catch him. We can't arouse any suspicions—that's Law #1."

"I've tried to pick him up on the brainwaves but that's not so easy in the millions of thoughts around Tagnor. If I had gotten into this sooner—"

"Well, it can't be so important as all that," said Osega but in dismissing the subject so lightly he committed the biggest mistake of his life. "So other than that, anything else to report?"

"Nothing as far as my side is concerned. What about you? Want me to tell anything to the Major?"

"No, it's all clear on my side. Tomorrow I'll be making the usual TV appearance and I'm planning on talking about the impending military campaign again. So far, Arkon hasn't let slip one word about who the target may be of all these war preparations. Everybody thinks it's against the Druufs—that is, if they know anything about Druufs in the first place."

"Are they going to make up any more troop transport quotas?"

Osega shook his head. "No, as strange as that may sound. We have the required number of recruits ready for another shipment but Arkon has suddenly stopped the transport flights. It's as if the continuation of their schedules had run into a snag of some kind. I don't mean any blockage here—it's directly due to something going on in the Arkon System itself."

The mouse-beaver started to grin. His incisor thrust forth in all its glory. "Rhodan!" chirped Pucky elatedly. "Who else?"

Osega raised a brow at him. "You mean Rhodan may be behind it? That would really be fantastic!"

"Maybe a little fringe benefit from the operation that we hadn't counted on. Now the poor Zalites may still have a chance, even if they're drafted."

Osega nodded. "Yes, it could be. Maybe they'll not be transported to Arkon any more. Too bad we can't give them the good news instead of having to still keep them in the dark."

"Keep in there and lean on them hard, Calus!" urged Pucky. "We don't want any mistakes now!"

"I'll make 'em shake in their boots," Osega assured him, and he stretched out his hand to the mousebeaver. "Until tomorrow night. And don't forget what you promised. Maybe a nice slice of ham—that'd be terrific!"

"Cannonball!" Pucky grunted in revulsion as he dematerialised before Osega could point out to him the word he meant was cannibal. It was as though he had been frightened that meat stirred Osega's appetite.

10 minutes later, Osega admitted into his room the Arkonide officer who had carried out the inspection of the caravan. He had to listen to all the details about the suspicious Zalite who carried a falsified set of documents and had gotten away. Without scolding the officer, he finally dismissed him.

Then he lay down to sleep.

* * * *

The following morning was taken up by routine business, after which he had lunch—synthetic dishes as usual. He also received several officers from the recruiting camp. He could not tell them anything new since Arkon so far had not given any reasons for the lull in troop shipments.

In the afternoon he called his car around and drove to the broadcast station. There a cordon of security robots made way for the Admiral and allowed him to pass inside without hindrance. The Zalites present were immune from the military draft because of their essential occupations. They all bowed to the Admiral whenever they encountered him.

In the broadcasting room everything was in readiness. Every day at this time Calus made a half-hour speech. Three cameras were aimed at him as he sat down at the crescent-shaped table and arranged his notes.

The Zalite technicians gave him a signal. The cameras began to hum.

"Zalites!" said Osega in a cold tone of voice. It made him realize how much he hated the role into which he had been forced—ironically in order to help the suppressed people of this world. "The Regent is displeased with you! Everywhere on Zalit the conscientious objectors and draft dodgers have hidden

themselves and our appeal to these men has appeared to be in vain. It must therefore he assumed that our measures are too mild. This is why the Regent has ordered an immediate sharpening of our controls and security procedures. Exceptions will be less frequent than before. Only in unusual cases will those draft classifications be honoured which indicate disabilities. The Regent has also directed that all Zalites without exception must be registered within one month's time. After that time, anyone caught without proper passes can expect the severest punishment, including execution."

Osega paused for a moment.

The humming of the three cameras made him nervous. The automatic devices did not need operators but today there was one. The man was a Zalite whom he did not know. In fact he had never seen him before in the broadcasting station.

Osega felt cautiously for the grip of his weapon in his belt. He always had to be on the lookout for fanatic natives who threatened his life. Even here where he was virtually surrounded by security robots. But how could an assassin ever get this far? Nobody got into the transmission section unless he belonged to the technical personnel.

The Zalite inspected the flawless functioning of the cameras, nodded his head in apparent satisfaction and disappeared from the immediate area.

Osega sighed with relief. Over by the door was the motionless figure of a watchful robot. Both his weapon arms just now pointed to the ceiling. In any given second he could send their deadly beams in all directions.

"At this point I should like to emphasize once more," said Osega, continuing his address, "that Arkon is very desirous of being able to look upon Zalites as their allies. We are mutually facing a powerful enemy who must be destroyed. Perhaps our methods of enforced conscription are somewhat hard but Arkon does not have any other choice."

Osega got only that far before he was interrupted.

The door where the robot was standing banged open and a Zalite dashed into the broadcasting room. He pushed past the colossus and charged toward Osega. Behind him sounded a hue and cry of alarm.

