

THE TROY PLOY

WHEN KHREST reveals that his ancient ancestors took the precaution of providing the Robot Regent with a safety switch, it gives Perry Rhodan an inspiration based on the old Greek warriors' trick: A future Trojan horse!

Conceived on Terra. Constructed on Zalit. En route Arkon.

In the battles against the Druufs the Giant Brain has concluded that there is need for living beings rather than robots as cannon fodder and the need is met with—

RECRUITS FOR ARKON

1/ THE FRINGE CONNECTION

"We're far from being out of the woods yet. In fact, I think it's getting darker!"

Perry Rhodan looked up to encounter the grave surveillance of the speaker, who sat opposite him. Objectively he noted that the other's red stubble of hair was lying almost flat against his head, which though normal for most people was unnatural for Reginald Bell. The broad, rounded face reflected a reddish complexion, and a restless fire seemed to flicker behind his pale-blue eyes.

"That's putting it drastically, Bell, but of course you couldn't have expressed it more precisely. If something doesn't happen pretty soon, it really looks bad for us and the Earth."

The old man with the white hair nodded slowly. Seated on Rhodan's left at the conference table, his lean figure was bent with age but something glittered in his eyes that was still vital and young. It was something that smouldered there like an inextinguishable fire of secret hope and trust.

Rhodan turned to him. "Khrest?" As a surviving descendant of the now extinct Arkonide ruling class, his opinion was always respected.

"I was about to agree with Bell, as far as his statement goes," replied the ancient Arkonide, "but I wanted to point out that the loss of our *Kublai Khan* has been more or less counterbalanced by a victory of sorts. The last traces of any data have been destroyed which would have led the robot Brain to any clues regarding the position of the Earth. There is no Topide living today who took part in the fighting at the time of the war in the Vega sector—at least none who still knows that he was there. True, we lost the *Kublai Khan* ..."

"Bell was covering more territory than that," Rhodan cut in, although not contradicting. "He was thinking

of the overall situation. And that is certainly clear in the entire galaxy there are three power factors. The first of these you might say is the Druufs because they're going to constitute a menace for another 12 months or at least while the overlap front exists between the two time-planes. Then comes our undying titan, the robot Brain of the Arkonide Empire. It's true that at the moment he is sufficiently occupied with the Druuf invasion; but the day will come when he can turn his baleful attention to what is presumably his main mission in life—that is, to find us and bring us under his soulless domination. All of which marks us as the third factor."

At Rhodan's right sat another Arkonide. He was younger than Khrest, at least in outward appearance. Actually, Atlan was more than 10,000 years old. He had been rendered virtually immortal by means of his cell activator, which had been given to him by an unknown entity in ancient times. He had lived on Earth since the sinking of Atlantis and had become Rhodan's best ally. Or at least this relationship would prevail as long as his former homeland—Arkon—was being ruled by a robot brain.

Atlan spoke up loudly and clearly: "I'm afraid there is only one answer to the situation: we have to eliminate the robot Brain!"

This statement from an Arkonide came as a strange sort of shock but aside from that it was also practically unfeasible. The mighty Regent of Arkon was surrounded by an unassailable security network that protected him from all outside attacks.

But-what about attacks from within..."

Rhodan swiftly followed this train of thought. "We still only have seven super battleships of the *Titan* and *Drusus* class. We have lost one of our two teletransmitters, which can't be replaced. Our space fleet is large but by comparison with Arkon's power it is negligible. So how can we attack Arkon, unless it be from within?"

"From within?" echoed Atlan reflectively. His reddish eyes brightened. "Perhaps that is the solution."

At Bell's left sat a man who also had red hair. This was merely a coincidence and otherwise Capt. Hubert Gorlat could be taken for the unprepossessing type of everyday person. At least from outward appearances. Actually, Hubert Gorlat was an intelligence expert in Solar Security and was the direct assistant to Mercant. His special capacities were considerably greater than he would have led anyone to assume at first glance.

"That just might be up my alley," he said with attempted casualness but his voice trembled with eagerness.

Rhodan smiled. "I'm the one who called this conference together and you can rest assured that no one is sitting at this table just by chance." He looked at each man present, one by one. "So you're not going to be deprived of your share of duty, Gorlat."

"You mean you have a plan?" inquired Bell with sudden new interest. His ruddy complexion took on an even redder glow and some of his hair stubble began to stand up again.

"It's going to develop from the present meeting," Rhodan explained, thereby inferring that a contribution was required from each of them. "First, let's lay out the facts, once and for all. The Topides will no longer be able to give the Regent any clues as to the galactic position of the Earth. Nevertheless, the Regent will find us one day, just as soon as he sees no more danger in the Druuf situation and can concentrate on us. Nothing could hinder such a discovery then because the Arkonide Imperium has united and acquired new

strength. Someday a ship will stumble across the Earth and radio the coördinates to Arkon. And then—ah yes, what then?"

Nobody volunteered an answer.

Finally the aged Khrest expressed himself gravely: "We would not survive the resulting attack," he said. "There's no doubt about that. Arkon would destroy Terra, although the two empires together could be lords of the universe. So the madness of former Earthy political leaders would be repeated on a cosmic scale."

"Your recommendation, Khrest?" Rhodan spoke the challenge factually and calmly, although a storm raged within him. He betrayed none of this by tone or expression.

Khrest sighed. "Am I supposed to have a suggestion? Well, perhaps I could give a hint or two, from which a recommendation might be constructed. For example: who is our opponent? The Arkonides? No, not those who are governed by the robot Brain. Our enemy is only the Brain, the Regent of Arkon! So it's him we must eradicate if we want peace with Arkon.

"Now the robot Brain was conceived of and built by Arkonides. It was only made Regent finally as the vitality and drive of the Arkonides began to fade. *But at the time* they built it they were still their bold and noble selves of old. Here is a point that I would like to emphasize as a possible key to success. Because I consider it to be completely out of the question that those scientists who constructed the Regent would not have installed some kind of safety device.

"Let's be logical, after all, gentlemen. The Arkonides constructed the robot Brain so that it could take over rulership of the Empire in case they themselves should degenerate and thus become unfit for leadership. We have to give them credit for recognizing the possibility of their own weaknesses. But by the same token we can surely presume that they were also shrewd enough not to just turn themselves over to the mercies of a positronic brain without any recourse. They had to retain the hope that someday there would again be capable Arkonides. And if so, an provision must be made whereby such regenerated Arkonides might take over the government once more. Therefore, I believe it may be clearly deduced from this that a failsafe circuit must exist, which it is expedient to find. Do I make myself clear?" He looked about him searchingly and was met with inspired looks and glowing expressions.

Rhodan nodded to him. "Absolutely, Khrest. We understand what you mean. From that it would seem that the only problem facing us is to find out what this safety device looks like and how it is operated. Do you consider it a simple task to discover that?"

Khrest became a bit uncertain. "Not simple, by any means—but feasible."

Gorlat was the one who remained unmoved and factual. "Before we get all involved in that part of it, we should first figure out if it's possible at all to even approach the Regent."

Atlan suddenly entered the discussion again. "I'm inclined to go along with Khrest's line of thinking. The main thing is, we're firmly convinced there has to be a safety circuit. This possibility I wish to confirm, quite definitely. There *is* such a failsafe! So with that it is possible to eliminate the robot Brain without any fighting but by means of cunning alone and thus liberate the Arkonide Imperium from the power of its mechanical dictator!"

"The only question is," cautioned Bell, "How do we get to Arkon before we get blown to atoms?"

"That's what this meeting's for," answered Rhodan and he turned with visible interest to Atlan. "So you're completely convinced—along with Khrest—that such a safety circuit exists?"

"Completely, Barbarian!" replied Atlan. He used his favourite form of address for Rhodan, which was more out of old tradition than mockery. "Back in those days, 10,000 years ago, was I not an admiral of the original Arkonide Empire? Admittedly we were not thinking then of building a robot intelligence or of relaxing and letting it take over the task of rulership—yet at least in theory there were such ideas. Whenever such plans were discussed, I recall that the main item *was always* the idea of having some sort of safety device that would enable the right man, at the right time, to reprogram such a giant brain."

Rhodan nodded pensively. "That's the point: by *theright* man! And who would be the right one?"

Once more, as often happened with such delicate questions, the answer was silence.

Rhodan smiled as he looked around the table. "We should be very grateful to Khrest and Atlan for expressing their views on this. They happen to coincide exactly with my own suspicions. So I'm going to share with you something I've kept secret until now. For some months I've been giving considerable thought to the destiny of our agent, Jeremy Toffner. I think he may be one of the key figures who might pave the way for us into the impregnable Fortress Arkon."

Arkon was 34,000 light-years distant from Earth, actually lying outside the galaxy itself, in star cluster M-13.

"Jeremy Toffner?" asked Bell, apparently trying to recall the name. It was no wonder, since the cosmic agents of the Solar Empire were scattered turnups the entire galaxy. "Who is he?"

"A man who was born on Venus. Capt. Gorlat will be able to produce all necessary data from the dossier files. But just now that's not important. Our main interest is *where* Toffner is located."

As Rhodan paused momentarily, Bell seemed ready to burst out of curiosity. "Alright—so where is he located?"

"On Zalit, fourth planet of the sun Voga."

The men looked at Rhodan, all of them obviously startled. Zalit was no more than 3 light-years from Arkon

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...and the Zalites were obedient subjects of the Regent of Arkon.

Jeremy Toffner already knew this fact when he was secretly set down on the alien planet and left to his own resources. Having been provided with excellent identification papers by Solar Intelligence, he was confident of being able to pass any chance inspection. Experts in the medical research department had so altered his outward appearance that even his own grandmother would not have recognized him. Anyone he encountered would simply take him for a genuine Zalite, who as a descendant of the master race had the same general appearance of an Arkonide—with certain exceptions.

The Zalites were outwardly humanoid in appearance and generally had slender bodies with reddish brown skins. Their most exceptional feature was their copper-coloured hair, which under favourable lighting took on the shimmer of greenish rust.

These people were considered to be the most intelligent of the colonial races under Arkonide rule and the latter's most reliable allies.

It had not been very difficult for Jeremy Toffner to become submerged in the vast population of Tagnor, consisting of some 30 million persons. Tagnor was the capital city of Zalit, covering an area that would have been equivalent to an entire state on Earth. Since the overall planetary population had greatly exceeded the 8 billion mark, a concentration of merely 30 million citizens was no longer regarded as unusual.

As on the planet Arkon itself, here in Tagnor the typical funnel-shaped architecture predominated. Below at the 'spout' end of each building was the entrance, which led the visitor into a completely isolated world. The living quarters and various apartments were arranged in tiers around the widely flaring inner wall. This funnelled architectural form expressed the predilection of the Arkonide for individual privacy and seclusion. The Zalites had carried over this custom from their forefathers and retained it.

The largest cone-shaped edifice belonged to the government, at the head of which was the Zarlt. This Zarlt, or dictator, was subordinate to the robot Brain of Arkon and responded to all of the latter's wishes.

Even though Toffner could manage to escape the attention of the numerous guards and sentinels here, nevertheless he could never rid himself of a lingering uneasiness. He was located too close to the lion's den. Arkon was that brooding lair and it was way too close. If he were to be discovered, it would probably happen so fast that he wouldn't have a chance to destroy his secret data. Perhaps he wouldn't even have a chance to kill himself in time to avoid a hearing and examination which could have the most dire consequences for the Earth.

The super civilization of the Zalites manifested itself now in a reversion to forms of barbarity and savagery. Although not as degenerated as the Arkonides, they were still afflicted with that boredom which all perfection brings with it. They had to do something to escape it, and since there was an overabundance of technologies available to them, they misused their sciences by establishing conditions which had long ago submerged into mists of the past.

Jeremy Toffner speculated about these things as he settled himself in Tagnor. There was no officially acceptable business he might get into without at least attracting the attention of the perennially suspicious authorities. On the other hand, if he turned to any activity that was even partially illegal, he automatically came to know certain Zalites and even governmental agencies that did not adhere quite as rigorously to the letter of the law.

For example, the operation of the fighting arenas was entirely permissible and even encouraged by the State. Nevertheless there was an air of illegality about it that nobody would either confirm or deny. It was a rather curious situation for which Toffner could find no explanation.

He had taken up living quarters in one of the inverted cone structures but for the most part he kept himself in subterranean areas such as in the spacious halls and chambers under the principal arena. Down there he knew every nook and corner, every hideout and passage-way. And there also he had concealed the secret equipment that every cosmic agent of the Solar Empire was furnished, no matter where he

was.

The rather good-sized metal case contained the hypercom gear, which he used at set intervals to advise the relay station somewhere in space that he was still alive. By means of this hyperspace communication equipment he received his orders and instructions. As the sole Terranian on Zalit, he had only this one small tie to Earthly humanity.

Almost 4 months ago he had just obtained a permit from the authorities to promote and arrange mass battles between the bloodthirsty Hhracks and the voluntary gladiators. His prestige had grown at least in the eyes of those who made a livelihood from the fights. They had acclaimed him for his sudden rise to means and assured him high percentages off their winnings.

This was all to the good for Toffner. To live cost money, even here on Zalit. And the expense reserves he'd been furnished with were not inexhaustible.

That day before Toffner went home he had paid a visit to his secret chamber deep in the rocky substrata. His routine report was not due yet, but it may have been an instinctive hunch that warned him to check the place. At any rate he was not overly surprised to see his red signal lamp light up as he stepped into the room. It meant that a hypercom contact was desired from the 'outside'.

He hastily locked the door behind him and turned on the equipment. About a minute later his small view-screen revealed the face of a man who was unknown to him. The stranger looked at him curiously and smiled.

"You are agent Toffner—cipher ZV-4?"

ZV-4 meant: Zalit—Voga—4th planet.

"Correct!" he confirmed.

"The Chief wishes to speak to you—stand by for 30 seconds."

The Chief...?

There were only two men who were called Chief. Naturally, first of all there was the Administrator of the Solar Empire, Perry Rhodan. And then Mercant, head of Solar Intelligence. What did Mercant want with him...

A hot wave of alarm ran through him. Was it possible that by 'Chief' they actually meant Perry Rhodan himself? He waited in front of the viewscreen... 20 seconds... then 30.

When he saw the face on the screen he knew that his suspicion had been correct. Perry Rhodan gazed at him searchingly. His cool eyes seemed to look through him, penetrating into the last corner of his being.

"Jeremy Toffner?"

"Yes sir," was all that Toffner was able to say.

"I am speaking to you from shipboard and this transmission is scrambled; nevertheless we will make no mention of names and places. The danger would be too great, especially for you. You have been living there for almost 3 years. Have you noticed anything unusual in recent days?"

Toffner was nonplussed. He answered hesitantly. "No sir... not to my knowledge. The Za... the inhabitants are calm, the government is normal; no unusual events."

"Perhaps I should rephrase the question so that you can see what I mean," Rhodan replied. "Not far from you is another solar system—you know which one I refer to. You must observe whether or not your world is being visited by the inhabitants of the other system—and what I mean is visits with a very specific and special purpose. If you see this happening, you will immediately advise us accordingly."

"I don't quite..."

"It's quite simple, Toffner. I want to know if the inhabitants on your world are being left to their own resources or if somebody is mixing into the internal affairs of ZV-4."

Toffner looked back somewhat perplexedly at Rhodan. "Naturally the people here are free but all the same they are watched over... not, however, by their own government. Am I making anything clear?"

"Quite! Thank you, that's about all for now. The main reason I made contact with you was to alert you as to the importance of your position—or perhaps what it may become. You are my advanced post in a war that hasn't yet broken out. Goodbye, Toffner!"

That had been his brief conversation with Perry Rhodan.

Toffner recalled that after the screen went dark he had sat there staring at it for at least another 10 minutes. From one instant to the next his destiny seemed to have been decided for him. His existence here on Zalit was dangerous—it had been so from the moment of his secret landing. But after all, between a passive and merely potential danger and one that was suddenly urgent and acute, there was a mighty difference!

From then on he attended to his apparent tasks but actually paid more attention to what was going on around him. At first he had not been able to notice anything. Ships came from Arkon at no greater frequency than they had the year before. They brought merchandise, work robots, technical equipment and synthetic food. And of course they also brought sentry details to relieve the soldiers already stationed at Zalit.

For the most part the officers were Arkonides or members of some auxiliary race but the troops proper were made up of robots more than living entities. From time immemorial Arkon had maintained this kind of troop mixture on its colonial planets, even though they were disguised as police or helpers. The Zalites submitted reluctantly to this slight yoke but they did not dare to provoke the anger of the mighty Regent of Arkon, who was in such uncomfortable proximity to them. Their memory of punitive expeditions made against them was still too fresh.

Rhodan's instructions had been clear enough. Toffner observed the troops from Arkon. But however diligently he kept watch there was no noticeable change in routine. Rhodan's suspicion seemed to be without foundation.

The periodic reports to Solar Intelligence continued normal and quite routine also. Days passed, turning into weeks and finally into months. Rhodan had not repeated his contact and Toffner had begun to think that they had probably only wanted to jolt him out of a presumed state of lethargy. Perhaps there was a need for isolated and lonely agents to get an occasional panic treatment like that. Hm-m-m... not at all an impossible idea!

Exactly 3 months after Rhodan's call, Toffner rented one of the standard travel gliders with automatic pilot and journeyed to Larg, a city to the East of Tagnor. Although the population of Larg was only 5 million, it was regarded as the commercial centre of Zalit. The monthly trade fairs that were held here were an attraction for modern caravans, wealthy merchants, swindlers, confidence men—and the police.

Toffner obtained a hotel room and then visited the current trade mart, hoping to keep an eye open for items suitable for future gladiator fights. The animal market was as profuse and variegated as ever and only a few hours passed before he had submitted a number of orders. He paid cash for his purchases since most of the tradesmen were known to him. After the completion of transactions it was customary to celebrate them, so it was not unusual that Toffner should find himself in some lively and colourful company along toward evening, or that he should land in a noisy tavern where it was customary to consume large quantities of the local wine.

Toffner's hypno-schooling on Terra had enabled him to speak a pure Zalit dialect, which was actually Arkonide with a slight accent. He was conversant with even the finest nuances of expression.

"Hey, Garak! You back in Larg again?" The shout came to him across a room that was crowded with merchants and buyers and all types of tradespeople. Some-where in a corner someone was singing a sad song though nobody seemed to be listening. "Bought up some new attractions, did you?"

"You guessed it!" Toffner called back.

Toffner concentrated once more on the conversations of the men at his own table.