The robot reacted swiftly but to no avail. If it had used its weapons it would have endangered Admiral Calus. It could only move toward the table behind which Calus sat.

But Osega was no longer seated. He had seen his danger.

The Zalite intruder stood next to him before the cameras as billions of Zalites observed the scene on their viewscreens. "Let Arkon spare us from this war!" yelled Rhog at the top of his voice, while whipping his weapon out of his pocket. "Send that robot away, Admiral Calus!"

Osega gave an order to the robot but the behemoth did not obey. Although it maintained a distance of about 3 meters from them, it did not draw back. Osega realized he would have to act quickly if he wanted to save his life. On the other hand, he could not cross up Rhodan's plans.

Of course what he might have said to the assassin was that he was mistaken and that what he intended to do would destroy the best friend Zalit had. He might have told him that in reality the true Admiral Calus had long since been a prisoner of the foes of Arkon. But billions of Zalites would have heard

this—not to mention the ever-watchful Arkonides.

If the thought had at least occurred to anyone to cut the broadcast off the air, they would have avoided doing so. For Zalites it was a welcome opportunity to hit the Arkonide where it hurt. Such a defeat as this, in front of the television cameras...

Osega saw only one alternative: if he wanted to live and at the same time not endanger Operation Troy, he had to kill the Zalite before the latter killed him.

But before that he tried one more angle. "Wait, Zalite he said as calmly as possible. "You are committing a fatal mistake. Will you listen to me before you—?"

"Die, you imperial traitor!" shouted Rhog dramatically as he lifted his weapon. "All of you are traitors who serve the Robot Brain!"

He fired before Osega had a chance to draw his own weapon. The sergeant died before he could feel any pain and he did so before the eyes of an entire planet. He slipped down onto the edge of the table and then sank to the floor.

But Rhog also died. Since Calus' safety was no longer a factor, the robot opened fire. Bored through by 3 or 4 fingers of energy simultaneously, Rhog collapsed. Like all other inhabitants of the planet, his companions in the distant cave witnessed his death—but it was a death that symbolized a great victory. Because Calus, too, was dead.

The deadly beams fired by the robot also damaged the cameras, however. Everywhere on Zalit the viewscreens darkened. But everyone now knew that the tyrant was dead!

Something or other was sure to happen now. And not a few Zalites quailed in fright before this certainty.

Even Cagrib and his friends who sat silently and filled with doubt before their video receiver in the cave...

6/ THE HORSE GETS A-WAGGIN'

After Rosberg had stopped speaking and the micro-receiver became silent, it was almost two minutes before Rhodan replied:

"This is very tragic news, Rosberg. Osega's death was unnecessary."

"But it could be to our advantage, sir," answered Rosberg.

There was practically no danger of their hypercom transmissions being intercepted. The modulated carrier was on such a tight beam that no reception was possible even within a few kilometres of it. Nevertheless, some degree of precaution was indicated. If a ship happened to cross the beam, and if its own receiver happened by chance to be open at the same waveband, it was remotely possible that...

"A man's life is too valuable to be compensated for by any advantage no matter how great. Besides, Osega's death does us more damage and poses more danger than any possible advantages. What would happen if they examined the corpse? Also, Arkon is only going to send a new admiral to Zalit to take his place. So what do we do then—make another switch...?"

Rosberg had only heard the first part. "Good Lord! If they do an autopsy of any kind! Even a cursory examination could reveal to the Arkonides that Calus was exchanged and that they don't have an Arkonide body on their hands at all. What should I do?"

"Take that corpse out of the broadcast station, Rosberg! Let Pucky do it."

"It won't be that easy because from what I've heard they've already picked up the body and taken it away. Admiral Calus is to have a state burial on Arkon."

"Oh no—not that, too!" Rhodan pondered this for several seconds. "You've got to prevent it, no matter what. Now—what else do you have to report?"

Rosberg hesitated. He sounded uncertain when he spoke. "We have to consider that things are going to get tougher here on Zalit. The Regent has announced there will be a punitive expedition."

"You'll also have to handle that on your own when it comes, Rosberg. I can't help you now. Let me know if the situation gets critical. Until then—good luck!"

"Same for your side!" came the answer and then the connection was broken.

Atlan joined Gorlat, who had been listening in. "The situation's getting sticky!" he said tensely. "If the Regent finds out his assassinated Admiral Calus is actually a Terranian in disguise, we'll be sitting on top of a volcano, Perry. Let's hope Rosberg gets to bury Osega himself."

"Yes, let's hope so!" returned Rhodan grimly. However great the danger was, he could do nothing about it here. It was like a kind of destiny that one was helpless to influence. "Meanwhile we'd better make sure we don't have any hitches in our own operation. You know Seiko has found out that tomorrow they're going to start making detail assignments already. Let's see what kind of ship they are going to let us have."

"Without schooling or training?" asked Bell wonderingly.

"The Regent never loses any time. He's given orders that all experienced Zalite space officers should be given provisional commissions. They are to be assigned crews for 'practical' training during a series of checkout flights."

"Makes sense, you'll have to admit," muttered Atlan appreciatively. "But he certainly seems to be anxious to push his attack against the Earth. Strange, though, when he still has no idea where to look." He deliberately fell silent for a moment while he stared at Rhodan. Then he added: "Or perhaps...?"

"No chance," said Rhodan with seeming composure. "His main push is still against the Druufs." He looked out the window. Out there beyond the low-lying buildings lay the stony wastelands of a moon that had become an outpost of Arkon. Scraggly tatters of clouds were being driven by an icy wind so that they often obscured the light of the stars for brief moments. A bleak and desolate world, this, and yet it was here that the future fate of the Earth would have to be decided. At least where the first phase of that decision was concerned. "No, I don't think so, Atlan. Because if the Regent knew the position of the

Earth we'd have heard about it by now from Marshal Freyt in Terrania. The Regent would have attacked us immediately."

"This head session is getting nowhere!" snorted Bell unceremoniously. He retired to his bed. "All this brainstorming inside a bucket where we can't see what's coming—I've had it! I'm going to sleep so I won't have to think. Anybody who wants my ration of snake fodder at supper is welcome to it!"

Although everyone was hungry, nobody took him up on it.

* * * *

By noon of the following day everything had been decided.

In accordance with the results of examinations and with the help of the Aras' computer data, Admiral Semekho had made his breakdown of detail assignments. During this process he had given consideration to Zalites with the highest I.Q. These were appointed to commanders or subordinate officers in charge of various ship's operations, and crews were assigned to them. Yet, at the same time Semekho had tried to keep already identified training groups together. It was only due to this circumstance that Rhodan and his men were not separated.

"So the name of our scow is Kon-Velete," mumbled Bell wearily. They had just come back to their quarters after an involved commissioning ceremony. "And our skipper is some guy named Ighur—who on the Q.T. bears the civilian name of Atlan. Semekho sure closed his eyes to whatever our ranks were before. Major Sesete and Major Roake got bumped down to only First and Second Mate. And I end up taking orders from a mere captain..."

Rhodan had the trace of a grin on his face. "What other choice did we have? At least we are quite properly under the command of an Arkonide—who is actually an Admiral, to boot. What *more* do you want?"

"Maybe a crying towel," muttered Bell.

Atlan interjected: "This whole affair is a bit more complicated than we suspect. On the one hand, the *Kon-Velete* is a brand-new battleship of the *Stardust* class, 800 meters diameter. We may be able to consider ourselves lucky that Admiral Semekho kept the crew down to only 200 men, but that still means we're going to be thrown together in close quarters with 50 unknown Zalites."

Rhodan shook his head. "We'd have to be just as careful as if we were by ourselves. I'm certain there are hidden cameras on board these ships which keep the Regent and his staff officers advised as to how the new soldiers of the Imperium are handling themselves on their assignments. In other words, we've got to be two-faced. As Zalites we have to carry on as though we are not aware of being observed; but as Terranians we have to realize at every moment that we are being watched. That means we're still doing our masquerade every second while we're on board the *Kon-Velete*. Even in our bunks. Hopefully nobody has the habit of talking in his sleep!"

"I'm inclined to be more concerned about the situation on Zalit," said Gorlat uncertainly. "We don't know what's going on there. At least here we still have a chance to see what's happening but on Zalit."

He left his statement unfinished.

Before Rhodan could answer him the loudspeaker crackled. Robot 574 announced: "All crews assigned to their ships will go on board in 2 hours. Test flights will be under war-simulated conditions. Stand by for further orders."

The loudspeaker went silent. Atlan raised his eyebrows slightly. "They're really stepping up the pace," he remarked with a note of sarcasm.

* * * *

In certain respects the *Kon-Velete* was a disappointment. Of course it was so new that it had only come from the Arkon shipyards a day or so earlier but it had originally been designed for a robot crew. Very makeshift sanitary accommodations were the only indication that the vessel was now to be operated by humans. Crew quarters were uncomfortable and left just about everything to be desired.

Atlan seemed slightly uncertain as he stood in the Control Central. John Marshall, Gorlat, Bell and Rhodan were keeping him company after having determined that all hands, whether Terrans or Zalites, had been assigned to their stations. The ship was ready for takeoff.

John Marshall received Atlan's modulated radio signal at minimum power: "*Can we use our microcoms for emergency communication? Ask Rhodan.*"

The telepath passed the message on soundlessly to Rhodan and he nodded. Then Atlan picked up the answer in his ear receiver: "*Yes, but only when it's absolutely necessary. From now on we are Zalites who want to serve the Regent. We have to try to win the confidence of the robot Brain.*"

Atlan appeared to be reassured by this. It was a good feeling to be able to share opinions and get some advice in case of emergency.