"...something that shouldn't be very good news to any of us!" complained Markh, the animal supplier. "It looks as though some kind of big revolution or something has broken out all over the galaxy and there'll be a big demand for troops to fight it. I've got no stomach for getting packed into a spaceship..."

"The way you do with your animals, right!" interjected somebody, trying to be funny. But nobody laughed.

Markh continued without paying any attention to the snide remark. "I've heard tell that new commands are being formed every day. Of course it's on a voluntary basis but I'm thinking there's a slight shove behind it from the Zarlt—or better yet, it's a slight shove he passes along after getting a push from Arkon."

Everybody talked at once and reiterated their opinions. Nobody seemed to be in sympathy with the war in the distant Milky Way.

Hhokga, the wealthy fabrics merchant, stated his opinion. "Things are going well for us on Zalit and nobody is threatening us. Not one of our merchant spaceships has ever been attacked. What does Arkon's war have to do with us? I, for one, will never go in as a volunteer!"

"Nor I!" chimed in another, until all had expressed their support of his stand.

When there was a lull, Markh said: "I'm afraid they'll soon be running short of volunteers and then you'll see things get compulsory around here! There'll be forced conscription of troops! This I fear, my friends."

Toffner was annoyed at having missed the first part of the conversation. He asked: "What the devil are

you talking about, Markh? You mean there's war?"

The animal trader stared at his best customer in some surprise before he answered: "You'd better keep an eye on things happening in and around Tagnor or one of these days the events are going to take you by surprise. Don't you ever read the papers? The government's putting out calls every day for voluntary enlistments in the spacefleet. So then what happens to the poor devils? They climb on board an Arkon robotship and go off to nowhere and are never heard from again!" He stopped suddenly and looked toward the door.

Toffner paled underneath his tinted skin. Two uniformed Zalites had entered the tavern and now looked about challengingly as though they were searching for somebody. The conversations at other tables ceased abruptly. Everyone was staring at the Dictator's police, and they all seemed to have a guilty conscience.

But when the two officers turned around and went out again the sudden atmosphere of relief was almost palpable.

Markh emitted a deep sigh. When he spoke, it was in a lower tone. "They spy on us everywhere no matter where we go. I'm about ready to believe they're looking for victims. The Zarlt is Arkon's servant—and we were so happy without this protection of Arkon, which is ruled by *arobot* Brain. I ask you, friends, why do we need a machine to tell us what to do?"

Toffner leaned toward him and whispered: "Calm yourself, Markh! You'll land us all in jail if you keep talking like that! We're getting by alright, aren't we? Why should we be concerned if a few lunatics voluntarily enlist in the space navy so they can lose their lives on some alien world? As long as they leave us in peace.

"But they won't!" cried Markh. To Toffner's secret satisfaction, the animal collector remained stubborn about the subject. "Pretty soon there won't be any question about our *preferences* in the matter. They'll force us!"

"You're exaggerating!" By now Hhokga wanted to divert the conversation into safer channels. "For the time being they're only taking volunteers, so you can't complain about that. If it comes to something else, there's always enough time to do something about it."

"Pah!" snorted Markh angrily. "What could you do about *itthen*?"

From then on the conversation began to become tedious. The good spirits of the tradesmen had dissipated and each became immersed in his own thoughts. Toffner soon took his leave of them and went back to his hotel, where he sought to digest all that he had heard.

Was this more or less the kind of information Rhodan was looking for?

He decided to return that night to Tagnor and beam out a short report to the Solar Empire. The closest relay station would pick it up, wherever the communications vessel happened to be.

So it was that a month prior to the top meeting in Terrania, Rhodan learned that the Regent of Arkon was starting to add to or replace his robots with volunteer people of all subordinate or colonial races.

The robot Brain realized that he could not get along without the organic type of intelligence, meaning humanoid brains or otherwise, as long as they were living and not mechanical.

A small factor that was worthy of reflection and one which was not without a certain element of hope...

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Through the windows of his suite of offices Rhodan had a good view of Earth's capital city—at least in one direction. Terrania had become larger and was growing daily. Since this growth was not haphazard, the homes and buildings and streets followed the lines of long-range definite planning, always harmonizing with the overall aspect and character of the city. Terrania appeared to be organically integrated—and that it was.

Bell came in and joined Rhodan at the window. "It's like a city in a fairytale," he muttered somewhat dreamily, which was not at all like him. "Here all the threads come together and flow through our hands. The metropolis of an entire solar system. Actually, I think we can take pride..."

Rhodan barely turned his head as he interrupted: "We have to figure out how we are going to preserve Terrania."

Bell stared at him in some amazement. "What do you mean by *that* crack—preserve it! Who is going to..."

"Arkon! You should know that, because our meeting on the subject certainly made it plain enough. Either we destroy the Brain or he will destroy us. There is no longer any other alternative. A new treaty of alliance would be senseless because we know what the Regent is planning. And he cannot be persuaded to change. Have you given some thought to ways and means?"

Bell was somewhat embarrassed. "To level with you—no. I thought there was still some time."

"We don't have any time!" Rhodan looked out and down again at the city stretching out before him to the horizon. Somewhere out there the great desert began, traversed today by avenues and streets. "The robot Brain has more time than we do and yet he's accelerating his efforts. I believe we have to take action."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Our meeting served to strengthen my decision to be the aggressor with Arkon. Our monster genie, the robot Brain, happens to have a magic weak spot: the hidden failsafe device! If we can find that, the Regent will be vanquished."

"That's not going to be easy," cautioned Bell.

"Easy?" Rhodan smiled fleetingly but sobered again immediately. "I would say it's almost impossible! At least the first stage of the problem. Reports from our agent in that area indicate that it has become impossible to penetrate the ring of fortresses around Arkon. So force is not the answer. Not even the teletransmitter can break through those energy fields. If we are ever going to get into Arkon, it can only be by legal means."

"Legal! You mean, with the Regent's permission? Hm-m-m. I wouldn't be able to figure..."

"I don't know any way, either, as yet," confessed Rhodan gravely. "But we're sure going to find one!"

Bell made no reply. Thoughtfully he looked down at the hustle and bustle of the city, at the broad avenues filled with automatically guided vehicles, the police hover-cars gliding here and there above them and the swarms of humanity pressing through the business quarters.

He was about to add a comment when the silence was interrupted by a shrill ringing sound. Almost in one leap, Rhodan reached the switchboard that took up an entire wall. He flipped a small switch down and the viewscreen there brightened up. A man's face appeared.

"Message for the Chief! Message for the Chief! Message for..."

"Chief here!" Rhodan cut in impatiently. "What's the matter?"

The man's face hardly changed expression. "You have a radio connection with Venus, sir. Marshal Mercant is there at the present time."

"I know that. Connect me with him!"

It was not 10 seconds before Mercant with his thinning crown of hair became visible on the screen. The Chief of Solar Intelligence had remained young because he had received the same life-prolonging biological treatment as Rhodan and Bell.

"Glad I got through to you," he said with satisfaction. "I was going to wait till the *Burma* got there but then I thought maybe it'd be better for you to know what's going on."

"The *Burma*?"

As though it were possible for Rhodan to have forgotten, Mercant went on as though to refresh his memory: "The *Burma* is stationed close to the overlap front between our universe and that of the Druufs and it's operating as a relay station for our agents. One of my men informs me that he has a report for you personally. The *Burma* will be landing in Terrania in a few minutes. That's what I wanted to tell you. Other than that, how's it going, sir?"

"Thank you," replied Rhodan. He did not seem inclined to answer the question. "We'll be seeing each other in a few days. Till then, try to keep the saurians off your back."

Mercant understood and cut off. The screen darkened.

Bell had come away from the window. "What do you think that means, Perry? The *Burma* —is she connected somehow with our plans regarding Arkon?"

"Perhaps, Bell. I don't know. She's carrying a special message or report for me. From whom? From Arkon? If so, why does it have to be delivered to me personally? I'm sorry but I can't answer your question. We'll just have to wait."

"Mercant said the *Burma* is going to land in a couple of minutes. He ought to know, even if he's on Venus just now,"

Rhodan was ready to leave. "Fresh air will do us some good. Are you coming along with me to the spaceport?"

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For three weeks after the trade fair in Larg nothing happened other than the fact that Toffner had been able to find proofs of assertions made by Markh the animal dealer. It was true that the Regent's transport ships left Zalit almost daily now, taking loads of volunteers to Arkon.

However, by the end of the 4th week—it happened!

Two super battleships measuring over 4500 feet in diameter landed at the Tagnor spaceport along with a larger number of giant transport vessels. Out of both giant ships flowed an army of fighter robots, metallic monsters 10 feet tall, and these soon formed themselves in platoons and companies. The gun turrets in the weapons ring around the equatorial region of both warships were turnable. Powered by Arkon energy-cumulators, they rotated slowly and menacingly in all directions. But then, just as the metal army had marched into position, it suddenly seemed to freeze into complete immobility. Somebody had deactivated the robots.

This 'somebody' soon made himself known.

Unmistakable in his arrogance, as well as by his magnificent uniform that was overladen with rank insignia and orders of merit, an Arkonide official set foot on Zalit and demanded to be taken at once to the palace of the Zarl.

Even Toffner did not know what happened there or what was discussed but the events of the following days spoke for themselves.

The Zarl issued a proclamation to the populace in which all young men were summoned to report to the examining commission of Arkonide Admiral Calus. Registrations would begin first thing in the morning. Anyone refusing this summons would be subject to the severest penalties.

The proclamation was published in all daily newspapers and also regularly repeated over television channels. Everybody was made aware of it and there would be no excuses. A schedule and time limit was established so that appearances before the commission were to take place according to considerations of profession and age.

Jeremy Toffner figured that he still had 10 days before he would become subject to penalty—10 long days on Zalit, yet so frighteningly short!

Now this evening as he hurried through the streets of Tagnor en route to his hideout, he frequently noticed groups of people in heated discussions. Their conversations switched to banalities as he passed but he was not deceived. He knew what people were talking about.

He sent out his alarming report and requested new instructions. As a precaution he turned on the automatic recorder. If any message were to come in during his absence, it would be tape-stored in coded form. Then at any time he could play it back and by this method he would not miss any transmission that

came in unscheduled.

Then he left the room, locking it carefully behind him and causing a wall of natural-looking rock to slide into place before the door. Even the jaundiced eye of the most zealous police agent would never discover the small fissure that was left, as it, too, was jagged and uneven.

He moved as swiftly as he could through the dimly-lighted passages in order to reach the surface. If he were caught here he might have a few questions to answer but that was not the worst that could happen. Down here below were the animal cages, the locker rooms and the gladiators' living and training quarters. It was after all in the province of his profession to check around in these areas to see if everything was alright. Nevertheless he wanted as much as possible to avoid any contact with the authorities of Tagnor.

Unchallenged, he reached his apartment in the funnel-shaped building. No one stopped him, even though he had noticed more police patrols in the city than normal. It was no wonder, considering all the minor demonstrations he had seen before.

He took the key out of his pocket and was just about to shove it into the lock of his door when a shadow emerged out of the darkness of the hall. It came closer and stopped beside him. Toffner was scared half out of his wits.

Had they found his trail? Had his game here come to an end?

"Take it easy, Garak—it's me!"

Toffner heaved a sigh of relief, recognizing the voice of Markh the animal dealer—his business friend! "You gave me a shock there!" he answered, offering his hand. "Why were you waiting here for me? You ought to know where to find me every day."

"Let's go inside your apartment, Garak. What I have to tell you is not meant for alien ears."

Toffner sensed the urgency in the other's voice and asked no further questions. He began to suspect that this coincidence might be favourable to him even though his situation was starting to become hazardous. He would have to try to unite both elements of fortune and danger to his best possible advantage.

He opened the door swiftly and permitted the animal dealer to enter. Then he carefully locked it again and made sure that no one had bugged his place during his absence. This was a nightly ritual, a vital routine. Markh watched him silently.

"Everything is clear. Let's sit down." Toffner looked at his friend inquiringly. "What made you come here, Markh? Here there's just the two of us, so speak your mind. I presume you didn't come here at this time of night without a good reason—certainly not just for amusement."

Normally ruddy and deeply tanned by the Voga sun, Markh's face was remarkably pale although still darker than that of a European after 4 weeks on the Earth's equator. It was just that the coppery tone was lacking that was typical of all Zalites. In his eyes was a harried look. Markh must have been frightened by something.

But by what or why? The registrations wouldn't begin until morning.

"Have you seen the ships at the spaceport?" It was a question that Toffner merely answered with a nod

of his head. "I knew all the time that it would come to this. Now they'll drag all the able-bodied young men away! They're fighting a war they can't win or they're building up for a major attack against somebody who seems to be stronger than Arkon. And we're supposed to join up and help with the fighting!"

"I figured it that way, myself, more or less," offered Toffner with cautious reserve.

"So... ? What will you do? Go with them and die?"

"Who says they're going to take us?" Toffner sought deliberately to stir up controversy in his friend so that he could obtain the information he needed. "Maybe it's only a routine investigation of potential reserves in case of crisis."

"So that's why they need a robot army?"

"Well, maybe not—but you know Arkon loves to demonstrate its power. At the same time, don't those robots prove that the Imperium isn't in danger? If it were, actually, how could the Regent spare his troops?"

Markh held to his stated suspicion. "I said—they're building up for something. In that case the robots aren't needed now but will be later. And we're to go along and join them."

Toffner pondered this. "Let's assume that your suspicions are confirmed—what will you do about it? Will you resist them and take the risk of getting shoved in front of a battery of Arkonide energy guns?"

"Does it make any difference at all where I die, whether here or slightly later on board a ship somewhere between a bunch of soulless robots?"

"You *will* risk it?" Toffner watched Markh questioningly, and when the animal dealer nodded, he added: "Why was *I* the one you came to? How could I help you? My deadline is in 10 days and there's no doubt they'll find me fit for service."

Markh leaned forward. "I got to see the proclamation just a few hours ago. My call time is in just two days, Garak! Think of it—two days!"

"And?" Toffner acted very unconcerned but inwardly he was in a turmoil. Was this finally a chance to win over true friends and trusted confidants after three years of undercover work—or was he at the end of his rope?

"And! Man, I'm not going over to the Arkonides! I'd rather live down in the catacombs under your arena, hidden and outlawed, hounded by the police, a prisoner of my own will to freedom! Now do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

Toffner understood only too well. Naturally the animal dealer knew there was only one way to elude the clutches of the draft commission: he had to hide himself where nobody could find him. What could be more suitable for that than the catacombs under Tagnor? Many of them were ancient and partially clogged up or caved in as well as half forgotten. Only a small portion of those vast subterranean labyrinths served as fighting arenas.

"In the caves under the arena?" Toffner repeated the thought in order to gain time. "What do you expect from that? You certainly can't spend the rest of your life without the sun and in total isolation from men."

"Nor do I intend to, Garak. One day the Arkonides will go away again, after they have enough troops. Then I can come out of my hiding place and begin a new life. The Zarlt's police won't bother about me any more, once this Calus character is out of the picture."

Toffner had misgivings. "I don't know if I should agree with you or not. A lot of people will have arrived at the same idea as you have. When the influx of recruits dies down, there'll be a search for those Who are missing. And where would they logically begin? In the catacombs!"

Markh did not answer immediately. He sat there in grim silence and seemed to stare at nothing but Toffner could easily tell that he was already regretting the fact of having confided in another. However, after some minutes, the animal dealer looked directly at him again.

"We've always worked well in our business ideas and we are friends. If I ask you for a favour, will you help me? I have money, Garak. You only have to provide me with food—just basic provisions. Any small forgotten rock chamber down there is more preferable to me than the comparative luxury of an Arkonide battleship. Do you think you can hide me...?"

Toffner realized that he shouldn't overdo his little act. "Of course I'll help you. In fact, I might happen to know where I can hide you. But it's a little sudden..."

"I still have 2 days. I'll go back to Larg and arrange for somebody to run my business—an old man who'll never be drafted in any army. He'll say I'm off on another expedition for animals and haven't come back yet. You can see it is possible for them to overlook me or ignore me altogether. I'll bring my cash assets with me—and they are not small. Also I'm bringing an old friend of mine—somebody who has no more taste than I do for taking up arms."

"You've told others of your plans?" asked Jeremy, alarmed. "Wasn't that a little careless?"

"It's Kharra. You know him, too. We can depend on him to keep his mouth shut. So—we'll see each other in two days. Here in your apartment, at the same time?"

Toffner reached out and shook hands with Markh. "You can count on me. Maybe you two won't be alone in your hideout. To tell the truth, I'm not overly fond of the idea of saying goodbye to Zalit forever. Sooner or later, Calus has got to fly out of here."

Markh was pleased when he got up. He was enthusiastically grateful and departed with the promise that he would be careful not to arouse any suspicion.

Alter that, Jeremy Toffner was alone.

When he was finally in bed and closed his eyes, he had no greater desire than to receive a firm set of instructions over the hypercom.

No matter what, he was being drawn into a dilemma—a blind alley that seemed to have no way out.

After a few crisscross hyperjumps through the galaxy, the State class light cruiser *Burma* finally landed on the spaceport at Terrania. By this erratic method of approach the ship's commander was complying with standard regulations regarding security. No longer could one depend alone on the universally installed residual energy traps, or 'trace dampers' as they were called in the spaceman's vernacular, even though they served to neutralize space-warp phenomena following each hypertransition and made it impossible for sensors to track them. Experience had demonstrated only too painfully in the past that even such sophisticated equipment as this could fail—and then the camouflage was gone. However, any discovery of the position of Earth would mean the end of everything.

The *Burma*'s commander placed a general restriction on all ground leave for the crew members, basing it on the fact that they would be taking off again in a half hour at the latest. Then he summoned Lt. Behrends to him, the officer who operated the relay station for the Security network transmitters. It was he who was to give the report to Rhodan.

Only 5 minutes later, Rhodan and Bell entered the Staff section of the *Burma*. After a swift reception by the Commander, they followed Lt. Behrends into the Communications Central.

Behrends was still quite young for an officer but he was highly experienced and very reliable. He had already put in years of duty as one of those special operators who maintained contact with agents of Solar Intelligence everywhere in the galaxy. Rhodan knew him personally and knew he was dependable. A case in point was Behrends' present observation of security precautions. After all, this very important message could simply have been beamed out from the relay point. It was 99% certain that no unauthorized operator would intercept the hyper-beamed transmission—but to Behrends even this remaining 1% had represented too great a risk.

"Did you pick up this message yourself?" asked Rhodan when they were finally alone with him in the Com Room, which bristled with complex communications equipment and materials. "Who sent it? Perhaps our agent, Jeremy Toffner on Zalit?"