So that no suspicion would be aroused, they had not neglected to assign important positions to the two Zalite officers, Lt. Kecc and Lt. Hopro. Their IQs were high enough to justify handling responsible jobs. On the basis of recommendations which Admiral Semekho himself had made, Lt. Kecc had become Chief Communications Officer of the *Kon-Velete* while Hopro was put in charge of technical personnel where he would be working with both Zalites and Terrans.

"Robots may be able to sleep in those bunks but no humans should try it if their bones are fragile," carped Bell in Zalite. He figured a normal amount of complaint might not be considered suspicious. "They could have done a better conversion job on Arkon. When do we get into action around here?"

Rhodan phrased his answer specifically for the ears of the Regent. "Don't forget that up till now most of Arkon's ships have been exclusively manned by robots. We should consider it an honour that we Zalites are replacing their infallible robots, Maj. Roake. Anyway, we have special robots on board who are backing us up, even though they are under the command of Capt. Ighur."

* * * *

Gorlat stood apart and was lost in thought as he scanned the controls that were along the forward bulkhead of the Control Central. The main viewscreen was active and it now revealed the spaceport of Naator. So far as they knew by this time, there was more than one spaceport on the 5th planet's satellite.

The line of ships sat there in close formation. An entire fleet, ready to fly its first mission. If everything went according to plan, the day was not far off when the Admiral would receive final orders to hand over the whole fleet to Arkon itself.

"The *Kon-Velete* is certainly a mighty improvement over our Zalite cruisers," said Rhodan with a straight-faced sanctimoniousness. "With ships like these, Arkon is sure to win the war."

"Quite right, Maj. Sesete," agreed Bell with an equal amount of hypocrisy, nor did he grin even for a moment. "I'm actually pretty proud to serve the Regent under Capt. Ighur."

Atlan was about to contribute an appropriate remark to the wordplay when the door of the Control Central opened and a robot entered. Turning to Atlan, the thing spoke to him in its rasping and coldly impersonal tone of voice: "Admiral Semekho has commissioned me to support you in your assignment. I was the commander of the *Kon-Velete* who brought the vessel here. I am at your disposal, Captain."

"Of course I shall try to fulfil my duties without your assistance," replied Atlan respectfully. It was the first time in his life he had ever shown personal respect to a robot but in case he was being monitored secretly he wanted to spread it on thick. "But I'll be grateful to you if you will watch to see that I don't make any mistakes."

"That is my specific duty," replied the robot.

Another viewscreen flashed to life. Semekho's face appeared. The Base Commander of Naator said: "In a few minutes the fleet will take off for practice manoeuvres. Each commander will maintain direct contact with me and will also receive from me his course instructions. Today all I want to establish is that commanders and their crews are well coördinated and work effectively together. Where this does not prove to be the case, the necessary replacements will be made. Are we all ready for takeoff? I am standing by for confirmations from the commanders."

Chief Com Officer Kecc stepped into the Control Central. He was a tall, typical Zalite and was apparently eager to serve. "Your contact with the Admiral is ready, Capt. Ighur. I'll make sure the transceiver remains in operation at all times and that it may be used directly from the Control Central."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," replied Atlan. He then turned to the viewscreen where Semekho's face was still to be seen. "The *Kon-Velete* is ready for takeoff, Admiral. We are standing by for your instructions."

7/ PUCKY & FIRE-EYES PERFORM

Pucky had not been able to accompany Rhodan to Naator because in spite of his willingness and his every available capability it had not been possible to change him into a Zalite. He was not alone in his assumed misfortune. There was one other mutant who would have betrayed himself by his form: the 'human fuse', Ivan Ivanovich Goratschin. For Ivan possessed two heads. However, this was not his most outstanding characteristic. At great distances he could manipulate any kind of matter containing the slightest trace of calcium or carbon and convert it into pure energy—usually in the form of a tremendous nuclear explosion.

When one used him effectively, Ivan constituted an incredibly dangerous weapon. In times past, Rhodan's greatest antagonist, the Mutant Master, had discovered this son of a Russian scientist in Siberia and had used him as a tool. After the defeat of the Mutant Master, Ivan became a member of the Mutant Corps.

* * * *

The stifling silence gradually got on Maj. Rosberg's nerves. He looked askance at Pucky. "I don't see any way to keep Osega's body out of the clutches of the Arkonide investigating commission. We don't even know just now where it is—but I know that we'll be in a lousy mess if they find out that Calus isn't Calus!"

The mouse-beaver sat on a chair and permitted Betty Toufry to scratch his pelt, just as though he had no other care in the world. Across from him sat Ishy Matsu and the two-headed mutant.

"Aside from us present aliens and the Arkonides," said Pucky, "there are still about 20 million Zalites in Tagnor. All of these 20 million are thinking—even though most of it's nonsense and useless garbage. But they think, and that's the stickler. Each thought is an impulse, a tiny tendril to trace. Each of them has to be checked. So you can figure out for yourself how long it'll take to cover it all."

Rosberg knew this and made no reproaches. "Osega certainly can't give us the information any more. But they'll probably tell Admiral Calus—hey, what am I saying! Am I going out of my mind?"

Pucky grinned, undisturbed. "You can be glad you've got one to lose, Rosberg." But then he became serious. "Even if we know where Osega's body is, how can we snatch it away and hide it anywhere without making it look suspicious? If one of the Arkonides sees me..."

"That's just the point!" agreed Rosberg. "Your capabilities are of no use to us in this case. The corpse simply has to disappear, no more and no less. But under no circumstances must it disappear by mysterious means. How do you like a complication like that!"

Maj. Rosberg was a soldier and liked to follow a straight line. This business of obtaining the *corpus delicti* had all the earmarks of a real criminal manoeuvre, and that was not his cup of tea.

Betty Toufry interrupted her telepathic searching to speak a word of consolation. "Maybe Toffner is onto something. At the moment I've lost him and his two friends but they're wandering around close to the palace."

"Let's hope so," said Rosberg. "And besides—it's hardly probable they could detect Calus' false

identity right away. Osega is well disguised. Why should they X-ray a corpse right away?"

One of the scientists of the biochemical lab spoke up from the background. "We shouldn't think along those lines," he admonished. "The possibility of such a discovery is only about 5%. Of course even that is too much to tolerate. Osega has to be pulled out of wherever he is! And by the way..." he added, looking over at the curtained booths where his colleagues were. "What are we supposed to do now with the real Calus? Is he always going to be our prisoner?"

"Maybe Rhodan will let him go someday when this is all over with," replied Rosberg. "Anyway, we can't do anything with him now."

Betty had sunk back into a kind of meditation but now she suddenly looked up. When she spoke it was with a note of certainty. "I believe I've picked up a trace."

Rosberg leaned toward her. "Toffner?"

She nodded in silence and turned a mental ear 'inward' to the indescribable maze of countless thoughts, among which just the right one had to be detected.

* * * *

Although Toffner and his two Zalite companions still had their special passes signed by Calus, which excused them from military service, they were uncertain now under the present circumstances as to how long Calus' signature would continue to be valid. To this extent it was still dangerous to venture anywhere near any Arkonides. Yet they had no other choice, and where the two native men were concerned this was the least they could do to help those who had helped them.

Of course Toffner was not a Zalite but Khara and Markh had no suspicion of this. He had furnished the life-saving documents to them and they would do everything for him and his friends in order to prove how grateful they were.

The robot that stomped ponderously toward them belonged to the security cordon surrounding the palace. The Arkonides were not relying too heavily on the Zarlt's troops, even though they appeared to be loyal to the Regent.

"What do you want here?" the metal sentinel asked in its typically rasping voice.

Toffner produced his regular pass and his special release. "I am Garak, the manager of the arena. These two men assist me in my work. We are trying to make arrangements for new war games so that we can do something about raising the morale of all Zalites. We seek an audience with the Zarlt."

"Why haven't you enlisted in the Fleet?"

"All three of us have been declassified due to debilities. Here is the special release paper."

The robot examined the document scrupulously yet seemed undecided as to whether or not it should give these Zalites permission to enter the palace.

"Wait!" it ordered and returned to the palace.

There it stopped and became motionless. Toffner knew it was to be expected since the robot would now make radio contact with its superiors in order to obtain instructions. Permission to enter the palace would depend on the latter.

The robot came back. "My officers feel that a resumption of the war games would attract many men and lure them into Tagnor for us. The audience with the Zarl is granted. You may go in."

Inwardly Toffner was relieved, even though the permission loaded him with a new concern. Of course they'd get to see the Zarl and talk to him but the real purpose of their action was something else. Maybe they could find out something concerning the whereabouts of the 'Admiral's' body—if the Zarl knew anything about it.

The robot escorted them to the main portal of the palace and turned them over to two Zalite soldiers who belonged to the Zarl's bodyguard. Even though these troops were not particularly popular just now, they were still considered to be Zalites. They simply had no other choice than to obey the Zarl and the Arkonides if they did not wish to share the fate of the 'volunteer' inductees.

They had to identify themselves two more times before they could enter the true inner palace. Here they were received by a Zalite in a colourful uniform.

"The Zarl is waiting for you, Garak. Follow me."

Kosoka was an old man who was too weak to oppose the will of the Arkonides. Buried within him was the age-old instinct of awe before the Lords of the Imperium, even though a robot Brain had long since taken over the actual governing powers. Zarl Kosoka was a servant of the Regent and because of his very fear and his weariness was considered to be a 'trusty'.

He sat in his elevated chair of State in the audience chamber and watched the approaching visitors with an indefinable expression. "You are here to talk about the arena?" he asked, as Toffner, Markh and Kharra bowed before him. "No games have been held there for quite some time. Why is that, Garak?"

"If men and gladiators are scarce, Your Grace, so are the expeditions that are needed for collecting the animals. Here is Markh the animal dealer. He can't go by himself into the desert to capture Hhracks."

Kosoka nodded slowly. "That makes sense, Garak. But you have come to propose something to me. You may speak."