Lt. Behrends interrupted his activity to whirl around and suddenly stare at Rhodan as though at an apparition. When he could speak, he almost stuttered: "You... you... uh... from Toffner, sir? How come. I mean, sir, how did you know that...?"

Rhodan smiled. "So it *was* Toffner! I thought as much."

Behrends finally recovered from his surprise. "This I have told to no one and I have handled the information as secretly as possible. For Security reasons I even refrained from passing on the text of the report to Marshal Mercant—and yet you already know what it's about. I mean, sir, I don't understand..."

"It was only a hunch, Lieutenant—and anyway it's confirmed. But take it easy; I was expecting an important message from Zalit. Actually, for some weeks now."

Lt. Behrends seemed reassured, since he had apparently not made a mistake of any kind. He turned on the recorder and placed a finger on his lips, asking for silence. The transmission was somewhat distorted in spots. A few words were lost due to the sounds of interference but the context came through clearly enough so that the missing fragments were easy to fill in.

Rhodan and Bell listened almost breathlessly to the faraway voice of a man who was performing his duty

for Terra alone and completely on his own—a man who lived in the midst of an alien race of beings and didn't know from one day to the next if he would live to see another sunrise. These cosmic agents were held in high esteem because they were among the bravest men in the universe—and the loneliest.

"As of a few hours ago, Arkon has started a mass conscription of Zalites into military service for their spacefleet. There are no exceptions. An Admiral named Calus is in charge of this oppressive action. He is fairly young and surprisingly active for an Arkonide. The Zarlt here has submitted to his demands without resistance. Kosoka, the Zarlt, is a weak old man who will always kiss the Arkon boot. I am standing by for further instructions."

Rhodan listened further but Toffner's voice was silent. He turned questioningly to Behrends. "Why did you consider this report to be so important?" he asked. "The contents do not appear to be especially mysterious or even secret."

The lieutenant had recovered from his initial shock and now spoke with a calm deliberation. "That may well be," he said. "But Zalit is the farthest outpost for us and the most important. It cannot be lost and that's my main reason for taking special precautions. Then the report confirmed that Arkon is mustering troops—and incidentally we've also received similar reports from other colonial worlds out there. So I was especially concerned to take every measure necessary to avoid having the enemy find out that a Terranian is located on Zalit. When the Regent catches wind of our countermeasures, Arkon will develop such a suspicion soon enough as it is."

"Quite correct," said Rhodan. He regarded the young lieutenant appreciatively. "You have acted very prudently and earned yourself a citation. Of course we are going to take some action on this matter but by the time Arkon catches wind of it, as you say, it will be too late for them—that is, if everything goes according to plan. Which is something devoutly to be desired."

Lt. Behrends got up. "Would you care to hear the message again? Or may I erase it?"

"Erase it, Behrends. And get back to your post out there. Within the next few days I'll send you a communication for Toffner. Get ready for an immediate relay transmission. I'll want maximum coding and scrambled pulsing. It's of the utmost importance."

"I can well imagine," replied Behrends and he saluted as Bell and Rhodan left the Com Central.

When they met the Commander again, Rhodan gave him the order to take off within the next five minutes. He breathed a sigh of relief when he set foot on the ground outside. Without a word he climbed into the glider next to Bell. Soon the spaceport was behind them.

"So what now?" asked Bell. "Are our plans going to be speeded up?"

"The plans are over with, old friend. We have to execute them now. It's a good thing I've already paved the way. Today is the beginning of 'Operation Troy'."

"Nothing like playing a dark horse," murmured Bell tensely as he stared ahead at the swiftly approaching rooftops of Terrania. "There's one long shot that has to come in!"

* * * *

The combat commando group was in standby readiness. It consisted of 200 men, all well-trained and long since prepared for their mission. No one knew what the actual mission was to be but they all suspected that the forthcoming action would be of major importance. For months now the men had been subjected to intensive hypno-schooling which imparted to them everything that a Zalite could know or do. They spoke the Zalite language with a perfect fluency, understood Arkonide and were familiar with their technology. Among the 200 members of the special taskforce were experienced space pilots, communications men, scientists of all types, mutants and former Intelligence agents.

One of the commanding officers was Maj. Art Rosberg, a specialist in the field of matter transmission. He knew all there was to know about the construction of the transmitter that was to have a special role in the pending action, whatever that action might be. The somewhat gruff and grumpy major, grey-haired and stocky, was an expert in his field, although he wasn't too pleased about being placed at the head of 200 hand-picked men on such short notice. Together with his friend Capt. Gorlat, he supervised the training of the special troops.

This evening the two of them were sitting together again and giving free rein to their speculations—with the exception that Gorlat knew more than he cared to admit. Having regularly taken part in meetings and briefings between the leading men of the Empire, he was still duty bound to observe a certain degree of discretion, even in relation to Rosberg.

"I hope this show gets on the road pretty soon," grunted the major, discontentedly. "This waiting around gets a man pretty uptight."

"Better keep those nerves all in a bundle," retorted Gorlat grimly, "because I'm afraid you're going to be needing them very quickly. If I'm not mistaken, we won't have much longer to wait for a green light. This afternoon, you know, the *Burma* landed here. You know which one that is: the State class cruiser—she's a relay ship."

"So? What does that have to do with us?"

Gorlat didn't want to say too much, yet he used every opportunity to keep the major in good spirits and on his toes. "I don't know exactly myself, but Rhodan and Bell were on board for about half an hour. After that, the *Burma* took off again."

"As far as I'm concerned," declared the major, "the men on that ship are to be envied."

"That could happen soon." Gorlat didn't realize just how soon his prophecy would be fulfilled. "The actual training schedule has been completed on all points. All we're waiting for now is the order to start."

Even before Art Rosberg could answer him, the desk telecom buzzed. This was the standard visiphone device with a small viewscreen. Rosberg reached for it almost indifferently and pressed the 'on' button. Who could be calling him this late in the evening? At the most, somebody wanting a gate pass, or maybe...

He stiffened with a jolt of surprise when he suddenly recognized Rhodan's face.

"Maj. Rosberg? Is Capt. Gorlat with you...? Ah, there he is! Listen, Gorlat—*Operation Troyis* in effect as of now. Take care of what must be done. In 3 days you will take off in the *Drusus*."

Gorlat had jumped to his feet. "I understand, sir!" he answered, somewhat rigidly. "I'll wind up everything that's necessary." With a quick glance at Rosberg he asked: "OK to take the wraps off for the major here?"

Rhodan smiled. "You'd better do that, Gorlat. Otherwise he'll explode from curiosity and we still have to use him." The screen went dark.

Rosberg stared for a moment at the milky raster of the tube, then turned slowly to face Gorlat, who met his demanding gaze with a grin.

"What was all that supposed to mean?"

Gorlat waved a hand vaguely. "What he means is, sealed orders can be unsealed—I can tell you the truth about our mission. You've been walking around long enough racking your brains about it. But hold on a moment while I pass on some orders. We can't have any delays in schedule from here on in." He used Rosberg's telecom and began giving instructions out but this time dispensing completely with code names.

The 'wraps' were really off. From minute to minute the Major seemed to become paler as he listened, yet a gleam of excitement grew in his eyes.

The waiting period was over!

* * * *

The work now went on around the clock, day and night. There was an especially high pace of activity in the biochemical labs. Here the bio-medics were busy transforming the combat commandos, applying a new colouration to their eyes and their skins as well as their hair. Every hour now, a minimum of 8 completely changed Terranians left the laboratory and began getting used to their new appearance. It was well that Rhodan had issued a blanket cancellation of all leaves from the special mission's inclosed area because otherwise the various niteries of Terrania might have witnessed a number riots.

The next station after the biochemical lab was the clothing department. Every participant in the forthcoming operation was outfitted here with typical Zalite garments, tailored after painstaking research data. As was to be expected of 'mufti' or civilian clothes, each outfit varied somewhat in style or characteristic from the other. The wide trousers sagged or flapped a bit about the calves but they became accustomed to it. Bell had not been spared from this process any more than Rhodan and he must have tolerated a few well-intentioned pieces of advice because finally he had less baggy pants than anybody.

There was only one exception to the disguising procedure, which everyone could understand and agree with. The mousebeaver Pucky remained as he was. There was no possibility of changing him into a Zalite. He was just a giant mouse with a fiat beaver tail. Being only too well aware of the exception he represented, Pucky strutted proudly among the men and dispensed a priceless variety of wisecracks concerning the masquerade. Rhodan gave him a free hand because he knew the men needed a boost to their morale.

Two days later the last mission-briefing took place. By morning they would all be under way.

"So the two vessels departing will be the *Drusus*, with the teletransmitter, and the *California* with the five standard matter transmitters. The fewer ships we take into star cluster M-13, the less danger there will be of discovery. We have to extract a maximum utilization from the least possible amount of equipment. There can't be any slip-ups or we'll be fire bait (21st Cent. slang: our fat will be in the fire), gentlemen. Our lives are also going to depend on the capability of our agent Toffner. He has received instructions to set up a portable bearing transmitter for our purposes at a certain location on Zalit."

The combat commandos sat there watching Rhodan in silence. After a short pause he continued: "After making a few camouflaged transition jumps, we will reach the Voga System. That's when the *Drusus* will have to make a lightning-fast operation. Using the teletransmitter guided by Toffner's location beacon, it will transfer a regulation matter-receiver station to the surface of Zalit in the place we have designated. After that, the *Drusus* has to disappear as quickly as possible. The rest is strategically less complex. On board the *California* are 5 sending stations for the transmission of material. We are also on board the *California*, gentlemen, and that means all our equipment as well. The transfer to the ground must happen fast. In fact, we have to make sure we're on Zalit within 10 minutes after a 'go' signal because we have to expect that our approach flight will not have gone unobserved. So even while the *California* is being tracked and maybe pursued, we have to already be secured on the surface. You have all been briefed on what's to happen and why. The only thing left for us to do is wish each other luck. We'll certainly need all of that we can get. Any further questions on the subject?"

The 200 men—and one mousebeaver—only looked at Rhodan. Nobody seemed to have a question. Or was there someone...?

Maj. Rosberg's gruff voice interrupted the tense silence. "And what will we be doing on Zalit, sir? So we look like Zalites—that's fine. But what's the purpose and goal of the action? I'm assuming we're not merely going to Zalit to give the people a scare..."

"Of course not, Major," retorted Rhodan with a slight edge to his voice. "But don't forget that Zalit is only 3 light-years distant from Arkon. From the cosmic point of view, that is a mere cat's jump. For us, Zalit is the gateway to Arkon."

"Or the portal to hell," added Rosberg and fell into a silence of foreboding.

Laconically, Rhodan replied: "Perhaps."

* * * *

Jeremy Toffner stopped at the door before leaving. "This is what you wanted, friends, so don't complain. Nobody's going to find you here—that I can guarantee you—but it isn't exactly a villa. You have enough to eat and drink and you're not lacking in books to read. The only thing missing is your freedom."

"The supplies will last half a year," replied Kharra cheerfully, "and this Calus fellow won't be here on Zalit that long. The main thing is, they won't be sticking me in a uniform. I have never in my life ever cared for uniforms."

"Nor I," agreed Markh and he shuddered. "I'd rather live in this cave than die for Arkon. And what will you do, Garak?"

"I still have 8 days to make up my mind," Toffner told them, yet he was in a fever of inner anxiety, wondering what he actually should do in the week that was left. There was no way he could remain above. "At any rate I'm going to get some provisions together for myself. Then I'll try to search out some Zalite on the outside who will be able to send us word when the way is clear again."

"Go to Hhokga the fabric merchant in Larg," said Markh. "He's way too old for Arkon military service. And he's absolutely reliable."

"I'll look him up," Toffner promised. "Of course we have television sets that could keep us in touch with life on the surface but who will know if the commentators are speaking the truth? Under Arkon's persuasion they could deceive the Zalites who are illegally hiding out and everybody could be lured into a trap. That's why I think that a trustworthy personal ally is indispensable. Tomorrow or the day after I'll be back."

He signalled a goodbye to his two friends and stepped out into the passage. He carefully closed the outer door of stone and satisfied himself that the hideout was practically undetectable. Then he hurried as swiftly as he could to his own rock chamber.

When he entered, he knew at once that the urgently hoped for message had arrived in the meantime.

* * * *

Rhodan looked on silently while David Stern, Chief Com Officer of the *Drusus*, beamed out the coded message. Now in the same second, via hyperspace, the *Burma* would receive the dispatch and relay it onward immediately. At least within the same minute, Jeremy Toffner could have it in his possession, if he happened to be sitting at his receiver.

The waiting game was being played in a wide enough area. The *Drusus* and the *California* were orbiting the Sol System at a distance of 6 billion miles. Here Rhodan was determined to wait until the final signal from Zalit came in—which would be the confirmation of his instructions and the date of reception. Once that had occurred, only then would their mission even make sense.

The existence of the Solar Empire dangled by a thread.

* * * *

With a pounding heart Jeremy Toffner climbed the few steps which led to Hhokga's living quarters. He was now faced with the necessity of staking everything on a single card. If Markh was mistaken in his evaluation of the fabric merchant, all was lost. Of course, if Hhokga refused to help after being confided in, he could always be killed, but it would have been repugnant to Toffner to have to kill an innocent man.

Besides, he was old and defenceless. In any case he was a man who would not be taking any risk whatsoever if he merely abided by the existing laws.

Toffner had spent the previous night in Tagnor and made all preparations necessary for answering Rhodan's message as swiftly as possible. He knew they were waiting for his reply and that without his direction they would not be able to start their operation. On the other hand he was only too well aware of his responsibility in the matter and he was not about to give those waiting commandos a green light until complete safety had been assured.

Now tonight the time was pressing and so he had decided to combine his own plans with this visit to Hhokga and maybe kill two birds with one stone.

Hesitantly he pressed the buzzer.

For awhile nothing stirred inside. The fabric dealer lived in one of the standard cone-shaped buildings where each tenant lived in seclusion and enjoyed a maximum of privacy. He might as well have been living in a cabin somewhere in the wilderness because each apartment had its separate entrance. And if one took the stairs instead of the lift he was safe from the eyes of any curious neighbour.

Now he could hear footsteps behind the door. Was Hhokga himself coming to open it? Perhaps he lived here alone. Markh had said that he was not married, and the hired help didn't stay here at night.

The door opened and the elderly man stared at Toffner in astonishment. "It's you Garak—but here in Larg?"

"I just wanted to..."

"Come in, Garak, come in!" He stepped to one side to make room, after which he carefully closed the door again. "Certainly you haven't come here just to wish an old man a good evening."

"You're not all that old, Hhokga," Toffner parried as he took a preferred chair. "In fact, you're at the best age of all right now. Nowadays a lot of men would love to be your age."

Hhokga was not slow-witted by any means. He looked at Toffner attentively and then nodded several times to himself. "That's a matter of opinion, Garak. If I were younger... or let me put it in another way: I'd be happy to join up with the Arkonides or even be drafted by them—if it would make me younger."

"One is always filled with a noble spirit of sacrifice if he is offered some impossible gift in return, Hhokga. But the young men of Zalit think otherwise because they *are* young!"

Hhokga ruminated a moment. "It always depends on the point of view, my young friend. In other respects I'm afraid that I'm not yet old enough to escape the Arkonides in the long run. Do you see my point?"

Toffner got the point but did not share the merchant's pessimism. "You still have plenty of time, Hhokga. It'll be years yet before all the younger men on Zalit have been pressed into service. By that time you will have gotten still older. So I don't see any reason..."

"By the way, have you seen our mutual friend Markh in the last few days?" As Hhokga suddenly interrupted him his eyes were fixed very attentively on Toffner. "Night before last was our card night but he didn't show up."

Coincidence? Or a trap?

Toffner could see in the old man's eyes that he could never be a traitor or deceiver. He decided to stake everything on one card and draw Hhokga into his confidence. It had to happen sooner or later and now seemed to be the most logical time.

"Yes, I ran into Markh. He came to Tagnor to ask me for help. I hid him down in the catacombs along with the merchant Kharra, whom you also know very well. Neither one of them wants to report to the Arkonides for conscription. In fact, they sent me to you!"

Hhokga appeared to reflect upon this for a moment. Then his pale reddish eyes lit up. "You have faith in me—you and my friends. But why burden me with this liability? Why have I become an accessory to secret information which can be fatal?"

Toffner explained everything to him and concluded: "You will receive a portion of Markh's financial assets and you won't have anything to do other than deliver basic food and provisions at certain set intervals. But above all you have to advise Markh when the Arkonides have left Zalit—and especially this Admiral Calus. There's nothing else you have to do."

"I'd be a poor friend if I were to refuse," replied the old merchant and he offered his hand on the proposition. "You may rely on me. Just don't think that I'm in favour of what these high-nosed Arkonides are doing. Quite the contrary! But what can I do to fight it? Even a passive resistance is dangerous. However, if I can help my friends, that's the way it's going to be. But money I don't need."

Toffner was relieved to have reached this point of the negotiation but there was still another matter to take care of. It had to do with Rhodan's hypercom message. He was not familiar enough with Zalit, himself, to be able to locate a suitable place for the Terranian operation, even though Markh had given him some good descriptions of likely areas. So in this regard Hhokga would have to also help.

"I have one more request It's absolutely necessary that I locate a well-hidden, camouflaged place somewhere in the desert, west of here and between Larg and Tagnor. From the air I noticed that the desert in that area is divided by a ridge of high hills. On the western side of that ridge there are supposed to be some caves, according to what Markh told me. He also assured me that you were familiar with those caves because of excursions you and he have made there in the past. Would you lead me there?"

Hhokga shook his head. "Garak, don't be angry with me if I don't help you with that. It would hurt you as well as myself if anybody became suspicious and that's what would happen if I were to go to the desert. It wouldn't be unusual for an animal collector like Markh to visit that region but it probably would appear to be for an old man like me. However, even if I don't go with you I'm perfectly willing to give you information that will certainly be helpful. I know the caves of which you speak."

Toffner felt a great burden lifted from him. Perhaps it would be much better for him to go alone. It would attract less attention to leave the city without being accompanied by the merchant. If anybody should follow to check up on him he could say that he was looking for the animal dealer Markh, who was probably camped somewhere in the foothills of the desert region.

"That sounds like a deal," he answered. "You mean you can describe the caves for me so that I can find them easily?"

"I'd be glad to."

Toffner leaned forward and asked pointedly: "Why don't you ask me what I want to go to the caves for?"

Hhokga smiled prudently. "Garak, the less a man knows the better it is for his health. I'll help you to help yourself. Why you want to find the caves is no concern of mine. Wait here and I'll get a piece of foil so that I can draw you a map."