Toffner saw himself being diverted from the actual purpose of his visit but reasoned that perhaps it was necessary. "There are many Zalites who were found unsuitable for military service," he said. "They should be called upon to help Markh organize an expedition into the desert—in return for good pay, of course."

"Can't Markh scrape up his own men?"

Toffner was amazed at how quickly he hit upon an excuse. "No, he's tried that, Zarl. The people are distrustful. They suspect an Arkonide trap behind his offers. Even those with the special release papers remain suspicious. We'd only be able to get men if the Zarl would make a public announcement guaranteeing their safety."

The old man's answering nod was a bit hesitant. Inwardly he had to admit that Garak was right but he wasn't sure he should intimate as much. The Arkonides might take it the wrong way. He made an obvious attempt to hedge for time. "I have to wait until Calus' replacement arrives. We are expecting the new Admiral within the next few days. I'm afraid..." He lowered his voice instinctively. "I'm afraid, of course, that Arkonide isn't very well disposed toward us these days. After the murder of Calus..."

"Such a black mark in our history," said Toffner quickly and his tone of remorse was genuine although for reasons unknown to the Zarlt. "Admiral Calus was a great friend of Zalit and its inhabitants. Too bad his assassin died so quickly. He deserved a more lingering death."

At least now they were on the desired subject. Perhaps a revealing remark could be coaxed out of the Zarlt. What Toffner was unaware of was the fact that Betty Toufry had now located him and was monitoring the conversation. Which meant that she was also able to perceive the *thoughts* of the Zarlt as well as his spoken words.

"Admiral Calus will be replaced by a very strict man, said Kosoka apathetically. "Maybe this one will even prohibit the war games in the arena and he may even invalidate the special releases a lot of you have because of various disabilities. I've been expecting something of the sort."

"All the more reason to curse that murderer. I myself thought a great deal of Calus because he was fair enough to free me from military service. He even spoke to me once in the street. I'd sure like to see him once more before they take him to Arkon."

The Zarlt leaned forward and stared at Toffner. "You mean, his corpse...?"

"Yes, Calus' cadaver! Why shouldn't I pay my respects to his remains when they represent a man I honoured and revered?"

Kosoka leaned back again in his chair. "Unfortunately that will not be possible, Garak. Admiral Calus' body is already on board the ship that is to take him back to Arkon. No human being will accompany it because the ship is manned by robots. Calus' last flight will be his flight alone. Figuratively it is his spirit that is to guide the courier cruiser home."

To Toffner this was like a kick in the face. It was all he needed. If the Zarlt wasn't lying, then this development meant that he and the others were in big trouble.

With a few innocuous remarks about the arena and with a promise to come back when the new Admiral arrived, he said his good-byes.

The three of them were permitted to get through the cordons of guards without hindrance and leave the palace. As swiftly as they could, they hurried to their hideout down in the catacombs. To their surprise they discovered that everyone there had already been apprised of the situation.

In reply to Toffner's questions concerning this, Betty Toufry gave him an answer. "The Zarlt wasn't lying, Toffner. He spoke the truth. Osega's body is already on board a small torpedo-shaped vessel with a crew of 10 robots. They've already set up their course coordinates. The ship is supposed to take off as soon as the new Admiral arrives and gives the order for it. So we have a few days of time." Until then She became silent, not knowing what else to say.

Toffner looked at Maj. Rosberg. "What now, sir? We could never lift that body from the ship without turning suspicion toward Rhodan's Mutant Corps. Their feats are too well known not to become obvious

in a case like this. Telekinesis or teleportation are out! It would attract too much attention."

"I'm afraid you're right," admitted the Major and he sank into a pensively silent mood.

Nobody disturbed him. Not even Pucky.

* * * *

While more than 3000 light-years away a second test flight was being made by Commander Ighur and his 200-man crew—much to the satisfaction of Admiral Semekho—the situation on Zalit became critically serious.

Calus' successor had arrived, armed with a set of merciless orders. From now on any Zalite caught with a weapon was to be shot without benefit of trial or sentencing. The death penalty was to be imposed also on anyone who failed to report to the draft commission. All release documents issued by Calus were declared invalid. The Zalites were to be subjected to a new round of examinations.

From one day to the next the situation had kept changing.

It wasn't easy for Maj. Rosberg to accept the complexion of events. After all, this Calus for whose death Zalites were being held responsible was still alive. The Admiral sat huddled here on a lowly cot, hypno-blocked, apathetic, devoid of memory, offering no resistance of any kind any more. Yet they could not let him go free. His appearance would instantly make it evident to the Regent that his greatest enemy was in the vicinity. It would do nothing to better the situation, in fact it would make it much worse.

The two Zalites, Markh and Kharra, refused to go up to the surface again. Of course they didn't know that their friends were Terrans but they suspected that their release documents were of no value now. If anybody stopped them they'd be sure to land in the military boot camp at the spaceport.

But Toffner contradicted this view. "Even if Calus' signature is no good, that doesn't mean that right today everybody will be detained who carries his papers on him. Processing under the new regime will take weeks yet to complete. I have no qualms about showing myself. If they tell me to go to the draft commission—so I'll go." He grinned. "Before my departure for Arkon they'll surely allow me to attend to my personal affairs. The Zarlt will help me."

Betty Toufry had been on telepathic duty again, still scanning the thoughts of the Arkonides. At this moment she said: "The ship carrying Osega is to take off by this evening. I just picked that up from a conversation between two officers. We'll have to hurry."

Rosberg nodded. "We went over everything yesterday in detail, so we'll stick to that. Everybody involved knows his assignment. Toffner, your action comes first. As a relay station—if that's a proper expression—you know what you have to do. Here's luck!"

"He'll need it," peeped Pucky. "If anything happens to him I'll yank him out—no matter what the cost. I'm quick enough nobody will see me."

"You will only do what I tell you to do!" snapped Rosberg with unusual severity. Still worked up, he

turned to Toffner. "Go now. We must not lose another minute."

Toffner departed without further ceremony. He knew his assignment and he was going to complete it. Whether they grabbed him or not.

Without being stopped by anyone he reached the first restricted area at the spaceport. He was comforted by the feeling that he was in continuous contact with his friends through Betty Toufry—even though it was unfortunately a one-way channel since he was not a telepath. They would always be aware of what was happening around him.

Here come the first couple of guards. He signalled this mentally as the two security robots blocked his further progress. He showed them his papers and said: "I'd like to see an officer." He spoke quite without fear. "I have information of an important nature."

"What kind of information?" the robots wanted to know.

"That I cannot reveal. Only to this extent: it has to do with deserters. I know their hiding place."

It worked. Toffner received permission to enter the spaceport area. He was told that the succeeding sentry posts had been notified about him. He was to proceed without further hindrance.

And thus it worked out. He was able to penetrate further checkpoints without interrogation and a few minutes later stood inside the fenced enclosure in front of a young lieutenant who exhibited all of the arrogance of a typical Arkonide. "Who are you?" he asked.

As Toffner gave the right answers and explanations of identity, he took more time than was necessary so that he could look around.

"I am told," said the lieutenant, "that you were supposed to have some important information for us."

"I think it could be important," answered Toffner, carefully minimizing. "It has to do with the deserters. Yesterday I met a friend from Larg who claimed to know the hiding place of the Zalites who refuse to serve our Imperium."

In spite of his arrogance the lieutenant was not naive. "Why do you wish to betray your countrymen?"

"I have no egotistical motive," Toffner asserted guilelessly. "But I don't think it should be called a betrayal if a man is dedicated to the Imperium of Arkon."

For a moment the officer seemed to be taken by surprise and found himself cornered. But then his hereditary arrogance came to the fore. "I didn't ask for a dissertation on your political convictions. Say what you know and then you may go."

A real sweet fellow, thought Toffner, boiling inwardly. However, he continued to smile humbly and respectfully. He had spotted a small, torpedo-shaped ship near the landing field. An honour guard of Arkonide robots was standing in front of it.

That must be it! But he wanted to be sure.

"My friend has gone back to Larg but I'll be seeing him again in a few days. At that time I'll learn a few more details. It wouldn't be good to start looking for them just yet because it would only tip them off."

Today I merely wanted to inform you about it."

The lieutenant seemed disappointed. "You don't know actually where the deserters are?"

"Somewhere in the northern mountains near the edge of the desert but I don't know the exact spot." He paused a moment and then pointed to the small ship. "I used to be a spacer on the merchant ships. I know the various classes and types of vessels, even those of the Arkonide Fleet, but I've never seen a small ship like that one. Does it have light-speed capability?"

The officer permitted himself to be diverted, or perhaps he sought to encourage Toffner to reveal his secret. At any rate, he pretended at least to be amiable. "Light speed? That model has a long-range hyperspace capability; it's going to carry the body of our Admiral back to Arkon. There are many Arkon ships you don't know about, Garak. When do I see you again?"

"As soon as my friend returns from Larg."

"Good. If you don't come I'll have someone search for you. And you know we usually track everybody down." The statement was pushy and greatly exaggerated but Toffner let him go on. Meanwhile he did not take the small ship and its honour guard out of his sight. He thought of the ship, and thought, and thought...

His mental concentration had its purpose.

So intensive was the impression that Betty Toufry received, down under the arena, that she could see the ship plainly before her. Pucky also switched into her telepathic channel and prepared for a teleport jump. Yesterday such an idea had appeared to be impossible but now there was no other choice. Osega had to be taken out of the ship.

Just so no trace or clue was left!

"Now Toffner has been dismissed but he's still standing at the gate and looking back. He's observing the ship and he's thinking of it. I can jump now, Rosberg."

The Major nodded. His voice was expressionless when he said: "Jump, Pucky."

And the mouse-beaver vanished from their sight.