Toffner leaned back again. He was very pleased with the progress he was making. If he could find a suitable cave he could give Rhodan the signal by tomorrow. He reached into his pocket and felt the triangular shape of the metallic box. It was the bearing transmitter or location beam generator that he had to place inside the cave. Once activated, it was capable of beaming out a signal for an entire week, using a frequency that was known only to Rhodan. Except by some incredibly remote accident, it was impossible for anyone else to intercept the signal. And even then the interloper wouldn't be able to decipher its meaning.

Hhokga came back with a very thin piece of metal foil and spread it out on the table. In his hand he held a magnetic writing instrument.

"I presume, naturally, that you are going to fly there, Garak?"

"Yes, I've rented a glider."

"Good, then follow me closely here. This is Larg..." He drew a circle on the righthand side of the sheet. "And here is Tagnor." The second circle was larger and was located at the far left. Then Hhokga drew an uneven line down the middle, from the top of the sheet to the bottom. "Here is that stretch of small mountains that comes through the desert in this area. The two cities are about 600 miles apart. Nobody lives in that wasteland and certainly not in those desolate hills. Our ancestors did not believe it was necessary to cultivate that part of the country—nor is there any need for doing so today. Who for? The Arkonides?" He sighed and turned again to the map. "Just about here... you will find the caves. I'd say that the largest cavern could almost hold a spaceship inside it. Some of them show traces of earlier inhabitants but that must have been very long ago. Perhaps fugitives..." He smiled at Toffner. "Whatever you're going to use those caves for, there you will have the greatest possible concealment. No one will be able to find you."

Toffner realized Hhokga was misconstruing, believing they were going to conceal themselves in the caves. He probably even thought that there was a subterranean passage between the catacombs and the mountains.

"I'll find the caves," he assured the old man but said nothing else to enlighten him. "First thing tomorrow I'll start the search." The merchant invited Toffner to spend the night in his apartment. Toffner was happy to do so and he had a sound and restful sleep in the security of a private home. On the following morning he said goodbye and reached the parking area by taxi, where he found his rental glider waiting intact. Before leaving, he deposited a fairly large sum of money in Hhokga's account at the bank.

Once he had fed his destination coordinates into the robot pilot, the aircraft rose up gently and then climbed swiftly into the heights. Soon the city of Larg was out of sight and he could not surmise when the next time would be that he would see it again—if ever.

Monotonous and barren, the desert swept past below. Only rarely was it broken here and there by a rocky plateau or a dry creek bed. Once there was even a sparse woodland where he made out a herd of

animals that scattered wildly at his approach. So at least there was a source of fresh meat—just for future reference.

After that the long range of low mountains rose before him on the horizon. They were not actually as flat as such formations always seemed to be when seen from a high altitude. Toffner estimated that the peaks, on the average, rose up to somewhere between 6000 and 7000 feet. The clearness of the air seemed to shrink distances.

He checked his map and corrected his course. His speed lessened as the glider dropped lower. Gliding along closely above the peaks, he followed the gradual slopes of the other side. Somewhere beyond the horizon lay Tagnor.

The glider finally landed in a hidden basin in the hills. Prior to this, Toffner had ascertained by a local survey flight that a narrow embrasure led out into the desert. But from the desert side the canyon cut was hardly noticeable.

The valley basin was almost circular in shape, with a diameter of about 1500 feet. The monotony of the surrounding cliffs was broken by the dark mouths of caves.

He was at his destination.

After a 2 hour search he finally discovered the most suitable place. It was certainly not the largest of the available caverns but it was spacious enough for the planned purpose. Also there was no problem about the access opening, which was easily passable. A whole army could be quartered in this basin without any danger of discovery.

Toffner carefully removed the small transmitter case from his pocket. He activated it and placed it on the door of the cave, exactly in the centre so that there would be enough room to the right and left. Rhodan had expressly emphasized in his instructions that this was important.

Toffner regarded the metal case thoughtfully; it was now sending out its signal. Of course the transmission was being propagated at the relative speed of light but in the present case this was not vital. Because if Rhodan needed this signal so that he could locate the cave it meant he'd have to be in close proximity to the planet Zalit.

A new excitement caused Toffner to start trembling suddenly. It was the realization that he would not be alone for long now...

3/ ALARM IN THE YOGA SYSTEM!

The special commando unit's patience was put to a hard test. For almost two days the *Drusus* and the *California* plied their far orbit around the Sol System while waiting for an answer from agent Jeremy Toffner.

The entire combat group was already on board the *California*, ready to go into the next phase of the mission. The *California* was the light cruiser type with the super-fast propulsion, capable of uncanny

acceleration. Within 5 minutes it could reach the relative speed of light.

Of the commando team, only two were still on board the *Drusus*. One of them was Rhodan, who was waiting for Toffner's vital hypercom message. The other was Pucky, who had wanted to be with him. As soon as the signal was in, the mousebeaver planned to flash over to the *California* in a teleport jump.

Lt.-Col. Baldur Sikerman, the super battleship's commander, had just turned over the pilot seat to a younger officer in order to go with Rhodan and receive final instructions for the mission. The two men sat in a room that was adjacent to the Communications Central where David Stern monitored the hypercom receiver, waiting for the message. There was no danger that the sharply-pulsed transmission from the *Burma* would be intercepted by others. At the most, the entire message would only have a 10th of a second duration. Even before anybody could turn a tracer beam on it, the transmission would cease.

Sikerman repeated his instructions once more: "So I take a 10-minute head start over your action and do a hyperjump that brings me within one light-minute of Zalit. During approach flight and retrobraking, I locate the trace-beam transmission and get the coördinates. Our matter transmitter is in the radiation field of the teletransmitter, which will be aimed precisely according to Toffner's guide beam. Then, within approximately one minute, the teletransmitter will be activated and the matter-transmitter station will be beamed to Zalit. After that, I pull back the *Drusus* and secure."

Rhodan confirmed this. "That's all you have to do. Just make a short transition and wait for the *California* to join you again. She will have finished her part of the mission 10 minutes later. Then you and the light cruiser will go to the calculated standby position. Toffner will get in touch with you if it's necessary and when we need you. I think that about covers everything."

Sikerman made a wry face: "Everything? Very good, sir."

Rhodan smiled. "Everything as far as our plan is concerned. I will refrain from making any prophecies just now as to the outcome of the total action."

The door opened and Pucky poked his head in. "The signal is in, Perry. Stern is running it through the decoder."

Rhodan got up with an almost unnatural slowness. He nodded to Sikerman and followed Pucky. Suddenly the commander scrambled out of his chair and hurried after the other two into the Com Central.

"Another 2 or 3 minutes, sir," said David Stern. "Then we'll have it. The *Burma* was super cautious and double compacted the pulse-burst pattern." He worked at the decoding machine and searched for the right control adjustments. Then a humming noise started in the complicated apparatus. Register lights flickered, accompanied by a whispering of tiny relays and a clicking of delay-line circuits.

Rhodan waited patiently while Sikerman rested nervously on one foot, then on the other. Pucky stood slightly to one side, a small monument of imperturbability.

Finally, a paper tape strip came out of the machine. Stern took it and immediately handed it to the Chief Administrator.

Guide beam operating. Time 14:00.

That was the message—nothing more.

Sikerman took the strip and studied it. "Then does this mean we're set, sir?"

"I'm going now with Pucky, back to the California. You will begin in exactly 3 minutes to accelerate. You will reach your Zalit position by way of the 4 hypertransitions you were directed to use. Overall, that will bring you to Zalit in 2 hours." He checked his watch. "I will expect the receiver to be on Zalit and ready for reception by 17:00 Earth time. Here's luck, Silkerman—well all need it!"

Sikerman shook hands with Rhodan. Then he turned abruptly and hurried away toward the Command Central.

David Stern looked on as the little mousebeaver stepped close to the Administrator and took hold of his hand. Then the air around them began to shimmer and suddenly the forms of Rhodan and Pucky had totally disappeared.

Almost simultaneously the propulsion engines of the *Drusus* began to set up a howl. With its g-shock absorbers compensating for the awful pressure of acceleration the ship peeled away from its solar orbit and struck a course for the first transition point.

Rhodan and Pucky had already rematerialised on board the *California*. Exactly 3 minutes later, the light cruiser also hurtled outward into interstellar space.

The great gamble for a stellar empire had begun. But it was also a gamble of life and death...

* * * *

When Toffner shut off his hyper-transmitter and concealed it in its rocky hiding place, he knew that there wasn't anybody now who could stay the course of events.

He had returned safely to Tagnor in the glider and immediately sent out the message that had been agreed upon. When Rhodan and his men would arrive, of course, he didn't know. He also had no idea of how many men were involved or what they planned to do. He had simply carried out his instructions and now he waited. The directional beam had been operating for 80 minutes.

He left his hideout chamber and took a deliberately erratic course in the direction of his friends so that he could inform them concerning his conversation with Hhokga. Markh and Kharra were very pleased to learn of the fabric merchant's readiness to help. They urged Toffner not to delay any longer. They said he should complete his preparations and go under cover as soon as possible.

Toffner made the excuse of having to take care of a few matters yet and he hastily said goodbye. He knew that his two friends would no longer be much involved in the forthcoming events. They were now mere bystanders in an operation of galactic magnitude.

He gave a deep sigh of relief as he came up to the surface through the legitimate entrance and once more drew fresh air into his lungs. Down below in the catacombs there were still a few air-conditioning units in operation but they were far from adequate for the labyrinth of rooms and passages involved. In the course of time, the stuffy atmosphere down there tended to hang in the lungs like so much dust, making it

hard to breathe. It was something one had to get used to.

He had made all the preparations he deemed necessary. In the vicinity of his own hiding place there were a few large chambers which could serve well as shelters and workshops. He knew nothing of Rhodan's actual plans but he had enough imagination to more or less visualize the developments to come.

Perhaps, he thought, it would be well to return now to the desert and wait for Rhodan's arrival. His rental glider was in a parking area close to the arena. He started off briskly in that direction, suddenly filled with a sense of new urgency. He felt instinctively that somehow he must hurry in order to get there in time.

He had already turned the last street corner and was in sight of his goal before he came to an abrupt stop, startled.

A few solitary sentinels of the Zarlt's guard-watch would have been nothing to get excited about because they were generally no cause for worry. However, that which surrounded the parking place now was a full cordon of heavily armed Arkonide fighter robots. Among them moved a few uniformed officers of the Imperium. They were checking everybody who sought to reach the civilian aircraft parked in the area.

Toffner observed that some of the Zalites seeking entrance were sent away. On the other hand, some of the others were being grasped roughly by the robots and taken away. Perhaps they were Zalites who had been careless enough to try to make a business trip without proper identification?

Toffner smiled, reassured, and reached for his I.D. card in his coat pocket. Everything under control. He was a registered citizen of Tagnor, born on Zalit, and followed a legitimate trade. Among the Zarlt's soldiers he had many friends and patrons because they all loved the fighting games in the arena, though they might not admit it officially.

He simply continued onward toward the parked vehicles and soon discovered his glider in the place where he had left it. However, an Arkonide officer blocked his way.

On the man's face was the typical arrogance of his race. "Can't you see that it's forbidden to enter here?" he said peremptorily. "No one may leave Tagnor without our permission!"

It was an unexpected jolt for Toffner. More was involved here, apparently, than a mere checking of permits. Why shouldn't anyone leave Tagnor? Such a restriction only occurred in case of a revolution or a war. The present political climate of Zalit had reflected neither of these conditions.

War...? Well, so what? At least not here on Zalit!

"My business affairs require that I fly to Larg," he replied, taking out his I.D. "My papers are in order, officer."

The Arkonide took the credentials and studied them intently, after which he observed Toffner's face somewhat testily. "You operate the fighting arena of Tagnor?"

"Everybody here knows me—or do you doubt the authenticity of this document?" Toffner pointed to the I.D. card. "Just ask any of the soldiers over there."

"Why should I do that?" retorted the officer. He watched Toffner's expression, then continued. "When

are you going to shut down your business and come with us to Arkon? Do you know your recruiting date by now?"

Like a bolt from the blue it was suddenly clear to Toffner that he had walked right into a blunt, wide-open trap. This was no permit control setup. In effect it was a 'recruiting point' for the Arkonide armed forces.

As calmly as possible he nodded and answered with cold deliberation: "Of course I know my deadline... I still have 7 days. Why do you ask?"

Toffner's outward calm made a visible impression on the Arkonide. "Is that so—7 days? And what's your business in Larg?"

"I told you I have to take care of some of my affairs there. If I have to go into training on Arkon, somebody will have to run the arena for me. I have to give him some instructions and procure a few fighting animals. You can appreciate that even during a war—in case there really is any conflict in progress—people don't like to do without their entertainment and pleasures."

"Nor you your business activities, I see... No, that goes without saying. But what guarantee do I have that after 7 days you won't disappear somewhere and cause us to be waiting here for you in vain?"

"Disappear?" Toffner's expression was so genuinely nonplussed that the officer could not suppress a broad grin. "Where could I possibly disappear to?"

"Don't think you'd be the first one! There have been many already who have failed to show up for roll call, although they were summoned. All of them will be found and punished. Here. Your pass! In Larg you will report to the commander in charge of the recruitment board there. If you fail to do that you'll be in trouble—even before the termination of your 7 days!"

As Toffner took back his I.D. from the officer he concealed his sense of relief. Putting on a show of confidence and innocent righteousness, he passed the robot guards and walked over to his rental glider. He sensed the gaze of the officer on the back of his neck but he didn't look back again. With a slow indifference, he opened the cabin door, climbed in and then took off.

Robots, aircraft, Zalites and the officer—all fell swiftly away below him as he negotiated his exit pattern and struck an eastward course toward Larg. He climbed higher and kept a lookout for police or military aircraft but he wasn't able to see any. Far below him he made out a long, marching column... robots... robots...

Tagnor was like an armed battle camp. Toffner began to suspect that he would never be able to return officially to Tagnor again without running the risk of simply being shoved into service by the Arkonides.

He revved his machine to full speed and within 15 minutes he reached the mountains. After he had made certain that no other aircraft was in the area, he dropped with lightning swiftness into the depths. He pulled up at the last moment and made a gentle landing in the basin.

Everything was still undisturbed; there was nothing to see. Above was a circular patch of sky, cloudless and clear. From that direction only was there any threat of danger.

Suddenly, Toffner tensed, staring upward.

Wasn't that a metallic flash of light up there? Far up, probably way, way out. There—again! Then a brilliant burst of light that swiftly faded.

Maybe he was seeing mirages already... He shook his head and moved toward the cave where he had planted the directional beam transmitter. Just as he was about to enter, a figure approached him from the inner darkness.

A Zalite!

With a lightning movement, Toffner reached for the weapon he had concealed in his clothing. They had found his hiding place! All was lost!

He made a giant leap that brought him behind a boulder, where he resolved to defend himself to his last drop of blood, in order to avenge this would-be betrayal, whoever it might have been.

He slowly raised his weapon.

* * * *

When the *Drusus* emerged from its 4th transition, Zalit appeared as a large ball, no more than 20 million kilometres distant. Of course this was only as seen in the view-screens because to the naked eye it would only have been a brightly glowing star at the distance. For after all, one light minute is still a considerable stretch.

Sikerman was a model of composure. He knew that he only had a 3 minute head start. The *Drusus* began braking its speed immediately. The matter transmitter in the transfer field of the teletransmitter was activated. It had to be ready to receive, once it arrived on Zalit.

Rhodan only had this one TTM. He had received it while on the synthetic planet Wanderer as a gift from the immortal entity there. Since then they had tried in vain to duplicate it. The strange machine operated on 5th dimensional principles and was able to transfer objects to any desired location with no loss of time.

As for the matter transmitters, they had already been produced on Earth but they had a short range and only worked when both a sender and receiver were available. It was just such a receiver that the *Drusus* had to beam down to Zalit with the help of the teletransmitter. Rhodan required it to be in position there before undertaking his phase of the operation.

Sikerman smiled grimly to himself. If there were to be any hitches, it was not going to be his fault. He'd soon take care of his part.

An alarm shrilled through the Control Central.

"Two cylindrical ships on light-speed approach, sir! They're signalling an Arkonide code and request identification."

Sikerman retained his monumental composure. He looked calmly at the chronometer. "Let them have it!"

he said tersely. He still had 40 seconds. "All weapons!"

The *Drusus* outclassed the two scoutships by far. These could have been Arkonides or perhaps recruited members of a subject race. Before the aliens could begin their attack, a titanic invisible fist drove them back millions of kilometres into space. Their engines and power plants collapsed, rendering them helpless. Only with an effort could they keep themselves on course, utilizing emergency energy reserves in their storage banks—but they needed part of this in order to warn Admiral Calus that an alien ship of Arkonide design had penetrated the system and failed to give any identification.

Exactly 30 seconds after the *Drusus* made its appearance, a red alert raced thin the solar system of Voga.

With greatly reduced velocity, Sikerman dove into the atmosphere of Zalit and circumnavigated the planet until he received a signal from Stern that he was picking up the direction beam. Automatically the target tracer of the TTM. locked onto it before it was activated.

One second later the transmitter's transfer chamber was empty. The matter-receiver station was now somewhere on Zalit. If everything had gone according to the program, it would be sitting within 10 meters of the still-functioning direction transmitter.

The *Drusus* swung around and raced out into space again. It had come within 100 kilometres of the planet's surface.

But the Arkonides were alerted now. Their warning system was working perfectly. More than 200 robot ships responded to the signal from the two spindle cruisers—and the Regent of Arkon began to suspect that wherever a superbattleship of the Empire class appeared it had to be connected either with Arkonides or those accursed Terranians!

Naturally the robot Brain was not programmed for invectives but if he had possessed such human characteristics he would have indulged in such an expression now. So he had to be content with cold figures and soulless calculations.

Admiral Calus received the dispassionate order to fire upon any Arkon ship that failed to identify itself.

The command reached Calus at a time when the *Drusus* was already into hyperspace, leaving not the slightest trace behind it. But in almost the same second the *California* appeared and hurtled directly into the blockade formation of the alerted robotships.

When Rhodan beheld Zalit on his viewscreen, he was figuratively staring into the projector gun-muzzles of more than 30 light-cruisers and many more unidentified supporting ships.

The challenge for an identification signal went unanswered.

Following their instructions, the robots levelled a murderous barrage of fire at the unknown spherical spaceship which had emerged from hyperspace and was now attempting to penetrate their defence front.

It was as though the *California* had run into an invisible wall of pure energy.

4/ MUTANTS INTO THE FRAY

Zarlt Kosoka sat on his throne.