* * * *

Unmolested, Toffner vacated the dangerous territory he was in but at the same time lost sight of the ship. However, that was no longer important because Betty Toufry knew where it was located.

Inside the ship the Arkonide 'Admiral Calus' lay on a broad couch in his resplendent uniform. Two robots stood over him as his honour guard. Although they were not the types with built-in weapon arms they nevertheless carried effective energy weapons, In the arched ceiling of the small control room a subdued light was burning. The automatic controls were already operating. At any moment the ship could take off.

Pucky was lucky. When he rematerialised he happened to land right in back of the two robots. They did not notice his arrival.

The mouse-beaver looked down at the pale face of Osega. He had known the sergeant well and had swapped many a joke with him in the past. Now Osega was dead. He lay here in the place of the man who should have rightfully died.

Pucky was seized by a tremendous anger when he thought about it. But then it occurred to him that this was no time to brood over things that could not be changed. Osega had to be brought into the catacombs so that they could bury him with honours. These two robots were to become witness of the incredible but if everything went according to plan they would not have a chance to pass on their information.

Seconds counted now.

To save valuable time, Pucky leaned carefully forward and grasped Osega's arm. It felt cold and stiff to his touch. It occurred to the mouse-beaver that this was the first time in his life that he had ever had to teleport a cadaver. With bodily contact thus established, Pucky concentrated on their hiding place under the arena and dematerialised.

The whole process had not required more than 10 seconds. The two robots stood there in motionless silence, still standing guard of honour for their Admiral. They might not have even noticed his disappearance if at this moment the ship's commander—also a robot—had not come into the control room. It had received the order for takeoff.

It stood as though incapacitated in the doorway. Its insidiously gleaming eye lenses stared at the empty couch on which Calus had been lying.

It was just about to turn to the two guards when it happened.

After Pucky's return, the 2-headed mutant Ivan Ivanovich Goratschin had had enough time to concentrate on the target in accordance with Betty Toufry's information. His mysterious mental currents set the process of atomic disintegration into motion, Calcium and carbon were converted into energy within a space of a single second.

On the edge of the spaceport a nuclear explosion occurred in the place where the small ship had stood, a mushroom cloud appeared and rose swiftly into the twilight sky of Zalit. Only then could the crater be seen. Not the slightest trace remained of the ship, the 10 robots or the corpse of Admiral Calus.

Toffner was still not far from the spaceport and was hurrying to get into hiding when he heard the detonation. Then he knew that the plan had succeeded. Soon there would be pandemonium in the streets of Tagnor. They might even come looking for *him* because he had just been at the spaceport with a rather hokey excuse for his visit.

Unchallenged, he reached the catacombs and was soon secure.

In a nearby rocky chamber they prepared a grave for Osega and buried him with a simple ceremony. Major Rosberg gave a short speech and eulogized the dead man by saying that he had not only given his life for the Earth but also for the Zalites. It was the irony of fate that he had fallen by the very hands that he had sought to help.

They all sat awhile with each other before they retired to sleep.

"Osega was a great guy," said Pucky in pensive remorse.

"We should notify "Rhodan suggested Betty Toufry. "He'll be relieved to know this threat has been taken care of."

Rosberg nodded, "I'll handle it later."

A silence fell on all of them. There they sat only 20 meters under the surface of a planet where the Arkonide search commando units would soon be stomping about. Fifty Terrans, a lost little company at a lost outpost 30,000 light-years from home.

But they knew that "Rhodan already held the key to Fortress Arkon in his hand. Atlan was in command of one of the ships of the Imperium. The Regent did not suspect how close his most deadly enemy had come.

No, the situation wasn't quite as bad any more as it had appeared to be at first glance. Things had taken on a whole new complexion.

However negligible the explosion at the spaceport might have appeared in comparison to a full-scale war, nevertheless it had shaken the foundations of a stellar empire.

For Arkon the most critical hour of all its many thousands of years of existence lay close now at hand.

But Arkon knew it not...

CONTENTS

[1/ RIGHT MAN, WRONG ADDRESS](#)

[2/ TROJAN HORSE ASTRAY](#)

[3/ THE MEDIC-MASTER MENACE](#)

[4/ TO HAIL WITH THE REGENT](#)

[5/ RIGHT ADDRESS, WRONG MAN](#)

[6/ THE HORSE GETS A-WAGGIN'](#)

[7/ PUCKY & FIRE-EYES PERFORM](#)

[THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME](#)

CONFLICT CENTER: NAATOR

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

ROBOT REGENT, your regency may soon be a thing of the past.

The positronic control that you have so long exerted over your interstellar domain may be painfully close to catastrophe.

Trained in Conflict Centre Naator Recruits for Arkon are even now on their way to the headquarters world where you hold sway.

And why?

To destroy you!

Robot Ruler of Arkon, beware!

If the key to power leaves your 'hands', who then will hold it?

The legions of impatient followers of Rhodan's adventures will find out next time in—

POWER KEY

by

K. H. Scheer