It was a throne in name only. In reality it no longer possessed any significance. With his pale reddish eyes, Kosoka looked down at the young officer before him.

The latter's bearing and tone of voice reflected the typical Arkonide imperiousness. The words were those of a person accustomed to giving commands. "It appears to me, Zarlt, that you do not understand the seriousness of the situation! You don't just arbitrarily delegate others to carry out my instructions. It's supposed to be your duty to personally concern yourself with these orders. Your own soldiers seem to be practicing a kind of passive resistance. Only yesterday they let a deserter get away!"

"Yes, that was a man," replied the Zarlt, "who was not even allowed to say goodbye to his family before he was to be shipped off to Arkon. Admiral Calus, you know I submit to the orders of Arkon because I have no other choice but I must express my displeasure with the methods by which Zalit is being depopulated."

"You have to obey if you wish to remain in office," retorted Calus coldly. "And above all you'd better remember that you are not to do the thinking. That department is taken care of by the Regent—and that includes all of us!"

The Zarlt nodded. "I know, Admiral. But what appears to be developing is that the robot Brain is no longer going to operate without human assistance in these conflicts. Why all of a sudden this big requirement for human officers and soldiers? He always made out with robot troops and crews before."

"The Regent is not an end in himself, Zarlt. He is not ruling for his own purposes. He operates in the interests of all of us. And now when danger threatens we must help him to eliminate it."

Calus delivered this statement without batting an eye. However, he prudently avoided mentioning that there were other reasons behind the robot Brain's inclusion of Arkonides and Zalites in his plans. He had simply come to realize that he could not get by without organic support. A stellar empire could not survive for long if only backed up by robot armies. Therefore an integration of humanoid intelligences with the electronic military forces of Arkon had become a pragmatic necessity, nothing more and nothing less.

By the same token it was also the first indication of defeat for the mighty robot Brain.

"Why can't Arkon be satisfied with volunteers?"

"Because there are too few who are willing to fight for the common Empire. The Zalites have become soft and weak, and on Arkon we are going to toughen you up again. The training period is short, actually, but it includes all important phases of weaponry and ordnance handling."

The Zarlt eyed Calus closely when he asked: "What kind of ships were those that attacked Zalit yesterday—or at least tried to? They were not of the Empire?"

Calus made a deprecating gesture with his hands which was intended to express his disdain. "Pirates or Terranians, who knows? They may have been trying to infiltrate their agents here or perhaps they just

wanted to test our defence readiness. Whoever they were, they won't come again."

The Zarlit was about to say more but was interrupted by the entrance of an Arkonide officer.

Calus responded indifferently to his underling's deferential salute, as though a recognition of his exalted position were to be taken as a matter of course. "What is it?" he demanded. "Why do you disturb me?"

"The recruiting schedule, Admiral! Today again more than 200 failed to appear. Their homes were searched but they have disappeared. Their friends and relatives have no idea of where they are."

"That is *their* story!" raged Calus and he walked back and forth in angry excitement. "There should be no consideration given to them. Families must be held responsible for the insubordination of these men. But where could they have concealed themselves?" He turned to the Zarlit. "Do you have an answer?"

The Zarlit denied any knowledge of the matter.

Calus thought awhile and then turned to the officer. "In the next few days I shall speak to the people of Zalit. I want all tele-stations to be prepared for a planet-wide broadcast. I think we will have fewer difficulties after that."

The officer departed.

Calus then turned scornfully to the Zarlit. "Incidentally, it has just occurred to me—why should Zalit actually need an army? There is no threat of revolution and the planet is under protection of the Imperium. So why soldiers here? I think we shall simply take the whole Zalite army, such as it is, and transfer it into the Fleet. Do you have any particular reflections on the subject, Zarlit?"

A slight silence ensued in which the two men, so dissimilar in character and outlook, proceeded to regard each other searchingly.

Then the Zarlit shook his head. "No, nothing to criticize there—naturally not."

Calus smiled his satisfaction.

* * * *

The defence screens of the *California* were so overloaded by the attack that there was hardly enough energy left to operate the weapons. Emergency power drawn from the accumulator banks flowed into the propulsion units so as to maintain manoeuvrability.

At the flight controls, Gen. Deringhouse strove to evade the ships of the enemy blockade. Ordinarily this would have been practically impossible but the *California's* main design feature was speed and mobility. It could outrun and outmanoeuvre the Arkonide ships.

Rhodan knew that his combat commandoes were standing at the transmitters waiting for his orders. Every second lost now could never be regained.

"Blast through!"

He had nothing more to say to Deringhouse—just those two words.

And Deringhouse blasted through.

Accelerating wildly, the ship broke sharply away from the attackers. It was almost as though it had made a transition jump. Some of the attackers were still able to pursue but even they fell back and their energy beams either fell short of the target or glanced ineffectively off of the defence screens.

Zalit grew swiftly before them. It did not make any difference where the receiver for the matter-transmissions was located, no more than it would have mattered to a normal broadcasting station where the radios were that were receiving its program.

Rhodan spoke into the intercom mike: "First combat unit—go!"

Almost 100 men stood in the 5 energy cages of the matter-transmitter complex. When Rhodan's command sounded in the speaker, the transmission impulse was given. It only required one second before all the cages were empty.

Somewhere below on the planet's surface, the 1st combat unit would rematerialise—precisely in that spot where Toffner had placed the directional beam device and where the receiver station was also located by now.

Somewhere...? Actually, a cavern which Harno had been able to visualize for him.

Rhodan waited 10 seconds for the rest of the men to get into position. "Second unit—jump!"

Then he got up and said to Deringhouse: "Wait exactly 5 minutes and then get out of here to your picket position. You'll find the *Drusus* waiting there for you. Clear sailing, soldier!"

"Yes sir!" answered the general. "Here's luck!"

"Thanks. See you later!"

Rhodan turned swiftly around and left the Command Central. He had to hurry to avoid any delay in timing. When he came into the hangar, the transmitter cages were just about reloaded with the last of the arms and equipment. The *California's* crewmen completed their task as he readied himself for the jump. He was the last member of the combat task force to make the daring transfer. The special gear and supplies would be transmitted with him.

He stepped into cage 5 and checked his watch. By now the second group must have cleared out of the receiver chamber down below. Maybe another 20 seconds...

The officer in charge of the transfer operation wished him luck.

"Thank you," he replied.

Another 10 seconds.

There was a sudden shrill of alarm sirens throughout the ship, followed by Deringhouse's voice over the

speakers:

"All hands, alert! We are under fire again by a strong attack force. Transition in 20 seconds! Transition in 20 seconds!"

Rhodan still had 5 seconds to go on his own timing. It was enough.

He grasped the transfer switch and threw it into position—and in the same instant he found himself inside the receiver cage on *Zalit*. He did not feel any effects of rematerialisation; the only change was in his surroundings. Where the smooth bulkheads of the *California* had been a moment before, he now saw the glistening rock walls and ceiling of a giant cavern.

Men were busily moving about in all directions and some of them dashed into the cage to take care of the last load of equipment. Rhodan quickly determined that everything had gone according to plan. In fact, the receiver was located in the best possible hiding place. The cave was big enough to contain them all and certainly it must be so oriented to the outside terrain that they could not be detected.

He stepped out of the energy-grid cage and discovered *Atlan*, who was helping *Bell* to supervise the unloading operation.

"So far, we're right on the beam!" said *Bell* as he barely eluded somebody moving past with a load. "I'd sure like to know where we are. *Toffner* didn't give us any details..."

"He'll be contacting us quickly now—that was the agreement," *Rhodan* answered, attempting to be reassuring. But inwardly he wasn't quite at ease. If anything had happened to *Toffner*, even if he was only being delayed, they would all be stuck here. "Anyhow, we're on *Zalit* and no one is the wiser. That, at least, is something to be thankful for."

Bell grinned and turned to *Atlan*. "How does it feel to be an admiral and yet be wearing the disguise of a *Zalite* who's going to be a soldier in the robot *Regent's* army?"

Allan grinned back candidly. "Certainly not any worse than a certain fat friend of mine who'll soon be toeing the line in a barracks yard."

"It's another piece of luck that I'm no human," chirped *Pucky* as he came waddling up to them. "Here's one body the *Arkonides* won't be drafting. There'll be no rookie drills for me!"

"They still won't lose the war without you," commented *Bell* and he looked at him curiously. "Where do you think we really are?"

His question brought the present reality back into focus. *Rhodan* ordered everybody to unpack the weapons first and get them distributed. In case of attack they didn't want to be unprepared.

In the midst of the ensuing hubbub of activity, *Pucky* suddenly cried out: "Outside—in front of the cave somebody's coming!"

Rhodan made a swift orientation and observed that the cave only had a single entrance. He shoved a small hand-beamer into the pocket of his civilian outfit, which disguised him as a typical *Zalite*. Brushing back his copper-coloured hair, he strode toward the cavern's exit. "I'll take a look to see who it is," he said, adding: "*Pucky*, keep in sight. You'll know when you have to take any necessary action."

It was natural for the mousebeaver to know this, for after all he was a telepath. One thought-signal from Rhodan would suffice.

Even though Rhodan was a true Zalite in the fullest sense of the word, by outward appearances, he nevertheless moved out promptly from the concealment of the cave as soon as he saw the solitary man approaching. By appearances this one was also a native of Zalit but the first thought-impulses Rhodan picked up confirmed his suspicion that he was looking at Toffner.

However, Toffner carried a weapon which he hesitantly aimed at Rhodan. It was a good indication that Rhodan's disguise was genuine. If he could even fool Toffner who had been living on Zalit for 3 years.

"Greetings, Jeremy Toffner," he said in English. "As you can see, you may save your ammunition."

A wave of relief washed over Toffner as he heard these words in his mother language. He lowered the weapon and replaced it in his pocket. "Thank God!" he exclaimed and completed the distance between them. "May I ask who you are? You look like a Zalite, you know..."

"I am Rhodan," responded the Chief Administrator and he offered his hand to the cosmic agent. "I believe we've met."

"Yes, of course—that time on Terrania when I received my assignment to come to Zalit. I never forgot what you said, that I would have to be a long time alone." Toffner glanced at the cave entrance where a number of men were standing and conversing. "Well, it looks as if the lonesome time is past." Meanwhile, Pucky mingled with the men, having realized that his special services would not be required. "Did everything work out alright, sir?"

"So far," Rhodan smiled. "How do we get to Tagnor? Have you been working out any plans for that?"

Toffner had only one excuse for not having done so. "I didn't know how many men would be in the commando group," he said. "I've worked out how and where you can all be sheltered in Tagnor but it's going to be a tough go getting into the city without being noticed. Guards are everywhere. Everybody is being checked, no matter where they go."

"Credentials are no problem."

"Just your I.D. documents won't be enough, sir. I have excellent papers, myself, but now the Arkonides have started simply grabbing off every man in the usable age bracket to make sure they won't try to escape the conscription into military service.

While Rhodan considered this, Maj. Rosberg and Capt. Gorlat came out into the open and began taking an obvious interest in their surroundings. Apparently they were pleased with the deep basin they were in, surrounded as it was by towering cliff walls. Inside the cave, all the weapons and equipment were being placed in order.

"So the problem is—how do we get into the city and set ourselves up in the hideout you've arranged for us? The matter transmitter can't help us because we only have just this one. It would be a hard task to get it to Tagnor without being conspicuous. Do you think we might get past the checkpoints under cover of darkness?"

"That might be possible but Tagnor is almost 500 kilometres from here. Any march through the desert would not go unobserved, sir."

"Of course. You have a point there." Rhodan looked up at the clear sky. The rays of the sun brightened the upper face of the steep cliff walls surrounding the pocket valley. "However, would you say we are fairly safe here?"

"Yes, pretty much so. Nobody goes voluntarily into the desert. Of course aircraft often fly over the desert and the mountains but they'd hardly notice this particular basin."

Rhodan made no comment. He turned his gaze speculatively toward Pucky who was waddling past Rosberg and Gorlat to have a word with the African teleporter Ras Tschubai. John Marshall, the actual mission leader, was talking to Bell. More and more men were showing up at the cave entrance. The main work of stowing the gear and securing provisions seemed to be nearing completion. The troops were waiting.

"Pucky! Ras!" called Rhodan. He excused himself and left Toffner to go into a side conference with the two mutants. "I have a couple of questions for you."

"Fire away!" said the mousebeaver. "But if you're going to ask what I think of this place, I'd say we're sitting in a first-class lousetrap!"

"Pucky is right!" agreed the African, grinning. "A deep basin like this can shield us from curious eyes, alright, but once we're discovered there's no way out."

Rhodan nodded. "That's why we have to make ourselves scarce. If the Arkonides start searching for the runaway Zalites who are dodging the draft, they'll certainly go through these hills with a fine-toothed comb. By that time we have to be in safe hiding elsewhere. But Toffner tells me that it would be difficult to get into the city past the control points. So what I'm going to have to ask you is this: how long would it take you to teleport all 200 men and the equipment to Tagnor?"

That was a very good question, for although Pucky and Ras were teleporters they were not without their natural limitations. It was entirely possible for a teleporter to carry two men at a time in a single jump but the strain on the nerves was of no small magnitude. This process could not be repeated in rapid succession without periods of rest. The recuperation periods would be absolutely essential. In this case the distance involved presented no problem: 500 or even 5000 kilometres made no difference.

Pucky smoothed down his fur in a casual gesture that may have been a way of covering his momentary embarrassment. "That's a real chore," he confessed. "But if Tako can give us a hand we might be able to handle it in one or two days. Do we know our target area?"

"Toffner will show it to us."

"Then it's no sweat. I didn't see any items among our equipment that might be too heavy. Ras and I can double up on the bigger stuff. When does the shuttle service begin?"

It was a relief to Rhodan to see how calmly the two teleporters accepted their assignment. Naturally they weren't just taking the whole thing lightly—that would have been irresponsible of them. But all the same.

He signalled Toffner to join them and the agent approached them curiously. He had already heard much about the mousebeaver but had not actually seen him before.

"This is Pucky and this is Ras Tschubai, both of them teleporters," explained Rhodan. "They will take us

to Tagnor. The four of us will make the jump first so we can get familiar with the locality. The others will follow later. I'm going to be giving final instructions to the men, so in the meantime you can be explaining to these two what your target area looks like."

Leaving Toffner alone with the mutants, he went over to Rosberg, Gorlat and Bell. The three men stood at the cave entrance where they could see the valley as well as most of the rocky cavern's interior. By now they did not appear to be entirely happy about their surroundings.

"Bell, you'll be taking my place for a couple of hours. I'm going with Toffner and Pucky and Ras to look over our quarters in town. In case of an attack here, no holds barred. Give them all you've got. Of course then our tactics will have to change. Maybe the Arkonides will think we're Zalites who are trying to dodge the draft."

"Why don't we all go together?" asked Rosberg.

"Because it's not possible. Toffner tells me that the control points are tougher to pass through than we figured on. But anyway that only changes our plans very slightly. I'll reconnoitre and make sure of the setup we have in Tagnor and then I'll come back. In two or three days, I hope, we'll all be settled down in the catacombs under the city."

The leavetaking was brief. Rhodan took his small hand-beamer with him and he did not forget to leave Harno behind in Bell's keeping. Then he went with Toffner Ras Tschubai and Pucky toward the valley's small exit canyon. Those who remained behind saw them disappear into the rock-walled fissure.

John Marshal had only read part of Rhodan's intentions in his mind. "So we're going to be carried one at a time to Tagnor if no better way can be found. Why don't we just stay here in the desert? It seems to be safe."

"It would be much harder to operate out of here than it would if we were sitting in the middle of Tagnor among the Arkonides," said Bell, looking up at the sky. "When in the devil do we get any nightfall around here?"

Rosberg had carefully studied the local details. "That'll be in about 4 hours," he said, "but by then the Chief will probably be back."

Bell remembered his duties as Rhodan's second-in-command. He went back into the cave and satisfied himself that all their gear was properly packed and stacked along the walls. Every man in the commando team knew exactly what he was to carry—if it became necessary. Weapons, bio-chem lab equipment, physics lab instruments, food supplies and special armaments—it was a considerable assembly of packages.

Bell was just about to make an individual check of the bundles when he was interrupted by Maj. Rosberg, Capt. Gorlat and Marshall, who came storming into the cave.

"An aircraft!" shouted the major, gesticulating excitedly. "It's flying very low over the basin and seems to be searching for something. Let's hope that crew doesn't get suspicious!"

Bell glanced at the special armaments cases nearby. It would be useless to try breaking out one of the portable rayguns and it would take too long to assemble it.

"Everybody keep out of sight—stay away from the entrance!" he ordered, while he himself went to the

opening. He cautiously emerged just far enough to be able to see the valley and a small piece of the sky.

It was a short-winged glider but its flight motion clearly indicated that antigrav fields were being used. The airship sank slowly until it almost touched the floor of the basin.

Bell hid behind a rocky outcropping and beckoned into the cave. "Ten men up here!" he called while making his own weapon ready for firing. "Be careful! We don't want them to discover us too quickly!"

John Marshall was among the men who crept forward. "How many of them do you make out?" he asked, as he came close to Bell.

The glider made a landing and the hum of the engine died out. Shortly thereafter a cabin hatch opened and four figures sprang out. They wore no uniforms. They were robots.

"The pilot's an Arkonidian officer!" Marshall reported. "I can sense his thoughts. This is a routine search, a pure coincidence that they've landed here."

"Just our luck!" grunted Bell. "But if they come our way we have to put them out of commission. Then what do we do with the pilot? If he escapes it'll be the devil to pay! They'll storm into this place with armies and bombs. OK, then *nobody* gets away!"

"André Noir!" Marshall spoke through a small throat transmitter and the Mutant Corps' hypno-telepath easily caught the signal. He crept up swiftly and sprawled next to Marshall.

"You called me?"

"If we knock out those robots, we have to keep the pilot from taking off. Can you handle it?"

Noir nodded. "I'll give it a try. Maybe I can get him to leave his ship. Later I'll give him a hypno-block and he'll forget everything. It's even possible to send him back to Tagnor with a false memory of what happened."

"Perfect!" said Bell as he concentrated on the approaching robots. One of them had come to a sudden stop and was drawing the attention of the others to what it had discovered in the sand of the valley floor.

Marshall knew at once what it was. "They've found our footprints!"

"Then it's just as well," growled Bell decisively. "That saves the agony of waiting around. Noir, do your thing now. We're going to take on these robot snoopers!"

The robots conferred with each other by means of their built-in transceivers. Their weapon rings began to rotate slowly as though seeking a target. Then they began moving again, but separately, since they had not yet determined their goal.

Bell thrust himself forward slightly and lifted his beamer. One of the robots was coming directly toward the cave entrance. "We'll all fire at once," he whispered to his companions, "so that they won't have any warning. We have to take them before they can switch on their defence screens."

It was perfectly possible to disable or destroy a fighter robot with a hand weapon if one was familiar with the more vulnerable places in the monster's construction. And if one fired his shot in time. Once the metal titans activated their energy screens they were practically invincible.

Bell raised his left hand. The men were well deployed into positions where at the moment two or three of them could keep any one robot under fire.

Bell's hand dropped and in that second a hellish cross-fire was unleashed. Their weapons flashed bolts of lightning that smashed through the armoured plates of the robots, penetrating vital parts and vaporizing them in an instant. Electronic brains operate with amazing swiftness but not after their master circuits have been obliterated. And such was the case with three of the robots.

Only the fourth one escaped destruction. It activated its defence screen which inclosed it in an invisible shell that neither matter nor energy could penetrate. And the it began to answer the fire.

Bell ducked, sensing a wave of heat behind his back. The robot's bolt of energy had struck the rock wall, which blistered into sluggish drops of lava. A second shot came much closer. From several sides came probing beams of gleaming energy, seeking in vain to break through the combat robot's screen.

"Betty!" Bell whispered the name in sudden desperation, realizing that if their one remaining telekinetic mutant didn't take a hand in the battle they wouldn't have a chance against the towering monstrosity. She was also a telepath and would be able to catch his thoughts. "Betty Toufry!"

Betty had become a young woman and had remained so. The bio cell shower on Wanderer had prolonged her life for 60 years. She picked up Bell's excited thoughts and comprehended at once. She hurried to the cave entrance and took in the situation at a glance. Three robots had been incapacitated. They lay motionlessly on the valley floor, half-melted down and utterly destroyed.

The fourth one, however, was marching straight toward Bell where he lay behind a rock sending her his distress signal.

There was no time to lose!

Bell could hear the heavy thump of the robot's feet as it came nearer. Why it had picked him out above all the other marksmen was a mystery that would probably never be solved. If Betty didn't make her attack now.

Suddenly the heavy footsteps were silenced. Somebody among the commandoes gave a yell but the tone was one of relief. Bell risked sticking his head out and what he saw caused him also to breathe a sigh of relief. Betty had heard his call and had known what to do.

The robot swayed. Then it lost its balance and crashed to the ground. While it sought to reactivate its screen, which had collapsed as a result of the fall, a large boulder rose up from the ground only a meter or so away and moved swiftly aloft as though raised by a ghostly hand. It paused exactly over the robot's head and then as though released by the same hand it dropped vertically downward. With the full impact of its momentum it struck the vital head portion of the monster and shattered its positronic brain. The robot slumped as though it had been a human being. It lay there motionless.

But the danger was not yet past!

At the first sign of hostilities the glider had taken off and started to climb toward the sky. But it stopped within 20 meters of the ground and hovered there. It was as though the pilot were wondering what to do next. Then, with a downward spiral, it landed again. The pilot clambered out of the cabin and approached the cave entrance with a strangely stiff stride.

André Noir rose to his feet near Bell. "I have him under control, sir," he announced with a slight touch of triumph in his voice. "His brain is easy to take over because the fellow seems to be slightly degenerate, mentally. Not much in his head to begin with."

"Good show!" enthused Bell as he also got up. He shoved the hand weapon into the belt of his civilian outfit. "Let's have a look at the character. Marshall, you work on him with Noir and pick up anything from him that may be important. Then we'll reprogram his memory and let him fly back to his base."

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to take over that glider and..."

"No! They'd miss it and come searching. What good is it, anyway? Besides, Toffner's glider is still over there under that overhang. I think it'll be to our best advantage if we send this pilot back home with some false information. At the least, you know, he's going to have to come up with a plausible story to explain the loss of 4 robots!"

Noir sighed. "Alright, so let's get busy with this Arkonide."

Half an hour later when the glider took off in the direction of Tagnor, the same Arkonide sat behind the controls as before. But a synthetic memory had been planted in his mind.

* * * *

"Come on, give me your hand!" Ras Tschubai became impatient as Toffner hesitated. "We must have bodily contact to make a jump together." He looked at the mousebeaver, who stood nearby holding Rhodan's hand. "Do we have the target?" he asked.

Pucky nodded. "If Toffner can keep on thinking of those catacombs as intensively as he is now, that's where we're going to land. Far as I'm concerned, we can let 'er rip!"

The two teleporters concentrated. The jump occurred without a direct knowledge of the target area but one of their number knew the goal and was sharing his vision telepathically with Pucky. Also there was physical contact between Pucky and Ras, as well.

The three humans and the smaller mousebeaver rematerialised.

About an hour later Admiral Calus received the alarming news that a considerably large group of rebels existed in the northern mountain regions between Tagnor and Larg. This group was reported to have attacked an Arkonide's airship and destroyed four fighter robots.

Calus trembled with rage as he beheld the glider pilot whom he had called before him. It was a struggle for him to control himself as he listened in silence to the man's report.

"According to instructions, sir, we went out searching for men who were capable of bearing arms, especially in the remote areas of the desert and the mountains. It's suspected that the Zalites who refuse to serve the Imperium are hiding there. Along with a few other officers I made a thorough search of the middle portion of the mountains without discovering anything. The mountains there hardly offer any cover

at all. But further north the terrain became more tortuous and difficult to examine even from the air. We separated and I covered the slopes to the east in the direction of Larg. Suddenly I was fired upon and I noticed some Zalites who had hidden themselves in a valley. In compliance with instructions I then landed and sent out the robots. However, all four of them were destroyed. In order not to let the glider fall into the hands of the rebels, I took off and immediately returned here."

Calus looked at him indignantly. "In the northern mountains, you say?" He thought awhile and then asked: "Were you able to ascertain the exact location?"

"I would be able to find the valley again, sir."

"Good! Then today before nightfall a squadron of fast pursuit ships will be dispatched to attack these rebels in the mountains. You will attempt to take them alive. We need soldiers, not corpses, is that clear?"

"You can depend on us, sir..."

"I'd like to do just that, if possible! And don't get any ideas about suddenly not being able to find that place again. I'm warning you! If this mission isn't successful, you will be decommissioned and returned to the status of a bootcamp rookie!"

The squadron took off 10 minutes later.

The sun was already lowering toward the horizon as they raced eastward into the approaching night. But the unhappy officer with the altered memory flew with them. It was his last day in service as an officer, inasmuch as Calus always kept his promises as well as his threat.

The designated alleged location of the hiding place, moreover, was now 2000 km north of the small basin where Bell and his combat commandoes waited impatiently for Rhodan's return.

They rematerialised in the middle of the wide rock chambers under the Tagnor arena.

Rhodan let go of Pucky's hand and assured himself by a glance at Toffner that they had landed in the right place. Then he looked about him. The room was rectangular and subdivided by low-walled partitions into individual niches and recesses. The ceiling appeared to be rough hewn but very massive, in fact slightly arched. The main walls were smooth and coated with a transparent glaze of some kind. No doors were apparent.

"Here I want the main headquarters to be set up," he said and he listened to the sound of his voice. How far down are we under the surface?"

"Not more than 20 meters," Toffner replied. "There are a number of exits. The doors are so well dovetailed into the walls that they can hardly be detected. The locks are partly electronic and partly operable by body frequencies. We're under the centre of the arena here, which puts us in the middle of the city. The Government palace can be reached in 5 minutes."

Rhodan nodded his appreciation. "Excellent! We can operate out of here. We'll set up the labs in the various sectional chambers." He looked at Toffner sharply. "Who knows about this cellar vault other than yourself? Why hasn't it occurred to the Arkonides to search down here for fugitives?"

"I presume that they don't know about these catacombs. Only the outer ones are known and they've

already been scoured through. This inner area is sealed off by doors that have remained undiscovered. We are safe here. My own hideout has been down here for 3 years already."

"I wasn't being distrustful, Toffner, but we have to be cautious and take everything into consideration. Very well, then, we'll bring in our men and the equipment. Pucky and Ras, you teleport back alone. I'll stay here with Toffner."

The mousebeaver seemed to want to say something but instead he merely nodded his agreement and took hold of Ras Tschubai's hand. They teleported together.

Rhodan stared at the spot where they had just been standing. "OK, Toffner," he said in a strange tone of voice, "now tell me about the two Zalites you've hidden down here. Pucky read your thoughts. So what's with those two?"

Toffner swiftly overcame a preliminary flush of embarrassment. "They are friends of mine who were to be taken into the service. They begged me for help and I hid them, that's all. They have no idea of what's really going on down here. Their chamber has no connection with this one."

"Maybe they can help us one of these days," Rhodan pointed out, thus indicating that he didn't frown on Toffner's Good Samaritanism. "They have reason enough not to be very favourably disposed to the Arkonides. When I get a chance I'll have a look at them."

Toffner was relieved. His face plainly showed it. But before he could make any reply, Pucky materialized with Bell in tow.

Rhodan observed the latter with a shake of his head. "You look a sight! What have you been doing, conducting cross-country manoeuvres?"

Bell tried to straighten out his rumpled and dusty clothing. "Something like that," he said. "An Arkonide officer tried to smoke us out with four robots." Briefly he depicted what had happened, and concluded: "So now the pilot is going to tell Calus a nice fairy tale and if we're lucky they'll look for us about 2000 kilometres north of our valley until their eyes pop out."

"Hopefully," said Rhodan as he saw Ras Tschubai materialize in the company of a combat technician. At the same time, Pucky disappeared again. Finally, Tako Kakuta the Japanese teleporter appeared also with a passenger in hand.

The massive regrouping manoeuvre had begun.

It required a good two days before they were sufficiently established in the underground vault to start their main task of getting to Arkon. On an official and legitimate basis—of course!

5/ THE ADMIRAL MEETS HIS MATCH

Admiral Calus had the turbo car stop in front of the building and he got out. Two high-ranking officers with energy weapons in hand accompanied him as he climbed the broad steps and walked through the

entrance portal. The two Zalite sentinels on guard saluted him deferentially.

From the top of the building a spherical antenna towered aloft into the dear sky. Tagnor's broadcasting station was the largest and most powerful on the planet. Relay stations provided that the transmitted broadcasts were received everywhere with flawless clarity. The entertainment programs had been reduced recently in favour of an increasing military communications traffic.

Almost every day Calus came here to give one of his imperious and threatening speeches. Two officers were always with him so that they might thwart any attempt on the Admiral's life but fundamentally Calus did not fear any such action against him. Behind him stood the might and power of Arkon! No one would dare to bring down upon himself the wrath of the robot Brain.

Ten minutes later the face of the Arkonide appeared on millions of viewscreens. Everyone understood his language, which was the official tongue of the Arkonide Imperium. It was a hard-sounding idiom but clear and articulate.

Deep below in the rocky chamber under the arena Rhodan and his closest colleagues were also seated before a viewscreen. Today they were seeing and hearing Calus for the second time. Yesterday they had studied his appearance and had found someone in their group who slightly resembled him. Now this one, a Sgt. Roger Osega, sat right next to Rhodan and carefully observed every movement made by Calus. The bio-chemists had already made a few minor changes in his facial features and by now Sgt. Osega bore a startling likeness to Calus.

Either man could practically be mistaken for the other.

"Admiral Calus is a member of the well-known family house of Moniz," explained Toffner in the midst of a short pause on the part of the Admiral. "The Monizans have served the robot Brain a long time now and they enjoy his fullest confidence."

"He'll soon be changing his mind," remarked Bell grimly. He fell silent as Calus continued his speech.

"And we shall employ every means at our command if the recruiting ordinances are not carried out. Refusal to serve in the immortal army of our Regent is punishable by death. Until now I have not exercised my rights as Supreme Magistrate but in the future I shall not hesitate to have every fugitive and deserter shot. I am giving every Zalite capable of bearing arms just 10 more days in which to present himself to the recruiting centre. Whoever is found after that and is unable to give a satisfactory account of himself will go before the firing squad. I believe I have expressed myself clearly enough."

The viewscreen darkened.

Sgt. Osega sighed aloud. "And I'm supposed to be that monster? That won't be any picnic..."

"Picnic or not," admonished Rhodan, "the success of our operation is going to depend on how good a ham you are. The bio-chemists will give you one more going over and then I can guarantee you that no one will be able to tell you from the real Calus."

Osega nodded. "Of course I can understand, sir, why there's no other route to go... it's just that it'll be going against my grain to conscript innocent Zalites into military service in the name of Arkon."

Rhodan laughed. "But you'll also have some volunteers to ship out—including ourselves! I think we're going to like the new Calus a lot better than the old one. And him we'll take under our wing down here!"

And therewith the plan was completed. All that was necessary now was to wait for an opportunity to bring it into effect.

This opportunity presented itself four days later.

* * * *

Prior to that, Osega had experienced some uncomfortable hours in the lab.

Dr. Tschai Toung, the best disguise and makeup man in Solar Intelligence, carefully plied his trade. The Sino-Terranian expert was quite pedantic when it came to changing one man into the likeness of another. The films made of the TV broadcast kept running endlessly and Osega had a chance to study his 'double' very thoroughly.

And of course Doc Toung was studying them with a more professional eye. He shook his head with its crown of smooth black hair. "I don't like the nose yet, sergeant! Of course you already have valid I.D. papers from Arkon and are officially this Calus on paper but your nose is not his! I'll still have to graft on a slight bioplastic hump."

Osega groaned piteously. "You've messed me up enough already!" he complained without being actually serious. "My own mother wouldn't recognize me now!"

"Which is precisely the name of the game," replied the Chinese gravely.

Dr. Eric Manoli assisted in the completely painless operation and when it was over with, Tschai Toung could look upon his work of art with pride.

"Now I'm satisfied," he announced. "The two admirals can no longer be differentiated one from the other." He rubbed his hands and regarded the mutants and commando specialists who were sitting around him. "And now show me what you can do! Exchange my pupil for the real Calus! If it is done cleverly and quickly, nobody will notice it."

"And nobody is going to!" Rhodan asserted as he stepped forward. "Osega, you'll also have to double for Calus on those telecasts. Do you think you can cut it?"

"I've seen his club-waving enough," said the sergeant affirmatively, "and I've had enough time to catch onto his style. Like it I do not, but do it I can!"

"That alone makes the difference. As for Toffner, in spite of the risk I've had him reconnoitre the situation outside. At first I thought of making the switch while Calus was making a telecast but then I had a better idea. The Admiral lives in the Zarl's palace and always has a bodyguard around him but he's often alone in his office or work room there. I'll let you see for yourselves.

Harno, the spherical creature from Tatlira, lowered himself from the ceiling, a white shimmering ball with a smoothly polished surface. On this surface a picture was visible as though on a screen. Harno possessed the astonishing faculty of making visible any desired spot in the universe, without any recourse

to hypercom or television cameras. He had become the televisor of the Mutant Corps.

They were looking at a room furnished with heavy furniture, some technical apparatuses, a table and the head of a bed. A short swing *through* the door revealed that two armed guards were standing outside in the corridor.

"The switch must be made in this room," said Rhodan. "Since it won't be necessary to get past the guards, it shouldn't be difficult. Both sentinels will be able to swear that at no time would anyone have been able to enter the room—but it won't be necessary for them to make such a declaration. Nobody's going to ask them because nobody is going to know the real Calus is missing. Osega, Pucky will bring you into the palace. For security, Ras Tschubai is going along in case Calus puts up a struggle. It has to happen fast."

Sgt. Osega gazed steadily at Harno. "When?"

Rhodan checked his watch. "Calus is just about to make his usual telecast. We'll let him. But tomorrow you will be making the speeches! So it's tomorrow at 14:00 Earth time."

By evening Toffner came back unharmed. He had come across several of his friends who had been drafted in the meantime, plus two soldiers of the Zarlt who knew him well due to his activities with the arena. From all reports it appeared that a new troop transport would be leaving for Arkon in 3 days. The troop contingent for this particular transport had been filled already. Departure schedules for still more transports were to be announced. It was said that the troop training centre was on one of the Arkon planets.

Here below in their concealment the difference between night and day was only marked by a dimming of the lights and periods of sleep. Rhodan utilized some of the remaining time to go with Toffner and pay a visit to the latter's two Zalite friends who were in hiding. At first the two native-born men were shocked to learn what was going on but they soon declared themselves willing to be of service to the operation where possible. Naturally they were greatly mystified by the presence of this secret organization on Zalit but they finally adjusted themselves to it. For good reasons of his own, Rhodan had avoided telling the two Zalites that they were the *only* natives in the organization.

The night passed; a new day arrived. Everyone hoped that it would be the beginning of a new epoch in the affairs of men.

* * * *

In the early part of the afternoon, Admiral Calus received a message from the Regent. It was brought to him by an officer from the flagship who was in charge of the communications on board. He appeared to be very excited.

"This dispatch came in 30 minutes ago, Admiral," he announced, making reference to Arkonide time, which was approximately one half hour by local standards. "The Regent is becoming impatient!"

Calus waved off the implications with an imperious gesture and read the message. Then he said angrily: "Not enough troops! Training is taking too long! The Regent wants more officers!"

He pondered long and intently over this. The officer stood waiting at a respectful distance from the desk. With a certain degree of awe he watched his superior, who was the direct representative of the Regent.

Calus looked up. "The next transport is leaving day after tomorrow, is that right?"

"Yes, Admiral."

"Good! In my speech today I shall emphasize the need for drafting men in older age brackets. The Regent needs experienced spacemen and officers. Perhaps he's finally located this planet Terra that's caused us so much annoyance. Thus all these heavy preparations... Well, whatever may be the reason, we have our duty to fulfil, nothing more. You will send the following message to the Regent..." Calus thought a few moments and then dictated: "Calus to Regent. Special transport of officer candidates will be organized. Space experience emphasized. Having no problems on Zalit. Everything normal. Admiral Calus." He glared at his underling. "So have that transmitted at once to Arkon and let me know when further dispatches are received from there!"

The officer departed, leaving Calus alone in his office. He sat behind his large work table, not knowing that every word he had spoken had been heard. Nor could he know that his every gesture and movement was being closely studied. It was exactly as though he were standing in front of a camera which faithfully reflected every phase of his existence.

He had almost 2 hours yet before making his speech and he wanted to make use of his time. The picture was by no means as rosy as what he had represented to the Regent. It would have been to his own disadvantage to have reported the truth. It might even have occurred to the robot Brain to replace him with another officer. There were enough ambitious descendants of formerly powerful families who would snatch at the chance to outdo their peers in these matters. The plum in the tree, of course, was in the case of the robot Brain's eventual 'abdication'. *Thensomebody* would have to become the Emperor of Arkon!

He sighed.

In the past few years there had been a rising improvement among the Arkonide—at least with some. In the long run maybe a robotic rule was not as disadvantageous to the development of humanoid mentality and spirit as it had appeared to be—in fact, the opposite! Inwardly the resistance had become greater. Many Arkonides remembered the former greatness of their race and were ashamed of their present state of debasement. Of course the new generation recognized the robot Brain but deep within them the plan had already been born to replace the Great Machine one day.

Calus believed that he was fully qualified to take over the management of the government as the Emperor. But of course he had no idea of what such an officer *really* required!

He sighed again and proceeded with his notes. All Zalites in the younger age groups had already been taken—that is, of those who had reported in. More than 100,000 of them must have disappeared. Perhaps it would be a good idea to state this condition as a reason for having to draft the older age groups now. This way it was quite possible that the one group could be played against the other.

Experienced spacemen were being sought. That was odd! Was it no longer sufficient or feasible to send positronically controlled ships and crews against the enemy? Why this sudden need for humanoids? This was not the Regent's normal pattern of operation. Was it possible for even a robot to learn by experience?

Calus heard a noise and looked up. He stared into his own face.

Thunderstruck, he stared at the Arkonide who was standing only a few steps away, between his desk and the door. How he had gotten there remained a mystery to Calus. He was only certain of the fact that there was only one entrance to this room.

But this Arkonide had not come here alone. With him was a rather dark-skinned Zalite and a remarkable little creature who was regarding him with the most amazing impudence. Calus remained sitting stiffly in his chair. His mind groped vainly in search of a reasonable explanation for the incomprehensible.

"What's the matter—are you so surprised?"

It had actually been the animal who spoke to him in Arkonide! Still another miracle! First the inexplicable appearances and now this of all things! But the worst was yet to come.

"No, noble Admiral, I am no talking pet and nobody's taught me any tricks lately. You shouldn't think such nonsense, it can spoil a good relationship."

Could this animal read thoughts...?

Calus could not find an answer because he was not given the opportunity. Surreptitiously his right hand had reached toward a small, dark-coloured box on his desk. He was just about to press a button on it when the box rose effortlessly into the air as though it had suddenly become weightless. It floated slightly to one side as though held in ghostly hands and then fell to the floor. Something clattered suspiciously like broken glass as plastic splinters scattered all over. The intercom box had been rendered useless.

Sgt. Osega stepped nearer to Calus and spoke to him with sarcastic undertones: "Sorry, Admiral, but your enlistment time is over with. You see your successor before you. Would you kindly step aside so that I may have your chair? You are to go with my two friends. If you are reasonable, nothing will happen to you."

Calus of course had not yet recovered from his surprise but he reasoned that it would be time for explanations later. At the moment it was necessary to face up to this danger. "Who are you?" he asked excitedly. "And who are your companions? What do you want of me? Successor? You're insane!"

The small animal came walking around the table, waddling like a duck. It came to a stop and supported itself against the floor with its broad tail. Under its cheerfully sparkling eyes appeared a single incisor tooth which seemed to gleam with pleasure. Calus couldn't know that Pucky always revealed this tooth when he was in high spirits and planned to play a prank.

"You are facing Admiral Calus, you miserable wretch!" chirped Pucky in an incredibly high tone of voice. "Are you not going to get up and pay your respects?"

Calus swallowed hard. But *he* was Calus! This other person was only an imitation of him.

"Is that so!" challenged the mousebeaver and Calus knew then with a fair certainty that his thoughts had been read. "If there is an imitation Calus around here, you are the counterfeit! Or can you prove the contrary?"

The Admiral began to suspect that there was more here than met the eye, quite aside from the fact that his uncanny visitors seemed to possess faculties that he did not understand. Be that as it might.

He brought the small needle-gun out of his pocket with a lightning swift movement but before he could press the trigger the weapon was pulled from his hand as though by sorcery. It glided into the paw of the animal creature, whose incisor tooth became even more prominent.

"But Admiral, what kind of methods are these? Are you a soldier or a murderer? Now that's enough—out of the way for the real Calus! He has to prepare his speech. I see you've already made some notes about it. Very obliging of you!"

Calus apparently would have remained seated but he suddenly felt something behind his stiff backbone. It seemed that the chair rose up slightly. Startled, he sprang up and took a few steps. The chair then returned to the floor.

His duplicate, Sgt. Osega, moved past Calus in a dignified manner and sat down at the desk. Then he addressed Pucky and Ras Tschubai. "It would be better for you to disappear as soon as possible. If anybody should suddenly come in, it might appear suspicious. Two copies of this character would be too much!"

"There's only *one* too many 'Calluses' around here," asserted Pucky gravely and he pointed to the Arkonide admiral. "Namely, this one! One 'Calus' will now be removed!" He stepped up to the real admiral and took hold of his limp hand. "He's half-paralysed with fright, anyway, and that makes it easier to teleport him. Let's go, Ras, give me a hand with him!"

The African needed no further urging.

"Lots of luck, Osega! We'll keep in constant contact with you!"

Before the Arkonide had a chance to think, he and the two mutants dematerialised.

As the false Calus, Osega was left alone. Fortunately, however, he wasn't to become lonely. Through the telepath John Marshall, he maintained a constant contact with Rhodan and thus received instructions promptly when needed. The timeliness and accuracy of such directions were due to Harno, who could conjure up a picture of Osega and his surroundings and reproduce them on his rounded surface.

Pucky and Ras had hardly disappeared with their prisoner before a mental warning came to the sergeant: *Watch out, Osega! An officer is approaching. He wants to see you!*

Fine, returned Osega, who knew his thoughts could be picked up at the other end, *that will be a good test right away*.

He appeared to become absorbed in the speech papers. When the door was opened, he hardly looked up. Like a trained actor, he produced a few furrows of displeasure on his brow, which was now the brow of Calus. Hopefully the officer would also regard it as such.

"Good news, Admiral, sir!" The officer was obviously hoping to improve the mood of his superior. "A transport has arrived from some of the western city areas and it is filled with conscripted recruits. A robot crew brought the vessel in. There are about 5000 men on board."

Osega received the news with an outward calm. On the one hand the announcement was very

regrettable because it meant that another 5000 innocent Zalites were to be carried off to Arkon; but on the other hand it could also mean that Rhodan and his combat commando team might not have to wait very long for their transshipment behind the impregnable walls of the Empire!

It was why, he could honestly exclaim, "Excellent!" But he added: "See to it that this information is transmitted to the Regent at once. And now I wish to be alone—I have to work on my speech."

The officer breathed a sigh of relief and departed.

Also Osega was visibly relieved. It had worked. Now he was sure he'd also stand the test in front of the telecast cameras. Especially when he could distract the audience with these new drastic measures regarding the older age groups.

The Zalites might wonder about it but the main objective was to keep the Arkonides and the Regent from *wondering* at all!

* * * *

Certainly the genuine Calus had sufficient grounds for wondering about many things. There was not only the fact that he had been brought by means of teleportation to a completely unknown location which was apparently deep beneath the planet's surface, but also he was confronted by alien, unfriendly faces.

In one corner of the room was a printing machine that produced a valid set of Zalite credentials every few minutes. A group of men in white smocks fastened photographs and brain-wave pattern cards to the documents, filled out the pertinent personal data for each and stacked them all in a neat pile.

In the background a number of Zalites sat at crudely fashioned tables and conversed with one another. Some of them were reading. To his left, one of the niches had been partitioned by a curtain of some sort. He could not make out what was behind it. Only once a man came out from behind the curtain and spoke to another Zalite:

"The equipment is ready, sir. We can begin whenever you say."

"Good." The Zalite who had been spoken to now regarded Calus with a somewhat indefinable expression on his face. "You can see what's taken place here, Calus," he explained. "We have put a double in your place. You are in our hands now and you will only be set free when we have achieved our goal. Just when that will be is going to depend a lot on you. Do you want to give us the information we need, of your own free will, or are we going to have to use some gentle persuasion?"

Calus was thoroughly convinced that he had fallen into the hands of the rebels. Perhaps they were getting support from beings who came from another world and who possessed parapsychical characteristics. For the present, however, he had not yet entertained the idea of being involved with the much feared Perry Rhodan and his Terranians.

"Ask what you will," he answered calmly. "What I am permitted to say, you will find out. As for the rest..."

"As for the rest, you need not concern yourself," the Zalite assured him. He was, of course, none other than Perry Rhodan himself. "Our methods of hypnotic examination are not injurious to the health. Now for the first question: what is the purpose of the forced conscriptions, the human recruitment activity? Who is the enemy Arkon is fighting?"

Calus' eyes narrowed to slits. "I refuse to answer that question. And in addition may I remind you that you have kidnaped an admiral of Arkon, which makes you liable to the gravest form of punishment? But if you will set me free I'll be glad to exert every influence I can..."

Rhodan shook his head and looked across toward the men in the corner but now his smile was gone. "Manoli! As much as I'm against it, there's no other way. He gets the hypno treatment."

While the struggling Calus was being placed under electrical shock fields, a man walked through the streets of Tagnor who was assigned the task of putting the false Calus' first orders to the test.

This was the Japanese mutant, Tako Kakuta, a teleporter. No one might have associated his small figure with that of a Terranian or even a Japanese because a special processing had changed Tako into a genuine-looking Zalite. In the place of his formerly stiff, black hair, a full coppery mane now decorating his head. The greenish oxidation effect was deceptively perfect. Tako only had to hold his head at an angle and the rays of the giant sun Voga would shine through the added micro-crystals of his synthetic hair in a rare burst of splendour.

Tako sauntered through the streets like a person who had nothing to do. He saw only a few Zalites of his own age. Either they were already on their way to Arkon or they had gone into hiding. He succeeded more than once in eluding various search parties. These details were most frequently under command of Arkonide officers and made up of robots or Zalite soldiers.

These search patrols weren't having much luck lately. Any Zalite in the vulnerable age group would have to be crazy to venture openly into the streets like this. There were still plenty of older men in evidence but so far these latter had nothing to fear. On the contrary, the Arkonides treated them very politely, in the hope, of course, that they might find a few informants among them. It was a hope that had not been filled to date.

As the public address systems announced the daily speech by the Admiral, Tako went into a restaurant. He sat down at a table and ordered a glass of the local specialty, produced from fruits that flourished well under the giant sun. Shortly thereafter, the well-known face of Calus looked down at him from the telescreen.

He was aware of a few half-suppressed curses among the patrons but then the Arkonide's voice drowned out all whispered comments.

Tako watched Calus carefully and had to concede that few deceptions had ever come off as well as this one. Calus was Calus, there was no changing that. Even the voice was the same as well as his forms of expression and intonations. Osega had also practiced the hand movements that were used to emphasize important parts of the speeches, thus making the illusion complete.

...am herewith issuing the order that all men—I repeat:*all* men of Zalit—must report for recruitment processing. We will decide there who is fit for service in the Fleet and who is not. Within one week, every Zalite must be properly registered. Whoever is found after that without a stamped certificate can expect to be arrested."

Tako was amused to think of how peculiar the situation really was. The certificates mentioned by Calus were even now being prepared in the rocky chamber beneath the arena and were to be submitted to the military draft commission. So Rhodan's thrust into the Arkon Empire had come this far.

...that there are still Zalites who have thus far refused to complete their voluntary service for the Imperium. As of now these age groups are subject to martial law. If any member of a draftable age group is found today without proper credentials, he can be sentenced to death."

Tako noted that some of the older Zalites were looking at him. Evidently he fell into the category that was being mentioned.

Calus continued, emphasizing that the Regent's patience was definitely exhausted. He said that the Imperium was being threatened by an alien power but in spite of this the robot Brain was being magnanimous enough to offer Arkonides and Zalites important and even vital positions in the Fleet. Therefore, it was bordering on ingratitude for a man to refuse... et cetera, et cetera...

When Calus finished speaking, there was a momentary silence in the restaurant. Then an older Zalite got up, tossed the proprietor a coin and went to the door. There he stopped to face everyone.

"Whoever goes over to the Arkonides is a traitor and a servant of the Robot!" he exclaimed, after which he disappeared.

Those remaining appeared to suddenly break out of a trance. They all started at once to argue excitedly and urge one another to one form of action or another. Tako utilized the ensuing confusion to leave the premises. He had to confess that Osega had done his part well... almost better than the real Calus. He was convinced that even the Regent of Arkon would have been deceived if he had been able to hear the speech.

Tako didn't run into any of the usual patrols so he became a bit more venturesome. Almost inadvertently he wandered closer to the spaceport area, until he was suddenly confronted by a cordon of sentries. They were all robots without exception. Their cold, expressionless eyes focussed on him as though he were some wild quarry they had long been waiting for. One of them set itself in action and approached him. It would have been useless to simply attempt to run away because the robots were capable of unbelievable speed.

"Identification!" grated the machine ominously.

Naturally Tako had his credentials. They had only been freshly produced yesterday down under the arena. Toffner had furnished the necessary details. But now the papers were of little use because Tako was in the targeted age group.

When he handed his I.D. to the robot he didn't flicker an eyelid as he stated: "I was about to go to the recruiting station. Could you direct me?"

The robot read through the credentials. At the first encounter its program gated its logic circuits for a 'capture' but now there was a switching action. The man standing before it was voluntarily reporting in. This was covered by another set of commands.

"Through the gate by the administration building. There is an officer waiting there."

Without having intended it, Tako had become a sort of guinea pig. While moving onward he attempted

to make contact with John Marshall or another mutant by means of his micro-transmitter. It was only when he was close to the designated building that somebody answered.

"You have to act as though you were ready to enlist. If they ask why you waited until today, tell them you were sick. We are watching over you. Harno has you right on his screen. Don't sweat it—we'll be following you soon!"

Tako walked onward. He felt reassured. Nothing could happen to him as long as Rhodan and his mutant colleagues were nearby.

He had come here just in time to witness the arrival of the Arkonide Admiral, who was conducting a surprise inspection of the headquarters.

6/ THE ARENA HAS ITS "GAMES"

On the following day 10 more of Rhodan's men reported for induction into the Arkon Fleet. They were equipped with the pertinent documentation and could present sufficient reasons for their delay in responding to the conscription order. Without further formalities they were inducted into the training program and were processed by the examining board. They all came under a single category: suitable for Fleet duty.

Within another two days these 10 men—among whom was André Noir the hypno-telepath—began to 'work' the officers of the assembled troop units. It was not too difficult to lure them individually into the billet assigned to the Terranians. There they were subjected to a special post-hypnotic treatment which altered their memories, after which they returned to their units with an unusual set of instructions.

So it was that the 10 Terranians, and finally Tako also, were all very swiftly promoted. Soon they were junior officers answering directly to the Arkon official staff. Even the robots had to obey them—specially in view of the fact that they had been secretly reprogrammed.

Meanwhile Osega continued to play his role as Calus. After his report to the Regent that a new transport-load of recruits had been gathered, a giant spherical ship arrived, and shortly afterward it took off again, taking many of the inducted Zalites with it.

Rhodan's men were not included. Even Calus didn't have the authority to make arbitrary decisions affecting the transshipment. Besides, things had not quite come to this point yet.

Underneath the arena Rhodan and his men were having a strategy meeting in the vaulted rocky chamber. Harno glowed at only half his usual intensity because he had not rested in days. There was always somebody beside him observing what he projected onto his curved surface. Pucky slumped dejectedly in a corner and nibbled rather indifferently on a native-grown vegetable which Bell had offered him as a carrot substitute. But this was not the reason for his vexation; it was, in fact, the least of his worries. The main problem was that Rhodan had announced the names of the 50 people who would not be going on to Arkon. And he, Pucky, was definitely on that list. There was just no way to change him into a Zalite.

"Today we will go up to the surface and report to the induction and troop evacuation centre. Altogether

that will make up 150 men, which should be sufficient." Rhodan looked around the room. "Toffner will remain here. Major Rosberg will take over command for me here and head the action on *Zalit*. Should anything unforeseen occur, Maj. Rosberg will use Toffner's hypercom to alert the *Drusus* so that all remaining men can be picked up. I trust I've made that clear."

"That's the only point that tempts me to disobey an order," remarked Rosberg. "Do you really think, sir, that we can leave you sitting in a trap just because things get a little rough? We'll just stick around and haul you guys out..."

"Get off it, Rosberg!" Rhodan's voice was unusually sharp. "We'll take care of ourselves! Besides, your sacrifice would be completely assinine. If any trap closes on us, you'd not be able to do a thing about it. So you will stick to my instructions. Any other questions?"

Rosberg again: "The transmitter-receiver in the cave... when do we man it?"

"Glad you reminded me, Rosberg. It would be best to post 3 men who will stay there after you've signalled the *California*. We'll need a backup of weapons and material. Here on *Zalit* a first class support base has to take shape—one that could even handle attacks from Arkon.

I don't know if it will come to that but we have to be armed. Anyway, hold up on the cave action until we're on our way to Arkon."

Further details were completely discussed until everything seemed to be clear. There was no point that failed to be taken into consideration. Contact between the two groups would have to be interrupted even though Harno would always be able to transmit a picture of the *Zalit* team to Rhodan.

The latter two left the headquarters under the arena in order to be located at the spaceport. The danger there was no longer significant since the 11 who had enlisted earlier had prepared the way. Most of the officers had been provided with a hypnoblock and almost all robots had been reprogrammed. The two telepaths, Betty Toufry and Ishy Matsu, being part of the *Zalit* team, maintained contact between Calus and Maj. Rosberg, along with Pucky.

Two days later the last 'volunteers' moved out. Aside from Rhodan and Bell, their number included Atlan, Capt. Gorlat and Fron Wroma. Like all the others they carried false documents with them which identified them by *Zalite* names. There could be no slip-ups now.

They passed the first inspection point and arrived at the main gate, where they were received by a very haughty Arkonide. Combat robots with fire-ready weapon rings patrolled the area beyond the temporary fence. Inside the camp it was fairly swarming with *Zalites* who had completed their rookie training and now awaited transshipment to Arkon. There the final phases of their full induction into the Imperial Fleet would be completed.

The Arkonide officer regarded the newcomers with a mixture of pleasant surprise and unbearable arrogance. However, he strove to find an acceptable compromise between the two attitudes. "So you have decided to serve in the glorious fleet of the Imperium, have you?" he said by way of greeting, and he made a sign to the robot guards which caused them to become motionless. "You will be processed through and transhipped as quickly as possible. There is a great demand for capable men and technical personnel are also sought." He stretched out his hand. "Your papers, please."

Finally he returned the documents. "Over there in the first building you will find the registry desk. You will report to the duty sergeant, who will guide you from there. I wish you a victorious future."

Rhodan thanked him and pocketed his credentials again. He passed the robot guards, not knowing whether this contingent had been reprogrammed or not. But of course that didn't matter too much at present. They were recruits and were not free to operate without arousing suspicion. For the time being they had to strictly toe the line and comply with all the rules.

Fortunately the duty sergeant at registration had already been conditioned by the hypno André Noir. One of Rhodan's men who had been in the camp for a number of days turned out to be the sergeant's assistant and he now helped to process the new enlistees. Everybody presented their pass papers and took care not to speak one suspicious-sounding word. Hearing devices could be concealed anywhere and certainly the Arkonides listening at the other end would not have been hypno-treated.

As if to confirm this, the sergeant looked up and winked at them inconspicuously. "Ah, so I see you have already served in the Zalite fleet... uh... Major Sesete...?" It was Rhodan's cover name. "Excellent! We need men with experience. I think we can keep your old service rank for you." He looked at the other credentials. "Captain Ighur, Merchant Fleet." He referred to Atlan, who confirmed with a nod. "You were all officers? Maj. Roake..." He glanced swiftly at Bell. "Capt. Norvt, Lt. Likro... excellent!" He shoved the papers over to his assistant. "Assign them to the proper billet. It isn't every day that an entire group of former officers reports in to us. You've probably held off a little while before deciding to enlist, I take it? Well, we'll skip all that. The main thing is, you responded to the draft proclamation. Medical examinations will take place tomorrow but you all look pretty healthy to me."

The assistant handed back all papers to the newcomers. In addition they were given a sheet showing a map of the camp. Individual numbers were in a related sequence, showing each man his assigned location. As it turned out, some rather respectable quarters had been provided for them, as was suitable for former officers who would no doubt continue to be officers in the future. By some strange coincidence, all the members of the Terranian commando group had been housed in close proximity to each other.

* * * *

Toffner took his assignment very seriously. He knew how much depended upon its execution. Major Rosberg had warned him that if for any reason he should be apprehended by the Arkonides or soldiers of the Zarlt he should not count on getting any help. Also there could be no hint or clue that would lead anybody to the catacombs.

In effect Toffner was once more alone and left to his own resources. His only consolation was a paper he carried with him that had been signed by the new Calus. It was a confirmation by the induction board that his medical had classified him as unfit for Fleet service. It was not without specific purpose that Admiral Calus had issued such releases since they were a basis for other exceptions and facilitated other related permits.

The forthcoming Fall season of fighting games in the arena had to be prepared for. It was imperative for Toffner-Garak to obtain gladiators. But where was he to get them from when there were hardly any men left on Tagnor who were capable of bearing arms? There was no alternative but to start travelling and making a search.

He rented a glider, this time a larger model. He might have to take care of some heavy transportation. Twice he was stopped by search patrols and interrogated but his release permit worked wonders. He was allowed to continue without obstruction of any kind.

The glider was waiting for him in the civilian flight terminal. The solid cordon of guards surrounding it only elicited a secret smile from Toffner. What could possibly happen to him now? The checkout went along as expected, as quickly and smoothly as before. After he announced his destination, Larg, he was permitted to take off.

As he flew the usual exit pattern low over Tagnor he was able to determine that normal traffic had practically died out. Once in awhile he encountered a military glider but none of them paid any attention to him. He quickly reached the city outskirts and glided eastward into the desert.

He resisted. a temptation to land by the cave. As far as was known, no one had visited it in the meantime. That would only be in the days to come. The transmitter would have to be turned on again and the incoming supplies would have to be unloaded from it.

The mountains came and passed beneath him, after which he landed safely in Larg. He parked the glider and set the positronic safety lock to his own identification coding. No one other than he would be able to open the cabin unless he had the same brain-wave patterns and that of course was out of the question.

Hhokga the fabrics merchant was not only surprised to see the alleged Garak so soon again, he was frightened. Urging his unexpected guest to silence, he led him into his livingroom. It was late afternoon and in a few hours it would be dark. Down below the robots were patrolling the streets.

"You are exposing me to very grave danger!" Hhokga whispered the words in such a low tone that Toffner could hardly understand them. "Why have you come here? In the past few days the situation has gotten worse. Tomorrow I'm going up for my physical. They're drafting old men now..."

"Just relax!" Toffner interrupted and he seated himself. "Under no circumstance will you be drafted, believe me. Don't ask any questions now but take this voucher. It has been made out in your name and it confirms that you were examined in Tagnor and have been classified as unfit to serve. You may show this to any patrol that may stop you."

Hhokga stared at the document in amazement. "Where did you...?" Then he looked at his guest with a new respect. "You must have some very influential friends. Maybe you could even protect Markh and Kharra from the Arkonides."

"They are now able to get around in Tagnor with no hindrances because today they also received similar vouchers. They will also be able to get travel permits to come to Larg and that's why I am here."

Hhokga brought refreshments from the cabinet and he also sat down. "Of course I don't understand how you were able to accomplish all this but I know I'll never be able to return the favour. You are more powerful than I am—an old man without any hopes for the future."

"The future looks better than you think," said Toffner in an attempt to be reassuring yet he hoped he hadn't said too much.

"Well, of course even Admiral Calus isn't immortal."

Toffner was startled. Could it be possible that an assassination attempt was being planned against the

Arkonide admiral, without anybody realizing that he was actually a Terranian and the Zalites' greatest friend? This could complicate the situation. Perhaps Hhokga knew something.

"You mean—somebody's going to try to kill him?"

"Where did you get that idea, Garak? No, I meant it in a general sense. We all have to die sometime." He sighed. "Now why have you come to see me, my friend?"

"Markh informs me that you have connections with the local authorities. Of course as an animal dealer he'd be able to get around pretty well on his own but we just consider it wise for him to stay in the background for a little while. I need wild animals and volunteer gladiators for the arena. I can't get even any political or other types of prisoners because the Arkonides have emptied the prisons. And who is left there who would willingly go into the arena? We haven't many men left. So if I can't scare up any gladiators I'll have to book fights between the animals themselves."

"And how can I help you?"

"By organizing a freight-forwarding project for me. You only have to arrange for one of your freight transports to make a stop at a certain location in the mountains, where it will pick up cargo in Markh's name. It's all quite official and will have the approval of all authorities concerned. I'd organize all that myself but I have to get back to Tagnor as soon as possible.

"You are receiving from me 10 release vouchers which have been signed by Admiral Calus. They all state that the holder of the document has been examined by the Arkonide enlistment commission and has been classified as not suitable for service. These permits are all blank, so you can fill them out any way you please. I'm sure you have 10 friends who would be very happy to handle the transport schedules if they could have a guarantee that the Arkonides will leave them alone."

"If the documents are really that effective, then I can guarantee to bring a whole caravan into the mountains. Let me sketch out a plan for you."

A half hour later Toffner departed from the hospitable merchant's dwelling. It was already dark when he landed in Tagnor. By devious routes he arrived at his hideout under the arena, where he proceeded to make a report to Rosberg.

The Major developed his strategy: "In two days Pucky will make a couple of jumps to the cave so that he can bring three specialists in there and get the transmitter reactivated. Prior to that we'll get in touch with the *California* and requisition the things we need. Then in three days this Hhokga friend of yours will start out from Larg. By that time the cargo will be there for him to load onto his carrier but wouldn't it be wise to have a few animals in the shipment so as to make it look good to the guards at control points? Your friend Markh could take care of that."

Toffner promised to get the animal handler busy with this task.

"And how does it look on the surface?" asked Rosberg finally, after the details had been gone over. "I heard Osega's speech today. Zalit must be half depopulated."

"It's not all that bad, sir. I'd say a majority of the men are still hiding out. Business and commerce has just about come to a standstill but the situation isn't threatening yet. The people here are well to do and they have reserves they've put aside. They'll be able to hold out for awhile."

"Until that time we're out of danger," replied Rosberg calmly. "Or it will cease to make any difference. One or the other."

Toffner nodded gravely.

One or the other. But which?

* * * *

The patrol consisted of 4 fighter robots and one Arkonide.

They were making a systematic search of taverns and cellars along a certain street of Tagnor which led directly from the palace to the arena. This fact alone was not particularly alarming because such patrols appeared every day in the city to look for deserters.

And nothing might have happened this time had it not been for an unfortunate chance encounter.

A man ran right into the search unit's arms who happened to be a Zalite sentry who was off duty and had come into town to see his family. His credentials were checked and he was released but just as he was going away the Arkonide called after him.

"Soldier, do you know Tagnor very well?"

Since this was a Zalite who was overly anxious to be of service to the 'Overlords' he nodded in confirmation. "Like the back of my hand, officer. Do you wish some information?"

The Arkonide pointed in the direction of the nearby arena. "Is that where the war games take place?"

"Not at present, sir. There's a lack of animals and gladiators."

"Are there underground installations in the arena area?"

"A few catacombs, sir. When the games are on; the fighters stay there. Also the animal cages are kept there.

"Wouldn't it be possible for deserters to be hiding in those catacombs?"

The soldier shook his head. "That's very unlikely, sir. We've searched through the catacombs quite thoroughly, as far as they are known to extend. We have not found any trace of Zalite fugitives."

The officer stiffened slightly. "As far as they are known to extend? Does that mean that the underground installations are not fully known?"

"You might say that, sir. In former times there were many secret passages that led out from the palace, which have since been walled up for the most part. The arena managed with as little underground room as possible because it was too expensive to heat and ventilate all the catacombs."

It was actually all the Arkonide wanted to know. He had guessed correctly. Underneath Tagnor there were still hiding places that no one knew about—or at least were known to very few. "Thank you," he told the soldier. "You may go."

The Zalite strode away, happy over the fact that he had not been forced to attract unpleasant attention to himself. On the contrary, he had performed a service for the Arkonide. Perhaps one day he might make use of that. The information he had given certainly couldn't do his own people any harm.

The entrance was a good 10 meters wide. Steps led downward and ended somewhere in the depths. So this was the gateway to the catacombs! The Arkonide recalled that this area had already been searched through but he had not forgotten the Zalite's small added phrase, "as far as they are known to extend." This was the decisive point that now motivated his present action.

"Follow me!" he ordered, speaking to his robots. "Thermo-guns in fire readiness!"

It was dark down below but the bright searchlights of the robots pushed back the darkness. There were former light fixtures at even intervals along the arched ceiling but they were now broken and extinguished. Now and then a smaller passage led off to the right or left. Finally the Arkonide left one robot on guard while he investigated a branch corridor with the other three. But each attempt of this nature usually ended a few meters away against a smooth wall.

The fact that he did not discover any deserters only served to strengthen his suspicion. If no one was hiding here, then there must be better hiding places behind these walls—or farther below. And they had to be found.

Their footsteps echoed hollowly in the corridor but they failed to hide the sound of other footsteps.

"Halt!"

The robots seemed to jerk to a stop. Their weapons pointed into the darkness ahead. The Arkonide listened. He was right! Somebody was coming toward them.

"Lights out!"

Complete darkness surrounded them. Ahead, however, and slightly off to one side, a source of light shimmered, becoming brighter as it drew nearer. Also the footsteps became more audible.

Then a figure emerged from the entrance of a side passageway. It came toward the group and then suddenly stopped at sight of the 4 robots. The lamp swayed slightly.

"Who are you?" asked the Arkonide, stepping forward.

Simultaneously the robot lamps flamed up again and caught the figure in a flood of brilliant illumination. It was that of a Zalite.

Toffner thought he might have heart failure when he made out the search patrol—and of course too late to be able to get to safety. He had just come through the secret door, intending to visit a friend in Tagnor. And now...!

"My name is Garak. I'm the manager here."

"And what business brings you down here at this time of night?"

"It's a part of my work..."

"Perhaps so," said the Arkonide suspiciously. "But where have you just come from? There—from that side passage? Come—you will show me where you were!"

Toffner knew it would take a miracle now to prevent discovery. The passage was short and ended, like all the others, at a smooth wall of rock. He went slowly ahead, followed by the officer and the robots. This time all 4 machines came along. None remained behind. It was a very unpleasant sensation, having the monsters' energy weapons trained on his back.

"Here the passage comes to an end," he said finally as he was forced to come to a stop, knowing that their hidden domain lay beyond the wall. Toffner could only hope that the Arkonide would not notice the tiny slits around the door—and that a meter or so of rock would be enough to hold back the robots.

But the Arkonide was not stupid. He had a logical mind. "So you were just strolling in a short passage which has nothing in it?"

"Yes—I went the wrong way."

"I see. For the manager of the arena who knows every nook and corner around here, don't you think that's quite unusual—to lose your way? Now talk, Zalite! What are you up to—and where does this go from here?"

Where did it go from here?

Toffner sought frantically for a way out. *Pucky!*

Betty! Ishy! his mind called soundlessly to the three telepaths. *Top danger—outside the door! Four robots, one Arkonide! Alert! Alert!*

The answer returned to him through the micro-telecom imbedded in his ear: "*Already aware, Toffner! Keep cool! Hang in there!*" It had to be Pucky.

Wilco! Toffner thought back, meaning that he would try.

"Answer me, Zalite!" The Arkonide began to get rough as Toffner's silence continued. "What were you doing here? Either show me your secret door or I'll order the robots to melt down the partition!"

It was just a threat and nothing more. Nor was it any less. The Arkonide was simply pressing him on the off chance that he would be taken in by the bluff.

"There's nothing behind the wall," Toffner asserted. He hoped something would happen in a hurry. The men in the hideout had been alerted. They would be able to defend themselves but the setup would be worthless if the wall were to be melted down. "As far as I'm concerned you can put your robots to work. Maybe then I can find out once and for all if there are really any secret passages down here."

The Arkonide hesitated. Could a Zalite actually lie and pretend as well as this? But now was not the time to philosophize about it. He gave orders to the robots.

"Low intensity—against the front wall!"

The fingers of energy burst forth and struck the smooth wall of rock, where they flowed evenly across it in all directions. The rock began to melt slowly and droplets of lava fell to the floor. Glittering puddles of molten rock began to form in the corridor.

Toffner sweated but not from the heat of the thermos. What were they waiting for on the other side? If they didn't take action pretty soon...

"Ps-s-t!" Suddenly there was Pucky nearby and someone was with him. "I brought Betty along. We need two telekins to knock out the robots. You know how they're constructed. While we hold them, you get at their shutoff controls. Later we'll reprogram the brutes and send them on their way again—together with the officer. He's sleeping just now but he'll be processed before we let him go."

Toffner said nothing. They moved toward the bright-flaming end of the passage until they were close behind the robots. A portion of the wall had already been melted away. The hissing of the energy beams drowned out all other sounds.

"I'll handle to--Betty one. OK, Toffner, the safety lock...!"

It was a recessed turn-lock, somewhat like a key handle, and it could easily be turned, once one succeeded in surprising a robot from behind. Even the Arkonides had not been able to dispense with this security feature. In emergencies a robot could be quickly deactivated by this method.

Toffner took a few steps forward and groped for the first of the turnoffs. Even as he switched off the recessed key, he heard Pucky's urgent whisper behind him.

"Speed it up! Take the other two! We have them under control—but not for long!"

The other two... no great problem... Toffner was able to also put them out of commission.

The fourth one proved to be more difficult. He stood at an angle which would enable him to see the intruders if he turned only slightly. Also his thermo-gun was still operating so that if he turned toward them it would mean extinction. The heat was almost unbearable. Half of the wall must have been melted through by now.

Pucky waddled quickly past Toffner until he was close behind the robot. He stared at the place just under the machine's neckline where the safety lock was located. Slowly, only with excruciating slowness, the recessed key began to turn, forced by Pucky's parapsychic powers. The same force that restricted the robot's movements was being used to turn it off entirely.

The energy beam went out fitfully, swinging wildly and causing dangerous flickering sparks. Pucky let out a shrill cry of pain and made a lightning teleport jump out of harm's way.

Betty Toufry ran to him and bent over him. "Oh, you poor darling. Does it hurt very much?"

"With you to comfort me, Betty—pain doesn't have a chance!" The mousebeaver straightened up. "What's with the Arkonide?"

"He only received a light blow. Hadn't we better all get to safety now? And we should remove all traces of the struggle here. That hole in the wall..."

...can be heat-moulded back into shape," put in Pucky, matter-of-factly completing her sentence. He blew on his paws which were still smarting from the glancing spark of thermo energy. "First we'll give the robots a new program and then the Arkonide will get a hypno-block."

Toffner was grateful that no one reproached him for what had happened. In a certain sense he was to blame, if anyone cared to think of responsibility for the incident in the first place.

The actual secret door was just next to the end wall of the passage. Fortunately it had not been damaged by the robots' thermal barrage. The commando specialists inside greeted the two mutants and Toffner with expressions of relief. They had not been fully aware of the nature of the encounter outside. Ishy Matsu had only been able to give them some very sparse information.

So it came about that a search patrol returned 4 hours later to the spaceport and reported to the commanding Arkonide officer: "Street leading to palace searched. No results. Also conducted thorough search and investigation of the so-called catacombs. All passages lead to dead ends. No possibility of a hiding place. It is not possible that deserters can be hiding underneath the arena."

The officer who turned in this report received a special commendation for his diligence and at the same time received his assignment covering streets to be patrolled on the following day. Whereupon he declared that he would also fulfil this task to the equal satisfaction of his superior. He stated proudly that his robots were unique, that there were no others like them to be found.

All of which his superior officer was pleased to believe, since he had already been 'conditioned' by the commando specialists.

Thus all the keys were in Rhodan's hands. The first phase of the preparations had been completed—preparations which were aimed at the eventual conquest of Arkon and the elimination of robot rule. 150 men stood ready to lift an entire stellar empire off of its hinges.

And it would be the Regent himself who would give the order for his own demise.

Specifically: a fateful order to transport from Zalit to Arkon a very deadly animal for the greatest war game of all.

It was—a Trojan horse!

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

RECRUITS FOR ARKON

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

MOCK BATTLES must precede real battles... if the Robot Brain of Arkon is to be destroyed.

And the time has come for the mental marvel, the great positronicon, the soulless Regent to be eradicated.

Such is the mission of the Recruits and it is realized full well that theirs is a task which cannot simply be rushed into nor regarded lightly. Commando training must first be undergone, battle tactics tested in a baptism of fire. For this purpose and to this end, the creation of a special combat 'school'.

Naator!

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CONFLICT CENTER: NAATOR

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Clark Darlton